This Is Your Brain on Books: Young-Adult Literature and Identity Formation

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In Search of Lost Time
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“Adolescence is the only period in which we learn anything.”
- Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*

I.

Adolescence is an immensely fruitful time for learning, development, growth, and the overall process of becoming one's adult self. It is also the period remembered most easily and fully by adults and elders, in a psychological phenomenon called the “reminiscence bump.” Neuroscientist Jonathan K. Foster writes that the reminiscence bump may be caused by the density of important events during adolescence and early adulthood, such as graduation, starting work, or meeting a future life partner, “events in which emotions are heavily involved.”² Psychologists and neuroscientists agree that an important function of adolescence is the development of a personal identity, separate from family and circumstance.³ Identity, however, is a multifarious concept.

For the purposes of this essay, an identity can be understood as a life story, a thread that binds our experiences and memories together. Neuroscientist and memory scholar Daniel Schacter writes:

> “Psychologists have come to recognize that the complex mixtures of personal knowledge that we retain about the past are woven together to form life stories and personal myths. These are the biographies of self that provide narrative continuity between past and future—a set of memories that form the core of personal identity.”⁴

But memory is fallible, and recollection is always constructed. Foster writes that “instead of

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reproducing the original event or story, we derive a reconstruction based on our existing presuppositions, expectations and our mental set.”

Our memories are not video cameras or tape recorders; they are more like still cameras, where we record a few snapshots of individual details, and we must build the story back up around them. This leaves a lot of room for error in our memories, depending on where we get the knowledge that informs our expectations.

In part, we get this information from the stories we consume, whether they’re told at our bedside as children, or seen on TV or in a movie, or read in books. If identities are made up of memories, and memories are constructed from stories, then surely the stories we read affect our identities profoundly. If identities are created in adolescence, then surely the stories we read as teenagers affect us even more profoundly. But how, exactly?

II.

John Green's young adult novel Looking for Alaska tells the story of a group of friends at a boarding school in Alabama. Immediately upon arriving at the school, 16-year-old Miles develops a crush on the mysterious, mischievous, beautiful Alaska Young. Alaska, however, has a collegiate boyfriend, and Miles is too shy to say or do anything, instead admiring Alaska from the safe distance of friendship. Their friendship grows over the school year, which they spend smoking cigarettes, drinking cheap wine, and playing pranks on classmates. In February, when Alaska is very drunk, she kisses Miles, then disappears. The next day Miles learns that she has died in a late-night accident on the highway, after driving straight into a police cruiser with its lights and sirens on. He and his friends spend the rest of the school year trying to understand Alaska's mysterious death: they wonder if it was an accident or a suicide, why she

5 Foster, 12.
might have killed herself, what they might not have known about Alaska's true self.

Miles's narration of the story significantly portrays Alaska as a “Manic Pixie Dream Girl,” a term coined by Nathan Rabin in a 2007 review of the film Elizabethtown to describe a female character who “exists solely in the fevered imaginations of sensitive writer-directors to teach broodingly soulful young men to embrace life and its infinite mysteries and adventures.” The phrase gained traction quickly, and is widely used enough to have its own page on TV Tropes, a website that tracks common tropes not only in television shows, but also in movies, books, comics, theater, myths, and other media. That page further defines the “Manic Pixie Dream Girl” as being “stunningly attractive, high on life, full of wacky quirks and idiosyncrasies (generally including childlike playfulness and a tendency towards petty crime),” as well as “exist[ing] to help the protagonist achieve happiness without ever seeking any independent goals herself.” The first phrase describes Alaska perfectly: Miles introduces her as “the hottest girl in all of human history,” and her quirks include piles of books lining her room, which she calls her “Life's Library,” a propensity for pranks, and a penchant for “furthering her own mysteriousness.” She chose her own name and says incredibly profound things like “imagining the future is a kind of nostalgia.”

But Green has stated repeatedly that Looking for Alaska was intended to be a deconstruction, rather than a perpetuation, of the Manic Pixie trope. He wrote on his blog that while Miles

“clearly sees Alaska as MPDG from the moment they meet, [...] the entire second half of the novel is spent exploring the ways that [Miles] oversimplifying and misimagining

9 Ibid., 20.
10 Ibid., 115.
11 Ibid., 53.
12 Ibid., 54.
Alaska—casting her as a type instead of seeing her a complicated person—ends up having devastating consequences for everyone involved. That noted, due to the overall arc of *LfA*, the reader never really SEES the lie of the Manic Pixie Dream Girl exposed.”

Though Miles's narration includes Alaska's independent goals of reading her whole Life's Library and someday teaching autistic children, overall, Miles flattens Alaska, and she notices it. When she is upset about something, and Miles tells her it's okay, she says, “Don't you know who you love, Pudge? You love the girl who makes you laugh and shows you porn and drinks wine with you. You don't love the crazy, sullen bitch.” When she talks about the future, Miles says “I don't get you,” and Alaska replies “You never get me. That's the whole point.” Every time Alaska experiences significant negative emotions, Miles remarks on her “unpredictability.” Even learning about Alaska's mother's death when she was little, for which she feels responsible because she didn't call 911 in time, does not jolt Miles into self-awareness, or into awareness of Alaska as a multidimensional person. And then she dies, and while he says to himself “I guess I didn't know her completely,” he also insists on thinking of Alaska and the uncertainties of her death as a challenge, a puzzle to be solved, not as a human being to be laid to rest. In his final essay for his religion class, which serves as the conclusion to the book, Miles writes that Alaska “collapsed into the enigma of herself.” Even at the end of his character arc, Miles sees Alaska as more puzzle than person, flattening her unknowable human depths into the picture he imagines of her. Because she is dead, she can never prove him wrong.

In order to continue his deconstruction of the Manic Pixie trope, Green wrote another book, *Paper Towns*, where the protagonist's love interest survives to show him how wrong he

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14 Green, 96.
15 Ibid., 54.
16 Ibid., 75.
17 Ibid., 158.
18 Ibid., 219
is in reducing the whole of her being to the character he imagines. But in my experience, *Looking for Alaska* is much more typical of young adult fiction, especially the young adult fiction in the genre called “realism” (as opposed to fantasy or science-fiction). Realistic, however, these books are not. Mike Cadden, in his essay “Genre as Nexus,” refers to the genre as “fake realism.” He describes books like the *Gossip Girl* series as “guilty beach-reads for adolescents” and “wish-fulfillment fiction” that “entice... young readers to wallow in unrealistic expectations about their lives as well as others.”  

He points out that such books do not have “much to offer the reader in terms of learning about human nature or the human condition,” but many parents consider them more “useful” than fantasy or science fiction YA because of their “realistic” setting. Cadden limits his discussion of fake realism to the definitively superficial and artificial worlds of books like *Gossip Girl* and *The Clique*, worlds that are obviously not quite true to the average teenage life, despite superficially resembling it.

A much more insidious form of fake realism, however, is represented by books like *Looking for Alaska*; that is to say, books whose realism is significantly closer to real. Rather than the opulent and scandalous world of *Gossip Girl*, *Looking for Alaska*'s world is populated by poor and middle-class teens who disparage their wealthy classmates, who have no major social or sexual scandals, who live what appear to be a fairly ordinary lives, albeit at a boarding school, and including a few remarkably well-orchestrated pranks. While books like *Gossip Girl* may set up unreasonable expectations for wealth, adventure, and scandal, even brash young readers are able to distinguish that world from their own to some extent, and the lighthearted tone of the books encourages readers not to take them too seriously. *Looking for Alaska*, on the other hand, is not particularly lighthearted; its focus on suicide precludes that. It

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20 Cadden, 311-12.
is also permeated with heavy-handed ideas about “human nature and the human condition,”
integrating them through the religion class that all the characters are taking and the ways they
process their academic learning alongside the other events of their lives. This more serious
nature and more realistic world are what make the book so insidious: it feels so authentic that it
becomes very easy to internalize not just the book's explicit messages about life, but also its
implicit ones.

This slippery realism is reinforced by the first-person narration used in *Looking for Alaska* and a disproportionate number of other young adult books.\(^\text{21}\) Readers feel as though they are receiving an immediate and authentic reflection of teenage experience, when in reality, behind their empathetic narrator is an adult, constructing a picture of youth out of “a combination of memory, observation, and belief.”\(^\text{22}\) The characters that adult authors create may feel very true, but they are not real, a fact that often disappears into the illusion of first-person narration. Karen Coats writes that this illusion “can be read as a bad faith manipulation, or it can be read as a comforting reassurance.”\(^\text{23}\)

In an essay entitled “The Irony of Narration in the Young Adult Novel,” Cadden addresses the effects of first-person narration on the ideological messages presented to the reader. He points out that “the YA novelist often intentionally communicates to the immature reader a single and limited awareness of the world that the novelist knows to be incomplete and insufficient” and questions the ethical integrity of this choice.\(^\text{24}\) The first-person narrator is only capable of providing one voice, and this voice is frequently “so highly confident that it is ultimately unassailable within the text.”\(^\text{25}\) Cadden gives examples of cases where this is not

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\(^{21}\) Mike Cadden, “The Irony of Narration in the Young Adult Novel,” *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 25, no. 3 (2000): 146, DOI: 10.1353/chq.0.1467.


\(^{23}\) Ibid., 325.

\(^{24}\) Cadden, “Irony,” 146.

\(^{25}\) Ibid., 148.
true, where a narrator's self-doubt or other characters' dialogue urge the reader to consider his possible unreliability or fallibility, but Looking for Alaska is not one of those cases, and Cadden implies that such books are uncommon. Though supporting characters point out the holes and faults in Miles's worldview, he retains it to the end, never really revising his view of Alaska as a puzzle, a metaphor, a supporting character in his life, rather than an individual in her own right.

Developmentally, Miles's perspective makes sense. Adolescents notoriously struggle to fully understand the subjectivities of others. Psychologist David Elkind writes that when children develop into adolescents, they gain the capacity for formal operational thought, which “permits [them] to conceptualize the thought of other people.” The problem, however, is that they are not very good at it. They imagine that others' minds are very much like their own, and share their own interests and preoccupations. Because of the rapid personal physical and mental changes of adolescence, teenagers are extremely preoccupied with themselves—and they think everyone else is, too. This mindset is what Elkind calls “the egocentrism of the adolescent.” Essentially, Miles is psychologically incapable of fully comprehending Alaska's subjectivity. It's only natural.

John Green, however, is an adult, fully capable of presenting a story with more than one side. His popularity as a young-adult author also gives him significant influence over impressionable young minds. Does he have an ethical responsibility to use that influence positively, to provide a nuanced counterpoint to adolescent oversimplification? How deep would the effects of his stories have to be to mandate such a responsibility?

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27 Ibid., 1030.
Let me tell you a story about obsessive teenage love:

In my ninth-grade math class, there was a girl named Maddi, and she swore I was her older sister's twin: we had the same birthday, the same stature, the same small hands. One afternoon I went home with her and met her sister, whose name was Emily, and while the coincidences were uncanny, it didn't seem to matter very much. We could never be friends, because she was a junior and I was supposed to be friends with her sister, not her. All the same, that afternoon the three of us ate cheese and watched TV together, talked over our school days and complained about homework. I don't remember how the subject came up, but we ended up talking about self-harm, and Maddi said it was stupid, and I put forth a first-person explanation, couching it in past-tense middle school pain. Emily didn't say anything either way.

But that evening I received an instant message from someone new: xgasolinexrainx, a screenname that seemed dark and adult, sophisticated and cool. It was Emily. She told me she was impressed, or something, that I had told them about my self-harm. I don't know whether she knew how much it was bravado and not bravery that had made me tell them. She told me she did it too. We talked, I think, for a while. Or maybe we didn't that night. But it turned into something that happened almost every night—long AIM chats across the few blocks of darkness between our houses.

Then we started spending all these golden afternoons together. After school, we'd go to her house where no one was home yet, and we'd sit on the couch under enormous white down comforters, and listen to the Savage Love podcast, or watch TV. She didn't watch any of the TV shows I used to watch with my middle school friends, like Gilmore Girls and Charmed, or the shows I'd watch at home by myself, like reruns of Full House or I Love the 80s. She was
too cool for that stuff. She was too cool for most things. It seemed so effortless back then, how cool she was. I would compare her pink-streaked hair, her black eyeliner, and her fitted button-up school shirts to my unpainted face and floppy polo shirts and come up short and admiring. She climbed trees barefoot with fairy wings on, and I watched from the bottom branch. That's why I don't remember what we watched on TV those afternoons. I was too busy watching her.

And then it wasn't just watching anymore. It started out just leaning on each other, cuddling, resting. We needed to rest, after staying up too late chatting online. Then it was her hands playing in my hair, with my head in her lap one day. Then it was her lips on my forehead, her hands on my body, her teeth on my neck. I loved it all. It was more of everything than I'd ever had: more sensual, more sexual, more intense, more attached. It all happened so fast that if I had been thinking about it, I wouldn't have believed it. But I wasn't thinking about it. I was just drinking it in, absorbing every moment, every touch, every ray of sunlight filtered through the big green trees of our neighborhood into that unsupervised living room. She touched me, she cared about me, she left marks on my skin. The hours I spent with her were intoxicating, so much so that one afternoon I came home and my mother asked if I was high. I swore up and down that I wasn't, which was true. I didn't need to be. I had Emily.

That makes it sound simple enough. But it was never simple. Neither of us confessed desire for each other, we just acted on it—within very specific unspoken rules. She would bite my neck and pull my hair, kiss my forehead and hold me close, but a kiss on the mouth seemed preposterous to both of us. Someone suggested we date, or asked if we were, and I laughed it off even harder than she did, because I wanted it so much. I said I couldn't even imagine it, that we were good friends but would make terrible lovers. I thought the only way to protect myself from the fact that I could never have what I wanted was to pretend I didn't want it. I wanted her love, but she loved someone else.
The person she loved wasn't simple either. I never really knew him. I never wanted to. I preferred to hate him when he hurt her, and ignore him as much as possible. But her love for him meant that while we could have our afternoons together, she simply couldn't kiss me or date me or be anything more than overcomplicated friends. Her evenings were spent at rehearsal—spent with him. She talked a lot about “romantic friendship,” about touching a person and loving them but not being in a relationship with them, not being in love with them. I remember the phrase “forehead kisses and friendship.” I told her that seemed perfect, because I didn't want to seem unsophisticated or needy, because I didn't want to risk the wonderfulness of whatever it was we had on the potential of having something even better. I told her I didn't want more so that I wouldn't have to let go of what little I had.

On the night of the premiere of the play she was in with him, something happened. I had only known Emily less than two months. We were already close, had already started having our afternoons together in the sunshine. At least I think we had; maybe they weren't so physical yet. Maybe they were. Things move very fast when you are fourteen and sixteen and autumn still holds most of the warmth of summer. That night, though, it was chilly. I saw the play with her father and sister, and even though it was only two blocks from their house to mine, he insisted on dropping me off afterwards. Within a few hours, Emily and I were chatting online, again, always. We talked about how lonely we felt, how lovely the rain was, how sometimes we just wanted to be not-alone, how sometimes we just wanted to do something impulsive. Wouldn't it be something, we wondered, if we snuck out and met up? Somehow incredulous ponderings turned to actual plans and we agreed to meet by her favorite climbing tree.

The rain was cold and misty, the sky orange-gray with light pollution. I got there first and I remember not knowing why: her house was twice as close as mine. When she did come
she came barefoot. We climbed up into the tree, sat on a branch, and talked. We listened to the rain and shouted “Too fast!” at the few passing cars. We looked at the mist visible in the cone of light from a streetlamp, and we swore the unknown sounds in the dark beneath us were mountain lions, or ghosts, or ghost mountain lions. It got colder and wetter, and we held each other closer. We talked about everything but how romantic it was, how obvious my feelings were, how mysterious hers. If it were a book or a movie we would have kissed in that moment, sometime around midnight in the cold rainy dark, perched together up on a tree branch. Instead, the tension remained thick and my lips kept waiting.

The next day at school, we found each other in a free period and slept side by side in the library armchairs. In the movies, they never show the exhaustion after sneaking out at night. Still, it felt so perfect, even lacking the kiss, even lacking the words that come before a kiss. The misty rain, the orange light, the cool darkness, the rough bark, and us, holding hands in the crook of a branch.

IV.

Human beings use stories to make sense of our lives. Medical ethicist and philosopher Guy Widdershoven writes, “Story and life are similar, in that both are supposed to have a meaning. The story tells us in a meaningful way what life itself is about.”28 This quotation comes from an essay on the relationship between narrative and life history, particularly with regard to narrative therapy. Narrative therapy is a modern therapeutic technique that focuses on rewriting personal stories around psychological problems, in order to empower the client to work through, past, or around those problems. Narrative therapy also pays attention to larger cultural contexts and how they shape our beliefs about ourselves.29 Narrative therapists

understand the extent to which the way we frame our personal experiences is dictated by what our culture tells us our experiences should be or mean.

Narrative psychiatrist and student of Native American cultures Lewis Mehl-Madrona reminds us that a story is simply “a unit of meaning that provides a frame for interpreting experience.”

Stories are integral, however, because not only do we filter all of our life experience through them, we end up living out the stories we tell ourselves about our lives:

“We become who we describe ourselves to be. We perform the roles required by our stories, for particular audiences and on particular stages—the various contexts of our lives. These stages may include the home, the workplace, the hockey rink, the neighborhood bar, and others. The audience can include our immediate family, our co-workers and bosses, our fellow hockey players, or just the guys at the bar. People may have invisible audiences who are always watching—a bearded male god on a silver throne, a dead mother, the angels, the spirits, and more. The performance of a new story or role can transform a person's life, but only if the story is performed for the correct audience.

… The idea that our lives are situated in our stories implies a particular notion of authenticity—a person arrives at a sense of authenticity in life through the performance of his or her stories to an appreciative audience, with a sense that the play fits what is expected.”

The nature of what is expected, therefore, is context-dependent. The larger context of our lives is our culture, and its archetypal stories determine our scripts. These stories “reflect the values, beliefs, and customs that have gained prominence in a particular culture at a particular historical point. Thus while they are usually presented as the 'right' way to live, they are nonetheless specific historical constructions,” writes scholar Helen O'Grady. Deconstructing these cultural narratives can bring a measure of peace and wellness to therapeutic clients, and one suggestion by narrative therapists Jill Freedman and Gene Combs is that people may “find support in subcultures that are living different stories.”

31 Ibid., 154.  
32 Helen O'Grady, Woman's Relationship with Herself (New York: Routledge, 2005), 47.  
This implies that we are capable of internalizing and using scripts that are more specific to our own self-constructed identities than those provided by our cultures at large. It is entirely possible, then, that a teenager who sees herself as othered by her culture because of her age, sexuality, mental health, personal style, and media taste, might be desperately seeking more comfortable scripts, and might find them in the young adult novels she voraciously consumes. These novels finally provide empathetic narrators, experiences that feel plausibly comparable to her own. Though of course they are part of her culture, they feel subcultural or countercultural, as though they were written for her personally by another young person who knows just what it's like. But the scripts provided by these novels are a mixed bag. Some of them are healthy, encouraging personal growth, behaving honestly and authentically, valuing good friendships. Some of them are less so, like Looking for Alaska's integration of the Manic Pixie trope into a script that implicitly validates a reductive worldview, a lack of self-awareness, and an overwrought sense of personal drama.

Regardless of whether or not they were good for me, I ate those novels up, and absorbed everything they gave me like a sponge. The story I told above, the story about Emily and me, probably seems a little bit self-obsessed, a little bit over dramatic, a little bit flat when it comes to Emily's characterization, or her side of the story. That wasn't intentional: it's really what I remember, really how I remember it. I was self-obsessed, over dramatic, and incapable of imagining others' subjectivities. This is partly because, like Alaska's Miles, I was in an egocentric developmental stage, and partly because I had read so many stories about characters like Miles that they had become my scripts for what youth was supposed to look and feel like. I was just living up to expectations.

At least, I think I was. That's how I remember it. But memory is notoriously unreliable. False and distorted memories have provoked questions around the validity of eyewitness
testimony, for example. Memory can be distorted when information is initially encoded, or it can be distorted upon recall. It can be distorted on the basis of emotion and perspective, prior knowledge, misleading information given after the fact, and several other factors. One of these factors is the schema, which Frederick Bartlett, an early scholar of memory, defined as “active organizations of past experiences” which give us “a framework within which new information is processed.” Schemas organize what we already know about the world, so that when we learn new information, we already have a place to file it. When we don't have a file that into which it easily fits, we have trouble remembering it. Schemas enhance our memory.

However, schemas and prior knowledge can also cause errors in recollection. Expectations of what an experience 'should' look like “can either facilitate or mislead” our memory. This can include adding information that was not originally present, reordering information, or leaving out information that does not fit with the schema. Schemas are a lot like the cultural scripts discussed above, but they are specific to memory and recall. My cultural scripts ordered how I understood my experience in the moment, and fit it into the overall narrative of my life and identity, but my schemas affected how I recall specific experiences now. There might be a difference in what I thought of the moment then, and what I think of it now. It's possible that what I remember as firmly, authentically true of events and subjective experience are not the things I wrote in my journal that night or the next day.

What I did write in my journal is this:

“The Night Thoreau Spent in Jail happened, Emily's play, and I saw it with Maddi and Mr. Yost. At intermission I bough a bag of Skittles and saved all the cherry ones for her. That was Thursday evening. Thursday night, as I was attempting to do homework, she IMed me. She does every night. We talked and talked on the subject of loneliness. I felt so lonely, and it was dark and cold and raining. She asked me if I wanted to take a walk, and we met on the path. Then we walked to the tree. This was

34 Foster, 61.
35 Ibid., 68.
36 Ibid., 71.
around 11 or 11:30 at night. We sat in the tree in the rain and talked and talked. She did not wear any shoes. We held each other for warmth. We sat in those branches for hours, talking about ghosts and gossip and girls and the way the rain blew in sheets under the streetlight. We were out there until past 1:30 – we occasionally checked my phone. I answered her questions from her note – about my first kiss, or other things I might have been named. I told her about sleeping in Elena's bed, and she told me about how she got together with Hilary. We ran across Roland [Avenue] holding hands. What is it with me and crossing streets holding hands? It feels. right.

The next day I had 2nd period free because of comment-writing, and she just did. We sat together in the nook in the library that feels like the prow of a ship, lazing and talking and reading and working. She annotated her books of erotica and I peer-evaluated for tech. I almost fell asleep in my chair but the bell rang...

Things I wanted to say but that didn't fit in the flow: … Another thing Emily and I did that night was yelled at cars. “TOO FAST!” and “Good speed!” She told me about a time when she yelled at a bicyclist like Zoe Trope. “I love you! Do you love me?” I did that today, while walking the dog. Not loudly, but aloud. I also sang, loudly. I stopped caring who heard me.”

The other entries surrounding this one show that I didn't even meet her until the beginning of October. She had barely touched me by that night, we had barely been alone together. But we had talked nearly every night that month. Almost everything I wrote was true, except I got the date wrong, and the order of things, and the exact location of our meeting. I left out some of the subjects of our conversation, and our hand-holding run across the street. And the rain came down in sheets instead of mist.

That journal entry starts, “Five days! I haven't written in FIVE DAYS!” The journal itself is 100 pages long, and spans only five weeks. I was writing about 20 double-sided pages a week. I didn't just date my entries, I noted the time to the minute, because I wrote too many times each day. Everything that happened or that went through my head felt critically important, like it had to be recorded for posterity. I never questioned that importance at the time, I just scribbled and scribbled.

Now I know there are psychological reasons for my scribbling. Elkind's paper on adolescent egocentrism introduces two concepts: the imaginary audience and the personal fable. He defines the imaginary audience as the phenomenon of a teenager “assum[ing] that
other people are as obsessed with his behavior and appearance as he is himself,” and “anticipat[ing] the reactions of other people to himself,” such that he is “continually constructing, or reacting to, an imaginary audience.” 37 The personal fable, meanwhile, is “the adolescent's belief in the uniqueness of his own emotional experience.” 38 Elkind remarks that adolescent diaries serve as evidence for the personal fable, as they are “often written for posterity in the conviction that the young person's experiences, crushes, and frustrations are of universal significance and importance.” 39

Another psychology of diary-keeping is presented by narrative psychologists Wendy J. Wiener and George C. Rosenwald, who write that the diary might be “a performance as well as creating the audience for it,” 40 a place to process and reshape emotions, a mirror for self-objectivation and observation, and a way of managing and “binding” 41 time, or of “hoarding’ the past.” 42 Wiener and Rosenwald discuss a study by D.A. Sosin on the diaries of adolescent girls, specifically. Sosin asserts that diaries serve as a “transitional object” for adolescent girls who need “‘soothing psychic structures' that bridge the gap between the 'me' and the 'not me,'” 43 a way to “secure differentiation from the mother” in the “second individuation of adolescence.” 44 Essentially, young women write in diaries in order to sort out the rapid personal change they are undergoing, in their emotional and psychological selves, familial and social relationships, and physical bodies. Outside of that specific developmental period, diaries

37 Elkind, 1029-30.
38 Ibid., 1031.
39 Ibid., 1031.
41 Ibid., 52.
42 Ibid., 48.
44 Wiener, 32.
serve many functions related to emotional processing.

Wiener and Rosenwald also note that “the diary involves a characteristic use of language,” and connect that language use to Vygotsky's “inner speech,” or “the place where thought and language meet,” and to Piaget's “egocentric speech,” which is a childhood form of inner speech, “a function developmentally prior to the ability to talk to oneself mentally without verbalizing externally.” In a way, Wiener and Rosenwald argue, diaries are a similar externalization of inner speech, and egocentric speech “may persist throughout the life span” in the form of diaries.

This theory of the diary as egocentric speech and Elkind's theory of the imaginary audience and personal fable dovetail perfectly to explain adolescent diary-keeping. The diary solidifies and objectifies the imaginary audience, serving as both the performance and the audience, as noted above. It formalizes the personal fable into a narrative housed in something very close to a book. For a bookish teenager, it was yet another way to fit into the expectations of my specific scripts: if the books I read were in the first-person, they were probably almost journals, right? Many young adult first-person books even explicitly take on the journal form, such as The Princess Diaries series. And the characters writing these journals often felt othered within their schools and communities, just like I did. Or did I feel othered because I identified with the empathetic narrators of my books, and wanted to be more like them, aspiring to the way they made otherness cool?

V.

A while before that late-October night, Emily had lent me her favorite book. It was called Please Don't Kill the Freshman, and it was like nothing I had ever read before. Most YA

45 Ibid., 51.
46 Ibid., 51.
literature fell into the category of things Emily was too cool for, or at least too mature for. But *Please Don't Kill the Freshman* was different: instead of being a novel, it was a memoir. Instead of being written by an adult for teenage readers, it had been written by an actual teenage girl during her freshman and sophomore years of high school. She gave herself the pseudonym of Zoe Trope, a combination of her real first name and a reference, I learned later, to an early animation device, one of those things you can make at home with the spinning cylinder with tiny slits you put your eye to and a progression of pictures inside. The pseudonym was also a reference, I suppose, to all the tropes of young adult literature that the memoir both enacts and subverts.

Trope also gave all the “characters” in her life pseudonyms, nicknames like Linux Shoe, Greasy Buddy Holly, Curry, Midwestern Tackiness, Case Boy, Jar Guard, and Cherry Bitch. Emily loved cherries, cherry candy, cherry lip balm, cherry red lipstick. I don't remember whether she fancied herself our own Cherry Bitch or whether I realized it by myself, but I started leaving her gifts of cherry tea or cherry lipgloss with notes addressed “Dear Cherry Bitch.” She decided that the only character I could be would be Zoe herself, maybe because I would quote Trope's lines describing her Cherry Bitch in my notes to her, or maybe because of my incessant journaling, or maybe just because nothing else fit better. So we signed our notes to each other Cherry and Zoe, and I toyed with Trope-style pseudonyms in my journal and in the blog I started because Emily had one.

My writing style changed, too. I tried to be more “vague and cryptic,” the way Trope wrote that she felt. I tried to sound grown-up and use shorter sentences, a feature which can be seen in the journal excerpt above, used to no great effect. I tried to tell the truth rather than relay the facts. I tried to be more ambiguous, more stylized, more artistic, more poetic. Previously I had kept poetry in a box marked “poetry,” and let prose be just prose, and never, I
thought, should the twain meet. *Please Don't Kill the Freshman* introduced me to prose poetry, even if it wasn't really prose poetry itself, and I adored it. I wanted to write like Zoe Trope because I wanted to be Zoe Trope. Her life seemed so perfect: the perfect chaotic friendships and relationships, her perfect vintage Beetle, her perfect girlfriend-then-boyfriend Scully-then-Skull, her perfect Pacific Northwest life, and of course, her book. What fourteen-year-old aspiring writer wouldn't want to be published at fifteen in a small-press chapbook, then again in an expanded version, a full memoir, earning six figures from Harper Collins? A book tour by age sixteen? How wonderful, not just for the aspiring writer, but for any teenager, as we all entertained Elkind's egocentrism: Zoe Trope had her 'personal fable' validated as special and her 'imaginary audience' actualized into real rows of people in front of her at readings. And just like every other YA narrator, Trope was perfectly empathetic and relatable, maybe even moreso than every other YA narrator, because she was real, and I knew she was real. Her life seemed so close I could touch it. I couldn't really touch it, but I could make my life as much like it as possible.

This aspiration to someone else's life could have been just as damaging to my young mind as aspiring to fictional standards was, but the thing about Zoe Trope being real was that even though she seemed to perfect to fourteen-year-old me, her story resisted the airbrushed perfection and subtle manipulation of my YA novels. *Please Don't Kill the Freshman* contains sections about the process of growing the book from a small-press chapbook to a full-fledged book, including a meeting with a publisher:

“She gives me advice on my writing and my book like it's fiction. She says she wants a 'narrative arc' and 'character tension' and I want to tell her this is MY LIFE
Not a novel for her to rearrange but my life and my story and I'm sorry it's not a page-turner best-seller. And you want to make it marketable and I want it to be real. My life on paper and you think it's okay to talk about these people like they don't (I don't) exist but they, I, we do exist and you are holding my forty-four-page life in your
The way that Trope shares the history of her book, including this dialogue about authenticity, provides a counterpoint to both the fake realism of most YA literature and any notions the reader may have had that this book too is fake. It reminds the reader that this story may seem perfect, but it's not; that when it seems too perfect it may have been edited into shape. It reminds us that we as young readers ought to look with a critical eye at our books, because the stories didn't spring fully-formed from nature or God, human beings made them, and manipulated each one to be “a page-turner best-seller,” and that usually means adding qualities that don't occur in real life, and removing ones that do.

Of course, I didn't realize all of that so explicitly when I was fourteen. I just recognized myself in the characters, my feelings and perspectives in Zoe Trope's narration. The back of the book says,

“I wrote a story about you. Well, sort of, see, it's mostly about me. Well, entirely about me, but here's the catch: I'm you. No, really, I mean it, I'm you. I know what it feels like when your heart beats so hard against your white bone ribs, when you sing in the shower with soap in your eyes, when you run until you get a side ache. I wrote this story about you because I am so in love with you. This is a reckless love story. This is my shameless confession.”

To me that blurb felt completely true, just as the whole book felt completely true, because it was. Though upon rereading I cringe at Trope's judgmental cynicism, I also still swell with joy at her adolescent idealism, and I smile at the way those two characteristics can coexist so easily in a smart, thoughtful teenager, because no matter how smart or thoughtful a teenager is, they are still constantly in flux, chaotic, ignorant, and unfinished. They are flipping constantly between different narratives of self, trying to figure out how they most comfortably and authentically fit into their worlds.

48 Ibid., back cover.
When adult authors write teenage characters, they are reconstructing this chaos from what they remember of their own youths and what they are able to perceive as adult outsiders. These reconstructions are often very accurate, but just as memory is fallible due to its reconstructive nature, so are most YA novels. There are tiny little hairline cracks in the authenticity of the characters, or the importance of telling a good story gets in the way of telling a real story, or the biases the authors have developed as adults shine through, or the messages they insert to try to counter those biases are too heavy-handed and leave a smart teenager bored and frustrated. *Please Don't Kill the Freshman* doesn't have these problems because of its immediacy. Certainly it must have been edited, but the core of what's on the page is writing by an adolescent about adolescence, looking back days or weeks rather than years or decades.

In addition to this immediacy, because Trope refused to totally modify her truth for a spot on the best-seller list, her story doesn't encourage too many unrealistic expectations about what life will look like. Rather then telling a lie cloaked in realism, Trope tells the truth, but a very stylized truth. Rather than showing only one side of characters and portraying that side as all there is to them, it is very clear by the way that characters drift in and out of the narrative that they have lives beyond what Trope sees, participates in, cares about, or is going to share with her readers. Instead of the quasi-omniscience of a fictional first-person narrator, whose narrative doesn't always encourage the less-critical young reader to question their reliability or integrity, Trope's narration constantly reminds us that she is young and clueless and unreliable, and she knows it, and we should know it too:

“I can't write. No, no, no, don't try to argue with me. Don't try to tell me that my writing is good or that it makes you feel something of that you like it. … I can't write letters or words or put them into sentences with punctuation. My hand crumbles under the weight of my black bic pen and I forget everything I learned in kindergarten.”
… I can't do this. I can't fake my heart on paper and I can't copy the answers or cheat. There are no bubbles to fill here and everything else is blank, white, pure, empty.”

Or:

“I got six A's on my progress report and I didn't deserve them. I don't know what I deserve. My mother starts sentences with, 'You don't know...' and 'You don't understand...'. I DON'T KNOW ANYTHING! WHAT EVER GAVE YOU THE IDEA THAT I KNOW A FUCKING THING? I DON'T KNOW A FUCKING THING!”

Or, perhaps most poignantly and directly:

“I just wanted to let you know that this is all a rough draft. We can go back later and fix the grammatical errors, the tense errors, the content errors.

This whole thing is just practice. Pretend. We can erase some of the characters in my life and highlight some of the others. The regrets that I have will be purposeful and lead to an effective and meaningful conclusion.

That whole thing in seventh grade where I wrote nothing but four-stanza poetry will be COMPLETELY omitted. My repeated crushes on boys in sixth grade will be omitted as well, as it has no relevance to the completion of my character.

Watching my friends carve initials into their arms in fifth grade will be slightly revised. Instead of using broken beer bottles on the playground, they will use sharpened hair barrettes.

I will be more reflective. I will be less trite. I will be different. I will always know.

I will recognize and highlight my recurring feelings of lesbianism (see: wanting to touch my friend while watching a movie, wanting to ask to kiss my friend when she stayed the night, brief phase of peeing while standing up, beating up boys on the playground, attraction to tomboy lesbians, taking turns cross-dressing with a best friend while parents were gone, looking forward to kissing girls during games of spin the bottle, being dry-humped by best friend at age six, etc).

This is just a rough draft. This is just a first draft.

By the time you hear the story, it will be something completely different.

It will be completely different.

It will be something you actually want to hear.

And you won't have to listen to me whine about chemistry tests (was the answer really .402 moles?) or the boy who gives the best hugs in the world (his name rhymes with beer) or falling in love.

This is the best game of telephone.

It just gets better every time.

This is just a rough draft. My first draft. Please ignore the errors. Focus on the content. Give suggestions.”

49 Ibid., 124.
50 Ibid., 128.
51 Ibid., 256-7.
This overt recognition of the narrative as a narrative is one of the primary qualities that makes *Please Don't Kill the Freshman* so special and so important. Even if the young reader internalizes messages from the book about what teenage life 'should' be like, they are also reminded that this is not some natural order, that it is a construction, and that every construction is constructed by someone. These passages remind the reader of Trope's agency, or sometimes lack thereof, over her own story and her own life, and by extension, of our own agency over our narratives and our lives. When I attempted to emulate Zoe Trope, I did so deliberately. Instead of constructing my identity accidentally, coincidentally, subconsciously, according to scripts I'd internalized from YA fiction, *Please Don't Kill the Freshman* allowed me to construct myself consciously, carefully, and somewhat artificially, according to scripts I had learned from nonfiction. Instead of being manipulated by stories, I was manipulating my own story, because finally someone had showed me that I could.

Of course, it's not really that simple. Both types of books were in my head at once, as were the classic novels I was reading for school, and television shows, and movies, and the wild hormonal hurricane of puberty, and my genetic predisposition to anxiety and depression with their distorted perception and thought. My emotions, including things like my intense, complicated love for Emily, were entirely real. I wasn't just manipulating or just manipulated; it was never either-or. Being a human is very, very complicated, which is one of the problems of young adult literature in general: it usually tries to simplify the human condition or distill some element of it into a short or easy-to-read novel, and when the complexities are lost, the essential messages are often altered or biased.

I read so many of these simplified stories, and I let them tell me who to be. I enacted the narratives they told me were mine, because they felt so close to true and yet so far away at the
same time that they couldn't be anything else but aspirational. So I aspired, and did the best I
could to embody. That was my identity then, and teenage identities evolve into adult identities.
Edited and adapted, perhaps, but similar at the core. I am who I am because of the books that I
read. Not only because of them, of course, but not insignificantly so, either.

All of this bears heavy implications: that the authors of media for teenagers have a
significant ethical responsibility to their readers and society as whole for the messages they
send; that parents who want to have a hand in who their children become should pay attention
to the media they consume and how they understand it; that media aimed at teenagers is not
only a valid area of study for media theorists and literary critics, but possibly even an
especially fruitful one; that we as a society have got to pay more attention what we are telling
teenagers if we want to improve the world. Teenagers with biased or reductive worldviews
often grow into adults with biased or reductive worldviews.

A sentiment I've heard over and over, and probably echoed myself, is that teenagers
think the world revolves around them, and that that belief is wrong and a problem. It is
distorted, as we saw in Elkind's study of egocentrism, and it can be a problem. But perhaps
teenagers have something right in their thinking; maybe it would actually be a good thing for
all of us if the world revolved around them a little more. In the not-so-distant future, they will
be the adults in charge, and if we care about our future, we have to care more about the internal
lives of teens. Not our memories of our own adolescences, not our fictionalized reconstructions,
but the actual young human beings living in our world, our siblings and children and neighbors
and students. They need to read good stories so they can tell good stories about themselves, so
they can live good stories. They need good stories because “they” is really billions of “I”s, and
all those individuals deserve a chance at complexity. They need good stories because we all
deserve better than a reduced, poorly distilled, two-dimensional world; we deserve the real
thing. As adults we often forget it, but just because teenagers are developmentally curated to be annoying does not mean they don't deserve the real thing too.