

**Real or Imagined:  
The Line between Young Adult, Crossover, and Adult Fiction**

**Panel paper presented at the AWP 2008 National Conference, NYC**

I believe the line is real. Why do I believe there's a line?

Teenagers are not adults. Physically, emotionally, cognitively – they aren't there. Reader response is clearly different. And I believe there are things a writer can do during the writing to assess potential reader response and determine where the book will fall on the YA/cross-over/adult spectrum. And, if desired, adjust accordingly.

Before I delve into methods of assessment, I'll ask for your indulgence as I share some anecdotal evidence that is, admittedly, somewhat self-congratulatory and definitely self-promoting. And of course, supportive of my own argument. My ninth YA novel, *Just Like That (JLT)* was published in 2005. While my previous novels have done equally well and sometimes even better than JLT in the area of reviews or in earning a spot on ALA or other end-of year lists, JLT has surpassed any of my earlier books in what I think of as walk-in business: catching the eye of the store or library browser. With this ninth book, I've also at last been lucky with a cover. The publisher slapped a gorgeous cover on it. A pick-me-up and read-me cover.

Briefly, *JLT* is about an eighteen year old young woman, Hanna, and her really awful winter. Stuff happens. Part of that stuff involves a very cool and nice boy, Will. Pretty quickly into the novel Will arrives in Hanna's life, but just as quickly she boots him out. Fast forward to the end of the novel after more stuff happens. Four years after the main body of action, Hanna is on the phone – with Will. She's talking to him for the first time in years. Remember – he's a very cool and nice guy. That's where I leave it:

Hanna's flopping down on the sofa for what she just then realizes she hopes is a long conversation. The End.

Do they get together? What happens next? The author doesn't say.

I have heard plenty about the ending. And what I hear – or don't hear – has been clearly defined by the age of the reader. BTW, those of you who aren't in the business of writing for children might be interested to know that for some reason teen readers almost always tell you how old they are or where they are in school. I suspect this is a hangover from years of writing school book reports.

Up to 15, 16 years of age, readers loudly resist the ambiguity of the *JLT* ending, even as they profess their passion for the rest of the book. "Please change your mind about a sequel," is a common plea. "I need to know." "Couldn't you do a short story and put it on your website?" one reader asked. Continuing, "I estimate it would be about 50 pages." No matter how they phrase it, the refrain is clear: I need to know.

Older high school students, juniors and seniors, however, will say something like this email correspondent: "I wish you'd said if they get together, but I kind of like working it out for myself." Older readers (i.e., 19 and up) never mention the ending, rarely even mention Will, and instead usually comment on something else that's a deeper undercurrent in the story – death and grief, guilt, mothers and daughters, the role of art in life.

Hanna's brief romance with the very cool boy is a plot item that lies at the surface. As a rule, teen readers, on their own, read at the surface. Their response is deep and heartfelt, and must be respected, but it usually focuses on the immediate conflict, problems, or relationships in the story.

Of course, any number of adult novels might seem unambiguous in their storytelling. Yet, I still believe there's a difference. And, as I claimed earlier, I think potential reader response can be anticipated. How?

While I don't outline a novel prior to completing a first full draft, I'm a strong believer in outlining and graphing during the revision work. This sort of analytical work is the way this very unanalytical person can take a detached look at a piece of writing that I love. For the basic structure of my graphs, I'm partial to the inverted check graph Janet Burroway illustrates in *Writing Fiction* (10). The rising line, essentially. During revision I will do—and I request and even require my students do for their own work—a number of different graphing challenges. There's one I find to be especially useful for predicting YA reader response. Janet Burroway, again in *Writing Fiction*, says, “Underlying any good story, fiction or true, is a deeper pattern of change, a pattern of connection and disconnection ... an emotional tide, the ebb and flow of human connection (38).

I now recommend to students writing YA novels that they graph connections; that chapter by chapter, they assess the changing relationships the protagonist has with each friend, family member, and any other major players. Connection made or affirmed? Mark it on the graph's upside. Is a relationship severed, weakened, threatened? Mark it on the underside. Color coding the relationships while graphing helps clarify things, and the resulting graph then provides a quick and easy way to sum up the relationships in a character-driven novel. Some relationships will have undergone a disconnection and reconnection; some will remain disconnected.

Where's the promised predictor of reader response in this? Time for another sweeping generalization: YA novels will end with more connections (new ones or healed

ones) than disconnections. And most certainly, the book's major relationships will not be left disconnected.

Assessed in this manner, *Just Like That* may have ended with no clear life-long connection between Hanna and the very cool boy, but they are talking, and more importantly, there's no ambiguity about the sum total of connections made and restored in the story. The teen reader—even the younger teen reader who believes devoutly that Hanna's thing with the very cool Will is the major relationship—even that teen reader is delivered to an emotionally safe landing place. The assurance that there will be such a landing place represents the line between YA and adult literary fiction.

I need now to confess aloud that I lay all this theory out for you with the fervor and assurance of the recently converted. Once again, a little anecdotal evidence.

One year prior to the release of JLT, my eighth YA novel was published. *Too Big a Storm*. (TBAS.) Of course a writer loves each and every one of her books. But some are truly books of the heart. *Too Big a Storm* is one of those books for me. In it, I created a cast of characters I could write about forever. In fact, a couple of them show up, thirty years older, as the parents of the very cool Will in JLT. And a couple more show up briefly but importantly in the adult novel I've just finished writing and have placed in the hands of my agent. TBAS is set in 1969, the second time I've written about the Vietnam era, and once again, I used autobiographical material, giving to the female protagonist, Brady Callahan, some of my own experiences from the era—wild parties, political activism, and the death of a brother in the war. Other novel-worthy material: sex, drugs, jazz and the blues. Bombs go off. In short, stuff happens. Brady's really bad winter. You know where I'm headed of course. In spite of good reviews and making some end of the year "Best" lists, sales have been pitiful. TBAS has sold fewer copies

than my first novel. Teachers and librarians tell me it's a hard sell. I have received some wonderful mail from readers of TBAS, but in the three and a half years since its publication, I've gotten more mail from readers about a couple of my OP novels from the 90s. And I've never received a letter from a 15 year old.

When JLT, one year later, leaped out of the sales gate, I wanted to understand what was going on. Why one, not the other? Sure, one has a great cover, one a bad cover, but that's not the whole story. I have for years done the graphing work I described earlier. But, when it involved graphing relationships, my interest was more clinical. I was simply looking for changes in the protagonist's various relationships for the purpose of weighing their value to the story. Was some relationship not changing or carrying its weight? Cut that character and subplot.

The idea of connections is subtly different. Coming across the Burroway quote during a rereading of her book in preparation for leading a weekend workshop, I understood the difference. That's what I began looking for. I did some Retro-graphing of my novels. And the difference emerged quickly and clearly: the relationships in TBAS are all left on a somewhat ambiguous note. At book's end, the protagonist's dear brother is dead and she is still wrestling with guilt over the argument they had the night before he left; at book's end Brady has a fine boyfriend, Mark, but she complains in a closing letter to her new best friend, Sally, that he's pushing a bit hard about marriage. And that new, treasured best friend Sally, well she's a wonderful friend, true, but she's currently serving time in federal prison on charges related to some political activity. Where's the promise in that? The book begins during one of the darkest years of the Vietnam era and ends at the dawn of the Watergate era. No one is singing "Happy Days Are Here Again."

My favorite writer, my comfort writer, is Ward Just. In his 1999 novel, *A Dangerous Friend*, Just describes a character this way: “He had a lust for complexity; he had ambiguity in his heart.”

The adult writer of teen fiction must be aware of the ambiguity in her heart and be wary of its appearance on the page. She must find ways to corral that ambiguity in her writing; otherwise, her YA novel will march itself across the line, trailing very few teen readers and, because it crosses the line in the YA-to-Adult direction, finding few adult readers waiting with open arms.

Now, having unloaded all that about ambiguity and connections and assessing reader response, I’d like to leave you with one more hallmark of the YA-adult division. A much more concrete one. My Midwest writing colleague David La Rochelle, whose first YA novel *Absolutely, Positively Not* won the Sid Fleishman award for humorous children’s fiction, was a visiting writer at last summer’s residency for Hamline University’s low residency MFA in Writing for Children and Young Adults program. In his talk on Writing Humor, David said, “It’s not funny if an adult says it.”

There we have it, a clear distinction between YA and adult fiction: in a YA novel, the teen delivers the punch line.

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