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‘Youth theory’: a response to aetonnormativity

Abstract:

This paper proposes a ‘Youth Theory’ of analysis which constructs youth as a site of transition, rather than an ‘other’ figure, and examines the relationship that young people have with the dominant social discourse (adulthood). The theory is similar to Marxist theory, except instead of focusing on arbitrary class barriers, it focuses on a culturally determined age-based power hierarchy. Fiction for young readers is unusual in the publishing discourse because the target audience of the genre does not (usually) produce the texts they consume. Instead, Children’s and Young Adult fiction (YA) is produced by adult authors. This exclusion of the young readers’ voice can marginalise and (eventually) colonise young adults as readers because it privileges the voice of the ‘powerholders’, or adults. Young readers differ from other marginalised groups, such as women, people of colour, and LGBTQ+ people, because there is no youth-specific theory of textual analysis in the way that there is Feminism, Post-colonialism, and Queer theory. This paper addresses this gap in critical practice; it models the use of Youth Theory by analysing contemporary fiction for young readers through an age-based interpretive framework. It examines how aetonnormativity is portrayed in fiction, and how young characters are shown reacting to it.

Biographical note:

Jessica Seymour is an early-career researcher at Southern Cross University and a recipient of the Australian Postgraduate Award. Her research interests include children’s and YA literature, transmedia narrative strategies, fan studies and popular culture. Last year, she co-edited *Fan Studies: Researching Popular Audiences*, and has contributed chapters to several essay collections, which ranged in topic from *Divergent*, and *Doctor Who*, to ecocriticism in the works of JRR Tolkien.

Keywords:

Creative writing – Young Adult fiction – power – youth theory – aetonnormativity

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to propose a ‘Youth Theory’ of literary criticism to fill the theoretical gap identified by Peter Hunt (1984) and, later, by Maria Nikolajeva (2009). Both Hunt and Nikolajeva note that although fiction for young readers has invited much academic criticism, there remains as yet no Children’s or YA literature-specific theory of criticism in the way that there are Feminist, Postcolonial, and Queer theories (to name a few). This is troubling because fiction for young readers has long been constructed as a space for the indoctrination of ideology in a way that other fiction genres are not (Sarigiandes 2012; Park 2012; Zipes 2002; 2009; Carpenter 1985). The potential (and actual) pedagogical applications of fiction for young readers has led to much anxiety around the issues and themes portrayed in these texts and their potential effect on the readers who consume them. Despite this, there is as yet no critical framework which privileges young characters and how they are portrayed interacting with dominant, age-based power discourses. This paper models the use of Youth Theory as a framework for analysing texts which portray the social power-hierarchy as age-based. It does this by following the interpretive tradition of exploring and analysing portrayals of power, agency, and choice in selected texts. The proposed Youth Theory is similar to Marxist theory but, instead of a focus on arbitrarily defined social classes, Youth Theory focuses critical attention on the age-based power hierarchy at work in Western culture.

This paper will model the use of the Youth Theory literary framework with contemporary narratives because these narratives are consumed regularly by young people and reflect their social, cultural, and historical context better than texts produced in the first half of the 20th century.

Young people on the margins

Children’s and YA literature is an interesting and unique publishing discourse because young readers, unlike other readerships and demographics, rarely produce the books they read; adults do. Nodelman (2008) argues that this exclusion of young people marginalises and (eventually) colonises them because they lack the agency and power of adults in the publishing discourse – they can only receive the messages produced for them by those in power. Theorists such as Melrose (2012) and Gierzynski and Eddy (2013) have noted that young readers can and will reject ideology in fiction if they disagree with it, but there remains a culture of expected submission among academics who concern themselves with the potential sociological effect of these narratives. The fact that fiction for young readers was born from the morality tale tradition (Carpenter 1985; Bettelheim 1976; Tucker 1976; Kimball 1999), and criticism of the genre is often preoccupied with the potential effect it will have on the readers (Hilton & Nikolajeva 2012; Zipes 2002; 2009; Sarigiandes 2012; Park 2012) would appear to support this assertion. Nikolajeva (2009) adds to this discussion by proposing a term for adult normativity: aetonormativity. Aetonormativity, Nikolajeva argues, is ever present in texts for young readers: ‘[i]ndeed, nowhere else are power structures as visible as in children’s literature, the refined instrument used for centuries to educate, socialize [sic] and oppress a particular social group’ (2009: 16).

She proposes a heterological approach to fiction for young readers with the assumption that heteronormativity is used in narratives to oppress the young reader by privileging and even glorifying adult values.

Heterological theories of literary criticism are limited in that they are broadly concerned with the 'other' in general, and children and adolescents are not, as Melrose (2012) and Rudd (2013) argue, not 'other' in the way that traditionally marginalised groups are 'other'. Rudd (2013) notes that the construction of adulthood/childhood as a binary opposition is a disservice to the lived experience of both parties, echoing Melrose's (2012) discussion of youth as a space for development into eventual adulthood (and the power discourses which come with it). Unlike woman, people of colour, or LGBTQ+ people, youth are a marginalised group which naturally transitions into the dominant group. That is, in a social structure which privileges age, young people are uniquely positioned to grow into the dominant discourse.

Power, in the Children's and YA literature discourse, can reasonably be defined as the ability of a character to express agency. 'Exercising agency' as a concept boils down to freedom of choice, and the ability to act on choices. Agency can be limited in the real world by gender (Butler 1988), ethnic background (Kumar 2011), sexual orientation (Bittner 2010), and socio-economic factors (Atwood 1972). In fiction for young readers, agency tends to be limited by age, and the relative inexperience associated with it. The younger a character, the more the older characters can exercise power over them and subsequently limit their agency. When a young character is represented as making choices and taking control of their narrative arc, then they are considered 'powerful'. Contemporary fiction often portrays young characters as living within an age-based hierarchy of power, just like the real-world experience of readers who are culturally constructed as sites for development and eventual integration into cultural norms and expectations.

Just as Feminist, Queer, and Postcolonial theories respond to and critique patriarchy, heteronormativity, and colonial practices respectively, Youth Theory critiques instances of heteronormativity and power in media. There is space within Marxism for people to move between classes, but this is generally quite difficult to accomplish – whereas young people move closer to adulthood every day. Because of this, youth is constructed socially as a space for preparation – a brief period where future citizens are trained in the skills necessary to take control of a social order where they are powerful by virtue of their age. The social space children and young people occupy is not an othered space, because there is an expectation that they will naturally grow into adults.

The 'child' figure is a social construction. Although the physical and biological differences between adults and young people are quite clear, the child's position in the social hierarchy has changed throughout history, but there has always been a certain level of anxiety and apprehension surrounding the 'next generation', and whether they will be ready to take on the challenges of running the world once they have the power of adults (Holdsworth 2005; Jacobs 2005; Collingwood 2010). It is therefore crucial that young people are indoctrinated in adult ideals of normativity, so that they will

carry them forward. Roger Holdsworth (2005) writes that young people are trained from a young age to behave with the expectation that they will be assuming a role in the social order when they mature: “‘Study because it will help you get a job in the future’, ‘Learn about citizenship because one day you will be a citizen’” (2005: 141). This training teaches the child to associate their youthful experience with preparation and expectation. There is no intrinsic value to their behaviours except how they will serve society in the future, and this requires a level of adult control over the lives and agency of young people so that they will develop ‘properly’ (the aetnonormative ideal) and this control is exercised through the manipulation of certain aspects of young people’s lives (Holdsworth 2005; Jacobs 2005; Collingwood 2010).

Despite this apparent desire for perfect citizens, there have been many changes over the last few decades that have resulted in young people exercising more control over their lives. This paper argues that these changes are reflected in fiction consumed by young people, and the portrayal of age-based hierarchies which privilege adult power is a clear response to the disempowerment of young people by adult powerholders. This response, however, is not entirely positive. Considering how contemporary childhood is constructed legally (Graham & Fitzgerald 2010a; 2010b), social values appear to have evolved to include the potential for young people to exercise some control over their lives. Childhood Studies, as a discipline, has grown to accommodate a more active, engaged ideal of childhood, one which asserts that ‘children are articulate and insightful commentators on their own lives’ (Graham and Fitzgerald 2010a: 4):

Children are now regarded as subjects, not objects, of research reflecting a significant shift away from traditional conceptions of children as irrational, incompetent, vulnerable and unable to know their own best interests... involving children in research vindicates the right of children to have a say and to be heard (Graham and Fitzgerald 2010a: 4).

There has been an increase in the availability of resources (both online, and offline) which have allowed young people to become more engaged in political and social justice issues, often in direct conflict with the political and social perspectives of their elders (Jenkins 2006). There are hundreds of websites and organisations dedicated to youth engagement in politics and culture, and these indicate that age is no longer the deciding factor in social power. In 2014, a referendum was passed to lower the voting age in Scotland from 18 to 16 (Carrell 2014; Werber and Douglas 2014), which has sparked debate about youth inclusion in policy-making further afield (Williams 2015; Hartley-Brewer 2015). This sociological shift towards youth empowerment could account for the shift towards critiquing adult powerholders in contemporary fiction.

Contemporary children’s and YA literature came out of the tradition of using stories to teach young people and engage them (Carpenter 1985). Fairy tales, traditionally, depict young people as subjects of a narrative, with the story being told around them or with events happening to them. In some cases, notably a retelling of *Hansel and Gretel* (Lesser 1996), the young characters engage with the narrative drive, and the story is structured to rely on youth activity in order to further the plot. Hansel and Gretel are initially able to outsmart their wicked stepmother’s attempts to kill them,

and when they are captured by the evil witch they pretend to submit to her in order to survive and eventually escape. This is a demonstration of these young characters' active autonomy in the face of older, more experienced foes. Most of the time, however, the young character's patience and moral standing is portrayed as being more desirable by being rewarded with riches or, in the case of young women, marriage. These texts are, in their essence, morality tales, used to indoctrinate the child reader into the beliefs and values of their culture. One of the earliest novels targeted directly to young readers, *The Water Babies* by Charles Kingsley (1863), was the quintessential morality tale, using supernatural elements to portray different moral dilemmas. Although these texts have a history in morality-training and tradition, Melrose (2012) argues that it is a mistake to believe that young readers will passively consume the text's moral messages. The reader may not recognise the author's authority for example, or may come to the text with experience which contradicts the author's 'message'.

Rudd (2013) notes the troubling tendency of critics to revisit older fiction, saying: 'criticism of children's literature often [gives] one a sense of déjà vu' (57). Although Nikolajeva (2009) makes the argument that fiction for young readers explicitly supports aetionormativity, her analysis focuses on texts published in the first half of the 20th century, when texts were more entrenched in their morality tale origins, rather than contemporary texts which reflect modern constructions of the relationship between adults, aetionormativity, and young people. As discussed previously, the modern context is becoming more inclusive as young people become more socially and politically engaged. Nikolajeva's argument includes references to *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* (Potter 1901), *Winnie-the-Pooh* (Milne 1926), and *Pippi Longstocking* (Lindgren 1945), with more contemporary texts such as *Holes* by Louis Sachar (1998) only mentioned in passing. Such texts make interesting case studies because they show contemporary researchers how childhood has been constructed in the past, but these texts are beyond the context and lived-experience of modern readers. While Nikolajeva (2009) writes that contemporary children's literature 'has cautiously started subverting its own oppressive function' (16), the most recent text in her discussion, apart from the children's literature juggernaut *Harry Potter*, is *The Book of Everything* by Guus Kuijer (2004). She does not give a rationale for these choices.

While this is a major contribution to the field, Nikolajeva's (2009) argument works on the presumption of passivity among young readers, and that he or she will accept every ideology imparted to them through the fiction regardless of their socio-political or cultural context, or life experience. This assumption is, as pointed out by critics like Barthes (1968) and Maier (1970), dangerous because it implies that authors are always successful in their intentions for the text, and that readers will be amenable to the ideologies presented to them.

As Nodelman (2008) references colonial practices, the proposed Youth Theory of criticism takes postcolonial narrative theories of empowerment and disempowerment into account. As described by postcolonial narrative theorists, colonised individuals tend to become empowered through representations in fiction in predictable ways. Richard Delgado (1997) writes that a stock narrative is a story which the cultural centre tells itself in order to reiterate their place in relation to the margins of society

and create a shared reality in which its own superior position is naturalised: ‘The dominant group justifies its privileged position by means of stories ... Their complacency – born of comforting stories – is a major stumbling block to racial progress’ (1997: 239). In order to counteract this cultural maintenance of the status quo, counter narratives are developed which invert the oppressive traditions to the dominant group by creating stories that argue against their superiority. These counter narratives are meant to insinuate themselves into the dominant ideology and subtly work against it; turning the powerholders towards introspection. The narratives described and analysed herein represent a counter-narrative to the received wisdom that adults should hold power over young people by virtue of their age. Interestingly, this counter narrative does not need to insinuate itself into the dominant discourse because those who are marginalised – young people – will naturally transition into adulthood and carry these counter narratives with them.

During my analysis of YA and Children’s literature in my PhD research, I noticed that in-depth, critical textual analysis with fiction texts is occasionally sidelined in favour of exploring cultural and social implications of a text. Those theorists who engage in textual analysis and the representation of youth-specific themes often do so from the perspective of a particular theoretical framework (usually gender studies). For example, Bean and Harper’s (2007) work on the representation of masculinity in YA explores the nature and performance of masculinity through the various representations of male characters. Likewise, Jessica Miller’s (2012) analysis of gender identities in *The Hunger Games* maps the progression of Katniss and Peeta’s gender performances, while Stephanie Guerra (2009) explores the portrayals of biotechnology and corporatisation in various YA texts and argues that each narrative constitutes an alternative examination of: “the biotechnical subjection of human matter to market force” (293). While these analyses are theoretically interesting, they rely on heterological frameworks which assume that there is a clear ‘other’ within the text. The proposed Youth Theory is more concerned with the portrayal of a social power hierarchy which subordinates young people with the expectation that they will eventually become adult powerholders, and will continue to maintain the status quo. There is no clear ‘other’ in this case, only a self-reinforcing cycle of disempowerment.

Critiquing aetonnormativity in fiction

At first glance, the Children’s and YA literature examined below appears to support Nikolajeva’s (2009) assertions that fiction portrays aetonnormativity positively. However, by examining how young characters are portrayed reacting to adult power, and the overall effect that adult power is shown to have in the narrative world, these texts are shown to be ultimately critical of any age-based social hierarchy where young people are victimised. Nikolajeva (2009) writes that ‘[o]ne of the most recent examples of a fantasy story where adult normativity is endorsed in every detail, without ever questioning it, are the *Harry Potter* books’ (17). While the *Harry Potter* series does contain representations of aetonnormativity, a Youth Theory approach to the portrayal of those themes shows that the oppressed young characters critique and eventually overthrow the aetonnormative ideals enforced upon them. Harry is, for

example, portrayed throughout the series as questioning and arguing against the adults – whether these are the Dursley family, the teachers at Hogwarts, or Dumbledore himself. Occasionally, Harry is proven wrong and the adults are proven right but, often, it is the other way around.

Such a framework reveals how, in the *Harry Potter* series, aetonnormativity works to undermine the power of young people by keeping them ignorant and, through this ignorance, compliant to the adult powerholders. This is seen most clearly in *Order of the Phoenix* when Dolores Umbridge, acting on orders from the Ministry of Magic, is shown deliberately restricting the information young characters have access to. The educational structure of Hogwarts is troubling (Bassham 2010), but this is further exacerbated by the Ministry's apparent desire to train passive, compliant citizens. The Ministry recognises Harry as a potential threat to the power hierarchy which privileges adults over youth, and so his attempts to share his knowledge of Voldemort's return are violently oppressed through a media campaign to turn public opinion against him. Discrediting rivals by attacking their image is a very common political tactic in the modern Western world (Burns 1978).

Interestingly, Harry's age and relative vulnerability does not preclude the Ministry's attacks on his character. Umbridge, in her portrayed capacity as a de facto carer at Hogwarts, attacks Harry directly through corporal punishment (forcing him to cut the words *I must not tell lies* into the back of his hand) to discourage him from continuing his attempts to educate the public, while the Ministry undermines him through media slander so that the citizens of the Wizarding world will not believe him. This is a very heavy-handed reaction to a fifteen year-old boy, which reiterates Harry's disempowerment by adult powerholders in the narrative world. Harry is, however, portrayed as actively working against this oppression by the adult characters – both the apparently 'evil' institutions and characters like the Ministry and Umbridge, as well as the perceived 'good' characters who also use Harry's youth to justify keeping him ignorant, such as Dumbledore.

Dumbledore is shown throughout the series repeatedly insisting that Harry is too young for the information he needs to defeat Voldemort: 'When you are older ... I know you hate to hear this ... when you are ready, you will know' (Rowling 1997: 216). This is not an indication of Harry's incompetence or unwillingness to learn. Dumbledore is shown acknowledging that Harry is more clever and resourceful than many grown wizards, and Harry himself questions the desire of the adult wizards to 'protect' him when he has proven his abilities in battle: 'Why was he still trapped here without information? Why was everyone treating him like some naughty kid?' (Rowling 2004: 43). Despite these attempts, Harry empowers himself by seeking and sharing knowledge.

At first, Harry's desire for knowledge is portrayed as leading to negative consequences – it is, after all, his refusal to learn Occlumency and block out potentially useful information which allows Voldemort to trick Harry into going to the Ministry. This autonomous action leads to the death of Sirius Black, Harry's godfather and, in a way, this reinforces the importance of following Dumbledore's aetonnormative ideal of withholding information from irrational youth. However, it is later shown during

flashbacks from Snape's memories in *Deathly Hallows* (Rowling 2007) that Dumbledore's true goal in keeping Harry ignorant was not, as Dumbledore claimed, to protect Harry, but to make it easier to manipulate him. Harry is meant to die at the hands of Voldemort, and so any information which diverts him from this course is ultimately superfluous to Dumbledore's plans for him.

When Harry finally learns everything – during the final few chapters of *Deathly Hallows* when he is seventeen – he is shown adopting a policy of full disclosure with Voldemort and the other young characters at Hogwarts. In this way, Harry is shown to ultimately dismiss the aetonormative ideal of keeping his enemies and other people (who may be of use to him in the future) ignorant. Harry explains his strategy to defeat Voldemort immediately upon returning to Hogwarts, so that he and his opponent can make the best decisions with the information available to them: 'I know things you don't know, Tom Riddle. I know lots of important things that you don't. Want to hear some, before you make another big mistake?' (Rowling 2007: 591). This goes against Dumbledore's teachings because, while Harry offers Voldemort the opportunity to repent and save himself from a broken, sickening afterlife, Dumbledore was very open about his desire to destroy Voldemort both physically and spiritually, stating: 'Merely taking your life would not satisfy me, I admit' (Rowling 2004: 718). Here, Harry is shown demonstrating his capacity for compassion and support for those who are disempowered by Dumbledore's aetonormativity by offering Voldemort the chance to live. This clear separation between Dumbledore's ideologies and Harry's portrayed practice indicates Harry's shift towards empowerment.

In the case of *Harry Potter*, the aetonormative ideals are portrayed as relying heavily on the ignorance and complicity of young characters in order to remain in effect. Harry is a powerful character in his own right – both magically, and because his position as 'Saviour of the Wizarding World' affords him a great deal of political influence. It is therefore important, from the perspectives of adult power-holders in the narrative, that Harry remains ignorant of the larger schemes at work so that he will not interfere with their plans. This is portrayed as dangerous not only to Harry himself, but to young characters in the narrative and the Wizarding world as a whole. In this way, aetonormativity and the ideal of adults 'protecting' youth from information that they are not 'ready for' is critiqued and ultimately dismissed.

The popular YA dystopian series *The Hunger Games* portrays a protagonist, Katniss Everdeen, initially being complicit in the Capitol's plan to limit the agency of young people, but the series as a whole portrays this aetonormativity as damaging not only to the young characters but to the fictional society of Panem. The young characters in *The Hunger Games* are rendered powerless between the ages of 12 and 17 because those are the years in which they are eligible to compete in the Games. *The Hunger Games* follows the popular dystopia convention of interrogating the power of choice and agency in the context of a fictional, totalitarian regime, in this case, focusing on the power of youth. Katniss is a sixteen-year-old girl who faces constant identity construction and reconstruction by the authorities, and age-based discrimination which objectifies her and her fellow young people to the point where they are no longer considered human. Instead, they are represented as tools and weapons to ensure complicity with, and within, the ruling regime of Panem.

In *The Hunger Games*, aetonnormativity privileges people on either side of adolescence – although those characters who are too young for the Games are disempowered through the constant reminder that they will one day have their name in ‘the reaping’ — as well. Maturity is a guarantee of safety (at least, safety from the Games – starvation and police brutality are concerns no matter what age the characters are). Katniss and her fellow young characters learn helplessness through the continued reminders of the ruling regime that young people are tools for Capitol control:

this is the Capitol’s way of reminding us how totally we are at their mercy ... the real message is clear. “Look how we take your children and sacrifice them and there’s nothing you can do. If you lift a finger, we will destroy every last one of you” (Collins 2008: 22).

Throughout the series, Katniss is shown as adhering to aetonnormative ideals by reflecting the ideologies expressed by the Capitol. Before the events recounted in the series, Katniss allows two other young characters to be killed by Capitol hovercrafts because, regardless of the guilt she feels at doing nothing, the fear of Capitol retribution was enough for her to comply with the expectation that she not interfere.

When Katniss is reaped, she describes through an internal monologue how the Capitol stylists will likely dress her in a degrading and humiliating way. Before the Games, young tributes are paraded around the Capitol showing off their beauty, and Katniss describes a past year when the District 12 tributes “were stark naked and covered in black powder to represent coal dust” (Collins 2008: 80). Since no tribute is above the age of seventeen, this sexualisation of underage children portrays the Capitol’s understanding of the tributes as entertainment rather than actual human beings. Any attempt to know the tributes on a deeper, emotional level (the pre-games interview, for example) is carefully planned to ensure a certain kind of external impression which coincides with the Capitol’s limited expectations of young personalities: “Are you going to be charming? Aloof? Fierce? ... The impression you make tomorrow will decide exactly what I can get you in terms of sponsors” (Collins 2008: 140-141). As a method of institutionalised disempowerment, the reduction of tributes to stereotypes further serves to perpetuate the aetonnormative ideal of young people as tools for the oppression of the districts.

During the third and final book in the series, *Mockingjay* (Collins 2010), when Katniss becomes the symbol of rebellion for the Capitol, she is again expected to embody certain stereotypes in order to support the adults in power in this volume. In this volume, she is portrayed as an embodiment of, or vessel for, adult power – first for the Capitol, and then for the rebels in District 13. Katniss is shown throughout the series as attempting to reconcile the competing images of herself in order to establish a complete identity. She eventually adopts President Coin’s ideal of the Mockingjay as a rebel leader because she believes that this is the most commendable: ‘The berries. I realize the answer to who I am lies in that handful of poisonous fruit ... if I held them out to defy the Capitol, I am someone of worth’ (Collins 2009: 143). The defiant Mockingjay becomes Katniss’s most powerful incarnation, although she still fails to exercise true autonomy because that incarnation remains under the control of the adult

powerholders. Although there are significant feminist discourses at work in the series (Averill 2012; Miller 2012), the narrative drive – the complications, the series of events leading to Katniss's development of power and agency, and the series' conclusion – is informed by the age-based discrimination Katniss experiences. The series is, at its core, about disempowered children (both male and female), and takes steps to address and critique the social expectation of young people conforming to the ideologies of adult government.

In *The Hunger Games*, aetonnormativity is depicted as a destructive force in the lives of young characters. Katniss responds to the aetonnormativity in the series by appropriating enough power (in part by hijacking the images imposed upon her by adult characters) to reject the ideals which reduce her and her fellow young people to tools which are used to maintain adult control. By the end of *Mockingjay*, Katniss kills President Coin instead of President Snow and takes control of her uterus back from those who had reduced her to her biology. Coin's plan to hold one final Hunger Games using Capitol children follows the same line of thinking as the Hunger Games run by the Capitol using District children: limiting young people as disposable tools of vengeance and control. Katniss reflects that a regime controlled by President Coin will be no different than one controlled by President Snow: '[n]othing has changed. Nothing will ever change now' (Collins 2010: 432). Killing Coin ensures that change will take place, and is a powerful act against the aetonnormative ideal of a child who acts within the confines of adult expectations.

In the *Uglies* series by Scott Westerfeld (2005a), young characters are disempowered by being forced to conform to an aetonnormative ideal of beauty and passivity. At the age of sixteen, all young characters are given compulsory cosmetic surgery (or surge) to make them 'Pretty', which is based on an almost mathematical ideal of beauty. Essentially, every character is given a neutral, symmetrical face which is almost identical to everyone else's. The Government is portrayed as enforcing these standards of beauty because the population is more manageable when everyone looks the same and personal identity is meaningless.

When 'Uglies' are made 'Pretty', they are simultaneously subjected to invasive brain surgery. The brain lesions Pretties carry make them more compliant and peaceful, preventing them from any form of rebellion. Young characters in the series are taught to hate themselves when they are Ugly (which is what they are called before they have had their surge), and are raised to idealise Pretties. They are thus complicit in the beauty ideals which are designed to limit their personhood and personal identity. Adults are given additional surge to appear wise and nurturing, and older characters embody 'unquestionable authority': 'broad shoulders and a firm jaw, a sharp nose and high cheekbones... Everything had to be okay if she said it was' (Westerfeld 2005: 25). Thus, age is constructed in the fictional world as desirable and comforting, unlike the erratic ugliness of youth and the vapid compliance of late adolescence.

Like other young characters at the beginnings of their respective series, the main character of *Uglies*, Tally Youngblood, is initially complicit in the aetonnormative ideologies at work within the narrative. She is co-opted to infiltrate a rebel group called the Smokies by Dr. Cable, one of the leaders of Tally's world, and her

mandatory surge is withheld until she complies. The young people in Tally's world have internalised aetonnormativity to the point where becoming Pretty is desirable, and so Tally agrees to work with Dr. Cable in exchange for the chance to be Pretty. Later, at the conclusion of the second novel, after a failed attempt at escaping to the wild, Tally is made 'Special' by Dr. Cable.

At this point, Tally has learnt to question the aetonnormative ideal which requires her disempowerment, and so the Special surge is performed on her without her consent. Her body is re-built to make it stronger and faster, and her 'cruel-pretty' (Westerfeld 2005b: 2) appearance is considered terrifying to other characters, which isolates her. She is also subjected to more brain lesions, making her disgusted by anyone who is not Special and further limiting the relationships she can develop. This makes her an effective weapon for the adult powerholders because it limits her desire to disrupt the current regime and lose her privileged place. From a Youth Theory perspective, Tally's complicity in the continued disempowerment of her fellow youth by supporting aetonnormativity and adult power is portrayed negatively. The reader knows that Tally is being brainwashed, and the decisions she makes to limit her own contact with Ugliers and Pretties because they are inferior is clearly constructed negatively.

Towards the conclusion of the series, the adult powerholders decide that Tally has become 'too powerful': 'Because of your body modifications, you meet our criteria for a dangerous weapon' (Westerfeld 2006: 255). In this way, their aetonnormative ideology of reconstructing young characters to comply with adult purposes is shown to have backfired. The adults have made Tally too powerful to control, and she is also depicted as being self-aware enough to recognise their attempt to remove the surge which makes her Special as a violation of her bodily autonomy. Although the Special surge was performed on her without her consent, Tally refuses to allow the second violation which would once again render her powerless.

The adult powerholders in this series, like the adult powerholders in the real world, justify their attempts to limit Tally's physical agency by arguing that it is in her 'best interests', and for the safety of other characters: 'You are being held under controlled observation as a possible danger to yourself and others' (Westerfeld 2006: 251). Tally's decision to resist the final attempt to disempower her indicates that she has chosen to distance herself from the whims of aetonnormativity, unlike previous moments in the series where she was shown to be complicit. At the conclusion of the narrative, Tally cures herself of the brain lesions which keep her from making personal connections, and ensures that other young characters receive the cure as well. She partners with David, who is Ugly, in order to ensure that no further attempts are made by adult power-holders to abuse young people and the environment: 'Worry about us. However hungry the human race becomes now that the pretties are waking up, the wild still has teeth' (Westerfeld 2006: 371-372).

The *Artemis Fowl* (Colfer 2001) series is notable for creating a twelve-year old criminal mastermind in the title character. The series focuses on Artemis's ability to manipulate the adults around him in order to empower himself, and the development of his moral compass through his adventures with the much older Special Agent Holly Short – a fairy whom Artemis kidnaps in the first book of the series and holds to

ransom. Holly and Artemis's relationship over the course of the series is an interesting one, because while Artemis's age does not limit his power, it does limit his experience with moral dilemmas and the difference between right and wrong. The more he and Holly go on adventures and engage one another in healthy debate, the more he learns about these philosophical ideas. Holly, as an adult character, could arguably be said to embody aetonnormativity in the narratives, but Artemis's competence and ethical perspective is never portrayed as being a result of his youth. It is instead depicted as the result of his neglectful upbringing. His friendships with adult characters expose him to various social and cultural ideologies, but these ideologies are not aetonnormative in nature because they do not presuppose Artemis's conformity simply because they are held by adults. From a Youth Theory perspective, Artemis does not exist in an age-based hierarchy where aetonnormativity is portrayed as being internalised by young characters.

How to be powerful: a youth-centred approach

I would argue that the important point of the above analysis, from the perspective of Youth Theory, is not that real world adult values are occasionally portrayed positively in fiction, but that these values are tempered by the representation of young characters as actively engaged in the narrative. Political agendas never remain the same for very long, as demonstrated in the clear thematic shifts in fiction decade by decade (Gittins 2008), and although there is evidence to suggest that books read by young people do impact their political thought this indicates an intellectual engagement with *multiple* political ideas from various sources, rather than the blind internalisation of every political idea offered to them (Gierzynski & Eddy 2013). Readers do engage with older fiction with political thought from the past, but they have contemporary fiction and their own experience to contextualise these stories. Occasionally, readers will even go so far as to write their own versions of published works where characters and endings are changed to suit their understanding of narrative and personal tastes. Websites such as *Fanfiction.net* and *An Archive of Our Own* are designed to allow young readers the chance to engage on a creative level with published texts by altering stories to reflect their worldview and social justice concerns (Tosenberger 2008; Thomas 2007). Robin Hoffman's (2010) reception study assesses real child readers' responses to Roald Dahl's *The BFG* (1982) using an online archive of children's book reviews: *The Spaghetti Book Club*. Far from being passive readers, Hoffman's sample of thirty 8 to 11 year-olds demonstrated their 'capacity to derive highly personal meaning from the text while simultaneously manifesting self-awareness about their status as children in a larger reading community' (2010: 234).

Other series, such as the *Percy Jackson* (Riordan 2005) and *Gregor the Underlander* (Collins 2003) series, depict adults as having power over young people, and the age-based discrimination suffered by the protagonists and their fellow young characters are portrayed as almost exclusively negative. Characters like Percy and Gregor are portrayed as frustrated by their powerlessness in the age-based hierarchy, and these young characters spend the majority of their series working to overthrow the adult powerholders in order to exercise agency in the context of their fictional worlds. As

young readers engage with more difficult texts, they are continually exposed to this idea of youth power, but the rejection of aetonnormativity also appears in texts for early readers.

In the contemporary picture book, *Princesses Are Not Quitters!* by Kate Lum (2002), three princesses are bored with their lives of luxury and trade places with three servant girls for the day. They order the elderly housekeeper to treat them as she would treat the servant girls. This shifts the power in the narrative from the children to an adult caretaker. The young characters desire a new experience and choose to offer their power to someone else in exchange for that experience, and the young characters are made ultimately responsible for the distribution of power in the narrative. The plot relies on the princesses exercising agency and briefly relinquishing their control to an older, more experienced character. While the princesses keep missing meals because they fail to complete tasks on time, they refuse to give up. The work is difficult, and the princesses are left utterly exhausted, and so when their workday is over, in a sudden fit of empathy, the princesses decree that servants must limit their work so as to make time for fun.

Nikolajeva (2009) makes the observation that as young characters age and transition into the privileged position of adulthood, they could abuse the same power structures that had originally disempowered them; creating a cycle of disempowerment where elders empower themselves through the oppression of the youngers. I would argue that although the ability to exercise power over other characters may be implied by a character's age in the context of a fictional world, as it does in the real world, the characters are always placed in a position to choose whether or not to exercise this power. I am not convinced that the ability to exercise power over other characters would necessarily *ensure* the subsequent oppression of those characters; this is a rather extreme conclusion with very little evidence from contemporary fiction to support it. Nikolajeva references a few examples from classic fiction, but as discussed previously these texts are a reflection of historical constructions of power which rely on a clear dominant and subordinate. Contemporary age-based structures of power are not quite so adversarial. Each of the narratives examined here portrays a clear distinction between how the adult characters use power and how the younger characters use power. Once they have the power to behave autonomously, young characters are portrayed as wanting to exercise their autonomy differently to their adult oppressors. This breaks the cycle of disempowerment in the narrative.

An excellent example of the above can be found in the *Harry Potter* series, which Nikolajeva (2009) argues 'firmly ascertain[s] adult normativity, and the epilogue, in which Harry is grownup and prepared to oppress his own children, once again demonstrates the self-reproduction of power' (18). My reading of the evidence is, instead, that Harry advocates freedom of choice for his children by encouraging his second son Albus to join whichever Hogwarts house he feels is the best fit for him, and to disregard family tradition if he needs to: "It doesn't matter to us, Al" (Rowling 2007: 607). The only evidence that Harry is 'oppressing' his children is when he tells his sons that they cannot share a room. I would argue that this is not aetonnormativity at work, this is a parent defining clear boundaries for his children. This is certainly not portrayed as being on the same level of abuse and disempowerment which Harry

suffered at the hands of the Dursleys when he was growing up. Harry's experience of destructive aetonormativity in his youth allows him to make more inclusive decisions when he is in a position of age-based power.

While the adult power holders in *The Hunger Games* objectify young people in order to maintain control, Katniss is portrayed using her personal and political power to eliminate the Hunger Games as a method of oppression. This involves the use of her newly acquired agency to kill President Coin. Tally uses the powerful surge which was forced on her without her consent to hold adult power-holders accountable for their actions, but she does not make any attempt to extend her power over other youth – or even engage with the social order at all beyond what she needs to do to keep aetonormative ideologies from resurfacing. Even the princesses in *Princesses Are Not Quitters!* develop empathy as a result of their day of hard work, and they make a royal decree to ensure that the young characters under their employ do not suffer needlessly. Rather than enforcing aetonormativity once the young protagonists are able to exercise power over others, they are consistently portrayed as empowering other characters, demonstrating their distance from the self-reinforcing cycle of disempowerment advocated by adult powerholders.

Conclusion

Youth Theory offers a theoretical framework to identify and critique instances of aetonormativity in fiction. As demonstrated, this framework constructs youth as a site of transition, rather than an 'other' figure, and the relationship that young people have with the dominant social discourse (adulthood) is different to other marginalised groups because they naturally grow into it. Because of this, aetonormativity must be accepted by youth in order to maintain adult power. The above analysis indicates that fiction for young readers tends to critique adult powerholders and their aetonormativity, rather than accept or enforce it. Young characters are portrayed falling victim to adult powerholders, gaining their own power, and then breaking free from the age-based social power hierarchy, which requires their submission.

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