

THE CHANGING FACE OF THE NOVEL

Frank Serafini ▪ James Blasingame

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, metafictional 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 metafictional 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*

James Blasingame is a professor of English Education at Arizona State University, Phoenix, USA; e-mail james.blasingame@asu.edu.

The department editor welcomes reader comments. Frank Serafini is an associate professor of Literacy Education at Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College, Arizona State University, Phoenix, USA; e-mail fserafini@mac.com.

“The evolution of the contemporary novel continues unabated, as multimodal design elements, postmodern and metafictional devices, and an array of visual images reconfigure this traditional literary form.”

(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.

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 on 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 metafictional 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 metafictional 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

“Multiple narrators... force the reader to consider...who is doing the telling.”

“he said, she said” narrative sequence, in which the two main characters rotate chapters to tell their life stories. In *Seedfolks* (Fleischman, 1997), we are offered multiple perspectives on a vacant lot from residents in a tenement building. *The Year of Secret Assignments* (Moriarty, 2004) offers the reader not only different perspectives in the telling of the story, but also different formats for how they are presented. Using e-mails, notes, phone conversations, and narrative text, Moriarty tells of the trials and tribulations of teenage love and friendships.

In novels told from multiple perspectives, readers are no longer beholden to an authoritarian, didactic narrator (Nikolajeva, 1998). Different versions of the world blur together as readers have to consider not only what is told, but also from whose perspective the events are rendered. As educators, we may choose to use readers’ theater to allow different voices and perspectives to come forward.

Having students study a particular character and then attend a fake dinner party staying in character is another way to get them to see various points of view through the eyes of a main or subordinate character. In addition, creating space for interactive discussions that allow readers to consider the multiple perspectives offered and construct their own interpretations is paramount.

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.

“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.”

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 forges 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 wages 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....”

so that young readers can recognize and process them without distraction.

The attraction for the young reader may be that they are seen as victims, but are given the attention they desperately require. Some of these stories are more realistic, whereas some are entirely fantasy, but what resonates with young readers is the same: Where do I fit into a world gone wrong?

Teachers need to facilitate students in their personal engagement with dystopian fiction rather than attempt to employ what has been called the IRE (Initiate, Respond, Evaluate) method of classroom literature study so commonly applied to books read by a whole class (Applebee, Langer, Nystrand, & Gamoran, 2003). Applebee and colleagues explained that rather than having the teacher ask questions about literature and evaluate the students' responses based on preconceived notions of correct answers, the students need to think for themselves and defend their own judgments of a piece and its meaning. Dystopian literature resonates with young readers for a reason, and teachers need to help students explore how and why these books strike such a familiar note with them.

Students benefit most from discussing and defending their opinions with fellow students in conversations and in writing and exploring new ideas through

response logs and discussion boards. As Berger (1996) suggests, meaty, thoughtful interpretations of literature rather than summaries are unlikely to happen if students are not given some scaffolding designed to help them explore their own thinking and life experience revolving around their reading.

The important thing when using dystopian literature is to place the focus on how this reading helps students to process or make meaning of their own world. Teachers should be more concerned with what a book dredges up from the young readers' conscious or subconscious minds about their present or potential life situations rather than uniform agreement on the dominant themes or symbols.

Moving Forward

The novel remains a dominant text in many upper-intermediate and middle school classrooms. As the novel evolves, so too should the strategies and instructional approaches we use to foster young readers' engagement with these texts. Providing students with strategies for making sense of the new forms and formats incorporated in contemporary novels expands their interpretive repertoires and provides a scaffold for the understandings of these complex texts.

REFERENCES

- Applebee, A., Langer, J.A., Nystrand, M., & Gamoran, A. (2003). Discussion-based approaches to developing understanding: Classroom instruction and student performance in middle and high school English. *American Educational Research Journal*, 40(3), 685–730. doi:10.3102/00028312040003685
- Berger, L.R. (1996). Reader response journals: You make the meaning. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 39(5), 380–385.
- Blasingame, J. (2009). An interview with Suzanne Collins. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 52(8), 726–727.
- Nikolajeva, M. (1998). Exit children's literature? *The Lion and the Unicorn*, 22(2), 221–236.
- Serafini, F. (2011). Expanding perspectives for comprehending visual images in multimodal texts. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 54(5), 342–350. doi:10.1598/JAAL.54.5.4
- Sipe, L.R., & Pantaleo, S. (Eds.). (2008). *Postmodern picturebooks: Play, parody, and self-referentiality*. New York: Routledge.
- Youngs, S., & Serafini, F. (2011). Comprehension strategies for reading historical fiction picturebooks. *The Reading Teacher*, 65(2), 115–124. doi:10.1002/TRTR.01014
- LITERATURE CITED**
- Anderson, M.T. (2004). *Feed*. New York: Candlewick.
- Avi. (1991). *Nothing but the truth*. New York: Orchard.
- Avi, & Vail, R. (2005). *Never mind: A twin novel*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Collins, S. (2010). *The hunger games*. New York: Scholastic.
- Creech, S. (2001). *Love that dog*. New York: HarperCollins.
- DiCamillo, K. (2003). *The tale of Despereaux*. Cambridge, MA: Candlewick.
- Dresang, E.T. (1999). *Radical change: Books for youth in a digital age*. New York: H.W. Wilson.
- Fleischman, P. (1993). *Bull run*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Fleischman, P. (1997). *Seedfolks*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Frost, H. (2008). *Diamond willow*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Gaiman, N. (2010). *The graveyard book*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Hawking, L., Hawking, S., & Parsons, G. (2009). *George's secret key to the universe*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Holm, J., & Holm, M. (2005). *Babymouse: Queen of the world*. New York: Random House.
- Kinney, J. (2007). *Diary of a wimpy kid*. New York: Amulet.
- Kress, G. (2010). *Multimodality: A social semiotic approach to contemporary communication*. London: Routledge.
- Moriarty, J. (2004). *The year of secret assignments*. New York: Arthur A. Levine.
- Mowll, J. (2005). *Operation red Jericho*. New York: Random House.
- Park, L.S. (2005). *Project mulberry*. New York: Clarion.
- Pilkey, D. (1997). *The adventures of Captain Underpants*. New York: Blue Sky.
- Riggs, R. (2011). *Miss Peregrine's home for peculiar children*. Philadelphia: Quirk.
- Selznick, B. (2007). *The invention of Hugo Cabret*. New York: Scholastic.
- Selznick, B. (2011). *Wonderstruck*. New York: Scholastic.
- van Draanen, W. (2001). *Flipped*. New York: Knopf.
- Walter, V. (1999). *Making up Megaboy*. New York: Delacorte.