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Mike Cadden

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The Irony of Narration in the Young Adult Novel

by Mike Cadden

Critics of young adult fiction have good reason to dwell on the nature of narrative authority in the young adult novel, especially the authority claimed through the consciousness of young characters. That young adult novels are almost always written in first-person address was observed by Elizabeth Schuhmann almost two decades ago: "Because of this prevalence of first-person narration in young adult novels and because of the popularity of these books, many advocates of novels written for young people have come to consider first-person narration a preferred technique for this kind of literature" (314). But it is the language of the American Library Association's Margaret A. Edwards Award that highlights the irony of this "preferred technique": in worthy young adult literature, young adults will hear "an authentic voice that continues to illuminate their experiences and emotions, giving insight into their lives" (Barber 123). The irony of the use of "authenticity" is important to consider. While any novel is an ideal site for studying the different layers of narrative relationships, the young adult novel that features the consciousness of young characters is especially interesting because of the unique and ironic relationship between author and reader in this age-based genre. Novels constructed by adults to simulate an authentic adolescent's voice are inherently ironic because the so-called adolescent voice is never—and can never be—truly authentic. I would like first to discuss the nature of the irony implicit in this genre with the "preferred technique" of speaking through the consciousness of the young and then consider how novels that employ double-voiced discourse offer young adult readers the tools necessary for identifying and coping with that irony. Throughout I offer speculations—my own as well as those of others—on the ethical implications of this ironic relationship.

Robert Small points out that "adolescent fiction often employs a point of view which presents the adolescent's interpretation of the events of the story" which results in "incomplete 'growth to awareness' on the part of the central character" (282). The YA novelist often not only speaks from the position of the young adult but also often believably presents that incomplete growth to awareness without challenge from within the text. This is not a condition that results exclusively from the use of first-person address, however. While first-person narration makes it easy to present immature and unchallenged views, indirect address can achieve the same effect. What is more important than the type of address is the focalizer's level of maturity and the degree to which his or her view is challengeable and challenged. And while it is uncommon for first-person address to shift to multiple perspectives (one tool for calling some or all ideologies into question), third person address is not necessarily obliged to present the positions, perspectives, and politics of all, or even some, of the characters in the text, as we shall see. In any case, by employing an all-too-reliable young adult's consciousness, 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. It is a sophisticated representation of a lack of sophistication; it is an artful depiction of artlessness.

Does the author's maintenance of this ironic relationship necessarily mean that he or she somehow abandons the young reader? I don't believe that it does—or that it has to. Wayne Booth questions Northrop Frye's assertion that the ironist, like the lyricist, turns his back on the audience: "some ironies are written to be understood, and...most readers will regret their own failures to understand" (Booth, Rhetoric xi). The author of the young adult novel as described above counts on the reader's failure to see, understand, and subsequently regret the adult's ironic construction of an "authentic" adolescent's voice. However, by helping the reader recognize the limits of the young adult consciousness in the text, the author ethically trades the visibility of irony at one narrative level for the irony at another. All of this matters because the narrative situation in question involves social power relations that are fundamentally different from those between adults, and irony "involves relations of not only real but also symbolic powers, not to mention relations of force as well" (Hutcheon 17). When an adult writer speaks through a young adult's consciousness to a young adult audience, he or she is involved in a top-down (or vertical) power relationship. It becomes important, then, that there be equal (or horizontal) power relations between the major characters within the text so that the young adult reader has the power to see the opposing ideologies at play.

Linda Hutcheon identifies the basic ethical responsibility of the ironist as "the responsibility to guarantee the comprehension of irony (and the avoidance of misunderstanding)" (120); this ironist "must coordinate assumptions about codes and contexts that decoders will have accessible to them and be likely to use" (120). Barbara Wall, writing of children's books, argues that "writers who view the experience of life through ironic eyes, and who use irony in the presentation of character, must develop a special relationship with their readers" (111). This "special relationship" might include making available to readers the codes Hutcheon points to above and offering multiple and ideologically contrasting perspectives in the narrative, or even making visible narrative unreliability. Unless readers...
are given tools to help them see that any perspective is contingent, there will be no “invitation to come live at the higher and firmer location” (Booth, Rhetoric 11). And without that invitation to participate as an equal, the young adult becomes one “whose ‘confident unawareness’ has directly involved him in an ironic situation” (Muecke 34). “Confident unawareness” is arguably the definition of youth, but the question here is whether or not the ironist—in this case the young adult author who employs a young adult consciousness in a young adult novel—has a responsibility for how she or he manipulates that unawareness. Should the writer help the reader to recognize the contestability of any immature consciousness in the narrative? This help, I believe, would remove the need for the author to make evident the larger narrative irony of stepping out from behind the mirror. Should the condition for staying behind the narrative mirror be that the author reflect more back to the young adult reader than just an uncontested version of him- or herself?

Bakhtin’s theories on ethical fiction in general necessarily complement any ethical theory of irony. Bakhtin believed the most ethical form of narration to be double-voiced discourse. What is double-voiced discourse? The dialogic or double-voiced text represents voices as equal and provides alternative interpretations that offer, in their aggregate, no single and final answer for the reader. In a double-voiced text the author is the creator of “not voiceless slaves..., but free people, capable of standing alongside their creator, capable of not agreeing with him and even of rebelling against him” (Bakhtin 6). Two or more ideological positions share the text without any one being in obvious control. Though the reader may come to some decisions about the “rightness” of a particular perspective, the text has not clearly argued for that position and has provided other complete positions to consider. In a single-voiced text there is one dominant and didactic voice with no representation of a legitimate alternative position.

Robyn McCallum explains that “irony is an implicitly double-voiced narrative strategy because it depends upon a reader’s recognition of two implicit meanings and hence enables the representation of two simultaneous voices and viewpoints” (40). Recognition is key. We should distinguish irony from parody in Bakhtin’s system, however, if only to point out how the number of voices is to be considered along with their relative importance. Bakhtin considers any parodic text to be “passively” double-voiced discourse because one position in the text is dominant. The reader is made passive regarding the determination of the text’s position. There are two voices, but one is clearly wrong-headed from the implied author’s point of view. To choose the surface voice in parody is to choose wrongly, and for the parody to work the author needs to find a way to let the reader understand the point and the target. To take Swift at his word regarding the consumption of Irish babies, for example, is to fail to understand the real point of “A Modest Proposal”—a point that is the direct opposite of that stated. In “active” double-voiced discourse, in contrast, no single position in the text is clearly endorsed or becomes clear at the expense of others, which enables the reader to consider the rightness of the positions based on the specific details of the narrative. There are opposing positions and world views, and hence irony, but the most active double-voiced discourse does more than simply entertain more than one voice; it achieves ideological parity. The presence of active double-voiced discourse within the young adult novel alleviates some of the ethical tension inherent in the ironic (perhaps even parodic) narrative situation itself.

Bakhtin believed that any ethical act involved work. He believed that we must respond as well as we can to each unique and complicated ethical situation that we encounter. We cannot blindly follow abstract rules for ethical behavior; we cannot generalize (Morson and Emerson 25-27). Such ethical work involves paying attention to the unique and specific situation at hand, in life or in narrative. This is why the novel genre has such power in ethical education, according to Bakhtin: the sheer length of the text enables the reader to assemble enough particulars to make each case unique and beyond judgment by abstract rules. Double-voiced discourse forces work because it forces choice; there is neither eager nor unconscious acquiescence to an authorial position. The actively double-voiced text provides the reader with a host of unjudged concrete specifics that in their totality enable the reader to keep any single conclusion in doubt (or “unfinalized”) over the long term. “For Bakhtin,” McCallum writes, “an individual’s subjectivity is formed through the selective appropriation and assimilation of the discourse of others”, which makes it important that the discourse of others remains as responsible as it can be (11). The author needs to be able to “act in good faith” and is “obliged to surmount content with ‘loving form,’ which in turn has the capacity to redeem” (Morson and Emerson 72). From this point of view, there are ethical implications for how authors of young adult fiction help their young audience select, appropriate, and assimilate those discourses.

Karen Cushman’s Catherine, Called Birdy (1994) and Bruce Brooks’ The Moves Make the Man (1984) are single-voiced texts that, while imitative of a single young adult voice in each case, do not provide readers with enough tools to contest the perspectives or investigate alternative points of view. Stephen Chbosky’s The Perks of Being a Wallflower (1999), which also employs a character narrator, manages to provide the reader with access to multiple points of view (though indirectly) and, more important in this case, creates doubt in the reliability of the narrator in order to achieve double-voiced discourse. Robert Cormier’s The Chocolate War (1974) and Ursula Le Guin’s
The novels that are more celebrated for speaking through the young adult consciousness are those texts that are offered from straight first-person points of view—that “preferred technique” of character narration that Schuhmann discusses above. A popular convention for setting up a narrative context for first-person narration is for the author to have the protagonist speak through that character’s own writing, in which case the “speaking” is itself part of the story. As in dialogue, these texts show that the “narrator is obliterated and the character substitutes for him” (Narrative Discourse 174). Direct speech—or dialogue—asks the reader to believe that the narrator gives the floor to the character, allowing the character to speak for him—or herself. Gerard Genette regards this technique as “pretending,” which seems especially true of YA literature (Narrative Discourse 172). In Cushman’s Catherine, Called Birdy and Brooks’ The Moves Make the Man, both protagonists allegedly speak for themselves in implicit dialogue; they also, however, end up speaking only for themselves. Each text provides a single voice that is so highly confident that it is ultimately unassailable within the text. These books and speakers provide only one argument or position on a matter, and most important, they fail to provide within the text the tools necessary to reveal the contestability of these immature perspectives to the equally immature reader. The immediacy of the narratives above, the insufficient assailability of their narrators, and the absence of other voices in those stories all keep these books from achieving double-voicedness.

In an interview with Stephanie Loer, Cushman claims that she chose the diary form for Catherine, Called Birdy because it “would give the readers a more personal picture” of Catherine, making the story “more intimate and immediate.” Cushman also claims that the diary entries allow readers “to see Catherine through their eyes and through her eyes at the same time.” The diary form creates an intimate portrait of Catherine, and while this account is ostensibly for her brother Edward, it seems clear that as she progresses she writes without much regard for an outside audience. As a result, we seem to get her uncensored thoughts on various subjects—which seems to make them all the more “authentic.” Beyond this, however, the authenticity of the point of view provided by this medieval girl is questionable. While Joe Zornado makes a good case that individuals in historical fiction need not be held to historical demands for what groups thought during certain eras, Zornado also points to the extremity of Catherine’s modern, even “postmodern” view (258).

Surely, such a contemporary way of seeing the world makes Catherine more empathetic to the contemporary young reader, the ultimate goal of the first person YA novel; but that same empathetic perspective also makes Catherine unassailable as a voice within the text. Perhaps this is recognized by Cushman herself, who has Catherine hold what we would consider “enlightened” opinions about a good many subjects, including what to think of the poor, Jews, women, and capital punishment in spite of the cultural pressures that would shape those opinions. Cushman, while claiming an interest in historical accuracy, seems to realize that the combination of her chosen mode of narration and her implied audience forces her to be careful about what her highly empathetic protagonist says and believes. Cushman’s social conscience awakens in her a need to employ monologic discourse as she simultaneously follows the rules for successful YA novelists. The historically accurate crudities of language in the text are harmless compared to the potentially persuasive ideological views on the matters listed above. So, Cushman, recognizing the monologic limits of her mode of narration and her implied audience forces her to be careful about what her highly empathetic protagonist says and believes. Cushman’s social conscience awakens in her a need to employ monologic discourse as she simultaneously follows the rules for successful YA novelists. The historically accurate crudities of language in the text are harmless compared to the potentially persuasive ideological views on the matters listed above. So, Cushman, recognizing the monologic limits of her mode of narration and her implied audience forces her to be careful about what her highly empathetic protagonist says and believes. Cushman’s social conscience awakens in her a need to employ monologic discourse as she simultaneously follows the rules for successful YA novelists. The historically accurate crudities of language in the text are harmless compared to the potentially persuasive ideological views on the matters listed above. So, Cushman, recognizing the monologic limits of her mode of narration and her implied audience forces her to be careful about what her highly empathetic protagonist says and believes.
must be willing to sacrifice regarding the historical narrative in order to keep readers’ empathy while still persuading readers to reject positions morally offensive to contemporary society. While Cushman stays aback the mirror and manages to reflect a contemporary image back to the reader in what seems an honestly ethical mission, she does so at the expense of both history and a balanced view.

It could be argued that dialogic discourse ages better than single-voiced discourse because the assumptions behind positions are already uncovered to some degree. It need not be the case, for instance, that we condescend to older books’ world-views because “that’s just how folks thought back then” any more than we need to write contemporary consciousness into historical fiction. When a book presents equal, compelling, and competing perspectives on events, or when the narrating consciousness is self-doubting in equally compelling and legitimate ways, the book will likely avoid being judged either quaint or historically suspect.

While Catherine’s story is an initially unwilling “account of [her] days” (1), Jerome’s is a more-than-willing account of his friend Bix’s problems in Brooks’ *The Moves Make the Man*. Jerome’s story is a “book” (250) that is meant to tell us Bix’s “story” (315) and is inspired by Jerome’s encounter with the “creepy jive” (4) spread about Bix by the adult community. That “creepy jive” is never really represented beyond Bix’s father’s angry discourse during a one-on-one basketball game late in the novel. The response to that ill-defined “creepy jive” is the substance of the entire novel, however. This one-sided tale is provided to us by a narrator whose focus on Bix and whose self-representation are both highly questionable. Jerome tells us that the story is about “Bix and me, mostly”, although Bix does not enter the narrative with any real power until Part III of the novel and never really provides the reader with a clear point of view on events (5). Jerome protests too much throughout the narrative about himself, claiming, “I know who I am and that I will be fine anywhere”, but this amazing confidence cannot really be challenged because his is the only perspective offered (49).

Jerome’s highly melodramatic account of his basketball tryouts, his comically hyperbolic depictions of his psychologist-want-to-be brother Maurice, and his triumph in a one-on-one game with a train porter all might call his veracity further into question by a young adult reader if the narrative provided tools for calling Jerome’s “book” into question. Any frame narrative that might help in this way is absent, however. Hyperbole helps give the reader one tool for doubting the single-vision presented, but is it enough? Is this highly charismatic and articulate narrator shown by the text to be doubtable? Hyperbole, another form of irony, is harder to detect than either the contradiction provided by multiple perspectives or the doubt suggested by a more self-conscious narrator. More important, hyperbole, even if readers recognize it, does not enable them to consider the claims of characters with any equity.

Robert Small claims that a novel’s “point of view and narrator [should] be chosen wisely” and uses Brooks’ novel as an example (284). By “wise” Small means, among other things, “true to the character.” But the wisdom of the choice is also a matter of how well the text matches its genre’s implied audience (in this case defined by age). While Booth’s experienced reader might notice that the moves make Jerome, and that his hyperbolic verbal moves are as suspect as his basketball moves, young adult readers take Jerome at his word if they do not recognize the hyperbole or understand that hyperbole in some cases is enough for us to call other claims by that character/narrator into question. Jerome’s story is told as gospel by a clever and charismatic speaker. Does the narrator claim any uncertainty that might invite the reader to reconsider the truth-value of claims in the novel? We are told by Jerome that he will understand it all by summer’s end (5), and he pretty clearly claims to have Bix figured out by the end of the project (251). Because Bix’s and Bix’s stepfather’s views of the world are infinitely less authoritative than Jerome’s voice and view, the reader is led by the nose toward Jerome’s world-view. Jerome closes his book with the observation that, “there are no moves you truly make alone”, an observation itself rife with irony for the author of young adult fiction (280).

**Double-voicedness and Character Narration**

Stephen Chbosky’s *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, a 1999 MTV publication, is the story of a new high school student, Charlie, told through his letters to a person never identified to the reader. The letters cover Charlie’s first year in high school (from August 25, 1991, to August 23, 1992). Charlie is a character narrator and invites comparison to Catherine. Unlike Cushman, however, Chbosky uses first-person address in highly dialogic ways through a number of methods. Chbosky provides a single young adult voice with sufficient self-consciousness and self-questioning for a young reader to understand that, from the beginning, Charlie’s is a story that needs to be considered rather than just swallowed.

This book manages to build a believable and challenging narrator. The narratee, the recipient of the letters, is a figure unknown to the reader, not unlike Catherine’s or Jerome’s audiences, but also largely unknown to Charlie. He is self-consciously sending himself out to a reader to be judged and questioned. The narratee is someone a friend has told Charlie is “older than [Charlie]” (21), not unlike the psychologist with whom Charlie visits later in the novel (93). The narratee is in a
position to challenge and question Charlie’s words. The implied MTV reader/viewer, by implication, is invited to do the same from an equal position of authority. Charlie is vulnerable because he knows little of the narratee. Charlie touchingly closes each letter, from first to last, with “Love Always, Charlie.” This professed love can be construed either to be a miscalculation of traditional closings or, in fact, as indicative of the understanding he craves from both the narratee and the implied audience. Charlie’s vulnerability is palpable from the very beginning. He tells the narratee, “Other people look to you for strength and friendship and it’s that simple. At least that’s what I’ve heard” (2). Charlie’s qualification at the end is hopeful and full of the possibility of being wrong. Charlie trusts the narratee to be someone fixed, which helps us see that Charlie allows himself not to be—in contrast with Jerome. Chbosky creates a narrator who is less sophisticated and confident than others discussed above. While he mirrors back a naive voice when describing his family:

My brother is the oldest. He is a very good football player and likes his car. My sister is very pretty and mean to boys and she is in the middle. I get straight A’s now like my sister and that is why they leave me alone. My mom cries a lot during TV programs. My dad works a lot and is an honest man. (5)

Our relationship to this sort of voice changes when Charlie writes something like, “Five minutes of a lifetime that were truly spent, and we felt young in a good way” (33). Is Charlie’s naiveté a ruse? Consider Charlie’s thoughts on the sense of providing masturbation breaks at work instead of coffee breaks: “But then again, I think this would decrease productivity” (21), followed shortly thereafter with, “I’m only being cute here. I didn’t mean it. I just wanted to make you smile” (21). Is he simply not showing his hand in other places or can we take this passage to mean he is not being cute elsewhere? He does share insights into his own voice when claiming at an earlier point that “I just reread that and it doesn’t sound like how I talk” (4). I think we get the impression that he will provide us retractions of a sort when he thinks of it. The naive voice does not change dramatically over the months, although Charlie is capable of flashes of eloquence and insight that are not at all incongruous with his overall naiveté; but those flashes force us to read all of his observations with a critical eye. He shares his conscious doubts with us all along, unlike the narrators discussed above, and causes us to doubt his reliability in ways he does not realize. He observes that “it’s nice for stars to do interviews to make us think they are just like us, but to tell you the truth, I get the feeling that it’s all a big lie” (15). Charlie’s innocence is striking in moments when he writes, “I wasn’t raised very religiously because my parents went to Catholic school” (27); “Craig is older than my brother. I think he may even be twenty-one because he drinks red wine” (48); or, “She said I was the most sensitive boy she’d ever met, which I didn’t understand because really all I did was not interrupt her” (114). These, unlike the more eloquent passages of introspection of which he is capable, are closer to the consistent persona of the letters.

What would be Charlie’s motivation for fooling someone he does not know about these matters? None, really. Jerome has a case to make and Catherine a brother to “convert”—and both seek something from their respective narratees. He confesses early on that, “The reason I wrote this [first] letter is because I start high school tomorrow and I am really afraid of going” (6). The narratee has nothing to offer but sympathy, or empathy, which can never be communicated, as is the case with the implied reader. This creates an odd form of reliability in contrast to the unreliability discussed above. Together these factors enable readers to contemplate the competing ideologies and choices in Charlie’s life with the knowledge that the speaker has integrity.

But Charlie, like Jerome, fashions himself, literally, as a writer, although he is one more in training than in nature. All the same, this is cause for pause. “I have decided that maybe I want to write when I grow up,” Charlie shares; “I just don’t know what I would write” (46). We suspect that this collection of letters is what Charlie would write. Charlie tells the narratee that letters are better than a diary “because there is communion and a diary can be found” (206). These letters, though, are not the same sort
that Judy Abbott sends to her “Daddy” in Jean Webster’s *Daddy-Long-Legs*, which are clear practice in the art of shifting persona and moods in order to provoke an audience to respond. Charlie claims to respect the directness of Ayn Rand’s *The Fountainhead*: “But it wasn’t like you had to really search for the philosophy. It was pretty straightforward, I thought, and the great part is that I took what the author wrote about and put it in terms of my own life” (169). We have neither the bravado of Jerome nor the self-conscious posturing of Judy here. If anything, it is the mixture of the naive and the sophisticated that argues for the lack of guile in the telling and the respectful wariness of the reader. A number of equal voices form Charlie as a character, although it is significant that he is never “completed” as a project in identity, as we ourselves resist completion. Charlie (and we) hear the reported speech of other characters, his own uncertain musings about his life, those other characters, and a long list of books in which he is “starting to see a real trend” (63). Charlie’s artlessness, combined with his providing the reader with the tools to doubt his perspective, invites the reader to think through the dilemmas Charlie faces with him rather than wonder at his cleverness or wonder which persona is “really” Charlie. As more conflicting perspectives are presented in the novel, the reader is free to do the work of the ethical act. The young reader will read like “a filter, not a sponge”, as Charlie is warned to do by his teacher, and will be on the way toward becoming Booth’s experienced reader who is better equipped to accommodate the most compelling, ironic, or single-voiced of classic texts (165).

**Double-voicedness and External Narration**

*The Chocolate War* does not ask the young adult reader to trust in the voice of a single speaker or to accept a single, unchallenged view of events. In alternating chapters we are given thirteen different characters’ perspectives on events. Within some chapters, especially chapters twenty-five and thirty-five, the reader gets multiple points of view. Although Jerry Renault’s views are those most frequently shared, they do not account for even one third of the book. Despite the fact that no adult’s thoughts are represented (we never see into Jerry’s father’s or Brother Leon’s or Brother Jacques’ thoughts, for instance), the book does not limit itself to a single adolescent’s view of the world. The reader develops a sense of a complicated world through the recognition of competing positions and perspectives that are quite different from each other despite their all being “young adult.”

*The Chocolate War* is not written in first-person address, though the narrator reports thoughts from the position of the characters being portrayed. We are told, for instance, that “The Goober was beautiful when he ran” (51). We understand that Goober himself considers this to be true in contrast with the rest of his life, including the moment under narration in which he attempts a terrifying “assignment” (52-55). Here we see what Gerard Genette would call indirect address. *Weetzie Bat* and *The Beginning Place*, both discussed below, are also each the sort of text in which the “narrator takes on the speech of the character, or, if you prefer, the character speaks through the narrator” (*Narrative Discourse Revisited* 52). We accept that Hugh and Goober and Weetzie do actually hold the thoughts attributed to them indirectly, and the portrayal of the character matches the thoughts reported from the narrator. Such indirect address has the same effect as first-person narration regarding the privileging of the YA consciousness in the text.

In any case, we learn how the chocolate sale means different things to Sulkey and Caroni and Chartier and Cochran and Goober and others in Cormier’s novel without any interpretation from a narrator. For instance, the chocolate sale provides John Sulkey with the opportunity to be recognized for his “Service To The School” in a way he is never recognized for academic performance (85); the chocolate sale reveals the corruption of teachers to David Caroni, that “life was rotten, that there were no heroes, really, and that you couldn’t trust anybody, not even yourself” (109); the chocolate sale and Jerry’s resistance to it inspire Kevin Chartier to do what he’d never thought to do before—resist (133). And we are enabled to see, because of the opportunity offered by the length of the novel, how even one individual’s point of view can change over time, which heightens the chances that a mature sense will develop in the reader without the need for an interpreter. The young adult is not being told what to think from either a mature “adult” narrative viewpoint or from Jerry’s single perspective as one young adult. *The Chocolate War* in particular shows the reader how easy it is for different people in society (albeit a small one in this case) to have conflicting, changing, heart-felt positions regarding the same thing. We could not understand this paradox without the differing perspectives; young adults would only see it from one point of view and likely come away with a single opinion fortified with the voice of “one of their own,” ironically. Goober’s and Archie’s and Jerry’s and Janza’s ideas about the nature of conflict, for instance, are all different, and all “true” relative to each other, and are all from constructed adolescent viewpoints. Goober and Archie both avoid conflict in different ways and for different reasons; while Goober is “one of those kids who always wanted to please everybody,” Archie simply realizes that conflict is risky and might expose his own vulnerability (32). Jerry and Janza seek conflict in similar ways but in different arenas; while Jerry doesn’t know why he resists the sale and the obvious conflict it creates (112), Janza’s love of conflict is equally mindless, although more physical than metaphysical. This, for instance, is why the
novel is often damned for being pessimistic (rather than tragic) while at the same time it is applauded for its literally brutal honesty. Cormier does not appear to either clean or clear anything up, but he gives us enough contrast to know that truth is still to be determined by the reader—now, later, and later still. Were Cormier to restrict himself to Jerry’s or Goober’s or Archie’s point of view, whatever he might hold to be true, he would fail to have as full a vision of the complexity of the events in the story because of the limits of expression first-person young adult address would impose upon him. Whatever insight into any one matter is lost through the immature expression of the group of young adults, Cormier makes up for with multiple immature perspectives that highlight the contradictory nature of that matter, and he gives the young reader the chance to navigate her way through these contrasts.

McCallum claims that Cormier’s novel is restricted in its dialogism (despite its varied perspectives) because of the sameness of the characters’ worldviews. This sameness keeps the characters from entering into dialogue with each other (42). I concede that the degree of separation among perspectives is not great, but I find that Cormier mirrors the realistic nature of perspective in a world that, like any other, is limited by its setting. McCallum does go on to say that voices from “within a single cultural or societal context” stress “cultural heterogeneity within a specific social context” (55), and that is what I believe Cormier achieves through displaying the subtle and important differences among characters’ views of the chocolate sale and their views of conflict, discussed above.

Le Guin’s The Beginning Place also provides subtle but important differences in young adult perspectives. Susan Wood claims that “Le Guin does not...write fiction or criticism from any particular political viewpoint” (8). It is more accurate to say that it is not always clear what the particular political viewpoint is. In The Beginning Place, Le Guin does not answer questions with one voice but provides us with either unanswered questions or at least two answers to any one question. As The Chocolate War does, The Beginning Place alternates view points and the narrator takes on the voice and vision of the characters whose thoughts the young adult gets to hear though indirect address. The narrator tells us that “at slow times” at Hugh’s grocery store checkout, “old men and women liked to talk, it didn’t matter what you answered, they didn’t listen” (1). We understand this to be Hugh’s take on the situation rather than a separate narrator’s. Or when in the next chapter—Irene’s chapter—we are told by the narrator that “probably [the gate to the Beginning Place] would not be there,” we understand that this is really Irene’s suspicion rather than the narrator’s observation (39). We are given the perspective of each young character in alternating chapters—positions that are not entirely different or similar.

Le Guin is, if anything, a bit extreme in how parallel she makes the shifting viewpoints. Chapters one through eight shift each time from Hugh’s to Irene’s point of view, giving each character four chapters of dominance. Chapter nine, the last chapter, begins with Hugh, shifts to Irene, moves to dialogue between them without narration, and ends with one last brief paragraph of narration ending with the assertion (whose? Le Guin’s finally?) repeated from earlier in the tale: “there is more than one road to the city” (167). While this might seem to be a process of synthesis, the two young people remain different while also, however, establishing a commitment to one another. We learn that neither Hugh nor Irene is either completely right or completely wrong about the phenomenon of the portal, the place of Tembreabrezi, or the metaphorically charged events they share. We are not drawn into a single young adult vision and we also aren’t given any single answers. Even the last line of the novel, cited above, is richly ambiguous. The text gives the reader the tools to see the paradox of how the same phenomenon can be seen differently and that Hugh and Irene both have assailable positions on these matters. Le Guin and Cormier both provide the reader the contrast of equal and many times (but not always) opposing voices, and therefore give young adult readers the tools to identify the paradox of contrasting “authentic” young adult descriptions of the same situations.

Block’s Weetzie Bat can be contrasted to both The Chocolate War and The Beginning Place in how it makes multiple positions visible and, therefore, assailable. Robyn McCallum reminds us that “the presence of two or more speakers or focalizers...does not automatically ensure the dialogic character of the narrative discourse,” and this is true of Weetzie Bat (36). There are three places in the text where another character’s thoughts are given expression. In the brief chapter entitled “Duck,” Dirk’s thoughts about Duck are revealed: Dirk imagines “the feel of Duck’s skin” and concludes that Duck’s “eyelashes looked so soft on his tan cheek” (29). In the second instance, Charlie Bat dreams “of a city where everyone was always young and lit up like a movie” during his ultimately fatal drug overdose (74). The last time we are given the thoughts of a character other than Weetzie is when we are told that Dirk “thought of his lover and his best friend and his date—his Major #1 Date-Mate Duck Partner” (81). The rest of the text is expressed in “Weetzie-speak.” Other characters are given voice through dialogue, but the world is focalized through Weetzie’s indubitable consciousness throughout, including the beginning when the narrator tells us that “the reason Weetzie Bat hated high school was because no one understood. They didn’t even realize where they were living” (3). Here we have the same indirect address seen in The Chocolate War and The Beginning Place, but the multiple voices are almost always all seen through the same
focalizer: Weetzie Bat. The text's/Weetzie's/The implied author's ideology is clear regarding all matters including how and what to think of Los Angeles, homosexuality, dating, pre-marital sex, new-age family life, and even the merits of Okie Dogs. Block may find this single-voicedness necessary because the ideology presented is itself countercultural and therefore always already in dialogue with mainstream culture. Nonetheless, the voice of the slim novel is singular and irrefutable within the confines of the text. The narrative silence and inscrutability with which Charlie Bat's suicide is handled makes it impossible for us to claim that there is a dialogue of equal perspectives regarding a vision of life.

While the mask may stay on, while the author may stay securely behind the mirror, the author should not use that mask or mirror irresponsibly. Books like The Chocolate War, The Beginning Place, and The Perks of Being a Wallflower should be considered models for any author of young adult literature interested in helping young readers detect and cope with the irony, complexity, and contingency so rich in the world they hope so desperately to know.

NOTES
1. An earlier version of this paper was delivered at the Midwest Modern Language Association meeting in November of 1998. Thanks to the officers—Judith Gero John and Roberta Trites—and the attendees of the section on young adult literature for their helpful and encouraging suggestions. I also wish to thank Ian Roberts for his comments on earlier drafts of this paper.
2. For further discussion on the nature of first-person address in children's literature, especially the significance of the distance that cannot exist between the narrating agent and the self that is the subject of the narrative, see Wyile (185-202).
3. More on Booth's ideas about the ethics of literature can be found in The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction. For a discussion of this book in the context of children's literature, please see Mills 181-87.
4. "Double-voiced" should not be confused with Barbara Wall's use of "double address." Wall explains that double address is a flawed type of discourse in which children and adults are alternately addressed in the text; this results from an author's self-conscious and conflicted sense of audience. Single address, "a phenomenon of the twentieth century," is achieved when only one audience is addressed (36). Dual address is achieved when there is a fusion of single and double address that results in both children and adults being addressed simultaneously (9). There is a similarity between Bakhtin's and Wall's terms in that they both value dialogue that does not privilege one over the other—a dialogue that is more a quality of the text's sense of purpose and message than it is a matter of identifying multiple speakers in a text. Both the double-voiced text and the dually addressed text defer judgment on what is to be concluded, in terms of ideology or audience. See McCallum and Nikolajeva regarding the relationship between Bakhtin and children's and adolescent literature.
5. While it is true that not all readers will read a text sympathetically (anyone can become Alice's Duchess, after all, reducing any text—however dialogic—to a monologic conclusion), I am focusing here on the responsibility of the author to the reader rather than that of the reader to the author.

6. Rather than observing parallelism for its own sake, I limit my examples to texts that adequately cover all of the issues I believe to be important in each category listed above. I have chosen, therefore, to vary the number of texts in each section as well as the degree to which I examine each.

WORKS CITED


Mike Cadden is associate professor of English at Missouri Western State College where he teaches courses in children's and young adult literature.