The Changing Face of the Novel

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With the publication of The Invention of Hugo Cabret (Selznick, 2007) and subsequent awarding of the Caldecott Award in 2008, our conceptions of the novel for young readers were forever altered. The inclusion of visual images and graphic elements, metafictive devices, nonlinear structures, and multiple narrators signal postmodern and avant-garde influences on contemporary novels. These new compositions, structures, and design elements present an array of challenges to the young reader.

Dresang (1999) outlined three Radical Changes in children’s fiction: namely, (1) changing forms and formats—new design features and nonlinear structures, (2) changing perspectives—previously unheard voices and multiple narrators, and (3) changing boundaries—broaching unusually sophisticated topics and themes for young children. Contemporary novels, once dominated by written language and weighed down by the literary practices and conventions of the past, incorporate Dresang’s Radical Change elements to drastically alter what we have come to know as the novel.

The controversial topics and more elaborate design features contained in contemporary children’s literature align more with mainstream literature, for example, the expansion of dystopic fiction, the disruption of traditional narrative structures, and the use of metafictive devices (Nikolajeva, 1998). These changes have widespread implications for literacy instruction in elementary and middle schools, and teachers need to become more sophisticated readers of contemporary novels if they are to expand their pedagogical approaches and classroom resources.

Changing Forms and Formats

One of the most recognizable changes in the contemporary novel is the inclusion of visual images and elaborate graphic design features in addition to written text. These multimodal texts convey meaning through multiple systems of meaning, or modes, including visual images, typography, graphic design elements, and written text (Kress, 2010).

In George’s Secret Key to the Universe (L. Hawking, S. Hawking, & Parsons, 2009), photographs, diagrams, line drawings and other visual images are used to support the narrative text. In similar fashion, Diary of a Wimpy Kid (Kinney, 2007) includes line drawings, graphic designs, and other visual images. Other novels that incorporate visual images to varying degrees include The Graveyard Book (Gaiman, 2010), Miss Peregrine’s Home for Peculiar Children.

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For example, in The Tale of Despereaux, DiCamillo (2003) disrupts the illusion by directly speaking to the reader—asking if the reader is familiar with the word _perfidy_, and subsequently directing the reader to pause from reading to look up the word in a dictionary. Park (2005) disrupts the illusion between the actual and fictional world in Project Mulberry by featuring _inter-chapters_ in which the main character has a dialogue directly with the author about the author’s intentions and the direction of the story.

Additionally, novels have changed the format of the written text itself. Novels such as Love That Dog (Creech, 2001), Diamond Willow (Frost, 2008) and Nothing but the Truth (Avi, 1991) draw upon poetic line breaks and formats, screenplays, and journal entries to present their stories. The evolution of the contemporary novel continues unabated, as multimodal design elements, postmodern and metafictive devices, and an array of visual images reconfigure this traditional literary form. Teachers need to be aware that the novels their students are reading are not the same as the ones they encountered in school and require new strategies and approaches to make sense of these ensembles (Serafini, 2011).

Using storyboards to simultaneously display images from a novel allows readers to focus on the images and design features necessary to construct meanings (Youngs & Serafini, 2011).

In Nothing but the Truth, readers could assume one of the characters and read the story as a screenplay. Calling students attention to the various formats and using these as mentor texts for student writing brings reading and writing workshops together in meaningful ways. These metafictive devices may become an artistic device we find our students writers drawing on in a variety of genres.

**Changing Perspectives**

In traditional novels, a single narrator told a single story from his or her perspective. In many contemporary novels, this single perspective has been disrupted to allow multiple and commonly unheard voices to communicate the story. Multiple narrators and traditionally marginalized perspectives render a single version of story events indeterminate and force the reader to consider not only what is being told, but also who is doing the telling.

In Making Up Megaboy, Walter (1999) offers the events of a shooting at a bodega from numerous perspectives, as the wife of the storeowner, the mother of the shooter, reporters, and eyewitnesses offer their version of the events. In similar fashion, Bull Run (Fleischman, 1993) offers 16 voices, including Confederate and Union soldiers and a range of civilian perspectives, to tell the tale of the Battle of Bull Run.

In Flipped (van Draanen, 2001) and Never Mind: A Twin Novel (Avi & Vail, 2005), we are offered two stories in a

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(Riggs, 2011), Captain Underpants (Pilkey, 1997), Baby Mouse (Holm & Holm, 2005) and Operation Red Jericho (Mowll, 2005).

_The Invention of Hugo Cabret_ and the follow-up to that groundbreaking work, Wonderstruck (Selznick, 2011), draw upon visual images and design features to an extent not previously encountered in traditional novels. Moving back and forth from short passages of written text to pages of exquisite charcoal sketches, the reader must make meaning across visual and textual modes to understand the trajectory of the narrative.

When _The Invention of Hugo Cabret_ was awarded the Caldecott Medal for outstanding picture book, the boundary between picture book and novel was forever blurred. Reading like novels, but intertwined with visual images and design elements, _The Invention of Hugo Cabret_ and _Wonderstruck_ offer the reader a multimodal experience that incorporates a range of visual and textual information.

Another change in form and format encountered in contemporary novels is self-referentiality (Sipe & Pantaleo, 2008). Self-referentiality is a literary concept by which the author breaks the traditional wall between the fictional world and the actual world of the reader by referring to oneself directly in the narrative. This disruption of the secondary story world punctuates the illusion of fiction for the reader.
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Changing Boundaries

One change that has become evident in the past few years has been the publication of more dystopic fiction, in particular dystopian novels and novel series. Teen fascination with the dystopian novel would seem to be a phenomenon of the new millennium and has been frighteningly accurate in its predictions so far. Starting with M.T. Anderson’s Feed, a National Book Award Finalist in 2004, and continuing with the wildly popular The Hunger Games trilogy by Suzanne Collins (2010), the boom in dystopian novels for young readers foreges ahead.

In dystopian fiction, the world has gone radically astray at some point in the future, as authors extrapolate on current social, political, or economic trends. These novels provide teens with a look at a future they may suspect is nearly upon them, perhaps validating their worst fears.

In Feed, consumerism and corporate influence on society have overwhelmed the Internet such that it rules people’s lives. Almost everyone has an Internet feed directly implanted into his or her brain at birth, and the bombardment of advertising and unsolicited information is inescapable. This corporate entity also controls education in the future, where students are mostly indoctrinated into how to be more effective consumers rather than learning about history, science, math, or literature.

Is it any wonder readers identify dystopic fiction as among their favorite novels? The issues protagonists face can’t help but resonate with young readers as advancements in technology and current political events have followed Anderson’s predictions with shocking correlation. As if smartphones that provide instant information on the Internet weren’t enough, Siri allows iPhone users to pose queries, place phone calls, text, and make appointments at will.

With numerous reality shows cluttering current cable television networks, how can students help but imagine life as played out one night a week, complete with building personal conflicts, vendettas, and coups? As Collins’s protagonist in The Hunger Games, Katniss Everdeen wagers her own personal war against 23 other contestants in a battlefield designed to provide its own challenge, the conflict is broadcast to 100% of the citizenry of Panem, providing entertainment reminiscent of the Roman gladiators, but also reminding them that The Capitol has ultimate power over their lives, including the power of life and death. The lines of reality that are blurred for The Hunger Games author, Suzanne Collins, are surely blurred for her young readers as well (Blasingame, 2009).

In between Feed (2004) and The Hunger Games (2010), dystopian young adult literature has taken a number of forms. Some of these stories take place on other planets, some take place on a future Earth, and some in a generic location, but all have this in common: They portray a vaguely recognizable condition, a condition we are likely to arrive at if we don’t change our ways. Environmental disaster, political apocalypse, technological obsession, social tyranny, whatever the problem, these books separate these problems from the present
"As the novel evolves, so too should the strategies and instructional approaches we use...."