

DISTURBING THE GENRE: EVALUATING POWER STRUCTURES IN YOUNG
ADULT LITERATURE AND CHARTING NEW POSSIBILITIES WITH PUSH

By

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by

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Abstract of Thesis Presented to the Graduate School
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In 2002, Scholastic published its first books in its Young Adult (Y.A.) imprint PUSH, and since then has signaled a way to reevaluate the Y.A. market. PUSH works to rethink what the Y.A. genre is capable of through its 21 books, its website, its marketing, and its writing contests which seek to publish new teenage authors. Although the market for adolescent literature is quite diverse and some other books are challenging the genre in interesting ways, PUSH has a whole institution behind it which allows this imprint to work on a larger scale. Using Roberta Seelinger Trites's *Disturbing the Universe* for theoretical contextualization of power and repression in Y.A. literature, I examine the ways that PUSH exposes problematic social structures both in reality and within the genre. Investigating the difference in dynamics that results from the two common Y.A. threads—the *Bildungsroman* and the *Entwicklungsroman*—we can see how PUSH is able to empower adolescents from within different structures. And by looking at the

compulsion to define adolescence and adolescent literature, we can see other problematic issues of adult control over teenage life.

To represent some of the more interesting titles PUSH has to offer, I use Brian James's *Pure Sunshine*, Billy Merrell's *Talking in the Dark*, Tanuja Desai Hidier's *Born Confused*, Patricia McCormick's *Cut*, and Chris Wooding's *Kerosene* to explore the different formulas that pervade Y.A. literature and to show how many of the PUSH books reinvent, abridge, or reject those formulas. Finally, the PUSH website and its writing contests which offer young adults the ability to publish work for their own market prove the imprint's commitment to empowering adolescents and to initiating a relationship that demands a response from them. For only when we understand these power structures controlling adolescent literature and those reading it can we begin to reformulate the way we view adolescence.

INTRODUCTION

In 2002, Scholastic's Young Adult imprint, PUSH, published its first four books after nearly five years of intense planning. Since then, twenty books from twelve different authors plus one anthology of writing of young adults have appeared. The goal for this series was to provide groundbreaking, compelling, yet also ethically responsible works for a young adult audience. PUSH hoped to get its audience actively involved in creating and critiquing its own literature—to inspire an interaction and response on the part of its target readership. Granted, when it comes to Y.A. literature, some of the individual PUSH titles have only been updating the issues rather than reinventing them; yet when taking into account the entirety of the project—the website, the marketing, the writing contests, as well as the books collectively—PUSH is a fascinating and remarkably successful experiment.

What makes PUSH such an interesting candidate for study is its scope. PUSH produces each of its books with the unifying goal of rethinking traditional Y.A. literature. Certainly specific non-PUSH titles in the Y.A. market are attempting this goal as well, and even some realize it more effectively, but no single book is able to do the work that PUSH can do as an institution, working on multiple levels from marketing to production to audience response. No one aspect of PUSH alone is unique; only when added together is PUSH able to signify something new for the Y.A. market. In this case, the sum is greater than the parts. I am not claiming that Y.A. literature is homogenous, only that PUSH is able to rework the genre on a larger scale. While not every PUSH book can be

described as innovative, many titles are provocative, insightful, and popular enough to garner support from both adults and adolescents. For these adults advocating a new way of evaluating Y.A. literature and for the adolescents reading it, we can use PUSH to continue the current trend in criticism that looks at Y.A. literature as something worthy of theoretical approaches and at young adults as capable of utilizing the tools that such approaches would provide.

Y.A. literature is largely made up of stories that either implicitly or explicitly deal with power structures. And adults who want to encourage young adults to think critically about their world can use some of the PUSH titles to initiate this development as most of the PUSH books expose social power structures, from patriarchy to imperialism to forms of dominance in schools or religious institutions, just to name a few. And even those books that do not fundamentally undermine these power structures can still be utilized, once young adults are empowered with the proper theoretical tools, for analyzing those structures that remain intact. The structures are not exactly the same in every situation, of course, which is another reason PUSH deserves study. Since each book is independent to a degree, the PUSH series is able to explore the many different power structures as manifested in varied ways. This complexity allows for discrepancies in the debate between empowerment and repression and in what is deemed appropriate for adolescents in relation to these dialectics. And because the PUSH books are so cleverly tailored to their audience—relying on edgy plots, frank dialogue, and inventive characters—young adults will be willing to use them to take these steps towards critical thought.

PUSH as an institution succeeds even more than its published books. By expanding its arena to include outreach to its target audience, PUSH works to connect

with young adults and empower them not just in critical thought when analyzing literature, but also in the real world. Adolescents are able to communicate with PUSH editors about the books they want to read, they can respond and review what PUSH is offering them, and they even have the potential opportunity to work with PUSH to produce new literature by winning an online contest for new novelists. It is not just the books, but also the outreach into schools (through Scholastic's writing contests) and into the young adult community that makes this project unique. The power structures that influence young adults' lives get investigated by multiple areas of PUSH's work.

In her book *Disturbing the Universe: Power & Repression in Adolescent Literature*, Roberta Seelinger Trites discusses the social and institutional power structures that Y.A. literature both thematizes and sustains. Many, if not most, adolescent novels explore themes of power and conflict, and too often it is done problematically. She evaluates the most common power structure and shows that a majority of Y.A. literature relies on the same basic formula. Trites states that most of these books follow a similar construct, which starts with the protagonist's attempt to rebel in an unacceptable manner against a controlling body, merely to be repressed and forced to rebel again within acceptable limits. Only when protagonists act out their insubordination in an unobjectionable manner are they allowed to find transcendence as characters, which reinforces institutional and cultural levels of control over adolescents. The interesting cases are the books which, like many in the PUSH series, reject this formula and create their own new version. Trites also expounds on the difference between the two narrative threads in Y.A. literature—the *Bildungsromane* or coming-of-age novels and the *Entwicklungsromane* or novels of development—and we can analyze PUSH's success in

relying on novels that expose power structures from within. Drawing upon Foucault, Trites explains how to read these dynamics and proposes that we investigate and expose this predilection towards problematic power structures. Applying her ideas to both PUSH's creation and its books, we can begin to rethink Y.A. literature.

Here, I will explore the creation of PUSH and the Y.A. environment (both in audience and in critics) at the time of its arrival. PUSH's history, while short, is compellingly necessary to understanding the problems Y.A. literature has faced in recent years, both as a market and as a canon. By analyzing the ongoing attempts to essentialize adolescence and adolescent literature, I intend to show that the power structures within Y.A. books are mirrored not only by existing real-world counterparts, but also in the scholarship and criticism surrounding the books. The issues of control facing adolescence and adolescent literature form a bridge between power structures that are strictly literary and those that are strictly parts of reality.

I also examine individual titles that are particularly strong in proving PUSH as an asset to the genre. Of the 21 books, I will analyze Chris Wooding's *Kerosene*, Patricia McCormick's *Cut*, and Brian James's *Pure Sunshine*, each members of the inaugural PUSH publishing. I also look at Tanuja Desai Hidier's *Born Confused*, which was published later that year as well as Billy Merrell's *Talking in the Dark* which was released in 2003. Each of these books looks at a different formulation of power structures in Y.A. literature, some working on specific issues and others more generally commenting on the structure of control over adolescence. *Pure Sunshine* uses the story of a teenager doing acid to avoid, or at least abridge, the common power formula for Y.A. literature and to challenge the limits of acceptability for controversial issues in what

adolescents read. In *Talking in the Dark*, Merrell explores, among other themes, the power dynamic in which adults try to control adolescent sexuality and try to make any discussion of it taboo. *Born Confused* examines race, ethnicity and culture as areas in which power and repression are played out, while also serving as a great example of what individual PUSH texts contribute aesthetically to the Y.A. canon. Encompassing a broader structure, *Cut* explores new ways to build upon traditional story arcs of power versus repression and works as a metaphor for “institutional” modes of controlling adolescence. Finally, *Kerosene* completely avoids Trite’s formula for power structures in Y.A. literature and instead shows a new way to write for adolescents divorced from regimes of punishment. While many other PUSH books could be used to show comparatively important power structures, these five work to show the range of ideas that PUSH explores.

As stated before, it is not the individual titles that make PUSH unique as much as the way those books work in conjunction with everything else PUSH does. Most importantly, I will show how PUSH demands a response from its audience that makes it different from any other literary institution of its kind. Focusing on the website, the writing contests, and the potential for young adults to publish through PUSH, I examine the ways in which PUSH has begun to change the Y.A. market through a new demand that calls for readers to respond and take control of their own literature.

The inception of PUSH marked a challenge to the traditional view of Y.A. literature. Of late scholars have begun to analyze literary institutions as well as the texts that created them.¹ Such interest is warranted since understanding the formation,

¹ Janice Radway’s *A Feeling for Books: The Book-of-the-Month Club, Literary Tastes, and Middle-Class Desire*, Joan Shelley Rubin’s *The Making of Middle Brow Culture* and even a book like Matthew Battles’s

motivation, and continuation of these institutions is just as important from a social, economic, and political standpoint as anything that happens within the pages of the published books. Investigating Scholastic's progression into the Y.A. market through PUSH helps to illuminate specific elements currently at play in adolescent literature. To genuinely appreciate what PUSH is doing, we must first investigate its creation.

PUSHING A NEW AGENDA

When Scholastic released its first set of novels under the PUSH imprint, it was not doing anything new. PUSH allowed the publishing company to enter the Y.A. market, which at the time Scholastic was not too invested in (the closest it got to successful young adult literature was the highly popular *Goosebumps* series which catered to pre- and early adolescents). Scholastic happened to be the fortunate company that published the Harry Potter books in America and because of the obvious success of that series, it subsequently had much leeway in its publishing choices. However, many in publishing felt that the Y.A. market was underachieving in terms of sales, so any attempt to infiltrate it would most likely not be financially profitable. Thus, despite having a budget surplus from the Harry Potter juggernaut, the initial plans for Scholastic to enter the Y.A. field had to be relatively safe. In the late 1990s, Scholastic editor David Levithan developed a proposal to lay the groundwork for Scholastic's foray into the Y.A. market. He initially provided a wide range of ideas on how to do this—proposing paperback reprints of popular young adult fiction and possibly even, as stated in an intraoffice memo, publishing fantasy books, since these were seen as tried-and-true options (Memorandum 3-4). In 1998, Levithan saw the current market as rife with possibilities and the timing perfect for introducing edgier books. In an early memo, he stated, “We stand at the intersection of an astonishing array of trends—the rebirth of teen culture, the rise of literary Oprah novels, the Lilith Fair girl movement, and the increasing presence of Internet booksellers

that cater to teenage readers” (4 Memorandum). The desire to create PUSH was bolstered by the fact that not only was the spending rate increasing for teenagers, but the actual population was dramatically growing as well. Levithan pointed out in his memo that within the next 7 years or so, there would be 50 million teenagers, which meant that this age group was growing at twice the rate of any other (6 Memorandum). And while PUSH did not actually publish its first book until 2002, the teen culture rebirth and population increase he described four years earlier still had the momentum to carry this project.

From the beginning, Levithan knew that PUSH needed to represent something new for the market—Scholastic’s reputation was for providing quality reading material for elementary students, which might be counterproductive for this imprint.¹ PUSH was Scholastic’s opportunity to “grow up” and tackle new areas of concern for young adults. When proposing the idea, Levithan wrote, “PUSH books would have ‘edge’ . . . with a more honest portrayal than currently exists in much of our fiction . . . [T]eenage readers want to move away from the safe place of middle-grade fiction” (2-3 Memorandum). To distance PUSH from Scholastic—which worked both to protect Scholastic’s image and to give PUSH a distinct image of its own—the editors decided to make PUSH an imprint, with the only mention of Scholastic being on the copyright page. Thus, even though it was subtle, Scholastic was still responsibly serving its readers who grew up from the Clifford books and classroom order forms and into young adults.

¹ Levithan acknowledged this stating, “[T]he red logo is holding our YA books back. Kids who want ‘edgy’ reading do not want to turn to the publisher they’ve been seeing in school since they were Clifford age. Even the word ‘scholastic’ is contrary to the attitude of a teenage reader of fiction” (3 PUSH).

After over four years of planning, PUSH finally published its first set of books in February 2002: *Pure Sunshine*, *Cut*, *You Remind Me of You*, and *Kerosene*. These first books span topics ranging from drug use, self-mutilation, suicide and eating disorders, and arson and teenage vandalism. In the end, Scholastic went with what Levithan believes to be the riskiest choice by publishing first-time authors writing books that dealt with controversial issues rather than tested hardback novels reprinted in paperback or books written by established authors. The series is not connected by any theme, author, character, or style. PUSH now has a few authors with two books in the series (and Brian James and Kevin Brooks just published their third books), but other than that, the PUSH books look at a variety of social issues, and in different forms of writing—poetry, memoir, prose. One of PUSH’s aims is to be as diverse as its readership, and based on how eclectic the first twenty-one books are, it is succeeding.

While PUSH has been fairly successful in reaching its market, the books have detractors who find fault with the controversial issues the series addresses. Each of the first four books dealt explicitly with sensitive themes, and the successive books continued this trend by discussing teenage sexuality (homosexual, bisexual, and heterosexual), adolescent violence in many forms, alcoholism, cultural diversity, and others.² But despite the books often being controversial, the main bonding element of each of these works is that they are committed to their young adult audience. Controversial material is obviously not automatically a bad thing; how the books handle the issues matters much more, and PUSH is committed to presenting these topics to a knowing audience who will

² Not that every PUSH book has a huge controversial issue at the center of it. Kirsten Kemp’s two PUSH novels (*I Will Survive* and *The Dating Diaries*) focus on high school popularity politics. And Martin Zusak’s *Getting the Girl* (a sequel to *Fighting Ruben Wolfe*) is about two brothers in love with the same girl.

reject the series if it does not respect their intelligence. Again, many other books work within these same constraints, but PUSH uniquely commands these rules at an institutional level.

Yet the question remains: Why PUSH? What makes this series stand out from other Y.A. fiction as more worthy of study? First, PUSH is challenging many of the traditional trends in Y.A. literature, offering controversial and edgy books that are critical of what have come before them. And PUSH recognizes that young adults do not want to read condescending literature or to be tricked into reading didactic “message” books. Y.A. literature has been plagued since the 1960s and 70s with the ubiquitous “problem novel,” which still saturates the market. Because of the subject matter, some might be quick to also label the PUSH books as updated versions of the problem novels, with plots that merely exchange self-mutilation for divorce or bulimia for premarital sex. But problem novels have negative connotations and are seen as books that substitute melodrama for realism and lack character development. In Michael Cart’s *From Romance to Realism*, Roger Sutton remarks, “Instead of a character being the focus of the novel, a condition (or social concern) became the subject of examination” (65). Cart himself offers this analogy: “[The problem novel] is to young adult literature what the soap opera is to legitimate drama” (64). He mentions poor character development, intense or blinding focus on an issue for plot, and a lack of connection to story as the reasons these books read more like newspaper articles than novels. This is definitely not the case with the majority of the PUSH books. Sure, these books can be seen as perhaps reinventing the problem novel in that most of the books have a social concern grounding the plot, but that concern is never allowed to supercede all other aspects of the story.

And based solely on the stigma that problem novels are poorly written message stories, PUSH avoids this categorization again by rejecting mass-produced, one-dimensional character-filled, “message” books. Cart makes a call to action in response to the problem books that have inundated the Y.A. market, stating, “[B]ooks won’t change anything if they’re formulaic, problem-driven fiction inhabited by cardboard characters who only skate across the surface of reality” (277). For the PUSH books, the difference is that they take on somewhat controversial issues but in a way that does not offer a tidy moral lesson at the end or cater to a preconceived notion of youth that is obviously the fulfillment of adult fantasies. They avoid the pitfalls that Cart sets up as a barrier to successful adolescent literature.

But is that enough to make PUSH unique? To be honest, other books that just as deftly avoid becoming problem novels can be used to explore these relationships and to instigate a rethinking of the issues. But this series endeavors to analyze issues of power and repression, and PUSH succeeds in making a seemingly sundry set of books mesh together to fulfill this goal. Not only do the books published in the imprint challenge certain conventions while working from within what is already considered acceptable limits, but the PUSH website—including the young adult writing contests—and its interaction and involvement with the adolescent audience propel PUSH to the forefront of innovative and responsible projects for the Y.A. market. Though PUSH is at its base an adultist project, it nevertheless offers a solution to the adultist agenda that seeks to control adolescence. To see what PUSH is doing differently, however, we must first look at the current trends with Y.A. literature, with theories of adolescence, and the scholarship around them.

EXISTING POWER STRUCTURES

In *Disturbing the Universe*, Trites examines the power structures at play in both adolescent literature and in adolescents' lives. Problematically, these structures revolve around compulsions to define and essentialize adolescence. Luckily, most theoretical discussions of adolescence at least recognize the problems with creating a proper definition of this concept; adolescence remains elusive because, as Patricia Meyer Spacks reminds us, it is a construct. In *The Adolescent Idea*, Spacks quotes John and Virginia Demos's point that "adolescence constitutes an idea masquerading as fact" (6). Spacks states that the current beliefs about adolescence tell us "[n]ot necessarily a great deal about how the young live and act, but much about how adults think and feel" (9). Her analysis takes up adolescence in much the same way Jacqueline Rose famously confronts society's construction of childhood in *The Case of Peter Pan or the Impossibility of Children's Fiction*. Rose states that because such a disconnect between adults and childhood exists, there is "no body of literature which rests so openly on an acknowledged difference, a rupture almost, between writer and addressee. Children's fiction sets up the child as an outsider to its own process, and then aims, unashamedly, to take the child *in*" (2). Adolescent literature works in much the same way in that it denies adolescents political agency and reinforces hegemonic power structures. The constant

play with semantics and juggling of definitions is just masking this more potent problem with adolescent literature.¹

Historically, even though adolescents have always existed and been given attention, the idea of “adolescence” as something that needed a definition and a consciously aware focus was not fully realized until the 20th Century. In the introduction to *The Fin-de-Siècle Culture of Adolescence*, John Neubauer states that “adolescence ‘came of age’ in the decades around 1900 not only because the term itself had little currency earlier, but...because interlocking discourses about adolescence emerged in psychoanalysis, psychology, criminal justice, pedagogy, sociology, as well as in literature” (6). In 1904, G. Stanley Hall wrote the seminal two-volume *Adolescence*, with its focus on psychological and physical growth of the human body and mind during that specific phase of life, and since its publication it has been considered a milestone in the concretization of the concept of adolescence. Although much in his work offers little to help the study of adolescent literature, he explicitly calls attention to the importance of recognizing the adolescent’s relationship to literature in a way that anticipates the motives behind the creation of PUSH. He states:

It is, I believe, high time that ephebic literature should be recognized as a class by itself, and have a place of its own in the history of letters and criticism. Much of it should be individually prescribed for the reading of the young, for whom it has a singular zest and is a true stimulus and corrective. This stage of life now has what might almost be called a school of its own. Here the young appeal to and listen to each other as they do not to adults, and in a way the latter have failed to appreciate. Again, no biography, and especially no autobiography, should henceforth be

¹ Despite their similarities, however, it is important to keep adolescent and children’s literature separate. Too often, any critical reactions to adolescent literature get subsumed into criticism on children’s literature, which becomes problematic in that different structures are in place for the two of them. As someone so concerned with destroying arbitrary categorizations, my commitment to retaining different classifications for children’s literature and adolescent literature might be seen as confusing. But these categories do not exist to define what each necessarily *is*, but rather what is being done with them and within them.

complete if it does not describe this period of transformation so all-determining for future life to which it alone can often give the key. (589)

Although some of his ideas are dated, he effectively posits the need for adolescents to read, and to read about themselves in a way that many adults fail to recognize.

Yet therein lies another of the problems—when adolescents read about themselves, they are all too often reading destructive material. And this does not mean the controversial themes or plot points in *PUSH* that are often so quickly attacked. Worse than any scenes of drugs or sex or violence that leave censors drooling in a fit of bowdlerizing excitement are the books which have entire plots reinforcing existing power structures. Spacks speaks to the need to explore novels of adolescence: “Novels . . . about the young focus attention on memory’s ambiguities . . . [D]istortions inform the literature of adolescence, shape the myths with whose aid we purport to understand the young. Examining these myths, we examine ourselves” (17). The myth she describes is called the “teenage mystique” by Thomas Hine in his book *The Rise and Fall of the American Teenager*. The teenage mystique includes everything we “love, fear, and think we know about the basic nature of young people . . . This mystique encourages adults to see teenagers (and young people to see themselves) not as individuals but as potential problems” (11). It is not teenagers who are the problem, but rather the ideals we espouse about them and force upon them. In this unsettling continual need to balance the polarizing and diverse issues that arise during the teenage years, adults turn adolescents into metaphors, into easy and ineffective definitions that lack any complexity except in that they paradoxically represent both a nostalgic time and a time that must be feared. And these problematic myths need to be studied because they come at a price—through a power-structure imposition. Using Foucault’s theories, Trites explores those dynamics of

power found within adolescent literature. Common to almost every young adult novel is a protagonist's anarchical attempt at rebellion which always fails, to be followed by a more contained rebellion that remains within the confines of societal order which is allowed to be successful; Trites succinctly shows this in chart form:

dynamic of (over)regulation → unacceptable rebellion → repression → acceptable rebellion → transcendence-within-accepted-limits (34)

Trites goes on to state that “no institution exists in isolation; no discursive construct possibly can. Since institutions such as school, religion, church, identity politics, and family are invested in socializing adolescents, the depictions of these institutions in adolescent literature are logically implicated in the establishment of narrative authority and in the ideological manipulation of the reader” (142). Spacks also realizes the importance of these structures. Like Trites, she explicitly states that her book is about power: “Not by initial intent, but by necessity, this is a book about politics, about power relations. The reinterpretations by which our culture keeps its balance obsessively define and locate, redefine and relocate, power” (17). The ways in which adolescence is undermined and indoctrinated with hegemonic thinking occur at some point on just about every level of adolescent literature. The major problem here is that a problematic and deleterious amount of control being exercised over adolescence.

Trites spends more time on this subject while exploring, interestingly enough, the Harry Potter phenomenon in an essay published a year after her book. “[G]iven that the genre's underlying agenda may perhaps be to assure adolescents that they need to get over themselves and just grow up,” she states, “perhaps adolescent literature is, as Jacqueline Rose would have us think of children's literature, always already impossible. Indeed, adolescent literature may be as intent on thwarting adolescent power as Lord

Voldemort is on obliterating Harry Potter” (484). Along with this, an even bigger problem is that the majority of critics, scholars, and adults in general focus their attention on an area of adolescent literature that is completely overrated. What adolescents *do* read is never given as much attention as what they *should* read. Thus, PUSH can claim another justification for being studied—the books are being read by teens and are quite popular with them. If we ignore this fact, then adolescence is again controlled and defined under false pretenses, and the reality of adolescent experience is denied. By limiting adolescent literature, one effectively limits adolescence itself. It is an act of containment.

Much has been done in the way of definitively categorizing adolescent literature. A random sampling of some of the major critical and pedagogical resources (textbooks such as Kenneth Donelson and Allen Pace Nilsen’s *Literature for Today’s Young Adults* and W. Tasker Witham’s *The Adolescent in the American Novel* to books such as Jana Varlejs’s compilation *Young Adult Literature in the Seventies* and even Trites’s own book) shows a decidedly unstable definition of adolescent literature despite most writers’ conviction that they can succeed in producing the one supposedly inarguable definition. In one of the most ambitious yet unrewarding attempts, Maia Pank Mertz and David England surveyed adolescent literature and identified what they felt were the ten definitive characteristics of it. Despite the attempts, all the aforementioned authors create problematic definitions that rarely work in the way that they are intended. Most times when categories are established, they are done so under the guise of being as close to universally acceptable as possible. But this only ostensibly works since no two articles or books I surveyed actually agreed exactly on a definition. In “Rating, Ranking, Labeling

Adolescent Literature,” Alleen Pace Nilsen writes about the confusion over the terms related to writing for adolescents. After polling nearly 100 librarians, educators, academics, and publishers, she analyzes their feedback and determines that no one agrees on a definition for the categories of “adolescent literature,” “juvenile fiction,” “young adult literature,” and “junior (or teen) novel.” Nilsen finds that anything from confusion over intended age groups to pejorative lexicon affected the responses and reactions of those polled, and she realizes that the definitions have the most similarities amongst people in the same field (i.e. librarians tended to categorize most like each other, rather than like educators or publishers). Yet ultimately, she reiterates that creating universal definitions is nearly impossible. Patty Campbell calls this question of definition the first paradox of contradictory truths related to young adult fiction: “YA fiction by its very nature defies categorization. Like adolescence, its definition is constantly shifting” (363).

But why are so many people invested in propagating these definitions and the boundaries they imply? Obviously, many of these definitions exist as a means of narrowing the scope of the books that explore issues on Y.A. literature; this is understandable in that it serves to clarify what an author intends to study and do. However, most do not focus on the limitations of these definitions, and they do not pay attention to the implications of leaving certain works out. I am not positing that the incoherence of all these authors working individually towards a concrete definition is a bad thing; in fact, I feel quite the opposite. Let everything remain confused and inconsistent. The Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) understands this, as it releases a list of “Best Books for Young Adults” which has so far each year included, among the more traditional adolescent works, books deemed as “adult” but still

recognized because teenagers read them (*ALA*). YALSA also annually bestows the Alex Award to ten titles that are actually required to be considered “adult” books—one stipulation is that the book has to come from a publisher’s adult list—as a means of appreciating the fact that young adults quite often are drawn to and read adult books and to highlight the ones that are the best of what the Y.A. readership likes most. Although all these awards are still determined by adults,² this is a step in the right direction for showing that it is important to pay attention to the needs and desires of young adults. David Levithan also recognized this trend when he was writing proposals for PUSH, stating, “As the Amazon.com ‘Young Adult Best Sellers List’ attests, the line between ‘Young Adult’ and ‘Adult’ fiction has blurred considerably, to the point that Young Adult is largely a superfluous categorization” (6). He goes on to rhetorically ask which of the two aforementioned categories *The Catcher in the Rye*, *Pride and Prejudice*, and *The Joy Luck Club* fall into, and posits the answer that they fit both, just like the PUSH books will. This is coincidental because the history of these stipulations came from the publishing industry. In the 1970s, Sylvia Engdahl commented on this: “That designation [teenage novel] is determined solely by the structure of the publishing business... The *raison d’être* of that category is not literary but commercial” (132). Recognizing the need for classification as part of an economic ploy reinforces how unnecessary and futile these categorizations are. If we admit that the attempts at definition do more to muddle concepts than to illuminate them, then we can forget about even trying to posit a universal answer and instead focus on more important areas such as recognizing

² YALSA is also smart enough to ask for young adult feedback, and publishes an annual list of the best books chosen by high school students in book clubs across the country, and releases the results on YALSA’s “Teens’ Top Ten Books” page.

problematic trends in the adolescent literature canon and exploring the new arenas that Y.A. literature is creating to help solve these problems. We must return to the simple fact that the adult need to essentialize adolescent literature stems from an even larger problem: the need to essentialize adolescence.

But adolescence is obviously not so easily simplified. Adolescence is, as Hines shows, one of the most dangerous and scary times to those seeking to repress many aspects of life such as sexuality, political agency, and critical awareness of self. The subtle (and not-so-subtle) censorship of adolescent literature comes because this is the age group that wantonly flaunts these characteristics and proves that they are intrinsic. Most of the PUSH authors refuse to succumb to the rules that forbid characters to act in such ways, and that is what makes the series such a strong candidate for study. These books work within the academically and pedagogically popular genre of realism, which means they can challenge while ostensibly remaining in an unchallenged mold.

That said, the call to rethink the past trends in Y.A. literature is not necessarily new. In the 1970s, when many people began advocating a critical look at adolescent literature (see the essays by Natalie Babbitt, June Jordan, and Anne G. Scharf in Varlejs's collection), it often remained in that nascent stage—an awareness of the need for a critical approach without anyone actually going through with it. Some critics were offering close readings and some were going beyond merely the pedagogical issues related to adolescent literature, but they were the exception. Trites calls attention to this in the introduction to *Disturbing the Universe*: “[T]he critical study of adolescent literature has developed as a field without any great reliance on some of the post-structural theories that best help explicate the issues of power in the books that teenagers

read” (x). It is time to stop being merely pedagogical and to truly get critical and theoretical with adolescent literature.³ And PUSH, even on the preliminary basis of its oeuvre, is an excellent option to start to practice this.

³ Some new books are successfully avoiding this trap by not setting out to categorize. A few contemporary critics are leaving categories alone and merely applying theorists to specific readings. Martha Westwater’s *Giant Despair Meets Hopeful: Kristevan Readings of Adolescent Fiction* works through specific texts using the theories of Julia Kristeva. Karen Coats applies the work of Kristeva as well and many of Lacan’s theories to adolescent literature in *Looking Glasses and Neverlands: Lacan, Desire, and Subjectivity in Children’s Literature*. And Trites is influenced by Foucault’s ideas on power for her book and essay.

“NEW VOICES”: SPEAKING TO THE ADOLSCENT AND TRANSCENDING BARRIERS

One of the most interesting aspects of PUSH is that these books are most often chosen by the adolescents themselves, not at the behest of a librarian or teacher. Until October 2004 with the release of Brian James’s *Perfect World*, all the PUSH books were paperback and subsequently were less likely to be stocked by librarians. In addition, as stated before, many of the books deal with somewhat taboo subjects which often keeps them off of conservative school reading lists. Most of the PUSH books sold are to young adults themselves and are experienced as extracurricular reading. And proof that the PUSH books are capturing the interest of young adults can be seen in the books’ sales. Certain titles are stronger than others—*Cut* is by far the most popular, with over 200,000 copies sold—but the entire enterprise has, according to Levithan’s conservative estimation, reached over half a million.

In an interesting restriction for the series, practically every PUSH book limits personal empowerment for its protagonist within the confines of adolescence. Despite the characters achieving a certain level of autonomy in their lives, they must remain within the social systems delimited by adulthood. Trites discusses the difference between full agency and empowerment of Y.A. characters who reach adulthood within the books and the self-realization that occurs for a teenage character whose journey remains within adolescence by comparing the diverging paths of the *Bildungsroman* and the *Entwicklungsroman*. The definitions for Trites are simple: if a protagonist comes of age

and is an adult by the end of the book, then the story is a *Bildungsroman*; in an *Entwicklungsroman*, the character does not reach adulthood (10). The majority of PUSH books fall into the category of the *Entwicklungsroman* since most of the protagonists do not necessarily come of age but rather deal with a specific problem and realize their control over that one aspect of their lives. While this at first might seem to be another one of those unnecessary and unproductive disagreements over definition, the difference between the two forms is important because they offer different conclusions about authority, power, and repression. Trites calls attention to this:

Note that the *Bildungsroman* affords the protagonist slightly more social power at the end of the novel than an *Entwicklungsroman* does. Since most YA novels are *Entwicklungsromane* that end before the protagonist reaches adulthood, few of them depict their protagonists as fully enfranchised within their culture. In other words, *Bildungsromane* tend to allow for adolescents to overcome the condition of adolescence by becoming adults. As adults, they have relatively more social power than they had as adolescents. If we make the mistake of collapsing all adolescent literature into the rubric of the *Bildungsroman*, we miss the power differential between novels of development and coming-of-age novels. (19)

So what do we make of the fact that a majority of the PUSH books are the less enfranchising *Entwicklungsromane*? At the end of most PUSH novels, the protagonist has overcome his or her plot problem, but only from within adolescence; the protagonists rarely journey into adulthood to address any overbearing power structures. Is the *Entwicklungsroman* another step down from adolescent awareness of social issues, another way of distracting young adults from questioning power structures?

Interestingly, it is quite the opposite. Because the *Entwicklungsromane* always end with a power structure still in place over the protagonist (rather than the protagonists of the *Bildungsromane* who theoretically attain autonomy), it is easier to use them to focus on those remaining power structures. The *Entwicklungsroman* is by definition less empowering, so the fact that the PUSH books supercede the natural trajectory of the

genre means that there is a conscious effort on the part of PUSH to break down barriers for young adults while they remain within that age bracket. Instead of ending a book with the protagonist free from repression as an enfranchised adult, these books end with the protagonists remaining adolescents within a dominating infrastructure.

Entwicklungsromane do not let the reader forget about his or her current situation, which is important if we want to show them that empowerment is not merely the product of age but of realization of social and political situations. *Bildungsromane* cause more damage because they reinforce the idea that empowerment and social consciousness are strictly in the realm of adulthood. Thus, PUSH's books which offer empowerment to their adolescent protagonists while not denying or masking the continuing structures of repression are the most effective at opening adolescents' eyes to power dynamics. Brian James's *Pure Sunshine* explores this situation intelligently and responsibly.

Brian James's *Pure Sunshine* (2002)

One of the first PUSH books can also be seen as the most controversial for the imprint. Brian James's *Pure Sunshine* deals with two days in the lives of three high school students that culminates with an outing to a club and an acid trip. The book is actually short enough to almost be considered a novella, and tells a disarmingly simple story. It follows Brendon, the narrator, and his buddies Kevin and Will on two separate days in which the momentum of the story always revolves around their impending drug use. In fact, the novel starts at the moment when the three friends have just taken a hit of acid and goes through all the stages—the slow building of the drug, the high, and then eventually “coming down.” After this experience, the book goes through their next day at school and their developing plans to go downtown that night, ending with Brendon having a bad trip, leaving the club on his own, and sobering up in the morning with the

help of his crush Melissa. The penultimate chapter borders on the schmaltzy with Melissa as a *deus ex machina*, but the book saves itself in the last chapter by opening up Brendon's future to multiple options and avoiding a tidy ending.

The most interesting aspect of this book, and its source of contention, is how it diverges from traditional Y.A. fiction on the subject of drug use. Normally, a controversial Y.A. book is not approved and will not be published if it cannot ultimately be used as a didactic pedagogical tool. By choosing to publish this book, PUSH is showing an appreciation for the intelligence of its audience and an understanding that adolescents are capable of handling mature literature about issues that apply to their lives. Spoon-feeding young adults merely reinforces the idea that they are not ready for critical thought. Luckily, PUSH realizes that Y.A. books can be complicated, somewhat ambiguous, but still ethically responsible. *Pure Sunshine* has a discernable conclusion on drug use, it just makes it subtly and non-polemically.

The controversy surrounding *Pure Sunshine* proves that many adults are unwilling to grant adolescents agency. David Levithan has stated that this is the single most complained about book in the PUSH series for specifically the reason that adults see it as unapologetically ambivalent towards drug use. Because the ending avoids a PSA-style overt message and instead relies on the reader to conclude that the drug use did not improve the protagonist's life, some adults misread the book as a complicit endorsement of drugs. True, James presents drug use as appealing and intriguing—he understands that youth have a fascination with illegal activities and taboo issues—but he never states that drugs are a positive influence. Instead of pretending that young adults are not curious about drugs and are innately averse to them, he presents the situation honestly and lets the

readers infer from the actions of the characters that drugs are ultimately unappealing. And James never shows drugs without consequence; rather, he lets his reader connect the lines of the story to come away understanding the negatives of drug use.

James presents the protagonist's first trip as ostensibly a positive, or at least routine, event which could understandably upset adults who do not want to see adolescents reading books that glorify drug use. But much of what happens during this first trip recurs later in the novel with upsetting results and the juxtaposition of these two events presents a lingering feeling that the drug use is far from glorious. Even in the first trip, the night's events are not sugar-coated. The narrator describes the end of the night activities: "Will and I went over and shook Kevin out of his paranoid coma. He had spent the whole time he was peaking facedown, drooling on Sally's bed. I shook my head, not knowing how he could handle that kind of nightmare" (30). While Brendon and Will enjoy their trip (aside from the acid-induced nausea they feel during a late-night excursion to a diner), Kevin's trip causes him to act paranoid, fall asleep, and end up in a puddle of his own drool. While some adults are not satisfied unless every literary depiction of drug use ends with death, maiming, and/or all-consuming guilt as punishment for the characters' actions, James portrays the common and natural consequences of drug use. Sometimes people use drugs and little comes of it, and even sometimes something positive. But these characters are not idealized rock stars or celebrity role models—they are high school students indulging their curiosity. James makes the bigger problem Brendon's growing discontent with his relationships, showing that his drug use stems from his lack of an ability to connect with people on an intimate and productive level. When his final trip leaves him wandering the streets of

Philadelphia, shivering and vomiting on himself, it is quite clear that James is criticizing his character's dependence on drugs over healthier human connections.

While much of what is impressive about *Pure Sunshine* is how it rejects a traditional reaction to the subject matter, the overarching plot loosely follows the format that Trites criticizes in *Disturbing the Universe*: from regulation to unacceptable rebellion to repression to acceptable rebellion and finally to transcendence-within-limitations. As the first variable in Trites's formula, regulation is assumed because the characters are teenagers in high school and must exist within specific confines. Brendon participates in an unacceptable rebellion—taking acid—and is punished when his trip goes bad and he ends up vomiting in the park in the middle of the night, which works as the repression Trites discusses to reinstate boundaries over adolescence. However, for most novels following this formula, a whole act still has to occur in which a new form of acceptable rebellion takes place and the character realizes transcendence in an adult-approved way. For *Pure Sunshine*, this final act takes place in three pages and does not work in a way that would necessarily get the parental stamp of approval. Through an exchange with his crush Melissa, Brendon realizes that his actions are self-destructive and credits her with saving his life by making him understand that they have an important relationship as a support system for each other. Instead of feeling trapped in his own life, he sees a purpose and understands that he has basically limitless opportunities waiting to be explored. The book ends with Brendon going through a small list of possibilities for his life at that specific moment: possibly going to the country to fish, or going to his friend's house, or going “north the way of Santa Claus and falling stars” (159). James ends the

book on a positive note, but one that does not necessarily feel like his character is stagnated in a hopeless power structure.

Some might find this subversively problematic as it pretends that Brendon has freedom but in actuality is still somewhat trapped. But I do not subscribe to the ideology that discourse which pushes the envelope in certain regards yet ultimately falls victim to reinforcing certain dominant systems is more dangerous than the discourse that outright supports it. The former is problematic and at times self-defeating, but it nonetheless results in critical thinking more often than the latter. And *Pure Sunshine* does not reinforce any system of domination in the sense that Trites describes. Brendon does not promise to never touch drugs again; when listing his options for immediate plans for his life, he states, “Maybe smoke a joint and get in touch with nature. Maybe stay sober and see where I could find excitement” (159). And he does not become an honor roll student with a picture perfect girlfriend and live happily ever after. In fact, the reader is not given any real indication that Brendon and Melissa will end up more than close friends. So *Pure Sunshine* avoids collapsing into a more common, repressive Y.A. formula. To say that James’s book mimics Trites’s Y.A. model in fitting Brendon’s rebellion within sanctioned limits, or to fault this book for downgrading the protagonist’s rebellion from using acid to smoking marijuana, especially in comparison with other books dealing with similar themes, seems silly and inaccurate at best. Realizing his freedom as an individual to accomplish things on his own and to be able to act like an adult with agency despite still being a teenager is exactly what Y.A. literature needs to reinforce if we hope to break down the barriers that get transported from adolescence to adulthood.

Billy Merrell's *Talking in the Dark* (2003)

One of the most common adult beliefs imposed on adolescence is the denial of sexuality. Billy Merrell's *Talking in the Dark* nicely illuminates how the PUSH series avoids these traditional trappings. Homosexuality has become less taboo since the first young adult novels dealt with it overtly in the 1960s, although it is still often censored in high school curricula. In Merrell's poetry memoir, the protagonist deals with his parents' divorce, his problems at school, and coming to terms with his sexuality. The story does not let any one problem overwhelm the narrative or the people in it, and refuses to treat sexuality as a plot device. In fact, his memoir is groundbreaking for young adult literature in that the poems avoid focusing on his homosexuality and instead deal with the everyday problems of dating and finding someone to love. The book moves past most works which try to deny adolescents a sexuality and even past the more progressive literature that is willing to focus on sex, into allowing sexuality to be an innate aspect of young adult lives which is never questioned as inappropriate.

The first poem that offers a scene of childhood experimentation is "Back at the Playhouse," which tells of the young protagonist's encounter with his neighbor Christy. "She undoes her pants and says to/undo mine. She is seven or eight,/but one year older than me and four/inches taller, so I do. There we are,//two kids, curious, nervous, naked/from the waist down, when her father/opens that little pink door and/finds his daughter in my arms" (12). Merrell recognizes that children are curious beings, despite what adults want to believe (or want to forget). Because of the reaction of Christy's father, the protagonist feels he has done "a bad thing"—"[n]ot sure why or what, but something" (12). Again, the adult is the one who has a problem and must instill guilt in the children for their natural inquisitiveness. This type of scene would be enough to get

the book banned from many classrooms, but the PUSH series still allows the authors to remain honest in their portrayals of childhood and adolescence.

The first homosexual encounter in *Talking in the Dark* comes in the first poem of Part 2 of the book, “Sleepover.” Here, Merrell juxtaposes a childhood incident where the protagonist mixes a bunch of chemicals that accidentally destroys his family’s lawn with a sleepover at his friend’s house when he was seventeen and took his first hit of acid, which led to his first kiss with a boy. With this simple event, Merrell shows his character’s awakening to previously suppressed emotions and making a step towards acceptance of his own sexuality. The kiss does not get overdramatized—it is merely two lines of the poem. “He gave me a moment for the world do dissolve,/then kissed it [the acid] out of my mouth” (35). This event reminds him of the earlier childhood scene: “I think of the little boy giving up by the fence,/wondering if the grass will ever grow back” (35). Poetry, as a medium, often allows for remarkable subtlety, and Merrell takes full advantage of that in creating a simple, effective, and moving scene of a wakening teenage sexuality and all the anxiety and excitement that entails for a young adult. And by including discussions of adolescent sexuality in his book, he is able to attack the imposing adult mindset that seeks to control young adults’ agency by denying their ability to function similarly to adults. The teenage mystique that Hines elucidated is dismantled within Merrell’s pages.

Tanuja Desai Hidier’s *Born Confused* (2002)

Another one of the best and most interesting of the PUSH novels is Tanuja Desai Hidier’s *Born Confused*, which continues PUSH’s commitment to producing work that goes against adult impositions of sexuality and additionally explores issues of ethnicity and culture. *Born Confused* tells the story of Dimple Lala, an American-born Indian who

must navigate between her inward leanings towards the pop-American culture she has grown up in and her outward appearance as a minority living with her immigrant parents. Set during the summer between Dimple's junior and senior years of high school, the book presents a first-person narrative that follows the protagonist as she experiences two potential love interests, a tumultuous relationship with her best friend, her first exposure to "college life" (including alcohol and marijuana), and finally her appreciation for her family and heritage. The book is funny, intelligent, insightful, and always entertaining. At nearly 500 pages, *Born Confused* is by far the longest of the PUSH books, but it is also one of the most involving and rewarding. Levithan published this novel because it fit nicely into PUSH's online mission statement which says that the imprint is "dedicated to new authors and new voices. These writers tell it like it really is. No preaching. No false endings. No stereotypes or contrivance. Just an honest dose of reality. These books are funny, observant, heartbreaking, and heartstopping. Just like life" (PUSH). Certainly this mantra is all part of a marketing strategy, but when PUSH produces books like *Born Confused*, the hype can be believed.

Interestingly, the comment about publishing new voices is more pertinent to *Born Confused* than to any other PUSH book. Hidier's novel is the first book published for the Y.A. market written by an Indian-American with an Indian-American protagonist. Obviously, this alone does not qualify the novel as great literature, but it does show an active pursuit on the part of PUSH to fill in gaps in the adolescent literature market. Because of the dearth of books about Indian-Americans, *Born Confused* could probably have gotten away with relying on stereotypes and an obvious story arc. However, Hidier avoids this and, even when it appears that she is regressing to cliché, she ends up creating

truly original scenes that are remarkable for young adult literature. For example, making Dimple a photographer seems to be just about the easiest hobby to give a Y.A. protagonist, and when her crush, Karsh, asks to keep one of the pictures she took of her friend that reveals itself later as a plot twist, the scene is a little too reminiscent of a similar event in Amy Heckerling's teen classic *Clueless*. However, this passion of Dimple's also results in one of the most inspired scenes in the book, where she photographs her drag queen friend as he transforms into a woman in an early dawn scene in a diner. This serves as a clever and affecting climax for the novel's continuing themes of self-actualization and personal transformation.

The book also deftly avoids stereotypes; Dimple's parents are often funny and used for comic relief, but they are far from one dimensional. For every scene of the parents feeling out-of-place, there is another that proudly shows their excellent parenting skills or allows them to articulate their heritage in an intelligent and positive way. Dimple herself is fairly uneducated about her heritage, and thus the reader gets exposed throughout the course of the book to another culture in a sensitive, meaningful, and often personal manner. The book is also quite clearly intent on presenting not only the Indian culture, but the Indian-American culture, which is obviously often quite different. With Dimple, the reader gets to explore the underground hip-hop culture of New York City, the melting pot of ethnicities in Queens, and even extracurricular involvement in a metropolitan college. The book also offers a sensitive portrayal of being a minority within a minority with Dimple's lesbian cousin Kavita and in the drag queen Zara. Dimple learns that while the most conservative of her relatives would not be pleased with Kavita's lifestyle, lesbianism is common in India. In fact, Dimple's parents are

immediately accepting of Kavita once they learn the truth, and their only anger is directed at Kavita's lover Sabina who breaks their niece's heart. And during a sleepover with her cousin and her cousin's lover, Dimple learns of the history of transvestism in India.

—Come on, yaar, Sabina cried. —India is one of the most blatant places in the world when it comes to transvestism. Drag packs walk down the street in broad daylight. In fact, the drag queen was probably invented in India—haven't you ever seen hijra? (315)

Dimple thinks about her past trips to India and remembers groups of men in make-up and bright fabric, and then continues with the train of thought to consider the diversity of the entire population of that country. Finally, she thinks to herself, reiterating the book's continuing theme of growing self-awareness, “It jolted me that I had seen something as a child that, placed in a new context years down the line, was capable of throwing me off kilter. It was funny how much you knew without knowing” (316). For a Y.A. novel, this book is quite advanced in its depth of themes, intelligent humor, and style of prose.

This is not to say that the book is perfect; the final three chapters try to tie up the story a little too neatly, causing the novel to border on the romantic rather than realistic. But the ending is partially forgivable because everything leading up to it has been honest and sensitive, and because the ending itself does not go overboard in pounding home a message. The book suffers from a premise that does not actually leave it many options to avoid falling into a trap of some form or another—either the heroine gets the guy at the end, or her friend does. If Dimple's friend Gwyn got the guy, then it could be read as succumbing to a colonialist mindset that punishes the minority character in order to elevate the white character; if Dimple gets the guy, then it is saccharine and overly romantic. Of course, the option of the college guy not being interested in either of the girls is never made an option (even though it is probably the most honest one) and so the

reader must settle for the tidy romantic ending. For a book so obviously invested in positive portrayals of the queer community, it is upsetting that the conclusion reverts to heteronormative ideology. However, this is a perfect example of a novel that can be used in a productive way with a new critical lens that seeks to expose the ways hegemonic thinking infiltrates certain aspects of Y.A. literature and that asks questions commonly posited in postcolonial or feminist or queer theory: How does this novel attack dominant ideologies? Does it ever serve to reinforce them? This would be a complicated book to get into a high school curriculum, but one that is likely to have a great effect on adolescents, which is why the word-of-mouth advertising these books receive is so exciting.

Patricia McCormick's *Cut* (2002)

One subject lacking much literary representation, especially in fiction and specifically for adolescents, is body mutilation. Eating disorders rose to prominence and became a common topic with young adults in the early 1980s with the death of Karen Carpenter, but other forms of self-inflicted physical damage never received much attention. While not the first book to deal with “cutting,”¹ *Cut* by Patricia McCormick shows PUSH’s commitment to publishing books that have relevant subject matter for teens written in a way that is not condescending. This topic is not foreign to the Y.A. market, especially non-fiction titles, but McCormick’s book is a deft portrayal of a teenager dealing with an issue that does not often receive as much focus because many people still want to ignore it as a contemporary problem facing young adults (and adults as well).

¹ *Crosses* by Shelley Stoehr (1991) and Steven Levenkron’s *Luckiest Girl in the World* (1995) are two prominent examples of predecessors.

Cut tells the story of Callie, a cutter who becomes selectively mute and is institutionalized for her self-destructive behavior, and is framed by her conferences with her counselor. However, what is most interesting about this novel is that, like *Pure Sunshine*, it does not merely reinforce Trites's model of traditional Y.A. literature of youth containment. This book juggles the components of that framework so that Callie starts the novel with little positive agency—of course she controls her (in)ability to speak and her cutting, but practically no one would read her dependence on these activities as a sign of empowerment. At this point in the novel, she is following Trites's model in that she participates in an unapproved and uncontrollable form of rebellion, and she must be repressed for it. And despite the best intentions of the staff at the residential treatment facility Sea Pines, Callie still finds a way to cut herself at different times in the novel, showing an ability to fight against the repressive body. However, one cannot cite this rebellion as a positive image of working against dominating power structures—self-destruction tends to be ineffective as a means of battling repression. Although somewhat simplistic, empowerment in *Cut* comes with the resolution where Callie realizes that she has control over her life, runs away from Sea Pines, and literally escapes the institution, providing a cleverly appropriate metaphor. She does return to the institution at the end, but this time fully aware of her control of the situation and not subsumed within it.

The most laudable part of *Cut* is that the empowerment can be almost universally seen as beneficial by adults and adolescents, despite consequently also enabling a teenage character to control her own life. Councilors, nurses, and fellow girls from her group all help her through this time, but Callie ultimately realizes that the control is in her own hands. By tying most of her issues to problems with family communication and one

specific incident from her past that continues to cause her guilt, the solution to Callie's problem does seem to counteract the complexities found in the rest of the book; but if one wants to read this as a book of self-empowerment replacing self-destruction, Callie's discovery of her agency can be read as an inspiration for the adolescent readers to similarly realize their own potential effectively, even before adulthood.

Robert Cormier's *The Chocolate War* (1974) and Chris Wooding's *Kerosene* (2002)

Despite these previous examples, the PUSH books are obviously not the first ones to be doing something unique and challenging to Y.A. literature. The primary example that Trites discusses in her book is Robert Cormier's *The Chocolate War*. She uses the protagonist Jerry Renault's refrain, taken from T.S. Eliot, questioning, "Do I dare disturb the universe?" as the basis for the title of her book, and opens the book with an interpretation of Cormier's novel of school politics as a means of showing the distribution of power in Y.A. literature. Trites reads *The Chocolate War* as an example of Foucauldian ideas of power at play in adolescent literature, with Jerry fighting against the school gang, the Vigils, against the new school principal, Brother Leon, and against the forced proposition from both to participate in a chocolate sale fundraiser at his school Trinity High. In this novel, Cormier does something clever although not necessarily unique in that the power structure he plots almost reverses the one that Trites sets up as the common formula for school novels. Cormier's book actually starts with Jerry's compliance with one of the forces of power—which is typically where the novels end—and with the Vigils creating assignments for the students of Trinity, which calls for Jerry to refuse to sell chocolates for 10 days. Thus, in the beginning, Jerry is a character without much to praise; he is depressed, submissive, and somewhat weak. But once the 10 days pass, Jerry decides to continue to reject Brother Leon's "option" to sell

chocolates, and in turn becomes a hero of sorts for some students. While Brother Leon does not like this idea, it still falls within what any reader would feel is an acceptable form of rebellion—the middle stage of Trites’s formula. Fearing a power transfer, Brother Leon enlists the assistance of the Vigils, specifically the ring leader Archie, to help him force Jerry to stop his game and obey Leon’s established social order. When Jerry still refuses to comply, Archie leads an attack on Jerry that in the end has him beaten with the whole school watching (Leon included) and the novel ends with Jerry’s fate undetermined. Thus, Jerry’s final act of rebellion—choosing to fight in front of the whole school in a violent showdown—is what normally would open a traditional school novel, and as a result this climax does not offer Jerry a chance to have any fate other than absolute punishment.

Obviously Cormier is not trying to say that those who choose to fight against repressive forces of power are doomed to fail and should not even muster an attempt; the book relies on agitating its audience enough to make them want to follow the call from Eliot to react against these power structures, to disturb the universe. Critics read *The Chocolate War* in many ways, from an attack on Vietnam War politics to an indictment of the Mafia to Cormier’s own statement that the book is a metaphor for big business,² but in every reading it is clear that Jerry is the hero for fighting against these oppressors. The outcome of *The Chocolate War* is depressing and pessimistic, but the meaning—Cormier’s call to action—is nonetheless perfectly clear. In the same way that multiplying a negative number by another negative number results in a positive one, by reversing the normal trend of the formula, Cormier is consciously able to elicit a positive response to

² The readings of Anne Scott MacLeod, Perry Nodelman, Jan Susina, and Cormier himself are discussed in Trites book (24).

the negative outcome of the book. This book is Trites's recurring example of power structures at play in Y.A. novels and the way in which they invoke a proactive response from their readership.

The power structures in *The Chocolate War* are not new to young adult literature, and the pessimistic finale as a means of inspiring change can be seen working in books such as George Orwell's *1984* or William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*. This is a fairly common motif at play in books read by and assigned to adolescents. However, one PUSH book does much to counteract the more prevalent power structures more than a mere reversal of the formula. Chris Wooding's *Kerosene* is by no means the best PUSH book, but it does completely ignore the formula for distribution of power in Y.A. novels that Trites set up. Wooding's novel follows British teenager Cal as he slowly becomes divorced from his community and infatuated with fire. Ignored by his career-obsessed parents and losing touch with his childhood best friend Joel, Cal sublimates his feelings through pyromania. When two of the popular girls, Emma and Abby, decide to prank Cal into thinking they like him, the situation explodes and Cal becomes even more determined to rid himself of everyone around him who only exist to hurt him. To make matters worse, a detective, Ben Deerborn, is on Cal's trail because of his recent arsons, making Cal feel like the world is completely crashing down on him. When Joel gets in trouble with some drug dealers, Cal makes a plan to solve all of the problems at once—he will burn down his school with his best friend's enemies in it to scare them, while taking his own life in the process. Wooding's novel is one of the more problematic PUSH texts, not in the way that parents find it controversial (although some have lodged complaints against the book), but in the fact that the story relies on clichés a little too often and the

plot is quite gimmicky. Abby, one of the pranksters, slowly starts to fall in love with Cal despite the joke, but she can never properly communicate this to him other because plot contrivances keep getting in the way. And the detective who is investigating the arson cases is a ridiculous character who sees in Cal hints of his own son Carl (the name similarities are not lost on the character nor the reader), the son who he accidentally killed in a car crash years before. Thus, as Deerborn becomes more aware that Cal is the only feasible culprit, he also begins to think of ways to protect Cal from the law because he knows the kid would not survive in juvenile detention.

All this makes for a truly groundbreaking structure of power politics for a Y.A. novel, but one that is not necessarily positive. Cal starts the novel only setting containable fires, but gets progressively worse—when he burns down an abandoned warehouse, he almost unwittingly murders a homeless man sleeping inside it. By the end of the novel, Cal is planning to immolate himself as he destroys his high school, proving how far he has come in his acts of rebellion. The clichéd and unrealistic ending has Abby running into the burning school to save Cal, with Deerborn catching him red-handed as the perpetrator of the past crimes. But this is all, in the context of the book, forgivable because Cal learns that the girl truly does love him, and that he can trust his best friend. When Deerborn sees how impressionable Cal is, he decides to throw the case and not pursue Cal as a suspect, effectively leaving Cal unpunished for his actions. Ben Deerborn's thoughts are explained in the final pages of the novel:

Ben thought of Carl, of how frail and fragile he had been, and how like Cal he was. It was as if life had given him a second chance; a shot at redemption. He had known that Cal would never survive life in prison... Cal was what Carl might have been. The two, in his eyes, had become the same. He had ended Carl's life; but he had given Cal a new one, another chance. A clean slate. (194-5)

The book ends with Deerborn at peace with himself, finally resolving his son's death. The reader is supposed to accept that all the destruction and problems will be forgotten merely because the protagonist got his girl and a secondary character resolved inner turmoil.

As mentioned before, the characters and dialogue are not nearly as interesting as the relationships of power structures and the forms of containment in the novel. Cal starts out with small, manageable rebellions, only starting tiny fires in the woods. He then moves to larger ones, destroying private property and eventually almost murdering someone. At the end, when he is ready to end his life, he has his epiphany, and in doing so, the author forgives his actions and he remains unpunished. This is an awkward ending, especially compared to the formula Trites has established that pervades almost all Y.A. literature. His rebellions are never contained, even when found unacceptable, and Cal's transcendence comes while burning down his high school—something that is hard to classify as “within accepted limits.” Interestingly, the formula Trites exposed was most applicable to stories revolving around schools, and of all the early PUSH books, *Kerosene* uses that setting the most.³ So while Wooding's novel does not add much by way of literary merit to the PUSH series, it does provide an intriguing new formula of power structures and repression that Y.A. novels have not been quick to utilize. If nothing else, it shows that PUSH is publishing books that cannot be so easily pigeonholed into the traditional adolescent novel models. *Kerosene* is productive in that it opens a new dialogue on what is considered an acceptable power structure for Y.A.

³ *Talking in the Dark* and *Pure Sunshine* have scenes that take place in school, but it by no means is the most prevalent setting. *Born Confused* begins on the last day of school and continues throughout the summer when school is not even in session.

literature. And there is an odd sense of empowerment in *Kerosene*—Abby has to convince Cal that he is a strong person, that he has influence in the world and that he helped her become a better person, and this gives Cal the motivation to abandon his suicide attempt. As he leaves the burning school, Cal knows what he has done is wrong and shows remorse for his actions, and the reader is basically told that his new relationship with Abby will make him a changed man and resolve his pyromaniacal desires. In fact, as Deerborn watches the school burn from outside, he thinks of the two teenagers: “All [Deerborn] could see was the way Cal’s hand slipped into that of the girl’s. Togetherness. They had found each other. Unified” (195). Wooding takes some literary license and promises us with Deerborn’s spoken thoughts that Cal will not start any more fires. In the end, Cal gets to both rebel and transcend, unpunished, with the approval of the author (and, ostensibly, the audience). Thus, *Kerosene* proves that even when a book fails on a certain literary or aesthetic level, there can still be something to gain from exploring other issues at play within the text.

As *Kerosene* proves, the PUSH books are not immune to problems. The PUSH books are not some magical series that miraculously escaped the faults of current Y.A. problems; they still focus on the adolescent individual’s subjectivity within a social construct and more often than not ultimately reinforce some aspect of authoritarian power structures. But the focus on self-actualization—Dimple recognizing hybridity and purpose in her Indian-American culture, Brendon’s realization of his influence on others, Callie’s overcoming of her desire for self-mutilation—should not be read merely as some sort of continuing project of Ayn Randian individualism or personal empowerment for attacking collective thinking. Much of the benefit of these books is that they expose

young adults to thinking critically about social, political, or global issues—educating adolescents about issues that they are often denied access to because of their age which influences and warps their eventual understanding of the topics by the time they reach adulthood. The adultist agenda is perfectly clear when it comes to denying adolescents a complete understanding of these issues. Even Trites, who understands the problems that adults impose on adolescents, still feels that “adults are responsible for protecting children” so strongly that the statement to her is “like Truth rather than ideology” (81). But therein lies a problem—most of the “protecting” the adults do is merely a debilitating sheltering of adolescents. Who is there to protect adolescents from problematic adult protection that works more to punish than to help? Those who recognize the potential of adolescents and realize how imperative it is that they not be so guarded need to work in conjunction with those creating what influences them (i.e. their entertainment). A lot of good can come from teaching adolescents to respect their personal rights and responsibilities and exposing them to their involvement in society, and even more good can come from society finally refraining from sheltering adolescents from issues that affect their lives and instead get them interested and actively involved in their own world. Edward Said might be too complex to assign to a 10th grader, but raising the questions asked by postcolonial theorists in simplified terms while teaching *Born Confused* could effectively break down longstanding barriers. Eve Sedgwick might be out of a high schooler’s league, but that does not mean that queer theory cannot be used to read *Talking in the Dark* or another (less successful) PUSH title, Eddie de Oliveira’s *Lucky*. The solution to overcoming these problems is letting adolescents in on the secret that

these power structures exist in real life as well as in their literature and then getting them interested in correcting these problems.

GOING TO THE SOURCE AND GETTING A RESPONSE

Creating a desire in adolescents to explore these issues means getting them actively involved in the Y.A. literature that complicates traditional ideologies, which in turn makes investigating PUSH's current marketing strategies for the series all the more interesting. PUSH continues to focus on young adults, but in a way that does not force them to merely receive the information or marketing campaigns—PUSH actually gets adolescents to interact in a way that, more than the books, marks this endeavor as unique. The best example of this marketing is also PUSH's most visible: its website www.thisispush.com. The homepage always has a complete list of the PUSH books, and an announcement about the newest additions to the series. For Spring 2005, PUSH released three new books, Matthue Roth's *Never Mind the Goldbergs*, Kevin Brooks's *Kissing the Rain*, and Eireann Corrigan's *Splintering*, and curious visitors can click on any of the titles on the left hand side to read an excerpt from the book.

The top menu gives many more options for interaction with young adults (or, technically, anyone) who wants to learn more about PUSH. readPUSH offers the synopsis of each title from the back of the book, along with links to read interviews with the authors. Also, the website offers a way to contact any of the authors in PUSH, encouraging the audience to critique, complain about, or praise any book as they see fit. One of the most interesting aspects of the site is the section called reviewPUSH, which allows young adults to go an extra step in critiquing the PUSH books—they can actually write a review for it that might appear on the website. Granted, only positive reviews get

published (this is, after all, still a marketing tool) but young adults are given some sort of empowerment in that they can be printed on a publishing company's website if they are able to write a strong, insightful review. This also encourages readers to not passively read, but to actively involve themselves in the books knowing that their feedback can be heard.

A more general interactive part of the website is PUSHback, where the visitors can generically comment on anything about the PUSH series—ask questions about the books as a whole, offer suggestions for new ideas for books, and get specific information from the site. This section also allows visitors to sign up for the newsletter which is sent out every time a new book is published or an interesting development occurs with PUSH. Levithan stated that, as of 2004, about 3,000 people were on the PUSH mailing list, creating a strong fan base of visitors who are committed to PUSH as a publishing institution. And while the website is the most visible and easily accessible marketing for PUSH, Levithan stresses that word-of-mouth is their most effective and (obviously) cheapest, and the dedicated fans are the ones that make it a success.

By far the most interactive and demanding of the website's menu options is writePUSH, an opportunity for young adults to actually get published through PUSH. The site has constant contests for adolescents to enter and get published onsite, with topics ranging from "Conclusions" which has visitors finish a sentence and create a story out of it, to "Dialogue" which showcases a few lines of clever verbal interaction between characters, to "Character Sketches" which asks for a description for a protagonist that could end up in his or her own story. PUSH also has a Poetry Contest that will publish the top ten entries on the website, and has been doing this for some time because it is one

of the site's most popular features. But the most impressive contest asks for young adults to send in manuscripts to potentially be published through the company, not just the website. Currently on its fourth incarnation, the Annual PUSH Novel Contest asks young adults between grades 7 and 12 to submit three chapters of their novel (between 15 and 50 pages) along with an outline of how the story develops and ends. The winning manuscripts, while not guaranteed to get published, will get workshopped by the editors and the finalists in the hopes that it will become a PUSH novel. And if any of the winning works do get published, the author gets an advance and royalties. While many submit and only a few are chosen, this is quite an impressive opportunity for the lucky young adults. Thus, PUSH is seeking out the response that so few adult institutions do—it wants young adults to participate in creating their own literature and in speaking to themselves as an audience.

The PUSH contests, especially the one resulting in a published book, have been quite successful for the institution. Part of the inspiration came from the PUSH anthology, *You Are Here, This Is Now: Poems, Stories, Essays, and Art from the Best Young Writers and Artists in America*, which had its first incarnation in 2002 immediately following the first round of books published by PUSH. Editors actively sought out work from young adults in the annual national Scholastic Art & Writing Awards from 1999 through 2001—again proving that PUSH's connection to Scholastic can never be fully broken—and took the years' worth of submissions and created an anthology with 24 poems, 20 fictional works, 16 essays, and 31 art pieces, representing the best work that young adults have to offer. According to Levithan, "The idea was to really show new talent as it is developing, and also to have writers the same age as our

target audience, so identification would be high . . . We're really trying to appeal to teen writers as well as teen readers. This is really where the two intersect the most—if connection is our ultimate goal, then using peer writing is a great way to do it" (Email). In fact, the anthology is where Billy Merrell (as William Merrell) first caught the attention of Levithan, who worked with Merrell to turn his poem "Aubade to childhood" into *Talking in the Dark*. Levithan hopes for more success stories like Merrell's to continue coming from the Novel Contest and the anthologies. Currently, Levithan is finishing the second anthology installment, which should come out sometime in 2005, and fulfill his goal of publishing a new one every three years. From that anthology, Levithan is working with a few of the most talented writers to see if anything develops for a full-length book (Email).

Of course, not everything published in the anthology is of equal quality (the age range somewhat prohibits that, with 7th graders competing against 12th graders for a spot) but then again, neither are the books published by PUSH. The one commonality they have is being connected to an institution that is working to create works that inspire young adults, to generate a response from adolescents to the books that fall into the genre specifically advertised towards them, and to, at least sometimes, challenge the current trends in the Y.A. market. Granted, the bottom line for PUSH is economics, but the fact that these books can be used to start empowering young adults with theoretical tools, to combat the adultist agenda of Young Adult literature, and to evoke and foster a response from adolescents makes the institution one worth studying and promoting.

Adolescent literature is as limitless as the list of books possible for an adolescent to read. We need to move away from limiting this genre to the definition as provided by

educators or publishers and reevaluate the way we think about this subject. The advancements made by current critics in the field of adolescent literature are leading the way towards recognizing the need to expose adolescents to what is happening in what they read and empowering them to think critically. Many of the PUSH books thus become great examples of texts that critics can begin using for analysis in such a manner. Once we stop believing in a controlled view of adolescent literature, we can begin to reframe the way we think about adolescence itself.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Thomas Joseph Love was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, which served as the first of his many “homes.” As a Navy brat, he would not find stability until he moved to Florida at the age of twelve. He has been rather bookish his entire life, as attested to by his high school ID card, which he continues to carry in his wallet for the sheer kitsch value it contains. Because a friend he respected told him to, he decided to further pursue his education at the University of Florida, and Gainesville soon became the place of his longest consecutive residence. In an attempt to quiet some persistent academic advisors, he majored in English and, interestingly enough, found his life calling. He graduated in 2003 with a B.A., only to have one blissful summer of freedom before quickly returning to a scholarly life to get his M.A. Having decided to not make the same mistake twice, Mr. Love will be putting future adventures in academia on hold to pursue whatever it is normal people do. He hopes that he will find what he is looking for in Boston.