

# Adolescence, masculinity & alienation: Sites of engagement and resistance in American young adult fiction 1950-2000

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# **Adolescence, masculinity & alienation**

Sites of engagement and resistance in  
American young adult fiction 1950-2000

**Clare E Caldwell**

A thesis in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

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This thesis explores the correlation between representation of the adolescent male in late twentieth-century fiction and the progressive disengagement of boys from the practice of reading during that same period. By mapping the fictional embodiment and re-mediation of juvenile male experience through a series of focused, yet interrelated studies of seminal works in the genre since 1950, the vital and often overlooked disjunction between the fictional and lived experience of adolescent males emerges as a definitive reason for the steadily diminishing number of young male fiction readers.

Across the four case studies that comprise this thesis, the determining effects of habitus and field on teenage male engagement with young adult fiction are explored through analysis of mimetic limitations in key texts by prominent American authors, including J. D. Salinger, S. E. Hinton, Robert Cormier and Stephen Chbosky. In close reading and application of convergent methods drawn from cultural studies, cognitive narratology and theories of gendered reading, this thesis explores the complex divergences between fictional representations of male adolescence and the challenges presented by the efflorescence of other forms and channels of meaning-making for young males from 1950 to 2000, including a vast array of visual and digital media.

Whilst selective, the case studies pay particular attention to shifts in language, narrative devices and literary techniques that have traditionally enabled teenage males to close the gap between the existential fuzziness of fiction and the physical manifestations of adolescence. Each case study embeds the works under discussion in their particular social and historical contexts, ranging from post-World War II paranoia, evolving class structures and the emergence of feminism as a significant political force, to the rapid expansion of global capital and the unsettled political ambience generated by the Cold War. Themes of impermanence, intimacy, solipsism and isolation that typify young adult fiction in this period are also considered, particularly in relation to the ways in which the exemplary novels variously enact homosocial identifications and dynamics, and how this performative queering of masculine norms, in turn, informs the engagement of young male, and indeed, female readers in fictional incarnations of adolescent masculinity. **[348 words]**

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*Das beste, was du wissen kannst,  
Darfst du den buben doch nicht sagen.\**

*Goethe, Faust (Part 1, Scene 4)*

*\* After all, the best of what you know may not be told to boys.*

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# Publications & Presentations

## Publications Arising from this Thesis:

1. 'Adolescent Brain Development and Gender: Predictors of Future Reading Habits (Commissioned Essay). *Journal of Neurology, Neurosurgery, and Psychiatry*, 2018; (BMJ Publishers, UK; Impact Factor 7.349) [doi.org/10.1136/jnnp-2018-318094](https://doi.org/10.1136/jnnp-2018-318094)

## Invited Lectures and Presentations:

1. **C. E. Caldwell**, *Adolescent Boys and the Neuroscience behind a Reluctance to Read Fiction*, 24 March 2017, Brain and Mind Centre, University of Sydney, NSW, Australia.
2. **C. E. Caldwell**, *Why Boys Have Fallen out of Love with Fiction*, 19 October 2017, Royal Prince Alfred Hospital, Sydney, NSW, Australia.
3. **C. E. Caldwell**, *The Neuroscience Behind a Generation of Non-Reading Adolescent Males*, 15 February 2016, ForeFront, Neurosciences Research Australia (NeuRA), University of New South Wales, NSW, Australia.

## Abbreviations

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ACA	Australia Council for the Arts
ALA	American Library Association
ANT	Actor-Network Theory
FMRI	Functional magnetic resonance imaging
NEA	National Endowment for the Arts (USA)
NLT	National Literacy Trust (UK)
PET	Positron emission typography
TLS	<i>Times Literary Supplement</i>
ToM	Theory of Mind
YA	Young adult fiction/literature/text
YALSA	Young Adult Library Services Association (USA)

# Introduction

Over the past three decades, there has been much scholarly debate focused on the genre of Young adult fiction (YA), examining theories surrounding its emergence as a stand-alone category, its authorial motivations, its institutional purchase and, indeed, its *raison d'être*.<sup>1</sup> In 1996, Michael Cart provided a comprehensive overview of the field and its demographic – the teenager – who had been nominally identified in a social and cultural context after World War II and by the mid-1960s was a visible and vocal tier of contemporary society.<sup>2</sup> His work, *From Romance to Realism: 50 Years of Growth and Change in Young Adult Literature* (1996), traces the evolution of the genre from its origins in the 1950s, through its so-called Golden Age during the 1970s, to a conclusion that ponders the multiple literacies of modern adolescence and the ‘death of print’. In an updated edition in 2010, Cart makes it clear that, despite the passage of time, the undeniable appeal of YA continues to lie in its ability to articulate the gritty complexities of the transition to adulthood (Cart, 1996, p. 43).

Indeed, a survey of contemporary juvenile fiction illustrates that the problem novel – with its format centred on a specific dilemma that shows readers that they are not alone in facing life’s existential questions – stems from the YA styles of the late 1960s and early 1970s (Aronson, 2001, p. 55). Various studies exploring the themes common to teen novels have also found that their subject matter often continues to revolve around issues of gender formation and curiosity, sexuality and homosexuality, identity, self-image, depression and psychological disturbance.<sup>3</sup> However, regardless of their focus, the authenticity of the teenage voice persists as a lingering concern, even in the more complex investigations into motivation, reception and reaction in the field. Studies focussing on behavioural and linguistic models, have elicited a range of outcomes in relation to interest levels and preferences of young male readers in this regard. Surveys

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<sup>1</sup> The term young adult fiction was coined in the early 1960s by the American Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) to classify works for readers aged between 12 and 18.

<sup>2</sup> Cart is a YA theorist and former YALSA president.

<sup>3</sup> Caren J. Town’s *LGBTQ Young Adult Fiction: A Critical Survey, 1970s-2010s* (2017) provides a thorough overview of the themes that have permeated literature for queer teenagers (Town, 2017). As regards themes of identity, work in the field of narrative and Theory of Mind (ToM) is explored in Maria Nikolajeva’s ‘Memory of the Present: Empathy and Identity in Young Adult Fiction’ (Nikolajeva, 2014). Mental illness, although often featured as a theme in YA, has not been widely explored in a critical sense, with the exception of Miskec and McGee’s work on self-harm in teen fiction (Miskec & McGee, 2007).

of critical work in reader reception, for example, reveal issues of agency and relational, moral and intellectual change as primary factors in motivating or discouraging adolescents to engage with fiction from the ages of 13 to 16.<sup>4</sup> Yet, along with hypotheses around the persuasiveness of gendered language in YA, including a 2017 study that found so-called male ‘genderlect’ (linguistic features defined as gender specific) did not markedly affect adolescent boys’ motivation to read fiction (Pankhurst, 2018), the exploration of these themes is often targeted to suit its academic audience rather than to measure textual development against engagement in reading by teenage boys.

This thesis embarks on a synthesis of current and past critical attention in the field of YA studies and explores the potential gap between exemplary texts and their academic evaluation by focussing on the growing distance between teenage literature and its popularity amongst mid-adolescent male readers – those aged 13 to 16 – over the last 60 years. Using a convergent method that draws on three primary methods – surface reading, cognitive literary theory and Bourdieu’s sociological approach to reading practices – this thesis provides an analysis of the gradual disconnection of teenage boys from the fiction that was designed to engage them and capture their experience. Concurrently, this thesis will consider the emergence of YA narratives that explore the various travails of the adolescent male and the uneven critical reception of this subgenre. These concepts are approached in the context of recent debates about middlebrow fiction and popular cultural forms, which have highlighted the inadequacy of existing aesthetic categories as mechanisms for evaluating the complexity and nuance of their circulation and reception.

In particular, the themes are interrogated not as a hermeneutic exercise but to elicit the multidimensionality of the fictions themselves. Heather Love’s work into the popular, which employs a humanistic social science approach to reading texts, deeply informs this process, her work having introduced a more generous understanding of the relationship between author and reader and thereby displacing a tendency toward any

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<sup>4</sup> See Guthrie et al., 2012; Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000; Reschly & Christenson, 2012; Wigfield & Guthrie, 1997; Yazzie-Mintz & McCormick, 2012.

emblematic readings.<sup>5</sup> So too, the historical legacy of popular literature as a middle-class conceit, tethered to notions of the middlebrow and its self-appointed tastemakers, acts as a catalyst for enquiries into the reading of YA as a communal act, allowing a deeper understating of adolescent motivation.<sup>6</sup>

Each of the four chronologically staged chapters focuses on a single and seminal work of YA that acts as a cultural, social and political chronicle of its circumstances. The works are deliberately drawn from an American stable as a way of acknowledging the influence of the country's authors and texts on the genre and the substantial body of subsequent critical attention that has been paid by Western scholars to American YA. The exemplary texts – *The Catcher in the Rye* by J. D. Salinger (1951), *The Outsiders* by S. E. Hinton (1967), Robert Cormier's *The Chocolate War* (1974) and *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* by Stephen Chbosky (1999) – represent a turning point or departure from either traditional adult literature or YA in this American sphere. Specifically, they have been selected because, in each case, their publication generated a significant scholarly discourse from which arguments and comparisons may be made. In this respect, they have proven themselves as part of a popular counter-canon of literature that has been marked by controversy and an elevation to cult-like status by readers, if not critics.<sup>7</sup> It is important to note here that there has been a historical tendency towards critical specificity in analysing the genre (Humble, 2012, p. 2). As an example, early work published in journals such as *The ALAN Review*, *Journal of Adult and Adolescent Literacy* and *SIGNAL* favoured an applied criticism in institutional readings of YA (Hunt, 1996, p. 8). Since the 1970s, a growing number of academic journals from Australia, North America, the United Kingdom and Scandinavia have supported a broader and more nuanced critical scholarship, with *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, *Children's Literature*, *The Lion and the Unicorn* and *International Research*

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<sup>5</sup> Love in 'Close Reading, Thin Description' (2013) argues for a method of reading that employs the humanistic elements of the social sciences to elicit meaning rather than inferring it through the application of theoretical frameworks (Love, 2013, p. 402).

<sup>6</sup> In 'The Reader of Popular Fiction' (2012), Nicola Humble argues that the reading of fictions of the everyday is part of a powerful communal act (Humble, 2012, p. 87). Kerry Mallan in *Secrets, Lies and Children's Fiction* (2013) aids an exploration of the obscured philosophical and moral rhetoric that presents itself in YA under the veil of the popular (Mallan, 2013).

<sup>7</sup> Each of the four texts has had a sustained appearance on either *The New York Times Best Sellers List* or has won the ALA Best Book for Young Adults award.

in *Children's Literature* taking the lead in enquiries that employ theoretical criticism to explore texts.

However, despite this widening critical perspective, YA academics such as Karen Coats argue that adolescent literature is still rarely perceived as a destination genre. Instead, it is more likely to be regarded as an in-between literature that is most useful for pedagogical application or as entertainment before readers move into “the more serious work of studying capital L literature” (Coats, 2011, p. 317). Yet, the popular success of the four selected works, their often-contested appearance on high school reading lists and their enduring referential and intertextual role in the genre demand that they each be recognised as key texts in its evolution.<sup>8</sup> This may be argued of other YA that emerged alongside or after these works. However, what sets the chosen texts apart is their substantial and distinctive generational impact on a literary form that has historically converged narratives of adolescent male development with the conventions of the quest or adventure forms.<sup>9</sup>

By applying a range of sociological perspectives on the reading habits of young adult males to the texts and their reception, this thesis adds to a body of critical work that is yet to explain fully the steady turn away from fiction by adolescent males since the 1950s.<sup>10</sup> The range of literature examined is deliberately finite, spanning fifty years from the nominal outset of YA as a genre after World War II and largely concentrating on American novels. Circumscribing the exemplary texts by geography in this manner allows an exploration of the flow-on effects to Australia, Canada, Britain and other Western nations of the universal masculinity broached in these highly influential works.

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<sup>8</sup> It is interesting to note that the Common Core initiative, launched in American schools in 2009, allows a Grade 10 English student studying ‘Rites of Passage’, for example, to study no works of classic literature at all. Instead, teachers may choose from a range of sources, such as *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, *Fox Business* and other news outlets, that reference the core learning unit (Bauerlein, 2013).

<sup>9</sup> The notable quest narratives that punctuate the 60 years under examination in this thesis include *The Lord of the Flies* (1954) and the *Hardy Boys* detective series (1959-2005). Later, those generic themes were adopted by writers such as Madeleine L’Engle in her prolific output from the 1960s until the 1980s and J. K. Rowling, who dominated from 1997 until 2007 with the *Harry Potter* series.

<sup>10</sup> In *The Critical Merits of Young Adult Literature: Coming of Age* (2014), Craig Hill describes the genres of children’s and YA fiction as undergoing a period of intense critical scrutiny over the last 30 years. Those approaches include analyses of dialogic language, heteroglossia and intertextuality by theorists such as Trites (2000), McCallum (1999) and Nikolajeva (2014). Further enquiries also include those into Lacanian notions of narratology by Coats (1999) and concepts of authenticity of voice by Cadden (2000). However, there still appears to be ample critical space to explore the perspectives of this thesis by paying particular attention to specific texts in the genre’s formal and critical trajectory.

Similarly, limiting the study by period and thereby discounting the phenomenal success of works such as the *Harry Potter* series or *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent* trilogies enables a focus on the genesis and evolution of contemporary realism in YA that has percolated out of the American market. Accordingly, fantasy novels and their oeuvre are removed from the scope of this thesis for three specific reasons.

First, this study centres on YA fictions that present themselves as anchored in the everyday travails of adolescent male experience, a world bereft of the comforting fictions of supernatural powers or heroic quests. While they seek an audience, and in some cases find a significant one, they are not conceived or received as popular blockbusters. It is important to note at this point too, that when the terms ‘popular novel’ or ‘YA reader’ are used in this thesis, the semantic parameters of those concepts have also shifted in parallel with the genre. Although both acclaimed as best-selling novels of their time and genre, the difference in popularity between *The Catcher in the Rye* and *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* for example, is evident in book sales, the former reported to have sold more than 65 million copies (Yardley, 2004) and the latter only 500,000 (Lodge, 2014).

Coinciding with statistics that speak of the diminishing popularity of literature amongst teenage boys, the demographic of YA readership has also altered sharply in the 40 years between publication of the two titles that bookend this study. This shift reinforces the need to return to the generic origins of YA as a way of tracing a trajectory to its current state. For, despite declarations that YA is the “fastest-growing category in fiction” (Sydney Writers’ Festival, 2015), it is not the reading appetite of adolescent males that is driving demand. An American study carried out in 2012, entitled *Understanding the Children’s Book Consumer in the Digital Age*, found that 55 per cent of YA books were bought by readers aged 18 and over, with the largest segment aged 30 to 44 years (Nielsen Book, 2012). Of that segment, 78 per cent reported that they were buying for their own reading (Publishers Weekly, 2012). According to YA publishers, this has resulted in a noticeable lack of contemporary fiction aimed at older teenage boys, stemming from a limited core of material written for younger adolescent boys, which in turn leads to a dwindling male readership towards the later teen years (Corbett, 2013).



The second reason that certain seminal twenty-first century YA titles have been omitted from this analysis is that from a sociological perspective, the literary works produced for and by digital natives in the wake of the internet boom must be considered differently. Their stories are inherently impacted by an altered literary environment, regardless of whether their authors aim to acknowledge, repudiate, defy or embrace the new forms of meaning-making available to their audiences. The influence of digital technology – both as a medium and in terms of its content – is clearly a significant factor in the sharp decline in teenagers who read fiction for pleasure. However, its prevalence alone does not explain why the phenomenon is more marked in the male population. Media theorists such as Marshall McLuhan may have had us believing that the analysis of content is a blunt instrument in evaluating the impact of medium on its audience (McLuhan, 1964, p. 7). Yet, it is by observing content that an accurate secondary textual analysis is possible, providing potential answers to questions of resistance. Where a primary reading allows a critical understanding of the author's intention or the derivative effects of the writer's political, historical and cultural sympathies, a secondary reading acknowledges that texts exist in a fluid state that changes over time and space, driven by an audience's own perceptive and interpretative re-readings. This second approach avoids the "fatally reductive" tendency, as Fredric Jameson describes it (Jameson, 1982, p. 27), to periodise or limit the analysis of texts to the specific historical era in which they are produced, or indeed the medium from which they are generated. Instead, it allows both the intentional and the private/particular meaning of the text to hold equal weight. Hence, this thesis concentrates on how the origins of that content have influenced male reading patterns and how alternative media may have slowly eroded the value of discovery and wonder that comes from the measured and attention-heavy requisites of engaging with long-form content.<sup>11</sup>

The third, and perhaps most important, reason to concentrate primarily on what could be considered archival forms of YA, rather than their contemporary counterparts, is that the more recent works must be viewed as benefiting from the heritage of generic

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<sup>11</sup> If we accept this assumption, then the implications for YA and its relationship to the adolescent mind and body are significant. Media theorist David Wellbery, in the foreword to Friedrich Kittler's *Discourse Networks 1800/1900* (1990), presents the compelling argument that: "the body is the site upon which the various technologies of our culture inscribe themselves" (Wellbery, 1990, p. xiv). In the ensuing decades since Kittler wrote of the influence of media on the mind and body, this type of medial determinism can only be considered to have exponentially amplified in the rapidly evolving digital environment.

reformations made in adolescent literature that occurred during the second half of the twentieth century. Just as YA did not emerge in isolation from the pre-1950 literary field, nor did its twenty-first century iterations. Works such as *Tom Brown's School Days* (1857), *Huckleberry Finn* (1884), *The Jungle Book* (1894) and *The Lord of the Flies* (1954) wove their threads of imperial masculinity through the characters of Holden Caulfield and Ponyboy Curtis well before they did Harry Potter or Katniss Everdeen, despite their authors seeking to resist their influence. In this respect, early twenty-first century YA can be considered a generative literature that has come full circle, albeit in an unfamiliar guise. That is to say, the cultural practice of reading fiction has returned to notions rooted in the eighteenth-century Romance novel that define and perpetuate the act of reading as a habit of the feminised and interior mind. With female readers constituting the majority of the popular literature audience for the last 200 years, (Humble, 2012, p. 86; Mitchell, 2012, p. 122), the gender bias in readership, if not authorship, has been both an aid and a hindrance to the genre, with significant consequences in relation to depictions of gendered archetypes.<sup>12</sup> Accordingly, the exemplary case studies of this thesis aim to identify and map the catalysts for this metaphoric return to historic form.

Concentrating on mid-century works as pivotal to contemporary themes also allows for an examination of how the entrenched association of the genre with the female reader has enabled a persistent critical dismissal of YA as a subordinate form. In *The New Literary Middlebrow: Tastemakers and Reading in the Twenty-First Century* (2014), literary culture theorist Beth Driscoll suggests that critics and educators are perennially concerned with the legitimacy of texts and the way in which they should be read (Driscoll, 2014). This concern translates into a sense of literary authority that extends beyond the academic and into value judgements. In this sense, literature for adolescents continues to be deployed in a range of pedagogical roles, from enticing the reluctant reader, to validating adolescent culture.<sup>13</sup> The resulting conflict for adolescent male

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<sup>12</sup> In terms of stories of the everyday, popular fiction has enabled, for example through second-wave feminism, the reclaiming of neglected voices in women's writing (Glover & McCracken, 2012, p. 8).

<sup>13</sup> A review entitled *Young Adult Literature: A Key to Literacy* (2000) by educator J. Elaine White, traces the history of YA as an educative tool since the 1970s. She pays particular attention to Paulo Freire's work with illiterate Brazilians (White, 2000). In *Literacy: Reading the Word and the World* (1973), Freire's research found that to make literacy enticing it must, above all other criteria, be relevant to the lives of its readers (Freire, 1973).

readers is a generational narrative that exists as a barometer of cultural sentiment whilst simultaneously occupying the space of diminished art form. As an example, a UK study entitled *What Kids are Reading 2017* tracked the reading practices of almost one million school students across 4,000 schools (Topping, 2017). The concise and rather disheartening conclusion of the research was that when boys read, they chose books that were too easy for them and did not read correctly or thoroughly. Boys also spent far less time processing words than girls, happily skipping ‘boring’ parts of texts and tending never to move on to more challenging works, with the result being a failure to strike a deep connection with the material.<sup>14</sup> In the minds of its adolescent male readers, the implication of the study was that YA may speak of boys, but it belongs to girls.

Although YA is marketed to teenagers as a genre of and for their time, the fact remains that much of the literature aimed at mid-adolescent boys struggles to find an audience. A study into the reading habits of teenagers conducted by the Australia Council for the Arts (ACA) in 2000 found that reading for pleasure declined rapidly in frequency and intensity as children approached adolescence. In particular, secondary school-aged boys were the group least likely to regard fiction reading as an acceptable and legitimate pastime amongst their peers (ACA, 2000, p. 7). As a result, authors and publishers increasingly view teenage females as a far easier demographic to please.

To understand the multiple factors that contribute to adolescent males’ turning away from fiction, this thesis takes the form of a comparative chronological study of the texts themselves, coupled with an exploration of teenage male reading practices since the 1950s to identify the key points of engagement and resistance. In addition, by examining literary depictions of the male mind and body in generic YA archetypes through the lens of gendered reading, the study follows the progressive impact of new forms of imaginative experience in shaping concepts and enactments of adolescent subjectivity. This mapping serves two purposes. First, it establishes how the writing and reading of adolescent males in YA has evolved over the last half-century, including the methodological approaches that have been useful in analysing the field. Second, and perhaps more importantly, it tests a range of underexplored concepts in the corporeal,

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<sup>14</sup> The studies drew on data from a computer programme used across the United Kingdom that measures pupils’ reading ability. The studies focussed specifically on comprehension amongst readers aged five to 18 years. Interestingly, the research revealed that there were no discernible differences in the findings amongst the wide range of socio-economic demographics (Topping, 2017).

temporal and spatial dimensions of adolescence as possible reasons for the diminishing relevance of prose fiction in the lives of teenage males.

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Specifically, as a way of addressing the current state of scholarship, this thesis aims to extend the work of children's literature theorist Roberta Seelinger Trites, in pursuing the physical body as a totem of power and powerlessness in adolescent literature (Trites, 2000, p. x).<sup>15</sup> Trites argues that, "if our minds script what our bodies know, it seems inevitable that psychological growth would become the predominant model in literature written for people experiencing the greatest biophysical growth of their lives" (Trites, 2012, p. 78). Certainly, her assertion locates the distinct and historical influence of biological change as a theme and form of specific embodied language in YA, yet it also leaves available for scrutiny the growing disengagement of young males from the traditional models of telling and reading the growing and changing self. A balance of chronological and granular close analysis in this thesis aims to fill the gaps in current research, and at the same time reveal how the repurposing of old literature into dynamic and complex new forms has produced a generation who are resistant to the slow, time-consuming practice of long-form reading.

The focus of this analysis rests on the depiction of the male and masculinity as a cultural construct, with an emphasis on how normative patriarchal hegemony has intersected with the sociological and feminist strands of the critical literature on YA. In a broad sense, the lineage of masculinity in this sphere rests on what Rita Felski describes in *The Gender of Modernity* (1995) as a narrative of progress that privileges agency and function, over form and affect (Felski, 1995, p. 101). Under the particular microscope of adolescent literary analysis, Victoria Flanagan progresses that notion in 'Reframing Masculinity: Female-to-Male Cross-Dressing' (2002), suggesting that these constructions continue to shape literature for the young by depicting its deviations in inferior or absurd forms (Flanagan, 2002, p. 78).

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<sup>15</sup> Literature critic Lisa Zunshine argues in *Why We Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel* (2006) for fiction as a developmental constituent of social and cultural empathy, whilst Trites' arguments rest on the concurrency of adolescent fiction, physical embodiment and cultural construction as central to social meaning-making (Trites, 2012, p. 64).

The underlying premise of this work is that in this closely guarded framework, the adolescent male psyche is dominated by a physicality that in its quest for release through imaginative play – in concepts of fantasy, the future, alternative versions of the present and parallel worlds – is insufficiently sated by traditional prose fiction.<sup>16</sup> By examining texts, rather than behaviours alone, the aim is to elicit a deeper sense of how and why fiction has become an outmoded exemplar of male identity, not only in the novels prescribed by schools and institutions, but also in those available for self-selection.<sup>17</sup> In this respect, it is important to view YA from the wider perspective of popular culture, with specific attention paid to its reception.<sup>18</sup> For any work of literature to be considered popular, there exists a tension between what is the genuine reflection of a social milieu, and that which is imposed upon the public by those for whom “culture is a business” (Glover & McCracken, 2012, p. 3). This is a particular issue for adolescent fiction simply because its audience occupies a fleeting and transient phase between childhood and adulthood where the potential for educators, authors, publishers and marketers to inform the zeitgeist is ripe. It is relevant to note here that the influence of multi-national publishing houses has been instrumental in shaping the YA demographic, with a subtle evolution occurring around 1996 in which the marketing of adolescent fiction changed its focus such that the official target is now recognised as those aged 15 to 25 (Rybakova et al., 2013; Cart, 2003).<sup>19</sup>

The objective of YA in this recalibrated environment complicates its function, forcing multi-dimensionality where it is required to represent and connect with so many more

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<sup>16</sup> Although Jodie Webster, publisher at Allen & Unwin, cites fantasy/science fiction as their best-sellers for teenage boys (Webster, 2014), there continues to be a drift away from fiction amongst male readers.

<sup>17</sup> Data from a comprehensive survey of school students conducted by the Australia Council for the Arts (ACA) found that adolescent boys who were not engaged in fiction reading complained that it was “boring” and that it denied them the chance to prove themselves or “be a hero” like they might on a football pitch (ACA, 2000, p. 20). Of further significance was the finding that a large number of adolescents disliked the literary texts set as compulsory reading in senior school. Sixty per cent of respondents claimed that they would rather read a magazine (ACA, 2000, p. 22).

<sup>18</sup> Kerry Mallan, in her observations about the highly mediated field of children’s and adolescent literature, argues that reception to the texts is subject to the rules, relationships and conventions of various sectors, including the marketplace, which shape its production and reception (Mallan, 2013, p. 8). Kimberley Reynolds too, describes literature for the young as, unlike the adult genre, occupying a paradoxical cultural space that is highly regulated yet critically overlooked (Reynolds, 2007).

<sup>19</sup> A post-adolescent reading category defined as “new adult” began to emerge around 2009, articulated by the multi-imprint publisher, St. Martin’s Press. The sector, which encapsulates readers aged 18 to 30, deals with issues common to YA literature whilst incorporating the adult responsibilities of work or university.

translations of adolescent identity than its 1950s progenitors.<sup>20</sup> In this respect, YA performs the dual function of being both a producer and consumer of adolescent culture, with its purpose deeply embedded in the author's projection of his or her own literary and cultural intention, be that pedagogical, reflective or exploratory. These themes have emerged as identifiable divisions in the market, with traditional sub-genres metamorphosing into countless derivative forms – from steampunk and speculative fiction to urban fantasy and paranormal romance. Despite this, the genre as a whole continues to act as a narrative of the troubled psyche in opposition to the state or institution, with the steady appeal of science fiction amongst the dwindling number of younger male readers continuing unabated.

Yet the market remains stubbornly female in nature, with the focus of much YA bearing this out in the psychosocial interplay between distribution of power, crises of identity and the pursuit of independence bolstering all manner of material for female readers – one only need think of the popular success of the *Divergent* or *Hunger Games* series.<sup>21</sup> As a result, both the content and mode of consumption associated with YA have come to inform the field itself, its material perpetually assigned to the middlebrow and mediocre. Much like the literary-critical fate of early twentieth-century British fiction – the majority of which was produced and consumed by women – adolescent literature that speaks of emotions, feelings and the quest for alterity also situates the young protagonist and their audience as marginal cultural figures. Nicola Humble in *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s: Class, Domesticity, and Bohemianism* (2001) argues that since the 1920s, this categorising of literature and the vernacular used to describe it has been applied disparagingly to cultural products that are perceived as too simple or insular in their scope (Humble, 2001, p. 1). The consequence of this diminishing evaluation has often been a blindness to the critical and sociological value and complexity of constructions of adolescent masculinity that diverge from normative

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<sup>20</sup> See discussion by Kenneth Donelson and Aileen Pace Nilsen in *Literature for Today's Young Adults* (1980), in which the pair argues that mid-adolescent readers specifically seek out material beyond representations of the teenage self (1980, p. 11).

<sup>21</sup> Publishers of YA have concentrated their efforts on what has increasingly become a terrain dominated by female readers who prefer romance and realism to science fiction and fantasy. A wide-ranging study by the American National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) found that of those who read for leisure, 55 per cent were female and 37 per cent were male (NEA, 2013, p. 14). A comprehensive survey by the UK National Literacy Trust (NLT), determined that of the 64 per cent of adolescents who chose to read fiction outside the classroom, 36 per cent were female, whilst only 28 per cent were male (NLT, 2013).

heroic conventions and didactic messaging.<sup>22</sup> However, these timeworn fictions are progressively failing to find an audience in an environment that offers myriad alternative ways of making meaning. This thesis addresses this convergence of social, critical and literary factors, in the broader context of what the National Endowment of the Arts (NEA) describes as the “vast cultural impoverishment” that will result from a generation of lost readers (NEA, 2002, p. ii).

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There are a number of productive interrogatory methods that can be mobilised to reveal the genesis, impact, content and reception of YA on adolescent males. One could concentrate on its various divergences from the traditional conventions of the bildungsroman seminally exemplified by Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship* (1795-96).<sup>23</sup> As regards its place in popular culture, a useful approach may be to examine the sudden arrival and infiltration of paperback fiction for teenagers during the latter half of the twentieth century that began with titles such as *The Lord of the Flies* (1954). Certainly, during this time the paperback was identified as the form most likely to be bought and read by adolescents due to its inexpensive nature, which in turn attracted the attention of government censors during the early 1950s.<sup>24</sup> Equally profitable would be an assessment of the radical departure of contemporary YA from the historical narratives of the alienated, yet exceptional, child that inhabit the pages of Victorian literary classics such as *Great Expectations* and *Jane Eyre*. Another angle would be to explore the uneven critical reception of YA both in an academic and

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<sup>22</sup> Trites argues that adolescent literature has the overwhelming need to ‘teach’, with an overriding generic desire to exhibit what the protagonist has learned by the novel’s end (Trites, 2000, p. ix). This is an important factor to understand when considering that YA titles in 2015 generated US\$4.2 billion in book sales. The recurring themes of social and psychological construction – depicted by isolation, deprivation or disconnection – drove the sales (AAP StatShot, 2016). The top sellers that year included *Paper Towns* and *Looking for Alaska*, (stories that revolve around suicide and disappearance), both by John Green and *Me and Earl and the Dying Girl* (about a terminally ill teenager) by Jesse Andrews.

<sup>23</sup> Critics widely acknowledge Goethe’s work to be the first in the *Bildungsroman* style. Jerome Buckley identifies the defining characteristics that separate it from either child or adult literature as the protagonist’s capacity to work and love (Buckley, 1974, pp. 22-23). However, feminist critics such as Elizabeth Abel suggest that the objectives of these types of literature differ depending on the protagonist’s gender, arguing that female characters are more likely to be seeking out psychological maturation and intimate relationships as their goal (Abel, Hirsch, & Langland, 1983, p. 9).

<sup>24</sup> The House Select Committee on Current Pornographic Materials, an American government body active from 1952-1953 and commonly known as The Gathings Committee, determined that inexpensive editions of literature found a wider market amongst adolescent readers and should therefore be subject to more rigorous scrutiny around issues of moral decency (Schick, 1958, p. 110).

middlebrow critical context, and consider the consequences, if any, for adolescent male reading behaviours.<sup>25</sup> Rather than limiting the scope of the following analysis to one of the above lines of inquiry, this thesis addresses all of these critical concerns in the form of a rigorous close reading of four exemplary texts that follow the trajectory of YA from the mid to the early decades of the twenty-first century.

Close reading in this thesis thus becomes a convergent and borrowing method that draws in the fields of cultural studies, sociology, cognitive narratology, gender studies and the work of media ecologists to uncover the tacit assumptions of homosocial meaning-making in literature for the young.<sup>26</sup> The seminal work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick remains central to this project, reinforcing the constitutive role of the homosocial bond between men that she describes in *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985) as “not detrimental to ‘masculinity’ but definitive of it” (Sedgwick, 1985, p. 50). Sedgwick, and more recently, Love, have opened up new ways of understanding and unpacking the implicit moral universalisms that shape the narration of gendered behaviour. Love’s critically generative combination of queer and surface reading, in particular, is pivotal for this thesis’ analysis of the literary construction and reading of adolescent male sexuality in the context of the ever-shifting forms of YA in the second half of the twentieth century.

The objective is not to extract or trace a shared critical meaning in or through the novels, but to coax out differential interpretations as a way of charting a lineage and gauging the impact of generic literary renditions of the masculine in adolescent fiction. In this respect, Love’s practice of micro-sociological ‘surface reading’ is infinitely useful in combatting what she describes as ‘thick’ description.<sup>27</sup> The conventions of

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<sup>25</sup> Research from the United Kingdom, United States and Australia demonstrates a continuing decline in the number of adolescent boys who read for pleasure (Carpenter, 2014; Zickuhr & Rainie, 2013; Allen, 2008; Iyengar, 2007). An analysis of the reading habits of Americans that spanned the period from 1946 to 1977 showed a sharp drop in adolescents who chose to read daily, from 66 per cent in 1975 to 57 per cent in 1978 (Robinson, 1980, p. 141). The NEA survey of reading habits amongst the American population showed that the rate of decline in literary reading has accelerated from five per cent between 1982 and 1992 to 14 per cent since 1992 and 2002 (NEA, 2002). The Chairman of the NEA’s study of reading habits conducted in 2002 stated that: “Literary reading in America is not only declining among all groups, but the rate of decline has accelerated, especially among the young” (NEA, 2002, p. i).

<sup>26</sup> Specifically, this study calls on Judith Butler’s articulations of performative masculinity explored in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1999).

<sup>27</sup> In ‘Close Reading, Thin Description’ (2013), Love describes ‘surface reading’ as one that concentrates on literal meaning, often sidelining metaphorical depth and symbolism, by making reading central and focussing on the visible and material forms of social reality that it describes (2013, pp. 411-412).



‘thick’ or ‘deep’ reading, which attempt to speak for the hierarchies, cultures and conduct of writers and readers, are problematic in that they so often imbue a meaning that is erroneously imbricated by the critic.<sup>28</sup> Instead, my aim is to move away from those methods influenced by 1970s semiotics and self-reflexivity that rely on depth hermeneutics and emblematic readings, towards one that promotes the humanistic social sciences as a way of allowing literature to reveal its meaning through the writing and reading of texts (Love, 2013, p. 402). In this fashion, the thesis attempts what Love describes as a “thin description undertaken in proximate disciplines” that scrutinises texts for patterns of behavior and visible activity rather than trafficking in speculation about interiority, meaning or depth (Love, 2013, p. 404).

The rationale behind using the techniques of close reading, rather than employing its specific methodology of emphatic precision, is to avoid a critical rhetoric of mastery that Felski describes in *The Limits of Critique* (2015) as doing “symbolic violence to a text” in its refusal to acknowledge feeling and emotion in its evaluation (Felski, 2015, p. 10). In this respect, it is a method that also borrows from Franco Moretti’s theory of ‘distant reading’, which despite its focus on the European novel, is equally applicable to YA. Moretti’s argument is that texts that sit outside the formal auspices of the American canon, such as world literature or YA might, are rarely considered as autonomous developments, but instead as a compromise between a western formal influence and ‘local’ materials (Moretti, 2000, p. 58).

Surface reading as a productive method across the diverse fields of this thesis permits the text, as separated but not estranged from its context, to reveal the shifting relevance of the YA voice in the process of adolescent meaning-making and its subsequent place in a cultural hierarchy. The ultimate aim of this approach is to avoid a symptomatic or diagnostic reading.<sup>29</sup> Rather, it is driven by a desire to appreciate what attracts or repels the adolescent male reader and how they have used and continue to use fiction in

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<sup>28</sup> Love offers anthropologist Clifford Geertz’s essay ‘Deep Play: Notes on a Balinese Cockfight’ as an example of ‘thick description’ – the tendency by literary critics to extend the reading of texts beyond their original meaning. By applying complex hermeneutical analysis to the everyday practices depicted in opaque literary texts, Geertz interpolates the hierarchies and behaviours of masculinity in the Balinese community (2013, p. 401). In ‘Close but not Deep: Literary Ethics and the Descriptive Turn’ (2010) Love outlines the historical practice of relying on these hermeneutics in literary studies (2010, p. 373).

<sup>29</sup> Felski argues that the 30 years of literary criticism leading to the early twentieth century were dogged by decentering and de-familiarising the subject as methods of enquiry. This approach, she states, was rather futile as it merely ‘unmasked’ what the critic already knew (Felski, 2008, p. 1).

different ways as a form of meaning-making. Felski articulates this path in *Uses of Literature* (2008), in which she advocates for a “respectful rather than reductive” engagement with literature (Felski, 2008, p. 7). Unconvinced by ideological strategy or instrumental rationality, she opts for a reading technique that recognises the aesthetic value of literature as inseparable from its use. Specifically, she calls for a “heightened attentiveness to the details of milieu and moment and to the multifarious ways in which gender and literature interconnect” (Felski, 2008, p. 9).

This approach informs this thesis, specifically in its avoidance of any temptation to draw some type of inviolable thread between aesthetics and politics that simply does not exist. What has been resisted here is the mistake of forcing an unnatural correlation between the text and the conditions of its social production.<sup>30</sup> As a result, this work undertakes a careful chronological mapping of YA that attends to the specificity of each novel, yet neither extends nor demotes the significance of the texts’ individual language, environment or form in the wider narratives of their socio-historical provenance. Accordingly, the ongoing institutional implications, generational re-readings and historical gendering of these works will be equally scrutinised as factors in the evolving and diminishing desire amongst adolescent males to read traditional long-form fiction and, correspondingly, the narrowing scope of fiction written for and consumed by those teenagers.<sup>31</sup>

It is at this intersection, of the practical and theoretical inquiries into historically composed and culturally perpetuated renditions of adolescent masculinity in YA, which this thesis will focus. In the slow, yet quietly progressing displacement of the teenage male as a motif of power and change in fiction for the young, this thesis makes a contribution to the field by exploring the shifting articulation of adolescence in literature and its role in the historical decline in reading for pleasure by teenage boys.

Over the course of this dissertation, specific modes of thinking by theorists, including George Lakoff, Mark Johnson, Bruno Latour and Pierre Bourdieu, lay the groundwork for its practical elements, situating the fields of sociology, cognitive narratology and

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<sup>30</sup> There has been a tendency amongst literary scholars, argues Felski, to impose between textual and social structures a causal link to literary forms and larger political effects (Felski, 2008, p. 8).

<sup>31</sup> In ‘New Trends in YA: The Agent’s Perspective’, analysts argue that the content of much modern YA is now typically aimed at a reading audience that is overwhelmingly female (Corbett, 2013).

cultural studies within the physical body of the adolescent male.<sup>32</sup> The historical and philosophical practices of reading are addressed under the rubrics of gender and affect, aided by the work of theorists such as Felski, Love, Judith Butler and Sianne Ngai.<sup>33</sup>

## **i. Mapping the Field of a Gendered Form**

Situating YA within this cross-disciplinary paradigm and identifying the critical repertoire that aids a productive reading of the exemplary texts begins with mapping the field. The first consideration in this respect is to note that YA is a hybrid genre that is often overlooked as a lesser art form.<sup>34</sup> Yet, by acknowledging and locating adolescent literature in a wider cultural, social and political setting – not merely as an ideological or subordinate “jeans prose” that dwells on what adolescence might or should be – there emerges an alternative picture.<sup>35</sup> It becomes a story of the complex interplay of human emotions, cultural practice, market forces and the search for identity obscured in the guise of genre fiction. There is arguably no better way into this complex arena than through the text itself – since the words are essentially what is being tested as the central point of engagement or rejection for teenage boys in their decision to read or not. The idea of finding some type of truth within the text seems almost essential. In this regard, it is important to see past the self-conscious eighteenth-century bifurcation of literature into fiction and non-fiction that allowed readers to distinguish “fact” from “deception” (Gallagher, 2006, p. 338), and instead view the genre as providing a private

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<sup>32</sup> The work around cognitive narratology in this thesis relies on the arguments of Lakoff and Johnson in *Metaphors We Live By* (1980) and *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and its Challenge to Western Thought* (1999). Bourdieu’s *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature* (1993) lays the foundation for sociological discussions within this work, which are then advanced by borrowing from Latour’s *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (2005). Queries into gendered reading draw from Love’s ‘Close but not Deep: Literary Ethics and the Descriptive Turn’ (2010), ‘Safe’ (2012) and ‘Close Reading and Thin Description’ (2013).

<sup>33</sup> Felski’s work in *The Gender of Modernity* (1995), *Uses of Literature* (2008) and *The Limits of Critique* (2015), informs much of the theoretical work in relation to the language of YA and is also used to frame Ngai’s arguments regarding affect in *Ugly Feelings* (2005) and ‘Our Aesthetic Categories’ (2010) across the four case studies.

<sup>34</sup> In *No Respect: Intellectuals and Public Culture* (1989), Andrew Ross identifies the shifting status of the critic in questions of literary worth, pointing to an intellectual class who ‘slum it’ as a way of mixing with popular culture – what he refers to as a *cordon sanitaire* (Ross, 1989, p. 5).

<sup>35</sup> A formal term for adolescent literature was probably first couched by Yugoslav scholar Aleksander Flaker in *Models of Jeans Prose* (1975). Flaker cites *The New Sufferings of Young W* (1972) by the East German novelist Ulrich Plenzdorf, which is loosely based on *The Catcher in the Rye*, as setting the tone for the future of YA in Europe (Hilton & Nikolajeva, 2012, p. 8).

inscape somewhere between the two, an entrée into an intimate world of character and mood, setting and moment.<sup>36</sup>

The legacy of the historical division of fiction and non-fiction, which necessarily affects how texts are read and re-read over time and place, is specifically relevant to the YA genre because aside from its natural progenitor – children’s literature – there is no other fiction that is so often utilised for its educative potential. Exploring its unique influence, this thesis employs Bourdieu’s work on cultural production not just as a way of situating adolescent fiction within the broader field of literature, but as a way of interrogating the implications of a “scholastic consecration” of texts that shape ideologies through systems of institutionalised cultural conservatism (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 124).<sup>37</sup> This process and its ensuing implications are what Bourdieu declares in *The Field of Cultural Production* (1993) as an unequal relationship in which the collaboration of producer and consumer always favours the former over the latter. In his work on cultural capital and the role of media in its synthetic formulation in ‘The Market of Symbolic Goods’, Bourdieu finds that its agencies of consecration – publishers, screenwriters, producers and the like – are invested with the job of producing cultural legitimacy while simultaneously being subordinated by economic and social constraints (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 112).

If this spoke to the late twentieth century, then it is magnified ten-fold in the twenty-first. The rapid maturation, proliferation and sophistication of digital technology and new media have created a direct conduit between these agencies and their audiences. However, today that exchange is increasingly likely to drive economic and social validity rather than being constrained by it. Yet Bourdieu’s approach to understanding meaning-making remains valid. His theory dictates that one must view the literary field as one of positions and position-taking, which avoids the dilemma of reading a literary artefact from either an internal perspective or an allegorical analytic one (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 34). This approach allows for an acceptance of the social conditions under

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<sup>36</sup> Blakey Vermeule suggests in *Why Do We Care about Literary Characters?* (2011) that “a novel’s first sentence is always worth close inspection. Not only does it suture us into the narrative, but it also sets a limit against which the rest of the art work struggles” (Vermeule, 2010, p. xi).

<sup>37</sup> Bourdieu describes the ‘field’ (*champ*) as part of a dynamic social formation in which economics, education, politics, culture and the like are structured in a series of hierarchies, each defined by their structure, spaces and laws (Johnson, 1993, p. 6).

which a work of textual fiction is produced as part of the contradictory nature of engagement with literature. This understanding, by necessity, includes a tacit consent to the dominant political or aesthetic persuasions of its producers. By foregrounding Bourdieu's notion of restricted production, in which producers or creators position themselves as self-appointed intellectual interpreters, this thesis pursues a productive separation of the symbolic and educative nature of YA from its status as a popular literature (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 6).

Not only does this structure make room for a more nuanced interpretation of how YA operates within and across various social, cultural, political and educational milieu, but it also acquiesces to complementary and discrepant perspectives. Part of this process is to look back as well as forward; to borrow as far as is practicable, from the myriad disciplines that inform the cultural production and reception of YA. As an illustration, Fredric Jameson's hypothesis on the influence of history on literature in *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991), although somewhat reductive in this context, is useful in acknowledging the significance of particular political turning points on the writing of the adolescent in YA.<sup>38</sup> The evolving Cold War after 1950, conflicts in Vietnam during the 1960s and the mainstreaming of pornography during the 1970s, each of which is explored in the case studies, effected identifiable shifts in the social and cultural mindset of the West, making considerable impacts on the temporal and corporeal inscapes of young men and the literature that was written for and about them. Jameson identifies the last vestiges of Modernism during the 1950s – expressionist art, existentialist philosophy and auteur filmmaking – as heralding a new era enumerated by its empirical, chaotic and heterogeneous nature (Jameson, 1991, p. 1). The temporal elements of Jameson's claims are important to consider here because their sensibilities – the questioning of truth as a construction of social, historical and political discourse – coincide precisely with the nascence of what would become a new genre of fiction directly targeted at postmodern youth.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Jameson argues that the evaluation of any social moment is the object of a political affirmation or repudiation that resonates through its art forms (Jameson, 1991, p. 55).

<sup>39</sup> Although the birth of YA is difficult to pinpoint, it is widely acknowledged to be Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, published in 1951. Arguably, this period runs concurrent with the period in which Jameson suggests certain ideologies and movements in art, literature and social democracy were coming to an end, shifting from Modernism to Postmodernism (Jameson, 1991, p. 4).

What is of interest here is how the writing and reception of adolescent literature for and about males was so deeply affected by the social and cultural motifs of masculinity generated during this mid-century period. From images of company men and playboys, to spies and shell-shocked soldiers, it is important to identify the uncomfortable associations between these cultural representations and the production of YA. In this respect, the intersection at which Jameson's theories meet Niklas Luhmann's work on human interaction is productive. Specifically, this intersection highlights the implications of history and memory in the meaning-making process of any system of understanding. In *Social Systems* (1984), Luhmann focusses on the self-referential nature of societies, concentrating on the need for an admission of the self as an object within the system (Luhmann, 1984, p. 13). The argument of this thesis is that the 1950s produced a prescriptive masculinity in which young men had trouble identifying themselves within that system. The result was a cultural apparatus that at once sought to control and deny the power of adolescent males, whilst relying on outdated models to classify the emerging category of the teenager. The purpose of Jameson's perspective in this construction is not only to highlight the growing rift between the entity and its environment, but also to trace the historical distancing of the physical and visceral depictions of adolescent masculinity from the introspective and quietly feminised practice of reading.

The gendering of the novel and the pastime of reading in this scenario is an imperative part of conceptualising the difficult status of YA. Bearing traces of the novel's struggle for cultural legitimacy in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, adolescent fictions still play out the tensions between the classic values of literary conservatism and those of a more progressive, enlightened bourgeoisie. As Nancy Armstrong points out in *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (1987), fiction is heavily burdened by its cultural genealogy, with a reputation as a "vulgar" form that, during the

mid-eighteenth century, was employed to depict the seamy side of English politics and the domestic lives of the undistinguished (Armstrong, 1987, p. 96).<sup>40</sup>

Transposed onto contemporary YA, this inherited structure, which bears the legacy of intellectual subjugation along lines of gender and class, requires the teenage male reader to see himself as a functioning agent in a referential space of the historically feminised and make-believe. In a difficult juxtaposition, he must ascribe the role of ‘informer’ to the fictional characters with whom he engages – a process that sociologist Latour suggests in *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (2005) as the generic taking the place of the specific (Latour, 2005, p. 10). In particular, the male reader must overcome the socially legitimised construction of the feminised novel form and ignore what Latour describes as a system of “convenient shorthand” that designates all the ingredients of associative reasoning in a collective realm (Latour, 2005, p. 11).

In this context, the creeping impact of non-literary forms of meaning-making becomes particularly relevant in relation to the cultural reading practices of adolescent males. Recent research indicates that with the exponential rise in screen-based information sources, there has been a corresponding decline in the number of teenagers, especially males, who read fiction for pleasure. A study conducted in the United Kingdom in 2013 showed that the inclination to read outside school was widening along a gender divide, with twice as many boys as girls reporting that they did no reading whatsoever for leisure (NLT, 2013). In the United States, a trend assessment conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics found that in 1984, about nine per cent of 17-year-olds never, or hardly ever, read for pleasure. By the time the assessment was repeated in 2012, this number had tripled to 27 per cent (Rideout, 2014). Statistically, these figures

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<sup>40</sup> Armstrong identifies the cultural bifurcation of literature, in which the “admirable productions of the classic British authors” separated from the domestic writing of womankind, as occurring during the 1700s (Armstrong, 1987, p. 96). The cultural debate around the gendering of the novel is equally identifiable in the textual rendering of cultural activity during France in the eighteenth century. Literary historian Georges May argues that “le dilemme du roman” centred around the extraordinary cultural connectedness of women during this period, existing as a largely aristocratic elite of readers, patrons and novelists, thereby exerting a significant influence on the art form (Gelfand & Switten, 1988, p. 443). The copious literature around the history of novel-reading as a feminine pastime is neatly summarised in an essay by Andreas Huyssen entitled ‘Mass Culture as Woman: Modernism’s Other’ in *After the Great Divide* (1986). The essay employs Flaubert’s Emma Bovary to highlight the dichotomy between the woman as a passive, emotional reader of inferior literature and the man as the active and objective writer of the authentic (Huyssen, 1986, p. 47).

become significant when considered in conjunction with NEA research, which shows that this adolescent trend translates into non-reading adults, especially amongst men. Their 2012 study found that 56.1 per cent of American female adults and 37 per cent of males had read one or fewer novels in the past 12 months (NEA, 2013, p. 26).

Of course, part of the drift away from print to alternative media amongst adolescent males can be attributed to the extant genealogical link between certain types of popular fiction, such as romance and psychological drama, and the private interiority that continues to position the novel as a feminine form. However, other sub-genres aimed at male readers, such as science fiction, war, history and horror, are also the subject of what Humble describes as genres stubbornly rooted in narratives of middle-class identity and taste-making (Humble, 2001, p. 59), further binding the form to the domestic and non-literary. Of equal relevance is the extent to which the keen embrace of new media has magnified the subtle gendering of meaning-making over the decades surveyed in this thesis. It is evident, for example, that to the current generation of teenagers, the linear, static and non-interactive nature of printed text serves as a barrier to the acquisition of knowledge.<sup>41</sup>

In *Media Archaeology* (2011), Erkki Huhtamo uses the theoretical-historical contextualisation of the topos to illustrate the continuities and ruptures between new media and the historicity that formal literature represents (Huhtamo & Parikka, 2011, p. 3). This model assists greatly in understanding the points of engagement and resistance between adolescent males and literature. Huhtamo's proposition foregrounds historical literary devices as essential to the culture of new modes of understanding, regarding them as discursive engines that are simply newly requisitioned to mediate old themes (Huhtamo & Parikka, 2011, p. 25).<sup>42</sup> In this structure, fiction texts are certainly employable in repurposing the old, yet arguably, they continue to suffer the legacy of

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<sup>41</sup> A shift away from long-read format towards non-sequential and interactive broad reading is evident in a study entitled, 'Impact of Internet on Reading Habits of the Net Generation College Students' (2011). The research found that the ideal length for social content, celebrity news, opinion pieces and sexual content is 1,600 words or seven minutes' worth of reading time (Loan, 2011).

<sup>42</sup> Of the four case studies that occupy this dissertation, it is worth noting the influence of the screen on their reception. *The Catcher in the Rye* has never been made for the cinema. *The Outsiders* was a popular success on celluloid, remediated 16 years after its publication. A screenplay of *The Chocolate War* gained limited success when it was released in 1988 and *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, made into a film some 13 years after its publication, gained most success of the four works in its remediated form.



historical cultural dispositions that designate literature as part of a feminised middlebrow culture.

Addressing an earlier period in the history of reading, Catherine Gallagher successfully unpacks this problematic relationship by focussing on the centrality of effective characterisation. In questioning the Aristotelian view of fictional characters as being a 'type' in which the reader is able to find a referent, she argues that the issue with this schema is that so often the protagonists are neither genuine nor ordinary, but are expected to portray uniqueness under the "generic constraints of referential typicality" (Gallagher, 2006, p. 361). It is here that the infinite and perhaps self-destructive loop in contemporary YA presents itself. That is, how can a medium such as print – being neither dynamic nor interactive in a digital sense – continue to hold referential authenticity for twenty-first century teenage males? It can certainly speak of the fears, joys, transitions and hurdles of adolescent minds and bodies, but as a medium, its slow and protracted regimen is decreasingly a reality that adolescents themselves inhabit.

Occurring concurrently with the diminution of fiction in the lives of adolescent boys, the notion of a digital persona has become an integral part of Western teenage identity. This movement away from paper-based systems of knowledge has produced an environment that is no longer merely 'scriptive', but overwhelmingly visual, acoustic and experiential. The transformation represents a fundamental shift in how humans access and consume information. Unsurprisingly, the *Teens, Social Media, and Technology* review conducted in 2015 by the Pew Research Center found that 92 per cent of American teenagers go online daily (Lenhart, 2015). Another study by the American not-for-profit organisation, Common Sense Media, found that 45 per cent of 17-year-old Americans read fiction for pleasure only "one or twice a year" (Rideout, 2014). Meanwhile, it seems that having myriad texts conveniently and instantly available as e-books has had no effect on the reading of fiction. Extensive research into the online habits of young Americans in 2013 found that when they do have access to a device that has e-reading capabilities, such as a computer, Kindle, iPad, tablet or smart phone, the least common activity reported by the surveyed cohort was the reading of books (Common Sense Media, 2013).

This may be due, in part, to a literary form that for older teenagers no longer follows a model of juvenile escapism. Instead, YA is more likely to be concentrated on wresting control of nature in a dystopian world or fighting the corner of the underdog in a suburban class war.<sup>43</sup> An interdisciplinary conference convened by Mary Hilton and Maria Nikolajeva at Cambridge University in 2010 focused on precisely these issues, with much attention paid to the infiltration of new forms of meaning-making into the everyday lives of adolescents. Scientists, educators and authors met for two days to investigate how the teenage brain was affected or altered by reading popular YA novels, particularly fictions designed to stimulate fear or anxiety, such as the *Twilight* and *Harry Potter* series (Strauss, 2010). As its focus, ‘The Emergent Adult: Adolescent Literature and Culture’ conference wove together the fields of neuroscience and cultural studies to determine how YA affected teenage subjectivity.<sup>44</sup> Although the components of the published conference proceedings were diverse, the singular consensus was unwavering, with each contributor acknowledging the way in which the teenage subject was invariably configured as the troublesome symbolic representation of wider political and societal issues (Hilton & Nikolajeva, 2012, p. 1). This inherent burden on the generic form and its reader posed the central question for the conference participants of how authentic a representation of adolescence an adult author is able to construct. The question was interrogated thoroughly, with the conclusion being that the profound difference in life experience, as well as in linguistic skills, between an adult author and their adolescent reader creates “an inevitable discrepancy” between the narrative voice and the focalised and implied teenage character (Hilton & Nikolajeva, 2012, p. 10).

Here, the work of cultural historian Joseph Kett is useful in identifying the possible reasons behind this discrepancy. In *Rites of Passage: Adolescence in America, 1790 to the Present* (1977), Kett argues that after the teenager was first identified as an

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<sup>43</sup> Perpetual themes of the natural versus the constructed world dominate stories for the young. The purpose of this is evident in the recurring motif of “home/away/home” identified by Perry Nodelman and Mavis Reimer, which foregrounds the pursuit of familiarity and shared culture, often against a common evil, as an ultimate goal in YA fiction (Nodelman & Reimer, 2003, p. 197).

<sup>44</sup> Nikolajeva, director of the Cambridge/Homerton Research and Training Centre for Children’s Literature, described the overarching objective of the conference as an exploration of the physiological, psychological, chemical and sociological effects of reading teenage fiction. The outcomes of the meeting were later published in *Contemporary Adolescent Literature and Culture: The Emergent Adult* (Hilton & Nikolajeva, 2012), which draws together the perspectives of dozens of international academics on the subject of the moral, ideological and literary directions of YA fiction. The work tackles a wide range of issues, from nationhood and sexual awakening to post-colonial awareness and what neuroscience reveals about young adult readers.

autonomous social category by education psychologist G. Stanley Hall in *Adolescence* (1905), a number of progressive evolutions took place. These evolutions resulted in what could only be described as institutionalising the experience of adolescence. Industrialisation brought teenagers to high school as their economic value on farms decreased, administrators began a vocational guidance movement to help adolescents negotiate the transition from school to work and adult-sponsored movements, such as the Scouts, were formed to aid teenagers' physical, spiritual and mental development (Kett, 1977, p. 221). These early twentieth-century methods effectively became a way of controlling the turbulent period of adolescence by prescribing and curating the experience of physical and intellectual maturation.

Indeed, Hilton and Nikolajeva's work suggests that the legacy of these interventions is evident in the motifs of "colonialism, political injustice, environmental desecration, sexual stereotyping, consumerism, madness and death" that are repeatedly put to use in YA to reflect social anxieties (Hilton & Nikolajeva, 2012, p. 1). In this environment, the unmitigated success of utopian and dystopian novels amongst male readers arises from a distinct desire to eschew institutionalised control and shape their own reality. Clare Bradford et al. in *New World Orders in Contemporary Children's Literature: Utopian Transformations* (2008) highlights the genre's reliance on these apocalyptic and Arcadian motifs to satisfy the teenage drive for existential control over their environment.<sup>45</sup> However, critics such as Joanne Faulkner view these mediations of juvenility in a more negative light. In *The Importance of Being Innocent: Why We Worry about Children* (2011), Faulkner suggests that the particular social construction of youth through literature is a by-product of adults' tendency to fetishise children as innocents (Faulkner, 2011, p. 19).

The desires of which Bradford et al. and Faulkner speak – to conform or rebel within the constraints of formulaic literary identity – certainly do appear to be the identifiable legacy of a historical and state-sanctioned shaping of adolescence and gender that typified the early twentieth century. In response, the YA of the 1950s spoke a fresh,

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<sup>45</sup> Although these themes have proved popular in terms of sales, a saturation of the market appears to be imminent, with *Publishers Weekly* reporting from the 2014 Bologna Book Fair that "Realism Reigns" (Sellers & Roback, 2014). Contemporary realism – encapsulated in the success of titles by John Green – is "having a moment", with international publishers moving away from fantasy, science fiction and the paranormal, according to the New York literary agency Trident Media Group (Sellers & Roback, 2014).

sometimes raw and dangerous language of a generation that hitherto had been voiceless. In particular, it spoke a vernacular that referenced the world's new love affair with all things visual, including the 'home screen' (television), which by 1955 was a feature in more than half of American homes (Thompson & Allen, 2017). The screen would eventually come to change the way information and opinion was exchanged and how the understanding of knowledge was constituted.<sup>46</sup>

During this period, conventional portraits of masculinity were fed largely by an enthusiastic uptake of magazines, films and television that observed in detail a changing post-war society, paying special attention to the lifestyles of the middle-classes. The lens of this popular media often trained itself on issues of manliness, and in particular the extremities of the spectrum, from those who epitomised valour and chivalry, to those who made serious departures from normative enactments. For adolescent males who were seeking to establish their identities, the problem was that the era presented a type of limbo for men, in which there was not yet a feeling of the male in crisis, but neither was there a popular sanctioning of experimentation or freedom.

As a genre, YA emerged out of this disjointed social climate, which gender sociologist James Gilbert describes in *Men in the Middle: Searching for Masculinity in the 1950s* (2005) as aberrant and disorientating (Gilbert, 2005, p. 2). While Billy Graham's evangelical revivalism captured the white, conservative core of Middle America, the likes of sex researcher Alfred Kinsey were exploring the visceral desires of the male psyche. Meanwhile, in the awkward centre ground, authors such as Tennessee Williams were writing stories of domestic violence, sexual abuse and emotional blackmail. Yet, what was perhaps the most noteworthy divergence from the wholesome, family-friendly stereotypes of masculinity of the time was the birth of mainstream pornography. Here, *Playboy* magazine, established by Hugh Hefner and his associates in 1953, would very successfully marry highbrow literature with 'soft porn'.<sup>47</sup> With its publication began the declaration and legitimisation of the erotic gaze in mainstream media, shifting from

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<sup>46</sup> According to large-scale studies conducted amongst college students in the United States, teenagers now perceive the internet in much the same way. Their understanding of knowledge is drawn from the perspectival and unstructured 'grabs' of information they engage with on screens on a daily basis (Williamson, 2008; Bowman, 2002; Layva, 2006; Liu, 2005).

<sup>47</sup> The magazine's first issue featured Marilyn Monroe (clothed) on the cover and in various states of undress inside. *Playboy* presented itself primarily as a lifestyle and entertainment magazine, featuring articles, interviews and short stories by respected and prominent authors (Watts, 2008, p. 80).

subculture to commonplace and marking a new distinction between boys' reading and men's reading.

The paranoia surrounding the perceived breaches of social, sexual and corporeal norms that pornography enabled was palpable in how governments dealt with 'subversive' behaviours. Texts such as *Seduction of the Innocent: The Influence of Comic Books on Today's Youth* (1954) by German-American psychiatrist Fredric Wertham articulated the State-led desire to control the behaviours of its young citizens. Wertham argued that comic books were 'evil' and filled with overt and covert portrayals of sex, violence and drug use that were detrimental in particular to the developing psyche of teenage boys (Wertham, 1954, p. 192).<sup>48</sup> Although this fear quietly subsided, the germinating concept of the adolescent male as a dangerous, unpredictable, recalcitrant and promiscuous individual was not so easily dislodged, fuelled by films such as *Rebel without a Cause* (1955).<sup>49</sup> In short, popular media was beginning to mirror the worries that percolated in the wider community after World War II, where assaults on the bodies and minds of an entire generation of young men who had seen active military service were developing into frightening manifestations of the juvenile delinquent and the hoodlum.<sup>50</sup>

In determining how significant an impact those aberrant social manifestations had on the reading practices of adolescent males, it is worth recalling the historically embedded literary influences that led to the birth of the YA genre. Fiction for the young has followed a traceable arc that began with a pragmatic desire to impart pious instruction, evident in the array of religious texts produced for children in the fifteenth century

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<sup>48</sup> *Seduction of the Innocent* created enough alarm amongst American congressional policy-makers that it evoked an acute censorship of comic books during the mid-1950s. However, it soon became apparent that Wertham's findings were based on falsified research in which he "manipulated, overstated, compromised and fabricated" evidence using anecdotal accounts from teenagers with already troubled psychological backgrounds (Tilley, 2012).

<sup>49</sup> A period of oppressive post-war censorship produced a political climate in which films such as *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955) emerged. The film depicted the moral degeneration of American adolescence, with a script that had allegedly begun as a sociological case study of post-war juvenile delinquency (Lhamon, 2012, p. xiii). Whilst the USA operated under heavy-handed post-war censorship, many American writers, artists and moviemakers of the mid-1950s were defiantly tackling taboo subjects in the worlds of literature and cinema. In 1947, the House Committee on Un-American Activities blacklisted more than 300 Hollywood artists for their part in the production of anti-American or pro-Communist films that might promote subversive activity.

<sup>50</sup> A highly controversial 1961 essay, 'The White Negro' by Norman Mailer, articulated the perils of discounting the psychological effects of war on the developing psyche. He cited "the psychic havoc of the concentration camps and the atom bomb upon the unconscious mind" (Mailer, 1961, p. 303) as catalysts for unpredictable and unknowable behaviours in the wider community.

(McMunn & McMunn, 1972). During the sixteenth century, its purpose shifted into the imaginary, with chapbooks for children aiming to delight and entertain through folktales and fables. The focus shifted again in the seventeenth century, with the appearance of hornbooks that sought to educate through instructive tales. It was not, however, until the nineteenth century that an identifiable separation by gender is readily identifiable in the material produced for children. With the publication of works such as *The Boy's Own Book: A Complete Encyclopedia of all the Diversions, Athletic, Scientific, and Recreative, of Boyhood and Youth* (1828) and later, Robert Baden-Powell's *Scouting for Boys* (1908), the focus on constructive physical activity became the new way of speaking to boys.<sup>51</sup> For the first time, texts were available that promoted fun, curiosity, sports and games, rather than the reverential and moral tomes of instruction that had marked earlier works (Henderson, 2001, p. 153).<sup>52</sup> These types of publications, aided by organisations including the Boy Scouts, which aimed to encourage good citizenship and chivalry alongside a thirst for physical enterprise and outdoor activity, catered to the reading public's desire for adventure stories during the nineteenth century and dominated the first half of the twentieth century, setting the scene for much of the literature that followed.

The overt theme of muscular Christianity that peppered these early texts, characterised by piety and physical activity, would become the sardonic muse for a wave of youth publications that began in the 1950s in reaction to social depictions of adolescents that fetishised them as child-like. The importance of acknowledging these sub- and counter-culture texts in this thesis cannot be understated, their arrival marking a literary articulation of young masculinity that radically rewrote the instructive and educative, diversionary and delightful, into the acerbic and derisive. *Mad* magazine, the American satirical comic founded in 1952, used humour to mock the very subjects that *Boy's Own* had reified. Articles parodying popular culture, entertainment and politics filled its pages, with the magazine's mascot, Alfred E. Neuman, portraying a generation of juvenile delinquency – lazy, indifferent, irreverent and unpredictable. The success of *Mad*, which hit its peak in 1974 with more than two million readers, was its

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<sup>51</sup> First published in London and then in Boston in 1829 (Clarke, 1829).

<sup>52</sup> A *Boy's Own* magazine followed in 1855, and continued to be published in magazine form as the *Boy's Own Paper* until 1967, always with the aim of promoting good, wholesome, youthful masculinity through tales of adventure and practical how-to articles.

unapologetic snubbing of the domesticated and commercialised images of modern masculinity.<sup>53</sup> It existed alongside heavily gendered teenage literature, such as *Seventeen* and *Hot Rod* magazine, which epitomised precisely what *Mad* intended to lampoon.<sup>54</sup>

These types of subversive literary actions coincided with a popular style of institutional pedagogy that was well entrenched by the 1960s and had begun a steady and traceable decoupling of adolescent males from reading long-form fiction. For if one considers the distinctly humanistic ethics adopted by schools and universities during the late 1960s, it is clear that an organic rather than mechanic process of learning was making an indelible mark on the way literature was, and continues to be, taught and theorised in institutions.<sup>55</sup> In this situation, the tradition of passing down knowledge through literature becomes problematic in that the act of handing over can never be a neutral function.<sup>56</sup> Philosopher Ian Hunter describes the tendencies of this humanistic approach as dismantling the historical relationship between the teacher and student, a process that by its nature relies almost entirely on observation, identification, correction and exemplification as forms of governance.<sup>57</sup> Each of these elements, argues Hunter, belongs to the history of “pastoral instruction” that positions literature as a “privileged site of moral education and self-making” (Love, 2010, p. 372). By necessity, the model requires there to be a compliant agreement between student and teacher, which in turn produces a culture of institutional reading practice.

It is the figure of the privileged ‘messenger’ or ‘interpreter’ in this construction that I suggest is still central to both the teaching of fiction and fiction itself, thus presenting a persistent difficulty in engaging adolescent boys with literature. The problem lies not

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<sup>53</sup> What made *Mad* unique in the mainstream media was that it contained no advertising (Hatcher, 2001), enabling it to occupy and articulate an adolescent space that was relatively uninfluenced by the ‘agencies of consecration’ that Bourdieu argues subtly orchestrate and dictate patterns of social normalisation.

<sup>54</sup> *Seventeen* magazine – offering advice on fashion, beauty, cooking and finding a husband – launched in 1947, attracting a readership of more than 2.5 million predominantly white, middle-class teenage girls. Meanwhile, their male counterparts were likely to be reading news and special interest titles such as *Time* and *Hot Rod*, although in far fewer numbers (Hatcher, 2001).

<sup>55</sup> Humanistic or ‘third-force’ psychology evolved in response to behaviourist education in the United States during the 1960s. In *Compulsory Mis-education and the Community of Scholars* (1966), Paul Goodman articulates the movement’s ethos of student learning, describing it as a free-flowing result of desire and curiosity, rather than an executive process (Goodman, 1966).

<sup>56</sup> The notion of destroying history in the act of ‘handing over’ is explored by Howard Caygill in *Walter Benjamin’s Philosophy: Destruction and Experience* (Benjamin & Osborne, 1994, p. 21).

<sup>57</sup> See discussion *Culture and Government: The Emergence of Literary Education* (Hunter, 1988, p. 214).

only with the didactic pedagogy necessary to impart meaning in textual content, but at the interface between affective empiricism and the physical experience of one's emotional engagement with literature. In the case of teenage boys and their encounters with fiction, this issue of corporeal engagement is fundamental. As an example, the brain of an adolescent male undergoes a phase of rapid development around the age of 15, specifically in the spheres of advanced reasoning, abstract thinking and self-consciousness, all of which regulate emotion and impulse-control (Steinberg, 2014). During this period, that same 15-year-old is more likely to take unreasonable physical risks because his neural reward circuitry in the prefrontal cortex compels him to seek out, at almost any cost, physical pleasure (Albert, Chein, & Steinberg, 2013; Shulman, Harden, Chein et al, 2014; Steinberg, Strang, Chein et al, 2014). At this unstable stage of cognitive and psychosocial development, I argue that the experience of fiction, and indeed the presence of an authority through whom texts must be filtered, presents an incongruous elision of form and function in the minds of teenage boys.

## **ii. Surface Reading and Cognitive Literary Theory as Convergent Methods**

Gauging the effect of this potential impasse relies on tethering any arguments to the fundamental connection between meaning and language. Here, it is important to situate the methodological approach of this thesis as interdisciplinary, drawing in and borrowing specifically from cognitive narratology inasmuch as it aims to address the historically-grounded obligations and implications of the 'storyworlds' (Herman, 2013, p. 3) that YA creates and inhabits.<sup>58</sup> Cognitive narratology bridges that gap between the text and the mind, examining the storyteller, the story and the audience to understand how narrative performs the task of making sense of experience. The diverse academic mechanisms and methods of reading literature through cognitive narratology considered in David Herman's evolving online text, *The Living Handbook of Narratology* (2013), are useful in this regard. Herman describes the discipline as occupying a "nexus of

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<sup>58</sup> Herman suggests the label 'postclassical' cognitive narratology as appropriate in acknowledging a generational move forward from the 'classical' structuralist work by the likes of Roland Barthes and Tzvetan Todorov that had not yet been enriched by advanced research in to human intelligence and its effect on narrative structure (Herman, 1999).



narrative and mind, not just in print texts but also in face-to-face interaction, cinema, radio news broadcasts, computer-mediated virtual environments, and other storytelling media” (Herman, 2013, p. 1). It is this copious space, where stories operate as both targets of interpretation and means of understanding experiences, that texts function as tools for readers to draw inferences about characters’ minds. Herman’s hypothesis is particularly useful in foregrounding experience – both actual and projected – as an integral part of understanding fiction and its role in adolescent identity formation.<sup>59</sup> Cognitive scientist Mark Turner also argues in *The Literary Mind* (1996) that fiction relies on narrative imagining and the sequencing of fictional events and characters into ‘stories’ to form the basis of everyday thinking (Turner, 1996, p. 6). Put simply, every reader is able to exploit fictional character as a way of interpolating unique personal meaning into seemingly identical and static texts. In this sense, fiction produces a multi-interpretational palimpsest that takes place not only between readers, but also over time, through generations and across cultures.

However, it is the seminal work of cognitive linguists Lakoff and Johnson that most significantly shapes the way this thesis approaches language, the mind and its connection to physical experience as a way of interpreting and engaging with fiction. Their argument in *The Metaphors We Live By* (1980), that embodied language is a tool of quotidian human interaction, is integral to this work (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 124).<sup>60</sup> Essentially, it serves here as an investigatory tool in measuring the intrinsic and pervasive nature of allegory and symbolism in the development of human conceptual systems and specifically the relationship between the physical body and language. Seeking proof of this reliance of meaning-making on embodied metaphors, cognitive scientist Raymond Mar undertook a meta-analysis in 2011 of the neural bases for social cognition and story comprehension. The study concludes that reading narrative and engaging in the production of imaginary scenarios employs the same regions of the brain that would deal with the situation if it were real (Mar, 2011). Mar’s work, which

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<sup>59</sup> In the field of cognitive reception theories, visual aesthetics critic Jens Eder has closely examined the link between text and reader, concluding that concentrating on text alone is the basis for a *hypothesis only* reading of authorial intention and as such, provides only part of the picture in understanding literary minds and bodies as referents of meaning (Eder, 2003, p. 292).

<sup>60</sup> The notions of agency are embedded in a type of constructivism that was first proffered by psychologist Lev Vygotsky who argued that the ‘learner’ (in this case, the reader) should be an active sense-maker in the process of information gathering (Dewey, 1912, 1916; Piaget, 1969, 1972).

synthesises the research of cognitive linguists and neuroscientists over 15 years, found that functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) and positron emission topography (PET), both of which demonstrate cerebral activity in real time, are increasingly able to identify the brain's instant and pathological reaction to reading words.<sup>61</sup>

Although this thesis deals very deliberately with the 'fuzzier' realms of engagement and resistance in relation to the language of fiction, these findings support a notion of the most basic and instinctual human need to categorise and compartmentalize through words. This need arguably stems from our existence as neural beings – we are creatures of habit whose brains operate by recognising patterns and grouping like items, often through language. Here, Lakoff and Johnson identify three distinct fields in which the brain tends to categorise: colour concepts, basic-level categories (such as discerning that a rocking chair is a type of chair within the wider realm of furniture) and spatial-relational concepts (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999, p. 19). The last of these is of particular interest because it highlights how bodily interactions in thought and experience are essential to human understanding, and specifically how embodied language is implicated in reinforcing performative stereotypes such as gender. In *Philosophy in the Flesh*, Lakoff and Johnson confirm that this language of reason and experience is very much grounded in how we talk about and perceive the body in relation to the world around us (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999, p. 30). How these arguments are utilised in reading the selected YA that form the focus of this thesis is to trace, in a chronological fashion, the changing modalities of that embodied language and its connection to the temporal and corporeal elements of identity formation in adolescence.

If one regards language and literature as pathways to adolescent identity formation, the later work of Lakoff is significant in understanding the overwhelming compulsion of the brain to superimpose what it knows over what it does not know in a search for meaning. This phenomenon, known as simulation, has migrated from the field of neuroscience into the study of language and, suggests Lakoff, constitutes the absolute embodiment of human cognition (Lakoff, 2012, p. ix). Central to its proposition is that

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<sup>61</sup> Mar's review focuses specifically on the link between ToM and story comprehension posited by numerous cognitive linguists including Jerome Bruner (1986), Keen (2007) and Lisa Zunshine (2006). Using fMRI data, Mar and colleagues determined that subjects employed the same cerebral processing network to understand fictional others as they used to understand the mental states of real others (Gerrig, 1993; Oatley, 1999).

without the process of simulation – through which metaphor, character, allegory, paradox and the like are made possible – one would be incapable of comprehending any subject beyond the realm of one's own experience.

Literary theorist Lisa Zunshine asserts in *Why We Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel* (2006) that fictions of any kind are most commonly read and received as mirrors of the self (2006, p. 61). This concept is compelling in the context of this thesis given that the favourite genres for teenage boys, suggested by volume of sales, are war/battle, crime and science fiction (NLT, 2013, p. 14). It is interesting to note here that despite the persistent falling away of adolescent boys from reading YA over the last forty years, the subgenre of fantastic realism continues to maintain a solid core of teenage male followers, ably aided in recent years by J. K. Rowling. In texts that problematise the young adult's environment or de-naturalise their mind/body, fantasy has been enlisted to explore the transitions out of juvenility. In *Constructing Adolescence in Fantastic Realism* (2008), Alison Waller draws parallels between social improvisations of the self and the regenerative themes of fantasy as part of the appeal of these fictions, illustrated in recurring motifs such as doppelgangers and metamorphosis (Waller, 2008). However, her assertion that adolescents seek out these fictions in some sort of epistemic fashion to decipher or facilitate the passage between childhood and adulthood, rather than for the purposes of pure escapism, is perhaps debatable.

As a way into the complex, multi-faceted and fluid ways that adolescent males build and promote a notion of self through these and other text types, Zunshine uses Theory of Mind (ToM) as a methodological bridge between the science of reading literature and the nebulous concept of meaning-making.<sup>62</sup> In 'There's No Substitute for Fiction' (2013), Zunshine argues for the importance of connecting adolescents with the traditional novel form. Specifically, she calls for a renewed promotion of fiction in the educational setting to avert what she describes as the lamentable and deleterious move in American schools towards a government-endorsed Common Core system of teaching literacy that demotes fiction texts to second place in favour of non-fictional forms of

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<sup>62</sup> The work of Lakoff and Johnson underpins that of Zunshine and Trites, both of whom argue that the literature read by children and young adults acts as a tool of socialisation that relies emphatically on the process of deciphering metaphors (Trites, 2012, p. 65; Zunshine, 2002, p. 130).

learning.<sup>63</sup> The implementation of the Common Core works on the premise that meta-cognitive reasoning relies on the mastery of concepts such as inference, implication, prediction, doubt and assumption, each of which are closely aligned with the fields of science and history and the realms of non-fiction (Peskin & Astington, 2004).

This pedagogical backgrounding of fiction in children's learning is an important consideration in this thesis because it highlights how exogenous or measurable outcomes, rather than imaginative play, are being associated with cognitive maturation. Zunshine's rather persuasive argument is that in the Common Core schema, the acquisition of skills such as perceptual acumen, lexical ability and evaluative thinking that children gain when they follow a curriculum heavy in fiction, is being eroded. The perils this presents are wide-ranging, argues Zunshine, not the least being a degradation of children's ability to understand the emotions of others. Indeed, numerous studies (Astington & Jenkins, 1996, 1999; Villiers & Villiers, 2000; Tager-Flusberg, 2000) confirm that children gain a conceptual grasp of meta-cognitive terminology – I think, I wonder, I guess, et cetera – not through explicit, didactic exposure to those concepts, but from the ToM dexterity gained by inferring the beliefs and emotions of others through fictional scenarios. That is to say, knowing how to understand the other is not taught. It is learned through perception.

This premise of learned perception, of course, requires scrutiny because it privileges a unidimensional perspective that overlooks the fact that many young male readers no longer see or use fiction as a 'mirror of the self'. Here, the question of whether, or how, prose fiction is able to stimulate ToM better than other types of narrative may percolate down to the genre's inherent fictionality – its figurative language, mental verbs and metacognitive representations. It is helpful in this regard to invoke the measured approach of Alan Richardson who agrees in 'Cognitive Science and the Future of Literary Studies' (1999) with the need to employ neuroscientific rigour in any

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<sup>63</sup> The impetus for the Common Core initiative lay in findings by developmental psychologists that children in low-income families demonstrated substantial lags in their ToM understanding (Cutting & Dunn, 1999; Holmes et al., 1996). Previous studies had found that children from higher socio-economic families had twice the vocabulary of those from lower income groups and had a much wider access to a lexicon that allowed them to express themselves in terms of perception, thinking and evaluation. The conclusion, according to cognitive psychologists Joan Peskin and Janet Wilde Astington, is that "a rich vocabulary, more than any other measure" can be directly correlated with school performance (Peskin & Astington, 2004).

competent evaluation of text (Richardson, 1999, p. 158). However, he draws particular attention to reader response criticism and narratology as fields that must be rethought in terms of recent advances in psycholinguistics and cognitive psychology. Specifically, the case studies in this thesis employ Richardson's concentration on agency, subject formation and rhetoricity in relation to, rather than in spite of, ToM and cognitive neuroscience in the reception of YA amongst adolescent males.

Equally valid in these discussions is an admission of the extensive work into affective responses to fiction by Keen. In *Empathy and the Novel* (2007), Keen argues against the 'empathy-altruism' hypothesis that has tended to underpin the fundamental notions of ToM (Batson et al., 2004; Batson, 2010; Slote, 2001).<sup>64</sup> Instead, she presents a theory that spans fields from literary history and psychology to neuroscience and discourse processing, which places affect at the centre of questions about reader response. Her survey of these diverse disciplines suggests that it is the perception of fictiveness, rather than the texts themselves, that increase the likely feelings of empathy experienced by readers – a process that discharges them from the cautious reactions necessitated by real social situations (Keen, 2007, p. 51).

This is a convincing proposition and one that is reasserted in a 2014 interdisciplinary study conducted by German, French and English researchers across the schools of philosophy, brain sciences and linguistics. The study found that cognition – or knowing how to perform a task – is built from the repetitive interaction between the motor, sensory and language centres of the brain (Pulvermüller, Moseley, Egorova et al., 2014). This finding supports the earlier theory described by Donald Hebb in *The Organization of Behavior* (1949) of the role of synaptic neuroplasticity in learning – often referred to as Hebbian Theory – which asserts that “cells that fire together, wire together” (Doidge, 2007, p. 427). The 2014 research confirms that language – the written and spoken word – and the perception or understanding of those words, was the catalyst for each emotion, action or reaction recorded by the fMRI scanner. This observation is noteworthy because it highlights the measurable effects of a text on its readers. It further suggests that the influence of language lies not only in its ability to

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<sup>64</sup> Keen suggests that the current vogue for understanding empathy at the level of the neural substrate is rather reductive and needs to meet somewhere closer to the “fuzzier sense of empathy as the feeling precursor to and prerequisite for liberal aspirations to greater humanitarianism” (Keen, 2007, p. viii).

motivate and inspire in a conscious sense, but in its catalytic potential to alter the unconscious reactions – the physiological, neurological and biological – of the human mind and body.

The work of literary theorist Marie-Laure Ryan intersects with Keen's in 'Narratology and Cognitive Science: A Problematic Relation' (2010). Ryan argues in favour of "trusting the ability of our own minds to figure out how the mind creates, decodes and uses stories," rather than relying on a system that borrows "ready-made concepts from the cognitive sciences and applying them top-down to texts" (Ryan, 2010, p. 469). She is particularly suspicious of any method that reduces the aesthetic, psychological and philosophical products of reading to a set of scientific data for analysis.<sup>65</sup> The ToM critic, Blakey Vermeule, is sympathetic to this notion, yet approaches its principles from a slightly different perspective, concentrating on the role of fiction in terms of its evolutionary psychology. In *Why Do We Care about Literary Characters?* (2010), Vermeule argues that it is through fictional characterisations and being privy to the innermost thoughts and machinations of fictional personifications that humans have become proficient at understanding the emotions of others (Vermeule, 2010).<sup>66</sup>

This thesis attempts an integration of these perspectives to reveal how depth of fictional character is an integral part of a surrogate experience, ultimately becoming a vehicle through which the self is refiltered and reimagined with every new reading. However, the success of this surrogacy rests on a connectedness between the author and reader, with a reliance on an emotional reciprocity between the self and the manufactured artefact. This is precisely where hypotheses around fictional texts acting as reflections of the self, as suggested by Zunshine, begin to lose traction and as a result, pose the

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<sup>65</sup> Ryan's work on identity supports the concept of connection through character as a means of navigating and making sense of narrative. See *Narrative as Virtual Reality: Immersion and Interactivity* (Ryan, 2001) and *Avatars of Story* (Ryan, 2006). In addition, the relationship between real worlds/bodies and artificial worlds/bodies is explored in Ryan's *Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence, and Narrative Theory* (Ryan, 1991) and again in *Narrative Across Media: The Languages of Storytelling* (Ryan, 2004). The latter work focusses on text rather than theoretical frameworks as a way of interpreting how narrative and storytelling redefine themselves in light of new visual, gestural, electronic and musical environments.

<sup>66</sup> Vermeule asserts that it is human nature to care about characters even though caring provides no advantage in the "formula of humanity" (Vermeule, 2010, p. 2). In addition, she suggests that meaning in fiction does not necessarily stem from its form or content, which she describes as "simply a pattern of emphasis", but from the constancy of its literary characters (Vermeule, 2010, p. x).

central questions for this dissertation.<sup>67</sup> For where mirrors are static and passive, the self is inconstant and active, creating a schism between author and reader, between the perceptions of past history and current history-making. Thus, the projection and delineation of any fictional teenage character is, in itself, problematic because it disambiguates the meaning of self in its narrative, disallowing any sense of interaction, evolution or maturation. In this respect, fictional adolescence becomes an imitation – a collage of remembered foils and fantasies – that produces an environment in which characters are embraced or dismissed based on their authenticity.

It is here, in discussions about genuineness, that Richardson's argument for a dialogue between literary studies and cognitive neuroscience meets the work of Trites in evaluating the link between the experience of adolescence and its literary depiction. In *Disturbing the Universe: Power and Repression in Adolescent Literature* (2000), Trites draws a direct parallel between the physical embodiment of texts in adolescent fiction and the cultural construction of the modern teenager, with a particular focus on the institutionalised reading practices that privilege historical notions of gender, class, power and position-taking in those texts. This connection she describes as the entirely logical link between the body and mind (Trites, 2012, p. 64). Trites' later work in 'Growth in Adolescent Literature: Metaphors, Scripts, and Cognitive Narratology' (2012) proposes that an advantageous way to explore the discourse around YA is to concentrate on how embodiment influences the production and reception of its texts (Trites, 2012).

Accordingly, the theoretical lens through which YA is scrutinised is of significance, for the texts are competing in a field where the physical response to language can be neither overstated nor underestimated.<sup>68</sup> Equally, one must not ignore the influence of memory

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<sup>67</sup> Zunshine's reasoning about why humans engage with literature tends to privilege the mimetic appeal of character from the perspective of cognitive literary studies (Zunshine, 2006, p. 61). I suggest that a more productive reading is offered by Chris Danta and Helen Groth, who argue that although "cognitive theory suggests the death of aesthetics" (Danta & Groth, 2014, p. 2) it instead foregrounds the acknowledgement of the imagined as distinct from the real.

<sup>68</sup> Lakoff and Johnson argue for the influence of "embodied realism" (proposed by John Dewey and Maurice Merleau-Ponty) as one that relies not only on ways of thinking, but as informed by scientific understanding, including empirical psychology, neuroscience and physiology (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999, p. 97). Although both Dewey and Merleau-Ponty approach the subject from different perspectives – the former from a study of organism environment interactions, the latter from the inherent link between subject and object – they both essentially agree that an artificial conceptual structure has been imposed on notions of the mind and body that limits our understanding of how integral experience is to both (Dewey, 1922, 1925; Merleau-Ponty, 1962).

and affect on that physical body. Indeed, this type of reasoning relies on constructing a cultural model that, as Lakoff and Johnson describe in *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and its Challenge to Western Thought*, is inherently physical and experiential but orbits around decidedly philosophical questions of how one should act, who one is and what counts as knowledge (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999, p. 9). In a very practical sense, this notion is borne out in studies showing that when teenage boys claim that books helps them to “understand life” they are specifically referring to the ToM acumen that forms the link between the body and the mind – what many literary and cognitive theorists identify as the cornerstones of social maturation.<sup>69</sup>

One of the intentions of this thesis is to unmask what I will call the literary proprioception that is present in any reading of literature. Simply, this concept could be described as the unconscious yet perceptible spatial orientation that arises from stimulus within the body when one engages with a text. My argument is that literary articulations of the teenage male in textual form are made incongruent by a language that disconnects the experience of the body from the writing itself. By illuminating this space between the words and the bodies of which they speak, there is a freedom to explore the analytical models for which Gallagher argues in ‘The Rise of Fictionality’ (2006). She reminds us that regardless of a novel’s content, there remains a tendency for postmodernist theorists to evaluate meaning through either narrative or signification, thus producing an imperfect understanding of the more sophisticated nuances of fictionality (Gallagher, 2006, p. 336). Specifically, her intervention enables a reading of YA that acknowledges and clarifies the constitutional link between the corporeal and temporal in discussions about adolescence.

Unexpectedly, Walter Benjamin’s work helps situate the importance of these notions of history and time in the lives and literature of teenage boys. Particularly relevant is his theory of ‘now-time’ or *jetztzeit* and its potential as both productive and destructive to the experience of history (Benjamin & Osborne, 1994, p. xi).<sup>70</sup> My argument is that

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<sup>69</sup> An extensive study conducted by the ACA found that in the cohort of adolescent males who did still read for pleasure, fiction reading was used as a way to “understand life” (ACA, 2000, p. 21).

<sup>70</sup> *Jetztzeit* can be translated as ‘here-and-now’ in order to distinguish it from its opposite: the empty and homogenous time of Positivism. Benjamin argues that progress relies heavily on the irresistible perfectibility of humankind, which cannot be sundered from the concept of its progression through “homogeneous, empty time” (Benjamin, 1940, p. 260). Benjamin explains now-time as destroying the



through a disconnection of time from notions of history or progress – by embracing the potential for history-making in the ‘now’ space that fiction offers – Benjamin’s work can be mobilised to animate the temporal unevenness and complexity of YA. Of particular interest is the notion of historicity and the subsequent ripple effect for literature as enabling identity formation. In the case of YA, the text performs the role of both experience and object, its historical legacy vying for centre stage against an overwhelming array of new and alternative modes of experience that are ready in the wings, waiting to take the place of the literary object.<sup>71</sup>

Central to this conflicted image of history as experience is, of course, the amorphous notion of time. In evocations of the adolescent self, and specifically in literature, emphasis on the temporal is essential when speaking of the teenage body. Lakoff, for example, argues that the link between time, language and the body is elemental; that human physiology provides the fundamental philosophies by which we live (Lakoff, 2012, p. ix).<sup>72</sup> However, where cultural and cognitive studies may draw attention to the fixity of time or the historical notion of time experienced through the corporeal, this thesis explores time as a protean mechanism that both defines and obscures the potential of meaning-making. That is to say, the concepts of transition, memory, nostalgia and inertia – all notions of passing, passed or future time – are explored as systems that allow teenagers to close the gap between the ephemeral space of fiction and the physical

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notion of history-as-progress by putting “the apocalyptic doublet of catastrophe and redemption in its place” (Benjamin & Osborne, 1994, p. xi).

<sup>71</sup> The myriad forms of fictional experience available to the twenty-first century adolescent compete for relevance against long-read fiction. Current research from Australia, the USA and UK shows that by the time a boy reaches the age of 15, there is less than a 50 per cent chance that he will be interested in reading a novel in his leisure time (Manuel & Carter, 2015; ACA, 2000; ABS, 2012; NEA, 2002, 2013; NLT, 2013). The UK National Literacy Trust survey also found twice as many boys than girls reported not reading novels whatsoever for leisure (NLT, 2013).

<sup>72</sup> In *Metaphors We Live By* (1980) Lakoff and Johnson make the case for the notion that humans are incapable of talking about time without using metaphors, specifically embodied metaphors that implicate one’s spatial orientation in the action.

manifestations of adolescence.<sup>73</sup> They are also explored as a way of revealing time as an alienating element in the intrinsic contemporaneity of the adolescent male reader.

The importance of focussing on the temporal and corporeal in a genre that having been demarcated as middlebrow literature endures a persistent “critical neglect” (Humble, 2012, p. 2), is that it highlights two primary points of resistance in adolescent boys’ propensity towards reading. The first is related to knowledge and cultural hierarchies, to the connection between boys’ reluctance to read fiction and the novel’s historical reputation as a medium of edification and civilisation. The second is a question of physicality, apparent in the discrepancy between adolescent male impulsivity and fiction reading’s demand for sustained physical and emotional quietness. Indeed, Trites argues very persuasively in *Growth in Adolescent Literature: Metaphors, Scripts, and Cognitive Narratology* (2012) that the psychological and physical growth of the teenage male is “mapped” onto the domain of the teenage body through embodied language (Trites, 2012, p. 65). These issues together, illustrate how one cannot speak of reading unless one also speaks of the modern concept of attention.

Here, Jonathan Crary’s work in visual perception is useful in situating the adolescent male and their relationship with fiction. In *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture* (1999), Crary proposes that the spatial experience of modernity includes shock’s “reciprocal relation to the rise of attentive norms and practices” (Crary, 1999, p. 1). His argument filters down to thoughts of viewer perspective and the late nineteenth-century re-positioning of the observer into the role of subject – a notion that was in clear evidence during the 1950s when teenagers began to use visual media as their primary source of knowledge gathering. Accordingly, the modes of attention and distraction that interest this thesis borrow from Crary’s

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<sup>73</sup> In this environment, the work of Nicholas Dames is well placed to comprehend the adolescent male’s relationship with time and fiction reading. In *The Physiology of the Novel: Reading, Neural Science, and the Form of Victorian Fiction* (2007), Dames addresses the historical link between the body and reading by drawing on the observations of Raymond Williams, who noted that everyday speech communicated a ‘life rhythm’ that constituted a crucial part of the process of reading (Williams, 1981, p. 341). Dames suggests that the physical practice of novel-reading possesses and promotes its own set of cultural values that are continually recruited, regardless of their historical or geographical remoteness, into current debates about literature and its link to structures of ethics, taste and class (Dames, 2007).

hypothesis that for anything to capture the imagination, it must disturb the equilibrium to draw attention to itself (Crary, 1999, p. 47).<sup>74</sup>

Attention, in this setting, can be considered to hold within itself the potential for its own disintegration, much as YA as a genre for adolescent males has a potent capacity to self-cannibalise. That is, in the long history of literature – and the short history of literature for young adults – the socially and culturally gendered practice of reading has inflicted a subtle contingency of femininity on the genre that disconnects the male reader from the systemic construction of masculinity. Literature’s reliance on attention, interiority, quiet introspection, emotional and empathetic connection – both in its modes of production and means of consumption – inflicts on teenage boys a sense of deeply ingrained cultural alienation.<sup>75</sup>

By picking up where Trites and others have left off, this thesis extends the enquiries that have identified YA as burdening the male body with society’s ills and explores the impact on adolescent reading practices. In particular, notions beyond themes of biological change and intentional edification are explored as a way of illuminating the spaces between the words and the bodies under the microscope. By shifting attention away from the cultural-physical embodiment of YA texts, the possibilities of cognitive narratology broaden the lens in questions about the genre’s purpose. This approach exposes the points of connection and resistance for male readers by incorporating what Chris Danta and Helen Groth describe in *Mindful Aesthetics* (2014) as the critical space

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<sup>74</sup> Crary states that the ‘problem’ of attention arose when the observer became newly theorised as a subject in the late 1800s. At this point, attention became an unstable concept, shifting from a willed state of exclusive focus to a “disjunctive state of excessive and unmoored distraction” (Lamm, 2002, p. 215).

<sup>75</sup> In quantifying lost readers, clinical studies of attention span have focused on teenagers as a group who are particularly prone to the lure of screen-based fulfilment. Heuristic models of neurobiology mobilised by American researchers in a 2011 study illustrated that ‘reward’ plays a central role in adolescent behaviour, with goal-driven motivation less likely to appeal to adolescents than stimulus-driven motivation. This bias, according to the study, is most likely to account for the prevalence of impulsive, novelty seeking and risk-taking behaviours typical in adolescent boys (Ernst, Daniele, & Frantz, 2011, p. 377). A 2015 Canadian study of 2,000 participants found that the average attention span of a moderately heavy user of electronic devices is eight seconds – four seconds fewer than the average of 15 years ago. According to the study, conducted by Microsoft, teenagers who are engaged in high levels of social media and multi-screen usage, along with being early adopters of technology, were most likely to struggle when prolonged attention was required (Hooton, 2015). These outcomes share similarities with earlier longitudinal paediatric studies conducted in Washington DC in which 2,600 children were observed over six years to determine the effects of early exposure to television. Those children who watched a moderate to high level of television from the age of around two years onwards demonstrated higher levels of inattention, impulsivity and distractibility in later childhood years (Christakis, Zimmerman, DiGiuseppe, & McCarty, 2004).

between cognitive and non-cognitive theory – a territory that affords priority to both the aesthetic and the empirical (Danta & Groth, 2014, p. 2). In this way, the insufficiencies of cognitive narratology to decode the complex relationship between text and reader are acknowledged whilst a multi-disciplinary perspective takes over, one that intercepts both the intentional and subconscious rendering and reading of character to uncover a fuller picture of the chronological fashioning of the literary adolescent.

### iii. Pathologising Affect in Young Adult Fiction

By foregrounding adolescent emotion as a product of performative masculinity – as opposed to pursuing a specifically queer aspect – the objective of this thesis is to produce a generative rather than prescriptive reading of the exemplary YA texts, focussing on the affective whilst still admitting the influence of social and cultural context. This technique offers a way into a literature that has been historically subordinated by formal criticism as a way of reducing and explaining what is essentially a form of embodied subjectivity. In this respect, it is the construction of gender in these works that will be read, rather than reading from a gendered perspective. What motivates this approach is the question of how reading – both the act and the process – intersects with historical cultural concepts and performances of masculinity, and in particular its adolescent forms.

In the four chapters of this thesis, I build a case that implicates the stagnant literary depictions and public performances of gender as specifically inhibiting adolescent males' enjoyment of reading. In particular, the role of the erotic gaze, curiosity about bodies, sexuality and pornography are explored as debilitating tropes in YA. In addition, concepts of ambiguity, instability and experimentalism are mobilised as a way of exploring how YA continues to relegate adolescent male characters to the space of the 'other'.

To summon Butler, the genre repeatedly acquiesces to figurations of the male as a form of cultural practice. Butler unequivocally situates gender as a performative process, where masculinity and femininity become enactments of social and cultural norms

rather than the display of any innate traits of gender (Butler, 1999, p. 9).<sup>76</sup> In *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1999), Butler draws on Freud's Oedipal theories to argue that adolescent males most often identify with, and act out, heterosexuality not because they fear castration by their jealous fathers, but because they fear castration itself – they fear feminisation (Butler, 1999, p. 80).<sup>77</sup> This construction of the masculine is a useful staging post for Butler, and this thesis, in considering the problematic intrusion of the female in iterations of the male. In this arena, Butler argues that desire is so often reckoned as the exclusive domain of the masculine subject. She suggests that the unexpected agency of the female object who “inexplicably returns the glance, reverses the gaze, and contests the place and authority of the masculine position” (Butler, 1999, p. ix) becomes a notable and often unwelcome diversion from the norm. Indeed, dichotomous motifs of the visible and invisible female – from sublimated housewife to sexual predator – are a focus of this thesis and are examined in detail as aberrations of performative gender.

The primary point of reference for approaching the impact and manifestations of these performances stems from the methods articulated in Sedgwick's *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (2003). By aiming to transcend what she describes as the simplistic generalisation and symptomatic reading practices favoured by contemporary cultural studies, this thesis acknowledges the limits of interpretative power by instead focussing on pleasure and empathy as central narrative issues.<sup>78</sup> Specifically, by incorporating Sedgwick's notion of an “imaginative close reading” (Sedgwick, 2003, p. 145), the inadequacies of language to convey the emotions of the adolescent male are explored as points of friction, both for the characters within the texts and also the readers of those literary articulations.

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<sup>76</sup> The 2017 winner of the Royal Society Science Books prize, *Testosterone Rex: Unmaking the Myths of our Gendered Minds* (2017) by Cordelia Fine, offers a forensic appraisal of the gender stereotypes that occur at the intersection of evolutionary science and social history. Fine's work dispels any notion that physiology or biology shape men and women into separate species and puts forward an argument for culture as the primary force in determining gender behaviour (Fine, 2017).

<sup>77</sup> Freud referred to this process as the ‘consolidation’ of masculinity – the point at which a boy disengages from his mother (initiated by the incest taboo) and fortifies his attachment, albeit ambivalent, to his father (Butler, 1999, p. 76).

<sup>78</sup> Sedgwick argues for replacing a “paranoid” reading of texts with a more positive and reparative technique that avoids a symptomatising of affect (Sedgwick, 2003, p. 126).

Where Sedgwick informs enquiries into the language of YA, and Butler assists the interrogation of performative gender, R. W. Connell aids a construction of the ‘other’ – in this case the adolescent male – as an anomalous figure in the literary landscape.<sup>79</sup> Connell argues in *Masculinities* (1995) that science erroneously aims to pin down gender to a set of measurable behaviours or scientific proofs (Connell, 1995, p. 3). This pathologising of gender into the physical and psychological rituals of the masculine or feminine is a flawed legacy, argues Connell, which relies on the biological sciences and provides a hegemonic advantage when it comes to discussions about gender (Connell, 1995, p. 6).<sup>80</sup> This thesis takes account of these critical restrictions and explores their role in the connection between incompetent figures of masculinity in the key texts and the deeply ingrained ‘othering’ of YA as legitimate literature.

Here, the work of Flanagan in *Ways of Being Male: Representing Masculinities in Children’s Literature* (2002) bolsters the argument that non-conforming behaviours create a queering of character. Flanagan asserts that a social framework of hegemonic masculinity has maintained its social and cultural dominance by situating, in children’s literature, aberrations from the norm as comical, and therefore lesser, characterisations in the wider narrative of fiction (Flanagan, 2002, p. 78). By exploring episodes in which the male protagonist of the exemplary YA texts are either compromised, feminised or presented as effeminate, this thesis tests Flanagan’s hypothesis as a way of questioning and dissecting the neat son/husband/father stereotypes of conservative and decidedly American post-World War II culture that continue to inflict their historicity on the genre and cast a specifically American lens on the male in crisis.

These theorists offer a solid methodological base from which to approach the complex influences of performative gender in YA. In a sociological sense, Butler and Connell

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<sup>79</sup> Relying, perhaps too heavily, on the intersection between psychoanalysis and feminism as a productive junction for understanding concepts of gender, Connell cites Karen Horney’s paper ‘The Dread of Woman’ (1932) as the high point of early gender studies. Connell argues that the article crystallises the notion that “adult masculinity is built on over-reactions to femininity, and the connection of the making of masculinity with the subordination of women” (Connell, 1995, p. 11).

<sup>80</sup> Connell uses a study of late-nineteenth-century females to illustrate how women became ‘feminised’ by way of their separation from access to education, reinforced by scientific evidence highlighting innate sex differences. This, Connell states, formed the basis of a persistent demotion of the female role to that of good mother and wife. The irony, she suggests, is that research conducted over the ensuing 100 years reveals that there is little contrast between the genders: that in all the psychological traits examined – from emotions and attitudes to personality and mental ability – the differences are either non-existent or negligible (Connell, 1995, p. 21).

help situate masculinity as a cultural phenomenon, Sedgwick offers a way to read key texts and Flanagan provides insight into the specific gendering of literature for the young. Additionally, this theoretical convergence is further supported by the work of Felski and Love, whose techniques of close and surface reading produce an emphatically non-symptomatic approach to the texts. Where Love's contribution attends to the way the selected texts are read and informed by disciplines outside the literary, Felski's pertain to the science of mind that appries those readings. Felski argues that the 'hermeneutics of suspicion' is now virtually *de rigueur* in the critical analysis of texts, yet that there is an equally constructive way through that avoids the negative as inescapably normative (Felski, 2008).<sup>81</sup> By addressing ideologically driven readings of the exemplary YA texts, my aim is to ask not only what literary critics have adjudicated, but also what history has told us about the reception of these works. That the selected focus texts of this thesis have been controversial is of interest, yet of fleeting consequence when we consider that the seminal works of adolescent literature over the last 50 years have not been measurably instrumental in affecting any significant social or political change. Or have they?

In this regard, Felski restates the need for assessing literature not by way of philosophical meditation or historical explanation but through a "close up scrutiny of a *thought style*", paying close attention to rhetoric and form, affect and argument (Felski, 2015, p. 2). If we understand the lineage of literary masculinity, as Felski describes it in *The Gender of Modernity* (1995), as a cluster of values that include "the narrative of history as progress, the valorization of function over form [and] the sovereignty of the reality principle" (Felski, 1995, p. 101), then the construction of the male character in YA appears to exist outside those parameters. The Holden Caulfields and Ponyboy Curtises of teenage fiction defy the mode of the masculine – discomforting gender norms and challenging what Felski describes as "dominant definitions of the real" (Felski, 1995, p. 101).

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<sup>81</sup> The phrase 'hermeneutics of suspicion' is borrowed from French philosopher Paul Ricoeur who asserts that the modern mode of critical reading aims to dig out the unflattering and illogical (Felski, 2015, p. 1). Felski argues that this concept stems from Sedgwick's hypothesis that a paranoid style of literary engagement – a style of constant vigilance in which the critic feels compelled to read against the grain – has dominated the way texts are evaluated (Felski, 2008, p. 3).

Instead, YA is, and has been, more likely to embrace those liminal emotions, albeit with a quiet admission of shame that has been historically linked to the feminine. In that respect, Ngai's exploration of those awkward and inconvenient sentiments in *Ugly Feelings* (2005) is useful in unmasking performative gender and its composite behaviours in relation to the writing and reception of the fictive male. For where literary criticism concerns itself with the aesthetic emotions unique to our encounters with artworks, Ngai offers a perspective that fits so naturally with a genre fixated on the messy and often unrewarding process of adolescence that it would seem remiss to overlook it.<sup>82</sup> Indeed, the case studies of this thesis dwell almost exclusively on the emotions that Ngai describes as ugly – the *noncathartic*, the *amoral*, those offering little satisfaction or virtue (Ngai, 2005, p. 6). Indeed, her work highlights the historical tendency for the adolescent male of literature to be the subject of feelings – irritation, anxiety or paranoia – that are weaker and nastier than the rather more noble and adult emotions of fear or rage (Ngai, 2005, p. 7). Ngai calls on Bourdieu's work here, citing as entirely apposite his argument that the autonomy of any work, genre or movement is always mediated by the state of the field.<sup>83</sup> She further suggests in 'Our Aesthetic Categories' (2010) that one cannot read any text as a reflection without understanding its position within a "structural homology" and the internal dynamics and specific history of that field (Ngai, 2010, p. 953).

Ngai's sentiments, which support an image of the adolescent male as an unpredictable, unreliable and unnatural form of the masculine, create a persistent trace that runs through this thesis. They also share an unexpected affinity with the influential work of psychoanalyst Erik Erikson during the 1950s, which coincided with the nascence of YA. Of particular interest is Erikson's articulation of the eight stages of human psychosocial development, and his observations that the adolescent stage is typified and revealed through fluctuations in ego strength and an eagerness to consolidate personality (Gross, 1987, p. 39). Filled with erratic changes that present fundamental questions about a sense of belonging and the future, the adolescent stage is manifested

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<sup>82</sup> Ngai's work aims to expand and transform the notion of aesthetic emotions to recalibrate the privileging of cathartic emotions, which she argues is a legacy of the philosophical discourse first presented in Aristotle's *Poetics* (Ngai, 2005, p. 6).

<sup>83</sup> These structures work so effectively, according to Bourdieu, because they become normative without being the conscious product of a conductor (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 72).

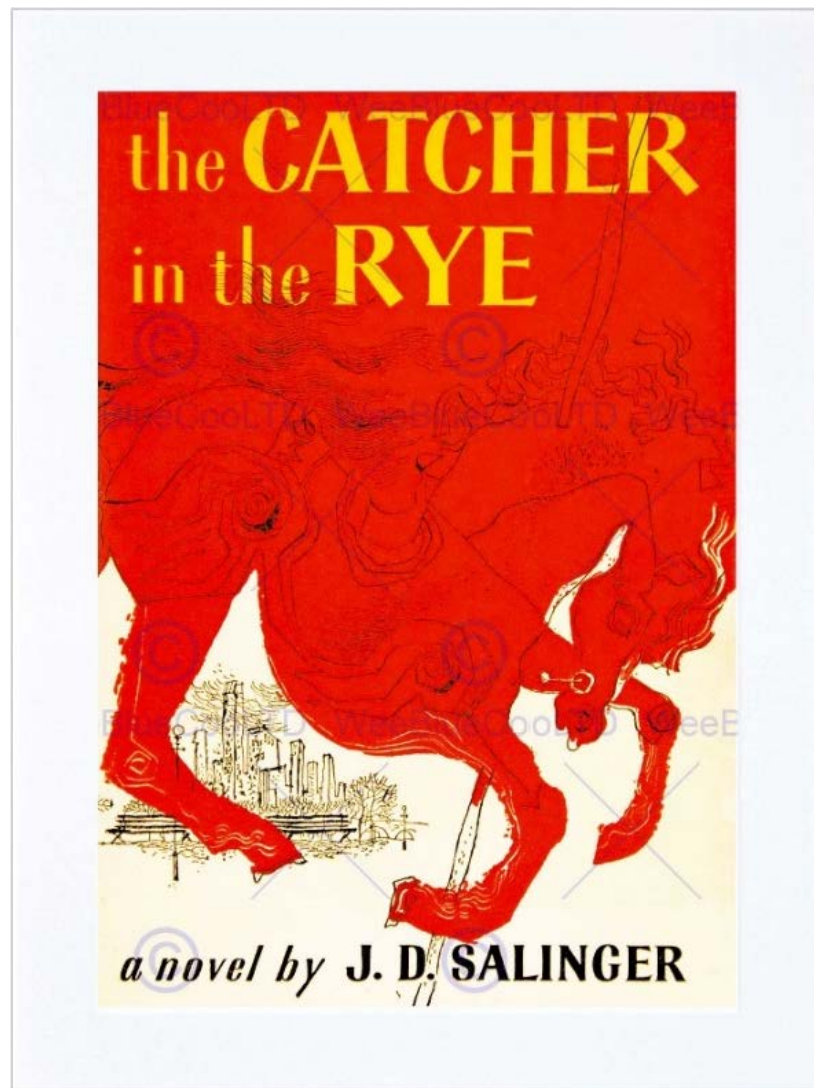


in mood swings, rebelliousness and a perseveration on the physical (Erikson, 1959). However, of most use to this thesis is Erikson's concept of identity crisis – a period he describes as one of dilemma and urgency that primarily occurs between the ages of 13 and 19 – which can be mobilised in studies of gendered reading practices. This stage, with its propensity to linger and resurface well into adulthood, presents pressing questions of inclusion and attachment that ultimately lead to the hovering worry: 'Who am I, and what can I be?' (Erikson, 1963).

The purpose of the following case studies is to establish how pivotal works in the genre, and their various articulations of performative masculinity, may have acted as turning points or catalysts of change in the trajectory of fiction for young men and their subsequent engagement with literature. Through a chronological and longitudinal examination of the critical reception of each of the four key texts, along with a particular 'surface' reading of the works, an original contribution to the scholarship of YA and cognitive literary studies will be made that addresses issues of readerly disengagement amongst adolescent males over the last half-century.

# 1

## 1950s: An Imperfect Masculinity in *The Catcher in the Rye*



Through an examination of the political climate, reception and developing critical analysis surrounding J.D. Salinger's seminal mid-century work, the purpose of this case study is to establish an understanding of how *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) set the benchmark for the depiction of male adolescence in literature and the implications of those historical precedents.<sup>84</sup>

This study concentrates specifically on the influence of World War II and the Cold War as points of control and domination in the depiction of adolescent male bodies. It draws on a range of critical fields to explore the work's impact – from sociology and cognitive narratology to cultural historical and psycholinguistic perspectives. Further, the key historical events will be traced as recurring themes in the literary objectification and brutalisation of those bodies in the germinating genre of YA.

Specifically, discussions around corporeal impermanence, control of the teenage male psyche, anxiety around unreliable and sexually potent male bodies and a refusal of historical *Boy's Own*-style memoir, drive the arguments of this study. The work of Trites on themes and motivations in YA situates the thesis in the field and provides a springboard from which to explore the implications of a generic form that repeatedly manifests the ills of society through the physical body of the adolescent. Aided by research into the educational implications of this structure, children's literature critics Hilton and Nikolajeva help locate the visceral notions of fear and corporeal danger as central components in the genre's rhetoric.

Perhaps most importantly, however, this chapter focusses on the language of the novel. Indeed, its new and raw tone, its anti-authoritarian stance and the infiltration of its idioms and vocabulary into the vernacular of Western adolescence are what propel this expedition into the complex relationship between adolescent males and contemporary literature. Here, the work of Lakoff and Johnson on the corporeal and temporal nature of language and its pivotal role in bodily experience forms the nucleus of the chapter. Their theories assist an exploration of ontological metaphor as an essential element of human understanding and its relevance in a text that came to alter the way society spoke to and about the experience of adolescence.

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<sup>84</sup> Image on previous page: first edition cover, *The Catcher in the Rye*, 1951 (public domain).

In particular, those perspectives are woven through concepts of fictionality offered by a diverse range of theorists. Gallagher's work (2006), for example, leads discussions about how the new way of writing about adolescence came to resist the exercise and expression of the Victorian novel. Ferdinand de Saussure's work in the semiotics of embodied language filters through into questions about making and erasing human history through adolescent language (Peirce, 1931-1935). Equally, Foucault's concepts around relationships of force inform an interrogation of Salinger's narratives and characters as products of a 1950s social paranoia (Foucault, 1980). Together, these approaches to *Catcher* produce a thorough analysis of an iconoclastic work that redefined the traditional novel form, altering both the trajectory of fiction for the young and, arguably, the reading practices of its audience from therein.

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Since its publication in July 1951, J. D. Salinger's *Catcher* has been mobilised in popular and scholarly debate as an artefact of historical and cultural importance.<sup>85</sup> What has allowed and facilitated such rigorous attention towards a single novel has no doubt been fuelled by an author who remained steadfastly remote from both society and the text. Salinger, in fact, never responded publically to questions about either the novel's intention or any of the enormous body of critical work that presumed to know or decipher the world of the novel's protagonist, Holden Caulfield.

Salinger's bold new form of storytelling categorically announced itself as *not* old literature. Instead, it eschewed the historical and autobiographical motifs of linear narrative that had typified canonical eighteenth- and nineteenth-century fiction and drew on the experiences, mindscapes and vernaculars of an audience that was finding its first voice. For readers of the 1950s, there were so many uncommon, offbeat and novel elements in Salinger's anti-heroic discourse that the work's refusal to celebrate the

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<sup>85</sup> Little, Brown and Company, publishers of *Catcher*, perhaps foresaw the significance of the novel they agreed to print for the first time in 1951. Historically, the company had developed a reputation for producing legal treatises, later moving into the American circulation of British poets such as Chaucer and Wordsworth. However, it was with the release of *Catcher* that the firm played a part in redefining literature, spawning a category that would later be labelled Young Adult.

bravery, masculinity and spirit of adventure entrenched by classic novels would shape the future trajectory of literature for males.<sup>86</sup>

If you really want to hear about it, the first thing you'll probably want to know is where I was born, and what my lousy childhood was like, and how my parents were occupied and all before they had me, and all that David Copperfield kind of crap, but I don't feel like going into it, if you want to know the truth. In the first place that stuff bores me, and in the second place, my parents would have about two hemorrhages apiece if I told anything pretty personal about them. They're quite touchy about anything like that, especially my father. (Salinger, 1951, p. 3)

Salinger would go on to introduce the reader to a painfully candid and psychologically unstable New York schoolboy who exhibited impressive mental fortitude and insight for someone not yet out of his teens. Holden exists on the fringes of society – rarely feeling the need or ability to negotiate its complexities. He observes humanity from a distant vantage point. As an individual, Holden finds himself physically and mentally isolated from his peers and the formal collectives they populate.

I remember around three o'clock that afternoon I was standing way the hell up on top of Thomsen Hill, right next to this crazy cannon that was in the Revolutionary War and all [...] You couldn't see the grandstand too hot, but you could hear them all yelling, deep and terrific on the Pencey side, because practically the whole school except me was there. (Salinger, 1951, p. 4)

Holden's intentional distancing from the football field announces his disconnection from the essential realms of 1950s masculine adolescence – school, sport and girls. His frenetic four-day bacchanalia in New York City tests his physical and mental endurance, culminating with his incarceration in a mental health facility – swapping one institution (school) for another (a psychiatric ward), with only the prospect of returning to these state-endorsed systems on the horizon: "I could probably tell you what I did

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<sup>86</sup> Amongst Little, Brown, and Company's extensive list of titles – including *All Quiet on the Western Front* by Erich Maria Remarque (1929), *The Adventures of Tintin* (1929) by Hergé, and James Norman Hall and Charles Nordhoff's *Mutiny on The Bounty* (1932) – *Catcher* stood out as the anomaly.

after I went home, and how I got sick and all, and what school I'm supposed to go to next fall, after I get out of here, but I don't feel like it" (Salinger, 1951, p. 234).

The reaction to Salinger's novel was swift and polarised. The novel's first review on 16 July 1951 appeared on the back page of *The New York Times*, book-ended by front-page news of the year-old Korean War (Burger, 1951). The coverage, however, was not a catalogue of American casualties, communiques from the field or maps of the territory in question – these were relegated to page two. Page one carried reportage on peace talks between the United Nations and the Communists, which would be unsuccessful, and an article from the American Secretary of State on the 'meaning' of the Korean conflict. The juxtaposition of the book review and the news item is not immediately apparent, but it is particularly salient in the discussion of YA and its contextual and historical link to the adolescent male reader. For the front pages did not speak directly of combat and consequences, but of the "verbal manoeuvring in the conflict between Communism and the Western world" (Ohmann & Ohmann, 1976, p. 16).

The significance of this is two-fold. First, its artificial hierarchy placed the discourse of agency above agency itself – *talk* of war was separated from actual reports of the war. Second, in physically isolating stories of war from stories of culture, any contemporaneity or historical relevance invoked in Salinger's novel was removed from the framework of world history. This arbitrary separation of culture from social and political reality was a pattern that recurred throughout the early 1950s, with many literary reviewers making little or no reference to the relation between historical events and the literature that was being produced (Ohmann & Ohmann, 1976, p. 17). However, its significance in understanding the disconnection between the physical body of the male adolescent and their identity through the literary artefact weighs heavily.

In the year after *Catcher* was published, the popular and critical reception centred predominantly on questions of its worth as an authentic rendition of adolescence, its validity as a literary response to the atrocities of the recently-ended Second World War and whether or not it was an accurate vignette of contemporary American society. Despite the efforts of critics and reviewers to pigeonhole *Catcher* as satire, tragicomedy and picaresque, as dictated by its formal features, the insolent and nihilistic voice of its adolescent narrator, replete with teenage idioms and syntax, heralded the work as

something that could not be easily classified. It would eventually become regarded as a culturally symbolic representation of the life of bourgeois urban America and, arguably, the first bona fide work of YA.

The popular response in periodicals and newspapers directly after the novel's publication produced a now well-documented fissure. Many critics and reviewers were enraptured and invigorated by this provocative interpretation of adolescence along with its insightful, yet misanthropic, observations of a bright, upper-class New York teenager in his transition to adulthood. Equally, the novel also drew ire. Encounters with pimps, prostitutes, homosexual men and nuns situated the text not merely as a dangerous work, but as a novel about the hitherto underexplored cultural, social, sexual and psychological wilderness between boyhood innocence and adult sentience.<sup>87</sup> As a result, what would haunt *Catcher* and its author from the day it was published, was the persistent query by critics and reviewers as to its mimetic function – how well it described 'real life'.

One of the first reviews, in *The New York Herald Tribune* in July 1951, was effusive. The newspaper's critic, Virgilia Peterson, immediately and succinctly flagged the novel as a compelling portrait of American adolescence – one that needed the full attention of the reading public. "Our youth today has no moorings, no criterion beyond instinct, no railing to grasp along the steep ascent to maturity. This is the importance of *The Catcher in the Rye*" (Peterson, 1951, p. 3). Peterson singled out Salinger's deft characterisation of the more sophisticated elements of teenage anxiety as the strength of the story. In particular, she praised Salinger's ability to depict the light and shade in the extremes of psychological adolescent turmoil as making it stand out amongst other one-dimensional offerings of the time. "Contaminated he is, of course, by vulgarity, lust, lies, temptations, recklessness and cynicism. But these are merely the devils that try him externally; inside, his spirit is intact," she observed (Peterson, 1951, p. 3).

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<sup>87</sup> Reviewers appeared to be divided, in a broad sense, over form and function. Nash K. Burger, in his *New York Times* review of 1951, praised Salinger's unique use of language and the authenticity of his protagonist's adolescent voice (Burger, 1951, p. 19). Conversely, critic T. Morris Longstreth was wholly repulsed by the novel, which he described in *The Christian Science Monitor* as failing to perform the benevolent duty of fiction for the young. Its author, he declared, had infected readers with the most unwholesome and abnormal depictions of social behaviour (Longstreth, 1951, p. 5).

The heightened awareness of the corporeal and cognitive realms of the male subject to which Peterson referred was a response to the rhetoric that had emerged around the brutalised and violated bodies and minds of a generation of young men who had recently returned from World War II. Although Peterson did not make direct reference to the author's stake in this dialogue, it was clear that Salinger's writing had been deeply influenced by the three years he had spent in active service in France and Germany and his exposure to the concentration camps at Dachau.<sup>88</sup> Peterson did, however, remark: "[r]ecent war novels have accustomed us all to ugly words and images, but from the mouths of the very young and protected they sound particularly offensive" (Peterson, 1951, p. 3). It was the transposing of visceral adult experience onto enactments of adolescence that appeared to shock and exhilarate Peterson and would do the same, with differing effects, to those who reviewed *Catcher* in the months after its publication.

Salinger's frank portrayal of the anxieties and proclivities of his young protagonist and more widely, the adolescent mind and body as vessels of both familiarity and alterity, became a theme that would permeate the literary landscape. Although his tale would concern belonging, connection, isolation and alienation – as many novels before it had done – Salinger's would not ruminate on the esoteric and existential fodder of the nineteenth-century novel to which readers were accustomed. In *The Crucial Decade – and After: America 1945-1960* (1961), Eric F. Goldman argued that the 1950s were unfairly lampooned as the 'Dismal Decade' or the 'Years of Neuroses', when American society had in fact adapted rapidly and decisively to the aftermath of the Holocaust and atomic warfare (Goldman, 1961, p. 290). The literary evidence, however, suggests that the cultural psyche – and especially the inscape of thinkers, writers and poets – was not so expeditiously adaptive, having been deeply wounded and disturbed by the atrocities of the previous decade. In particular, depictions of maladjusted, dysfunctional and malignant minds and bodies proliferated in the literary landscape. The same year that Little, Brown and Company published Salinger's seminal novel of scepticism and unknowing – "I mean how do you know what you're going to do till you do it?"

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<sup>88</sup> Salinger saw combat with the 12<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment, 4<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division (Lutz, 2002). He was also present at D-Day, the Battle of the Bulge and afterwards, the liberation of death camps at Dachau (Salinger, 2000).



(Salinger, 1951, p. 234) – there emerged a spate of best-sellers that shared a similarly bleak and disempowered vision of the future.<sup>89</sup>

The common element amongst the novels of 1951, regardless of their genre or intended audience, was that their dialogue veered organically toward themes of assault and incursion, perseverating on the violation and interruption of historically grounded formulations of the mind, the body, nature and communities. These uncomfortable concepts cast a literary mirror on post-war unease surrounding the unreliability and impermanence of knowledge, the fragility of the physical and psychological, the instability of order, and the dominance and/or fallibility of institutions, all specifically in relation to the male.<sup>90</sup>

The day following Peterson's review, *The New York Times* named *Catcher* as its Book of the Month (16 July 1951) with the reviewer, Nash K. Burger, earmarking it as "an unusually brilliant novel" due in no small part to the narrative of teenager Holden Caulfield in his "own strange, wonderful language" (Burger, 1951, p. 19). In making one of the first public judgements on Salinger's novel, Burger had only high praise for the work he described as something of a handbook of contemporary male adolescence. Burger saved a special ovation for Salinger's ability to expose the conflicted role of the adolescent. "Though confused and unsure of himself, like most 16-year-olds, [Holden] is observant and perceptive and filled with a certain wisdom. His minor delinquencies seem minor indeed when contrasted with adult delinquencies with which he is confronted" (Salinger, 1951, p. 19). Respected literary critic Clifton Fadiman also praised Salinger's dexterous characterisation of adolescence, remarking in a *Book-of-*

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<sup>89</sup> These included: Isaac Asimov's *Foundation* (1951), a trilogy of dystopian tales about a group of psychologists who employ art, science and technology in an attempt to save the planet from a decent into barbarism; John Wyndham's *Day of the Triffids* (1951), which depicts a post-apocalyptic world of bio-warfare, the work often being cited as the literary image of Cold War paranoia; and Ray Bradbury's *The Illustrated Man* (1951), depicting a dark world of fantasy and horror where the narrator meets a wanderer whose body is covered in exotic tattoos that come alive to tell their own stories of alien invasions, stranded astronauts and malevolent children of the future. More subtle, but no less emphatic in the portrayal of the unsettled psyche of the contemporary male, was Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952), published a year later. It tells the tale of a Cuban fisherman and his epic struggle with a marlin, the novel laden with questions surrounding the physical and moral challenge of man versus nature, for which Hemingway won the 1954 Nobel Prize for Literature.

<sup>90</sup> The themes that permeated the 1950s are perpetuated today in the dystopian depictions of humanity in novels such as *Divergent* (2011) by Veronica Roth and Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* (2008). So too, the pall of physical and mental brittleness that burdened a generation of post-war writers is evident in the 'sick-lit' novels that populate best-seller lists some 60 years later, such as John Green's *The Fault in Our Stars* (2012) and Jenny Downham's *Before I Die* (2007).

*the-Month Club* review: “that rare miracle of fiction has again come to pass: a human being has been created out of ink, paper, and the imagination” (Fadiman, 1951, p. 1).

However, what so enamoured these reviewers was what also offended the sensibilities of other critics. Certainly, there were those driven by a religious agenda who found the heavy-handed use of profanity and depictions of sexual activity and aberrance inexcusable. Holden’s salacious account of urban adolescence represented an unwelcome detour from the morality tales of muscular Christianity that had previously typified literature for young men.<sup>91</sup> Four days after the novel’s publication, *The Christian Science Monitor* declared the work “wholly repellent” (Longstreth, 1951, p. 5), with the thrust of its criticism focussing on the historically paternalistic obligations of fiction for the young. “Indeed, one finds it hard to believe that a true lover of children could father this tale,” he commented (Longstreth, 1951, p. 5). What so concerned the reviewer was that the mid-century pastiches of wholesome adolescence had been railroaded into a characterisation of deviant and ‘unnatural’ behaviours that would infect its readers. “[Holden] suffers from loneliness because he has shut himself away from the normal activities of boyhood, games, the outdoors, friendship [...] one fears that a book like this given wide circulation may multiply his kind – as too easily happens when immorality and perversion are recounted by writers of talent whose work is countenanced in the name of art or good intention,” (Longstreth, 1951, p. 5). It is worth recalling at this point that the types of adolescent publications dominating the landscape still bore the heavy influence of the pious Christian right wing in *Boy’s Own*-style literature.<sup>92</sup>

In identifying these oppositional relationships between adolescents and their environment, both at a critical and popular level, the extent to which cultural behaviour is buttressed by fiction literature begins to reveal itself. The paranoia around digressions from mainstream cultural behaviour during the 1950s was evident in the social polemics of commentators such as Fredric Wertham, who specifically identified the portrayal of sex and violence in popular literary forms as injurious to the subconscious minds of

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<sup>91</sup> Family-friendly stereotypes of Western masculinity would soon be tested with the emergence of mainstream pornography in the form of magazines such as *Playboy*, first published in 1953.

<sup>92</sup> Early fiction that catered specifically for adolescent male readers can be traced back to the influence of *The Boy’s Own Book* and *Boy’s Own* magazine, first published in the early 1800s in Boston and London (Henderson, 2001, p. 153).

teenage boys (Wertham, 1954, p. 192). Although his rather radical assessments quickly fell from favour, Holden was indeed the uncomfortable articulation of these fears. Volatile, capricious, undisciplined and uncompliant, Salinger's protagonist was the unnerving spectre of new urban masculinity – one seemingly sidelined and neglected by the rhetoric of formal criticism. A review by *The Catholic World* dismissed Salinger's adolescent narrative as a poor and unsuccessful imitation of good literature. "Holden's character as iconoclast, a kind of latter-day Tom Sawyer or Huck Finn, is made monotonous and phony by the formidably excessive use of amateur swearing and coarse language" (*The Catholic World*, 1951, p. 154). In appropriating Salinger's own subversive teenage vernacular, the reviewer effectively extinguished the potency of Holden as a symbol of rebellion and agency, invalidating his corporeal and temporal relevance in a single stroke.

## 1.1 First Act: Performing Adolescent Gender

Much of the intellectual posturing by critics, whether it produced delight or irritation, emanated from Salinger's uncomfortable depictions of the adolescent psyche in decay. In his first dozen pages, Holden makes multiple references to the violent repercussions of breaching the inviolable regulations of social and institutional rule. His first attempts are visceral, aiming to shock the reader. He describes his parents as having "about two hemorrhages apiece" if he talks to anyone about this "madman stuff" (Salinger, 1951, p. 1) and when he discusses the touching storyline of a book written by his brother, DB, he remarks: "It killed me" (p. 2). When DB opts to become a screenwriter rather than a novelist, Holden is deeply hurt: "Now he's out in Hollywood, D.B., being a prostitute" (p. 4); and of his younger brother, Allie, Holden delivers an equally blunt commentary: "He's dead now. He got leukemia (sic) and died when we were up in Maine, on 18 July 1946" (p. 43). In deliberately drawing attention to the pernicious nature of thoughts and feelings on the physical body, Holden underscores the effect of the awkward and liminal emotions that dominate adolescence – those 'ugly feelings', as Ngai describes them (Ngai, 2005, p. 41).

In brutal language, Holden tells the reader that he is *ashamed* of being mentally unstable (p. 208), that he feels *guilty* about bringing his family name into disrepute (p. 3), that his

brother lacks *integrity* (p. 4), that his body is *embarrassing* (p. 106) and that he feels *anxious* about the death of his brother (p. 172) – possibly part of a particular post-atomic-war sentiment of quiet nihilism during the 1950s. These are not the aesthetic emotions that so often concern literary critics, they are the *noncathartic* and the *amoral* that Ngai argues offer the reader little satisfaction (Ngai, 2005, p. 6), thus setting *Catcher* apart from a classic literature that aimed to edify, delight or stimulate the senses. These are the mundane, pedestrian and messy emotions that would lay the foundation for future literary expressions of the urban adolescent male.<sup>93</sup>

Holden, as the embodiment of the unpredictable, erratic and hypersexual teenager (if only in his imagination), represented a serious transgression from the mythology of adolescence being peddled in the romance novels and television shows aimed at America's youth. Salinger's lead was an unwelcome and rather menacing manifestation of budding masculinity. Meeting a classmate's mother on the evening train to New York, Holden remarks: "She was around forty or forty-five, I guess, but she was very good-looking. Women kill me. They really do. I don't mean I'm oversexed or anything like that – although I am quite sexy. I just like them, I mean" (Salinger, 1951, p. 61). Holden is clearly attracted to the woman and attempts to seduce her. He offers her a cigarette, although they are in a non-smoking carriage.

"I don't believe this is a smoker, Rudolf," she said. Rudolf. That killed me.

"That's all right. We can smoke till they start screaming at us," I said.

She took a cigarette off me, and I gave her a light. (Salinger, 1951, p. 63)<sup>94</sup>

He watches the woman intently, assessing her, as is his habit. "She looked nice, smoking. She inhaled and all, but she didn't *wolf* the smoke down, the way most women around her age do. She had a lot of charm. She had quite a lot of sex appeal, too, if you really want to know" (p. 63). He then offers to buy her a cocktail, which she politely refuses. These attempts to woo an older, married woman appear at first to be the clumsy enactments of an adolescent crush. However, the undertone is sinister. The danger in Holden's language and agency is that in attempting to seduce a school friend's mother,

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<sup>93</sup> Critics often compare Charlie Kelmeckis in *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* with Holden Caulfield, drawing parallels between their unnerving sense of detached nihilism and their unpredictability as classic traits of the modern adolescent (Kirkus Reviews, 1999; Publishers Weekly, 1999).

<sup>94</sup> Holden tells the woman that his name is Rudolf Schmidt: "I didn't feel like giving her my whole life history. Rudolf Schmidt was the name of the janitor of our dorm" (Salinger, 1951, p. 63).

he is committing a serious social and cultural infraction – he is crossing the gulf that separates child from adult, impulse from reason, flirtation from adultery. Holden is troubling the concept of the adolescent as an innocent – a concern that produced legitimate moral outrage and panic during the 1950s.<sup>95</sup> Indeed, Salinger appears to have attempted a bold dismantling of the very paradigms and paragons of social order responsible for producing those caricatures.

The bizarre and disturbing actions of Holden also highlight the specious and oppressive interjection of institutions on the minds and bodies of the young. In a scene where fellow pupil Stradlater asks Holden to write him an essay for the next day's English lesson because he is both incapable of and disinterested in producing it himself, the character serves a particular dual purpose that is central to the questions of this thesis. First, he illuminates the masculine as a realm disconnected from the literary.

“You goin’ out tonight?” he said.

“I might. I might not. I don’t know. Why?”

“I got about a hundred pages to read for history for Monday [...] How ‘bout writing a composition for me, for English? I’ll be up the creek if I don’t get the god-dam thing in by Monday, the reason I ask. How ‘bout it?” (Salinger, 1951, p. 32)

The paradox is not lost on Holden, who wonders to himself:

It was very ironical. It really was.

“*I’m* the one that’s flunking out of the goddam place, and *you’re* asking me to write you a goddam composition,” I said. (Salinger, 1951, p. 32)

Here, the juxtaposition of history (fact/reason/Stradlater) over literature (fiction/imagination/Holden) is heavy-handed, yet it brings to the attention of Salinger’s readers how the interiority of mind and its language is repeatedly demoted in relation to the pragmatism of physical proof and historicity. It is also not coincidental that while Holden is writing the English composition, Stradlater is on a date with Jane Gallagher –

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<sup>95</sup> See discussion in Wertham’s *Seduction of the Innocent* and its influence on literature for the young during the 1950s (Wertham, 1954, p. 192).

the one girl that Holden is attracted to and with whom he feels a connection – fulfilling all the corporeal promise of male adolescence.

As a character, and indeed a caricature, Stradlater's second job is to act as a foil to Holden's literary feminisation. Where Stradlater takes the role of historian, Holden is relegated to the writer and teller of fictions, focussing the reader's attention on the somewhat futile ambitions of educational rhetoric amidst the physical maelstrom of puberty. In this structure, Holden is acting out what Sedgwick describes as the "castrated status" of the female condition, in which the male is immobilised by refusing to participate in an essentially homosocial economy (Sedgwick, 1985, p. 57). The schism produces a situation in which Holden retreats to the role of passive storyteller, while his rival takes that of active agent. Accordingly, Stradlater is slavishly adherent to the gentleman's rules of Pencey Prep, yet lacks any academic integrity or rigour and displays little moral virtue in regards to women. During a heated discussion in their shared dormitory one evening, Holden lights a cigarette. "You weren't allowed to smoke in the dorm [...] I did it to annoy Stradlater. It drove him crazy when you broke any rules" (Salinger, 1951, p. 47).

Yet Stradlater has no compunction about allowing another student to complete his homework. When Holden produces a poignant ode to his younger brother Allie, who has died from leukaemia the year before, rather than a 'descriptive composition', Stradlater is furious. "You always do everything backasswards," he tells Holden (Salinger, 1951, p. 46). "No wonder you're flunking the hell out of here [...] You don't do one damn thing the way you're supposed to. I mean it. Not one damn thing" (p. 47). In distinguishing Holden as non-normative, Stradlater highlights the plight of the malcontent and the radical in the face of unyielding cultural conformity. Yet, rather than exploring the complex implications of the modern male in crisis, many critics found the easiest way to deal with Salinger's treatise on the ills of society was to dismiss it.

The *New Republic*'s Anne L. Goodman praised Salinger's attempt at channelling the motif of the troubled teenager but concluded that "the book as a whole is disappointing" because there is "too much of him" and "the reader wearies of this kind of explicitness, repetition and adolescence, exactly as one would weary of Holden himself" (Goodman, 1951, p. 21). So, although Holden's sabotage of performative gender and type had

certainly piqued Goodman's interest, it had succumbed to what Butler describes as the problem with subversive performances, that they always run the risk of becoming "deadening clichés through their repetition" (Butler, 1999, p. xxiii). However, from a readerly perspective, despite his unorthodox behaviours and a deleterious lack of insight into his own shortcomings, Holden possesses a clear perspective of the institutions that appointed themselves as tastemakers and arbiters of cultural valency. Early in the novel, in a series of somewhat laboured metaphors, Holden identifies Stradlater for the reader as the most repugnant of characters – one who presents the veneer of legitimacy (socially, academically, culturally) – but whose moral value and cultural substance hold little merit. In repeated examples, Holden attributes the highest of social values to the literate and literary and the lowest to those who 'perform' and 'appear' in social and cultural guises that lack authenticity or credibility.<sup>96</sup>

Salinger's distinct framing of 'performance' as a phony manifestation of the self is underlined in the powerful closing scene of *Catcher*. In a novel so devoid of happiness and hope, perhaps it is in Holden's final hallucinatory idyll that the teenage male reader is meant to understand the importance of individuality and the thrill of possibility in escaping the performance of society all together.

Finally, what I decided I'd do. I decided I'd go away. I decided I'd never go home again and I'd never go away to another school again. I decided I'd just see old Phoebe [Holden's sister] and sort of say good-by to her and all, and give her back her Christmas dough, and then I'd start hitchhiking my way out West [...] where it was very pretty and sunny and where nobody'd know me and I'd get a job. I figured I could get a job at a filling station somewhere, putting gas and oil in people's cars. I didn't care what kind of a job it was, though. Just so people didn't know me and I didn't know anybody. I thought what I'd do was, I'd pretend I was one of those deaf-mutes. That way I wouldn't have to have any goddam stupid

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<sup>96</sup> It is important to remember that the generation of 1950s teenagers empowered by a sense of freedom and recklessness in reaction to the atrocities of World War II, were also concurrently being suppressed and surveilled by a heavy-handed McCarthy-era government engaged in espionage, political repression and capital punishment to control its citizens. It was this environment in which a new type of teenager was emerging, one situated in a larger framework of social and cultural paranoia that made 'justifiable', State-endorsed impositions on the individual's mind and body. These were dangerous times for any person who chose to deviate from the norm – socially, politically, culturally or sexually (Fried, 1990).

useless conversations with anybody [...] I'd be through with having conversations for the rest of my life. (Salinger, 1951, p. 218)

In his imagination, Holden is removing the building blocks of bourgeois society – education, class, career, family, home, language and communication. In ostensibly erasing human history, or at least his own history, the potential is for Holden to reconstruct an alternative future, one that offers the possibility of escape, regeneration and reinvention. It is easy to read too deeply into Salinger's intention here, yet it is not unlikely that the author was imagining not only a new world, but a new type of literary landscape in which curated narratives become obsolete and personal stories take their place, where individuals weave their own unique histories.

The concept of removing oneself from society is not Holden's romance alone. Like so many characterisations in adolescent literature, Holden reflects the insecurities of wider society.<sup>97</sup> However, the 1950s male was far more complex than the clichéd characters that inhabited television screens and cinemas. James Gilbert argues in *Men in the Middle: Searching for Masculinity in the 1950s* (2005) that the era, although often portrayed as conservative and neurotic, was rather revolutionary in terms of politics, the economy, mass media and the family (Gilbert, 2005, p. 4). The discourse around gender during this period was also developing, with an increasing domestic role for men, especially in regards to paternal involvement in family life beginning to change the way that masculinity was understood. Amongst the post-war rhetoric, there existed an awkward and dichotomous relationship between men and their new homosocial environment. Generic models of the American flannel-suited man, briefcase in hand, kissing his wife goodbye at the front door of their neat suburban home grated against rugged images of *The Marlboro Man* and the domestic turmoil portrayed in Tennessee Williams' *Streetcar Named Desire*.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> As suggested by Hilton and Nikolajeva, themes from political injustice and sexuality to cultural degradation and psychological instability appear as themes in YA to mirror the worries of society (Hilton & Nikolajeva, 2012, p. 1).

<sup>98</sup> As part of a new commodified and televised culture, adolescence became a 'type' in which performance was an integral component. A study of the influence of new media between 1945 and 1960 – a period dubbed the 'Age of Affluence' – found that magazines, films, television and radio were equally as influential in shaping cultural patterns of behaviour as how one's peer leaders reacted to and relayed those messages (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 2006). The most influential of these forms was television, its success happily bankrolled by commercial advertisers who enjoyed the endorsement of America's Employment Act of 1946, which aimed to lift the economic pall of the Great Depression by stimulating demand for



Holden Caulfield exists in this conflicted temporal and spatial arena in which he is a dissenter and rule-breaker, sexually aberrant and psychologically damaged. He harbours a flagrant disregard for authority, institutions and parental control and inhabits an erratic and unreliable body, full of adolescent vigour and pubescent bravado. In this respect, he represents the irony of adolescent masculinity – society expecting young men to be gentle yet ambitious, reliable yet spontaneous, dominant yet compliant. More intrinsically, his dangerous dialogues were for the first time reflecting the biological and psychological volatility that had perhaps hitherto been suppressed, certainly in literature, under the guise of the Romantic or Victorian ‘gentleman’. Holden feels burdened and often repulsed by the obligations of their historical hangover.

After returning to the lobby of his hotel during his four-day odyssey through New York City, Holden finds himself compelled to accept the elevator operator’s offer of “a little tail t’night,” agreeing to host a prostitute in his room (Salinger, 1951, p. 101). Sunny, the girl who eventually arrives, although little more than a child herself, is dominant and aloof, acting out the conventional male role. She sits down on Holden’s lap when she senses that he is nervous about initiating a move. “You’re cute,” she says. “Then she started getting funny. Crude and all. “Do you mind cutting it out?” I said. “I’m not in the mood” (p. 108). It is in these seemingly innocuous moments of submissiveness and reversion to childlike behaviour that Salinger’s protagonist helps us understand what is essential to the question of this thesis: that there is an obligation for YA to carry the burden of society’s anxieties in the body and mind of the adolescent literary object.

Indeed, it is the *body* of the male adolescent in YA that appears to shoulder much of this load. Salinger achieves this by foregrounding and magnifying the performative imperatives of masculinity – the shows of vigour and virility – to expose the destructive nature of expectation on the young male psyche. As night unfolds on another eventful day in *Catcher*, Holden ruminates on his lacklustre shows of manhood, all the while attempting an outward display of both sexual and physical masculinity. On why he cannot confront the classmate who stole his gloves, Holden muses:

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consumer products (Santoni, 1986). The new culture of consumption, fed by a marketing medium beamed directly into living rooms, bombarded an enthusiastic teenage audience (who enjoyed a much higher disposable income than their parents’ generation ever had) with images of products and services that provided instant gratification and social cachet.

I'm one of these very yellow guys. I try not to show it, but I am [...] I'd feel I ought to sock the guy in the jaw or something – break his goddam jaw. Only I wouldn't have the guts to do it. I'd just stand there, trying to look tough [...] The more I thought about my gloves and my yellowness, the more depressed I got [...] I hate fist fights. (Salinger, pp. 99-100)

Holden's pointed references to being yellow, as not having guts, to looking tough and of feeling depressed, all revolve specifically around his interactions with males. These ontological metaphors, which Lakoff and Johnson describe as arising from personal experience with physical objects (especially our own bodies), provide the basis for viewing emotions and ideas as entities and substances in the novel (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 25). The irony of masculine adolescence – bearing the presumption of bodily maturation whilst at the same time having to contain the incumbent emotional outcomes – are evident in Salinger's heavy use of these linguistic referents. Throughout, Holden's body is persistently demonised as a sub-standard specimen – by his own admission he is cowardly, weak of body and weak of mind.

In these moments, Holden not only verbalises the deficit between the expectations and disillusioning realities of gender performance, he lives the deficit – constantly failing to complete both the cognitive and physical transition from adolescence to adulthood. His encounter with Sunny, in which he is unable or unwilling to 'perform', is in itself a metaphor for these failures. "I'm a virgin. I really am. I've had quite a few opportunities to lose my virginity and all, but I've never got around to it yet" (Salinger, p. 103), admits Holden. "I figured if she was a prostitute and all, I could get in some practice on her, in case I ever get married or anything" (Salinger, p.104). However, in a sardonic twist, it is a literary barrier that frustrates Holden's sexual fulfilment, his carnal desires being somewhat dampened by the memory of a character named Monsieur Blanchard who had appeared in a novel Holden had read at school. "He said, in this one part, that a woman's body is like a violin and all, and that it takes a terrific musician to play it right" (Salinger, p. 104). The literary allusion to performance is so stultifying and burdensome that when Sunny removes her dress, Holden is alarmed by his own abnormal reaction.

I certainly felt peculiar when she did that. I mean she did it so sudden and all. I know you're supposed to feel pretty sexy when somebody gets up and pulls their dress over their head, but I didn't. Sexy was about the last thing I was feeling. I felt much more depressed than sexy. (Salinger, p. 106)

For Holden, a failure to perform the physical rituals of masculinity occurs in the deviant and atypical form of a cognitive impasse. His mind produces a disconnection, a perceived aberrancy, between what it thinks should be done and what the body will do.

Don't you feel like talking for a while?" I asked her.

It was a childish thing to say, but I was feeling so damn peculiar.

"Are you in a very big hurry?"

She looked at me like I was a madman.

"What the heck ya wanna talk about?" she said. (Salinger, p. 106)

This scene is so uncomfortable precisely because it illustrates how masculinity viewed through a monocular lens denies gender depictions any latitude beyond the normative. Indeed, Holden's reticence to act out the culturally prescribed clichés of his gender underscores what I believe to be one of the most productive readings of Salinger's work. That is, by identifying and defining the teenage character by means of alterity, inconsistency and distortion through language, one is able to explore the adolescent mind and body as a primary site of conflict in enactments of gender.

## 1.2. Reading the Literary Body

To readers, Salinger's quest to unmask the 'phony' in the rhetorical performance of the homosocial may appear clumsy or fanciful, yet I argue that it exposes a deeply entrenched cognitive connection between gender, literature and phenomenological truth.<sup>99</sup> For, if one understands fiction as a metaphor – by which I mean that fiction 'stands for' an experience – then its purpose is to provide a surrogate form of participation – a proxy truth. In this respect, Gallagher's description of fictionality's

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<sup>99</sup> Lakoff and Johnson describe phenomenological truth in *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and its Challenge to Western Thought* as that validated by events and experience (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999, p. 106).

role as an active and determining element in human culture is highly pertinent (Gallagher, 2006, p. 336). *Catcher's* primary point of difference was that its first-person narrative – which spoke a new lingua franca and candid and emotional style felt honest and raw – did not read like a 'fiction'. Its authenticity appeared to emanate not from its form, but from its language. The work's second point of difference was that it subtly employed the metafictional technique of 'breaking the fourth wall', a style that had previously belonged to mid-nineteenth century naturalist theatre (Mangan, 2013, p. 172). The use of a narrator who spoke directly to the audience – Holden addresses the reader as "you" – was arguably what would establish the text as an iconic and authentic rendition of the teenage voice. In his defiant and vitriolic opening sermon, Holden breaks all manner of literary, social and cultural codes of conduct, but it is his direct conversation with the reader that cements the intimate relationship between character and audience.

Its form – essentially a psychiatry-couch confessional from a witty private school boy – allows Salinger to divulge the intimate and manifold experiences of white, middle-class adolescence. His private and deeply personal monologue produces a uniquely embodied text – tactile and visceral – on the inadequacies of the human psyche and its ineffectual corporeal enactments. In this respect, Holden's narrative falls outside the normative modes of reminiscence, explicit idealism and didactic moralising that had typified classic literature and instead favours a nihilistic and confrontational style. His technique relegates historical sentiment, institutional authority and literary canonicity – "all that David Copperfield kind of crap" – to the dustbin (Salinger, 1951, p. 3). His disregard for the conventional modes of memoir is patent in Holden's declarations – "that stuff bores me [...] I'm not going to tell you my whole goddam autobiography or anything" (p. 3). By refusing to engage with the essential elements of narrative storytelling – history, context and literary form – Salinger creates a new space in which the biography of an emerging generation might be told.

The reliance on traditional fictional form had come up against no particular opposition until a perceptible change in sentiment in the early twentieth century with the outbreak of two world wars and the enduring effect they had on the male psyche. The Industrial Revolution, which had necessitated an enforced transition in the labour market from agricultural and manual work to 'domestic' or office-bound professions had demoted

physical agency and alienated men from their 'nature'. These issues dogged the modern subconscious, evident in novels such as John Wyndham's *Day of the Triffids* (1951), *Alas, Babylon* (1959) by Pat Frank, Arthur C. Clarke's *Childhood's End* (1953) and *On the Beach* by Nevil Shute (1957), all of which tell stories of human decay and destruction. This shift in narrative voice is remarkable in that it signals a move away from the original disposition of the novel – which had since its eighteenth-century naissance tended to obscure its fictionality behind verisimilitude and relied on referentiality for validity (Gallagher, 2006, p. 337).

Many critics appeared to overlook this recalibration, simply applying traditional measures to assess *Catcher's* fitness as a great American novel. The brash refusal of form was variously summarised as "a kind of *Huckleberry Finn* in modern dress" (Branch, 1957, p. 145), a neo-picaresque novel (Aldridge, 1956) and the tale of "an adolescent male WASP" who was incapable of speaking for a generation (Shriber, 1990, p. 226). Yet the work's irreverent middle-class voice and shambolic subjectivity appealed to a post-war reading public, who devoured it voraciously. *Catcher* remained on the *New York Times* best-seller list for 30 weeks after its publication, reportedly selling nine million copies in its first decade in print (Ohmann & Ohmann, 1976, p. 15). The novel's translation into various European languages and its publication in paperback by The New American Library in 1953 elicited a second wave of popularity and cemented its enduring position as a school and university stalwart. By 1989, the novel had been reprinted in paperback 69 times.

Specifically, its new, unorthodox and decidedly un-Victorian form made it clear that the battle for the adolescent mind would be fought with words – words that mocked and parodied the formal historicity of the novel. Holden's bumbling use of dramatic irony, hyperbole and comedic metaphor – "Sensitive. That killed me. That guy Morrow was about as sensitive as a goddam toilet seat" (Salinger, 1951, p. 62) – speaks specifically to adolescent males in a voice that denies both the reverential depiction of growth favoured by the *Entwicklungsroman* and the timbre of the *Bildungsroman*, with all its emphasis on maturation and self-determination.<sup>100</sup> Instead, *Catcher* seeks out answers

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<sup>100</sup> Lakoff and Johnson dedicate a chapter in *Philosophy in the Flesh* to metaphor and truth as intrinsic to the system of human understanding (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999, pp. 118-129).

to questions not only about how the individual fitted within society but the existential query posed by Erikson of “Who am I?” (Gross, 1987, p. 39).<sup>101</sup>

Part of this quest is the reckoning, by either assimilation or invalidation, of medial form. In this respect, Salinger’s protagonist makes an impassioned appeal to readers for the preservation of authenticity in the ‘real’ medium of literature.<sup>102</sup> His sentiments squarely position the written word as the most stable holder of meaning, one that privileges metacognitive representations as superior in epistemological explorations of the self. Holden tells his readers: “What really knocks me out is a book that, when you’re all done reading it, you wish the author that wrote it was a terrific friend of yours and you could call him up on the phone whenever you felt like it” (Salinger, 1951, p. 22). In opposition, Salinger demotes visual media – film, television, advertising – as venal acts of the body – ones that require a conspicuous presence, an outward performance and an attentive audience to render them legitimate. Holden tells his readers that he despises the movies “like poison” (p33) and that their folly comes from an inability to capture the real. After DB takes him to see the film adaptation of Hamlet, Holden declares:

I hate actors. They never act like people [...] I just don’t see what’s so marvellous about Sir Laurence Olivier, that’s all. He has a terrific voice, and he’s a helluva handsome guy, and he’s very nice to watch when he’s walking or duelling or something, but he wasn’t at all the way D.B. said Hamlet was. He was too much like a goddam general, instead of a sad, screwed-up type guy. (Salinger, p. 130)

Holden lays bare the intrinsic problem with cultural performativity for teenage males. Specifically, how a comparison of the self with the ‘aesthetic’ magnifies the difficult task of making a social translation through a mimetic conceit. He illuminates how the posturing and presentation of stereotypes – specifically gender – and their inherent need for an audience, produces a paradigm that pits words/mind against actions/body.

This uneasy relationship is figuratively enunciated in Holden’s attitude towards the influence of emergent media over established forms. Specifically, Salinger’s protagonist

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<sup>101</sup> Trites makes a very convincing argument in *Disturbing the Universe: Power and Repression in Adolescent Literature* that the modus operandi for much YA relies on narratives centering on the assertion of individuality (Trites, 2000, p. 19).

<sup>102</sup> Holden repeatedly refers to the cinema as ‘phony’ and its screenwriters and actors as prostitutes (pp. 4, 80, 90, 94). Indeed, Salinger during his lifetime denied any person the right to reproduce or interpolate his novel in any alternative medium (Herskovitz, 2013).

feels compelled to iterate his disdain in grotesque and pejorative metaphors of the body when he speaks of the deleterious effects of new media. Of his author brother, Holden contends:

He used to be just a regular writer, when he was home. He wrote this terrific book of short stories, *The Secret Goldfish* [...] It was about this little kid that wouldn't let anybody look at his goldfish because he'd bought it with his own money. It killed me. Now he's out in Hollywood, D.B., being a prostitute. If there's one thing I hate, it's the movies. Don't even mention them to me. (Salinger, 1951, p. 4)

For Salinger's protagonist, the signs and signifiers of visual media are not credible measures of value. Holden rails against commercial cinema as a reaction to what he understands is an inferior cerebral experience – a move away from the rich and subtle world of metaphor, allegory and parable, towards the brash, conspicuous imagery of film. Equally, he is obsessed with inauthentic representations of self through overt performances of personality – often disgusted by phony people, phony bravado and phony displays of emotion. The semiotic logic of sign = representation = understanding appears to him opaque and hollow, jarring his aesthetic sensibilities. This deep sense of feeling unmoored perhaps stemmed from the newly visualised language of the 1950s – marked by what linguists Charles Sanders Peirce and Saussure had described 100 years earlier as a world in which “we think only in signs”, where communication and reasoning relies entirely on semiotics (Peirce, 1931-1935, p. 2.302).<sup>103</sup>

The disconnection between Holden's audience, who were no doubt enthusiastically engaged in the new visual semiotics of cinema, and a protagonist who repeatedly demoted the social and cultural worth of this new source of meaning-making, produces a very unnatural text – one that acknowledges yet vehemently resists the reductive and homogenising elements of mass communication that ply their medium through semiotic language. When Holden and Stradlater double date, Holden is nauseated by Stradlater's pretence. “What a technique that guy had. What he'd do was, he'd start snowing his date in this very quiet *sincere* voice – like as if he wasn't only a very handsome guy but

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<sup>103</sup> Peirce, known as the ‘father of pragmatism’, who was also an innovator in the fields of epistemology and abductive reasoning, would later contribute to the invention of digital computers – a technology that reduces every thought, word and image to a series of zeros and ones (Peirce, 1931-1935, p. 5: 541) Salinger's work appears to directly confront these structures of reductive thought that were influencing academic theory during the 1950s.

a nice, *sincere* guy, too. I damn near puked [He] kept snowing her in this Abraham Lincoln, sincere voice” (Salinger, 1951, p. 56). For Holden, spoken words are uncomfortably inauthentic, their enactments necessarily coupled with performance, robbing them of their intrinsic merit and interpretive meaning.

Throughout the text, the reader’s attention is repeatedly drawn to the ambiguous and misleading nature of these signs. Indeed, the very measureable way in which Holden’s parents chose to shape his mind and body by educating him at a series of elite private schools – each of which he is asked to leave – is the source of much sarcastic rhetoric. Holden’s scepticism towards the motivations of the institutional edifices he must attend reinforces his reluctance to accept signs on face value. Wary of their reliance on objectivism and rationality, neither of which he has been able to attain by the novel’s end, Holden desires only an authentic and individual experience, not one borne of method, logic or artifice.

Where I want to start telling is the day I left Pencey Prep. Pencey Prep is this school that’s in Agerstown, Pennsylvania. You probably heard of it. You’ve probably seen the ads, anyway. They advertise in about a thousand magazines, always showing some hot-shot guy on a horse jumping over a fence. Like as if all you ever did at Pencey was play polo all the time. I never even once saw a horse anywhere *near* the place. And underneath the guy on the horse’s picture, it always says: “Since 1888 we have been molding boys into splendid, clear-thinking young men”. (Salinger, 1951, p. 4)

In this passage, a number of issues are at work regarding the disconnection between signs and their meanings and the ensuing implications for the adolescent male psyche. The first is what Foucault describes as the “perpetual relationship of force” (Foucault, 1980, p. 92) by which any institution is necessarily a product of the social fabric from which it is constructed. Notably, the American middle class that Holden is so keen to escape, and the institutions that validate its existence, are articulated here through the medium of advertising – its empty hyperbole and duplicity becoming more apparent as Holden’s tale unfolds. The institutional metaphors that populate his world act as both sites of empowerment and sites of repression and are a perpetual source of friction. Accordingly, it is significant to note that much of Holden’s ‘education’ – the edification



of both his mind and body – takes place outside the institutional setting. Indeed, despite the fact that by the end of the novel he has spent considerable time in various private schools and a mental health facility, he appears to be unchanged and unmoved by any of them, further cementing the novel's challenge to the legitimacy of institutional discourse.<sup>104</sup>

This schism between the systems of 'message' and 'meaning' reinforces the need to examine both content and medium in understanding how the mind and body of the teenage male interacts with the signs that define identity. For Holden, advertising, much like cinema, is counterfeit. Its symbols are false idols and its language deceitful – it presents only a veneer of authenticity. As a comforting retreat, Salinger instead guides the reader to an inscape where solace, intimacy and satisfaction are gained through books – where acts of the physical are starkly contrasted and rarely edifying. Indeed, notions of the body are unceasingly temporal in Salinger's work, giving them a sense of urgent yet ebbing opportunity. When Holden's thoughts turn to whether Stradlater may have had sex with Jane on their most recent date, he becomes incensed.

I sat down on the vomity-looking chair in the lobby and thought about her and Stradlater sitting in that goddam Ed Banky's car, and though I was pretty damn sure old Stradlater hadn't given her the time – I know old Jane like a book – I still couldn't get her off my brain. I knew her like a book. I really did [...] I really got to know her quite intimately. I don't mean it was anything physical or anything – it wasn't – but we saw each other all the time. You don't always have to get too sexy to get to know a girl. (Salinger, 1951, p. 85)

The metacognitive language used to describe the mind and body in this passage speaks of value and purpose. When Holden describes his relationship with Jane – he knew her 'like a book' – he is articulating the understanding that by expending time and attention such as one would on reading, to immerse oneself in the thoughts and actions of another, one is better able to gain what cognitive scientists widely acknowledge as

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<sup>104</sup> The tension between individual and state is typical fodder for the YA genre, according to Trites, which tends to problematise institutions as an instinctive way of exploring and destabilising the language in which institutions are immersed (Trites, 2000, p. 23).

Theory of Mind.<sup>105</sup> In contrast, the reference to Stradlater giving Jane “the time” – a euphemism for sexual intercourse – draws attention to the passing of time as a physical process that abnegates intellectual rigour. Lakoff and Johnson argue that when time is metaphorically conceptualised as a resource in this way – rather than in relation to motion, space or events – it is drawing on a very specific mapping schema (see below).<sup>106</sup>

Resource (*time/the body*)

User of the Resource (*Stradlater*)

Purpose that requires an amount of the Resource (*sexual gratification*)

Value of the Resource (*low – Stradlater cannot even remember Jane’s name*)

Value of the Purpose (*high – Stradlater gains sexual and reputational gratification*)

The irony of Holden’s rumination is that in Stradlater giving Jane ‘the time’, he would in fact have been taking time from her, using up minutes in the most literal sense. By metaphorically commodifying the body and acts of the body as exploitable resources, Salinger opens a dialogue on issues such as the objectification of women, but more usefully for this thesis, he highlights the narrow, archetypal models of male adolescent physicality that are woven into the subtext and narrative of everyday language.

With *Catcher*, these metaphors and their narratives moved off the page in a process of social adaptation, and into public discourse where they were adopted and performed as part of a dynamic 1950s youth culture. The result was a very particular vernacular employed to speak of the adolescent male, one that perseverated on the temporal and cognitive, over the corporeal. In *American Moderns: From Rebellion to Conformity* (1958), critic Maxwell Geismar identified Holden Caulfield as a powerful symbol of this protest against what he called the “compulsive virility of the Hemingway school of fiction” (Geismar, 1958, p. 196). He also made the controversial observation that Salinger completely obliterates the protagonist’s ‘Jewishness’ in what is clearly the story of a Jewish boy in New York City, thereby betraying its lineage. By inserting

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<sup>105</sup> Discussions of metaphor by Lakoff and Johnson underpin the work of theorists who rely on cognitive narratology to bolster their arguments. Zunshine and Trites, for example, argue that the translation of metaphors into social cues is the cornerstone of ToM (Trites, 2012, p. 65; Zunshine, 2002, p. 130).

<sup>106</sup> Using ‘The Resource Schema’ proposed by Lakoff and Johnson in *Philosophy in the Flesh*, the characters in this scene are delineated as objects within a cultural system (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999, pp. 161-162). My emphasis in italics.

Holden and his sister Phoebe Caulfield – “what perfect American social register names” – into the role of “beautifully Anglicized” leading figures, Salinger creates an environment that omits any reference to its true nature (Geismar, 1958, p. 196).

Fellow critic Frank Kermode in *The Spectator* highlighted the weight of intention placed on Holden as an emblematic ‘hero’ of his generation, relaying his tale “in the Homeric Runyon tradition” so often associated with the fearless and stoic picture of the masculine (Kermode, 1958, p. 705). Paul Levine too, commented on the misfit hero in *Twentieth Century Literature*, noting Salinger’s importance as a cultural commentator in this process, the author tapping into a “moral awareness as well as a social perception” that produced an uncomfortably accurate image of white, privileged America (Levine, 1958, p. 92). Already in these reckonings, *Catcher* is a vexatious articulation of the tensions between young men, their minds and bodies, and their evolving social environments.<sup>107</sup> On the page however, Geismar determined that this had produced a psychological void and eventuated in an unsatisfactory tale of “the conspicuous display of leisure-class emotions” from a rebel without a past or a future, and apparently without a cause (Geismar, 1958, p. 197).

Provocative genre critic Leslie Fiedler also flinched at Salinger’s depictions of adolescent consciousness as a reflection of deeper social troubles. In ‘The Breakthrough: The American Jewish Novelist and the Fictional Image of the Jew’, Fiedler identified Holden as a creature of tricks of style who was “intended to represent a holy innocent against whom the rest of the world is measured” (Fiedler, 1958, p. 23). More recent scholarship, which benefits from the value of hindsight in revealing the nuance in a character like Holden Caulfield, instead implicates a so-called new consciousness that was emerging during the period. According to Grace Elizabeth Hale in *A Nation of Outsiders: How the White Middle Class Fell in Love with Rebellion in Postwar America* (2011), this “great refusal” was evident in the work of artists such as Allan Ginsburg, Susan Sontag and Norman Mailer, and created a particular way of writing for and about the bourgeoisie (Hale, 2011, p. 19). Specifically, it made itself apparent in Holden’s hatred of the self-conscious and reflexive elements of cinema, in

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<sup>107</sup> Literary critic Arthur Mizener praised Salinger’s facsimile of the American teenage male, his essence captured in Holden’s habitual activities, behaviours and turns of phrase, which came to define a volatile and unpredictable generation of young men (Mizener, 1959, p. 90).

which a person could be simultaneously inside and outside themselves, producing an unworkable environment in which it was impossible to discern purpose from reaction and effect (Hale, 2011, p. 19). This sentiment would become part of a post-war rebellion against historically sanitised representations of society that *Catcher* would help shape.

Ironically, Geismar and Fiedler's accusations of the white-washing and genericising of characters such as Holden and Phoebe into self-indulgent bourgeois dandies speaks directly to the purpose of this thesis. For it focuses attention on fiction's reliance on the passive acts of a readerly, mostly middle-class who are able to find both referentiality and difference in the images they conjure from the page. Geismar's assessment assumed that all those who sought out *Catcher* would be interested only in an authentic and realistic portrayal of adolescence – a schema that has proven over time to be a literary non sequitur in the genre of YA.<sup>108</sup>

The belief that Salinger's work is somehow non-admissible in the canon of English literature because it does not represent a truth, was highlighted in an article by David L. Stevenson in *The Nation* in 1957, who remarked that Salinger was "rarely acknowledged by the official guardians" in the institutions of higher learning across America (Stevenson, 1957, p. 215). Kermode typified this opinion, acknowledging *Catcher* as an "extraordinary accomplishment," but pointing out its manufactured inauthenticity and inherent 'phoniness' (Kermode, 1958, p. 705). Kermode argued that although Salinger had provided the reader with a predictable and potentially accurate picture of wayward adolescence, this was indeed the problem. The scenario had produced a prefabricated attitude in which the author perfectly understood the reader's need for satisfactory depictions of the human condition and had duly sated them.<sup>109</sup> Understanding the ramifications of the 'prefabricated' scenario, particularly in reference to YA, falls back so often on how effectively the text evokes a visceral reaction in its reader – how well it emulates or disturbs tenets of temporality, spatiality, physicality and the subconscious. In this respect, *Catcher* is both a product and a denial of

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<sup>108</sup> In *Literature for Today's Young Adults*, Ken Donelson and Alleen Nilsen claim that between the ages of 12 and 14, readers are endeavouring to 'find' themselves in novels. By the ages of 15 to 18, teenagers are increasingly likely to venture beyond representations of self (1980, p. 11).

<sup>109</sup> Kermode judged that Salinger had in this endeavour, brought together "in a single thought, purity and mess" and in doing so had produced a contented "rapport between author and public" (Kermode, 1958, p. 706). This damning indictment is, I suggest, a factor that contributes to the sense of disconnection between adolescent reader and adult writer in seeking a meaningful cultural exchange.

American post-war fiction, with its backdrop of simmering social and cultural uncertainty and associated tropes of incursion on the physical and psychological.

The impact on literature of McCarthyism, American imperialism and the gay and civil right movements, coupled with a heavy-handed 1950s paternalism, was evident not only in Salinger's work but in the textual output of an era that revelled in fantastical projections of future existence.<sup>110</sup> Yet, despite the reading public's voracious appetite for this new, bold type of fiction, the ability of literary critics to apply an effective hermeneutics to the texts lagged behind. The New Criticism of the 1940s seemed woefully ill equipped to identify, let alone comment on, the substantial influences that had radically altered the cultural landscape after the Second World War. The methodology of one of its best-known scholars, F.O. Matthiessen, who had rejoiced in the distinct flavour of 1940s American literature, rich with a philosophical depth and aestheticism that he attributed to an American tradition of liberalism, now appeared distinctly decontextualized. Matthiessen's approach had been characterised by an interpretative structure that relied on literature as a self-contained unit – that is, existing outside the paradigm of historical context, the author's personal experience or in relation to other texts (Matthiessen, 1941). By the 1950s, an age occupied with thoughts of atomic warfare, potential communist invasion, the Cold War and seismic shifts in sexual and civil rights, the extant critical apparatus seemed rather deficient in understanding a new generation's literary output. To argue that the work of Beat Generation writers such as Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac or William S. Burroughs could be comprehended without admission of their cultural, religious, political, psychological or social histories seemed rather misguided.<sup>111</sup>

This conflicted, paranoid and volatile environment – encumbered with a bizarre dichotomy of wartime atrocity set against a backdrop of 1950s domestic bliss – was the birthplace of YA. In *Deliberate Speed: The Origins of a Cultural Style in the American 1950s* (2012), W. T. Lhamon defines the acquisitive nature of medial performances

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<sup>110</sup> Science fiction rose to prominence, with its ruminations on alien invasion and life and travel to other worlds, in works such as J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy (1954).

<sup>111</sup> At the other end of the literary spectrum during the 1950s, the war novel underwent a renaissance. Norman Mailer, Kurt Vonnegut Jr and Joseph Heller portrayed in exquisite detail the inhumanity and savagery of battle and its aftermath. Concurrently, African-American literature began to mark its place in the written history of a nation, catapulted by Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), which depicted the repressed racial tension of urban America, along with issues of Black Nationalism and identity.

such as those evident in post-World War II literature and cinema as possessing infinite tethers across forms and between high and low culture, by borrowing from what has been, and what currently exists. This process he calls ‘the lore cycle’ – an intrinsic cultural understanding that forms the “connection underlying the breaks that we experience as historical shifts” (Lhamon, 2012, p. xiii). Put simply, these are the choppy and inconspicuous currents that run under the neatly delineated movements and schisms in social, cultural and political history – those that would later be categorised and theorised under nominal titles such as the Beat Generation, the Civil Rights Movement and the Feminist Revolution.<sup>112</sup> Although the histories of some of these anti-establishment movements are less easily recovered than formal forms, their collective influence grew to become a substantial force in empowering the teenage subject in matters of politics and social endeavour. John McMillian, in *Smoking Typewriters: The Sixties Underground Press and the Rise of Alternative Media in America* (2011), argues that without the shared social uprising of other marginalised minorities, the size, intensity and expressions of anger and bliss that characterised the ‘youth rebellion’ of the 1950s would not have been otherwise possible (McMillian, 2011).

The genesis of YA took place in this conflicted space – one that harboured a lingering tendency towards New Criticism’s self-referentiality, yet between the language of warfare, heroics, resistance and paranoia, expected adolescent boys to parse their existence in a wider social paradigm. Amidst this literary agitation, the notions of contextual primacy that had dominated the 1940s began to lose their valency. By the early 1950s, modernist critics were honing in on the somewhat neglected concept of the writer (the object), rather than the writing (the subject) as the source of more complex meaning.<sup>113</sup>

Salinger’s protagonist certainly sang to the new song sheet, situating not only himself but also his protagonist in the writer/creator role as a way of achieving connection and

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<sup>112</sup> These ‘tethers’ reverberated through American post-war society, revealing themselves in mainstream teenage culture through new risqué dance styles, rock music and a dangerous sense of self-determination, led by a new, youth-led collective voice of anti-war protest. Occurring concurrently was the 1954 shift in civil rights for black Americans, spearheaded by Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X – assassinated in 1968 and 1965 respectively for their stance on the issue.

<sup>113</sup> Modernist critic Charles Feidelson’s work, *Symbolism and American Literature* (1953), is considered an American forerunner in what was hitherto a predominantly Continental form of deconstructive philosophy (Foley, 1984, p. 45).

catharsis. In effect, Salinger positions Holden as both record-keeper and history-maker. Where his older brother, DB, has sold himself to the new medium of cinema, Holden memorialises his younger brother in prose, penning the creative composition for Stradlater's English homework as a eulogy to Allie in the story of his baseball mitt.

It was a very descriptive subject. It really was. My brother Allie had this left-handed fielder's mitt. He was left-handed. The thing that was descriptive about it, though, was that he had poems written all over the fingers and the pocket and everywhere. In green ink. He wrote them on it so that he'd have something to read when he was in the field and nobody was up at bat. (Salinger, 1951, p. 43)

The fact that the literary brooder Holden, and not the strapping tormenter Stradlater, is the composer of an artefact that evoked reminiscences of the 'real' was a direct rebuttal of 1940s critical ideologies that denied the complexity of fiction's productive environments. Indeed, the desire to hear and reclaim unheard voices and reposition texts within their historical and political framework, that began to take hold in the late 1950s, relegated Matthiessen's work in New Criticism to the background. Much of this re-evaluation took place during the turbulent period of 'identity politics' that dominated the civil rights and feminist movements, with an intentional shift in criticism to include authors and texts that would not have previously been considered part of the traditional canon of American literature. This environment arguably allowed YA to flourish in a space that blurred the boundaries between high and low culture, where enquiries into literary validity and worth were no longer the sacred domain of an intellectual class.<sup>114</sup> Indeed, theorist Frederick Karl in *American Fictions 1940-1980* (1983) makes the point that it was the marginalised authors – the experimenters, the recluses, the underground set – who were the real creators of literature during this post-war period (Karl, 1983, p. 3). Critically, what was taking place was an intellectual and cultural shift in which the enterprise that foregrounded certain texts over others – and tended to privilege one form of scholarship and literature over another – was being quietly moved on.

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<sup>114</sup> In *No Respect: Intellectuals and Public Culture* (1989), Ross identifies the slow shift towards a more democratic evaluation of literary worth that began in the 1950s. He argues that the process denied 'cultural snobs' the opportunity to subordinate works that had as their intention a rendition of the popular and the everyday (Ross, 1989, p. 5).

This movement, however, did not necessarily translate to the wider population, with various religious, educational and parental groups mounting vocal and repeated resistance to Salinger's novel in schools and libraries. The long and well-documented controversy surrounding the suitability of *Catcher* for teenagers began with the dismissal of a teacher from an Oklahoma high school in 1960 for assigning *Catcher* to a Year 11 class.<sup>115</sup> Since then, there has been a succession of challenges and bans worldwide, instigated by both institutions and state legislators, with the most recent being in 2010. Indeed, the novel held the infamous title of being the most banned book in the USA from 1966 to 1975. However, the American Library Association (ALA) estimates that actual cases were probably much higher, with approximately 75 per cent of challenges going unreported to the Association (Lancto, 2003). This is a history predicted by what Longstreth had famously described in 1951 as a children's book that has the "paradoxical result that it is not fit for children to read" (Longstreth, 1951, p. 7). The source of complaints were multiple, most often stemming from the depiction of violence, promiscuity and sexual acts, the use of profanity, the undermining of morality, and defamatory statements about minorities, God, women and the disabled.<sup>116</sup> Yet it was perhaps a small article published in *American Secondary Education* in 1975 that accurately encapsulated the contradiction in forbidding teenagers to read a book about teenagers. F. Anthony DeJovine argued in 'Catcher in the Rye and Sex Education' that vilifying the text for depictions of prostitution, for example, was "illogical because it precludes an educational outcome that these same critics would ordinarily endorse; namely, the young student's acceptance of orthodox sexual morality as desirable and defensible" (DeJovine, 1975, p. 35). That is to say, by removing any trace of what society considers culturally aberrant, how is the adolescent expected to read the cues and decipher the social mores under which they must function? Perhaps as a result, since the mid-1970s, little academic time or space has been expended on exploring the matter of cultural suitability further.

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<sup>115</sup> The teacher was later reinstated but *Catcher* was removed from the school syllabus (ALA, 2016).

<sup>116</sup> According to the ALA, *Catcher* is the second most often challenged Western classic, behind *The Great Gatsby* (Doyle, 2010).



### 1.3. A New ‘New Criticism’

By the 1960s, a new wave of deeply philosophical literary criticism was being employed, one that extracted fresh meaning from texts in relation to the changing politics of the West. *Catcher* began to be mobilised in complex discussions about disaffection, psychological maturation and the cultural validity of the adolescent, even though critical attention towards the novel had diminished somewhat since the fervour of the 1950s. Two themes that dominated the 1960s and 1970s were the uncomfortable and candid portrayal of a child-like psyche in breakdown and the concept of contemporary alienation, both the result of Salinger’s entrée into the fantasies and fallacies of the temporal and visceral world of young adulthood. Critics drew on previously underexplored dimensions, concentrating their analyses on the specific usefulness of *Catcher*’s teenage narrative in relation to wider ethical and philosophical issues that faced a new generation.

In 1976, critics Carol and Richard Ohmann published an article entitled ‘Reviewers, Critics, and ‘The Catcher in the Rye’ in *Critical Inquiry*. Its intention was to summarise reception of Salinger’s seminal text over the span of the preceding 25 years. From this distance, the article’s authors were able to make the very interesting longitudinal observation that almost all previous reviews of the novel had been based not on its stylistic or generic merit as a work of fiction, but on its depiction of American adolescence (Ohmann & Ohmann, 1976, p. 19). The analysis revealed that since its publication, *Catcher* had been assessed almost exclusively – as most fiction of its time had been – in terms of its ‘authenticity’. It highlighted Burger’s review in the *New York Times*, in which he had stated that “Holden’s mercurial changes of mood, his stubborn refusal to admit his own sensitiveness and emotions, his cheerful disregard of what is sometimes known as reality are typically and heartbreakingly adolescent” (Burger, 1951). Indeed, numerous other reviewers had made similar assessments over time, defining Holden’s struggles as an insightful authorial critique of the adult world, replete with astute observations of snobbery, injustice and callousness (Behrman, 1951, p. 71). However, despite the Ohmann review, which offered an unapologetically Marxist and ideological reading, the usefulness of the material remains. Indeed, their argument that there was little if any application of a historical framework in understanding the plight of *Catcher*’s protagonist still rings true, with critics in the main having categorised

Holden's dilemmas as "everywhere and always the same" (Ohmann & Ohmann, 1976, p. 20). What is clear from their assessment, is that in interpreting *Catcher*, and any other YA novel for that matter, there is the danger of overlooking what Raymond Williams defines in *Culture and Society* (1958) as the distinction between the "lives books lead in the minds of their readers" (Williams, 1958), and the lives their readers live in their own historical time.

In 1977, critic Gerald Rosen began expanding on the more complex readings of *Catcher* that the Ohmann survey had identified as lacking. In 'A Retrospective Look at *The Catcher in the Rye*' in *American Quarterly* (1977), Rosen explored the textual implications of what he perceived as Salinger's disillusionment with the West, in particular its bellicose nature and the author's subsequent dedication to Eastern philosophy and the practice of Buddhism. Rosen, in fact, reassessed *Catcher* and the story of Holden Caulfield as something rather more significant than other critics had done, claiming that Holden's tale is actually the story of Buddha himself. The Buddha, argued Rosen, "exists at the point where the lines of history and legend cross" (Rosen, 1977, p. 548) and much like *Catcher*, tells the story of a privileged youth, raised in a protective and affluent environment in which he is shielded from the suffering of the world. Just as Buddha was confronted with his mortality, argued Rosen, Holden faces the equally precarious negotiation of maturation into adulthood. He suggested that when Holden attempts to erase the 'Fuck You'<sup>117</sup> graffiti on the wall at his sister Phoebe's school, he was attempting to erase the connection between his culture's "highest aggressive insult and [...] its term for sexual intercourse" (Rosen, 1977, p. 556) – between his adolescent temporality and looming adult cognisance. This progression, argued Rosen, which moved from aggression to sex to the "grim reaper of Time", is evident in Holden's denial of impending sexual maturation and its necessary shedding of innocence. Rosen's final assessment of these motifs and the fundamental worth and success of the novel fell back on Eastern philosophy, the critic arguing that Buddhism at its highest level relies on the empirical, and "asks one merely to be awake to one's real situation" (Rosen, 1977, p. 560).

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<sup>117</sup> Salinger had published almost all his short stories in the *New Yorker* from 1947 to 1951, but by including the words "Fuck You" in *Catcher*, he ensured that the work would never be published in the magazine. The puritanical founder and editor, Harold Ross, had a strict policy of never including any piece that would "make a twelve-year-old girl blush" (Rosen, 1977, p. 558).

These spiritual questions certainly occupied Salinger and are evident in the novel's repeated return to venality as a motif of derision. However, the identification and analysis of this in terms of situating *Catcher* as a historical commentary appear to have been a missed opportunity for reviewers. Ohmann and Ohmann argued that mid-century American critics reviewed *Catcher* in interpretative terms that abstracted and universalised characters, producing a greying picture and "dimming the pattern of their own historical time" (Ohmann & Ohmann, 1976, p. 19). Later, Joyce Rowe in 'Holden Caulfield and American Protest' (1991) argued that *Catcher* was so contentious because it attacked everything that made American life what it was. She asserted that Salinger "desecrates and debases" whatever he finds offensive in its materialism and acquisitive intent (Rowe, 1991, p. 79). However, Theodore L. Gross, found in 'J. D. Salinger: Suicide and Survival in the Modern World', a final message in which the reader was able to grasp the remnants of a "collective desire and need to salvage whatever idealism we can" in an America that was increasingly driven by a capitalist and consumerist ideology (Gross, 1969, p. 462). The hopeful concepts that he identified in *Catcher* are decidedly Buddhist and followed the Zen practice of viewing the world not in dualistic terms, but through the experience of life.<sup>118</sup>

Certainly, questions about progression and maturation through experience had been present in scholarly enquiries into the novel as early as the 1950s, with many critics pondering whether Holden would emerge as a changed individual from the sanatorium depicted in *Catcher*'s final pages. The arguments were, of course, literary and speculative but they veiled serious contemporary questions about American youth. They were, in effect, arguments regarding the affirmation or rejection of the adolescent male in Western society.<sup>119</sup> The two main debates centred on Holden bowing to one of two outcomes. The first was that Holden would be unmoved by his spell in the mental health facility, remaining statically adolescent and nostalgic. This is a possible reading of the novel's final scenes, Holden feeling both free and secure whilst he watches Phoebe

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<sup>118</sup> Salinger's affinity with these Zen philosophies is most evident in his later works, such as *Nine Stories* (1953) and *Franny and Zooey* (1961), which have as their central themes the reliance on prayer, optimism and love (Goad, 1995, p. 7).

<sup>119</sup> There is, of course, a problem with reading Salinger's novel as a universal tale of the human condition. In a 2005 essay, Mary Suzanne Shriber points out that in this rendition, Holden Caulfield attempts to speak not just for all adolescents, but all people, regardless of gender. She describes criticism surrounding *Catcher* as being androcentric, noting that "an adolescent male WASP" is not automatically nature's designated spokesperson (Shriber, 1990).

riding on the children's carousel in Central Park.<sup>120</sup> The other was that Holden had emerged as a maturing and potential adult, willing to take on "Christ-like responsibility towards the [...] Stradlaters, as well as the Phoebes, of this world" (Luedtke, 1970, p. 200). Critic L.S. Luedtke opts in favour of the latter, referring to the evidence of the novel's title itself, Robert Burns' 1782 poem 'Comin Thro the Rye'. He argues that Burns' verse spoke not of *catching* bodies, but of *meeting* bodies in the rye. It is a story not of "salvation or frozen innocence, but quite the opposite, a tale of seduction and sexual dalliance in the rye" (Luedtke, 1970, p. 200). Although this assessment may have attempted to read well beyond the boundaries of the text, by the novel's end, the narrative had certainly shifted from one of naivety and fear to that of objective acceptance. Holden muses: "I felt so damn happy all of a sudden, the way old Phoebe kept going around and around. I was damn near bawling, I felt so happy, if you want to know the truth. I don't know why" (Salinger, 1951, p. 233). This authorial opening effectively created a *tabula rasa*, leaving the novel open for the reader, rather than its distant author, to write its ending.

The various unauthorised biographies – for they are all unauthorised – that attempted to fill the gaps left by an author who never found it necessary to justify or clarify either this or any other of his works or influences are all purely speculative.<sup>121</sup> However, *If You Really Want to Hear About It: Writers on J. D. Salinger and His Work* (2006), edited by Catherine Crawford, offers a comprehensive insight into the author's motivations, subsequent hermitic tendencies and the influence Holden Caulfield had on the trajectory of narrative fiction. Crawford's key claim is that Salinger was more than an author, "he was an affect" (Crawford, 2006, p. xii). As a result, *Catcher* has become one of the most

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<sup>120</sup> See further discussion of the significance of the carousel in LS Luedtke's 'J. D. Salinger and Robert Burns: 'The Catcher in the Rye'' (Luedtke, 1970, p. 198).

<sup>121</sup> Critic Warren French assessed that more had been written on *Catcher* than any other contemporary novel in modern history (French, 1963, p. 102). Ian Hamilton's biography, *In Search of J. D. Salinger* (1988), was famous for being the subject of a protracted lawsuit brought by Salinger himself. Salinger's letter to Hamilton declared that the intrusions on his life since the publication of *Catcher* were, "for whatever little it may be worth [...] more than any person could endure] in a single lifetime" (Hamilton, 1988). James Lundquist's biography puts forward the compelling argument that Salinger's entire body of work was the result of his involvement in the disturbing events of World War II, also arguing that *Catcher*'s popularity stems not from a nostalgic longing by readers to recapture their youth, but from a longing for voices that do not sound 'phony' (Lundquist, 1979). Paul Alexander's work, *Salinger: A Biography* (2010) makes the argument that much of the culture of Western adolescence would not be possible had *Catcher* not been written (Alexander, 1999, p. xiv).

read post-World War II works of fiction ever published and occupies an important place in the imagination and literary canon of the West. (Salzman, 1991, p. 2)

What is clear is that in eulogising *Catcher*, critics have plucked it from its historical roots and made it a generic template from which all manner of cultural shorthand is now derived. Since the 1980s there has been a small but significant number of cultural reworkings of *Catcher*, often in the style of cultish and quasi-mythical reverence, that have further positioned the text and its author as unique in the cultural landscape. The narrative of Holden Caulfield is said to have influenced the actions of Mark Chapman, for example, who fatally shot John Lennon outside his New York apartment in December 1980 (Stashower, 1983). In cinema, although *Catcher* has never been adapted directly to the screen, there have been countless homages to Salinger and his protagonist.<sup>122</sup> On the stage, John Guare's unsettling social observation *Six Degrees of Separation*, later made into a film, includes a homage to Salinger, and the 2002 film, *Igby Goes Down*, appears an almost direct copy of the novel. In further derivations of the work, *fanfiction.net* reveals thousands of amateur short stories based on the language, plot, narrative, points of view and characterisations in Salinger's first novel. A number of novels have also been identified as borrowing elements of authorial style and storyline from *Catcher*, including Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1967), Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969), *Less Than Zero* (1985) by Bret Easton Ellis and *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (1999) by Stephen Chbosky (Rohrer, 2009).

Yet, regardless of the types, tendencies or biases that each reviewer, critic or reader has brought to the text published by Little, Brown & Company in 1951, *Catcher* remains undisputed as one of the most influential works of twentieth-century fiction and a distinct product of its author's social, cultural and political history. What is evident from the last 60 years of scholarly debate around the novel, is that the inscape of its white, male, upper middle-class, Jewish protagonist became the blueprint for future YA. Central to its impact has been the projection and imbrication of the fragile, capricious and unpredictable nature of the mind and body in contemporary articulations – literary and otherwise – of the teenage male. Arguably, Holden Caulfield is the dichotomous

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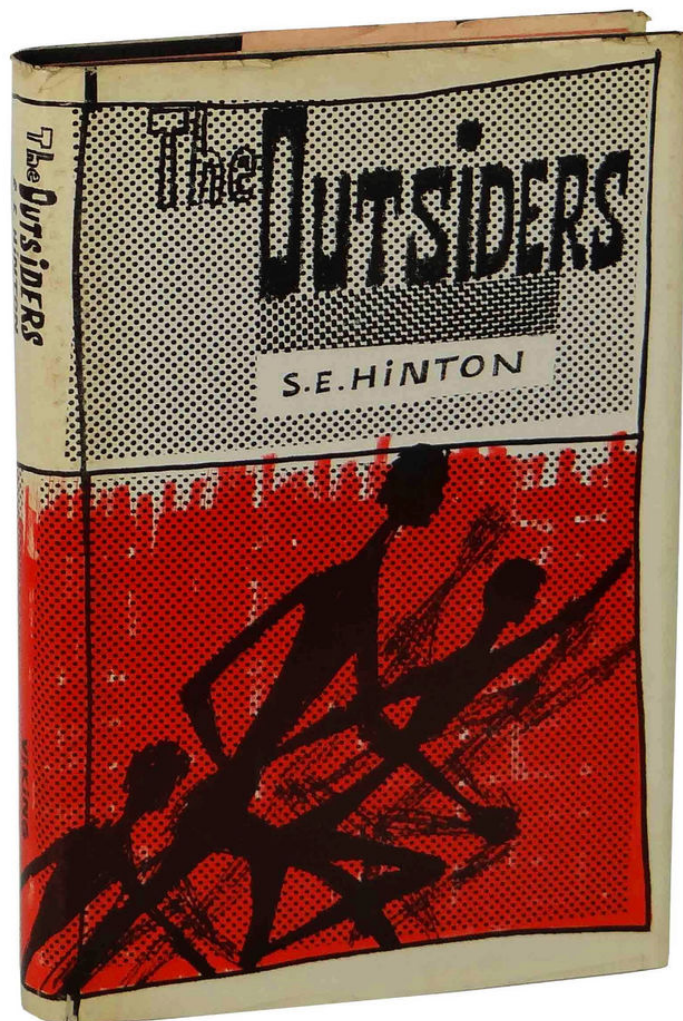
<sup>122</sup> The most recent film being *Coming Through the Rye* (2015), the story of a Holden Caulfield-obsessed teenager who, in 1969, escapes boarding school to find the reclusive J. D. Salinger and ask his permission to adapt the novel as a play. Reception to the film was lacklustre, with reviewers calling it “predictable” teen angst (Mazzanti, 2016).

historical spectre of Western adolescence – an equally dangerous and promising anomie of human potential. For, although the novel and its characters remain forever static, the perpetual critical attention that this work attracts is a testament to its relevance to the wider issues of society.

In tracking and analysing the progression and evolution of this reception, *Catcher* reveals for the purpose of this thesis, how Salinger's unfamiliar and dangerous language around adolescent masculinity would haunt future YA fiction. His work set in train a persistent generic narrative that even today alienates young males from their nature in threadbare images of heroes, underdogs and quests of physical triumph. The legacy of Salinger's entrée, which had acquainted readers of the 1950s with the urban anxieties of an articulate if disengaged middle-class teenage boy, was a new discourse that would be authenticated a decade later in S. E. Hinton's *The Outsiders*. In this context, *Catcher* enabled a refocussing of popular fiction on society's marginalised voices, towards a space that had hitherto been overlooked by a literary elite. What Hinton did, was to reappropriate that space by introducing the reading public to the ordinary suburban lives of America's working poor. If Salinger had helped construct the troubled adolescent male in this scenario, Hinton would infuse it with a genuineness.

# 2

## 1960s: *The Outsiders* as a Biography of Adolescence



In comparing the shifting social and cultural experience of adolescence during the 1960s, this case study positions S. E. Hinton's *The Outsiders* in relation to other seminal texts in the evolution of YA, particularly its representations of the young male in stories of disengagement and marginalisation.<sup>123</sup> The text is analysed at its points of encounter and opposition with historical narratives of the young and specifically its relationship to a lineage of quest narratives that has haunted the form since Dickens and Twain. Where the previous case study focussed on embodied language as a locus of meaning, this chapter explores how Hinton's deliberate departure from the urbane dialect of *Catcher* enables a new kind of adolescent account – one that alters the investment in cultural capital between writer and reader.

The framework that informs the reading of both Hinton's work and its productive environment is situated at the intersection of cultural studies, gender theory and literary criticism. In particular, Bourdieu's approaches underpin the enquiries into content and context, allowing an acknowledgement of shared literariness with Salinger's work, yet establishing how the suburban narrative of a girl still in high school challenged formal critical notions of textual authenticity. In this respect, Trites' arguments around the *unheimlich* in adolescent literature led a discussion into the power of familiarity/alienation as burdensome motifs in the genre and the connection that has historically married the language of those struggles with the cultural construction of the adolescent male. Specifically, the influence of literary remnants in the making of the 1960s adolescent is further explored with the aid of Flanagan's work on gender, providing a workable structure of hegemonic performativity through which Hinton's characters are analysed.

Tracing the genealogy of YA after World War II, and *The Outsiders*' place in that history, the chapter also borrows from Humble's theories on popular culture to determine how Hinton's text gave voice not only to a silenced American underclass, but also to the young adults who were now involved in the economies, cultural directions and geopolitics of their increasingly commodified and televised worlds. Here, the intention is to understand and track the legacy of a novel that is neither middle-class nor middlebrow, but a gritty expedition into the otherwise underexplored psyche of the

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<sup>123</sup> Image on previous page: first edition cover, *The Outsiders*, 1967 (public domain).



suburban working poor. Invoking Benjamin in this context, it will be argued that historical time becomes an intrusive and unwelcome companion to the contemporary narratives of adolescent males. Specifically, attempts to embrace Benjamin's 'now-time' as a way of rejecting false experience is explored in relation to Hinton's seeming reliance on the narratives of old – *Gone with the Wind* and *Great Expectations* – as informing the present.<sup>124</sup> Here, Love's observations on the point at which experience meets textual interpretation play a key role and place notions of 'attention' at the centre of hypotheses around literary authenticity.

These contributing elements come together in the focal point of the chapter – the influence of Hinton's work on both the popular and institutional practice of 'reading' the male body. The implications of this are explored from multiple angles, taking into account Ian Hunter's stance on the consequences of a humanistic style of pedagogy that reigned during the 1960s, Erikson's questions on adolescent identity formation, and the legacy of brutalised male bodies de-animated in print and then brought back to life in the homoerotic and nostalgic gaze of Francis Ford Coppola's lens. Noting the impact of these disparate social, political and cultural events, this chapter charts how the enthusiastic adoption of *The Outsiders* by educators, adolescent readers and later, film-goers, altered the status and trajectory of YA forever.

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In 1967, New York publishing house Viking released a ground-breaking first novel by new author, Susan Eloise Hinton. Her work, *The Outsiders*, would go on to become the best-selling YA of all time (Peck, 2007; Penguin, 2007). What made the work unique, from both an authorial and critical perspective, is that at the time of writing, Hinton was just 16 years of age, and only 17 when the novel was published. Her guileless and visceral suburban narrative would force critics to reassess the scope of YA and the rubric by which it had hitherto been measured. In this sense, *The Outsiders* spawned a genre proper, in a work that not only illuminated the darker corners of American teen

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<sup>124</sup> Hinton's repeated references to *Gone with the Wind* were presumably meant to engage the disparate notions of 'civil war' represented in the two novels. Equally, by aligning Ponyboy with Pip from Dickens' classic, Hinton elicits for her readers an unworldly, yet appealing underdog with little to lose.

culture, but that caused a significant historical shift in the teaching of literature in the Western school syllabus.

Where *Catcher* had sought to emulate the voice of urban adolescence through its adult author, *The Outsiders* was the ‘real deal’ – an uncompromising slice of teenage realism penned from the mean streets of Oklahoma. Hinton’s raw and violent, yet often poignant, vignettes of what is essentially the story of rich kids versus poor kids foregrounded many of the underlying social issues that plagued Middle America. The work represented what had arguably been lacking in terms of authenticity for adolescent readers since the genre emerged a decade or so earlier. Where *Catcher* had achieved notoriety and critical acclaim for its portrayal of the teenage psyche in self-conscious decay, Hinton’s work is far less self-assured, less arrogant and certainly not a reminiscence on Salinger’s breakthrough style.<sup>125</sup> Instead, *The Outsiders* delivers a deeply personal monologue on the contemporary reality of suburban adolescence. The work sets out a monologue of 14-year-old greaser Ponyboy Curtis, his older brothers Sodapop and Darry, and their equally underprivileged friends who wage daily class battles with the West-side rich kids known as the Socials (Socs) in suburban Tulsa.<sup>126</sup> The Curtis brothers have been recently orphaned, their parents killed in a car accident, but they carry on with their school life and low-paying jobs in an effort to maintain a semblance of life. Their weekends consist of hanging out at the drive-in, meeting at the local diner and defending themselves against the ever-present threat of the Socs who ride around in their Mustangs looking for fights. If *Catcher* had articulated the existential plight of the privileged mid-century leisure class, *The Outsiders* re-situates its voice, bringing it to the everyman in a process that would cement YA as a dominant genre in the reading consciousness of the twentieth century.

Just as Brian Way had remarked in reviewing *Catcher* some years earlier (Way, 1963), American culture had little interest in anthologising the weak, the disenfranchised or the marginalised. In Salinger’s work, the protagonist learns through repeated fractious excursions into the fringes of society that his experiences there only serve to incapacitate and destroy. Although outwardly, Hinton’s *The Outsiders* is a different

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<sup>125</sup> In a 2007 interview, Hinton remarked that the catalyst to write a ‘realistic’ teenage novel stemmed from her impression of Holden Caulfield as self-indulgent and needing “a good spanking” (Italie, 2007).

<sup>126</sup> Throughout the novel, the word ‘Soc’ is always spelled with a capital ‘S’. However, the term greaser carries a lower case ‘g’, denoting the generic and inconsequential nature of their ‘type’.

story – socially, culturally and psychologically – the reader arrives at an equally uncomfortable conclusion about 1960s society and the male adolescent in that world. Where thematically *Catcher* had orbited around the ‘life is a game’ metaphor (Way, 1963, p. 192), *The Outsiders* tells a darker story, one that suggests that life is in fact a war, particularly for those who dwell on the margins. Where Salinger’s narrative paints childhood as the only true state of innocence, free of corruption and nihilism, *The Outsiders* disabuses readers of that hypothesis, with Ponyboy and his greaser friends occupying a world where children are orphaned, neglected, beaten and murdered. For these boys, there is no need to worry about what one will wear to The Prom, rather the question is will one make it alive to The Prom? The fledgling experiences of adolescence for Ponyboy and his peers are not merely uncomfortable and confronting – they are dangerous and sometimes fatal.

Indeed, the compromised and endangered male body is a motif that saturates Hinton’s work, nowhere more evident than in the scenes that bookend the novel. Ponyboy’s story begins as he emerges from the local movie house, having just watched a Paul Newman film. As he walks home alone, he feels the unwelcome and all-too common threat of physical violence looming.

I like walking. I about decided I didn’t like it so much, though, when I spotted that red Corvair trailing me. I was almost two blocks from home then, so I started walking a little faster. I had never been jumped, but I had seen Johnny after four Socs got hold of him, and it wasn’t pretty. Johnny was scared of his own shadow after that. Johnny was sixteen then. I knew it wasn’t any use though – the fast walking, I mean – even before the Corvair pulled up beside me and five Socs got out. I got pretty scared – I’m kind of small for fourteen even though I have a good build, and those guys were bigger than me. (Hinton, 1967, p. 5)

In the ensuing moments, Ponyboy is rumbled by the Socs, has a knife held to his throat and is eventually rescued by his brother and their gang of greasers. In this assault, Hinton could not have been clearer. The body of the adolescent male in 1960s America was under attack – from the state, from institutions, from parents and from the wider community. It was a body open to public scrutiny – one that could justifiably be utilised, manipulated and controlled – the implications of which are explored in this

chapter. Indeed, Hinton brings the allegory full circle in the novel's final pages where Ponyboy's best friend Johnny lies dying in a hospital bed after saving a number of children from a burning church. In a rather conspicuous denouement, Hinton makes an impassioned plea on behalf of teenagers, attempting to bring the tenuous threads of the 'childhood as innocence' parable together. In this lasting scene, the small and frail adolescent body of Johnny becomes saint-like, and as he lays dying, he has time to reminisce on, of all things, literature. Recalling the Robert Frost poem, *Nothing Gold can Stay*, Johnny writes his parting words and tucks them inside a copy of *Gone with the Wind* for Ponyboy.

I've been thinking about it, and that poem, that guy that wrote it, he meant you're gold when you're a kid, like green. When you're a kid everything's new, dawn. It's just when you get used to everything that it's day. Like the way you dig sunsets, Pony. That's gold. Keep that way, it's a good way to be. (Hinton, 1967, p. 135)

In condemning Johnny to his death through the experience of adolescence, Hinton points to the perilous journey from juvenility to manhood, and in the process elevates youth to an ethereal pedestal. It is this emphatic memorialising of childhood, this fetishising of the body that would, I suggest, have the most profound and circumscribing effect on the future depiction of adolescent males in literary fiction. For, in all her efforts to replicate the struggles of her own age, Hinton ultimately fails to let her characters grow or progress – either physically or psychologically.<sup>127</sup> In a text that ostensibly aims to portray 'real' adolescence, Hinton peppers her work with the unfortunate results of this unprofitable endeavour. A jibe from rich-kid Randy just before a final rumble, confirms for readers that even within the realms of the marginalised adolescent, there are further strata that delineate and alienate – from the socio-economic and political, to the corporeal and intellectual. "You can't win, even if you whip us. You'll still be where you were before – at the bottom. And we'll still be the lucky ones with all the breaks" (Hinton, 1967, p. 89).

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<sup>127</sup> Jodi Picoult, in her introduction to the Penguin edition of *The Outsiders* (2006 edition), draws attention to the irony of the adolescent condition: "once you are aware that the world is bigger than you are, it's that much more difficult to transform" (Picoult, 2006, p. xii).

In repeated exchanges of this type, the conflicting obligations of an adolescence born of social performance become clear, revealing the impossible task of Hinton's seminal work. The first issue is that the text itself acknowledges, yet must also deny in its fictive form, the centrality of the physical body in the experience of male adolescence. The second is that it exposes the futility of venerating childhood as a way of rejecting the onset of future history. I argue, in this sense, that Hinton positions her literature as the child – as the fond memory of lost innocence, the keeper of history, of nostalgia and all things precious. These motifs reveal themselves in a text that pays homage to the power and influence of the word, yet prohibits its advantage in the real world. Johnny's deathbed entreaties to "stay gold" (Hinton, 1967, p. 139) are not delivered in a soliloquy, but written on a scrap of paper and tucked inside a copy of *Gone with the Wind* – a novel of indisputable significance in the making of the American psyche.<sup>128</sup>

The epic span of *Gone with the Wind*, both in print and on screen, depicted the country's uncomfortable history of segregation, slavery, poverty and survival, played out through the eyes of a teenager against a backdrop of the American Civil War and its aftermath. Indeed both *Gone with the Wind* and *The Outsiders* can be considered tales of a nation uneasy with its past and unsure of its future.<sup>129</sup> In a somewhat ambitious gesture, Johnny expects that Ponyboy will be able to complete the story of their adolescence. His note reads: "I asked the nurse to give you this book so you could finish it" (Hinton, 1967, p. 135). The abiding message is that Ponyboy will follow Scarlett O'Hara's path to maturation, one defined by thinking obsessively toward the future with a distinct antipathy towards reminiscence and reflection.

This desire to look forward, to eschew both the memories and the experiences of the past and to focus on creating new histories, is an intrinsically adolescent behaviour and has had a profound impact on the desire, or refusal, of teenage boys to engage with

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<sup>128</sup> In *The Inadvertent Epic: From Uncle Tom's Cabin to Roots* (1980), Leslie Fiedler identifies *Gone with the Wind* as part of a 'Popular Epic' of the American psyche. He states that the country's stories, rooted in themes of race, sex and violence in relation to the Civil War, Reconstruction, the Ku Klux Klan and the enslavement of American Blacks, constitute "a myth of our history unequalled in scope or resonance by any work of High Literature" (Fiedler, 1980, p. 17).

<sup>129</sup> The remediation of *The Outsiders* by Coppola's Zoetrope Studios makes a striking technical allusion to the old world cinematography of *Gone with the Wind*, captured in a colour palette and saturation that emulated David O. Selznick's 1939 Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer classic.

literary forms of meaning-making.<sup>130</sup> Indeed, there is sufficient empirical evidence to suggest that of the male adolescents who still read long-form fiction for pleasure, the group is prone to a type of philosophical and physical presentism, keen to seek out imaginative ‘play’ by focalising on concepts of fantasy, the future, alternative presents and parallel worlds.<sup>131</sup> In this respect, literature’s reliance on self-referentiality, introspection and empathetic connection – both in its modes of production and means of consumption – runs the risk of presenting a ‘false experience’ for the adolescent male, generating a subtle contingency of gender practice on literature that cannot be discounted.

The difficulty in engaging adolescent males in fiction reading is not a new phenomenon. Indeed, on the advice of her publisher, Hinton adopted a pen name that used her initials so that readers and critics would assume the author of this brutal mid-Western story of solidarity and brotherhood was male.<sup>132</sup> This, they argued, would make the work more appealing to its intended audience. Clearly, at this juncture there was a sufficient literary disengagement by boys that certain tactics were needed to satisfy market forces. By the 1960s, educational researchers had already identified a growing divide in reading practices and proficiencies along gender lines. A large-scale study conducted amongst 6,646 boys and 6,468 girls in American primary schools in 1957 sought to determine specific differences in reading speed, breadth of vocabulary and story comprehension across the cohort. The results concluded that boys fell behind considerably on all criteria compared to their female counterparts (Gates, 1961). Almost a decade later, a survey of the reading habits of American senior school adolescents found that a willingness to read fiction literature was accordingly reduced in the male population. Female students read an average of 5.5 books per school term, where males read only 4.2 (Robinson et al., 1965).

The gender ruse by Hinton’s publishers was part of a deliberate commercial strategy. However, its unintentional repercussions would be manifold, not the least being that the

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<sup>130</sup> Data from a large school study conducted by the ACA found that adolescent boys not engaged in fiction reading deemed it “boring” and that it denied them the chance to physically “prove” themselves or “be a hero” as they might be on a sports field (ACA, 2000, p. 22).

<sup>131</sup> Allen & Unwin Australia identified speculative fiction and fantasy as standout best-sellers for older boys in the last decade (Webster, 2014).

<sup>132</sup> Hinton’s publisher at Viking remarked that male critics would be ‘turned off’ by a female writing the male voice (Italie, 2007).

purposeful manipulation of both the author and audience heralded a new way of marketing fiction to a growing number of reluctant male readers. Hinton's novel, which was first printed in hardcover by Viking and soon after in paperback by Dell (both of which were adult imprints), signalled the beginning of what would become the very lucrative formal YA market as a standalone genre and one that would eventually be constitutionally delineated by the gender of its readers.<sup>133</sup> Indeed, within the next 50 years, the gendered bifurcation of adolescent literature would increase to the extent that a contemporary title is now three times more likely to feature a female protagonist and be marketed to girls than to boys.<sup>134</sup>

The tendency to separate fiction by gender barely registered in a critical sense during 1967, with reviewers far more focussed on the impact of social and political themes in literature. Where critics of the 1950s had measured early YA such as *Catcher* in the context of its post-war environment, *The Outsiders* would be evaluated on different terms. Attention towards Salinger's work had centred on American nationalism and its inherent motifs of suspicion, espionage and political subversion, whereas Hinton's would be assessed on its engagement with the more diffuse preoccupations of its era – class struggles, the growing disparity between the country's rich and poor, and the alienation of certain demographic groups in the face of growing Western consumerism. If the 1950s had been about drawing together in solidarity against a common evil after World War II, the 1960s produced a compartmentalising of these fears, bringing with it a collapse of the nuclear family and the rise of a generalised social friction, with ethnicity and wealth emerging as defining schisms of the decade.

The adolescents of this period were the product of the 'Baby Boom' – with more than a third of the American population aged 15 or younger – to which the film, music, television and fashion industries catered in a market increasingly driven by the teen dollar. The newfound social independence of young men and women that had begun in the late 1950s spawned a growing sense of rebellion against adult authority that reached its peak in the 1960s. Shrugging off the constraints of the traditional social unit became

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<sup>133</sup> Book sales in the Children/YA sector for 2016, as reported by the Association of American Publishers, totalled US \$689.3m, representing 22 per cent of the market (AAP StatShot, 2016).

<sup>134</sup> A distinct bias in the gender of YA protagonists is suggested in a survey by Roger Sutton, editor of *The Horn Book*. In 2014, he found that of the titles published during the first six months of the year, 65 per cent featured a female protagonist, whilst only 22 percent had a male leading character (Sutton, 2015).

evident in cultural expressions of rebelliousness such as hard rock music, the birth of urban gangs and an increasingly mainstream resistance to America's involvement in the Vietnam War.<sup>135</sup> In literature too, these generational issues of social, cultural and moral disquiet were being borne out, not only in novels such as Hinton's, but also in the critical language that was being shaped by the uncertainty of a changing world.

At the time of its publication, reviews of *The Outsiders* were few in number and brief in nature. It is evident with the privilege of a half-century's distance, that this reluctance to evaluate the novel in any formal academic way, emanated not only from a sense of intellectual elitism, but also from a position of vernacular incapacity. How could one provide commentary on the new nihilism projected by and onto an adolescent generation without knowing the particular difficulties of poverty, depravation and socioeconomic bigotry oneself? Unlike *Catcher*, Hinton's text was not the work of an urbane novelist reminiscing on youth. It was the personal memoir of a working-class teenager documenting the experience of growing up in the rugged suburbs of Tulsa.

Of the critics who did expend more than a few column centimetres on reviewing the novel, their analysis was often drawn into queries around the authenticity of the narrative voice. Unlike Salinger's *Catcher*, most deemed Hinton's authorial tone genuine, however they also formed strong opinions based around its mimetic legitimacy in capturing the adolescent male in situ.<sup>136</sup> As a result, immediate reception to *The Outsiders* was mixed, with the text judged harshly on whether it had achieved the complex literary goal of speaking to the implied reader without alienating the wider audience. Some critics argued that Hinton's gritty adolescent rhetoric was over-played and hyperbolic, tending towards the clichéd and sentimental. It seems clear now, that what these reviewers were in fact implying was that Hinton's characters were somehow too feminine. In one of the first reviews, Lillian N. Gerhardt remarked on the dichotomous, yet to her mind productive, relationship between the female author and her male protagonist. She noted in the carefully rendered emotions of the greasers that,

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<sup>135</sup> Protests against the Vietnam War, driven by left-wing activists during the late 1950s, went mainstream in 1965 when the U.S. government ordered troops to begin bombing communist North Vietnam.

<sup>136</sup> In a 1981 interview with *Seventeen* magazine, which features in Antoine Wilson's biography of Hinton, the author is quoted as saying: "I'd wanted to read books that showed teen-agers outside the life of 'Mary Jane went to the prom.' When I couldn't find any, I decided to write one myself. I created a world with no adult authority figures, where kids lived by their own rules" (Wilson, 2003, p. 26).



“In retrospect, the obvious clue [to the novel’s female author] is that maybe only a girl could [articulate] the soft centres of these boys and how often they do give way to tears” (Gerhardt, 1967, p. 64).

Certainly, Ponyboy’s ability to evoke pathos with an endearing combination of comedic timing and poetic narrative *feels* feminine set against the work’s corporeal tyranny of domestic violence and gang warfare. His touching description of older brother Sodapop is typical of the novel’s ability to conjure familial tenderness against a backdrop of knife fights, random assaults, psychological neglect and economic deprivation.

Soda is handsomer than anyone else I know. Not like Darry [Ponyboy’s eldest brother] – Soda’s movie-star kind of handsome, the kind that people stop on the street to watch go by. He’s not as tall as Darry, and he’s a little slimmer, but he has a finely drawn, sensitive face that somehow manages to be reckless and thoughtful at the same time. (Hinton, 1967, p. 8)

These frequent episodes of gentle, reflective dialogue make the novel difficult to pigeonhole in any generic sense, although reviewers felt the need to compare the departures in adolescent male narrative to the deeply entrenched *bildungsroman* framework of Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn*. Fiedler observed in *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1960) that:

[T]he typical male protagonist of our fiction has been a man on the run, harried into the forest and out to sea, down the river or into combat – anywhere to avoid ‘civilization’, which is to say, the confrontation of a man and woman which leads to the fall to sex, marriage, and responsibility.” (Fiedler, 1960, p. 26)

Twain was certainly the originator of this model, his 1884 *Huck Finn* constituting a standard construction of the male in American literature from thereon. Hinton, too, employs elements of this structure, with the predictable comparisons made at the time of its publication – an easy task given that both novels trace the life of a 14-year-old boy on his journey through adolescence. However, I argue that where *Huckleberry Finn* set a trajectory in tales of the juvenile quest, *The Outsiders* marks a critical turning point in the calculable progression of the collective writing of male adolescence. That is to say, Hinton’s novel delineates both the peak *and* the point of subsequent descent in boys who read fiction for pleasure.

This hypothesis borrows from Benjamin's notion of 'now-time' – a way of thinking that destroys the experience of historical time and brings our awareness to that which is yet to become history (Benjamin & Osborne, 1994, p. xi). In practical terms, this concept easily lends itself to the context of young men and their relationship with literature, for it reveals the self-destructive nature of writing, of capturing in the static form of prose, the corporeal acts of male experience. A novel such as *The Outsiders*, and arguably the bulk of YA that came in its wake, presents the visceral and immediate experience of masculine juvenilia as a maelstrom of physical, social and mental turmoil. It requires its male protagonist to overcome, destroy and conquer. Yet the problem with this conceit is that the characters in its folly are trapped in print, unable to address in any physical sense the struggle between the historical past and the temporal now. In this respect, the writer and reader have different investments in the cultural capital of the literary form. One uses it as a method to articulate and embody the chaotic experience of masculine becomingness and the other must sit quietly with those emotions, watching the spectacle from the page. My argument is that the memorialised and narrative depictions of historical masculinity, packaged and delivered as adolescence through the diegetic rhetoric of literary fiction, produced a prescriptive allegory of the teenage male that, to a large extent, has become the engineer of its own demise.

It is not surprising then, that even a text penned by an author in the throes of adolescence would fall back on the lingering historical apologue of the man-child that had typified nineteenth-century literature. When Hinton's Ponyboy muses on his place in society, he is naturally drawing from a well-established inventory of portraits.

I was still thinking about it [how the Socs lived] while I was doing my homework that night. I had to read *Great Expectations* for English, and that kid Pip, he reminded me of us – the way he felt marked lousy because he wasn't a gentleman or anything, and the way that girl kept looking down on him. (Hinton, 1967, p. 13)

In aligning himself with Pip, Ponyboy mirrors the Dickensian legacy that denies childhood in favour of productive maturity. Here, the notion of experience as destructive takes hold in an oblique narrative for any reader who knows the story of *Great Expectations*. Pip, like Ponyboy, is an orphaned youth, aspiring to elevate his social status to attract the attention of a girl. However, for both boys, life's experiences

ultimately prove that status is capricious, vanity is hollow and that friendship is the only enduring certainty. Hinton's natural tendency is to interpolate this historical narrative of youth into her thoroughly modern tale of 1960s America. Although this results in the fresh, provocative and best-selling YA novel of a generation, it fails to make a new relationship with 'the object' (adolescence) when it resorts to historical depictions to construct its new environment.

In Hinton's structure, there lies the perpetual and problematic issue of generational inheritance. This thesis proposes that such superannuated figures in YA texts are complicit in the framing of literary adolescence, which in turn does the twenty-first-century reader the disservice of eulogising, stagnating and preserving 'the teenager' as a type of archival metonymy. Their portrayals deny the reader the 'now-time' that is intrinsic to breaking the continuing classical narrative of the juvenile, which would otherwise enable the construction of a new history. Arguably, this routine is attributable to the reliance of YA on recognisable historical compositions to draw out points of similarity and difference in depictions of character and plot. This concentration on familiarity/alienation is a powerful and recurring motif – one that prompts Trites in *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* to describe the *unheimlich* as the single most important motivating principle in literature for the young (Trites, 2001, p. 162). Knowing how to make sense of and situate fictional characters within the realms of human understanding is part of that process and, as a consequence, adolescent literature depends like any other on using discernible cultural templates. In this sense, the casual menace of Ponyboy's greaser gang, for example, would not have been possible without readers first translating those oppositional figures from the ordinary, clean-cut 1950s tropes that appeared in characters such as Atticus Finch in *To Kill a Mockingbird* or the young Opie in the 1960s television comedy, *The Andy Griffith Show*.<sup>137</sup>

In assessing *The Outsiders*, critics appeared unsure of how to approach a text that was both a confirmation and a repudiation of the familiar simulacra of popular culture. Thomas Fleming, writing in *The New York Times Books Review* in 1967 fell victim to the most tempting of analyses. By comparing Hinton's text to archetypal quest

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<sup>137</sup> From 1960 until 1968, Ron Howard played the role of child protagonist Opie in *The Andy Griffith Show*. Howard's substantial influence in the evolving representation of the wholesome adolescent American male continued in roles such as Richie Cunningham in *Happy Days* (1974-1984).

narratives, Fleming had performed a rate-limiting step, suspending and diminishing the possibilities of the new genre by applying the contingent evaluation of traditional form. Fleming, although generally positive about Hinton's debut, was not so convinced by the authenticity of the plotline, remarking that his own teenage experience had been somewhat different, where "even *semi*-socs were the ones who got their lumps" and asking: "Can sincerity overcome clichés?" (Fleming, 1967, p. 10). His review judged that, given the pace at which the novel moved, readers would have little time to manufacture doubts in their minds regarding this question. He concluded that Hinton had "almost done the trick", producing a book that was alive with the fresh dialogue of her contemporaries and capturing in some vivid patches "a rather un-nerving slice of teen-age America" (Fleming, 1967, p. 10). By all accounts, Fleming had made his judgements on this new, raw style of prose by imposing a mimetic imperative on Hinton's work, narrowing the scope of his reference to both his own experience and the existing canon of American literature.

It would take three years before *The Times Literary Supplement* (TLS) reviewed *The Outsiders* in a more circumspect observation of the genre. Evaluating the text in relation to YA that had emerged since 1967, the unnamed reviewer placed *The Outsiders* in context as well as comparison to the wider body of work that had now been written for and about teenagers.<sup>138</sup> Early criticism had concentrated on the naïve teenage voice (Gerhardt, 1967, p. 64) or ruminations on the failure of the American public to 'grow up' in narratives of incompetent parenting (Fiedler, 1960). The TLS review, however, was able to contemplate both these perspectives in relation to the unconscious social and cultural positioning of the male body into situations of danger and impasse that had become part of standard post-war oratory. Ponyboy Curtis, argued the reviewer, was a highly credible character in this scenario. Despite the 'creaking' plot that would for adults render the "unrelieved seriousness" and "literary egocentrism" too monotonous, the reviewer found the story capable of articulating the intractable cultural composition

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<sup>138</sup> Accompanying the 1970 critique was a review of J. M. Couper's *The Thundering Good Today* (1970). The unnamed reviewer assessed the novel – the story of an Australian teenage schoolboy expelled for his anti-government graffiti protesting the 'lottery' conscription of young men to fight in the Vietnam War – in terms of its political and social value. The review situated the current temperament of adolescent males and "the sacrifice of the sensitive response to the call of manliness." The novel's urgent, existential prose was essential to the genre, argued the reviewer, because it exerted the reader's involvement in what was the "crucial experience of the present generation of young [men]" (TLS, 1970, p. 1258).

of the modern adolescent. Young readers “will waive literary discriminations about a book of this kind and adopt Ponyboy as a kind of folk hero for both his exploits and his dialogue” (TLS, 1970, p. 1258).

In revisiting these reviews more than four decades on, it is evident that issues such as the psychological burden of modern warfare had inflicted an immeasurable impact on the social and cultural conscience of 1960s authors and their depictions of the adolescent male under attack. *The Outsiders* did not stray from this theme, despite its content being decidedly domestic. Indeed, it was assessments such as these that defined *The Outsiders* from thereon and would establish the work as a mainstay on the Western senior school syllabus for the next 50 years. Perhaps going unnoticed in these critiques however, was the more obscure issue of how Hinton’s repertoire of characters had produced certain typologies that would go on to outlive both the novel and its remediation.

In particular, Hinton’s use of the male voice – the sensitive and observant boy narrator – was one that would come to epitomise literary adolescence. Her specificity of type and dialogue, in this case the working class hero, informed by her own cultural, social and gendered metanarratives, became instrumental in shaping the distinct performative enactments of masculinity that saturate contemporary YA today.<sup>139</sup> Where Flanagan argues in *Ways of Being Male* that lesser forms of hegemonic masculinity tend to produce comical or attenuated literary characters (Flanagan, 2002, p. 78), Hinton had somehow deflected those diminishing associations and achieved a picture of the young male in crisis that drew sympathy rather than derision. Although Ponyboy is physically and socially compromised, the reader’s empathy is with a character who continues to suffer under the influence of a 1950s historicity that trades in conservative middle-class stereotypes.

Of course, these are observations made with the privilege of distance. Critics of the time were far more interested in the implicit social commentary embedded in Hinton’s novel. In an *Atlantic Monthly* review in 1967, historian and novelist Nat Hentoff described the plot of *The Outsiders* as factitious and forced. Yet he recognised Hinton’s ability to

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<sup>139</sup> See discussion by Rolf Romoren and John Stephens in *Ways of Being Male: Masculinity in Children’s Literature* regarding the use of dialogue to foreground the performative elements of gendering practices (Romoren & Stephens, 2002, p. 219).

broach the growing cultural divisions in America that were conspicuously absent from other literature at the time. Hentoff noted that, “any teenager, no matter what some of his textbooks say, knows that this is decidedly not a classless society.”<sup>140</sup> He argued that, “with an astute ear and a lively sense of the restless rhythms of the young,” Hinton had been able to capture a taste of the tenacious loyalties that emerge amongst peer groups in adolescence (Hentoff, 1967, p. 401).<sup>141</sup>

From the reviews, it appeared that Hinton had produced a new, if under-valued, literature of American adolescence. Although the epiphanies of Ponyboy Curtis on class oppression, alienation, ethnicity and domestic violence were sometimes clumsily articulated, this had elevated rather than diminished their impact, with the naive narrative voice serving to confirm the work’s credibility. Writing a retrospective article on the 40-year anniversary of the novel’s publication, critic Dale Peck remarked in *The New York Times* that despite the improbable assertion that Ponyboy has written the novel as a school assignment – “Someone should tell their side of the story, and maybe people would understand then and wouldn’t be so quick to judge” (Hinton, 1967, p. 136) – the novel remains convincing.<sup>142</sup> In fact, these messy, juvenile attempts at drawing the novel’s threads together to imbue literary calibre has, argued Peck, been crucial to the context of the work because they provide the “occasionally clunky *deus ex machina* and foreshadowing” that make it real for its readership (Peck, 2007).

Although Hinton did not specifically respond to Peck’s critique, she has a history of engaging directly with her audience, as she did immediately after publication of *The Outsiders*.<sup>143</sup> In August 1967, *The New York Times Book Review* carried an editorial by Hinton in which she addressed reception of her novel, and more widely the new genre of YA. Her article, entitled ‘Teen-Agers are for Real’, questioned the validity of fiction written from outside the realm of proximal experience.

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<sup>140</sup> Of note, given that *The Outsiders* was female-authored, Hentoff made no mention of the position of women or girls in his assessment of American social structure (Hentoff, 1967).

<sup>141</sup> Decades later, Hinton defended her work in a 2007 *New Yorker* interview, commenting that *The Outsiders* was based on her own reality. “Teenagers are unpredictable and overly emotional,” she said. “I was surrounded by teens and I couldn’t see anything going on in those books that had anything to do with real life,” she recalled (Michaud, 2014).

<sup>142</sup> In the concluding page of *The Outsiders*, Ponyboy suggests that this novel is, in fact, his English assignment – a work that continues the journal entries of his friend, Johnny, who has died.

<sup>143</sup> In October 2016, Hinton became embroiled in a ‘Twitter War’ regarding *The Outsiders* that began when a fan suggested that the characters Johnny and Dally were gay. See later discussion (Schaub, 2016).

The trouble is, grownups write about teen-agers from their own memories [...] Teen-agers today want to read about teen-agers today. The world is changing, yet the authors of books for teen-agers are still 15 years behind the times. (Hinton, 1967 A, p. 26).

Hinton, being both a writer and a reader of adolescent fiction, found the generic literary offerings to be invariably focussed on and for a demographic of aspirational white middle-class youth where:

[R]omance is still the most popular theme, with a-horse-and-the-girl-who-loved-it coming in a close second. Nowhere is the drive-in social jungle mentioned, the behind-the-scenes politicking that goes on in big schools, the cruel social system in which if you can afford to snub every fourth person you meet, you're popular. In short, where is the reality? (Hinton, 1967 A, p. 26)

This was not simply the defiant rhetoric of disaffected youth. Through a public rejection of fake experience, Hinton sought to establish YA as a product of cultural practice and a new enactment of modern adolescence.<sup>144</sup> Ironically, these motifs of young masculinity can appear rather tired to the contemporary teenager who has been conditioned to the well-worn archetypes of the juvenile that were once new. However, in capturing these cultural synonyms, Hinton is a pioneer, painting the 'tribes' of her neighbourhood in instinctive strokes, revealing the unsavoury reality of absent and deficient parents, societal exclusion, economic and class division, public and domestic violence and substance abuse. Certainly, her depictions tend towards the prescriptive – on the whole, the greasers are characterised as troubled yet insightful and fiercely loyal, whilst the Socs are arrogant with a potential for cowardice and vanity – however, in these emotional and immoderate portraits, the reader senses the genuine contemplations of a real American adolescent.

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<sup>144</sup> These themes are evident in Hinton's subsequent works – *That Was Then, This is Now* (1971), *Rumble Fish* (1975), *Tex* (1979) and *Taming the Star Runner* (1988) – which each depict boys at psychological and emotional crossroads, attempting to navigate adolescence on the 'wrong side of the tracks'.

## 2.1. An Embodied Literature

In measuring the impact of these links between the experience of adolescence and the narratives that depict them, it is imperative to comprehend the extent to which YA texts rely on embodied language. Trites argues, for example, in *Disturbing the Universe* that literary expressions of the body are constitutionally wedded to the cultural construction of the modern teenager. Consequently, the value of examining the shift in embodied language during the nascent years of YA is that it illustrates how if *Catcher* had constructed the first formal literacy of the troubled teenager, then *The Outsiders* is its second incarnation – attempting to reinvent its antecedent in a wholly adolescent quest for identity through a vernacular of the body.

Certainly, characters such as Holden and Ponyboy share a similar countenance in that they feel alienated from the mainstream by their inadequate physicality, despite them both finding pleasure in literature. Holden spends the 200-odd pages of *Catcher* undergoing not only an identity crisis but also a crisis of his age – that is, struggling to determine his position as an adolescent in the architecture of society.<sup>145</sup> Characterised by clumsy attempts to damp down and disguise his idiosyncratic behaviour amidst the moneyed elite of New York City, Holden is forever grappling with conflicted emotions and testosterone-fuelled misfires, all the while struggling with his role and place in the world. Ironically, Ponyboy's struggle, although articulated in the simpler and more naïve language of its teenage author, is a more complex one and, I argue, an antithesis of the former. Ponyboy knows what he is – a greaser. The battle for him is not to escape his class or his peers or his burgeoning masculinity – as Holden's may have been – but to confirm his strength in these domains and to germinate and flourish in his marginalised environment. Consequently, Ponyboy's internal ruminations on the experience of adolescence produce a prose imbued with embodied vocabulary that reinforces the link, rather than the battle, between body, mind and identity.

In this respect, it is the *medium* that cements the difference between Holden and Ponyboy as portraits of the American teenager. From the opening pages, each text sets the stage for a very particular telling of adolescence that, although written fewer than

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<sup>145</sup> See previous discussion regarding the work of developmental psychologist Erikson and notions of the ego and 'identity crisis' (Erikson, 1959, 1963, 1968).



two decades apart, spoke of a heterogeneous landscape in which identity was increasingly negotiated in and through new forms of media. Holden holds a deep loathing for cinema and the actors who populate its screen, labelling them phony.<sup>146</sup> In contrast, Ponyboy reveres film. When he steps out of the movie house in the opening scene of *The Outsiders*, he tells his reader: “I had only two things on my mind: Paul Newman and a ride home [...] I like to watch movies undisturbed so I can get into them and live them with the actors (Hinton, 1967, p. 3). Here, Hinton illustrates that instead of reminiscing through literature to pause time or halt a maturation into adulthood as Holden had done, Ponyboy looks forward, embracing the new and living through the evolving expressions of his generation. For Hinton’s greasers, the only prospect of hope comes from *prospection*, not *retrospection*.

Ponyboy’s adolescent parataxis and ingenuous narrative speaks of this urgent desire to move on and out of his situation, reflecting the realities of a vast American underclass.<sup>147</sup> Indeed, the productive conditions of Hinton’s text are very much a factor in the evocation of this language. The previously unheard voices that she brings into mainstream consciousness set the scene for a cultural transformation that, as Humble describes in ‘The Reader of Popular Fiction’ (2012), elicits the feeling of a communal reading, one that perhaps for the first time acknowledges and reflects an overlooked generation and class in the formal literary space (Humble, 2012, p. 87). John S. Simmons in *Censored Books: Critical Viewpoints* (1993) comments that one of Hinton’s significant contributions to YA in this respect is that she has introduced a largely white, middle-class readership to:

[T]he desires, the priorities, the frustrations, the preoccupations, and above all, the *anger* of those young people who may live in the seedier parts of town but who have established a code of behavior which reflects (to the dismay of some) their sense of dignity and self-worth. (Simmons, 1993, p. 435)

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<sup>146</sup> Holden makes his disdain for the ‘phoniness’ of film and theatre clear throughout *Catcher*. In an early scene, he refers to his brother as prostituting himself by moving to Hollywood and writing for the screen (Salinger, 1951, p. 4). In a later episode, Holden takes his date Sally to see the Lunts (a famous husband-and-wife stage duo) in a Broadway show, all the while complaining bitterly of their ‘phoniness’ (p. 139).

<sup>147</sup> According to US census data, 22 per cent of Oklahomans lived below the poverty line in 1960 (New Geography, 2017).

Jay Daly in *Presenting S. E. Hinton* argues that the author's deftness in rendering that American teenage psyche had little to do with the age of the author or its realist setting, but instead everything to do with the humanity and honesty of her characters (Daly, 1987). That honesty, I argue, emanates largely from the protagonist's relationship with literature. Where Holden clings to books as a tether to the past, Ponyboy refashions literature's memorialised and atrophied tropes into modern effigies. Therefore, although the bold and noble lives that characters lead in books are endlessly appealing to Ponyboy, he realises that the streets of Oklahoma require a visceral and emotional engagement with the real to stay alive.<sup>148</sup> He opines:

Of all of us, Dally was the one I liked least. He didn't have Soda's understanding or dash, or Two-Bit's humor, or even Darry's superman qualities. But I realized that these three appealed to me because they were like the heroes in the novels I read. Dally was real. I liked my books and clouds and sunsets. Dally was so real he scared me. (Hinton, 1967, p. 59)

Ponyboy desperately wants to live the paperback romance. He longs for a world free of class vilification and social hostility, a world in which Johnny would have rightly survived the injuries he sustained in the church fire – even the local newspaper declared: “JUVENILE DELINQUENTS TURN HEROES” (Hinton, 1967, p. 82).<sup>149</sup> However, Ponyboy realises that Johnny's experience of *fictional* heroism results in the extinguishing of his *real* life. It is he who animated and illustrated the fatal consequences of mistaking the life portrayed in literature with a life lived in situ.<sup>150</sup> In effect, Hinton imbues her story and her players with a pragmatism that contraindicates any possibility of the fictive idyll. The outcome of Johnny's storybook heroics are manifestly, albeit heavy-handedly, rich in the metaphors that enable astute young readers to discern the distance between the textual renditions of masculine adolescence

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<sup>148</sup> The novel begins with Ponyboy's declaration that he is different because, “nobody in our gang digs movies and books the way I do” (Hinton, 1967, p. 3). Various other references to the works of poet Robert Frost and Margaret Mitchell's novel *Gone with the Wind* further assure readers that Hinton's protagonist is an aesthete amongst his peers.

<sup>149</sup> After accidentally killing a Soc in a knife fight while defending the honour of his greaser 'family', Johnny flees, finding sanctuary within the walls of a distant church, which later catches fire. Johnny saves the children trapped inside but in the process is injured and dies later in hospital.

<sup>150</sup> Raymond Williams in *Culture and Society* (1958) discusses the dis/connection between the 'world' that readers of fiction create in their own minds and the 'real' world in which they must historically contextualise themselves through the lived experience (Ohmann & Ohmann, 1976, p. 16).

and their own individual realities. Hinton is deliberate in this respect, consciously writing a character that has not previously appeared in texts and complaining openly about the lack of literature that reflects the reality of working-class teenagers.

## 2.2. The Institutionalising of Adolescence

However, for all Hinton's efforts to distance her work from the historical formulations and expressions of traditional literature, *The Outsiders* became a favourite amongst institutional educators. At the time of the novel's release, discourse amongst senior school academics centred on finding ways to read this new type of metonymic narrative. In particular, there was the predictable desire to employ the practices of comparative literature, drawing the obvious links to *Catcher* with its first-person Odyssean tale charting the road to manhood. William Jacobs in *Teachers College Record* noted that although the social environments of Holden Caulfield and Ponyboy Curtis are conspicuously different, they are both a character 'type' – sensitive and thoughtful – that allows a certain level of psychological insight, despite Hinton's protagonist delivering dialogue that is rather "too profound for hoods" (Jacobs, 1967, p. 201). Yet, in scrutinising this new fiction through the formulaic paralleling of texts, Jacobs offers a rather tired analogy of a genre that was yet to be fully realised. In his later retrospective, Peck argues that any echo of a 'testimonial framing' of Salinger's work in Hinton's is merely a coincidence of narrative device or characterisation and that identifying any deliberate correlation between the two is an over-reading.<sup>151</sup>

Drawing comparisons between the work of Salinger and Hinton is not only confined to their thematic or authorial intent. Just as *Catcher* had courted controversy, so too did *The Outsiders*. The novel was regularly challenged and banned in schools, most often by religious groups on the grounds that it promoted gang violence, held no positive role

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<sup>151</sup> Peck argues, for example, that there is no conscious connection between Salinger's theme – "If a body catch a body coming through the rye" – and *The Outsiders*' Johnny, who rescues a group of children from a burning church as types of martyr figures (Peck, 2007).

models and portrayed a fall from ‘the Christian path’ (Rosenthal, 2014).<sup>152</sup> As a result *The Outsiders* is, in part, an acknowledgment of the growing engagement of the young in matters of social justice and a validation of the marginalised voice. Central to the growing resentments amongst American youth was the country’s involvement in the Vietnam War, which brought the issue of teenage soldiers and the brutalisation of the male body to the fore.<sup>153</sup> During this time, men and women were almost equally represented in vocal public protests against military intervention in Vietnam. It was against this backdrop that the female voice was beginning to take shape, aided also by the rise of the women’s liberation movement, which championed rights to economic, reproductive and social freedom. Yet, although these shifts in the fabric of American society were changing the dynamics between generations and genders, Hinton recalls that in her home state of Oklahoma, there was little engagement with them on a day-to-day basis (Kjelle, 2008, p. 20). She commented in an interview almost 20 years after the work’s publication that as a teenager she had found herself alienated from the female culture and as a consequence had gained a reputation for being rather eccentric (Farber, 1983).<sup>154</sup>

However, what occurred as a result of the work’s popularity amongst school English departments is that Hinton’s novel inadvertently became an archival document. Amongst the very real business of incompetent parenting, class division, social awkwardness, burgeoning sexuality and gang violence, the characters and their plight became trapped in a literary motionlessness. My argument is that despite Hinton’s attempts to present the emotional acuity of young men in this situation, she found herself falling back on historical tropes of literary masculinity. Consequently, the educators who found *The Outsiders* to be a bold foray into the new field of contemporary realism were in fact enamoured by the same edifying potential as the tales

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<sup>152</sup> As recently as 2001 the novel was removed from a middle school curriculum in West Virginia with parents claiming that it exposed their children to “things they aren’t prepared for,” specifically depictions of drug and alcohol use (ALA, 2016). In 1986 the book was challenged for its inclusion on an eighth-grade reading list because, beside its normalising of drug and alcohol use, “virtually all the characters are from broken homes” (ALA, 2016). *The Outsiders* remained at number 43 on the ALA’s most-challenged list from 1990-2000 and has since not featured.

<sup>153</sup> Those who protested against America’s involvement in Vietnam in the mid-1960s were often branded as “hippies” and “un-American” (Kjelle, 2008, p. 19). However, by 1967 anti-war sentiment was mainstream, with a majority of the American population believing involvement in the war was a mistake

<sup>154</sup> Hinton has stated that her peer group at school consisted mainly of boys, which gave her the material she needed to construct the characters and scenarios for her novels (Kjelle, 2008, p. 22).

of virility and gallantry that had typified the canon of nineteenth-century literature before it. Here, in the late 1960s at the well-worn and busy historical intersection between “the richness of human experience and [the] process of textual interpretation,” (Love, 2010, p. 371), educators enlisted *The Outsiders* to fight the battle between literature and the new media that was beginning to ingratiate itself in the identity-making of teenage boys.

The deliberate use of ‘authentic’ adolescent texts was part of a post-1950s movement away from teaching methods that had privileged a master/slave institutional pedagogy, towards those that favoured a more humanistic approach. As described by Ian Hunter, these techniques ostensibly allowed students to control the choice and content of their learning (Hunter, 1988, p. 214) and in this regard, *The Outsiders* became a valuable tool. This assertion does not extenuate or underestimate the role of other 1960s YA texts, however, it acknowledges how the popular reception of the work offered easy potential to high school educators in engaging reluctant readers.<sup>155</sup> Like *Catcher*, Hinton’s novel had sufficient appeal amongst teachers and students for it to be easily mobilised, possessing both the idioms of extant teenagers and the form and function of traditional literature.<sup>156</sup> Just as importantly, it bore stylistic motifs that were already familiar in other juvenile literature to its reading demographic, with many themes only thinly disguised versions of their original form.<sup>157</sup> Indeed, critic Michael Malone writing in *The Nation* suggested that despite Hinton’s indisputable ability to evoke angst, *The Outsiders* conforms to the standard mythic rubric of “the tragic beauty of the violent youth,” following the stereotypical synopsis of teenage anguish in the vacuum left by absent parents (Malone, 1986, p. 277).

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<sup>155</sup> During the 1960s, YA sub-genres were beginning to establish themselves. In dramatic realism, Harper Lee had begun the decade with *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960). Later, Paul Zindel had success with *The Pigman* (1968) and *My Darling, My Hamburger* (1969). Fantasy titles included the series by L’Engle, beginning with *A Wrinkle in Time* (1961), and Ursula K. Le Guin’s *A Wizard of Earthsea* (1968).

<sup>156</sup> *The Outsiders* quickly established itself as a worthy educational text, winning the 1967 *Chicago Tribune* Book World Spring Festival Honor Book prize and a place on the *New York Herald Tribune* Best Teenage Book List. It also won the ALA Best Young Adult Books prize in 1975 (Wilson, 2003, p. 90).

<sup>157</sup> Hinton’s narrative was, in some cases, identical to that of her favourite author of the supernatural, Shirley Jackson. Amongst many examples of intertextuality is the opening page of *The Outsiders* in which Ponyboy opines: “but I have to be content with what I have” (Hinton, 1967, p. 3). Jackson’s protagonist in *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (1962), published some five years before *The Outsiders*, begins her story with “but I have had to be content with what I had” (Peck, 2007).

Yet, the considerable departure in Hinton's text from the writings of previous decades was its enthusiastic engagement with the emerging mediations of teen culture. In repeated allusions to, and appropriations of, new broadcast forms of expression, Hinton separated her work from her 1950s predecessors by mapping an alternative adolescent identity through pop culture. Peck identifies this trend in numerous examples of what might now be referred to as cultural memes. These included Sodapop being described as "16-going-on-17" (a reference to the 1965 film *The Sound of Music*), depictions of domestic violence that were strikingly similar to those played out by James Dean in *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955) and Dallas Winston's gun-toting confrontation with police that mirrored both *Rebel* and *West Side Story* (1961). When Ponyboy begins his story with a reference to Paul Newman, the assumption is that readers will have seen *The Hustler* or *Hud* or later *Cool Hand Luke* and instinctively know how to socially and culturally situate the novel's protagonist.<sup>158</sup>

This implied reciprocity between author and reader certainly established *The Outsiders* as a favourite teaching tool amongst educators. In a 2014 interview with *The New Yorker*, Hinton described the precise point at which this occurred. "*The Outsiders* died on the vine being sold as a drugstore paperback," she recalls, but her publisher noticed that, in one area it was selling very well.<sup>159</sup> Teachers were using it in classes. "All of sudden, they realized that there was a separate market for young adults" (Michaud, 2014).<sup>160</sup> It was at this point, in embracing the fictive experience of adolescence, that educators cemented Hinton's novel and its ilk as permanent literary enactments of the teenager, in effect denying the symbol any progression or maturation in the lives and minds of teenagers themselves. Consequently, the cultural adoption of *The Outsiders* signalled a shift in purpose, with its ratification by institutional educators impeding its competent historical deconstruction of literature written for the young.

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<sup>158</sup> Newman's prolific catalogue of films from the 1960s in which he invariably played the strikingly handsome and likeable delinquent included *Hustler* (1961), *Cool Hand Luke* (1967) and *Hud* (1963).

<sup>159</sup> *The Outsiders* has subsequently sold more than 13 million copies and continues to sell more than 500,000 per year (Michaud, 2014).

<sup>160</sup> Publisher Ron Beuhl, who worked with Hinton on her subsequent titles, *That Was Then, This Is Now* (1971) and *Rumblefish* (1975), recalls that in the late 1960s, textbooks rather than novels were being used for English classes. "I remember going to the American Library Association conferences and they were clamouring for something different. We realised there was a real market for books such as *The Outsiders*" (Italie, 2007).

However, it is evident that within the pages of *The Outsiders* a new brand of social and cultural distinction was hard at work. Hinton's novel – a narrative that is in equal measure radical and conventional – presented the ideal opportunity not only for educators but also for the market to commercialise the teenager and their environment. By tapping into a demographic whose identity enactments increasingly relied on differentiation through modes of conspicuous consumption, and in a process that came to shape the habitus of Western adolescence, the ability to harness the emerging buying power of the teenager became a high priority, and one that was being privileged through texts such as Hinton's. Set amongst the gang fights and love stories of Ponyboy's narrative, the disparate fields of economics, education, politics and culture came together, where previously they had been sovereign and autonomous, remote from the everyday lives of the young. It seems clear now that the co-mingling of the work's symbolic and cultural capital produced a new codification and patois for and about the American teenager.<sup>161</sup>

Yet, what educators and critics were unable to fully appreciate or identify at the time, was that at some level Hinton's work was a fully-fledged portrait of the now dominant connection between young adults and their potential as consumers. A solid image of 'the teenager' had emerged during the 1950s as a by-product of consumerism and its incumbency on creating a market for goods. The most influential of these marketing forms was television, its success bankrolled by commercial advertisers who enjoyed the endorsement of America's Employment Act of 1946, which aimed to lift the economic pall of the Great Depression by stimulating demand for consumer products (Santoni, 1986). By the 1960s, with the adoption of popular teen-centric mediations such as Hinton's into formal educational frameworks, it appeared that in their own small way, schools were authenticating the rise and proliferation of the capitalist model.

Woven through Hinton's narrative are casual references to "Corvairs and Mustangs, English Leather aftershave, Coke and Pepsi" (Bullen, 2009, p. 499). Along with mention of *The Beatles* and Elvis, *Band-Aids* and *DX* gas stations, the articulation of teenage tribes was contingent on expressing identity through the specificity of styles

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<sup>161</sup> Bourdieu described symbolic capital as being the accumulated prestige, consecration or honour founded on a dialectic of knowledge (Bourdieu, 1990, pp. 22, 111) and cultural capital as being more concerned with forms of knowledge, competencies and dispositions (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 7).

and looks, vernaculars and attitudes. The greasers watch Paul Newman films, smoke *Kool* cigarettes and wear a uniform of white t-shirts and denims. They have names like Ponyboy, Sodapop and Two-Bit and populate drive-ins and diners in the seedier parts of town. Meanwhile, the Socs in their Madras shirts cruise the neighbourhoods in their sports cars, picking up girls.

Elizabeth Bullen identifies in 'Inside Story: Product Placement and Adolescent Consumer Identity in Young Adult Fiction' (2009) that Hinton's work is one of the first YA texts to overtly reference brand names. *The Outsiders*, and especially its cinematic remediation, illustrates what she describes as the "semiotic capacity of brands [to] intersect with narrative strategy" (Bullen, 2009, p. 498). These 'looks' would subsequently be memorialised on screen as signifiers of class and type in Coppola's 1983 film, with the greasers slouching through scenes in their low-slung *Levis* and *Chuck Taylor Converse* shoes.<sup>162</sup> Indeed, the adaptation would play a significant role in filling out the moving picture of American adolescence and the part of the teenage consumer within it.<sup>163</sup> In employing these semiotic cues and normalising the commodified behaviour of her peers, Hinton is using a cultural shorthand – evident in the differences in clothes and hairstyles, music and modes of transport – to highlight the irony of superficial consumerism set amongst the daily struggles over class and turf. Ponyboy opines:

We're poorer than the Socs and the middle class. I reckon we're wilder, too. Not like the Socs, who jump greasers and wreck houses and throw beer blasts for kicks, and get editorials in the paper for being a public disgrace one day and an asset to society the next. Greasers are almost like hoods; we steal things and drive souped-up cars and hold up gas stations and have a gang fight once in a while. (Hinton, 1967, p. 4).

Hinton allows her protagonist these frequent diegetic asides on 'the way things were' perhaps as a reaction to the sanitised and synopsised images of wholesome masculinity

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<sup>162</sup> It is worth noting the legacy of Hinton and Coppola's evocative depictions of adolescence, with research showing that American children are more likely than any other in the world to report that their clothes and brands "describe who they are and define their social status" (Schor, 2004, p. 13).

<sup>163</sup> The rise in cultural capitalism during the 1960s heralded a new era that sociologists Jan Pakulski and Malcolm Waters describes in their book *The Death of Class* (1996). Their argument is that hierarchical divisions defined in terms of property and market relations are a purely historical phenomenon that no longer translates in a post-World War II consumer society (Pakulski & Waters, 1996).



that saturated pop culture during the 1960s in television shows such as *My Three Sons*, *The Andy Griffith Show* and *Gunsmoke*. The paradox is, of course, that in attempting to capture the visceral and physical experience of masculine adolescence through the still and introspective medium of text, the dynamism of that experience is necessarily compromised. Hinton wants her audience to connect and *feel* the decay and savagery that defines the life of underprivileged American teens, yet she is asking these same readers to access their senses through the highly cerebral process of abstract projection. In a text saturated with embodied language, Hinton needs her audience to utilise the most fundamental instrument of the *mind* – the processing of literary metaphor.<sup>164</sup>

This process is significantly shaped by images of the male body as spectacle. Hinton's deliberate and lingering focus on the physical form as a central theme of dominance and submission produced a powerful normative mode of subjectivity. Indeed, Crary, in *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture* (1999), argues that this 'way of looking' has the power to influence entire generations (Crary, 1999, p. 97). On this matter, this is no argument, yet Hinton's stark lens, presented a dichotomy. For in her desire to depict the new and real image of suburban teenage masculinity, she has instead reinforced the tropes of old in a text reliant on the conventional motifs of literature that Trites describes as "the physical body as a form of power and powerlessness" (Trites, 2000, p. x). In a somewhat laboured metaphor, the climax of Hinton's novel aims squarely at that motif. The violent rumble between the greasers and Socs is the physical collision of two opposing cultural narratives – one being the sanguine vision of white, clean-cut, middle-class America; the other a grubby undercurrent of the impoverished working poor. The interaction between the opposing social castes brings the adolescent male body to centre stage as the contested ground over which cultural identity will be fought.

The structure of this scene and its players is not new, exhibiting the essential nature of all social frameworks, described by Bourdieu as dependent on each participant to 'position-take' within its hierarchy.<sup>165</sup> However, the argument of this thesis is that *The*

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<sup>164</sup> Cognitive scientist Mark Turner argues in *The Literary Mind* that storytelling, and the ability to make abstract associations such as those required to understand metaphor is the instrument on which humans rely for all rational cognition (Turner, 1996, p. 5).

<sup>165</sup> See discussion of the paradigmatic power schema in *The Field of Cultural Production* (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 30).

*Outsiders*, like much subsequent YA for and about males, allows a critical observation of the chasm between literal and physical position-taking in the minds of adolescent boys, with one version merely speaking of the embodied action, whilst the other allows the corporeal *experience* of the act. An exchange between Ponyboy and his friends serves as a useful interrogation of this problem and the essential nature and reasoning behind young men's desire to execute and legitimise their physicality.

"You like fights, don't you, Soda?" I asked suddenly.

"Yeah, sure." He shrugged. "I like fights."

"How come?"

"I don't know." He looked at me, puzzled. "It's action. It's a contest. Like a drag race or a dance or something."

"Shoot," said Steve, "I want to beat those Socs' heads in. When I get in a fight I want to stomp the other guy good. I like it, too."

"How come you like fights, Darry?" I asked [...]

Soda piped up: "He likes to show off his muscles."

(Hinton, 1967, p. 101)

In the boys' simple dialogue, Hinton attempts to bring alive the corporeal experience for her audience, to bring a three-dimensional physicality to the muteness of the text. In a passage not unlike a fight itself, the exchanges are short, punchy and aggressive. Her characters spar with the dialogue, delivering it in spare and simple blows. "For a minute, everything looked unreal, like a scene out of a JD movie or something" (Hinton, 1967, p. 108). Then, "a hard right to the jaw that would have felled anyone but Darry (p.109). Ponyboy is pinned down by a Soc. He is "slugging the sense out of me. I thought dizzily that he was going to knock some of my teeth loose or break my nose or something," but Dallas arrives and is "already on top of someone". Amidst the action, Ponyboy's brother comes to his rescue: "he caught the guy by the shoulder and half lifted him up before knocking him three feet with a sledge-hammer blow" (pp. 109-110), and with that, the rumble is over as quickly as it began.

These enactments confirm what Ponyboy already knows. His physical inadequacies and his tendency towards introspection disconnect him from the action and he doubts his credentials in this overtly masculine environment.

It was the truth. Darry liked anything that took strength, like weight-lifting or playing football or roofing houses, even if he was proud of being smart too. Darry never said anything about it, but I knew he liked fights. I felt out of things. I'll fight anyone anytime, but I don't like to. (Hinton, 1967, p. 102)

Ponyboy's uneasy resignation signals Hinton's acute awareness of the limiting fables of American adolescence. Indeed, the title of her work alone speaks of the isolation and exclusion that defines so many experiences of adolescence.<sup>166</sup> In this difficult territory, Ponyboy suffers a double fate, being neither the greaser tough nor the privileged white boy. "It drives my brother Darry nuts when I do stuff like that [walk home alone], 'cause I'm supposed to be smart; I make good grades and have a high IQ and everything, but I don't use my head" (Hinton, 1967, p. 5). In effect, Ponyboy is an allegory of 1960s American youth – caught in a schizophrenic haze of physical, psychological and social uncertainty in which there lingers the uncomfortable and perhaps unanswerable question: "Who am I".<sup>167</sup> Hinton's work does not necessarily offer any solace or direction in this respect, despite drawing readers in with her intimate portraits. Instead, it exposes the legacy of brutalisation and corporeal incursion that had typified literature for men and boys after World War II. However, the threats to the body that seep through her work do not emanate from any external enemy, this time they emerge from within society. What Hinton had done is to relocate, in her graphic depictions of domestic and civil violence, the state-sanctioned warfare of the Vietnam jungles into the living rooms and back streets of suburbia.

These depictions, I argue, are a further textualising of the adolescent male body that serve to confound and diminish its capabilities in the eyes of its readership. These renditions require the counter-intuitive stilling and quieting of a necessarily virile, active and visceral entity, only for it to be presented with a nihilistic vision of impending adulthood. There is sanctuary neither inside nor outside the home for many of Hinton's characters and consequently, they seek 'family' amongst their peers. Ponyboy's ruminations on Johnny's home life illustrate the extent to which physical violence plays a part in the domestic setting.

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<sup>166</sup> Picoult describes adolescence as a series of divisions, as much about inclusion as exclusion, that define the experience of the teenage years (Picoult, 2006, p. xiv).

<sup>167</sup> See Erikson's discussion on the adolescent 'identity crisis' (Erikson, 1959, 1963, 1963).

If you can picture a little dark puppy that has been kicked too many times and is lost in a crowd of strangers, you'll have Johnny [...] His father was always beating him up, and his mother ignored him, except when she was hacked off at something, and then you could hear her yelling at him clear down at our house. I think he hated that worse than getting whipped. He would have run away a million times if we hadn't been there. If it hadn't been for the gang, Johnny would never have known what love and affection are. (Hinton, 1967, pp. 10-11)

These images represent a distinct deviation from normative models of familial harmony, particularly between parents and their children, which had distinguished 1950s literature for young adults.<sup>168</sup> Most notably, they situate the adult as an aberrant and undesirable element in the lives of adolescents. Hinton's way of dealing with the untidy connections between adolescents and adults – evident in the archaic renditions of paternalistic power that had permeated the work of authors from Dickens and Twain to Golding and Salinger – is simply to eradicate them.<sup>169</sup>

Where literature for younger readers generally scaffolds the connection between home and away – depicting a return of the child to familial safety by adventure's end or a youngster maturing and separating from their parents in order to fulfil the traditional *bildungsroman* model – *The Outsiders* removes the framework.<sup>170</sup> In this precarious environment, Hinton inserts teenage figures *in loco parentis* to magnify the sensation of detachment from conventional power paradigms, a strategy later adopted by writers such as Philip Pullman and Rowling.<sup>171</sup>

Hinton, like Salinger, deliberately discounts the role of parents in the experience of adolescence – placing the teenage protagonist in a position of premature responsibility. Hinton had herself been the product of a stable family unit, albeit punctuated by her father's battle with cancer. However, she chose to deny her protagonist the same

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<sup>168</sup> A 1958 article examining YA texts set for American high school students identified the unrealistic relationships between adults and adolescents as a major weakness of the genre (Dunning, 1958).

<sup>169</sup> The tale of the orphaned youth in modern literature began with Dickens' *Great Expectations* and continued with Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, the son of an unknown mother and drunken father. Later depictions included Mary in *The Secret Garden* (1911) and Harry Potter in Rowling's series.

<sup>170</sup> In 'The Paradox of Authority in Adolescent Literature', Trites argues that the separation of adolescents from their parents in juvenile texts is a defining characteristic of the genre (Trites, 2000 A).

<sup>171</sup> The character of Harry Potter variously relies on the moral and intellectual guidance of his teachers and peers after being orphaned after birth.

comfort, hinting at the growing Western phenomenon that would eventually see the collapse of the nuclear family as a predominant demographic.<sup>172</sup> In the case of the Curtis brothers – Ponyboy, Sodapop and Darry – Hinton orchestrates the death of their parents in a car accident eight months prior to the story’s telling. Ostensibly, this structure liberates the Curtis boys from both the constraints of childhood and the accountability of adulthood. Yet, Hinton has trouble disengaging from the traditional articulations of family, instead feeling compelled to insert Darry (the oldest brother) in the place where their father, and indeed mother, should have been – a surrogate parent who is compelled to forgo any dream of betterment in sacrifice for his orphaned siblings.<sup>173</sup> Ponyboy tells the reader:

Me and Darry just didn’t dig each other. I never could please him. He would have hollered at me for carrying a blade if I *had* carried one. If I brought home B’s, he wanted A’s, and if I got A’s, he wanted to make sure they stayed A’s. If I was playing football, I should be in studying, and if I was reading, I should be out playing football. (Hinton, 1967, p. 12)

The subtle effect of overlaying the conventional familial model on what is promoted as a revolutionarily depiction of growth and maturation is, I argue, an equally restrictive proxy of imperious rule over the adolescent. Whether Hinton’s readers realise it or not, the subtle literary message of *The Outsiders* is that young men are incapable of taking charge of their own emotional and psychosocial development.

Almost two decades after the publication of the novel, critics such as Malone are still noting, as his 1960s colleagues had done, that absent parents are a predictable literary tool that wrecks tragic beauty from a story of domestic and social brutality. Malone finds the motifs of missing or invisible adult role models implausible. “The vast majority of teenagers personally experience nothing close to the violence of Hinton’s characters, nor do they suffer the [loss] of parental supervision of her Peter Pan-like cast

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<sup>172</sup> Between 1961 and 1970, the number of ‘traditional family’ households – married couples with children – dropped from 50 per cent to 40 per cent and continued to decline. The most recent Census of American Households found that by 2013, only 19 per cent of ‘families’ fell into this category (United States Census Bureau, 2017).

<sup>173</sup> Ponyboy recalls his mother in romantic prose drawn from Frost’s poem: “I remembered my mother [...] beautiful and golden, like Soda, and wise and firm, like Darry” (Hinton, 1967, p. 94).

of orphans” (Malone, 1986, p. 276).<sup>174</sup> However, what Malone perhaps fails to consider is that Hinton’s text is symptomatic of a far deeper social issue, that it is the portrayal and enactment of a deficient adulthood in American culture. It would be some time before critics began to re-focus their attention on this matter, one that *The New York Times* film critic A. O. Scott refers to as “our national resistance to grownup responsibilities all the way back to the works of James Fenimore Cooper and Mark Twain” (Scott, 2014). Certainly, authorities in the field such as Leslie Fiedler had previously lamented the “sophomoric” tendencies of 1960s literature, complaining that most of it fell into one of two camps – boys’ own adventures or female sentimentality – and suggested that in its own way, all American fiction was YA (Fiedler, 1960).

Indeed, the only adults who make a physical appearance in *The Outsiders*, albeit thinly fleshed out, are educators – Mr Syme and Jerry Wood. Syme is Ponyboy’s English tutor and apparently the person for whom the novel is written. Wood is the teacher who accompanies Ponyboy to the hospital after the church fire and acts as a foil to Darry’s authoritarian veneer. Both play superficial roles, yet send powerful and transparent signals about the relationship between generations and the seemingly inconsequential influence of adults in and on the lives of adolescents. However, these themes are appreciably compromised in events that illustrate how life’s lessons can be learned through ‘grownup’ literature and the formal auspices of education. In fact, the two teachers who appear so very briefly in Hinton’s novel represent Ponyboy’s salvation – Mr Syme is the reason for verbalising his emotional journey through adolescence, and Mr Wood serves as a path to enlightenment, allowing Ponyboy to comprehend the paternal affection hidden under Darry’s hard exterior. Indeed, the parallel concerns of Darry and Mr Wood serve to cement for readers the understanding that adolescents do, in fact, crave the guidance and acceptance of those who have made it to adulthood.

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<sup>174</sup> On being asked why she wrote novels with absent or abusive parental figures, Hinton replied, “I didn’t know how adults thought. I didn’t ‘get’ them, so it was easier for me to leave them out” (Michaud, 2014).

Jerry Wood had stayed with me all the time. He kept thanking me for getting the kids out. He didn't seem to mind our being hoods [...] He was real nice about it and said that being heroes would help get us out of trouble, especially since it was self defense and all. I was sitting there, smoking a cigarette, when Jerry came back in from making a phone call. He stared at me for a second.

"You shouldn't be smoking." I was startled.

"How come?"

"Why, uh," Jerry stammered, "uh, you're too young." (Hinton, 1967, pp. 73-74)

The passage that follows is an emotional reunion between Ponyboy and his eldest brother that deftly mirrors the sentiments of Jerry Wood.

Then I saw Darry [...] He swallowed and said in a husky voice, "Ponyboy..." Darry didn't like me...he had driven me away that night...he had hit me...Darry hollered at me all the time...he didn't give a hang about me...Suddenly I realized, horrified, that Darry was crying [...] In that second what Soda and Dally and Two-Bit had been trying to tell me came through. Darry did care about me, maybe as much as he cared about Soda, and because he cared he was trying too hard to make something of me. When he yelled "Pony, where have you been all this time?" he meant, "Pony, you've scared me to death. Please be careful, because I couldn't stand it if anything happened to you." (Hinton, 1967, pp. 75-76)

Here, Hinton allows her characters an insight that countermands the egocentric adolescent disposition of her work, yet still leaves room for what Fiedler described as the reluctance of American adults to 'grow up' (Fiedler, 1960). The technique would, I argue, go on to have a significant impact on the trajectory of literature written for young adult males in that it underlines the heroic obligation and psychological burden that makes the 'civilised' world of manhood seem rather unappealing for its teenage readers.<sup>175</sup>

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<sup>175</sup> Twain drew attention to the irony of 'civilising' behaviour in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, published in 1884 after the American Civil War. By focussing on the arbitrary nature of customs, conventions and social hierarchy, and misspelling the word as 'sivilising', Twain highlighted Huck's instinct and experience as the most valuable measures of a meaningful and honest life.

### 2.3. Remediation and the Spectacularising of Boys

The genealogical nature of Hinton's narrative lives on in literary representations of the adolescent male today. The wild, uncultured youth maturing into a manly hero despite perceived delinquency, the uneasy occupation of the urban space and a lack of adult role models are all evident in the popularity of protagonists such as Rowling's Harry Potter. However, Hinton's characters are 'types' that had been percolating a decade earlier in the likes of James Dean in *Rebel without a Cause* and Marlon Brando in *The Wild One* (1953), and who had already served to normalise the model of recalcitrant youth in the American psyche. What is surprising therefore, given the highly receptive attitude towards cinema in both Hinton's work and the environment in which it was produced, was the length of time it took for her novel to be remediated. *The Outsiders* remained encased in print for 16 years until 1983 when Coppola approached the author to collaborate on a screenplay.<sup>176</sup>

Ironically, it is the story of how the novel came to be reimagined on film that lends much weight to the findings of this thesis. In 1980, a school librarian from a small town in Fresno, California, along with her seventh- and eighth-grade students, wrote to Coppola asking him to make a movie of their favourite book. A journalist from *The New York Times*, who covered the story after the film had been released, commented on the rather cynical decision-making process that generally went into selecting suitable material for film, stating that it primarily relied on whether tax-shelter funding had fallen into place or if a studio could insure themselves at the box-office by using big-name stars (Harmetz, 1983). However, Coppola saw the enormous potential of a new type of cinema that spoke to an audience who were used to the eclectic but rather adult offerings of sci-fi, war and frat house comedy that had dominated late 1970s film, including *Rocky* (1976), *Star Wars* (1977), *Animal House* (1978), *Alien* (1979) and *Apocalypse Now* (1979).

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<sup>176</sup> A later novel of Hinton's, *Tex*, was adapted for film by first-time director Tim Hunter for Walt Disney Studios in 1982 and drew US\$7.4 million at the box office. It was later eclipsed by Coppola's *The Outsiders* in 1983, which grossed almost five times that amount (Box Office Mojo, 2018).



Coppola's interpretation of *The Outsiders*, in collaboration with Hinton, resulted in a spectacularising of American adolescence that would influence future filmmaking for the adolescent market. Of particular note, apart from his ability to create a naturalistic if somewhat stylised visual perspective was the way in which he framed the teenager on screen. If Hinton had brought lyricism to the depiction of adolescence, then Coppola brought portraiture. Using intimate close-ups, high observational camera angles and lighting techniques that saturated the urban landscape in the golden hues of Frost's poem, the film declared a new way of seeing. Coppola's cinematic imagining brought adolescence into the public space, shifting it from the bedrooms and suburban back streets, out of the quiet interiority of print, and into a civic and communal arena to be observed, showcased, critiqued and weighed. In short, Coppola cinematically embodied a work that had captured the literary imagination of America's adolescents.

Lone Star School Library  
2617 South Fowler Avenue  
Fresno, California 93725  
March 21, 1980

Mr. Francis Ford Coppola  
1 Gulf and Western Plaza  
New York, N. Y. 10023

Dear Mr. Coppola:

I am writing to you on behalf of the students and faculty of Lone Star School. We hope you will take the time to consider our request.

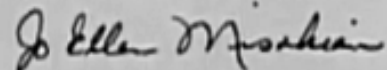
We are all so impressed with the book, *THE OUTSIDERS* by S. E. Hinton, that a petition has been circulated asking that it be made into a movie. We have chosen you to send it to. In hopes that you might also see the possibilities of the movie we have enclosed a copy of the book.

Lone Star is a small school in Fresno County. We have a student body of 324 students. It is a kindergarten through eighth grade school. I feel our students are representative of the youth of America. Everyone who has read the book, regardless of ethnic or economical background, has enthusiastically endorsed this project. This plea comes from our seventh and eighth grade students.

We feel certain that if you will read the book you will agree with us.

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely yours,



Jo Ellen Misakian  
(Mrs. John Misakian)  
Librarian Aide

**Image 1:** Letter from Jo Ellen Misakian, librarian aide at Lone Star School, Fresno, California, to Francis Ford Coppola, 21 March 1980. Reproduced from *More Letters of Note* (Usher, 2015).



June 10, 1980

Hollywood General Studios  
1040 N. Las Palmas  
Hollywood, CA 90038  
(213) 467-6202

Ms. Jo Ellen Misakian  
Lone Star School Library  
2617 South Fowler Avenue  
Fresno, Calif. 93725

Dear Ms. Misakina:

Thank you for sending us your letter, the petition from your students and the book "THE OUTSIDERS" by S.E. Hinton. Francis Coppola received them and was very impressed with the passionate interest you and your students showed in this book.

We are thus following through on it as you can see by the attached report that was done by one of our readers. The readers seems to agree with you and your students.

The next step is for myself and other members of our company to read the book and see if we really might want to make a film out of it. I'll try to keep you posted on the progress.

Thanks again to you and your seventh and eighth graders for being good literary scouts and for choosing our company.

Have a nice summer vacation.

Sincerely,

*Fred Roos*  
Fred Roos

FR/lff

cc: F. Coppola, L. Fisher  
S. Rogers, S. Ingleby

**Image 2:** Letter from Fred Roos, Hollywood General Studios, California, to Jo Ellen Misakian, librarian aide at Lone Star School, 10 June 1980. Reproduced from *More Letters of Note* (Usher, 2015).

In this case, the adolescents themselves had seen the opportunity for meaning-making in a medium that reflected their generation. The 13- and 14-year-olds of Fresno, California were, as their teacher had pointed out, “representative of the youth of America” (Usher, 2015), and their initial instinct on encountering a text that they ‘loved’ was to have it remediated in a way that was easily consumable. Of equal note was the fact that, even 16 years after the novel was written, adolescents still connected with its characters and its account of the social alienation of marginalised minorities. The historical conditions under which Hinton had produced her original work were as relevant in the social apprenticeship of adolescence as they had ever been, but now had the chance to unshackle the teenager from the cultural competencies and taxonomies of the wider adult environment.<sup>177</sup> This was a domain where the adolescent voice had the cadence and authority to shape market forces without feeling obligated by the legacy of any historical models of conventional culture.<sup>178</sup>

It is here, amid the gradual and discernible displacement of literature as the primary mode of adolescent meaning-making, and the rapid arrival of screens to fill the gaps, that new forms found a foothold. Further, what worked in Coppola’s favour in this environment, whose prodigious cinematic output had already garnered much critical success in the adult genres, is that he chose to engage with Hinton at a literary level.<sup>179</sup> Coppola stated, “When I met Susie it was confirmed to me that she was not just a young people’s novelist, but a real American novelist” (Phillips, 2004, p. 204).<sup>180</sup> In effect, what Coppola aimed to, and arguably did, achieve with *The Outsiders* was a mimetic experience of adolescence through the literary artefact. In reimagining her intricate portrait of small-town America, complete with the ugly and confronting narratives of an

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<sup>177</sup> Bourdieu considers that the “aesthetic disposition” which designates any work of art as socially acceptable is a product of the entire history of the field, a product that is reproduced in a new way by each individual as a result of their “specific apprenticeship” (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 264).

<sup>178</sup> This fertile ground embodied the message of McLuhan, whose declaration that “the-medium is the message,” would come to define the influence of visual and electronic media on what he termed ‘Gutenberg technology’ (McLuhan, 1964, pp. 7, 30).

<sup>179</sup> Coppola had already written, directed or produced dozens of films, including *The Godfather* (1972), *American Graffiti* (1973), *The Conversation* (1974), *The Great Gatsby* (1974) and *Apocalypse Now* (1979) with actors such as Marlon Brando, Al Pacino, Robert De Niro, Gene Hackman, Robert Duvall, Martin Sheen and Dennis Hopper.

<sup>180</sup> In an interview with *The New York Times* during filming of *The Outsiders*, Coppola remarked that his time with Hinton made him realise that having the writer on set made “a lot of sense” (Farber, 1983). Hinton’s storytelling ability charmed Coppola to the extent that whilst shooting *The Outsiders* in 1982, the two adapted the screenplay for Hinton’s *Rumble Fish*, which was released in cinemas the same year.

increasingly stratified America, Coppola embraced a text that he described as never preaching or moralising (Farber, 1983). In particular, he sought to reproduce both the field and the habitus of the teenagers who struggled with genuine issues of social isolation and parental neglect in a story ultimately about belonging and the close bond of male friendships. Coppola, in fact, devised specific environments in which his actors *lived* their roles. Tom Cruise, Rob Lowe, Emilio Estevez, Matt Dillon, Patrick Swayze, Ralph Macchio and C. Thomas Howell – later to be labelled the ‘brat pack’ – all aged in their teens and early twenties, spent three months filming in Tulsa, during which time they experienced the privileges and privations of their character.<sup>181</sup> In an interview some years later, Macchio recalled Coppola’s technique of imbuing a natural rivalry amongst the cast by inflicting a harsh regime on the greasers, of which he was one.

Francis wanted to really create the feeling of the class differences, so he had the greasers hanging out together, and we were all on the same hotel room floor, and the Socs had nicer rooms. They had leather-bound scripts while we had old, denim notebooks. We were picked up in like a mini-van from the airport, while the Socs had cushy rides. He was very much about the camaraderie, so when we shot the movie, we felt like we had been with each other a little bit. But he definitely kept us separated (Gilliam, Kline, O'Shansky, & Wright, 2016).

Coppola’s often-gruelling methods of casting and filming *The Outsiders* created authentic bonds and tensions between the actors that would eventually radiate on screen. His cinematic reimagining of male adolescence lay the groundwork for the myriad screen renditions of adolescence that would follow in that decade, most notably by director John Hughes in films such as *The Breakfast Club* (1985), *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off* (1986) and *Pretty in Pink* (1986) and others including *Footloose* (1984) and *Stand by Me* (1986).

It is my argument that this prolific period of teen-centred cinema marks a substantial recalibration of the Western adolescent’s field; one that will ultimately effect a shift in cultural agency from the static and institutionally mediated contemplation of literature

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<sup>181</sup> Ralph Macchio, who played Johnny Cade in the film, confided in a 2017 interview that until the age of 12 he had never read a novel from beginning to end. *The Outsiders* was his first (Wojciechowski, 2017).

to the visual and aural dynamism of the screen.<sup>182</sup> However, amongst the abundant cinematic fodder that hovered around issues of sexuality, peer pressure, feeble parenting, social aberrance and the alienation of both the collective and the individual, the visual representations of adolescence began to change demeanour, specifically in relation to gender. In a field that had been almost the exclusive domain of the teenage male, depictions of an increasingly engaged female audience were beginning to take hold, with a demographic keen to seek out stories about their own experiences of young adulthood.<sup>183</sup>

What is valuable in identifying this metamorphosing appetite for fiction along gender lines is that it exposes the very real need in the minds of adolescents to destroy the ‘old’ in order to achieve the ‘new’.<sup>184</sup> The significant and symbiotic working relationship between Hinton and Coppola spoke volumes about the new medial environment in which this transformation was taking place. However, more importantly, it revealed the productive conditions under which this new relationship to the object – in this case, the adolescent – would be generated and regenerated in the decades to come. Some film critics found the distinction between Hinton’s potent text and Coppola’s sentimental screenplay not explicit enough. Renowned film critic and historian Roger Ebert censured Coppola for his “stylized, over-careful, deadening approach” to characters who were “trapped inside too many layers of storytelling,” even though the film took US\$33.7 million at the box office (Box Office Mojo, 2018). Ebert argued that the toughness with which Coppola imbued his greasers belonged to a “more romantic tradition” and that his stylistic exercise had produced a “contrived Hollywood soundstage” that lacked any spontaneity or gravitas (Ebert, 1983). What concerned Ebert most was that Coppola had somehow betrayed his considerable talent – evident in his previous films *The Godfather* (1972) and *Apocalypse Now* (1979) – on something as

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<sup>182</sup> The legacy of Coppola’s teen-focused cinema translated to the small screen with many adolescent dramas and comedies populating television programming during the 1980s. These included *Growing Pains* (1985-1992), *The Wonder Years* (1988-1993), *Doogie Howser M.D.* (1989-1993) and *Beverly Hills 90210* (1990-2000).

<sup>183</sup> Television programming for teenagers made a noticeable deviation during the 1990s with series such as *My So-Called Life* (1994-1995), *Dawson’s Creek* (1998-2003) and *The O.C.* (2003-2007) depicting strong female characters, a motif that continued into the new century with *Gossip Girl* (2007-2012) and *Pretty Little Liars* (2010-2017).

<sup>184</sup> Benjamin’s theories on the temporality of the present as the moment of destruction are useful in understanding how the immediacy of the adolescent psyche is central to its destruction and ‘reproduction’ in new forms (Benjamin & Osborne, 1994, p. xi).

frivolous as *The Outsiders*. In a very public protest, Ebert was articulating the distinct gap between the genuinely popular and the critically popular, where the ‘agencies of consecration’ met the *cordon sanitaire* (Ross, 1989, p. 5).

Other reviewers variously praised Coppola’s ability to disarm and expose American stereotypes (Gaal, 1983), drawing allusions to *Rebel without a Cause*. However, Gilbert Adair, the novelist, poet and film critic, made the most thought-provoking assessment in *Sight and Sound* magazine. Adair stated that *The Outsiders* was the aesthetic equivalent of “a *faux-naïf* Pre-Raphaelite mural in which angels with dirty faces but immaculately pure hearts burn with a hard, gemlike flame before being snuffed out in their prime” (Adair, 1983). He remarked that it was “doubtful whether anyone not actually moved to tears by the predicament of its youthful principals will profit in the least from a critic’s attempts at illumination” (Adair, 1983). What had struck Adair in Coppola’s remediation was what he considered the homoerotic nature of the camera’s gaze. Where Hinton’s novel had very deliberately been a story of camaraderie, belonging and brotherly love, Coppola’s lens had transformed those experiences into an aesthetic visualisation of physical masculinity, inviting the audience to indulge in the beauty of the ‘mangeneue’.<sup>185</sup>

Adair’s assessment was certainly controversial, but it is also possible that he had over-read Coppola’s intention in the lingering close-ups of misty eyes and chiselled jawlines. In fact as recently as October 2016, Hinton herself was involved in a boisterous debate amongst her 40,000 Twitter fans about whether or not there were any “romantic feelings” between Johnny and Dallas (Schaub, 2016). Hinton denied the speculation, asking: “Where is the text backing this?” The Twitter user replied that she thought it might be “cute” if they had been lovers, to which Hinton responded quickly and decisively: “ask someone in the ‘60’s how ‘cute’ it was to be gay.” The result was an online ‘Twitter storm’ and accusations of Hinton harbouring homophobic views, which she subsequently denied and said she found insulting (Reynolds, 2016). Yet arguably, the most valuable material that emerged from this debate is not about sexual preferences or homoeroticism, but the difference between authorial intent and audience interpretation. For regardless of the medium – be it literature, cinema or even the fanfic

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<sup>185</sup> In urban parlance, the male equivalent of an ingénue.

that it generates – fiction operates at an interpretational level through which the participant must overlay their own unique human experience.<sup>186</sup>

It is via this psychological inscape that texts such as *The Outsiders* operate, with each reader required to see amongst the pages an apotheosis of their own adolescence. However, this construction represents an intractable folly because in privileging the voice of YA, in aiming to reproduce a generic biography of youth, there lies the danger of disconnecting its arguably essential precondition of *physicality*. What Hinton's work represents, I argue, is a generational turning point in the telling of male adolescence, and a subtle yet perceptible shift from the historical legacy of the printed word to the dynamic, visual, audial and interactive *experience* of the modern. Effectively, the text and its cinematic embodiment allow a new way of framing masculine adolescence that refuses to fetishise or diminish the object.

The gentle optimism around what is essentially a story of suburban inertia creates a literary environment where voices of the marginalised and oppressed can be heard. Yet, instead of embracing the liberations afforded by Hinton's work in that moment, the genre appeared to fall victim to a new despondency as the 1970s began. Political events, such as the resignation of Richard Nixon after the Watergate scandal and the collapse of America's liberal idealism, brought a pessimism to the social rhetoric of the West and the literature that it produced. For adolescents, a stifling political protectionism that devalued any sense of the collective spirit emerged in dark works of psychological drama such as Robert Cormier's *The Chocolate War*. With its story of the unprofitable business of seeking individuality in 1970s America, Cormier announced a shift in YA that would ultimately set the stage for the genre's obsession with the dystopian narrative of adolescence.

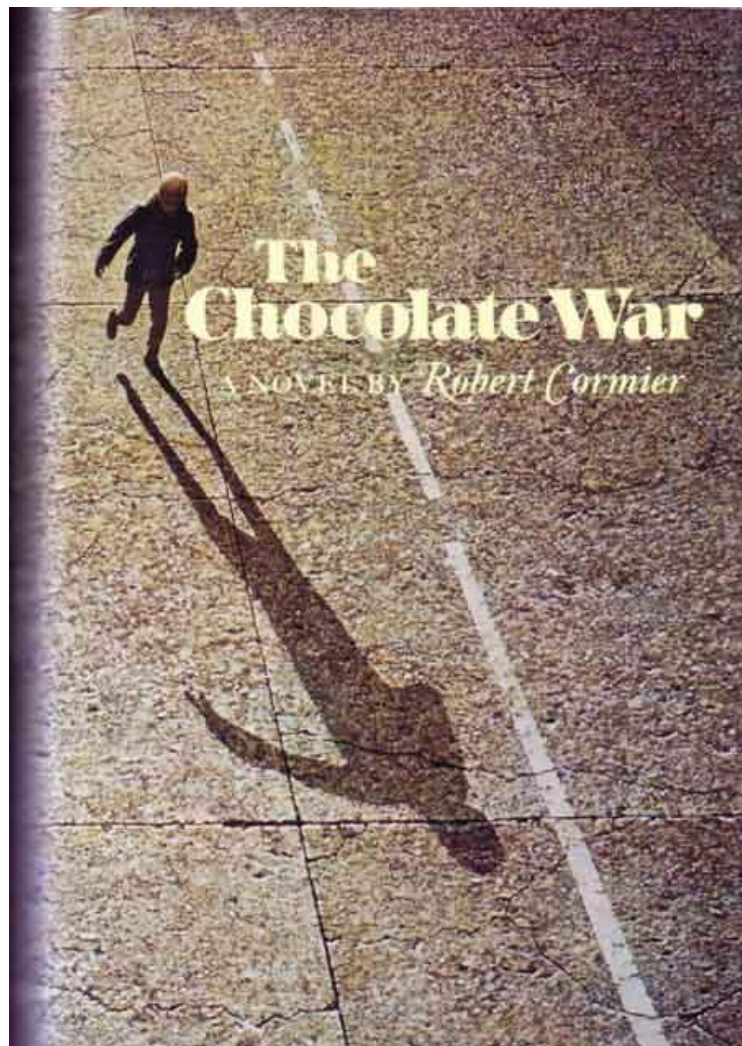
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<sup>186</sup> Fanfic remediation of *The Outsiders* features on *Figment*, *Tumblr*, *FanFiction.net*, *Livejournal*, *Wattpad* and *Archive of Our Own*, together boasting millions of contributors.



# 3

## 1970s: Institutional Rebellion in *The Chocolate War*



This case study examines the place of Robert Cormier's seminal 1970s novel, *The Chocolate War* (1974), in stories of adolescent disengagement and in relation to other influential works across the evolutionary arc of YA.<sup>187</sup> Where texts of the 1950s and 1960s had introduced readers to the vernacular of the teenager and the particular social and domestic plights of their protagonists, *The Chocolate War* focusses squarely on the abject in American society. From an environment characterised by diminishing social collectivism, governmental corruption and institutional degradation, Cormier introduces readers to the new subgenre of psychological terror and the ugly outcomes of a political system that aim to regularise and pathologise the adolescent male body. This chapter tracks the repercussions of such a shift in sentiment and asks whether *The Chocolate War*, and other similar works that took a detour into the decade's New Realism, were responsible for the documented decline in leisure-time fiction reading amongst adolescent males that coincided with the release of the novel.

According to YA critic Cart, it was the candid mood of mid-century writing for young readers that offered an entrée for authors such as Cormier to broach subjects that were previously taboo (Cart, 1996, p. 28). Indeed, the era was later referred to as The Golden Age of YA for its range of experimental writing.<sup>188</sup> However, *The Chocolate War* takes the good-natured naughtiness from *Tom Brown's Schooldays* – themes that continue today in works such as the *Harry Potter* series – and transforms them into a catastrophic vision of adolescence, leaving in their wake the fairy tale endings that Jacqueline Rose argues are fiercely guarded in literature for the young (Rose, 1984, p. 2).<sup>189</sup>

To understand the impact of this new and nihilistic style of fiction, Bourdieu's work guides a reading of *The Chocolate War* that focusses on its productive conditions. In particular, the dispositions of Cormier's characters are weighed in relation to the events

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<sup>187</sup> Image on previous page: first edition cover, *The Chocolate War*, 1974 (public domain).

<sup>188</sup> For girls, Judy Blume, whose prolific output began with *Are You There God, It's Me, Margaret* (1970), dealt with issues including menstruation, first sexual encounters and birth control. A year later, Beatrice Sparks wrote *Go Ask Alice* (1971) – the shocking diary of a drug-addicted teenager. For boys, works such as Richard Bach's fable of human potential, *Jonathan Livingstone Seagull* (1970) disrupted the rather serious themes of the genre, along with Douglas Adams' comedic best-seller, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* in 1979.

<sup>189</sup> In a study of Cormier's oeuvre, YA critic Patricia Campbell argues that *The Chocolate War* borrowed the nineteenth-century bonhomie of *Tom Brown's Schooldays* but recast the form by denying teenage readers the satisfying denouements that had historically been offered to its audience (Campbell, 2006, p. 69; Campbell, 1985).

of the 1970s that shape its narrative, from the influence of New Right conservatism and the Watergate scandal, to the aftermath of the Vietnam War and the rise of the individual. In exploring a text that depicts such dark and brutal incursions on the corporeal and psychological status of the young, the work of Trites progresses enquiries into this growing paranoia around the volatile and unpredictable nature of the male mind and body, and within that, the depiction of the adolescent male as a deviant form.

This line of enquiry provides a rich source of material through which the work of selected gender theorists is employed to build a nuanced picture of the deviant/other in a literature that grew out the right-wing political climate of the era. Butler's perspectives, for example, on the injured/compromised body as a site of powerlessness lead a discussion into the uneasy depictions of 'queer' bodies that act as threats to the homosocial hegemony of the American middle-class in Cormier's work. Love's theories shape a discussion on historical critical reception to *The Chocolate War* that privileged a reductive reading of homosexual desire rather than a more complex analysis of queerness. Sedgwick also assists in an understanding of how fictions of the era so often immobilised the male by imposing on him a dualistic model of performative gender.

Accordingly, the spectacularising of the male body occupies much of this chapter's attention, its gaze resting upon the brutalised bodies of Cormier's characters as sites of control, with the adolescent anatomy reduced to public property. Kasia Boddy's exploration of boxing lends insight here into the homoerotic and ritual forms of spectatorship that attach themselves to many of Cormier's literary articulations of gender. These notions, too, intersect with feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey's work on scopophilia and the rise of visual media, the effects of which are explored in the novel's range of compromised male figures and nullified female forms.

By way of bringing these convergent critical methods together, this chapter borrows selectively from Erikson's structural work on adolescent identity formation to undertake a close examination of Cormier's use of metacognitive language, narrative style, character and plot. The rationale behind this approach is to consider how the social, cultural and political conditions of the 1970s produced a disturbing literary image of the male in crisis – one that offered neither familiarity in the comforting hallmarks of historical form, nor promised the possibility of new beginnings as would a classic

*bildungsroman*. Indeed, this case study puts forward the argument that in New Realism, Cormier and his colleagues began a deliberate disengagement of the teenage male from the social script of manhood that would darken the genre for decades to come.

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One of the most nihilistic adolescent novels to emerge on the American literary landscape during the 1970s, *The Chocolate War*, tells the story of Jerry Renault, a teenage boy seeking elusive individuality against a backdrop of institutionalised conformity. His refusal to sell chocolates for the school fundraiser makes him a public enemy and the object of a vicious and prolonged campaign of emotional and physical intimidation. In the classrooms and on the football pitches of a New England Catholic boys' school, Cormier depicts an ugly world in which its young are moulded, brutalised and then broken by a systemic regime of myopic religiosity and barbarous state-endorsed pedagogy. In tales that normalise the psychological and physical abuse, sexual repression and catastrophic sublimation of young men's minds and bodies, the novel illuminates the pessimistic zeitgeist that had taken hold in America after the revolutionary changes in the cultural and political landscape during the 1960s. America was slipping into economic recession and being rocked by a combination of events including the Watergate scandal, which would produce a population who were often angry, divided and suspicious of the very apparatuses that existed to represent them.<sup>190</sup>

Cormier's work is very much a story about the conservative populism that was emerging amongst the middle classes during the 1970s. Nixon's dereliction of duty as president had created an ideal political climate in which the individual took the place of trust in the State apparatus. The novel's narrative openly reflects this break from a sense of collectivism and draws attention to public discontent around issues of deceit, cronyism and white male privilege. In this regard, *The Chocolate War* arguably marks a significant change in the way literature depicted the male, and in particular the adolescent male. Accordingly, Cormier's authorial motivations and their literary

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<sup>190</sup> The 1970s in American culture is often considered a reaction to the liberality of the 1960s. A so-called 'New Right' movement emerged in defence of a more political and domestic conservatism during this time. In 1972, President Nixon was exposed in the Watergate Scandal for undermining his political opponents, resulting in his resignation in 1974. This abuse of governmental privilege led to a deepening public sentiment of mistrust in relation to the State. See discussion in 'Public Opinion during the Watergate Crisis' (Robinson, 1974).

manifestations are central to this thesis because they succinctly define its primary line of enquiry – namely, the difference between experience and the representation of experience in literature. Indeed, the metaphorical distance between reality and allegory in Cormier’s rendition of the teenage male permeates well beyond the page and draws attention to two themes that dominate notions of selfhood – one is overt, the other more subtle. The first is a focus on the dangerous business of seeking to be an individual in an environment that rewards and privileges the collective, the state and its institutionalised and authoritarian power structures. The second is more difficult to uncover, requiring an openness to the idea that cultural *enactments* of the homosocial – those that are so often lionised and memorialised in life and literature – can be destructive performances that estrange men not only from depictions of themselves but, more importantly, from each other.

An effective path into comprehending the impact of both these issues on the willingness of adolescent males to read fiction is through an examination of literary corporeality and temporality in the evolving representation of the teenage boy in YA. Like any fiction, *The Chocolate War* speaks of and to its time. When Jerry, a freshman, confronts the authority of Archie Costello and his gang, The Vigils, about the cruel psychological ‘assignments’ they designate to junior boys – from vandalising school property to refusing to sell charity chocolates – the rightful order of Trinity High School begins to disintegrate. “Dare I disturb the universe,” asks Jerry, pondering the words of Frost on a poster left behind in his locker. Archie and the venomous Brother Leon engage in a two-pronged attack on Jerry, culminating in a brutal boxing match orchestrated by The Vigils in which Cormier’s protagonist is pitted against the school thug. The punches thrown are decided by ballot, the tickets to which are raffled off to fellow students. The novel ends with Jerry lying in wait for an ambulance, imploring his best friend, Goober, not to disturb the status quo.

Jerry’s initial naïve optimism and subsequent fatalism mirror the conflicted social and cultural atmosphere of 1970s America, its population obviously smarting from the fresh scars of its controversial involvement in the war against communism in Vietnam.<sup>191</sup> These political events had drawn attention to the psychosocial effects of warfare and, in

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<sup>191</sup> Despite widespread protests, and some 60 per cent of Americans opposing involvement in Vietnam, large numbers of young males were drafted to join the Army during the 1950s and 1960s (Lewy, 1978).

turn, the way it compromised the bodies and minds of its teenage male soldiers.<sup>192</sup> By the war's end in 1975 – the year after Cormier's book was published – approximately 282,000 young male Allied soldiers had lost their lives and almost 100,000 had returned severely physically disabled by armed combat or landmines.<sup>193</sup>

As a consequence of these assaults and incursions on the corporeal reality of the adolescent male, a generation of young Americans grew up in a society that both valorised and demonised the bodies and minds of its teenage boys. In effect, the 1970s adolescent became a pathologised subject – a public property that, from its glorification to its denigration, was a product of what Bourdieu would have described as a “collective orchestration” (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 5). It was an orchestration that regularised modes of thinking into dispositions, which slowly became structures, which then began to define practice, all without the formality of a coherently labelled action. From the battlefields of Southeast Asia, a new type of adolescent male had emerged, one that was a contested entity within a system of multiple institutional, social and cultural structures, yet without any genuine autonomy.

The character of Jerry Renault emanates from these convergent forces – an allegorical portrait of a failing David against an almighty Goliath in an America seemingly emancipated by its anti-war, anti-government counterculture, yet ultimately thwarted by its institutional and governmental regimes. His is the tale of the individual destroyed under the crushing weight of the system, of insignificance and futility in the face of a structural hierarchy, all leading to the depressing denouement: conform or perish. Cormier's literary motifs openly reflect the sentiments of the peri- and post-Vietnam War era experience, where the bodies and minds of young men had been standardised and brutalised in an effort to concentrate their power on the task of defending the State. Just as America's young men had gone to war, so too has Jerry, waging his own battle against the natural order of control, submission and religiosity at Trinity High School.

Cormier's disquieting and uncompromising realism earned him a career-long reputation as an antagonist, his work often drawing ire from the individuals and institutions he

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<sup>192</sup> During and after the war, psychiatrists in the USA and Australia were overwhelmed by the number of returned soldiers who reported symptoms of what was termed ‘post-Vietnam syndrome’ (Allam, 2014).

<sup>193</sup> In total, more than 1.3 million people lost their lives in the conflicts in Vietnam, including 587,000 local civilians. Records show that 61 per cent of the American soldiers who fought in the Vietnam War were younger than 21, thus representing almost 10 per cent of their generation (Lewy, 1978, p. 442).

depicted. Despite this, *The Chocolate War* attracted much critical acclaim alongside its enduring success as a work of popular fiction. For where the novel broke ground was in its portrayal of the disappointing and often devaluing experience of male adolescence. The merit of a work that did not dignify or glamorise this developmental stage, but instead highlighted the seemingly compromised and powerless position of the teenager, was widely acknowledged by critics of the time. Author Theodore Weesner in *The New York Times Book Review* declared the work “masterfully structured and rich in theme; the action is well crafted, well timed, suspenseful” (Weesner, 1974). The *Kirkus Review* of April 1974 praised the staccato-style dialogue of the work that made it compellingly immediate. “Mature young readers,” the reviewer declared, “will respect the uncompromising ending that dares disturb the upbeat universe of juvenile books” (Virden, 1974).

It was Cormier’s obstinate refusal to allow any joy to seep through the cracks in a story of abuse, intimidation and persecution that marked it as worthy of attention. Indeed, in a 1984 interview with *The New York Times Book Review*, Cormier was asked if he was sending a depressing message to teenagers that they could never beat the system. He replied, “They can buck it, but they can’t beat it” (Honan, 2000). He qualified this statement by commenting that the terrible thing would be not to try. Betsy Herne of the ALA was also struck by the work’s overwhelming melancholy. In her *Booklist* review of July 1974, sardonically entitled ‘Whammo, You Lose,’ she enunciated what many others seemed reluctant to say. As a well-respected children’s book editor and critic, it was the emerging trend of “didactic negativity” in fiction for young people that most disturbed her (Hearne, 1974). Hearne described *The Chocolate War* as “a book that looks with adult bitterness at the inherent evil of human nature and the way young people can be dehumanized into power-hungry and blood-thirsty adults” (Hearne, 1974). Her review lifted a veil on what were, and to a certain extent remain, the rules of engagement for YA. Not only did she expose a significant authorial bias that had established itself within the genre, but perhaps she had also illuminated the chasm that was emerging between the thematic intentions of female and male-oriented texts for teenage readers.

The 1970s would certainly earn itself the moniker of ‘The Golden Age of YA’ for its authors’ exploratory and experimental themes. However, the nature of those themes still

arguably adhered to a predictably gendered bifurcation. Cormier obliged in this regard, his work occupying the nihilistic extremities of a YA continuum that stretched from romance novels written almost exclusively for girls (often including themes of teenage sex, pregnancy and death) to the brutal and therapeutic honesty of dystopian science fiction and new realism written almost always for boys (engaging with the vulnerable psychological states of its protagonists). That is to say, despite a new crop of YA writers tackling issues that were previously taboo, the intrinsic delineation of texts by gender continued to classify its readership.

Highlighting the unique and important place of Cormier's text in the repertoire of 1970s adolescent literature, prolific YA author Richard Peck argued in *American Libraries* that, "too many young adult novels only promise an outspoken revelation of the relevant. *The Chocolate War* delivers the goods" (Peck, 1974, p. 492). He stated that the uncompromising storyline would offend and shock many, but that its message was one of the most necessary for adolescents to hear. "Anyone looking for a pat triumph of the individual," he declared, "had better avert his eyes" (p. 492). In particular, it was the novel's respect for its young audience, more than any authorial genius, that most impressed Peck, the critic surmising: "The young will understand the outcome. They won't like it, but they'll understand" (p. 492).

Hearne and Peck were amongst the few reviewers to expose the more complex elements of the novel, not merely exploring its sobering portrayals of adolescence, but also its ability to enunciate the disconnection between young men and their cultural stories. In a sinister portrait of modern adolescence, Cormier's work leaves no doubt. *The Chocolate War* has as its *raison d'être* the destruction of the 'false' experience of literary adolescence and the disingenuous portraits of boyhood perpetuated in the classic *Bildungsroman*. As a result, *The Chocolate War* poses an uncomfortable question for teenage boys about their relationship with literature: if you cannot escape, cannot win and cannot be a hero within the pages of a novel, then where can you?

For the 1970s adolescent, the answer would increasingly be found on the screens that were beginning to populate American homes and in the dark of the public cinema, with an explosion in filmmaking across all manner of genres during the era - from schlock



horror and ribald comedy to cold war espionage and extra-terrestrial invasion.<sup>194</sup> This proliferation of visual meaning-making offered a myriad of portrayals of adolescence. Equally, a newly invigorated scopophilia facilitated by widespread access to television encouraged and allowed the viewer to take, as Mulvey describes it, “other people as objects,” subjecting them to controlling and curious scrutiny (Mulvey, 1989, p. 16).<sup>195</sup> Her argument, that the woman is so often the image on film and the man so often the bearer of the frame (Mulvey, 1989, p. 17), suffused 1970s cinema, its screens replete with themes of machismo, one-up-manship and psychological dominance presenting a neat and satisfying *fait accompli* for viewers.<sup>196</sup>

For adolescents of the era, the screen became a new and graphic mediator between the imagined and the real. Indeed, two of the most influential works to explore these notions in relation to spectatorship were published during the 1970s. Louis Althusser’s ‘Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation)’ (1971) created a new frame of reference to speak about the subject, its representations and the discourse of cinema, whilst Roland Barthes’ ‘S/Z’ (1970) defined the scope of textual analysis in film theory (Mayne, 1993, p. 14).<sup>197</sup> In amongst this space, literature was working, as it always had, on a different level – one that despite being drawn into the scopophilic arena, still required its audience to *participate* rather than merely *observe*. It continued to insist on the heavy lifting of metacognitive interpretation, demanding that the reader work on a cinematic image inside their mind, one in which they must overlay and interpolate their own human experience into an amalgam of truth within the fiction. It is here, I argue, that the YA and the cinema of the 1970s parted company, producing two almost antithetical visions of the adolescent male.

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<sup>194</sup> By 1960, almost 90 per cent of American homes had at least one television set, with almost 60 million sets across the country (Jordan, 1996, p. 798). The popularity of television burgeoned with the increasing variety of programmes produced during the 1970s. In cinema, a range of films that are now considered ground-breaking genre classics were produced, including *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), *The Exorcist* (1973), *Jaws* (1975), *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* (1975), *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975), *Star Wars* (1977), *Apocalypse Now* (1979) and *Alien* (1979).

<sup>195</sup> Freud defined this term as the pleasure derived from looking at nude bodies, a desire he argued grounded the human instinct of sexuality (Lacan, 1994, p. 194).

<sup>196</sup> Actors such as Clint Eastwood, Sylvester Stallone and Roger Moore as James Bond epitomised the sexually and physically dominant male figure on film during the 1970s, privileging the masculine and erotic gaze in works such as *Dirty Harry* (1971), *Rocky* (1976) and *The Spy Who Loved Me* (1977).

<sup>197</sup> Judith Mayne in *Cinema and Spectatorship* (1993) examines how the notion of spectatorship emerged as one of the major preoccupations of film theorists during the 1970s, particularly in relation to the study of psychoanalysis and semiotics (Mayne, 1993).

### 3.1. Dehumanising the Adolescent Subject

Discourse around any form of literature – in the case of *The Chocolate War*, psychological realism – is a condition of the production and value of the work itself. By necessity, any drift to alternative ways of storytelling is part of a requisite hybrid of historical repetition and innovation. Cormier's work hovers on the outskirts of this hegemonic pattern. As far as critics were concerned, he was an author of adult fiction whose novels had vanished from bookshelves 15 years earlier, the success of his 1960s *Now and At the Hour* a distant memory (Campbell, 2006). The timing and method of his re-entry into the literary scene was as bold and uncompromising as his protagonist's resolve for singularity and independence. Indeed, some 20 years after *The Chocolate War* was published, Cormier admitted that he had been somewhat taken aback by the fierce opposition to his work. Unaware of the historical protocols of YA, he had produced a novel that entirely disregarded its traditions and taboos in a genre dominated by safe stories with "role-model heroes walking off into the sunset of happy endings" (Cormier, 1997, p. xii).

In contrast to the YA that preceded it, including the ostensibly optimistic stories of *Catcher* and *The Outsiders*, Cormier's novel presents a depressing vision of the future. The body and mind of his teenage protagonist are subject to a credible degradation, humiliation and sublimation as the target of a student-led, teacher-endorsed campaign of bullying. For Jerry Renault – unlike Holden Caulfield or Ponyboy Curtis – there is no hope of a sanguine dénouement. If Salinger's novel offered a benign portrait of the adolescent psyche in "a serious critical mimesis of bourgeois life in the Eastern United States" (Ohmann & Ohmann, 1976, p. 35), Cormier's protagonist stands for something much darker and more socially and culturally divisive. In this sense, *The Chocolate War* defies both literary and historical tradition and signifies an uncomfortable and confronting break from the good and the right in writing for adolescents. The 'antics' that take place at Trinity are not mere schoolboy pranks, they are a violation of a sacred American myth – of the lone hero, guns blazing at high noon, bringing justice and retribution to the downtrodden and the helpless. Cormier's work stands in stark contrast to novels that depict adolescence through gentle deconstructions of privilege, cultural superiority, class injury and truncated human possibility, whose mild generic themes

leave readers with the hopeful prospect of the individual and the future, their protagonists continuing to exhibit some level of desire and anticipation by novel's end.

*The Chocolate War* obliterates that optimism. The philosophical naivety that drives Jerry's contrary psychological experiment – a refusal to sell the school's charity chocolates – eventually breaks him, revealing the contingent and fragile figure of the individual in the established structures of political power. As a reaction to his mother's recent death from cancer and a morally corrupt Catholic-school hierarchy that tacitly endorses institutional sublimation and bastardisation, Jerry asks himself, "Dare I disturb the universe?" – a question T. S. Eliot had posed in 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' (Cormier, 1974, p. 123). The 1917 work, which had confirmed Eliot's place in Modernist poetry, was the emotional interior monologue of a disheartened, middle-aged man crippled by frustration and disillusionment with the "impotence of the modern individual" (McCoy & Harlan, 1992, p. 265). Prufrock's lament – his physical, spiritual and intellectual inertia – became one of modern literature's most recognisable themes and is certainly evident as a literary catalyst in Cormier's anti-hero.<sup>198</sup> Indeed, when Jerry decides to unsettle the power base of the school's teaching and student body by refusing to fundraise, he unwittingly exhumes a deeply entrenched cultural paranoia about the might of the individual.

The potential for radical and unpredictable outcomes in the pursuit of individuality, or indeed alterity, proves to be an incendiary device in Cormier's work. The author deliberately agitates tradition by weaving through his stories the notion of control as a malevolent condition in the handing down of customs and practices. In this adolescent world, the repercussions of heritage and legacy annul any expressions of self, each attempt meeting with violent psychological and physical punishment. Jerry is already conspicuously unorthodox in this arena. Marked by being physically small and failing to impress at the school's football trials, Jerry's otherness is firmly established at the beginning of the novel. By means of introduction to 'tradition', Jerry meets Archie, self-appointed leader of The Vigils and ringmaster in Trinity's student-led regime of

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<sup>198</sup> See Sacvan Bercovitch's discussion on the influence of Eliot's Prufrock on Modernist poetry in *The Cambridge History of American Literature* (Bercovitch, 2003, p. 99).

institutional intimidation. Archie metes out Jerry's 'assignment' – one so cruel that it even bristles the sadistic sensibilities of the gang's second-in-command, Obie:

For crying out loud, Archie. You saw him out there. He's just a skinny kid trying to make the Freshman team. Coach'll grind him up like hamburger. And his mother's barely cold in the grave. What the hell you putting him on the list for?  
(Cormier, 1974, p. 15)

'The List' – a roster of brazen initiation tasks – articulates the expectation that enactment is an essential ritual of gender – a motif that defines and drives almost every interaction in *The Chocolate War*. This desire, however, is without exception a deleterious force in Cormier's work and reiterates the destructive element of experience in the rituals of establishing gender identity. Jerry not only dwells on the outskirts of this tradition – socially, emotionally and physically – but, more importantly, he represents a threat to it. In philosophical terms, Jerry's deviation from the practices of the adolescent male – a phase inherently bound up in corporeal enactments – makes him unnervingly alien amongst the wholesome simulations of his era.<sup>199</sup> Here, Jerry exists within a very specific temporal space that offers both empowerment and destruction. Yet, despite the revolutionary potential of his stand against institutionalised bullying, hierarchical sublimation and physical intimidation, he is neither able to learn nor benefit from his experiences. Instead, he is broken and incapacitated by them, thwarted at every turn by corrupted renditions of ritual and historical adherence.

The sense of grim inevitability that Cormier casts over the future and potential of the adolescent male continues even more vigorously in his later, darker works that include themes of espionage, terrorism and biological experimentation in *I am the Cheese* (1977), *After the First Death* (1979), *The Bumblebee Flies Anyway* (1983) and *Beyond the Chocolate War* (1985). However, it is the exposition of Jerry's predicament – one that any young male might perceive as similar to his own – that comes to define a new sub-genre of fiction for adolescent boys. Indeed, Nodelman in 'Robert Cormier Does a Number' (1983) argues that Cormier's self-styled realism catered to an already skewed literary tendency that privileged a "pleasingly paranoid" picture of the corrupt adult

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<sup>199</sup> The substantial influence of television programming aimed at teenage audiences during the 1970s privileged a boy-next-door masculinity in idols such as David Cassidy, Donny Osmond and Leif Garrett.

world (Nodelman, 1983, p. 101). Variouslly described as psychological terror or psychological realism, the flavour was familiar to older readers from William Golding's *The Lord of the Flies* (1954) and marked a distinct move away from the sentimental focus on fantasy and good-natured fun that had typified 1950s literature for the young.

Whether it was coincidence or not, Cormier's particular brand of grim pubescent drama appeared in tandem with a sharp downturn in adolescent leisure-time reading that began in the late 1970s and whose arc has continued ever since. As evidence, a broad-based qualitative research study conducted in the USA in 2014 found that reading amongst 17-year-olds dropped most significantly during the past 30 years. Boys were most likely to report that they 'hardly ever' read for pleasure and girls appeared to read more than boys, with 18 per cent of boys saying they read daily, compared to 30 per cent of girls (Common Sense Media, 2014).

My argument is that works such as *The Chocolate War* play an influential role in this shift, marking two distinct moments in YA that change both the course of the genre and the reading habits of its male audience. The first has already been explored – that Cormier and his ilk had modified the parameters for writing about adolescence, removing the archetypal 'happy ending' or even the potential for a happy ending that readers knew and cherished from childhood stories. Instead, *The Chocolate War*, along with the likes of *Go Ask Alice* (1971), *Watership Down* (1972), *Carrie* (1974), *Interview with a Vampire* (1976) and *Flowers in the Attic* (1979), replaced genial works of juvenile fiction with a morbid, demoralising and fatalistic vision of adults and adulthood.<sup>200</sup> The second and less obvious effect of Cormier's influence is that it illuminated what I have referred to as the inherently cannibalistic nature of YA – that is, the novel's writerly, readerly and printed form represented a conscious and identifiable disconnection from the cultural construction of masculine identity.

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<sup>200</sup> During the 1970s, graphic and confronting themes of drug addiction, prostitution, psychic control, environmental destruction and the supernatural introduce adolescent readers to a discomforting world of literature that has rapidly translated from adult titles. *Go Ask Alice* (1971) presents the diary of a teenage drug addict; *Watership Down* (1972) recreates *The Odyssey* in a story of environmental destruction; Stephen King's first novel, *Carrie* (1974), deals with an adolescent girl's supernatural powers; *Interview with a Vampire* (1976) was Anne Rice's debut novel of gothic horror; and *Flowers in the Attic* (1979) depicts a gothic tale of imprisonment and incest. See further discussion in Lisa Speer's 'Paperback Pornography: Mass Market Novels and Censorship in Post-War America' (2001)

The act of reading disabled what gender sociologist Michael Kimmel describes in 'Masculinity as Homophobia: Fear, Shame, and Silence in the Construction of Gender Identity' (2004) as a preoccupation with agentive masculinity in which the public arena, as a sphere of production, has been a defining factor in Western concepts of manhood. "Masculinity must be proved, and no sooner is it proved that it is again questioned and must be proved again – constant, relentless, unachievable" (Kimmel, 2004). Despite its exploratory and sometimes anarchic rhetoric and the physicality of its plot and dialogue, *The Chocolate War* represents historicity, it represents tradition, and in its femininity and stillness, it bows to the inertia of a history written by the victors.<sup>201</sup> For young adult males, Jerry represents this psychological and intentional conflict of adolescent masculinity – he is a fighter, a defender, a champion of good and right, yet he is crushed by the system, by the rituals and performances of tradition, trapped amongst the pages and imaginations of his presumably equally disillusioned readers.

In the closing pages of *The Chocolate War*, Cormier's protagonist delivers an internal monologue that verbalises so succinctly this contradictory remit of fictionalising adolescent masculinity in Western culture that it is worth examining in detail. Although somewhat didactic in tenor, its value lies in how it reflects the immense irony of the psycho-social construction of the contemporary juvenile male and his imagining in print. Indeed, in bodies and minds that are regulated and homogenised by institutions, Jerry and his fellow students are the incarnation of a young generation of males who are as much an admission as they are a rejection of their 'nature.'

The 'assignment' that Jerry had been allocated – not to sell charity chocolates for 10 days – he accepts. However, his refusal to peddle the chocolates *after* the assignment is over, defies the unspoken rules of the game in which a challenge to the 'alpha male' signals a challenge to social order itself. In rejecting the arbitrary and sublimating rituals of gender, Jerry marks himself as "a queer" (Cormier, 1974, p. 201), exposing the tension between the acting out of masculinity and its many and various realities. At the time, the more complex representations of Cormier's 'abnormal' narrator would have

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<sup>201</sup> It is useful here to consider Benjamin's notion of *jetztzeit* as a time so ripe with possibility that it detaches itself from the notion of history. Its potential, however, is contingent on the intervention of a revolutionary entity to break it free from a history written from the perspective of "the victors" (Buchanan, 2010). In this regard, Cormier presents both the possibility and impossibility of the individual within systems that are increasingly arbitrated with notions of civil order in mind.

been obscured by what Love describes as a post-war focus on deviance, rather than queerness, as a way of articulating socially aberrant behaviours (Love, 2015, p. 74). Cormier certainly complicates this metaphor, sublimating the linguistic in favour of the corporeal, which Sedgwick may suggest is an attempt to overcome the female condition in which the male is immobilised in the homosocial setting (Sedgwick, 1985, p. 57).

When Jerry's refusal culminates in a physical showdown – a boxing match that pits the individual against the mob – the reader understands that the 'war' has not been simply a quest for identity, but a repudiation of the status quo, of institutions, of educational structures, of religious hierarchy and the culturally manufactured notions of the masculine.

[Jerry] didn't want to fight. He didn't want to return to grammar school violence, the cherished honor of the school-yard that wasn't honor at all, the necessity of proving yourself by bloody noses and black eyes and broken teeth. Mainly, he didn't want to fight for the same reason he wasn't selling the chocolates – he wanted to make his own decisions, do his own thing, like they said. (Cormier, 1974, p. 201)

Jerry's dialogue redoubled the volume of a message that the protagonists of Golding, Salinger, Vonnegut and Phillip K. Dick had declared decades earlier. That was, in the mode, language and content of YA there was the emerging and traceable proliferation of independent thinking amongst the writing of adolescence. This development, I argue, is both beneficial and injurious to the maturing genre, with the shift in attention from the collective to 'the self' having the inadvertent consequence of allocating an unwarranted level of substance to opinion as a determining factor in the identity formation of young males.

Accordingly, it is useful to interpret this shift in social consciousness in relation to the concurrent maturation of the teenage subject and the existential framework of adolescence. Not discounting the influence of work by Robert James Havighurst in *Developmental Tasks and Education* (1943) or Jean Piaget's later work in *The Growth of Logical Thinking from Childhood to Adolescence* (1958), this chapter specifically employs Erikson's theories on 'belonging' to interrogate Cormier's textual assault on the teenage ego and adolescent identity. My argument is that Cormier's answers to

Erikson's questions of "who am I?" and "where do I fit in?" (Gross, 1987, p. 39) are so disturbingly pessimistic and so filled with resignation that they set a frightening new tone in stories of and for the young. For his readers, who had been raised on a solid diet of 1960s children's books in which good triumphed over evil and the hero always won out, *The Chocolate War* declares a savage re-grounding. This is an environment that requires men to be part of 'the team' whilst simultaneously relying on enactments that estranges men from each other.

Immediately after the death of his mother, Jerry seeks solace in his father's companionship – the one male figure who should have been able to offer familial comfort – but finds none. "His father was a stranger during those terrible days [...]" Even at the cemetery, they stood apart from each other, a huge distance between them even though they were side by side. But not touching" (Cormier, 1974, p. 58). The disassociation between father and son depicts not only how the cultural structures of masculinity divorce men from each other, but also how the artifice of its behaviours draws attention to the fictionality of gender performance itself. That is to say, Cormier's characters contribute to an understanding of the changing attitudes of teenage males towards fiction during the 1970s because they articulate the decoupling of boys from their 'nature' and the comforting themes of childhood, of happiness and redemption. The vista from Cormier's omniscient perspective is bleak, extinguishing all hope of joy or success. His protagonists are variously defeated – by the system, by their changing bodies and minds, by demoralising social failure or by a self that is out of step with binary performative gender – thus confirming in his readers' minds the treacherous distance between the reverie of childhood and the reality of looming adulthood.

Given this context, it is not so difficult to understand how the motivations and points of cognitive resistance in teenage boys' engagement with long-form fiction can be traced back to the distinct shift in generic themes that emerged during this period. In work that eventually spans three decades, Cormier's oeuvre with its focus on psychological warfare, corrupt institutions and corporeal domination, intersects with each one of the four elements Erikson describes as essential in the emotional development of adolescents. Exploring these elements in a way that utilises cognitive literary theory whilst acknowledging modes of adolescent identity-seeking, it is the shared reliance on adaptation, mutuality and psychosocial development that makes Erikson's structure so



appropriate. Where Freud concentrated on the ego as a porous interface between the self and the world, and Lacan proposed a concept of the *stade du miroir* as the space in which all cultural experiences take place (Holland, 1976, p. 230), this thesis exploits a combination of both those approaches in Erikson's interpersonal model of the mind. I do not intend to use his work in a reductive fashion, but instead a discretionary one that takes the malleable nature of the adolescent ego as a central theme and applies a selection of Erikson's theories to the notions of language and affect to explore the junctures at which adolescent males may have engaged with Cormier's fiction.<sup>202</sup> Accordingly, they are explored here in detail:

1. Where Erickson identifies physical appearance and ability as key factors in teenage identity formation, Cormier offers the weedy and physically incompetent Jerry, unable to prove himself behind the bike sheds or on the football pitch. At Trinity, nonchalance and machismo elevate the victors in a hierarchy of physical and psychological showmanship. During his first football try out, Jerry experiences the brutal nature of this 'natural selection', the omniscient narrator observing its savagery. "Suddenly he was caught from behind and whirled violently, a toy boat caught in a whirlpool. Landing on his knees, hugging the ball, he urged himself to ignore the pain that gripped his groin, knowing that it was important to betray no sign of distress." He remembers his friend Goober's advice: "Coach is testing you, testing, and he's looking for guts" (Cormier, 1974, p. 4).
2. Erikson also deems the search for sexual identity as essential to the developing adolescent psyche, and it is here that Cormier presents a novel entirely devoid of embodied female characters, removing any potential for social, emotional or sexual maturation. In the place of women – mothers, sisters or girlfriends – Cormier inserts the vengeful and barbarous religious brothers.<sup>203</sup> In this

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<sup>202</sup> Certainly there are psychoanalytical models that have historically been favoured for use as tools of literary interpretation, specifically those developed during the 1970s by Charles Rycroft in psychoanalytical symbolism, Heinz Kohut in narcissism and Roy Shafer in 'action language'. See further discussion in Norman Holland's 'Three Phases of Psychoanalysis' (Holland, 1976). However, Erikson's work offers a structure that allows a more expansive reading of YA texts that pays attention to the particular deliberations of adolescent identity formation.

<sup>203</sup> In the few references Jerry makes to his mother, he refers to the lack of her presence as an absence and emptiness that has left a "yawning cavity like a hole in his chest" (Cormier, 1974, p. 58).

juxtaposition, there is no subtlety, his story of budding masculine identity set inside the claustrophobic walls of an institution ruled by priests, by men who had suppressed their own carnal desires and channelled their physical and psychological attention towards hundreds of boys in the prime years of their sexual exploration and experimentation. Brother Leon, the vindictive Assistant Headmaster who takes charge of the school during the course of the novel, epitomises all that is unnatural in the repression of instincts and exclusion of women in the formation of male identity: “Leon was a special breed. On the surface, he was one of those pale, ingratiating kind of men who tiptoed through life on small, quick feet. He looked like a henpecked husband, a pushover, a sucker” (Cormier, 1974, p. 24). Here, Cormier’s deliberate depiction of the priest as the feminine alter ego falls back on the historically persistent motif of women as weak, devious and capricious: “But all this was deceptive. In the classroom, Leon was another person altogether. Smirking, sarcastic. His thin, high voice venomous” (p. 24). It is interesting to note that amongst the various forms of literary criticism dedicated to this novel, there is little enquiry into the queering of gender that Brother Leon and his cohort represent. The correlation between the novel’s sadistic form of ‘teaching’ and queer pedagogy even evades the attention of educators themselves. In *Teaching Young Adult Literature Today: Insights, Considerations, and Perspectives for the Classroom Teacher* (Hayn & Kaplan, 2012), the authors suggest that the best way to approach Cormier’s text is by examining the language that disrupts heteronormative assumptions, yet they make no mention of the position of the religious brothers in the delivery of that rhetoric. Certainly, there has been an acknowledgment that the work’s overt homophobic references allow an unveiling of closeted femininity – Jerry is repeatedly called a fag, a queer, a fairy, and accused of ‘living in the closet’ – yet the subject of celibacy and the denial of sexual desire amongst the priests appears not to have piqued the interest of critics to any extent. Instead, masculinity, or its aberrant forms, is perpetually couched in terms of their relationship to power and the subversion and perversion thereof. Trites for example, spends time examining the subject of aberrance in *The Chocolate War*, focussing on homosexuality rather than any anti-homosocial reading, stating that Archie and Brother Leon are made more menacing by their

implied homophobia. She argues that the reader is meant to despise these two males who are “so corrupt that they have reached a level of intense homoerotic debauchery” (Trites, 2000, pp. 37-38). However, her assessment leaves open for discussion an alternative reading of the fist fights and football games, the physical ‘education’ of the male body wrought in violations of the flesh, in the broken skin, the saliva and vomit of Cormier’s characters. Butler, for example, in *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (1993) argues that it is possible in these circumstances to take one of two directions: to either work the mobilising power of the injury or else relapse into the injurious state (Butler, 1993, p. 123). I argue that Cormier ensures that his characters succumb to their injuries by disallowing a literary resignification of their adolescent state – they have no voice, no recourse and no vindication. Equally, by casting the religious brothers under a homoerotic lens, the aperture is narrowed to an either/or proposition, delegating the reading of masculinity to a series of exclusionary and dualistic behaviours.

3. Where Erikson recognises the establishment of *religious and political orientation* as a key component of adolescent maturation, Cormier offers Trinity Catholic School, a venal and contaminated orbit in which absolute power corrupts absolutely.<sup>204</sup> In this setting, entitled boys etch out their perverted enactments of tradition through rogue priests and a blinkered hierarchy of religiosity that produces for Jerry a “picture that haunted his life” (Cormier, 1974, p. 49). The closing pages of *The Chocolate War*, in which the boys of Trinity become spectators to a gerrymandered boxing match between Jerry and Emile Janza, illustrate how both religion and institutional politics are artificial constructs erected to favour the privileged few:

That was the simple, stunning beauty of the raffle [where students dictated the blows that would be exchanged between boxers]. In one stroke, Archie had forced Renault to show up here, to become part of the chocolate sale, and he also placed Renault at the mercy of the school, the students. The

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<sup>204</sup> Ironically, the phrase “Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely” is attributed to the Catholic historian and politician, Lord Acton, written in a letter to Bishop Mandell Creighton in 1887 (Figgis & Laurence, 1907).

fighters on the platform would have no will of their own. They would have to fight the way the guys in the bleachers directed them. (Cormier, 1974, p. 230)

In this scene, the notion that social persuasion is imparted through the physicality of boxing not only conflates masculine identity with violence, but also with Erikson's first element in the psychological mapping of adolescence – that of physicality. The suppressed eroticism evident in the homosocial ritual of boxing – so often called the “sweet science of bruising” – is one that works so effectively in *The Chocolate War* as a device to illustrate the tension between heterosexual normativity and paranoid homophobia, yet has been relatively overlooked by critics.<sup>205</sup> Given the phenomenal success of Muhammed Ali and his sport during the 1970s, it is perhaps not surprising that Cormier's novel culminates in such an evocative cultural display, situating Jerry's plight in the wider social context of the spectacularised body. The image of the gladiatorial male is one that Boddy describes in *Boxing: A Cultural History* (2008) as deeply embedded in a practice that trades on courage and honour, ritual and spectatorship, yet also deals in the messy business of the violent and grotesque (Boddy, 2008, p. 8). One of the few YA theorists to broach the subject is Jan Susina, who claims that Cormier is fully aware of the homoerotic aspects of the boxing match, yet chooses to direct his critical attention to the more homosocial motifs of performer and observer in the shows of masculine violence (Susina, 1991).<sup>206</sup>

4. Lastly, Erikson names the synthesis of *experience with future expectation* as essential to the transition through adolescence. Here, I argue that Cormier is one of very few novelists who has painted such a desolate canvas for young male readers. The ideological portrayals of nurture, compassion, trust and obligation that he summarily dismantles throughout *The Chocolate War* serves as an ugly

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<sup>205</sup> Since the 1800s, boxing has been spoken of in poetic terms such as these, probably due to the language established in sports texts such as *Boxiana* (Egan, 1812-1824) and *The Sweet Science* (Liebling, 1956).

<sup>206</sup> According to Cormier's biographer, Patricia Campbell, the author devised a chapter that was never published in which Archie, unable to think of suitable revenge for Jerry's defiance, attempts to masturbate. His powerlessness makes him impotent, but once he conceives of the boxing match, he is able to achieve climax (Campbell, 1985, p. 41).

and unpalatable entrée into adult life. The institutions that have been charged with both dictating and upholding the tenets of humanity, of goodness, righteousness and edification, are the very ones that will destroy their own foundations. Jerry's experience has clearly demonstrated that the future holds no prospect if he continues to seek individuality over conformity or defiance over compliance. Lying bloodied in the ring after the boxing match, Jerry articulates his resignation:

He had to tell Goober to play ball, to play football, to run, to make the team, to sell the chocolates, to sell whatever they wanted you to sell, to do whatever they wanted you to do [...] It's a laugh, Goober, a fake. Don't disturb the universe, Goober, no matter what the posters say. (Cormier, 1974, p. 248)

Put simply, in seeking out answers to the existential question of 'Who am I?' Jerry finds (and offers his young male readers) no voice, no hope and no future. Like Holden and Ponyboy before him, Jerry's characterisation is a reaction to the social and political landscape that his author inhabits. However, where traditional works for young readers replicate a world in which the adult is the producer (author, giver) and the child is the consumer (reader, receiver), Cormier's work occupies a different space. In this respect, he is de-familiarising a structure that Rose describes in *The Case of Peter Pan: or The Impossibility of Children's Fiction* (1984) as the traditional framework for almost all fiction for the very young (Rose, 1984, p. 2). The return to lost innocence that Rose identifies as the genre's impetus, speaks of a literature written for the child-within-the-adult. Cormier's work is a refusal of this premise. Indeed, the characters that Cormier brings to life in *The Chocolate War* are a direct rebuttal of those conventional literary paradigms, being a highly politicised manifestation of liberal anarchism and the conservative New Right that was emerging in America at the time.<sup>207</sup> As a result, when the novel opens with Jerry's try-out for the school football team – his resentful attempt to join the 'collective' – there is no delicacy in its contemptuous narrative, no doubt aiming to leave its young male readers with the message that the fraught and

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<sup>207</sup> The New Right to which Cormier reacts was a re-emergence of a populist movement that focussed on social issues and the American state, with strong links to the Religious Right. Its policy arm brought Ronald Reagan to power in 1980 on a platform of conservative nationalism (Arin, 2013).

unrewarding pursuit of adulthood would soon be theirs to face. “What he said aloud was, “I’m alright, coach,” because he was a coward about stuff like that, thinking one thing and saying another [...] he had been Peter a thousand times and a thousand cocks had crowed in his lifetime” (Cormier, 1974, p. 5).<sup>208</sup> These biblical references to devotion, betrayal and honour amongst men articulate Jerry’s public and ignominious failure on the field and his ensuing determination to ‘disturb the universe’ – an event that results in a physical and psychological demolition from which he will never recover.

### 3.2. Sublimation and Abjection in Adolescent Fictions

It is this breaching of the inviolable innocence of childhood and its narratives, in themes of injustice and moral decay, where Cormier’s work stands out. In the rather unlikable and ineffectual anti-hero of Jerry Renault, Cormier constructs an uncomfortable literary personification for America’s young readers. Jerry does not fulfil any of the fantastical obligations associated with juvenile literature of old. In fact, he represents something hitherto unseen in fiction for adolescents: the abject – something to be both despised and feared. Subjectively, he is a miserable and wretched figure – an easy target for channelling the inadequacies of his tormenters. Cormier’s chief antagonist in this respect cannot pinpoint the precise nature of the delight he gains from inflicting misery on Jerry; he simply understands that it is pleasurable and satisfying. “Archie was always puzzled about whatever there was inside of him that enjoyed these performances – toying with kids, leading them on, humiliating them” (Cormier, 1974, p. 31). In this respect, Jerry’s powerlessness makes him an object of pity. Yet it also makes him contemptible – despised not only by the Vigils for breaking their code of compliance, but also by Brother Leon, who is affronted by Jerry’s disregard for ‘the system’. Accordingly, Jerry’s abjection becomes an unpredictable and bilateral threat – he is to be feared, but also eliminated. In the final days of the school’s chocolate fundraiser,

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<sup>208</sup> This allusion refers to Jerry’s comparison of himself to the Apostle Peter and his betrayal of Jesus. In the biblical account, to save himself, Peter denies knowing Jesus when questioned. After his third denial, a cock crows, and Peter weeps bitterly at his failing.

Brother Leon asks one of the students, Brian Cochran, to read out the total numbers sold by each boy.

He looked at the last name on the list.

“Renault...zero.”

The pause. No names left.

“Renault...zero,” Brother Leon said, his voice a sibilant whisper. “Can you imagine that Cochran? A Trinity boy who has refused to sell the chocolates? Do you know what’s happened, Cochran? Do you know why the sales have fallen off?”

“I don’t know, Brother Leon,” Brian said lamely.

“The boys have become infected Cochran. Infected by a disease we could call apathy. A terrible disease. Difficult to cure.”

What was he talking about?

“Before a cure can be found, the cause must be discovered. But in this case, Cochran, the cause is known. The carrier of the disease is known. (Cormier, 1974, pp. 146-147)

The disease is, of course, individualism and its incumbent bedfellows: inquiry, doubt, insubordination and the temerity to challenge authority. It is defiance, rebellion and dispute. It is everything that the adolescent male has historically been taught is at their disposal in negotiating their way to adulthood, yet is so often denied them. In *The Chocolate War*, Jerry’s desire to seek out independence and autonomy through experiences not dictated by the state, the church or institutions, produced both an abject hero and a persona that would intrigue, frighten and alienate his adolescent male readers in equal measure. Jerry was not a character that readers can love – but his story is. Indeed, Cormier’s novel paints a scenario that draws on all the insecurities of adolescent identity formation and confirms their veracity. When Jerry states his intention to challenge institutional hierarchies, the language is one that his audience understand: it is physical, visceral and instinctive. Cormier’s transparent metaphors make this connection between the male and the nature of physical consequence clear. “No. I’m not going to sell the chocolates.” Jerry declares. “Cities fell. Earth opened. Planets tilted. Stars plummeted. And the awful silence” (Cormier, 1974, p. 112). What Jerry confirms

for his readers is that ‘disturbing the universe’ can and most probably will be the most incapacitating and invalidating experience of their young lives.

Some reviewers of the 1970s were able to see past this dismal message, focussing on the value of failure in the pursuit of independence as a positive message. These critics spoke specifically of the psychological tenacity the novel might provide its readers and the merit of allowing adolescents to see that they were not alone in their struggles.

Donelson and Nilsen remarked that the work had been variously described amongst their peers as an example of the best modern realism for young adults (Donelson & Nilsen, 1980) and by others as “Watergate at the high school level” (Nilsen, 1975).<sup>209</sup>

Writing in *The English Journal*, educator Robert C. Small Jnr noted that the ‘art of the novel’ shone through in a work such as *The Chocolate War*, it being redolent of adult classic literature. Praising Cormier’s technique, Small argued that the text mirrored the “perfect working model of the more involved and more subtle plots of Conrad and Hardy” (Small, 1977, p. 57).

Some critics also felt particularly buoyed by the mainstream adoption of Cormier’s realist works into the American teaching syllabus, despite being pessimistic about the possibility of them ever being accepted as worthy in a scholarly sense. Educator G. Robert Carlsen bemoaned the fact that during the 1970s there was an inordinate number of individuals involved in children’s reading who were congratulating themselves on the tastes of young people when few adolescent were actually seeking out the books being written and set by the predictable tranche of “status authors” who remained aloof and remote from their readers (Carlson, 1976, p. 15).<sup>210</sup>

However, many critics who addressed Cormier’s work saw little educative potential in its tale of woe. Children’s literature critic Anne McCleod described the novel as sending a “sour no-win message,” adding that the “frank statements about the dead ends in human life may startle or offend some readers” (MacCleod, 1976, p. 96). Other critics

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<sup>209</sup> An unverified attribution from the 1975 National Council of the Teachers of English Convention (USA) reports that speakers referred to *The Chocolate War* in these political terms.

<sup>210</sup> Carlsen qualified this statement in ‘International Perspective: Books and the Teen-Age Reader in England’ (1976) by saying that a number of English scholars had interpreted the entire genre through the relative success of the novel *The Owl Service* (1967), which sold 90,000 copies. One cynical scholar pointed out that during the same period, *Skinhead* magazine had sold 250,000 copies. He suggested that probably most of the copies of *The Owl Service* had been purchased by adults and *Skinhead* by teen-agers themselves (Carlson, 1976, p. 16).



were concerned that *The Chocolate War* was part of a new trend towards relentlessly germane stories on drugs, divorce and alcoholism that was permeating the YA landscape, in tales that lacked any hope or worthwhile role models.<sup>211</sup> The anonymously authored *Go Ask Alice*, published in 1971, was possibly the most confronting and contested work of this type.<sup>212</sup> Its depressing teenage narrative spoke of the liberties and liabilities that second wave feminism had afforded women of the 1970s.<sup>213</sup> In many ways, the text mirrored the struggles of all adolescents in a conflicted social space that continued to expect acquiescence to the twee 1950s formula of the submissive female and the dominant male perpetuated in popular media.<sup>214</sup>

It is the deft exposition and utilisation of chaos within these parameters that mark Cormier's cheerless and fatalistic figures as part of a wider movement in literature that would come to be known as New Realism.<sup>215</sup> This trend in juvenile fiction to depict the gritty, messy and often depressing matters of adolescence discarded what poet Walter de la Mare had grandly declared as the purpose of children's writing: to free the fancy, delight the inward eye and charm the tongue and ear (Rinsky & Schweikert, 1977).

Cormier consciously removes any essence of this cloying historical nostalgia and replaces it with the joyless and conflicted spectre of the broken boy – a literary equivalent of the returned soldier in the American psyche. The author is weaving his own story of a generation of young men who make their way back home from the war in Vietnam, psychologically and mortally wounded, only to be isolated and vilified for

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<sup>211</sup> In 'Readers, Realism, and Robert Cormier' (1980) Sylvia Iskander details the history of resistance to Cormier's work in the education setting, focussing on critics who argued that *The Chocolate War* contains "no adults worth emulating" and that it "presents a frightening universe" (Iskander, 1987, p. 8).

<sup>212</sup> Presented as the real-life diary of a 15-year-old girl who develops a drug habit, leaves home and eventually dies of an overdose, the novel shocked librarians, parent groups and educators worldwide. It was later attributed to therapist and author, Beatrice Sparks (Yagoda, 2009, p. 158). *Go Ask Alice* has featured on the ALA's '100 Most Challenged Books' list since publication.

<sup>213</sup> Betty Friedan's 1962 book, *The Feminine Mystique*, is credited with sparking second wave feminism. Amongst its pages were declarations of frustration from a generation of college-educated women who felt trapped and unfulfilled: "I have no personality. I'm a server of food and a putter-on of pants and a bedmaker, someone who can be called on when you want something. But who am I?" (Friedan, 1962).

<sup>214</sup> For women, the most significant shift was in body politics with the arrival of the contraceptive pill. Simple, cheap and effective, the pill allowed women to control their own bodies and facilitated an autonomy that was not so easily articulated by their male counterparts. Meanwhile, *Seventeen* magazine, launched in 1944 and described as central to the American girl's understanding of adolescence, published articles on beauty, fashion and boyfriends. See further discussion in 'A Feminist Theoretical Perspective on the Socialization of Teenage Girls through *Seventeen* Magazine' (Peirce, 1990).

<sup>215</sup> Prior to the 1970s, novels for teenagers tended to focus on domestic or friendship issues under the rubric of 'social realism' where, despite adults or parents being part of the problem, they would also be part of the solution. This model changed in the 1970s with a move towards hard-hitting New Realism.

their part in a politically loaded and socially unpopular conflict on the Indochinese population. This was a war in which soldiers were compelled to take part in a brutal and disturbing tour of duty where they were under fire 24 hours a day.<sup>216</sup> Soldiers were often forced to kill women and children in order to hit their Vietcong targets, leading to an unprecedented number suffering permanent psychological damage and resorting to the habitual use of marijuana and heroin (Dean, 1992, p. 59). For the civilians back home, the difference between this war and any previous conflict was that the apocalyptic enactments of instrumental violence were being played out on their television screens on a daily basis.

Ironically, Cormier, who was born in 1942, never fought in the war due to his myopia, instead working in a comb factory whilst his friends left for active service (Thomson, 2003, p. 28). He later became a reporter and columnist for his local newspaper, and after shifting to novel-writing, rarely strayed from the town where he was born. Despite this, Cormier's dialogue left critics and readers in no doubt as to his sentiments on the futility of America's engagement in Vietnam. Jerry, Archie, Brother Leon, the Goober and their ilk represents a seemingly authentic mimesis of the compromised and brutalised male, haunted by the enduring threat of corporeal attack that had become an intrinsic part of the masculine psyche. These issues clearly trouble Cormier, who begins Jerry's story in block capitals:

THEY MURDERED HIM.

As he turned to take the ball, a dam burst against the side of his head and a hand grenade shattered his stomach. Engulfed by nausea, he pitched toward the grass. His mouth encountered gravel, and he spat frantically, afraid that some of his teeth had been knocked out. Rising to his feet, he saw the field through drifting gauze but held on until everything settled into place, like a lens focusing, making the world sharp again, with edges. (Cormier, 1974, p. 1)

In Jerry's world, the ball is the enemy, the pitch is his battlefield and football is the currency. Disregarding Cormier's laboured metaphors, the distance between the expectations and the capabilities of the young male body in this environment are

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<sup>216</sup> It was American government policy to limit tours to one year in duration due to the intense physical and psychological nature of the warfare. This resulted in combat groups who lacked cohesion and suffered from low morale (Dean, 1992).

sickeningly apparent. In this passage, and an inordinate number of scenes throughout the novel, the connection between corporeal violence and the repression of the adolescent male body – especially in relation to the sublimation of sexual frustration – is forever present.<sup>217</sup> However, in a deliberate deconstruction – some might even say a postmodernist twist – Cormier deploys these traditional and archetypal representations of cultural masculinity not to prove his protagonist's worth, but to thwart it. Jerry's dichotomous quest – both desiring and resenting the human compulsion to 'fit in' poses itself when the football coach asks him: "What the hell you want to play football for?" (Cormier, 1974, p. 6).<sup>218</sup> The fact that the answer eludes Jerry for the entire novel leads readers to the necessary conclusion that the one-sided relationship between teenagers and 'the system' is something to be survived, not won.

The recognition that formulaic enactments of male gender tends to fester and necrotise in these environments provides Cormier's work with a now-renowned sense of menace. An interaction between Brother Leon and a pupil named David Caroni succinctly illustrates the corrupting and corruptible influence of the institutions that so often rely on the apparatus of history to shape and condition their young. Caroni asks himself, "Were teachers like everyone else, then? [...] Were teachers as corrupt as the villains you read about in books or saw in movies and television?" (Cormier, 1974, p. 107). The answer comes decisively in an interaction where Brother Leon suggests that he might be able to re-mark Caroni's failed exam paper if the boy's chocolate sales improve.

"On the other hand, Caroni, perhaps the *F* will stand," Brother Leon said. "It depends."

"I see, Brother Leon," Caroni said.

And he did see – that life was rotten, that there were no heroes, really, and that you couldn't trust anybody, not even yourself. (Cormier, 1974, p. 109)

In this and every other interaction between the individual and the system in *The Chocolate War*, the themes of fear, control and ignorance cast the die for the

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<sup>217</sup> Throughout *The Chocolate War*, multiple scenes and dialogue exchanges refer explicitly or obliquely to either 'screwing' or masturbation.

<sup>218</sup> Salinger had employed the same motif decades earlier in *Catcher*, Holden recalling how ambivalence towards football isolated him from his peers. "I was standing way the hell up on top of Thomsen Hill [...] You could see the whole field from there, and you could see the two teams bashing each other all over the place [...] practically the whole school except me was there (Salinger, 1951, pp. 4-5).

melancholy articulations of masculine adolescence. For if the novel is to be understood as a work of New Realism, then it is fair to assume that the mature and intelligent YA reader expects to find their own prospects mirrored in Cormier's characters.<sup>219</sup> How disheartening then, to see in the looking glass a series of disappointments and setbacks, where not so long ago in the tales of childhood, literature had ignited their passions and fed their curiosities in stories of hope and joy.<sup>220</sup>

Refusing to employ the unspoken authorial obligation of children's literature to restore moral order, Cormier presents a reimagined figure that shatters a powerful American stereotype. Jerry is a non-conformist who fails to enjoy even "a qualified victory" (Iskander, 1987). It is in this formulation that Cormier performs what would be his most audacious departure from depictions of male adolescence in fiction. For what Jerry and his story present is a transgression that challenges readers' fundamental understanding of the relationship between literature and the more diffuse and nebulous 'texts' of social and cultural reality – that is to say, the 'realities' generated by public discourse and opinion.<sup>221</sup> Cormier's portrait is disturbing in this respect because its verisimilitude portrays an image so dark and nihilistic that many young readers would barely recognise themselves as part of its world.

Cormier's inclination to alarm the reader with motifs of corporeal and psychological violence arises not only from the bellicose nature of the American state, but from the terrorist attacks, hijackings and political scandals that mark the era, all of which are contributing to a protectionist rhetoric that is absent from literature for the young. The author seeks not only to reveal these stories, but also to tease out the motivations behind what he perceives as the often-immoral behaviour behind them. "I'm very much interested in intimidation [and] the way people manipulate other people," Cormier

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<sup>219</sup> New Realism focused on darker issues that required young readers to make inferences and judgements that had previously not been a feature of fiction for young readers.

<sup>220</sup> In some ways, Cormier may have felt responsible for disseminating such a desolate picture of adolescence. Well into the 1980s, he continued to accept telephone calls from young readers who felt isolated or depressed after reading his novels. They had discovered that the telephone number Cormier published in his novel *I Am the Cheese* (1977) – a story about an adolescent boy's search for his parents – was in fact Cormier's own number (Honan, 2000).

<sup>221</sup> Literary theorist Jonathan Culler, using Tzvetan Todorov's theories on *vraisemblance*, describes realism in *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics, and the Study of Literature* as being shaped by five distinct 'texts' that help us make sense of the world (Culler, 1975). In simple terms, they are social, cultural, literary or artificial texts, our reaction to those texts, and the complex relationship of intertextuality in which one text uses another as a point of reference.

remarked in an interview with the *School Library Journal* (Sutton, 1991). Jerry Renault is the product of this compulsion. His refusal to sell chocolates for the school fundraiser makes him an enigma – both a reaction to and a result of a vicious and prolonged campaign of the emotional and physical intimidation that Cormier sees reflected in the behaviours of wider society.

The genre fiction that flourished during this period offered young male readers equally cold comfort. Realistic horror proliferated from the early 1970s along with crime and spy fiction, which established themselves as mainstays in paperback publishing.<sup>222</sup> Concurrently, there was an existential shift away from the folk-oriented messages of peace and communal activism that had typified the 1960s towards an anti-establishment libertarianism and its anarchic declarations of unrest in artistic forms such as hard rock and punk music.<sup>223</sup> Essentially, these waves of change announced a youth-led rebellion against the myth of adult experience – against a devaluing of the years to come and the presupposing of outcomes that hindered optimism. Unlike earlier YA such as *Catcher*, in which the protagonist had sought hope for the future, Cormier's work is a refusal of that allegory. Two powerful passages from the novel confirm his aim. The first is a realisation by Archie, the brutal assigner, that the wisdom and surety of adulthood are grand illusions.

Archie became absolutely still, afraid that the rapid beating of his heart might betray his sudden knowledge, the proof of what he'd always suspected, not only of Brother Leon but most grownups, most adults: they were vulnerable, running scared, open to invasion. (Cormier, 1974, p. 23)

By the novel's end, Cormier's readers are left with no doubt as to the inauthenticity of any person claiming to have successfully negotiated the path to adulthood. The very deliberate use of a third-person omniscient narrator highlights Cormier's resolve in this undertaking, affording him the authorial advantage of both exploring the internal machinations of the teenage mind whilst sparring with the equally incapable enactments

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<sup>222</sup> *The Exorcist* by William P. Blatty was published in 1971, whilst struggling substitute teacher Stephen King released his first novel, *Carrie*, in 1974. Frederick Forsyth's *The Day of the Jackal* (1971), *The Odessa File* (1972), *The Dogs of War* (1974) and *The Devil's Alternative* (1979) along with John le Carré's *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* (1974) all appeared in the 1970s.

<sup>223</sup> Bands such as The Sex Pistols and The Clash burst onto the English music scene, whilst artists such as Patti Smith and The Ramones defined American hard rock culture, each marking a reaction to the erstwhile sentimentality of music from the 1960s.

of adulthood. The significant irony of this technique is, of course, that it removes the voice from the teenager and puts it back in the hands of the adult author. Yet, unlike works such as *Catcher* and *The Outsiders* – both narrated in the first person by their teenage protagonist – *The Chocolate War* gains its ‘authenticity’ by affecting a realistic simulacrum rather than a fetishising of the adolescent.<sup>224</sup>

What Cormier’s work does is to reveal the mistake of perceiving history and the experience of the past as inalienable ‘truths’ that are unaffected by the present. Whether or not it is Cormier’s intention to dislodge this formal philosophical notion of temporality – one that Benjamin has described as contingent on the destruction and reconstitution of tradition – is debatable.<sup>225</sup> However, what appears clear is that Cormier’s vision, and Jerry’s ill-fated odyssey, speaks of the merit, if not always the success, in seeking out the false in historical and institutional systems of knowledge. This enterprise is evident in a passage about the importance of disappointment, one that laid bare for readers the futility of seeking role models and heroes in historical myths of the past. In the novel’s climactic finale, Jerry lands a devastating blow on his opponent that makes him feel profoundly hollow.

A new sickness invaded Jerry, the sickness of knowing what he had become, another animal, another beast, another violent person in a violent world, inflicting damage, not disturbing the universe but damaging it. (Cormier, 1974, p. 242)

In that moment, Cormier’s audience comes to understand that the fabled lone hero of American folklore is a sham. It is of course Cormier’s intention to betray this historical formulation – a deliberate ploy that YA critic Patricia Campbell claims is meant to solicit an interaction from readers in which they would cry: “No! This is all wrong!” (Campbell, 2006, p. 63). For the teenage boys who will read *The Chocolate War* in the decades to come, both by choice and as a prescribed text, they will not discover within its pages Benjamin’s *jetztzeit* – a time ripe with revolutionary potential. Instead, they will experience an overwhelming sense of the inevitable and implacable might of ‘the

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<sup>224</sup> Critic Joanne Faulkner argues in *The Importance of Being Innocent: Why We Worry about Children* (2011) that the literary mediation of children as ‘innocents’ produces a by-product that employs the juvenile as a proxy to expound wider societal ills (Faulkner, 2011).

<sup>225</sup> Benjamin regarded the present as a complex act of temporalisation that was persistently under threat of being pinpointed to a specific notion of time dictated by clocks and chronology (Benjamin & Osborne, 1994, p. xii) See further discussion in ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’ (Benjamin, 1940, p. 257)

system' – of its reach, its gaze and its suffocating historicity. Indeed, Cormier himself in an interview a decade after the work's publication remarked that his depictions of Trinity, despite being a fiction, were a realistic approximation of the manipulations and agonies his readers would encounter in their adult lives (Rosenberg, 1985).<sup>226</sup> Yet it is in this single statement that Cormier confirms for his readers the contradictory nature of the literary artefact: that the fantasy and scope of fiction is in itself a fiction.

An insightful young reader, in a type of postmodernist epiphany, may have identified a correlation between the plots of subterfuge in Cormier's text and the deceptive nature of fiction itself. For in foregrounding deceitful and capricious characters such as Brother Leon, the manipulative power of fiction becomes clear and, according to children's literature critic Patricia Head, asks the sophisticated reader to question *any* authoritative narrative voice (Head, 1996, p. 29). Claims by critics and even the author himself that *The Chocolate War* presents real life or a new realism are problematic because they require the reader to overlook the fact that the work's fictionality cancels out its own authenticity. Of course, all readers of fiction must rationalise this issue in their own minds. However, its significant role in diluting messages around literature's legitimacy in contemporary identity formation for teenage boys cannot be overlooked.

### 3.3. Morality and Manipulation in a World without Women

If it is established then, that fiction represents inherent existential difficulties in the minds of adolescent readers, Cormier cements its contraposition in the exiling of one essential element from his novel. For all the critical proselytising and myriad essays, journal articles, chapters and books that discuss the intricacies of *The Chocolate War*, and amongst debates about the work's themes and characterisations, plot developments and authenticity, there seems little attention paid to the fact that the entire story takes place without the meaningful appearance of a single female character. Some are mentioned peripherally – dead mothers, domestic help, soft porn models and girls at bus stops – but at no point do any of the male characters engage constructively with a

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<sup>226</sup> Responding to an article in *Booklist* that claimed *The Chocolate War* was too violent and had a downbeat ending, Cormier remarked in *Newsweek*, "As long as what I write is true and believable, why should I have to create happy endings? My books are an antidote to the TV view of life." (Drew, 1997).

female. In fact, the scarce few girls and women referred to within the text are merely objectified – destined for either household chores or fantasies of sexual gratification.

Perhaps the most intriguing and noteworthy element of this absence of the feminine in the experience of growing up male in *The Chocolate War* is that it has been remarked upon by so few. Indeed, opinion surrounding the work was generally couched not in terms of *whether* it was realistic, but *how* realistic it was. Some years after the novel's publication a critical eye was cast on the implications of this unnatural scenario for its audience, however the analyses were driven by heavy-handed ideological objectives. In a withering assessment entitled 'The Absence of Moral Agency,' children's educator Carol Anita Tarr argues that Cormier forces his readers into a misogynistic tunnel vision that "disallows any counterview to the moral vacuousness of the characters" (Tarr, 2002, p. 97). Stating that its anti-female rhetoric is one that should be of concern to all readers, she perseverates on the use of the word "screw" throughout *The Chocolate War*. The term is clearly a euphemism for sexual intercourse and she protests its ubiquitous use in repeated allusions to loose and tight, screwed and unscrewed, order and chaos. This, according to Tarr, presents a postmodern difficulty for readers in that it gives no guidance as to the best choice in a frame of binary opposition, Cormier privileging neither side, leaving his audience in a moral no-man's land.

It is certainly not difficult to find textual examples of this contention. Whenever females are mentioned in *The Chocolate War*, regardless of whether they have been portrayed as good or bad, the result is the same: women are objects and invariably a source of guilt. As Jerry lies crumpled on the field after a particularly brutal football tackle, he contemplates the visceral nature of the attack, his thoughts turning to his mother.

The bleep [of pain] grew larger, localized now between his ribs on the right side. He thought of his mother and how drugged she was at the end, not recognizing anyone, neither Jerry nor his father. The exhilaration of the moment vanished and he sought it in vain, like seeking ecstasy's memory an instant after jacking off and encountering only shame and guilt. (Cormier, 1974, p. 7)



The allusion is clearly oedipal, for which Cormier feels no need to excuse or elaborate, choosing merely to present these adolescent queries to his readers rather than explore or explain their complex origins or destinations.<sup>227</sup>

However, what *is* perhaps Cormier's obligation if he truly intends to paint 'real' life is to allow the female voice to be heard in a legitimate way in the narrative of adolescent masculinity – a voice that by 1974 had been well established in public discourse by strident feminist ideologues such as Gloria Steinman and Kate Millett.<sup>228</sup> Instead, Cormier's denial seems almost antiquated, his proscribing the critical presence of women or girls in the writing of the so-called 'real' serving to invalidate their worth – reducing them to objects of carnal or utilitarian purpose. Cormier's construction withholds companionship, nurture, love and intimacy as part of the human condition and, I suggest, changes the relationship between literature and his young male readers by denying them both the fantastical possibility of fiction and the comforting surety of the real. His authorial realism, in which no female voice exists, breaks the historical connection between reading and the feminine by exposing the abyss between the experience of male adolescence and its literary representation.

For there not to be a single female character of note in a narrative of budding masculinity – a story of physical capability and culpability, psychological maturation and manipulation, political power, cultural institutions and the systems of social production – is to say something significant about the invisibility of women in these processes. Whether Cormier is telling his readers that the influence of women is auxiliary, rather than essential, to the struggles of adulthood is unclear. Perhaps his motivation is to warn rather than to instruct. Nevertheless, his work paints the female as a persistent source of guilt, doubt, torment and indifference. Little extrapolation would have been necessary on the part of Cormier's young readers to understand this message

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<sup>227</sup> Reference to Jerry's rib predictably draws the reader into analogies of the creation myth and the bodily connection between mother and son.

<sup>228</sup> An article by Gloria Steinman in *New York Magazine* in 1969 entitled 'After Black Power, Women's Liberation' brought worldwide attention to the women's movement, which had gained significant momentum by the mid-1970s. *Sexual Politics* (1969) by Kate Millett was the first mainstream publication to outline coherently the aims of the women's movement in America. In a 1970 *Time* article, George Stade, professor of English at Columbia University and Millett's PhD supervisor, remarked that, "[R]eading the book is like sitting with your testicles in a nutcracker" (Anon, 1970).

in his unsubtle abutment of feminine/interiority/inaction against masculine/exteriority/action.<sup>229</sup>

When female characters ‘appear’ in Cormier’s novel, they adopt personas that are hollowed out. Jerry’s mother – who is never given a name but described as loving her home and always having a project underway, “wallpapering, painting, refinishing furniture” (Cormier, 1974, p. 56) – is a source of depression and guilt for both he and his father.

When his mother finally died, suddenly at three-thirty in the afternoon, slipping off quietly without a murmur, Jerry was overcome with rage [...] He wanted to bellow at the world, cry out against her death, topple buildings, split the earth open, tear down trees. And he did nothing except lie awake in the dark, thinking of her body there in the funeral home, not her anymore, but a *thing* suddenly, cold and pale. (Cormier, 1974, p. 57)

Jerry is emasculated by his grief, unable to enact the male rituals of physical anger after the loss of the only significant female in his life. Instead of memorialising his mother, he chooses to dehumanise her by using inanimate terms – in his mind, she is now “a *thing*” (Cormier, 1974, p. 57). His father, too, is weakened and mechanised by the event, “a stranger during those terrible days.” After a fleeting moment of shared sorrow beside the grave, the narrator reminds us, “[t]hat was the last moment of intimacy he and his father had shared” (p. 58).

It is of course possible that Cormier intends to illustrate the instinctive need for the feminine voice as a way to connect men to each other. In terms of Jerry’s mother as a thematic influence, her pall certainly hangs over the novel in the timeline of grief and growing depression that cripples both father and son. Yet, aside from scattered mentions, Cormier’s references to her and the other sparsely positioned females in the novel suggest otherwise. What does become clear is that despite many of the characters craving interaction with the feminine, when they do encounter it, the effect is invariably

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<sup>229</sup> Cormier’s work relies on the legacy of the Ancient Greek model of the masculine, evident in the apportioning of anxiety, fear and deferential behaviour onto the literary body of the female or a diminished representation of the male. This Homeric style privileges the ‘spectacle’ of the masculine body in Western literature (Brivic, 2008, p. 63).

fraudulent and pernicious and one that presents the female as a deceptive object – a fiction.

One of the most obvious examples of this articulation are the chocolates themselves – 20,000 boxes of sickly sweetness left unsold for a particularly pertinent cause. Brother Leon tells the boys, “Actually, these are Mother’s Day chocolates [...] I was able to pick them up at a bargain price. Beautiful boxes, gift boxes, and in perfect condition [...] All we have to do is remove the purple ribbons that say *Mother* and we’re in business” (Cormier, 1974, p. 23). By stripping the chocolates of their superficial shows of beauty and re-badging them for profit, their original incarnation – one that proved both unpopular and unrewarding – is expunged along with the value of the significant women in the lives of the boys who will sell them.

In another example, feminine sexuality is unceremoniously revealed as a façade, with potential girlfriend Ellen Barrett quickly dissolving as a foil for Jerry’s erotic fantasy. After finding her name in the telephone book, Jerry makes an unsolicited call. “[T]he voice was fresh and appealing, the kind of voice that went with all that beauty he had seen at the bus stop.” After a few clumsy attempts at explaining his identity, Jerry discovers the image and the reality are antithetical. “Are you some kind of pervert?” she asks. “No, I’m the fellow at the bus stop,” he says. “Are you sure this isn’t Danny? Are you trying to put me on, Danny? Look, Danny, I’m getting tired of you and your crap” (Cormier, 1974, p. 166). The expletive offends Jerry. He hangs up the phone. “He didn’t want to hear anymore. The word “crap,” echoing now in his mind, had destroyed all illusion about her. Like meeting a lovely girl and having her smile reveal rotten teeth” (p. 167). Here, the void between perception and practice reveals itself, fictionalised desire in the place where physical and visceral experience should stand.

Mrs Hunter, the Renault’s housekeeper equally represents the silenced female – a tired stereotype of domestic servitude that would have jarred against the emancipating feminism that had come to dominate the 1970s. Mrs Hunter’s voiceless presence replaces the voiceless presence of Jerry’s deceased mother. Textually, the most significant observation that readers may make about these characterisations is that, despite a number of references to their ‘work’, they never actually appear. Their ubiquity is required and expected, but never imbued with a value or the occupation of a

space. Therefore, although they carry little weight as characters, the relational *practice* of gender that these women represent is of paramount importance.<sup>230</sup> It is therefore remarkable that in such a challenging and supposedly ground-breaking work of new realism – one that Cormier claims is an antidote to the TV view of life and ‘phony’ realism – that the female is doubly violated.<sup>231</sup>

Equally, Cormier offers no prospect of any physical pleasure in interactions with women, each rendition presenting a troublesome composite of desire and derision. The character of Paul Consalvo (aka Tubs Casper), despite an overwhelming desire to have sex with his girlfriend Rita, is nauseated by the inevitable result of such an act. When he knocks at the door of a local house to sell chocolates, having prepared “his most innocent and sweetest smile for whoever opened the door,” he is met by a dishevelled woman with a number of nappy-wearing children tugging at her skirt. His nose wrinkles at “the smell of pee” and the woman laughs at his ridiculous sales pitch. The scenario is uncomfortably familiar for him – “Paul felt sorry for older people, stuck in their houses and tenements with kids to take care of and housework to do.” He thought of his own parents “and their useless lives [...] too old for sex even, although Paul turned away from the thought. He couldn’t believe that his mother and father ever actually...” (Cormier, 1974, p. 92). Ironically, Tubs is intending to use the money from his chocolate sales to buy Rita a bracelet for which he hopes to be rewarded – “tomorrow she’d probably let him get under her sweater” (p. 91).

Rita is the only girlfriend who physically appears in *The Chocolate War* and is the gauge by which Cormier’s readers are expected to measure the adolescent female – the confusing metaphors translating into a misanthropic tale of a boy who is prepared to sell his mother (the chocolates) for the promise of sexual favour. This conflating of the female image – blurring the lines between mother/girlfriend/sexual object – is one that feminist theorist Kaja Silverman describes in *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (1992) as almost essential in the process of identity formation in adolescent males. She argues

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<sup>230</sup> Mallan argues in *Gender Dilemmas in Children’s Fiction* (2009) that structures such as these perpetuate contradictions that preserve and reproduce traditional gender relations and hegemonies (Mallan, 2009, p. 2). Nodelman, too, in ‘Making Boys Appear: The Masculinity of Children’s Fiction,’ suggests that the “artifice and repression implicit in our current constructions of masculinity remain invisible” and resist unmasking in the depiction of boys in fiction (Nodelman, 2002, p. 1).

<sup>231</sup> See discussions on the rise of New Realism in both adult and YA during the 1970s (DeLuca, 1979, p. 143; Nodelman, 1983, p. 103; Crouch, 1979, p. 216).

that, borne of fantasy and desire, the process inserts the subject into a tableau that is shaped by the dominant social, cultural and political ideologies of their environment (Silverman, 1992, p. 6). Decidedly out of step with the rising prominence of women in society, Cormier offers his readers a scene that is unapologetically misogynistic, where the feminine brings not comfort and intimacy, but guilt and revulsion. Without exception, the women and girls who populate the novel are grotesque and tired parodies of femininity – harried mothers, domestic help, gold-diggers, teasers and tarts – their voices diminished, discounted and suppressed.

Along with myriad references throughout the novel to sexual desire, sexual potential, masturbation, aberrant sexuality and celibacy, Cormier at every turn objectifies and nullifies his characters' interaction with the feminine. A conversation between two peripheral characters highlights the extent to which this misogynist rhetoric underscores his telling of adolescent masculinity.

“Know what?” Howie Anderson asked.

“What?” Richy Rondell answered, lazily, dreamily. He was watching a girl approach. Fantastic looking. Tight sweater, clinging, low-slung jeans. Jesus.

“I think the Renault kid is right about the chocolates,” Howie said. He’d seen the girl too, as she moved along the sidewalk in front of Crane’s Drug Store. But it didn’t break his train of thought. Watching girls and devouring them with your eyes – rape by eyeball – was something you did automatically. (Cormier, 1974, pp. 133-134)

The instinctive tendency towards violation of the female body is, of course, meant to shock readers. However, it is vital to note that the nonchalance of that deliberate breaching is delivered by the omniscient narrator – not the characters themselves. The disquieting realisation for young readers would be that that these hateful and brutal ideations are not merely adolescent hyperbole, but the ruminations of the authoritative adult narrator. If Cormier is dealing in ‘realist’ discourse – one that reflects a familiarity and referential concreteness in its aesthetic form – then the message for his audience is

clear: teenage boys, and the men that they would become, view the female as not much more than a functional object.<sup>232</sup>

In this respect, Cormier's obligation of moral stewardship is significant, especially considering he has claimed his work to be not a literature, but a documentation of 'the way things were.'<sup>233</sup> In particular, his way of 'looking' draws attention to the objectification of the female form. In a work that persistently situates women and girls under the male gaze, Cormier 'shows' the female in an irremediably hierarchical relationship and although his depictions are static rather than cinematic, they are equally scopophilic in their language and the lens through which they allow men's subconscious desires to materialise.<sup>234</sup> The problem for Jerry is that he is unable to perform the requisite rituals that accompany these gendered social practices. Not long after the novel begins, Jerry enters the newsagents to buy his first ever copy of *Playboy*. "The girl was heart-wrenchingly, impossibly beautiful. Desire weakened his stomach [...] He studied the photograph surreptitiously and then closed the magazine and put it back where it belonged, on the top shelf." A sign above read prohibitively: "NO BUY NO READ" (Cormier, 1974, p. 17).

Of course, there is little 'reading' required, but the concept of 'reading' the female body through a dominant and gendered *mise-en-scène* is ever-present and certainly enabled by what Mulvey describes as the 'castrated woman' incapacitated by the pornographic lens (Mulvey, 1975, p. 9). Jerry's uncomfortable and unsuccessful interactions with this type of mainstream voyeurism upset the predictable Freudian structures of male/active/narrative control and female/passive/eroticised spectacle to such an extent that they earmark him as an aberrant form of the masculine (Sassatelli, 2011, p. 124). The confusion for readers is whether they are supposed to empathise with the protagonist or feel repulsed by his anomalous reactions. Jerry struggles to understand why he feels such guilt when he looks at the magazines, considering that he "sometimes saw copies scattered casually on coffee tables in the homes of his friends." He recalls

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<sup>232</sup> See further discussion by Barthes in 'The Reality Effect' on the way the artist or writer becomes a maker in the third degree by imitating a simulation of realness (Barthes, 1984, p. 144).

<sup>233</sup> In an interview with *The New York Times* in 2003, Cormier stated that he thought of himself not as a "thematic writer, but as a storyteller" (Rosenberg, 1985).

<sup>234</sup> See Mulvey's 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (1975) and *Fetishism and Curiosity* (1996) on how the male gaze forces very particular types of images of women to 'appear'.

the time he did buy a copy, snuck it home on the bus and hid it in his bottom drawer, but never knew “what to do with the damn thing [...] He is terrified of discovery” (Cormier, 1974, p. 18). Cormier leaves the notion of ‘discovery’ deliberately ambiguous, the inference being that either Jerry’s father may find the magazine or that he fears unleashing his own sexual desire. The latter, it seems, would force him to join the ritual game of performative masculinity that by the 1970s had entrenched itself in Western culture, with ‘soft’ pornography legitimising the erotic male gaze through its association with respectable literature.<sup>235</sup> In this respect, Jerry is conspicuously incompetent in the ritual enactments of contemporary masculinity.<sup>236</sup>

Not only does Cormier happily deal in these uncomfortable and discordant realms of male culture, he makes it clear through contextual devices and the remarkable absence of real women in the lives of his male characters that the female voice plays no part in the ‘education’ of young men. In allowing a celibate and all-male teaching staff to shape the minds of their charges, Cormier effectively disconnects boyhood from the historically female sphere of the classroom. In this respect, the author forces his audience into a rigid homosocial reading in which the relationships between men are the most important and the role of women is assumed by men (Nodelman & Reimer, 2003, p. 125). This condition so often requires the acceptance of homophobia as part of its formulation, but also an understanding amongst its male participants of the cultural roles they must assume within that framework. Jerry is naïve to this structure, so when Emile Janza accuses him of hiding a dark secret, Cormier’s protagonist is oblivious to the environment in which he finds himself. “What secret?” he asks. Emile responds with venom: “[T]hat you’re a fairy. A queer. Living in the closet” (Cormier, 1974, p. 201).

In recurring episodes, Cormier evokes isolation as the most divisive element in the homosocial environment, a structure that Sedgwick describes in its ideal state as engendering inclusivity rather than alienation (Sedgwick, 1985, p. 50). However, Cormier’s text elicits only a stifling and narcissistic mess of poisoned relationships

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<sup>235</sup> Magazines such as *Playboy* (founded in 1953) and *Penthouse* (founded in 1965) presented themselves as lifestyle and entertainment titles, their pictorials interspersed with investigative articles, interviews and short stories by respected and prominent authors such as Ian Fleming, Vladimir Nabokov, Saul Bellow and P. G. Wodehouse (Watts, 2008, p. 80).

<sup>236</sup> The large body of work by Butler describes societal notions of gender as a series of cultural enactments as opposed to any psychological or physical trait of gender (Butler, 1999, p. 9).

between and amongst men in which all the emblems of fellowship – trust, equality, loyalty and friendship – are either absent, chimerical or in a state of decay. *The Chocolate War*'s distinctly necrotised homosociality deliberately affronts the convivial all-male environments conjured in classical literature and the familiar motifs of *Boys' Own* tales. Sedgwick's notion of the homosocial allows a critical understanding of these misshapen male relationships in an all too real, too recognisable, mimesis of 1970s American society – one in which cultural patriarchy dictated that the relations between men dominated, and those amongst women evaporated.<sup>237</sup> Thus in Cormier's blunt narrative of adolescent masculinity, the articulation of the female, in almost every form and circumstance, is destructive.

It is here that Cormier's timeworn iterations of gender fail his audience by falling back on tired 'acts' that pinpoint incumbent performances of masculinity as the cause of the estrangement between his male characters.<sup>238</sup> For only astute young readers would have discerned how the depiction of the feminine as either absent, disruptive or dangerous in this homosocial scenario might have been a contributing factor to its artificiality.

Cormier's version of a man's world – heavy with historically reinforced gender binaries – obscure and obfuscate the more complex outcomes of the 'unnatural' separation of men from women. He offers his readers no comfort, no recourse and in no way troubles the heteronormative rhetoric around masculinity that has typified conventional adult literature since the eighteenth century.<sup>239</sup>

This, I argue, effectively eliminates the female voice in Cormier's literary reckonings of male identity. If readers understand masculinity as a set of attitudes and behaviours dictated by the complex cultural frameworks of society, *The Chocolate War* exposes the widespread Western anxiety about being or becoming the middle-class heterosexual male of literature. Indeed, Cormier's work speaks directly to that anxiety, its depictions of privilege, power and hegemonic masculinity serving to isolate any person –

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<sup>237</sup> Feminist economist Heidi Hartmann describes modern patriarchy in 'The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Towards a More Progressive Union' as a set of social relations between men, which have a material base that although hierarchical establishes an "interdependence and solidarity among men" enabling them to dominate women (Hartmann, 1978, p. 11).

<sup>238</sup> Connell argues in *Masculinities* (1995) that gender is constructed through social and cultural 'acting out' rather than any intrinsic difference between males and females (Connell, 1995).

<sup>239</sup> See discussion on the influence of Enlightenment texts on binary iterations of sex, gender and sexuality in *Heteronormativity in Eighteenth-Century Literature and Culture* (Boe & Coykendall, 2015).



specifically females or compromised males – who chooses to exert their individuality in any form other than the straight, white male. Cormier is perhaps reflecting the sentiments of his age, his work coinciding with the advent of what is broadly considered the first significant men's movements in America. Taking their lead from early feminists who focussed on the restrictive nature of gender 'roles', men's liberation movements during the 1970s argued that they too were subject to the damaging and dehumanising aspects of performative masculinity.<sup>240</sup> However, despite this buoyant and optimistic scope for revolution, the no-gloss reality that Cormier presents is terminal. For his readers, whose experience of fiction would have been contingent on the historical themes of adventure, fantasy and escapism in childhood literature, they were in their path to adulthood presented with a story of futility, frustration and claustrophobic finitude.<sup>241</sup>

The confusing message that Cormier's work sent to a generation of young male readers is that the self they expect to see mirrored in YA is either a repugnant cliché of masculinity or a frighteningly accurate one. This problematic connection between the cultural performance of gender and its presentation in textual form emanates from a well-worn historical 'script' – a palimpsest of the underdog, the hero, the thug, the queer, the bully – that applies a set of deeply rooted corporeal obligations onto the male body in literature. That is to say, in asking teenage boys to engage with the story of modern American adolescence, Cormier is also asking them to disengage from the systemic cultural production of masculinity by taking part in the alienating feminisation of reading themselves in print. My argument is that, despite Cormier's attempts to breach these barriers, he ultimately produces a story that simply reinforces the stifling historical entrapments of performative gender.

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<sup>240</sup> In "The Limits of 'The Male Sex Role': An Analysis of the Men's Liberation and Men's Rights Movements' Discourse" (1998), Michael Messner identifies a common rhetoric in the men's liberation movements that tends to decontextualise gender relations, arguing that any bifurcation of 'roles' is equally harmful to both men and women (Messner, 1998). Stimulated by second wave feminism, the men's movement gained prominence in America with the First National Conference on the Masculine Mystique in 1974. This was followed by the publication of Marc Feigen Fasteau's *The Male Machine* (1974), Warren Farrell's *The Liberated Man* (1975) and in 1976 Richard Doyle's *The Rape of the Male* and Herb Goldberg's *The Hazards of Being Male* (Junko, 1998).

<sup>241</sup> In the 1988 cinematic adaptation of *The Chocolate War*, filmmaker Keith Gordon significantly alters the dispiriting dénouement of the novel. The film version sees Jerry in the boxing ring, pitted against the psychological puppet master Archie, rather than Emile Janza. Where the novel had depicted a finale with Jerry beaten, hospitalised and conceding that he had lost 'the war,' the film presents a very different outcome, the audience left with the distinct and satisfying feeling that good has prevailed.

In the 25 years that followed *The Chocolate War*, Cormier created a substantial body of work in both long and short story formats, with themes of betrayal, mental illness, violence and abuse running a continuous thread through his characters and plotlines.<sup>242</sup> However, as the last decade of the century drew in, a perceptible social recalibration occurred that was perhaps not being encapsulated in Cormier's nihilistic narratives. Specifically, the rise of the internet produced a sense of the 'global village' and a democratisation of information that became evident in the online practices and production of adolescent identity-making. It was this socially progressive environment into which a new range of adolescent literature emerged, with the publication of Stephen Chbosky's *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (1999) coinciding with the point at which the internet saturated Western culture.<sup>243</sup> In this new space – where the threats of the Cold War had subsided under a neo-liberalism that encouraged political, economic and social autonomy – the obligations and equally the freedoms of the individual began to assert their dominance (Palley, 2004). This was arguably the first time since the teenager had emerged as an identifiable demographic in the 1950s that adolescents were able to employ a praxis that no longer involved the intervention of an adult 'author'.

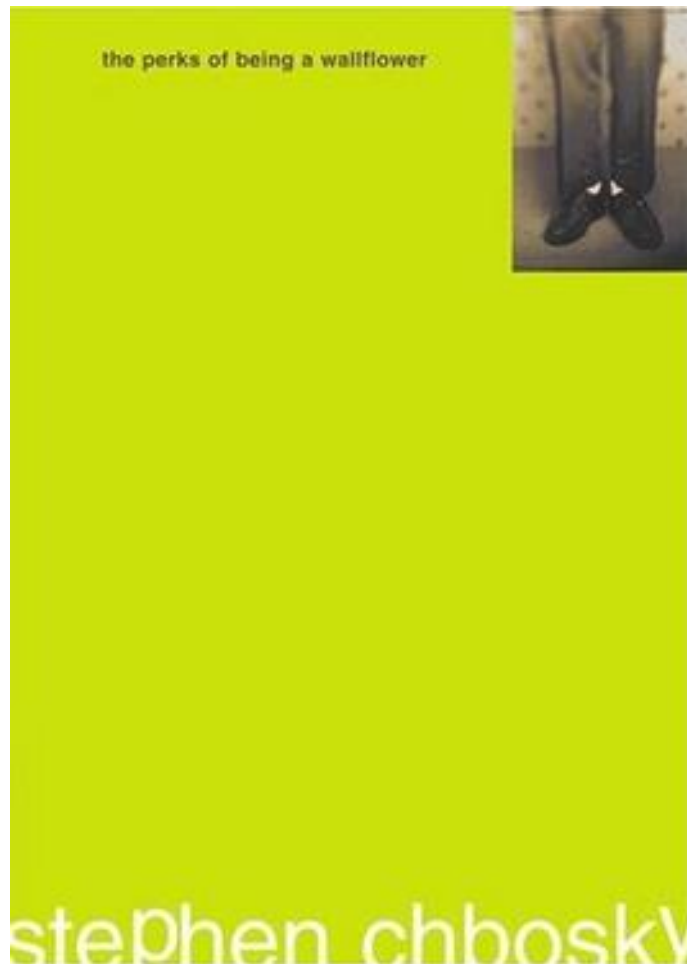
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<sup>242</sup> Cormier's work after *The Chocolate War* included: *I am the Cheese* (1977), *After the First Death* (1979), *8 Plus 1* (1980), *The Bumblebee Flies Anyway* (1983), *Beyond the Chocolate War* (1985), *Fade* (1988), *Other Bells for Us to Ring* (1990), *We All Fall Down* (1991), *I Have Words to Spend* (1991), *Tunes for Bears to Dance To* (1992), *In the Middle of the Night* (1995), *The Moustache* (1996), *Tenderness* (1997), *Heroes* (1998), *Frenchtown Summer* (1999) and *The Rag and Bone Shop* (2001).

<sup>243</sup> The World Bank reported that by 1999, between 35 and 40 per cent of the entire populations of USA, Canada and Australia were using the internet in their daily lives (The World Bank, 2017).

# 4

## 1990s: Destructive Nostalgia in *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*



By examining *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (1999) in relation to other seminal texts in the course of YA, this case study examines the impact of a growing late-twentieth-century liberalism on the social and cultural experience of male adolescence.<sup>244</sup> Aiming to distinguish the work's queerness in the largely homogenous social narrative of the 1990s, Stephen Chbosky's work is scrutinised using approaches to cognitive narratology, where they intersect with affect studies and gender theory, to distil a reading that recognises the unusual nature of his text. This method concentrates not only on conventional notions of queerness, but on the more precise issues of spectacularised male bodies, nostalgia, repressed emotions and their effect on the writing and reading of late-century adolescence. The aim here is to establish how the changing dimensions of masculinity and the proliferation of new medial literacies are implicated in the growing disengagement between young males and long-form fiction.

Essentially, between Cormier's 1970s nihilism and Chbosky's 1990s liberalism a new curiosity arose around questions of stability and change. Rather than a discourse that routinely used the teenage male as a surrogate to express the maladies of society (Faulkner, 2011), *Perks* seeks out voices of the silenced and repressed in a story of the uncanny that troubles an entrenched Western heteronormative rhetoric. In this respect, the author's particular and incessant fixation on nostalgia and residual memory – explored through Charles Acland's theories on cultural phenomena that rely on encounters with the past – is problematic for the postmodern reader. Employing Lakoff and Johnson's theories around the "myth of truth", this chapter aims for a very specific reading of Chbosky's plots and players, who although reassuringly familiar in their teenage struggles, expose an ugly underside to the homosocial metonymy of the West. In determining the ramifications of these constructions on both the trajectory of YA and its readers, I mobilise Trites' work on the historical connection between the teenage psyche, the physical body and institutional power as the foundation for discussions in this chapter.

Under scrutiny here is the status of *Perks* in the wider political sphere of a twentieth-century *fin de siècle*. Threatened by the uncertainty of Reagan's 'New World Order',

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<sup>244</sup> Image on previous page: first edition cover, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, 1999 (copyright granted, Simon & Schuster).

the 1990s was a period in which citizens were questioning their place in the world. This anxiety translated into predictable literary repetitions – mimicking to a certain degree the gothic turn in nineteenth-century fictions that introduced readers to mutating bodies and dislocated minds – but also in a more subtle turn away from works that favoured the quest narrative.<sup>245</sup> The argument of this case study is that *Perks*' quiet and submissive teenage observations are able to discreetly undermine the hierarchy of formal literary criticism that had formerly designated institutions as the arbiter of texts for the young. By dislodging the habitual pedagogical practice that Hunter describes as privileging the translator (teacher) over the receiver (student), this thesis engages in an 'observational' technique, embracing the specific surface reading tactics of Love, to produce a new translation of *Perks* that avoids traditional hermeneutics and instead illuminates the intersection at which the text and human emotions meet.

Most importantly, this critical approach allows an interrogation of the question of 'becoming' and how that process invariably gravitates towards notions of freedom and transgression. In close readings, Butler's work in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1999) is used to explore the incest taboo, helping to situate the male body as a site of violation, domination and sublimation in the novel. Ngai's theories, drawn from her explorations in *Ugly Feelings* (2005) and 'Our Aesthetic Categories' (2010), are utilised to reflect on how the protagonist's naivety destabilises the illusory boundary between actual emotions and 'false' experience. However, it is the more complex nature of masculinity that benefits from the detailed work this case study undertakes in relation to the psychosocial role of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* in Chbosky's text. Tracing its effects through the novel, I test Felski's notion of fiction as reliant on recognition, which she articulates in both *Gender of Modernity* (1995) and *Uses of Literature* (2008), by examining the ways in which the author deliberately draws attention to 'fake' enactments of gender. In this regard, Flanagan's perspectives in 'Cross-Dressing as Transvestitism in Children's Literature' (1999) are also utilised to widen arguments on the hegemonic performances of masculinity.

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<sup>245</sup> The success of late twentieth-century gothic literature that arguably began with authors such as V. C. Andrews during the 1980s, proliferated during the 1990s with authors such as Anne Rice and later, Stephanie Meyer, dominating the landscape from 1976 to 2016, particularly for female readers.

In attempting to avoid what Felski describes as a diagnostic reading (Felski, 2008, p. 1), it is through the novel's moments of infraction and misdemeanour that I seek an explanation of how the cult of 'becoming' in *Perks* marries so effectively with the story of adolescence in YA. What is ultimately being proposed here is that Chbosky's text represents the remnants of a discourse that was being slowly eroded by the creeping influence of alternative medial forms. In examining the cultural historical repercussions of the superannuated modes of nostalgia and repressed memory that *Perks* depicts, this case study identifies the novel as so haunted by the narrative of history that it disallows its audience the distinct and singular pleasure of seeing themselves reflected between its covers.

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In a poignant story of the friendless and emotionally fragile 15-year-old loner Charlie Kelmeckis, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (1999) by Stephen Chbosky epitomised the experimental liberalism that had begun to characterise YA of the late twentieth century. Through a series of expository letters to an anonymous friend, Chbosky unmask in his debut novel the inscape of an unusually sensitive teenager struggling with the archetypal complications of adolescence in his first year at a Pittsburgh high school. Charlie, who has been recently destabilised by the suicide of his best friend Michael, meets a new and disarmingly honest group of friends. Although seniors, they are beguiled by Charlie's sage-like introspection and naïve curiosity about the behaviours and performances of adolescence. Of the group, Sam and Patrick, who are step-sister and brother, take on a totemic significance, with Sam playing Charlie's unrequited love and Patrick the portrait of late twentieth-century homosexuality. Together, they explore how the historical legacy of gender and adolescence impinge on original and authentic enactments of the individual.

By the novel's end, readers discover that Charlie's eccentric and erratic behaviour stems from the sexual abuse he endured as a child whilst in the care of his aunt. Although the subject of incest had already been presented to adolescent readers in works such as V C Andrews' *Flowers in the Attic* (1979), the incursive act in Chbosky's text centres on the complicated issues of control, domination and gender normativity and perhaps more

obtusely on how those themes impact literary depictions of adolescence.<sup>246</sup> The effects of Charlie's sublimation become evident in a character who is forever unsure of his place in the world, both as a young adult and as a heterosexual male. For, as Butler describes through Foucault, "if we conceive of the incest taboo as primarily productive in its effects, then the prohibition that founds the "subject" and survives as the law of its desire becomes the means by which identity, particularly gender identity, is constituted" (Butler, 1999, p. 99). Indeed, by repressing any memories about the violating acts, Charlie provides a narrative openness for questions about historical frameworks of sexuality, sexual deviance and the performance of gender.

Alongside the customary texts of social awkwardness, first sexual encounters and angst-ridden attempts at individuality, *Perks* stands out from surrounding late-century speculative fiction and gothic romance such as *The Vampire Diaries* (1991-2014) with a story that challenges predominant figurations of masculinity.<sup>247</sup> Through a refreshingly earnest narrator, Chbosky exposes and questions the legitimacy of those performances and the arbitrary nature of the gender 'show'. In Charlie's ingenuous observations of gay sex, domestic violence, sexual abuse and date rape, the audience becomes accidental voyeurs in a benign examination of late 1990s adolescence.

What makes *Perks* so valuable in the examination of this thesis is that its cultural performances of adolescent gender are reported through the seemingly impartial eyes of an individual who is, by turns, emotionless, unequivocal and burdened by an acute clinical distance. Chbosky's narrator is an observer, not a participant. My argument is that this positioning of the teenage male as 'voyeur' is an important segue for the genre in that it calls into question what Trites claims are the inherent and necessary connections between mind, body and institutional power in literature for adolescents (Trites, 2001 A, p. 473). What *Perks* exposes is the tenuous psychological, physical and theoretical notions of personhood in the face of heightened insecurities around the mind and body under threat. In 1994, when Chbosky began writing his novel, America was on the cusp of the *fin de siècle*. Social anxieties were surfacing in regards to the uneasy relationship between what George W. Bush described as a "New World Order" after the

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<sup>246</sup> The act of incest in *Flowers in the Attic* occurs between an adolescent brother and sister.

<sup>247</sup> The trend in gothic romance, especially for female readers, would continue well into the next decade, evident in the phenomenal success of the *Twilight* series, which broke the record for the fastest time to sell one million copies (Alexander, 2009).

Cold War with the former Soviet Union, and a corresponding escalation in aggression from new enemies in the Persian Gulf. These global threats restated the uncertainties around America's dominance as a world power and brought its conflicts to the cities and suburbs of America.<sup>248</sup>

In adult literature, the inclination to deny the corporeal realities of these threats revealed itself in texts that focussed on psychological escapism and emotional wellness.<sup>249</sup> In many respects, YA followed the same trajectory, with works such as Rowling's *Harry Potter* series reflecting a tendency toward speculative and fantastical alternative dimensions.<sup>250</sup> Pullman's *His Dark Materials* and George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire*, along with novels by the likes of Neil Gaiman, Garth Nix and Lois Lowry, reinforced the historical tethers that linked expedition and crusade with the generic arc of normality-destruction-resolution in male-oriented fiction, all within the immaterial realm of the paranormal.<sup>251</sup> Later, works such as *The Cherub* (2004) and *Hunger Games* (2008) series would continue the theme. However, *Perks* presents an uncomfortable counter-narrative to the heteronormative subjectivity of quest-oriented fiction. Indeed, Chbosky's work rebuffs the so-called generic *purpose* of YA and its cathartic obligation of epiphany as resolution (Hollindale, 1997), allowing a candid and productive examination of modern adolescence, rather than an authorial dictation, to take place.<sup>252</sup>

This places Charlie in the role of biographer and directly engages with the prevailing theoretical practice of placing the reader/student into a subordinate position in a pedagogical framework. In this respect, Chbosky succeeds in destabilising the hierarchy

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<sup>248</sup> In 1993, the World Trade Centre in New York City was the subject of a terrorist attack by Kuwaiti nationals, and in the same year a Pakistani national shot dead CIA agents outside a facility in Langley, Virginia. In 1995, disgruntled Gulf War veteran Timothy McVeigh bombed a federal government building in Oklahoma City.

<sup>249</sup> The best-selling novels of 1995 included *The Celestine Prophecies*, a narrative of spiritual awakening by James Redfield; *The Rainmaker*, a legal thriller by John Grisham; *The Bridges of Madison County*, a poignant love story by Robert James Waller; and the romance novel, *Five Days in Paris* by Danielle Steel (The New York Times, 1995).

<sup>250</sup> Although the 1970s and 1980s had been dubbed the 'Golden Age of YA' with literature that tackled serious and controversial subjects, the best-selling titles were still those written by female authors for a female audience, with a tendency towards romance. In 1985, *The Perfect Summer*, part of the *Sweet Valley High* series by Francine Pascal was the first ever YA-specific novel to reach the *New York Times* paperback best-seller list (Cart, 1996, p. 39) and by 1990 there were 34 million *Sweet Valley High* novels in print (Huntwork, 1990).

<sup>251</sup> The cult television drama *Game of Thrones* is based on Martin's series of novels.

<sup>252</sup> YA critics Donelson, Nilsen and Cart describe adolescent fiction as being purpose-driven, with motifs of social inclusion and isolation as central tenets (Trites, 2001 A, p. 473).



that Love describes as privileging the messenger in literature and instead inserts Charlie as its non-partisan translator. In ‘Close but not Deep: Literary Ethics and the Descriptive Turn’ (2010), Love describes this approach as putting to one side the depth hermeneutics that have dominated activity in the genealogy of literary studies to instead adopt “an alternative model of reading that does not depend on the ethical exemplarity of the interpreter” (Love, 2010, p. 375). As a result, *Perks* marks a pattern of change in the narration of adolescence, deviating from YA that was rooted in the often-belligerent fiction of the 1960s and the acquisitive narratives of the 1980s that served to physically and psychologically alienate adolescents from both their present and future stories.<sup>253</sup> Tales of rapacious greed and planetary destruction – in works from Madeleine L’Engle’s *The Time Quintet* (1962-1989) and *The Giver* (1993) by Lois Lowry to John Marsden’s *The Tomorrow* series (1994-1999) and Pullman’s *His Dark Materials* trilogy (1995-2000) – had engulfed the genre in a dystopian whitewash.<sup>254</sup>

In ‘New Social Orders: Reconceptualising Family and Community in Utopian Fiction’ (2005), Mallan, Bradford and Stephens argue that these themes are part of a utopian/dystopian strain that has long been present in children’s literature. However, what Chbosky offers his readers is a fractured vision of society under the veil of a failing utopian suburbia. This uncomfortable scenario perhaps emanates from what Mallan et al. propose is a specific historical moment in which the emerging ideologies of American national identity converge with a generalised anxiety around the ambiguous notion of family (Mallan et al., 2005, p. 6). So, even though *Perks* does not orbit around a central synoptic or cataclysmic event – a death, a moral injustice or a catastrophic change – but rather on the minutiae of the everyday in the liminal and very real world, the effect is sufficiently disturbing. Equally, the work’s protagonist is not the valiant hero or the plucky underdog of traditional dystopian fiction – he is a quotidian eyewitness and a peripheral recorder of events trapped in a strangely impotent body.

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<sup>253</sup> Novels with aggressive and combative male protagonists dominated the adult best-seller lists during the 1960s and 1970s, certainly influencing YA of the same period. Works such as *A Clockwork Orange* (1962), *One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest* (1962), *The Spy Who Came in From the Cold* (1963), *In Cold Blood* (1966) and *The Godfather* (1969) typified the era.

<sup>254</sup> The motifs of avarice, apocalypse and demonised humanity permeated adult literature, with novels such as *The Running Man* (1982), *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985) and *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (1987) representing a new nihilism. In cinema, *Mad Max* (1979) and *Blade Runner* (1982) depicted a dystopian future whilst *Trading Places* (1983), *Risky Business* (1983) and *Wall Street* (1987) focused on the scourge of capitalism. Meanwhile, the term ‘yuppie’ was born and Madonna designated herself ‘the material girl’.

Accordingly, Charlie's gentle and submissive narrative reflects the marginality that sociologist Erving Goffman describes as uniquely experienced by the "socially disqualified" (Love, 2012, p. 167). His dialogue is pedestrian and adolescent, sufficiently aloof for its readership to be enticed by its ambivalence, yet alluringly honest enough to engage. Charlie is not the eloquent ambassador of a rich historical literature, but a paratactic list-maker, his narrative prosaic and utilitarian. He begins his story by declaring: "Some kids look at me strange in the hallways because I don't decorate my locker, and I'm the one who beat up Sean and couldn't stop crying after he did it. I guess I'm pretty emotional" (Chbosky, 1999, p. 9). Here, rather than relying on what Lakoff and Johnson describe as the essential building blocks of modern language, Charlie speaks in disarmingly plain prose that lacks lyricism, hyperbole, and to a certain extent, metaphor.<sup>255</sup> Indeed, throughout the novel, he dismantles the edifice of any poetic intention in favour of speaking 'the truth'. This difference positions *Perks* and its storyteller as anomalous and draws attention to the integral nature of language in aligning and estranging the adolescent self within social systems. Charlie's clinical, no-frills dialect removes itself from the legacies of both adult literature and extant YA to establish a sub-genre that allows the marginalised and mercurial to become everyday.

#### 4.1. Affect and the Language of Adolescence

In this setting, *Perks* emerges not as product of the teacher-student narrative that Hunter describes as a pedagogical practice in which the 'teacher' utilises identification and correction as a form of governance (Hunter, 2006), but as a viable and authentic communicate in which readers can recognise the complicated and various performances of adolescence.<sup>256</sup> Although the story is a fiction, readers perceive it as a living text, one that achieves something more than the symbolic projection of a social malaise in which characters merely perform literary functions. Its distinction, I argue, lies in the role of

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<sup>255</sup> Lakoff and Johnson's argument is that humans cannot talk about themselves in relation to time without using metaphors (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). They suggest that metaphors of human physiology provide the concepts for the philosophies by which we live and speak about ourselves (Lakoff, 2012, p. ix).

<sup>256</sup> Ezra Miller, who played Patrick in the film adaptation of *Perks* commented that he first read Chbosky's work when he was 14 and that the novel and character felt 'real' and were significant influences on his life. Miller described Patrick as a type of "celestial mass" to which people were inexplicably drawn (Carraway, 2012).

the reader. Instead of the untidy business of adolescent identity formation, teenage sexuality, first loves, domestic violence and mental illness being the result of authorial contemplation or introspective rationalisation, they are presented as reflections in the truest sense. Charlie's epistolary dispatches deliver the 'news', not a social commentary, thereby addressing what Luhmann describes as the only way to overcome the point at which reflective reasoning contradicts itself and ceases to fulfil its purpose. That is, to "adjust the criteria of observation to the need for accelerating observation and thereby to the reduction of complexity" (Luhmann, 1984, p. 344). Chbosky's reduction reveals itself in retrograde, child-like anecdotes that lay bare for readers the complex and contradictory realities of suburban adolescence, highlighted in the closing pages of the novel as Charlie emerges from a psychiatric facility.

When I got released yesterday, my mom drove me home. It was in the afternoon, and she asked me if I was hungry. And I said yes. Then, she asked me what I wanted, and I told her I wanted to go to McDonald's like we did when I was little and got sick and stayed home from school. (Chbosky, 1999, p. 229)

Chbosky's language, with its staccato sentences and juvenile grammar, elicits a deliberate pathos, the image of a sobbing, breathless child conjured in the readers' mind. Its affective style no doubt plays a central role in legitimising the text for its adolescent audience, with its appeal lying not in its complexity, but in its sparsity. This simplicity does not deny readers the 'richness' that Love describes as "the busy intersection between the intricacy of texts and the intricacy of human feeling" (Love, 2010, p. 371). Instead, it reproduces the familiar vocabulary and syntax of childhood that guide and comfort readers through a series of confronting enquiries. As a result, its linguistic frugality achieves a coolness around the performance of adolescence that replicates the authentic enactments of teenage disengagement.

However, what makes the novel's conversations about sexual proclivity, domestic violence, youth mental health and casual drug-taking so uncomplicated for its readers, makes it equally repellent to those who recognise the characters and their issues all too well.<sup>257</sup> Chbosky's text, devoid of the pedagogical insistence that often suffuses

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<sup>257</sup> The most common complaints about *Perks* from parent groups were related to depictions of homosexuality, drug use, suicide and date rape (ALA, 2014).

literature for the young, enables a dialogue that exposes how the collective so often diminishes the place of ‘the other’ – the eccentric, the maverick, the queer. The danger that *Perks* poses is that its fictitious version of adolescent alterity is an all-too accurate and uncanny reflection of the real. Ngai, in exploring the disquieting and infectious nature of this phenomenon in *Ugly Feelings* (2005), describes the power of “fake feelings” or those elicited by fiction, as both seductive and believable because of the ordinariness of what they describe (Ngai, 2005, p. 39). Her argument is that the affective, bolstered by the real, is easily able to generate repercussions that mimic those of a genuine physical experience.

Ngai’s observations are important to consider because they foreground the nature of emotions in forming and dissolving subjective boundaries. Certainly, Ngai elegantly describes the very remit of fiction literature itself, yet she also taps into what it is that produces both the pull and push for adherents and detractors of YA. That is to say, the language, tone and mood of Chbosky’s work paints such a realistic picture of the marginalised teenage male that it exposes an alternative emotional economy – one in which the adolescent wrests back a modicum of power by being able to critically observe the system from outside the apparatus.<sup>258</sup> I argue that this is a perspective that specifically appeals to adolescent male readers who at the time were being swamped by the neat philosophical denouements of the *Harry Potter* series. In place of the conventional quest rhetoric – heavy with the socio-historical tropes of good versus evil, moral responsibility, family loyalty and homecoming – *Perks* poses a fractured reflection of the system that obscured the generic images of juvenile literature.

Where bravery, humility and redemption should have been, Chbosky inserts ugly feelings, not only in Charlie’s story, but also in his literary tone. It is this “slippery zone between fake and real feelings” (Ngai, 2005, p. 41) that offers much to Chbosky’s readers. Charlie’s mode of delivery produces a narrative so benevolent and pure, so free of didacticism and inference, that the audience feels comfortable hearing its confronting tales. His is an everyman story in which stereotypes both abound and disintegrate: aunts molest their young nephews, testosterone-fuelled footballers tour parks for anonymous

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<sup>258</sup> See Ngai’s *Ugly Feelings* on Melville’s *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade* (1857), in which she describes the author’s “exploration of the new emotional economy produced by the general migration of “trust” from personal relationships to abstract systems” in relation to modernism (Ngai, 2005, p. 40).

gay sex, yet girls are still sexually submissive and men uphold the façade of homosocial machismo. Indeed, the entire paradigm of performative gender becomes chimeric. In an early scene in *Perks*, Charlie is bewildered by the reaction of his sister's boyfriend when she berates him for not standing up to the class bully. After a short argument, the boyfriend begins crying, but quickly feels humiliated by his emotions and retaliates. However, more than the physical attack that follows, it is Charlie's child-like tone, peppered with ill-placed and repeated conjunctions, that makes the retelling of the abuse so disturbing.

And this guy got really red-faced. And he looked at me. Then, he looked at her. And he wound up and hit her hard across the face. I mean hard. I just froze because I couldn't believe he did it. It was not like him at all to hit anybody. He was the boy that made mix tapes with themes and hand-colored covers until he hit my sister and stopped crying. The weird part is that my sister didn't do anything. She just looked at him very quietly. It was so weird. My sister goes crazy if you eat the wrong kind of tuna, but here was this guy hitting her, and she didn't say anything. She just got soft and nice. (Chbosky, 1999, p. 13)

What Chbosky presents in place of the conspicuous performances of homosociality, is the uncanny in characters and behaviours that should be recognisable, but prove intensely alien. These contrasting dimensions introduce readers to a story that no longer situates the adolescent male as simply a disquieting presence in literature with its requisite instability constituted as a problem of institutional, structural or ideological control.<sup>259</sup> Certainly *Perks* conforms textually in that it falls broadly into line with the common objectives of literature that Felski describes as recognition, enchantment, knowledge and shock.<sup>260</sup> Yet, its naïve and anti-diegetic voice resists that same remit. For, if fiction can be understood as a synthesis of process and content, *Perks* disrupts that coalescence. In lieu of the reproductive tendencies of literary capital so evident in texts that are meant to educate, Chbosky inserts a queer lens that privileges none of those formal auspices. Indeed, his protagonist deliberately draws attention to the

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<sup>259</sup> As recently as 2016, teachers, students and parents at an Iowa high school held an open forum to discuss whether *Perks* should remain on the reading list for its Advanced English class after a number of parents had complained about its explicit sexual content and depictions of rape and domestic violence. The committee voted unanimously to retain the book (Wiedemann, 2016).

<sup>260</sup> Felski dedicates a chapter to each of these themes in *Uses of Literature* (2008).

deceptive nature of the homogenous enactments that are bound to the notion of adolescent identity in literature. This intent reveals itself in Charlie's repeated failure to either comprehend or undertake those performances. In a letter to his recipient on New Year's Eve, he confides:

I guess what I'm saying is that this all feels very familiar. But it's not mine to be familiar about. I just know that another kid has felt this [...] All the books you've read have been read by other people. And all the songs you've loved have been heard by other people. And that girl that's pretty to you is pretty to other people. And you know that if you looked at these facts when you were happy, you would feel great because you are describing "unity." (Chbosky, 1999, p. 102)

In his ingenuous and clumsy script, Charlie exposes his readers to the complex notion of the affective fallacy. By depicting the uncanny as a very real phenomenon, Chbosky's character allows himself to become vulnerable to the adolescent feelings that Ngai describes as weaker and nastier than those historically ascribed to the adult (Ngai, 2005, p. 7). It is here that the work demonstrates the impossibility of assigning static and singular affective meaning to a dynamic cultural object. In this respect, Chbosky's text challenges YA's historical reliance on the reflexive reading of the self in the wider system of its cultural context.<sup>261</sup>

Despite presenting these seemingly fundamental departures in YA, *Perks* received a lukewarm reception from critics. *Publishers Weekly* called it a "trite coming-of-age novel," with an unlikeable and irritating protagonist who indulged in a "bath of bathos" and a droning insistence on his supersensitive disposition (*Publishers Weekly*, 1999).<sup>262</sup> The review in *Kirkus* was a little more generous, declaring that Chbosky's work had "the right combination of realism and uplift to allow it on high school reading lists," although the constant references to sexuality, drinking and drug taking may preclude its admission (*Kirkus Reviews*, 1999). Both reviewers agreed however, that *Perks* was a faithful homage, if not a blatant plagiarism, of Salinger's *Catcher*. "More sophisticated

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<sup>261</sup> Luhmann cites 'systems' as being reliant on self-referentiality and the acknowledgement of the self as an object within a social system (Luhmann, 1984, p. 13).

<sup>262</sup> The *Publishers Weekly* reviewer remarked that Chbosky had openly broadcast his filmic intentions by releasing the novel under an imprint of MTV Books, with it being heavily advertised on the MTV channel (*Publishers Weekly*, 1999). Chbosky, who had trained in screenwriting, would later go on to write the screenplay for the film adaptation.

readers might object to the rip-off,” remarked the *Kirkus* critic.<sup>263</sup> Yet most notable was the fact that these sparse reviews constituted much of the novel’s mainstream reception at the time. It seemed that *Perks* was illegible to a class of self-appointed tastemakers whose job it was to evaluate the cultural worth of texts for the next generation of adults.

In *No Respect: Intellectuals and Public Culture* (1989), Ross identifies as part of this invisibility, the purposeful intellectualising of acts that, for others, seem rather routine (Ross, 1989, p. 1). What the dearth of critical response to *Perks* proved was that Chbosky’s novel satisfied a desire amongst adolescents to read authentic stories of the everyday, but at the same time highlighted the sometimes-impossible task of the literary critic to theorise that pleasure. Its non-committal and uncommonly honest portrayal of suburban adolescence presented an unapologetic observation – neither a commentary nor an analysis. In the truest sense, it was a reflection, hovering somewhere between fiction and creative non-fiction. Certainly, *Perks* had all the distinctive hallmarks of fiction – it was a discursive art form that readers could tell apart from both fact and deception,<sup>264</sup> it achieved the acute individuation and minute rendering of realism,<sup>265</sup> and to invoke Friedrich Nietzsche, it privileged “the victory of the particular over the general”.<sup>266</sup> However, I contend that in delivering its recount in reportage style, seemingly free of nuance or bias, *Perks* also denies its own fictional composition. As Charlie declares throughout the novel, he is an observer, one who is simply relaying the events of his year to an anonymous recipient via a series of letters.

This notion engages directly with Felski’s question of what is lost when a “dialogue with literature gives way to a permanent diagnosis, when the remedial reading of texts loses all sight of why we are drawn to such texts in the first place” (Felski, 2008, p. 1). Where critics found it easy to discount *Perks* as a predictable recycling of the teenage problem novel, perhaps what eluded their prescriptive gaze was that the work is unique in its own quiet way, in that it had never been conceived with a reader in mind, but with a viewer. Chbosky was tapping into a new audience who engaged on a daily basis with

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<sup>263</sup> Charlie reads a number of classic works at the behest of his English teacher, including *The Catcher in the Rye* (Chbosky, 1999, p. 110).

<sup>264</sup> See Gallagher’s description of fiction techniques in ‘The Rise of Fictionality’ (2006).

<sup>265</sup> Benjamin pinpoints the ‘individuation’ of character as the particular and identifying trait of fiction in the 19<sup>th</sup> century bourgeois novel, rather later than Nietzsche had done (Gallagher, 2006, p. 349).

<sup>266</sup> See Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy* (Nietzsche, 1956, p. 106).

screens as part of their meaning-making. *Perks* is an exceptional artefact in this evolution precisely because it repositions the adolescent not only in literary terms, but in medial terms, too. If one understands these fields as intersecting during the 1990s, then Actor-Network Theory (ANT) is a useful tool in gauging how *Perks* deviated from previous incarnations of literature for the young. By choosing not to engage fully with formal literature, the work evades inherent associations with a field that defines, names, categorises and criticises its own formal structures. Instead, Chbosky's novel is a 230-page communique from the fringes – an adolescent stream-of-consciousness riddled with harrowing memoir, social indiscretion and dubious grammar. It disassociates and isolates for inspection the notions of agency and performance to illustrate how society becomes blind to the construction of systems and to how the assemblage of practices and behaviours unconsciously overlap.<sup>267</sup> *Perks* was a new literary form within that process, one that deconstructed the actors, the show and its text.

Chbosky focusses the reader's attention on how the network could be a generative rather than coercive system, one that could be self-policing rather than dictatorial. That is to say, Chbosky's actant refuses to allow his nature, substance and intention to be dictated by the network.<sup>268</sup> Specifically, it is the work's cinematic quality that dislodges the adolescent of historical literature and ushers in a new regime – one that generates affect not only in the mind's eye, but also in the aural and visual inscape of the teenager. This new way of depicting adolescence gained cult status, with *Perks* named as one of America's favourite teen novels of all time. The work ranked 16th in National Public Radio's '100 Best-Ever Teen Novels' as voted by 1,200 participants. Also on the list were *Catcher* at number six and *The Outsiders* at number 13. The *Harry Potter* series was voted number one (National Public Radio, 2012). Soon after its publication, *Perks* reached *The New York Times*' best-seller list, spending more than 71 weeks there and remains MTV Books' best-ever selling title (Bing, 2000). Its imprint has remained on *The New York Times* best-seller list since its film release in 2012. Some 13 years after

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<sup>267</sup> In *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, Latour argues that within a Network there is an assumption that labelling a domain or a material – in this case, YA – denotes a “stabilized state of affairs” in which the object is justified by its relationship to other phenomenon (Latour, 2005, p. 1).

<sup>268</sup> Latour discusses how the terms *actor* and *network* bypass the notions of agency and structure in an effort to dismantle the sociological distinction between the two. His argument is that Networks are contingent and variable and that in this framework, ‘fact’ and ‘fiction’ are the product of collective activity (Latour, 2005, p. 3).



its publication, the teen editor for *Kirkus Review* described the work as having “generational longevity,” anticipating that it would be adopted by the offspring of its original audience (Hare, 2012). Its popularity had already been confirmed in a 2007 *New York Times* article in which the critic praised the work’s appeal amongst reluctant readers – which he stated was a euphemism for teenage boys. The reviewer reported that American school librarians had described *Perks* as a book that was “passed from adolescent to adolescent like a hot potato [...] one of the most-read books by high school kids in the country” (The New York Times, 2007).

However, the popular success of Chbosky’s novel emanates not from its ability – either potential or actual – to provide an accurate critical mimesis of late-century adolescence, but perhaps its inability to do so. For, if one takes fiction as a specific mode of communication within an established social system – and YA as a further element within that system – then *Perks* unsettles the natural tendencies of its process by vexing the central tenet of systemic communication: that it exists as “the unity of the difference between action and observation.”<sup>269</sup> In his cinema of words, Chbosky presents an anima paralysed by a distinct and overwhelming sense of *inaction*. Charlie is a careful watcher, regularly removed from the physicality of performative masculinity and bewildered by its foreignness. “I always wanted to be on a sports team like that,” he confesses. “I’m not exactly sure why, but I always thought it would be fun to have ‘glory days’. Then, I would have stories to tell my children and golf buddies” (Chbosky, 1999, p. 55).

These are perpetual concerns for Charlie, who regularly contemplates the behaviours of the male figures in his life. The overt machismo of his brother, who has “posters of ‘super models’ and cars and beer and things like that on the walls in his room,” (Chbosky, 1999, p. 55) disconcerts Charlie, who is unable to connect with the conspicuous enactments of gender that Butler identifies as social products rather than any innate physiological behaviours (Butler, 1999, p. 9). Chbosky’s specificity in these depictions, and Charlie’s reaction to them, unmask the historical legacy and perhaps tiredness of these tropes, deeply rooted in the muscle cars, drive-in movies and soft porn that had been part of teenage boys’ media landscape since the 1950s. Instead of reacting

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<sup>269</sup> Luhmann describes as a primary requirement in the “reduction of complexity” the need for objects to ‘stand’ as representations of the whole. See further discussion in *Social Systems* (Luhmann, 1984, p. 344).

to these tropes, Charlie merely observes and discards them, utilising a mode of reduced complexity to limit and control his existential relationship with the overwhelming volume of available information. In this sense, Chbosky confirms for his readers that this was not a text compelled by history or pedagogy, but instead a study of the arbitrary heteronormativity that suffuses and defines the cultural images of adolescence.<sup>270</sup>

Certainly, Chbosky's timeworn visual metaphors are a lazy authorial shorthand for the insistent corporeality evident in cultural renderings of masculinity. However, it is important to recognise that these symbols perform an essential role in what Lakoff and Johnson refer to as the "myth" of truth (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 185). The cultural associations that these virile devices conjure – the semi-naked women, sports cars and fun times with alcohol – had embedded themselves over generations as foundational to the modern subject. This formulation is of course problematic because it allows only a binary view: either you "believe in absolute truth or you can make the world in your own image" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 185). My argument is that Chbosky's text directs his adolescent readers towards a more productive reading that allows an experientialist synthesis – a type of imaginative rationality – to be revealed through those tired metaphors. In this revised perspective, the posters of super models, cars and beer not only represent masculinity; they represent the fallacy of masculinity. These symbols speak one language to Charlie and another to his brother, posing alternative realities in patterns structured by experience. In this respect Chbosky, intentionally or not, is re-presenting adolescence by removing the veneer of authorial bias and allowing his audience to glimpse the imperceptible framework of the heteronormative myth. Early in the novel, Patrick explains to Charlie how these performances work.

"Well, there are rules you follow here not because you want to, but because you have to. You get it?"

"I guess so."

"Okay. You take girls, for example. They're copying their moms and magazines and everything to know how to act around guys [...] I mean it's not like in the movies where girls like assholes or anything like that. It's not that easy. They just

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<sup>270</sup> Hilton and Nikolajeva argue in *Contemporary Adolescent Literature and Culture* (2012) that the most common foci for YA texts are the struggles for political and sexual agency, which are often achieved through 'lessons' that depict intellectual maturity and the formation of an identity that demarcates the teenager from the child (Hilton & Nikolajeva, 2012, p. 11).

like somebody that can give them a purpose.”

“A purpose?”

“Right. You know? Girls like guys to be a challenge. It gives them some mold to fit in how they act. Like a mom. What would a mom do if she couldn’t fuss over you and make you clean your room?” (Chbosky, 1999, p. 25)

In these types of artless exchanges, Chbosky acknowledges and highlights the assertive and conspicuous enactments that complicate the process of experiential synthesis in teenage identity formation. Essentially, *Perks* is not about dominating or controlling those stories, but about re-framing the network to include the reader as part of the artwork, as part of the dialogue of modern adolescence.

## 4.2. Compliance, Control and Those Ugly Feelings

Examining the place of the reader in this construction, ANT is a useful framework to understand how the bond between language and feelings intrinsically links to social behaviours. Latour argues that it is rather futile to impose order or attempt to limit possibilities within any social system, but instead that one must “follow the actors themselves” to learn from them what the collective existence has become in their hands (Latour, 2005, p. 12). As a protagonist, Charlie’s job is not to comment on the behaviours shaping end-of-century adolescence, but to be a witness to them, charting the trajectory of the players and their place in a collective existence. Specifically, Chbosky’s text allows a mapping of literary affect and its historical relationship with enactments of gender – from the heroic, fearless and forward-looking ego of the adolescent male to the retrospective and nostalgic interiority of the female.<sup>271</sup>

In *Perks*’ ironic depictions of emblematic masculinity – from its rather asexual teenage protagonist to a range of abusive boyfriends, inadequate father figures and gay football players – the instantly recognisable signifiers of machismo that readers would have understood at a deep social and cultural level underwent a fundamental deconstruction. Chbosky’s language chips away at the static dualism codified by the social practices of

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<sup>271</sup> See discussion by Ngai on the critical framing device in Western literature that establishes emotions as binary signifiers of the feminine and masculine (Ngai, 2005, p. 213).

gender and speaks of a different experience of adolescence. Specifically, it draws attention to the feminised protagonist of Romantic literature and its complicit and marginalised male character. Connell explores these types of performances in *Masculinities* (1995), identifying three specific categories of behaviour into which men generally fall, describing them as hegemonic, complicit or marginalised (Connell, 1995, p. 242). In broad terms, 'hegemonic' masculinity is the most dominant and culturally valued. Men who are homosexual, physically weak or exhibit a high level of emotion, she argues, are generally classed as a 'subordinate' form (Connell, 1995, p. 78).

In this difficult space, *Perks* exists as a liminal text engaged in an unconventional manner with the sovereign rhetoric of gender. Its most discernible detour is that it refuses to be hemmed in by the overbearing polarity in contemporary literature that requires the nature of masculinity to be presented as the modern, and femininity to be presented as tradition. Felski, in 'Masking Masculinity' suggests that the ongoing influence of the Romantic cult of the genius has produced a restrictive framework in which the male artist presents as a transgressive form of the masculine whilst simultaneously being endowed with the appealing feminine traits of sensitivity, intuition and emotional empathy (Felski, 1995). Chbosky's protagonist deliberately inhabits this contested arena. His rhetoric is poetic and sentimental, longing for the past in reminiscences of childhood and 1970s music. Yet, equally, Charlie seeks out the new in the exploration of sexual encounters and deeper relationships outside the family. His candid missives, posted as letters to his unnamed recipient, depict those un-curated emotions, his voice and panorama 'feminised' by a perpetual tendency towards the nostalgic, submissive, conciliatory and deferential.

Dear friend,

I am writing to you because she said you listen and understand and didn't try to sleep with that person at that party even though you could have. Please don't try to figure out who she is because then you might figure out who I am, and I really don't want you to do that [...] I think you of all people would understand that because I think you of all people are alive and appreciate what that means.

(Chbosky, 1999, p. 3)

Charlie's open dialogue is confessional and non-threatening. Its epistolary form marks it as emotional and feminine, setting it apart from other male-oriented YA. Yet, it appears comfortingly familiar with themes of emotional growth, sexual maturation and the search for identity as recognisable literary hooks.<sup>272</sup> Equally, Chbosky's narrative, laden with verbs of metacognition – listen, understand, try, want and think – in which he repeatedly asks his reader to hear and comprehend (all very much notions of the mind), confounds the binary dictations of traditional YA. However, it is in his sparse and particular employment of corporeal language that the protagonist openly flays the tropes of performative gender and exposes the complicated intersection of pubescent cognisance and budding physicality. Specifically, Charlie thanks his recipient for not surrendering to any urges of the body – because you “didn't try to sleep with that person at that party” (Chbosky, 1999, p. 3).

This deliberate sublimation and demotion of corporeal enactments established *Perks* as a text that spoke a new language – one that acknowledged and reflected the social change that had occurred in the decades leading up to the turn of the century. Revolutionary shifts in gender equality, the rapid corporatisation of public and private industry and the engulfing influence of the digital age were effecting generational transformations and producing a cultural landscape in which representations of the alternative mind and body no longer needed couching in terms of allusion.<sup>273</sup> In short, *Perks* did not need to hide behind its fictionality. Chbosky's text embraced the era's perceived liberality in candid observations, fleshing out the stubborn heteronormativity that continued to linger in societal rhetoric. Charlie's friend, Patrick, is the sounding board for those homosocial relics. “The kids started calling him Patty when his real name is Patrick. And [he] told these kids, “Listen, you either call me Patrick, or you call me nothing.” So, the kids started calling him “Nothing.”” (Chbosky, 1999, p. 15). In labelling the atypical as valueless and non-existent, Chbosky highlights not only the archaic cultural diminution of the homosexual in society, but also underscores the

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<sup>272</sup> Few YA employ the epistolary format, with notable exceptions being *Go Ask Alice* (1971) *The Adrian Mole Diaries* series by Sue Townsend (1992-2009) and *Bridget Jones's Diary* (1996).

<sup>273</sup> Although the USA was one of the first countries to introduce sex discrimination as part of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, it was not until the 1990s that women's participation in the workforce reached its peak of 74 per cent (Cotter, Hermesen, & Vannemen, 2004). Since 1990, there has been no increase in that percentage. By 2010, almost half of the American states had instituted laws that prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation or identification (US Congress, 2015).

historically marginalised and voiceless adolescent in wider conversations about belonging.

In the multiple depictions of disempowerment and feminisation in which the tropes of agentive and performative masculinity are questioned however, none is more thought provoking than Charlie's introduction to the world of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. Part science fiction, part horror, part rock and roll musical, performing in *Rocky* allows Charlie and his friends to discard the shackles of gender and age. Watching Patrick take on the high camp persona of Frank N. Furter and Sam channel the once demure but now sexually voracious Janet, Charlie experiences a sense of liberation, unsure why he feels so happy taking part in these enactments of 'corrupted' sexuality.<sup>274</sup> It is, I contend, in this uneasy liminality that Chbosky's novel finds its audience. For, Charlie's convenient inability to process nuance or analyse subtlety presents readers with a type of *tabula rasa*, one that frees the text from the evaluation of history. That is, in the process of separating feeling from judgement, as one might in applying Affect Theory for example, then it is possible to unmask the motivations behind what appear to be natural tendencies.<sup>275</sup>

If one considers *Perks* in this context, then the upsetting or confronting emotions the audience experience on reading Charlie's story feel less anomalous, less paradoxical.<sup>276</sup> Charlie's response to *Rocky* foregrounds the very human response to fill those empty reactive spaces with feelings of embarrassment or shame.<sup>277</sup> "It is very hard to watch the movie because Sam walks around in her underwear when she plays Janet. I am really trying not to think of her that way, which is becoming increasingly difficult," Charlie reveals to his reader. "I wrote her a poem after I saw her in *The Rocky Horror Picture*

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<sup>274</sup> *Perks* can be viewed as a homage to the 1975 Jim Sharman film, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, in which the transvestite scientist Frank N. Furter creates the muscular Rocky, who sexually 'corrupts' newlyweds Brad and Janet, two unsuspecting visitors to the scientist's remote laboratory. The obvious references to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* in the storyline of *Rocky* draw the readers' attention to historical notions of performative and constructed modes of masculinity.

<sup>275</sup> Patrick Colm Hogan in *Affect Studies and Literary Criticism* (2016) argues that the motivations behind negative emotions such as grief or terror are often the strongest (Hogan, 2016).

<sup>276</sup> W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley first articulated the shame that readers experience as an effect of their emotional entanglement with literary texts in *The Affective Fallacy* in 1949. Their work described the aesthetic as a conceptual framework for separating pleasure from value, and the mistake of confusing the two (Wimsatt & Beardsley, 1949).

<sup>277</sup> Ngai's examination of the character of Helga Crane in *Quicksand* (1928) notes the ability of texts to produce blank spaces where the reader steps in to produce the requisite emotion – hate, grief, anger – that, in turn, elicits either passion or sympathy from the reader (Ngai, 2005, p. 188).

*Show*, but I didn't show it to her because I was embarrassed" (p. 51). In being so frank about his uneasy relationship with the performance of sexuality, Charlie's words reward, rather than punish, the reader. By articulating and naming his awkward feelings, Charlie confirms the value and transformative potential of both beautiful and unpleasant emotions. *Perks* allows a safe literary space in which the audience can be part of that simulation.<sup>278</sup>

In this queer arena – disentangled from the heritage of pedagogical metanarrative – Chbosky presents deviance and aberrance as acceptable and common behaviours within the restrictive framework of adolescence. Although the practice of cross-dressing, according to Flanagan, is accepted across many cultures and timelines in children's literature – from Brothers Grimm to Disney (Flanagan, 1999, p. 5) – Chbosky's depictions are far from the benign and comical subversions of *Aladdin* or *The Lion King*. What *Rocky* did share with a younger children's literature was a rejection of the "limitations imposed on individuals by an inflexible, bipolar system of gender" (Flanagan, 1999, p. 13). However, where juvenile tales of transvestitism had trickery and subterfuge as their mode, *Rocky* was a defiant magnifying and repudiation of those motifs. Replete with a repertoire of gender-bending, hypersexual, promiscuous misfits, *Rocky* laid the groundwork for Chbosky's alternative story of adolescence, his text receptive and transparent, enabling an exploration of the duplicitous notions of sexual difference. Indeed, Chbosky's protagonist finds the shedding of gender artifice the most cathartic and empowering moment of his life. "Of all the things I've done this year so far," declared Charlie, "I think I like *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* the best" (Chbosky, 1999, p. 50). What appeals so intrinsically to Charlie is the characters' ability to develop and metamorphose, to (mis)shape their own identities.<sup>279</sup>

A number of cultural theorists have hypothesised on the magnetism of *Rocky* and its theme of transformation. However, the most useful is an observation by film noir critic

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<sup>278</sup> The "paradoxes of fiction-inspired emotion and tragedy-based enjoyment" that Patrick Colm Hogan describes in *Affect Studies and Literary Criticism* (2016) are useful in understanding why YA fiction is so often expected to do the work of simulating experience. The possibilities and limitations within this sphere obviously lie in the differences between individual cognition and its impact on the processing of emotion (Hogan, 2016).

<sup>279</sup> The midnight movie cult of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* involved participants acting out the film whilst it played on the screen behind them. The phenomenon, which included miming, improvisation and singing along, began at Waverly Theatre, New York in April, 1976 (Henkin, 1979) and continues on a weekly basis around the world today (Moylan, 2016).

Bruce Austin, who argues that “cult films are not *made* (as, for example, one sets out to make a musical or a western) as much as they *happen* or *become*” (Austin, 1981, p. 44). This concept speaks to Kathryn James’ hypothesis in *Death, Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary Adolescent Literature* (2009) that the persistent theme of ‘becoming’ in YA stems from a focus on the knowledge about carnality and its limits. Of particular interest is her observation that in gothic and horror novels (of which *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* must be considered an example) there is so often a fixation on the process of death and dying (James, 2009). This motif of genesis reflects the business of adolescence so neatly that despite *Rocky*’s transgressive overtures, the story of Charlie’s ‘becoming’ is enhanced rather than overshadowed by the shameless goings-on in Frank N. Furter’s laboratory. When Charlie is called on to play Rocky after the usual actor fails to arrive one night, he feels terrified yet surprisingly unshackled from the homosocial oratory that associates feelings of shame, fear and panic with vulnerability and inadequacy.<sup>280</sup> Charlie’s friend, Mary Elizabeth, asks him:

“Do you think you can play Rocky?”

“I’m not cut and hunky.”

“It doesn’t matter. Can you play him?” [...]

The next thing I know, I was wearing nothing but slippers and a bathing suit, which somebody painted gold. (Chbosky, 1999, pp. 117-118)

Charlie is in raptures when he writes to his recipient. “I won’t go into detail about the whole show, but I had the best time I ever had in my whole life. I’m not kidding,” he gushes. “I got to dance around, and I got to wear a “feather boa” in the grande finale, which I wouldn’t have thought anything of because it’s part of the show, but Patrick couldn’t stop talking about it” (Chbosky, 1999, p. 118). In this collective act of disrupting the apparatus of gender, and in the shared process of exploring the sequestered enquiries of adolescent identity, Chbosky’s characters together find a sense of belonging and becoming. When Charlie takes on the persona of Rocky “the muscular robot,” his performance of subordinated masculinity feels safe, un-haunted by the

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<sup>280</sup> See *Modernism and Masculinity* (2014) in which Natalya Lusty explores how Connell’s work underpins much of the scholarship on the social and political effects of male privilege (Lusty, 2014, p. 2).



historical practice of conflating unorthodox male enactments with the feminine.<sup>281</sup> It is only when Charlie returns his body and mind to the inhibiting obligations of the homosocial that he feels uncomfortable: “All I could think was how nice it was that everyone applauded for me and how glad I was that nobody in my family was there to see me play Rocky in a feather boa. Especially my dad” (p. 119).<sup>282</sup>

The first consideration in understanding this act of collective iconoclasm revolves around notions of intentionality. If cult status becomes rather than is made, then one needs to consider by whom it is made. The argument must be that it is made by the audience and not by the authors or the filmmakers. In ‘Portrait of a Cult Film Audience: *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*’ (1981), Austin makes the point that cult film recidivists or veterans are typically young, single and in high school or college (Austin, 1981, p. 44).<sup>283</sup> Of the many variables that Austin tracked whilst researching *Rocky* audiences – from what props patrons brought, to how often they had seen the show – the one constant is that they were there to *participate* – to shout lines back at the actors, to throw popcorn at the screen and to squirt water during the storm scenes. Indeed, the results of Austin’s study found that the overriding reason for attendance was “to be part of a group ritual” (Austin, 1981, p. 53).<sup>284</sup> In utilising *Rocky* as a metanarrative for his novel, Chbosky re-imagines and reclaims the tropes of cult cinema to his advantage. No longer is the teenage reader merely an audience member, they are the authors, actors and directors in their own cultural stories.<sup>285</sup>

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<sup>281</sup> Gender theorists Jack Halberstam (1998), Judith Lorber (1998) and Patricia Yancey Martin (1998) argue that Connell’s theory fails to acknowledge that there is no conceptual apparatus with which to distinguish femininity from subordinate masculinities unless we reduce femininity and masculinity to the practices of those genders (Schipper, 2007).

<sup>282</sup> *Rocky* as a theme of liberation speaks to a specific audience. Critic James Monaco argues in *American Film Now* that cult films are a “private genre” for “the privileged children of the middle class,” having their origins in 1960s screenings in college towns across America (Monaco, 1979, p. 66). Their content, he claims, relies on a “trash” aesthetic, which includes eccentric, often sadomasochistic characters and poor production values. The cultural shadow that these themes cast on Chbosky’s text are important to consider because they reveal why *Perks* finds its place as a totem of subcultural identity.

<sup>283</sup> At an October 1979 screening of *Rocky*, Austin and colleagues interviewed 562 patrons lined up to enter a midnight screening in Rochester, New York. The study found that most subjects were aged between 17 and 22, despite the film being R-rated (restricted to over 18s unless accompanied by an adult) and were virtually all white (Austin, 1981, p. 53).

<sup>284</sup> The phenomenon of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* relies on the audience understanding references to traditional film forms and characters in parody (Austin, 1981, p. 48).

<sup>285</sup> Twentieth-century literature critics David Glover and Scott McCracken argue that the potential for adolescent agency is exponentially increased by the re-imagining and reclaiming of texts, a process in which the reading publics are continually being remade in the adaptation of old texts into new forms (Glover & McCracken, 2012, p. 4).

The second consideration in this regard returns us to the scene of affect, and in particular, the concept of the zany. For if *Rocky* is viewed as representational of this aesthetic category, then one must presume that Chbosky expects his text to also fall into what Ngai describes as the “undeniably trivial encryption” of artworks into historical or ideological classifications such as ‘the zany’ (Ngai, 2010, p. 948).<sup>286</sup> In privileging *shared ritual* as a central theme, Chbosky allows his audience to see past the stigma and intellectual snobbery that so often attaches itself to eccentric enactments such as the burlesque of *Rocky*.<sup>287</sup> Instead, the zany is mobilised as a unifying emotional response that resists the institutionalised rhetoric of literature for the young. Indeed, after a fight with his friends, Charlie feels isolated by his inability to participate in the ritual that helped him feel part of the narrative of becoming. “So, on Friday, I went to *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. I waited until the movie had already started before I went into the theatre. I didn’t want to ruin the show for everybody.” He sits in the darkened back row and watches. “It was just so nice to see all my friends. I left before the movie was over. I drove home listening to some of the songs we listened to those times when we were infinite” (Chbosky, 1999, pp. 158-9). Charlie realises that the antidote to his distinctly ugly emotions – guilt, shame and embarrassment – is to seek out the collective state of consciousness that grounds his emotional well-being.

Despite these emphatic and empowering lessons of mutual belonging, *Perks* does not gloss over the darker inscape of adolescence. Indeed, Charlie’s emotional encounters are often fraught, couched in terms of debilitation or degradation. “I’m really glad that Christmas and my birthday are soon because that means they will be over soon because I can already feel myself going to a bad place” (Chbosky, 1999, p. 78). The moments that trouble him most are those in which he must engage with his own internal ruminations or attempt to interpret those of others. Indeed, it is his inability to process a series of repressed ugly emotions regarding his sexual abuse that catapults him into a psychosis for which he is scheduled to a mental health facility.

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<sup>286</sup> Ngai argues that aesthetic categories such as cute and zany revolve around a specific type of inconsequentiality and that ‘zany’ in particular, is typified by depictions of helplessness and impotent rage (Ngai, 2010, p. 951).

<sup>287</sup> Love makes a detailed exploration of the connection between stigma and social exclusion in *The Stigma Archive*. Of particular interest is her research into how deviant forms of the individual such as show people, carnival workers and bohemians have been historically reduced or disqualified from society, but at the same time benefit from a shared marginality (Love, 2012, p. 167).

I've been in the hospital for the past two months. They just released me yesterday. The doctor told me that my mother and father found me sitting on the couch in the family room. I was completely naked, just watching the television, which wasn't on. (Chbosky, 1999, p. 225)

What is implicit in Charlie's response to his molestation, and rather more telling than the act itself, is that the spectacle of the masculine body continues to endure the burden of psychological assault in Western literature. That is to say, the emotions of anxiety and fear continue to be cast off onto the literary body of the female subject or otherwise feminised through a diminished representation of the male.<sup>288</sup> In this respect, Charlie is not emasculated by his molestation, but by his hysterical reaction to it.<sup>289</sup> The physical violations inflicted by Aunt Helen have transferred into a psychic violence that paralyses Charlie, thwarting his ability to move from the safe and nostalgic embrace of childhood towards the self-sufficiency of adulthood. "I don't really want to talk about the questions and the answers. But I kind of figured out that everything I dreamt about my aunt Helen was true. And after a while, I realized that it happened every Saturday when we would watch television" (Chbosky, 1999, p. 225). In this moment, perhaps the reader appreciates why Charlie is frozen in a pattern of 'watching' rather than 'participating'.

Outwardly, Chbosky's articulation of the hysterical male does little to dismantle its gendered framework; however it does call into question the legacy of emotional suppression in historically bound expressions of masculinity. Throughout the novel, in every instance where declarations of the feminine are quashed or dismissed in favour of the masculine, the results are spurious and pernicious. Charlie describes himself as "very small" and "emotional" (Chbosky, 1999, p. 9). His sister refers to him as a "freak" (p. 26). So too, the adolescents who populate Charlie's world present as deviant forms of the legacy, neatly disguised in the cloak of homosociality. Brad, the football

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<sup>288</sup> In *Ugly Feelings* (2005), Ngai points to the 'castration complex' as a common framework in Western literature. She argues that much discourse around privation differentiates between 'masculine' and 'feminine', with only the former being able to experience genuine anxiety or dread. The female subject, she states, is perpetually allotted the less traumatic and less profound affective category of nostalgia or envy (Ngai, 2005, p. 213).

<sup>289</sup> For centuries, it has been common in psychiatry for the symptoms of men's 'hysteria' (a solely female term) to be referred to using other names, such as melancholy or shell shock (Brivic, 2008, p. 63).

star, is dating Nancy but lusts after Patrick; Craig, the ‘cut and hunky’ male model, is boyfriend to Sam (Samantha), yet a recurrent philanderer; and Charlie’s best friend Michael Dobson commits suicide before the novel begins because he feels that he has no-one in which to confide. In a Western society that so attentively guards its dominant homosocial rhetoric, Chbosky makes it very difficult for his teenager readers to draw a coherent meaning from these anti-establishment models. Unlike the archetypal YA framework that privileged the relationship between men over those with or between women (Nodelman & Reimer, 2003, p. 125), *Perks* inserts the male as the destructive presence in the emotional and psychological maturation of the adolescent. In so doing, Chbosky highlights not only the fragility of perpetuated hegemonic masculinities, but also their capricious nature. If masculinity means being competitive, emotionally detached and viewing women as sexual objects, then Chbosky’s characters present a blurred vision in which neither their behaviours, nor dominant renditions, produce a competent enactment of the model.

What makes *Perks* stand out in this respect is that it refuses to engage with the *unheimlich* – the strangely familiar – using the standard crisis-and-peripeteia model. The incessant primacy of the tropes that shape this model, argues Trites in *The Uncanny in Children’s Literature* (2001), are evident in all manner of contemporary teenage literature, with solipsism and physicality rather than contemplation remaining central themes in works for adolescent male (Trites, 2001, p. 162). However, Chbosky allows his readers to sit with the unanswered and uncomfortable human desire to expose and interrogate that which is incomprehensible. He offers a gentle, empathetic and nonpartisan text whose meaning comes not from any curated metonymy but from the messy and unpredictable real-life experiences that can shape the work for individual readers. As such, the novel lives multiple lives – a hybrid of queer text, subversive tract and survival guide for teenagers – allowing male readers, in particular, a more complex reading of adolescence than the dilemma-adventure-redemption fiction that was lining YA shelves. It is worth noting that in 1997, two years prior to the publication of *Perks*, the first of the *Harry Potter* series was published, with the following two published in 1998 and 1999. These titles alone were credited with rekindling readership in the 12-18 years demographic, specifically amongst males (Lebrecht, 2011). The series went on to sell more than 500 million copies.

So, although *Perks* presents the uncanny in a framework that is recognisable to teenagers dealing with the complicated issues of puberty – changing bodies, sexual relationships, friendships, self-doubt and depression – it is uncomfortably foreign in its seeming cultural dissidence. The matters that the novel raise – from adolescent suicide to date rape – are, according to Chbosky, situations that are widely occurring and needed discussing in an open and frank dialogue. Indeed, a number of young people wrote to Chbosky saying that *Perks* had saved their lives, with the original publisher describing it as having that “hand-to-hand, pass-along effect” that books suggested by teachers or librarians failed to achieve (Hare, 2012). In a 2015 interview, the author engaged with its critical reception, referring to *Perks* as “a blueprint for survival,” arguing that by banning it from school curricula for instance, which occurred on a regular basis and as recently as 2015, was a mistake.<sup>290</sup> “The classroom legitimizes these issues,” he argued of the novel’s themes, “and by taking it out of the classroom we demote these things to ‘dirty little secrets’” (Vo, 2016).

### 4.3. Reminiscence and Residual Emotion

What the work’s emphasis on the uncanny also achieves is a troubling of the persistent solipsism that attaches itself to notions of the adolescent. Specifically, Chbosky’s perseveration on nostalgia and repressed memories confronts any childish presentism by constructing reality as an amalgam of contemporary narratives woven through a historical consciousness. Certainly, Charlie’s propensity to dwell on archaic renditions of meaning-making, evident in his eagerness to engage with long-form fiction and 1970s cinema, frustrates any pigeonholing of the work as a wholly juvenile text.<sup>291</sup> Chbosky had intuitively written *Perks* for the screen and its narrative, heavy with cultural references to music and film, created a protagonist who was definitively retrospective, enthusiastically embracing the storytelling that had shaped the generations of boys and men before him.<sup>292</sup> The songs that accompany the significant moments in

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<sup>290</sup> The ALA reports that *Perks* has appeared on their top 10 Banned and Challenged Books list since its publication in 1999 until 2015 (ALA, 2014).

<sup>291</sup> The novel’s heavy references to the 1970s *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* and the song *Let’s Do the Time Warp Again* highlight the nostalgic and backward-looking intentions of *Perks*.

<sup>292</sup> It is relevant to recall that *Perks* was first co-published by a subsidiary of the MTV channel.

Charlie's year are decidedly retro, with David Bowie, Procol Harum, Nick Drake and the Moody Blues scattered amongst Suzanne Vega and The Smashing Pumpkins.<sup>293</sup> After making a mixtape for Patrick, Charlie muses: "I hope it's the kind of second side that he can listen to whenever he drives alone and [it makes him] feel like he belongs to something" (Chbosky, 1999, p. 66). For Chbosky's characters, music – and specifically that from the past – is an essential adjunct and panacea to adolescence. "I thought about how many people have loved those songs. And how many people got through a lot of bad times because of those songs. And how many people enjoyed good times with those songs. And how much those songs really mean" (pp. 66-67).

Equally, literary classics inform Charlie's future. In the classical works recommended by his English teacher, Charlie gains a pre-emptive understanding of the recurring themes that he will face in adulthood, those of injustice, prejudice and obligation.<sup>294</sup> After reading *Hamlet*, Charlie ponders his own emotional incapacity in the face of psychological trauma. "It has [...] helped me while I'm trying to figure out what's wrong with me. It didn't give me any answers necessarily, but it was helpful to know that someone else has been through it" (Chbosky, 1999, p. 147). Charlie's sentimental reflections create a very specific, backward-looking and interior dialogue. By refusing to project forward, he remains submerged in history and in his mind.<sup>295</sup> So, although many of his experiences revolve around the physical – in violations, compromises and fallibilities – Charlie's thoughts repeatedly return to the interior. At Sam's farewell party, he informs the reader: "The inside jokes weren't jokes anymore. They had become stories. Nobody brought up the bad names or the bad times. And nobody felt sad as long as we could postpone tomorrow with more nostalgia" (p. 212). The past is a

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<sup>293</sup> The novel notes that *Landslide* by Fleetwood Mac is playing in a seminal scene in which Charlie watches Sam standing up in the back of her pick-up truck whilst Patrick drives through the Fort Pitt tunnel. In the film adaptation, David Bowie's *Heroes* plays. The difference between the two songs reflects a shift from the rather slow and nihilistic sentiments of *Landslide* to a bold anthem of love, desire and ephemeral youth.

<sup>294</sup> Throughout *Perks*, Charlie is influenced by a number of texts suggested by his English teacher Bill. These include *The Fountainhead*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Peter Pan*, *The Great Gatsby*, *A Separate Peace*, *The Catcher in the Rye*, *On the Road*, *Naked Lunch* and *The Stranger*, each of which carry a significant message in relation to how Charlie may deal with the complexities of approaching adulthood.

<sup>295</sup> It is worth noting that cult YA novels such as *Divergent* and *The Hunger Games*, along with texts such as *Thirteen Reasons Why* are all written in the present tense. This technique generates an urgency and immediacy that eschews reminiscence and nostalgia.

happy place because it suspends reality and locates positive and empowering emotions in shared experiences that were once private and are now public.

Here, the active is perpetually overshadowed by the aesthetic and lyric in a cinema of the mind that elevates the male psyche above the limits of its physicality. In having Charlie relate his memoir in the past tense, Chbosky forces his protagonist to dwell on the passing of time – something that the genre had tended to obscure.<sup>296</sup> Where present-tense narratives had allowed a reader to experience the *doing*, Chbosky's encourages readers to contemplate, to analyse, to reminisce. In this way, the novel focusses on thinking as a way of deferral – delaying action, responsibility and indeed adulthood. When Sam is readying herself to leave for college, Charlie is desperate to capture a static picture of her. "I just watched her pack, and I tried to notice as many details as I possibly could. Her long hair and her thin wrists and her green eyes. I wanted to remember everything. Especially the sound of her voice" (Chbosky, 1999, p. 213).

What Chbosky is privileging in this moment is residual emotion – not memories that are obsolete or outdated, but those left behind when the object is gone and the shadow remains. Specifically, *Perks* hones in on what Acland describes in *Residual Media* as a cultural phenomenon that relies on encounters with the old (Acland, 2007, p. xx). In lingering on the remnants of past technologies, old music and superannuated literature, Chbosky tests the subcultural niches in which old media reasserts its relevance in the modern. Charlie and his friends are obsessed with redundant motifs of the past. Their playlists feature Simon and Garfunkel, Nick Drake and The Beatles; they visit charity shops looking for treasures; and Charlie's old typewriter, given as a Christmas gift by Sam and Patrick, declares the potential of writing the new on the old. Indeed, *Perks* suggests that adolescence need not be a discarding of history, but instead a productive reappropriation.

Whether these authorial attempts to recompose the past are a reaction to, or run in conjunction with, the re-staging of neo-liberalism that was occurring during the 1990s is not clear. However, Chbosky's text butts against a set of current ideologies that had

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<sup>296</sup> Of the male adolescents who read for pleasure, the cohort often appears to operate in a type of philosophical presentism, embracing what is and what could be, rather than dwelling on the past. As a result, the commissioning editor for Allen & Unwin Australia, Jodie Webster, says speculative fiction and fantasy have been standout best sellers for older boys (Webster, 2014).

begun to enforce notions of the corporation and the private market over the individual. A new wave of deregulation during the early part of the decade had shifted the onus for economic and fiscal robustness to the free market, releasing governments from obligations around welfare and community wellbeing.<sup>297</sup> This changing relationship between the self and the state generated a measurable extension of the adolescent phase by delaying the realities of work and family, producing an uncertainty and pessimism around the looming responsibility of late-century adulthood.<sup>298</sup> Charlie observes:

My dad had glory days once. I've seen pictures of him when he was young. He was a very handsome man [...] Sometimes, I look at my parents now and wonder what happened to make them the way they are [...] My dad played college baseball [...] but he had to stop when Mom got pregnant with my brother. That's when he started working at the office. I honestly don't know what my dad does. (Chbosky, 1999, p. 56)

This was undoubtedly the sombre reality for many teenagers who were meanwhile enjoying the stories of deferred adulthood in television series such as *Melrose Place*, *Friends* and *Beverley Hills 90210*.<sup>299</sup> Chbosky does not aid this spectre, with his range of pathetic and transgressive adult characters presenting a rather unappealing picture that in every instance relies on detached or abnormal emotions. Chbosky's most commonly occurring motif in this respect is 'the secret'. In addition to clandestine homosexual affairs, abusive boyfriends and paedophilic aunts, these secrets include collective understandings that devalue the relationship between and amongst males. Charlie's own family produces the most poignant example of these learned behaviours: "[We were] sitting around, watching the final episode of *M\*A\*S\*H*, and I'll never forget it even though I was very young," Charlie recalls. "My mom was crying. My

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<sup>297</sup> Although neoliberalism in the USA can be traced back to the 1970s, the Clinton administration introduced the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act in the 1990s, which was intended to reassert the 'American work ethic' (Karagiannis, Madjd-Sadjadi, & Sen, 2013, p. 58).

<sup>298</sup> The notion of 'extending' adolescence that exists in the 21<sup>st</sup> century can be traced to the 1990s, with research indicating a statistically significant peak in the propensity of individuals to remain in education longer and marry later. The percentage of students going on to matriculate from high school peaked in America in 1996. Those entering university rose from 33 per cent in 1960 to 69 per cent by 2010. As a result, the number of 30-year-olds who reported they had ever been in full-time employment dropped from 63 per cent in 1966 to 57 percent in 1994. Domestically, the median age of first marriages shifted from 20 years in 1960 to 25 years by 1999 (Furstenberg, 2000).

<sup>299</sup> These popular series about '20-somethings' transitioning from college life into adulthood ran on American television between 1990 and 2004.



sister was crying. My brother was using every ounce of strength he had not to cry. And my dad left during one of the final moments” (Chbosky, 1999, p. 19). Charlie secretly follows him to the kitchen.

I saw my dad making a sandwich [...] and crying. He was crying harder than even my mom. And I couldn't believe it. When he finished making his sandwich, he put away the things in the refrigerator and stopped crying and wiped his eyes and saw me. Then, he walked up, patted my shoulder, and said, “This is our little secret, okay, champ? (Chbosky, 1999, p. 19)

The repression of human instincts – of vulnerability, empathy and compassion – highlight for Chbosky's readers the counter-intuitive behaviours that dictated the pantomime of homosociality and the mystifying rituals that legitimised its performance. By illuminating this space, *Perks* identifies the impossible likeness of the late twentieth-century male that in the wake of modernity had become an ideological stereotype of the archetypal hero. By challenging the historical endorsement of the masculine enactments that had become codified as a type of truth, Chbosky's work makes an important segue in the trajectory of YA. His queer depictions of masculinity broached in some way the difficulties encountered by the first authors to write about sexual difference in teenage fiction. Children's literature critics Cart and Christine Jenkins cite Daly's *Seventeenth Summer* (1942) and L'Engle's *The Small Rain* (1945) as two of the first in this segment, with their novels featuring either a gay or transvestite character. However, these depictions invariably cast the character as incidental and observed with intrigue. Rather than playing any pivotal role, they were used to highlight the protagonist's naivety in the ways of a changing world after World War II (Cart & Jenkins, 2006, p. 5).

In the more liberal setting of late-century literature, Chbosky attempts to demystify this model of the male other – be it an adolescent, a homosexual, a submissive male or a deficient father – and present the difficulty in rendering any positive alternative identities in the face of history. Charlie's conversation with his friends about the difference between *Nirvana's* Kurt Cobain and *The Beatles'* John Lennon highlights the difficult issue of measuring contemporary value with a historical apparatus. Patrick suggests that, “the problem was that since everything has happened already, it makes it hard to break new ground,” and that everything in life already has a context. Bob

comments that it is, “all about our parents not wanting to let go of their youth and how it kills them when they can’t relate to something.” Sam muses that once a person begins to compare themselves to another, “their own personal voice would be less from that moment on” (Chbosky, 1999, p. 112). Although Charlie realises that their discussion accomplishes nothing in particular, “it felt great to sit there and talk about our place in things” (p. 113).

Here, the question of perspective becomes central, and specifically the role of the producer and the audience in that construction. As an avid reader, Chbosky cites *The Catcher in the Rye*, which he read in high school, as one of the novels that most influenced his writing style, evident in the repeated critical comparison between Salinger’s work and *Perks* (Kirkus Reviews, 1999). However, perhaps most critical to those observations is the understanding that Chbosky’s career as a screenwriter, and his overriding intention to realise his first novel on film, alters the reading experience for his audience.<sup>300</sup> In this context, it is useful to examine what Adorno refers to as the “retarding aspect of film” in which the primarily representational process of photography places an inordinately “intrinsic significance on the object, as foreign to subjectivity” (Adorno & Levin, 1981, p. 202). The genericising effect of the representational at the expense of the individual is an imperative consideration in examining Chbosky’s writing because it foregrounds the shifting social reality of the late-century adolescent and their environment. *Perks* speaks emphatically to Adorno’s notion that film, by its very nature, is more prone to the imbrication of society than any other art form because it cannot dissolve or modify its objects to an extent that it ceases to be representational and achieves the purely aesthetic (Adorno & Levin, 1981, p. 202).

My argument is that the success of Chbosky’s work, both in its literary and later box office incarnations, is not only due to audiences connecting with its content, but also its ability to tap into the new medial representations that would shape the twenty-first century teenager.<sup>301</sup> In writing cinematically, and in producing a conscious photographic duplication of that text, Chbosky’s work resonates with what was becoming the current

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<sup>300</sup> Chbosky would go on to write and direct the 2012 cinematic adaptation of *Perks*. After later working in television production, he returned to filmmaking, directing *Wonder*, based on the novel by R. J. Palacio, which was released in November 2017.

<sup>301</sup> According to *The Numbers* data service, *Perks*, which cost US\$13 million to make, grossed US\$33 million worldwide at the box office and US\$17 million in DVD sales (The Numbers, 2017).

reality – the new way of ‘looking’ and ‘seeing’ – for Western adolescents who regarded screens as a ubiquitous feature of their everyday meaning-making. Indeed, *Perks* acts as an emulous and prophetic pronouncement of that interaction with visual media.<sup>302</sup> Yet, when the screenplay was released in 2012, a number of critics commented that the work’s remediation to film had somehow diminished its appeal. It had, they argued, curtailed the capacity for reflection and imagination on the part of its audience.<sup>303</sup> In one particularly harsh review in *Slant* magazine, the film is described as a “risible, somewhat revolting piece of pop martyrdom, made for and isolated to the damaged middle class” (Cabin, 2012). However, others hailed Chbosky’s rendering of the teenage male ego in flux as rather revolutionary. Renowned film historian Roger Ebert, who by then was aged 70, commented that, “All of my previous selves still survive somewhere inside of me, and my previous adolescent would have loved ‘The Perks of Being a Wallflower’” (Ebert, 2012).

What these disparate opinions achieve is to return us to the question of perspective and the lens, language and semiotics of a medium that attempted to straddle the space between the literary and the spectacular.<sup>304</sup> Arguably, what Chbosky’s film produces is a parallax view that runs counter to what Mulvey describes as the incessant focus on straight and socially established interpretations of sexual difference that control images, erotic ways of looking and the notion of the spectacle (Mulvey, 1989, p. 14). Therefore, although Charlie comes to life both within the pages of a cinematic text and later in celluloid form, Chbosky is careful to accentuate the genericising and polarising effect of the camera’s gaze. When Sam and Patrick ask Charlie to name his favourite band and book, he has little trouble: The Smiths and *This Side of Paradise* by F. Scott Fitzgerald, respectively. However, when quizzed about favourite movies, Charlie struggles. “I don’t know really. They’re all the same to me” (Chbosky, 1999, p. 22). In this moment, he identifies himself as trapped in the cognitive space between movement and fixity, with

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<sup>302</sup> Adorno articulated in a letter to Benjamin in 1936 that, “reality [in film] is always *constructed* with an infantile attachment to the mimetic” (Adorno & Benjamin, 1999, p. 131).

<sup>303</sup> In *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1997) Adorno claims that cinematic and visual media has the tendency to stifle the imaginary world by presenting ‘complete’ pictures (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1997, p. 126),

<sup>304</sup> See discussion by Peirce on semiotics and the notion that human communication operates in a world in which “we think only in signs” (Peirce, 1931-1935, p. 2:302).

film merely a representation of its various states of inertia and acceleration.<sup>305</sup> He is from Generation X – he loves U2, sharing burgers at The Big Boy and hanging out with his friends. Yet, he is nostalgic and prone to reminiscence – he reads classic literature, he listens to adult-oriented rock, he loves *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* and although he attempts to repress memories of the past, he is forced to reconcile his childhood assault as the origin of his present psychological instability.

Chbosky's way of looking enables a panorama that, in equal measure, references the past, present and future. Despite some rather bleak observations about mental health, alternate sexuality and peer group pressure, *Perks* retains a defiant optimism. For if one accepts that teenagers seek identity and meaning through the 'texts' with which they engage – be they written, visual or aural – the retrospective sentiments of *Perks* should have run contrary to the forward-looking ego of the adolescent male.<sup>306</sup> However, perhaps the success of both the novel and film confirmed that the *medium* matters less than the work's ability to project what is and what could be, allowing the audience to find themselves within the story. The problem for Charlie is the terrifying prospect of being the author of his story (his-story). When Bill the school English teacher – advocate and purveyor of the introspective and feminising realm of fiction literature – alerts readers to the fact that Charlie's passivity is dichotomous and problematic, he is calling attention to the arbitrary and ironic obligations of gender in the construction of that perspective. "Bill looked at me looking at people, and after class, he asked me what I was thinking about, and I told him." Then Bill asked, "Do you always think this much, Charlie? It's just that sometimes people use thought to not participate in life" (Chbosky, 1999, p. 26). In placing the male rather than the female in what Mulvey describes as the "half-light of the imaginary," (Mulvey, 1989, p. 20) Chbosky recalibrates his aperture to focus on the patriarchal unconscious that persistently promotes homosocial relationships in contemporary social systems.

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<sup>305</sup> In *Residual Media* (2007), Will Straw explores in 'Embedded Memories' (Straw, 2007, p. 3) anthropologist Greg Urban's notion of the old within the new (Urban, 2000, p. 6). Urban's argument is that every culture relies on a system of 'delaying' that, in turn, produces an integrity evident in what hides and persists. These remnants are evident in Chbosky's repeated return to interiority and the stillness of captured memories – not moving pictures – as the ultimate form of memory.

<sup>306</sup> According to Erikson, ego strength in adolescent boys is driven by concerns over identity formation in which teenage males channel the visceral and temporal notions of desire and fantasy. Their tendency is not to look to the past for social and cultural cues in this process, but to align themselves with the present in a search for 'belonging' (Erikson, 1963).

In disrupting the historical binaries of male/female, subject/object, gazer/target, *Perks* also agitates the notion of scopophilia as a key pleasure in the cinematic gaze. Rather than the ‘looking’ being a productive and essential instinct of sexuality, for Charlie it presents a barrier. Although characters such as Patrick derive gratification from the homoerotic gaze, it lacks the power over its subject that Freud identified as intrinsic to its potency. When Patrick watches Brad playing quarterback on the football pitch, his longing stares exert no influence and effect no change. They are benign. Charlie’s gaze too, is impotent. When he retreats to his bedroom during his brother’s party and a couple ask if they can use the room to ‘make out,’ rather than leaving, Charlie stays and watches. However, he gains no sexual pleasure from the episode. “Did they know you were in here [...] Why didn’t you stop them?” his sister asks, incredulous. “I didn’t know what they were doing,” he answers. “You pervert,” was the last thing my sister said before she left the room” (Chbosky, 1999, p. 34).

For its adolescent male audience, *Perks* appears to confirm that ‘watching’ – be it in the form of reading, film-going or social observation – is an inhibitor to agency. Charlie’s friends commend his ability to observe and understand – to be a wallflower – however, he only ever feels truly alive when he is ‘participating’ – a realisation that becomes the story’s leitmotif. Indeed, both the literary and cinematic versions of Chbosky’s work end on the same image of Charlie riding in the back of Sam’s pick-up truck, with his thoughtful voiceover and an emotional soundtrack completing his story of self-discovery.

I was crying because I was suddenly very aware of the fact that it was me standing up in that tunnel with the wind over my face. Not caring if I saw downtown. Not even thinking about it. Because I was standing in the tunnel. And I was really there. And that was enough to make me feel infinite. (Chbosky, 1999, p. 230)

Rather than perceiving infinity as a temporal notion of endless life, the infinity of which Charlie speaks is corporeal. It elicits a sense of boundless and immeasurable capacity

for living.<sup>307</sup> Even in Chbosky's bookish, emotional and highly introverted protagonist, this need for agentive and physical legitimacy declares itself. Despite railing against the performative markers of masculinity, Charlie still feels empowered and enlivened by their demonstrable validation of his worth – he feels 'infinite' only when he is physically participating in the meaning-making of his adolescence.<sup>308</sup>

This recognition marks a significant turning point in the novel, with Charlie realising that rather than prior 'texts' – both actual and metaphorical – haunting his present, and rather than historical forms of adolescence interpolating into the new, he must break free of their fictionality to elicit a *bodily* response. That is to say, the potential of his life is no longer trapped inside his mind as a concept, but emerges as an *affect* – as a physical manifestation of the imagined that enables the leap between thought and action, and in the same way, between fiction and reality.<sup>309</sup> For Chbosky's teenage male readers, the observation and documentation of this important distinction may well have been the allure of the novel, it acting much like a scrapbook that enables its audience to commonplace shared mementoes. In this respect, the work offers a diorama of middle-American adolescence. Devoid of the typical refinements and percolations of an omniscient narrator, the text provides the reader an opportunity to distil their *own* meaning from a script that privileged difference.<sup>310</sup> Indeed, Chbosky's rebuttal of historical homosociality in favour of singular integrity is evident in the quiet insertion of Ayn Rand's *The Fountainhead* (1943) into the stack of books Charlie reads during the

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<sup>307</sup> This notion is relevant if one considers the cognitive studies of adolescent males conducted by Ingalhalikar et al in 2013. The study involved 949 adolescents with an equal distribution amongst male and female subjects using fMRI to examine the diffusion-based structural connectome of the brain in identifying novel sex differences (Ingalhalikar et al., 2014). The research, presented to the American National Academy of Sciences, identified that when the structure of adolescent brains begins to bifurcate at puberty, boys' brains identifiably change and adapt to facilitate connectivity between visually and spatially orientated perception and co-ordinated action, whereas female brains develop for higher level analytical and intuitive processing.

<sup>308</sup> These enactments certainly translated to the audience more effectively on screen than they did on the page with the novel reaching a print run of 1.5 million copies worldwide, compared to box office ticket sales in the region of 4 million. DVD and digital download sales account for another 1.7 million viewers of the film (The Numbers, 2017).

<sup>309</sup> It is worth noting here that Freud argued on the power of reverie in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) that even though the *content* of a text may be imagined, the emotional response to it is very real (Freud, 1900, p. V: 460).

<sup>310</sup> The success of YA novelists such as John Green, author of the best-selling *Looking for Alaska* (2005), *Paper Towns* (2008) and *The Fault in our Stars* (2012), and listed as one of *Time* magazine's 100 Most Influential People in the World in 2014 (Woodley, 2014), arguably relied on the market for contemporary realism forged by Chbosky in the decade before. Green named Chbosky's remediation of *Perks* as the "best film about adolescence in decades" (Twitter, 2012).

course of the novel's year-long trajectory. Rand's treatise on the triumph of the individual over the collective is no doubt to be read as a manifesto on the essentiality of forging one's own path on the road to adulthood, and literature's place in that process.

After finishing *The Fountainhead*, Charlie remarks, "It was a really great experience [...] It was a different book from the others because it wasn't about being a kid [...] I took what the author wrote about and put it in terms of my own life. Maybe that's what being a filter means" (Chbosky, 1999, p. 181). This potent message translates for those readers or viewers who might have missed its subtlety into *Perks'* most famous teenage epithet. In a conversation with his English teacher, Charlie discloses that his sister stays with a boyfriend who hits her. "[Bill] got this very serious look on his face after I told him, and he said something to me I don't think I will forget this semester or ever [...] Charlie, we accept the love we think we deserve" (p. 27). The aphorism and its sentiment have transcended both the text and its remediation, inserting itself into pop culture parlance. Superficially, it acknowledges the insecurities of the human ego. However, for Chbosky's audience a more productive reading would say that it delivers the message: in every relationship, one seeks out a reflection of the self.

# Conclusion

## The Next Chapter in *The Boy's Own* Story

In tracing the historical arc of the adolescent male in seminal YA novels since the 1950s, the findings of this thesis support a number of conclusions. Through a series of close analyses of texts, representations, critical approaches and patterns of reception, the perceived and actual demotion of corporeal and agentive masculinity in fiction for the young reveals itself as an intrinsic factor in the diminishing appeal of long-form prose amongst teenage males. Unexpectedly, it is the later texts – such as *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* in which marginalised and queer subjectivities are privileged – that have had the least relevance for adolescent boys. Although often deemed popular successes, the considerable difference in book sales between a best-selling 1950s YA title for males and its equivalent in 2018 is in the region of 100:1. By tracking the chronological lineage of this significant change in the popularity of YA texts, this thesis finds the reasons for the discrepancy to be complex and myriad. However, what becomes evident is that the cultural and political shifts in the hegemonic discourse around masculinity, the well-worn literary images of the brutalised male body of war and the residual influence of Romantic fiction on the modern form are all heavily implicated in this rapid change of course.

Across four case studies, focussed on specific turning points in the genre, each new literary mediation of the adolescent male appears to subject readers to an amalgam of persistent archaic characters and scenarios shaped by the legacy of YA's literary genealogy. Specifically, a close examination of the language, narratives, plots and outcomes invariably reveals that the story of the postmodern adolescent male appears to rest on variants of children's literature that are tethered to the pious works of the fifteenth century, the fantastical texts that typified the sixteenth century and the instructive hornbooks of the 1800s. However, the thesis pinpoints the gendering of fiction literature during the nineteenth century, in works such as *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *The Boy's Own* series, as a significant factor in the subsequent turn away from leisure-time reading amongst adolescent boys. Perhaps, more



importantly, the case studies reveal that it is the subtle changes in embodied and metacognitive language during that time that have been most damaging, inflicting a progressive obligation on the literature for and about the Western teenage male to produce mimetic authenticity. Indeed, even in instances where the historical literary formula of heroism, bravery and psychological grit in depictions of hegemonic masculinity has been obliterated – as demonstrated in the majority of the exemplary case study texts – the thesis finds that in their literariness the works tend to paralyse the very dynamic and chimerical nature of the adolescent male himself.

With time and across countless re-renderings of the anti-hero, the maverick and the hoodlum, those fictional renditions in print have slowly served to estrange the young male reader from the stories for and about his world. As an example of this steady withdrawal, Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* is reported to have sold in excess of 65 million copies (Burke, 2011), whereas a current best-selling YA title aimed at male readers, such as *The Maze Runner* series (2009-2016) by James Dashner, has sold only 10 million copies (Dashner, 2014).<sup>311</sup> The anomaly in this trend is, of course, *Harry Potter*, with total sales of 500 million copies across seven titles. However, the important point of clarification in considering Rowling's work is that although her writing is aimed at the juvenile market, it is neither specifically targeted at male readers, nor does it appeal solely to the adolescent reader. In fact, those aged 30 to 45 are the most likely readers of the series (Stanton, 2017).

For this reason, methods of cognitive narratology were specifically applied to extend Roberta Seelinger Trites' theory that the psychological and physical growth of teenage boys is "mapped" onto male characters through embodied language (Trites, 2012, p. 65). Attempting to bridge the gap between the text and the minds of its readers, the thesis exposes the changing notion of experience as a key feature in boys' engagement with fiction. As one would expect, the evolving relevance of visual semiotics, which are traced through an examination of television, cinema and computer-mediated environments at different points in the history of YA, prove to be an influencing factor in adolescent reading habits. However, by returning in each of the case studies to the way in which the physical body of the male is spoken about in literature, it becomes

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<sup>311</sup> The success of Dashner's print series follows the now-common routine of producing a cinematic tie-in for popular YA titles.

evident that narratives of agency, rather than agency itself, are a central impediment to adolescent males and their relationship with long-form fiction.

In focussing specifically on unconventional stories of ‘becoming’, the case studies identify Western imaginings of the adolescent male as discreetly impeded by historical iterations of literary masculinity. Indeed, literature’s manifestly slow rhythm and edifying intention appears to prevent the enactments of teenage gender that are so often proscribed through the cultural stories of fiction itself and in time come to make up a perceived ‘reality’. Recalling Jerry Renault in *The Chocolate War*:

He didn’t want to return to grammar school violence, the cherished honor of the school-yard that wasn’t honor at all, the necessity of proving yourself by bloody noses and black eyes and broken teeth. Mainly, he didn’t want to fight for the same reason he wasn’t selling the chocolates – he wanted to make his own decisions, do his own thing, like they said. (Cormier, 1974, p. 201)

This legacy of performative and spectacularised masculinity, which began with literature such as Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, haunts even the most anarchic postmodern texts in narratives that draw attention to, but at the same time incapacitate, masculine agency (London, 1993). The case studies found that in placing an inordinate primacy on the embodiments and enactments of gender, rather than foregrounding the subjectivity of the teenage male, the physical body itself became, as Trites describes it, the site of contested institutional dominance in stories of American adolescence (Trites, 2000, p. x). By assigning Love’s practice of ‘surface reading’ to this notion, the thesis built a slow but definitive image of embodied language as inseparable from the ideations of adolescent identity formation.

Taking account of the author’s productive environment, in addition to the dispositions of its readers, the case studies re-read the chosen YA texts from a Bourdieusian perspective, specifically focussing on the chronological progression and overlapping of the motifs of embodiment from 1950 until the early twentieth century. In so doing, this work uncovers not a palimpsest, not a rewriting of adolescent fictions, but a regenerating text that contains substantial and debilitating residual traces of narrative history. Within the literary ‘body’ of the teenage male, this thesis identifies three distinct elements that continue to shape the contemporary status of YA, and are

discussed here in brief. The first derives from the genre's form as necessarily reliant on the feminised and domestic genealogy of eighteenth century fiction (Armstrong, 1987, p. 96). This legacy reveals itself in male protagonists who are perennially isolated by their love of literature, which in turn leads to introspection and a failure to 'perform' competent enactments of gender. The most conspicuous of these is Chbosky's interpolation of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* onto a story of adolescent 'becoming'. The second is the imbrication of Freud's shell-shocked soldier onto literary images of the teenage male, and more recently those articulated on film and television that brought the broken bodies of World War II and Vietnam's returned soldiers into the living rooms of ordinary citizens. Cormier's work, in particular, trades on these disturbing figures to dehumanise his subjects, thereby exposing what he believed during the 1970s to be the malevolent influence of the State over the individual.

The third sphere of influence that reveals itself in the case studies is Wertham's 1950s articulation of the juvenile delinquent, which continues to habituate and burden the adolescent male of literature. Where Huckleberry Finn and *The Boy's Own* had imbued the culturally subservient teenage form with a shrewd sense of morality, post-World War II texts for teenage boys presented an anachronistic model of the domestic and physically compromised male in crisis.<sup>312</sup> This construction produces a fictive effigy of adolescent boyhood that remains in a perpetual state of endeavour, yet is hampered by personifications that bear the burden of society's ills (Faulkner, 2011). The mobilisation of YA as a tool of edification in this respect became an important exploration in this thesis, and specifically the deployment of *The Outsiders* by educators to lure reluctant male readers to fiction during the 1960s. However, a careful tracing reveals that these tactics may have indeed hindered the cause, with an American study entitled 'Ten Years of Research on Adolescent Literacy, 1994-2004: A Review', revealing that students who dislike the compulsory reading set at senior school are more likely to become non-readers later in life and suffer with self-identity issues (Phelps, 2005).

Thus, the rules and relationships that dictate the production, consumption and critical reception of YA provide a valuable line of enquiry into the multilingual dimensions that

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<sup>312</sup> In a controversial essay 'Come Back to the Raft Ag'in, Huck Honey!' (1948), Fiedler argues that the relationship between Jim and Huck features distinct homosexual overtones, a theme that he claims has since been at the heart of American literature (Fiedler, 1948).

emerge between readers, writers and educators. In this regard, Mallan's theories on the influence of the marketplace provided a useful base from which to explore how ideologies intersect with an inherent subjection and often a critical neglect of YA as middlebrow fiction. As the case studies reveal, the critical determination to read adolescent texts in the 'correct' way from the 1950s onwards has inflicted on the genre a legacy of persistent mediation and subordination.

Consequently, texts that appear familiar in that they use a common set of language rules and textual themes, become equally foreign to the contemporary adolescent male in that they emanate from within a system that the reader does not yet understand – a social, moral, political and capital frame of reference that dictates its output. Thus, the exemplary texts examined in this thesis map a journey that, somewhere between the wholesome goodness of *Boy's Own* and the darkness of *The Maze Runner*, many adolescent boys have decided they no longer want to take. A summary of the case study findings follows:

### *The Catcher in the Rye*

The critical and popular reception of *The Catcher in the Rye* confirmed the birth and evolution of the YA genre. Importantly, it ring-fenced a series of thematic tendencies that, despite having their roots in a 1950s post-war psyche, continue to influence the field today. What made the work conspicuous, notwithstanding its profanity and references to prostitutes, homosexuals and drug use, was that it was expected to provide a mimetic rendition of the adolescent male psyche. Where earlier fiction for the young – such as *Peter Pan* (1906-1911), *The Wind in the Willows* (1908), *The Hobbit* (1937) and *The Secret Seven* (1949-1963) – had generally dwelt in fantasy and heroic narrative, a historical retracing revealed that *Catcher* had almost always been critically evaluated on its authenticity as a literary 'proof' rather than a work of realist fiction. Indeed, it was one of the first works to complicate what Felski describes as the lineage of literary masculinity that insists on narratives of historical progress that have the sovereignty of 'reality' as their guiding principle (Felski, 1995, p. 101). Salinger's Holden Caulfield casually discarded any valourised notions of history – "all that David Copperfield kind of crap" (Salinger, 1951, p. 3) – and shaped a new and uncomfortable vision of the

troubled young American male that would permeate the characters and plots of YA for years to come.<sup>313</sup>

Specifically, the case study established that metaphor and hyperbole were Salinger's key instruments in articulating the psychological journey that took his protagonist from high school classroom to psychiatric institution in the space of four days. In foregrounding metaphor and the instruments of human interaction that provide the concepts and philosophies by which we live and speak about ourselves (Lakoff, 2012, p. ix), the case study proposed the mind and its language as essential rather than auxiliary elements in the identity formation of adolescent males. Applying Lakoff and Johnson's schema, which categorises time and the body as metaphoric resources (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999, p. 161), along with Erikson's hypothesis of 'identity crisis' (Erikson, 1963), the importance of language as a tool of surrogate experience in the lives of adolescent males made itself clear throughout the study. The distinct difference between *Catcher* and the texts populating the genre at the time was specifically that in Salinger's raw and honest language and its first-person narrative, it did not *feel* like a fiction.<sup>314</sup>

In direct contrast, the physical body of the adolescent male, more than any other feature in Salinger's work, underwent a fundamental devaluing that the case studies demonstrated has lingered in the genre ever since. Salinger's writing of the corporeal, which was deeply affected by a series of dehumanising encounters he experienced during his active service in World War II, seeped through in uncomfortable depictions of intimacy, sexuality and performative masculinity. Alongside these unsettling representations, the appearance of mainstream pornography during the 1950s, in which highbrow literature merged with 'soft porn', began to legitimise the erotic gaze and further complicate images and concepts of contemporary masculinity.<sup>315</sup> By layering America's political history of both celebrating and debasing the male body over Salinger's own encounters with war and modern sexuality, the now common trope of transposing adult experience onto the body of the adolescent boy in YA was established. What the interrogation of *Catcher* and its reception identified most

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<sup>313</sup> See discussion in Felski's *The Gender of Modernity* (1995) on the notion of history as progress in the narratives of masculinity (Felski, 1995, p. 101).

<sup>314</sup> Gallagher describes the categorising of literature into non-fiction and fiction as the historic tool with which we tell apart 'fact' from 'deception' (2006, p. 338).

<sup>315</sup> Hugh Hefner and his associates established *Playboy* in 1953.

emphatically was that the body and mind of the adolescent male in fiction would become a political conduit to channel a growing discontent with regimes that dictated and regularised the individual.

Where nineteenth-century fiction had celebrated a sense of wonder and empowerment around the anatomy of the male body in *Boy's Own*-style texts, Salinger's twentieth-century model moved away from those practical modes of address that had centred on nature, games and sport. The repercussions of altering both the tone and substance of literature for boys during that period was significant, with an identifiable change in male reading practices that continues today. A research study entitled *What Kids are Reading*, conducted amongst one million British school students in 2017, found that across all cohorts, boys tend to read books pitched below their age level, and that boys also fail to read as thoroughly as girls (Topping, 2017). This report is perhaps the most convincing evidence available that the movement away from instructional text types for boys, towards forms that are more inclined to invoke 'affect', have diffused a sense of agency amongst potential male readers and instead promoted the more nebulous concept of 'feelings'. This thesis finds that Salinger's work partly precipitated this shift, affecting an enduring generic representation that marks the physical and psychological experiences of adolescent masculinity as dangerous and potentially incapacitating.

### *The Outsiders*

Sixteen years later, *The Outsiders*, authored by a teenaged S. E. Hinton, attempted to replicate the negotiations of class division, social position-taking and corporeal violence of 1960s America. In what has become a recurring historical pattern, educators scrambled to adopt the text as a way of introducing reticent male readers to the improving powers of literature. However, for a work that was so visceral in its language and plot, its unwitting appropriation of Salinger's metaphoric flourishes and witty aphorisms suspended its characters in a type of literary limbo. For the first time in YA's short lifespan, the novel form began to work against the inherent presentism of its audience and specifically their desire to 'see' the story, rather than imagine it in their own minds. The visual pleasures of cinema, to which Hinton repeatedly pays homage, became infinitely more adept at articulating the experience of adolescence in this era. In

many respects, this recalibration of meaning-making towards visual and aural modes threatened to reduce the novel to an archival narration of the lives of its audience.<sup>316</sup>

By utilising Love's method of 'surface reading', the focus of this case study became the words on the page, rather than the secret history they potentially revealed. By attending to the heroic metaphors that pervade Hinton's central characters, this examination revealed that the author had returned to the Romantic tropes of literary masculinity that were evident in her references to Dickens' *Great Expectations*, Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* and the poetry of Frost.<sup>317</sup> This reversion unwittingly aligned with her own immersion in a contemporary discourse of adolescent masculinity that was increasingly prescriptive and pathologising in its focus on the perceived dissonance of the physical and psychological. Tracing the distinctly humanistic philosophies that were permeating schools and universities during the late 1960s proved to be a fruitful intervention in this respect. It is clear that the model of patriarchal and pastoral instruction that favoured a reductive style of observation, identification, correction and exemplification during this period had begun to dictate a new relationship between the teacher and the student, one that privileged the messenger whilst subordinating the receiver.<sup>318</sup> Although this pedagogical approach did not necessarily disadvantage boys, it did problematise the process of information-gathering for males by relying on constructivist frameworks that situated the 'learner' as an active sense-maker who creates knowledge through dynamic, rather than passive interaction.<sup>319</sup>

Tracing the ongoing critical and popular reception to *The Outsiders* in the shadow of this educational paradigm, the case study uncovered what is one of its key findings: that filtering any form of meaning-making through a literary authority – an author, critic or teacher – denies adolescent males the essential self-affirmation they seek through the abstract, reward-driven and often physical outlets of 'play'. The long-term consequences of this partisan relationship are certainly evident in studies conducted in

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<sup>316</sup> It is no coincidence that Coppola's film remediation some 16 years later was generated by a group of schoolchildren asking him to realise their favourite book 'in pictures'.

<sup>317</sup> The process of 'surface reading' concentrates on literal meaning and visible material forms of social reality as a way of interpreting texts (Love, 2013, pp. 411-412).

<sup>318</sup> See further discussion in Hunter (1988) *Culture and Government: The Emergence of Literary Education*, p. 214.

<sup>319</sup> These theories, posited by psychologist Lev Vygotsky, were later adopted by Dewey and Piaget (Dewey, 1912, 1916; Piaget, 1969, 1972).

2014 by the American research body, Common Sense Media, which found that boys are now less than half as likely as girls to nominate reading novels as a source of leisure-time enjoyment (Common Sense Media, 2014, p. 20). Just as convincing in this regard are the results of a further *What Kids are Reading* study conducted in early 2018 in the United Kingdom, again drawing from a cross-section of more than 4,000 schools, which found that when mid-adolescent males do read, they are almost three times as likely to choose non-fiction texts over novels (Topping, 2018).

### *The Chocolate War*

If authors of the 1960s, led by Hinton's depiction of America's working poor, had used literature to broach the subject of a decaying social fabric – and with it the embattled bodies of its young men – the 1970s marked a move towards a more nihilistic and visual semiotics that recast the adolescent male in the throes of a psychological terror. *The Chocolate War* set a pall over the potential and future history-making of the teenager. The corporeal violations and invalidations that had typified the adolescent boys of previous YA now took a sinister turn that deeply disturbed the concept of the child as an innocent.<sup>320</sup> What made Cormier's work so menacing was that its move away from the sentimental and fantastical stories of youth had dismantled the historically benevolent rapport between author and reader. Cormier, in fact, stated that there was no oblique optimism in his work, that his message was clear: you could buck the system, but you could never beat it.<sup>321</sup>

This deconstruction became evident in a popular culture that legitimised and promoted the male gaze. From low-budget horror and risqué comedy, to cold war psychodrama and narratives of alien invasion, the cultural stories of men and boys were being recalibrated on film.<sup>322</sup> Tracing the objectification of the female subject and the sublimated or deficient male in these environments, this case study explored the ramifications of a generational literature that was informed and affected by voyeuristic

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<sup>320</sup> Faulkner in *The Importance of Being Innocent: Why We Worry about Children* (2011) argues that the literary mediation of children as innocents forms a by-product of the juvenile as a proxy to speak of wider societal problems (Faulkner, 2011).

<sup>321</sup> See interview with Cormier in 1984 in *The New York Times Book Review* (Honan, 2000).

<sup>322</sup> A range of bold genre cinema characterised the 1970s, from Stanley Kubrick's psychological dystopias and futuristic works by George Lucas and Steven Spielberg, to the war dramas of Coppola.



and malevolent surveillance. Cormier's text positioned itself as a censure of the dominant homosocial mode, exposing the duplicitous nature of masculine virility and competence through the compromised spectres of celibate priests, impotent schoolboys and emotionally deficient fathers. In this space, the antithetical contract of Cormier's 1970s novel revealed itself as one that required of its readers the slow, singular and introspective metacognition of literary engagement, whilst denying them the satisfaction of the textbook happy ending.<sup>323</sup> In this respect, Cormier's insurgent narrative shifted YA further still from its historic connections with wholesome, good-natured childhood literature towards the relentless and brutal recounting of bodies and minds under attack.

Surveying Cormier's later work, which included themes of terrorism, biological warfare and espionage, it is clear that the destruction of 'false' experience was the driving force behind his writing. Through narrative, context and character, his novels reflected the growing discontent of the individual in a society that closely guarded its structures of institutional dominance. The Watergate scandal was a notable turning point in this process, fuelling a deep domestic mistrust of the State apparatus.<sup>324</sup> How this translated to the everyday was evident in a text that acknowledged the immense irony of fictionalising and attempting to trap on paper the psychosocial domain of the adolescent male. In a work that eventually submitted to the inherent institutionalising and homogenising of boys' minds and bodies, *The Chocolate War* painted a rather fatalistic picture for its readers. Its language spoke of shared adolescent realities – of rebellion and intimidation, of introversion and exclusion – yet its outcomes offered neither the authorial comfort of the *Bildungsroman* nor the escapism of fantastical juvenilia.

The case study traced this climate of corporeal and temporal insecurity against the reading habits of both adolescent boys and adult males during the same period and found a coinciding downturn in those who read fiction for pleasure. It drew from American research, which showed that amongst 17-year-olds, the sharpest drop in fiction reading has been in the last 30 years, with 27 per cent of boys reporting in 2012

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<sup>323</sup> Cormier admitted to being ignorant to the protocols of YA before writing *The Chocolate War*. He stated in an interview that he not set out to make a work that confronted the shibboleths of the genre that had tended to produce stories with role model heroes and satisfying endings (Cormier, 1997, p. xii).

<sup>324</sup> A 'New Right' emerged during the 1970s, with political and domestic conservatism as its goal. The movement coincided with Nixon being exposed in the Watergate Scandal in 1972 and his resignation in 1974 (Robinson, 1974).

that they had not read any fiction for pleasure during the year, and 37 per cent of American men reporting that they had read one or fewer novels in the same period (Rideout, 2014). Just as revealing, research conducted in the United Kingdom by the National Literacy Trust in 2013 found that twice as many boys as girls reported not reading fiction whatsoever for leisure (NLT, 2013, p. 6).

### *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*

Stephen Chbosky's work closed the twentieth century on an ostensibly higher note, enlisting an asexual and physically insignificant freshman to usher the mantle of alternative adolescent masculinity into the new millennium. Yet, despite the character's fresh and ingenuous disposition, the case study demonstrated that Chbosky had simply extended the literary heritage of the adolescent male in crisis. Rather than reproaching the sovereign rhetoric of performative gender that had filtered through since Salinger's *Catcher*, the work acquiesced, offering its adolescent male readers merely an observation rather than any refusal or resistance. In Chbosky's characters – the gay footballers, aggressive boyfriends, inadequate fathers and impotent protagonist – the authorial tone was one of resignation.

The challenge in reading *Perks* as a YA text was in balancing its evident desire to perform a subversive act – one that tested the boundaries of heteronormativity and social compliance – against what Felski argues in 'Masking Masculinity' (1995) is the genealogy of fiction that infuses transgressive male forms with the deprecating traits of the feminine (Felski, 1995, p. 95). Charlie, the work's protagonist, confirmed his adolescent male presentism in juvenile prose and staccato parataxis, yet he clung to history, to nostalgia and reminiscence – the trademarks of a more mature, yet feminine art form. In this problematic space, the application of Benjamin's notion of 'now-time' proved a useful mediation, eliciting an understanding of how progress insists on an irresistible need to perfect humankind.<sup>325</sup> In this respect, Charlie's complex relationship with his past was a roadblock to future experience. His sexual assault in childhood had invalidated, both physically and psychologically, any progression through adolescence.

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<sup>325</sup> See Benjamin's *Theses on the Philosophy of History* (Benjamin, 1940, p. 260).

Popular response to the text suggested that Charlie's incapacity to move forward was a very appealing story for its audience. As a wider allegory, it indicated the adolescent male's complex and often unwelcome emotional attachment to the tethers of cultural history.

However, it was the unusual way in which Chbosky dealt with these disagreeable emotions that defined the work as noteworthy.<sup>326</sup> Specifically, he left his audience to engage with the uncanny – with the familiar form of the literary artefact, yet one that lacked the satisfying peripeteian structure of YA by contemporaries such as Rowling. In offering Charlie as an impartial observer, rather than an omniscient arbiter, the audience no doubt experienced a distinct sense of unmoored readerly autonomy. In framing Chbosky's work within the broader context of a rapid and intense democratisation of knowledge during the internet boom of the late 1990s, the case study identified a readjustment of the power paradigm from the authors of history to the new and unmediated composers of future history. Yet, Charlie seemed unable to write his own story, remaining forever an observer, feminised and sublimated. The method by which critics chose to deal with this deviant form was integral to the case study, for instead of proselytising or dissecting, they chose in the main to ignore it. From the safety of the critical edifices that delineate high from low culture, reviewers chose not to dip into the auxiliary and dependent genre of YA, thus remaining rather immune to its experience.

Ironically, in largely rejecting a work that rested so heavily on the reverential privileging of historical narratives – from old technologies and classic novels to 1970s music and *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* – critics failed to appreciate the message behind Chbosky's intervention. The work's dialogue encouraged the reader to reminisce, focussing on an inherent lingering rather than any desire to progress. His characters were relying, as Acland describes, on encounters with the past as a way of reasserting their presence in the modern (Acland, 2007, p. xx). However, as proves to be a recurrent theme in YA, the source of this oppositional narrative was a political reaction – this time to the rising neo-liberalism that asserted the rights of the corporation and the private market over those of the individual. What Chbosky's text in fact seemed

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<sup>326</sup> Ngai describes ugly emotions as those eliciting feelings that are *noncathartic* and *amoral* (Ngai, 2005, p. 6).

to be reflecting was the social repercussions of such a development, of a need to repurpose rather than destroy the past, to wrest back residual emotions and experiences as a way of reframing the future for the individual.

### *Resolutions: Perspectives for future work*

The over-arching aim of this thesis was to track the disjunction between the fictional and lived experience of the adolescent male in the second half of the twentieth century and it is here that the popular and cult appeal, if not critical success, of a late-century work such as *Perks* confirms the interdependence of literature on reformulations of the past. For, in its nascence, YA actively sought to eschew the conventional narratives of history – depicting the psychosocial impacts of events rather than the wars or debates or political injustices themselves. Yet in the ensuing 50 years, the genre appears to have rebounded, with authors in particular longing to return to the comforts of an earlier consciousness. Correspondingly, the teenager’s engagement with literature has altered in those decades, perhaps increasingly shaped by what technology theorist Nicholas Carr reminds us is the ‘white noise’ of media that slowly erodes the act of deep reading (Carr, 2010, p. 74).<sup>327</sup> However, this expendability, this churn of words and reduced emotional attention that by subtle degrees has the potential to desensitise its primarily young audience to the slow rhythm and cognitive alterity of novel-reading, does not fully account for the rapid diminution of fiction reading amongst adolescent males.

Collectively, the case studies of this thesis implicate the stagnant and superannuated depictions of corporeal and temporal masculinity in YA to be far more influential factors in the decision to engage with literature. Indeed, the complex relationship appears to be the product of a shared and perpetual legacy of the male mind and body in crisis, one inaugurated in Salinger’s bellicose mid-century staging of a newly-vocal and independent stratum of society. With the arrival of Hinton’s teenage voice, the genre

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<sup>327</sup> In *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains* (2010), Carr commented that, “the very idea of reading a book has come to seem old-fashioned, maybe even a little silly – like sewing your own shirts or butchering your own meat” (Carr, 2010, p. 8). Revising his work four years later in *The Shallows: How the Internet is Changing the Way We Think, Read and Remember* (2014), Carr observed the impact of what McLuhan had prophesised some fifty years earlier (McLuhan, 1964, p. 7), declaring: “the computer screen bulldozes our doubts with its bounties and conveniences. It is so much our servant that it would seem churlish to notice that it is also our master” (Carr, 2014, p. 4).

attempted a further circumvention of historical juvenile repertoire in a work that deliberately rejected the self-indulgent monologues of the white, urban middle-class. Cormier's intercession resituated the field again, borrowing the rhetoric of warfare and corporeal incursion to alert the young reader to the destructive nature of institutionalised heteronormativity. As the bookend to a half-century of YA, Chbosky's uncomfortable narrative of the adolescent male, wounded, diffident and brittle, reminded us that despite the character being sequestered to play myriad roles during the last 50 years, he remains trapped. What is most evident in tracing the adolescent male's trajectory, and attempting to find the correlations and deviations from style and form, is the overwhelming sensation that one has read or seen or heard from this character before. Indeed, it is infinitely easier to find similarities amongst these boys – despite their very different stories – than it is to find differences.

In this respect, the premise of this thesis runs counter to the suppositions of Carr and indeed McLuhan, who declared more than half a century ago that when debates occur over the influence of new media interventions, it is often the content rather than the technology that is being contested (McLuhan, 1964, p. 7). My suggestion is that content is indeed the fundamental component of YA that has served to disenfranchise the contemporary adolescent male from fiction. In a generic form that bears the historical obligations of pedagogical guidance and mimetic representation, the complex and various influences of new meaning-making may have altered the way humans process and validate knowledge, but they seem not to have ameliorated the faded depictions of adolescent masculinity that continue to populate fiction aimed at its male audience. The challenge lies in reappropriating the adolescent male of fiction in a form that does not subordinate the legitimacy and value of fiction reading, but instead translates across new and multiple literacies without denying the historical resonance of the past in renditions of the new.

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