

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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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

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