Photo Finish
(a novel)

and

Too high, too low, just right:
Defining Australian young adult literature through metaphors of social class
(an exegesis)

by
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15th September 2013

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A Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
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Abstract

This thesis examines social class as a metaphor to suggest a new way of defining Australian young adult literature. It comprises a young adult novel with class as one of its main subjects and an exegesis that uses recent definitions and discourse on young adult literature to examine representations of social class in a selection of novels published in Australia over the last thirty years. This research produced two seemingly contradictory findings: first, that young adult fiction presents growing up as a generally positive experience; and second, that it regularly depicts powerful characters as negative. Given these findings, this thesis asks: how can young adult characters grow up and gain power in a positive way?

The key to answering this question lies in analysing how the novels under discussion arrange social class into three simple, yet identifiable tiers – upper, lower and middle – by regularly characterising the upper and (to a slightly lesser extent) lower tiers as largely negative, and the middle tier as the most positive. This analysis reveals similarities between the representations of social class and other hierarchies based on power. This power can take the form of popularity, attractiveness, sporting prowess, cultural knowledge or any other attributes that young characters recognise as advantageous and use to begin identifying themselves as adults. Characters in the upper tier of any power hierarchy receive the same, negative portrayal as those who are upper class. Having established how the powerful are depicted, the exegesis shows how young adult protagonists grow up and gain power in a positive way: through labour. This labour can take the form of paid work, in which time and effort can result in movement between
social classes. Within the fictional narratives analysed, the term ‘labour’ can also be applied to any time and effort resulting in movement between the hierarchical tiers described above. Young adult literature abhors power without labour, hence the generally negative depictions of those characters who appear in the story already imbued with power. However, those who work to achieve whatever position they occupy, whether it be a successful career or simply a realisation about growing up, are not only depicted positively, but are usually the protagonists of the young adult story.

The creative component of this thesis, the novel *Photo Finish*, puts these findings into practice. Eighteen-year-old Jacinta attempts to raise her social standing by insinuating herself into the upper-class life of the precocious student she tutors, thirteen-year-old Henry. Henry attempts a similar manoeuvre, lying about his relationship with Jacinta to bluff his way into the most popular group in his high school. Both main characters attempt to gain different forms of power and social position without performing any labour and each ends up in a negative situation, one which can only be rectified through individual labour. With their recognition of the need for labour, each protagonist begins their independent journey towards adulthood and this is a defining characteristic of the young adult narrative journey.
Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

_________________________
Sam Franzway
Acknowledgements

It takes a village to finish a thesis. Without the support of my fellow villagers, this one certainly would not exist.

Professor Jeri Kroll and Dr Ruth Starke were the best supervisors I could have asked for. They knew when to direct, when to guide and when to push.

As far as mentors go, I hit the jackpot with James Moloney. Jim’s wonderful feedback was as insightful as it was extensive. His advice turned a draft into a novel.

But, before the mentor can swoop in for the glory of the final drafts, the readers must suffer through the first. Jonathan Shaw, Kath Lockett and Dr Stefan Laszczuk read entire early drafts and still found kind, helpful things to say. For that, Jono and Kath are troopers of the highest order. Stef is still a ratbag.

To my supportive, intelligent and graduated colleagues at Flinders, Dr Gay Lynch, Dr Ben Chandler, Dr Mag Merrilees, Dr Sharon Kernot: he who finishes last at least finished at last. Thanks for being excellent. To Gregor Dawson: thanks for the whisky and looking out that window with me.

I would like to thank my friends from the Transition Office and Student Learning Centre for their advice, understanding, suggestions, cheese and company over coffee.
To Che McNamara-Moyle and Triton Tunis-Mitchell, I would like to say:
I think we all knew I’d end up doing something like this. Thanks for your support
and encouragement and distractions.

I would like to acknowledge Daniel Kinsman, Stephanie Ashbolt, Annie
Pinneri, Marc Lintvelt, Ben, Leah and Eden Watts, for putting up with countless
weekends and evenings with me shut away in the study instead of being with my
family.

To my parents, Suzanne and Neil: I owe you both my mind. You taught
me the utter pleasure of using my thoughts and my ideas and my imagination. It is
a gift I’ll always treasure.

To my bright boy, Charlie: you came along at just the right time. You
helped me in ways you probably won’t understand until you charge up and ask
me right after you read this. I love that about you.

To Dr Melanie Kinsman, thank you for your love, your intelligence, your
enthusiasm, your support and your strength. You showed me that it could really
be done, no matter what.