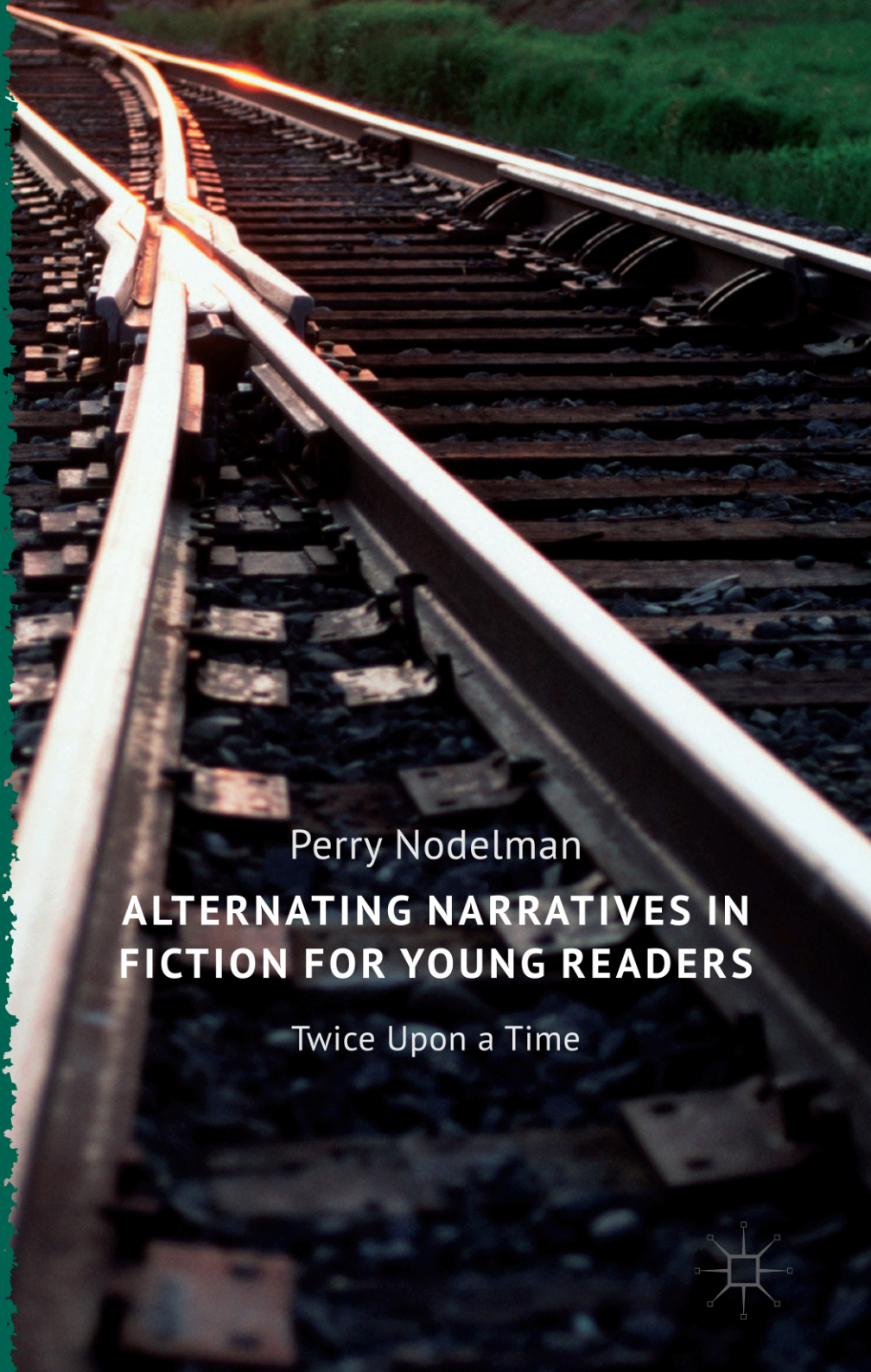
CRITICAL APPROACHES TO CHILDREN'S LITERATURE



Perry Nodelman

ALTERNATING NARRATIVES IN FICTION FOR YOUNG READERS

Twice Upon a Time

Critical Approaches to Children's Literature

Series Editors
Kerry Mallan
Faculty of Education
Children and Youth Research Centre
Kelvin Grove, Queensland
Australia

Clare Bradford
School of Communication and Creative Art
Deakin University
Burwood, Victoria
Australia

This timely new series brings innovative perspectives to research on children's literature. It offers accessible but sophisticated accounts of contemporary critical approaches and applies them to the study of a diverse range of children's texts - literature, film and multimedia. Critical Approaches to Children's Literature includes monographs from both internationally recognised and emerging scholars. It demonstrates how new voices, new combinations of theories, and new shifts in the scholarship of literary and cultural studies illuminate the study of children's texts.

More information about this series at
http://www.springer.com/series/14930

Perry Nodelman

Alternating Narratives in Fiction for Young Readers

Twice Upon a Time

palgrave
macmillan

Perry Nodelman
CRYTC, Department of English
University of Winnipeg
Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada

Critical Approaches to Children's Literature
ISBN 978-3-319-50816-0 ISBN 978-3-319-50817-7 (eBook)
DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-50817-7

Library of Congress Control Number: 2017934526

Cover illustration © Chris Cheadle / Alamy Stock Photo

Printed on acid-free paper

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by Springer Nature
The registered company is Springer International Publishing AG
The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

Preface and Acknowledgements

This book began in a classroom a number of years ago—or rather, in the spirit of 'twice upon a time', in two classrooms. The classrooms were occupied by University of Winnipeg students in two sections of a course of Canadian children's literature, one section taught by my colleague Mavis Reimer and one taught by me. As Mavis and I explain in an essay we later wrote about these classes, 'Teaching Canadian Children's Literature: Learning to Know More' (Nodelman and Reimer 2000), we had noticed that many of the novels we were thinking of teaching shared similar plots or characters. Some of them even had the same words in their titles. Nor could we think of many American or British books that focused so much on these matters. Wondering if these shared characteristics might represent something distinctly Canadian, we decided to organize our courses around these novels; and since we were both teaching the course in the same term, we realized we could double our group of specimen novels by choosing a completely different group of them for each of our classes. Once the courses began, each of us invited our students to consider what the novels had in common and what that might mean; and for balance and as a challenge to any generalizations we might try to make, we also included a number of novels that seemed to represent less central concerns. After our students developed lists of shared qualities, we visited each other's classes to tell the other students about our own students' lists and ask for their input, with the result that the students in the two classes were able to add to and complicate each other's ideas.

One of the items on the list our students had produced by the end of the term went like this: 'Most (but not all) of the novels switch repeatedly

between two contexts, or have two stories going at the same time. For example, the novel might be structured around two different points in a series of events (flashbacks), two different focalizing characters, or two different historical settings. The two contexts come together dramatically at the central moment of the plot.' As Mavis and I report in our essay, then, 'Perry Nodelman has developed an interest in the prevalence of narratives with two focalizations that our students helped make us aware of. He has been developing an increasingly lengthy list of Canadian children's novels that operate in this way, and begun to speculate about their significance' (Nodelman and Reimer 2000, p. 31).

The many years of speculating that followed have resulted in this book. It would not have existed without the perceptive students in those courses so many years ago, or without Mavis Reimer's part in that old project.

But, you might well ask, doesn't this book discuss novels produced elsewhere than Canada? Yes, it does—lots of them. My first forays into thinking about alternating narratives concentrated on Canadian issues, as revealed in two essays published in the journal *Canadian Children's Literature*, 'Of Solitudes and Borders: Double-Focalized Canadian Books for Children' (2003) and 'A Monochromatic Mosaic: Class, Race and Culture in Double-Focalized Canadian Novels for Young People' (2004). At the time, I note, I was identifying the quality that I was studying as 'double-focalization'. It was only after realizing that narrative theorists used that term to refer to a quite different phenomenon that I began to speak about 'alternating narratives'. I also wrote 'At Home on Native Land: A Non-Aboriginal Canadian Scholar Discusses Aboriginality and Property in Canadian Double-Focalized Novels for Young Adults', a chapter in *Home Words* (2008), a book about ideas of home in Canadian literature for young people edited by Mavis. The book as a whole grew out of another item from those lists our students had developed: 'Questions about the safety and comfort of home are central to these novels.'

But then, as I continued to work on this topic, I kept encountering American, British, and Australian books that exhibited some of the same characteristics. With fairly easy access to books in English from other places, and with writers, editors, and critics in vastly different places aware of and often influenced by what is happening elsewhere, English-language children's literature tends to be an international phenomenon. I soon realized I had to give up my idea that there was much that was distinctly Canadian about alternating narratives except the fact that there were so many of them, that Canadian writers seemed to be particularly

drawn to producing them. As I have argued in my earlier work on this subject, the alternation of narratives in Canadian novels does indeed resonate in intriguingly distinct ways in the context of Canadian history and culture. But as I hope this book reveals, those Canadian novels also share much with many other books for young readers published in the USA, the UK, and Australia. In order to highlight the international scope of this study, I have identified the country and date of publication of each of the novels with alternating narratives I discuss here when I first mention them. As my project has developed, at any rate, I have come to believe that, while the Canadian-ness of the Canadian novels I discuss here is significant, there is equal significance in the ways in which they reveal the consistent themes and patterns of writing for young people produced internationally—the themes and patterns I explore as being characteristic of writing for young people in my 2008 book *The Hidden Adult: Defining Children's Literature*.

As I expanded my focus to include novels from other places, I had a lot of assistance in finding the novels for young people with alternating narratives that my project came to include. Requests for examples of such books that I made on the Child_Lit (Theory and Criticism of Children's Literature) and Yalsa-Bk (YALSA Book Discussions) listservs, and on Facebook and other social media, resulted in far more titles than I had originally thought possible. The helpful staff in the children's department at McNally Robinson bookstore in Winnipeg added still more, as did Judith Ridge in response to requests I made to her for information about Australian novels with alternating narratives. With the help of these resources and others, I was able to develop a list that has now grown to include over 400 novels.

I am not the first scholar to be intrigued by novels for young readers that include alternating narratives, and I am pleased to acknowledge the extent to which my thinking about them has been especially influenced by the work of two others. Robin McCallum offers an insightful exploration of what she identifies as 'interlaced dual narration' in her 1999 book *Ideologies of Identity in Adolescent Fiction: The Dialogic Construction of Subjectivity*; and Melanie Koss's doctoral dissertation, *A Literary Analysis of Young Adult Novels with Multiple Narrative Perspectives Using a Sociocultural Lens* (2008); Melanie was kind enough to give me access to it.

I also owe a debt to Carol Matas. Carol and I have collaborated on two fantasy series of novels for young readers: the four books of the Minds

series and the three books of the Ghosthunter series. We had published the earlier volumes of the Minds series before I began my scholarly work on novels with alternating narratives. Even so, it took me some time to realize the significance of the title of the first of those novels: *Of Two Minds*. Carol and I chose that title both because the novel's two central characters each have unusual mental abilities and because the two of us were the minds that created it. But *Of Two Minds* and all the other books I have written with Carol switch between the points of view of two central characters. They are all of two minds, all novels for young readers that offer alternating narratives. I suspect that much of what I have learned as a scholar about such books emerges from my efforts to tease out what Carol and I had done in our novels and why we had done it without any theoretical awareness of its implications.

Because most of my work as a scholar has emerged from my undergraduate and graduate-school training as a close reader in the tradition of what was once called the New Criticism, it tends to focus on very few texts. As a result, trying to make sense of the large body of novels with alternating narratives that I came to be aware of was a challenge for me. I would not have been able to meet that challenge without the assistance of some very helpful software: Devonthink Pro Office allowed me to create a database of the novels I was reading and an efficient system of tagging the various aspects of my subject to which they seemed to have specific relationships. Once I had developed that database, OmniOutliner Pro allowed me to determine the best order in which to discuss those various aspects of the novels. I am grateful to the developers of these products for making the organizational aspects of my project so relatively effortless.

Finally, I am especially grateful to Asa Nodelman for his careful work in getting the manuscript of the book in shape for submission to the publisher.

This book is dedicated to Billie Nodelman, who has been one of the two voices in the alternating narratives that make up the unified story of our marriage for the past forty-six years.

Contents

CHAPTER 1

Alternating Narratives: An Introduction

Why, to begin with, *twice* upon a time? Because twice is not once. Telling a tale twice, as writers do when they provide different descriptions of the same events from the alternating points of view of different characters involved in them, is a relatively sophisticated form of storytelling, a form that readers expect in complex adult fictions by difficult writers like Virginia Woolf or William Faulkner, but one that seems miles away from the simpler world of stories of the sort that often begin 'Once upon a time'—far enough away to make stories told twice seem alien in the context of literature for young readers.

Once upon a time, most typically, there was … a tiny mouse, a timid rabbit, a lonely princess, a youngest son. Once upon a time, above all, there was a child or youth, a boy or girl about to experience something interesting or exciting, something that will somehow make his or her life better. 'Once upon a time' is one of the primary markers of stories told for children, a signal anyone familiar with Euro-American culture in the last few centuries will understand. The focus on 'once' is suggestive: Reports of events that happened 'once' tend to be one-sided. The tale about the three little pigs is just that, and only peripherally a story about the wolf they interact with. Even in retellings of the tale like Jon Scieszka's *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs by A. Wolf* (USA 1992), there is still just one story told once, describing the events as the wolf experienced them—though admittedly, readers need to remember the other more familiar

P. Nodelman, *Alternating Narratives in Fiction for Young Readers*,
Critical Approaches to Children's Literature,
DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-50817-7_1

story of what the pigs thought was happening in order to understand the humour of this alternate version.

That singularity of focus might happen because, while 'once' is clearly not now, there is an important way in which for young readers it *is* now, or at least supposed to be now. Perhaps unlike Scieszka's *Wolf*, which seems to require a more knowing and therefore less sympathetic audience, many stories describe situations that once happened to someone else in such a way that they encourage young readers to recognize a similarity to themselves and their own situations now. They ask young readers to see themselves in their main characters as a way of teaching them something about themselves. Perhaps the mice or princesses or children who lived once upon a time learn something in the course of their experience that young readers can, ideally, understand as a lesson for themselves. Or perhaps the mice or princesses or children simply represent what adults imagine young people are or ought to be, so that young people reading about them might learn to admire and adopt a similar youthfulness. Conventionally, and therefore, for most people nowadays, most often, 'once upon a time' is a signal that the story to follow is not only about the fictional characters and situations it describes—that it is also about who its young readers ideally are or ought to become.

As happened once, so things continue on in contemporary literary texts intended for young readers—not just those for young children, but also the teen audiences 'young adult' literature declares itself to be intended for. Whether they begin with 'Once upon a time' or not, texts for young people tend to tell one story—a clear line of events concentrating on one identifiably childlike or youthful central character who young readers are being invited to identify with; as John Stephens rightly says, 'the majority of children's fictions employ only one focalizing character' (2010, p. 56)—that is, the one from whose point of view events are being described. The main characters of these texts are, like James Barrie's Peter Pan or J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter, charmingly egocentric, ingenuously anarchic, and incredibly lucky; or like Beatrix Potter's Peter Rabbit or Frank L. Baum's Dorothy in Oz, simultaneously brave in the face of danger and meekly happy to acknowledge their need for adults to protect them from it. As I have argued in my book *The Hidden Adult: Defining Children's Literature* (2008), texts for young people often reaffirm the same conventional assumptions about what it means to be childlike or youthful, and often invite young readers to understand themselves in these ways.

In order to encourage young readers to do so, these texts conventionally focalize events from their main characters' point of view and provide those characters' responses to them. Whether the story is told in first person (as in, say, Judy Blume's *Are You There, God? It's Me, Margaret* or Stephenie Meyers's *Twilight* or third person (as in E.B. White's *Charlotte's Web* or J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter books), it tends to describe events as the young protagonist would see them or understand them. A comment by Laura Amy Schlitz in a note in her Newbery Award-winning book *Good Masters! Sweet Ladies!* (USA 2007) reveals how key that focus is to widespread conceptions of writing for children: 'It really isn't possible to write a play with seventeen equally important characters in it .... So I decided to write seventeen short plays—monologues—instead of one long one, so that for three minutes, at least, every child could be a star' (viii). As adults most often understand the process, every child reading any text written for children should be a star, and is encouraged to be one by identifying with a focalizing character.

Schlitz does not acknowledge the possible confusion of a child trying to figure out how to respond to a text unconventional enough to contain seventeen different role models for stardom——or for that matter, twenty-two, as there are in *Good Masters! Sweet Ladies!* Not only is it more difficult to follow two or more interwoven stories at once, but it seems logically impossible to identify with two or more different characters at once. Once upon a time, identifying is easy. Twice upon a time, it is not—especially for readers who have been trained by their experience of many books to expect always to be able to identify. Such a reader will start out reading the first part of a book identifying with its focalized character. But then chapter two comes along with a different focalized character, often one with different ideas about the same events. What is an obedient reader trained in convention to do? Suddenly see through the blindness or inadequacy of the first character's version of events? Refuse to accept the second character's views altogether? Try to be empathetic with and see oneself as similar to two quite different people? Or learn to be less egocentric in one's reading habits, just give up on identifying altogether, distance oneself from both characters, and become a detached observer, a critically thoughtful outsider?

Whichever of these choices individual readers make, they are no longer reading as most adults assume most young people do read and ought to read children's and young adult fiction. Telling the same story twice or more, first as one character experiences it and then as one or more others

do, flies in the face of common adult assumptions about how young readers ought to read and even about why children's and young adult literature exists.

In *The Rhetoric of Character in Children's Fiction* (2002), Maria Nikolajeva offers a discussion of Susan Cooper's novel *Seaward* (USA 1983) that shows what happens when a reader with a strong awareness of the conventions of literature for young people experiences a novel built on alternating narratives. The alternating narratives of *Seaward* tell the stories of Cally and Westerley, who start out in quite different and separate worlds but find themselves together in a dreamlike fantasy place, where they first have separate alternating adventures and then meet, after which the novel continues to report their differing responses to their shared adventures as they head towards the sea. Their adventures involve fantastic beings and events based in Welsh legends and rife with allegorical overtones, so that the book reads like a kind of symbolic psychic journey, with everything that happens more meaningful than real.

At one point, Westerly and Calliope are told that the world they are in is not their own, 'but it is an image of your own. An echo' (Cooper 1983, p. 125). In operating as a description of such an echo, *Seaward* seems to be exactly the kind of text that invites identification to promote self-understanding—or it would be, if it were about one main character rather than two alternating ones. Nikolajeva describes her response to these events in this way:

> Writing about *Seaward* in 1990, I without the slightest doubt interpreted it as Cally's story, viewing Westerley as her companion, Animus, or helper. I believe that my choice was affected by the author's as well as my own gender. Several years later, one of my female students wrote a paper about *Seaward*, interpreting it just as unproblematically as Westerley's story. This gave me serious reasons to reconsider intersubjectivity in the novel. (Nikolajeva 2002, p. 92)

After a few pages of interpretation, she concludes, 'The intersubjective reading of the characters enables us to reconcile the two separate narratives, the two separate inner journeys, viewing them as two sides of the same quest for self, in which the two concrete figures are interchangeable, not least because their gender complementarity makes their story more universal' (p. 94). Finally, whether one character or the other is the 'real' one does not matter, because under the apparent two-sidedness there is

really just one story with one shared and indeed universal meaning being told here. One can identify with both the characters because they are actually differing facets of the same unique entity.

Later in *The Rhetoric of Character*, in a discussion of John Marsden's *Letters from the Inside* (Australia 1991), Nikolajeva reaches a similar conclusion. While the novel proceeds by means of alternating letters between one girl in prison and one out,

> Viewing the novel as a depiction of an inner world rather than of external events, we may suggest that the whole correspondence is the product of one person's imagination. Perhaps Tracey is suffering from an identity split and has written letters to herself .... on the other hand, the source can be Mandy's fancies, caused by her anxiety about her brother. Since there is no authorial discourse to guide the reader, the reliability of both voices is dubious. (p. 255)

What fascinates me is the anxiety that Nikolajeva, a knowledgeable specialist in literature for young people, expresses about the possibility that there might be two different and unresolved points of view operating in these novels. The anxiety seems to arise from generic expectations about how texts for young people operate and should be read—as stories about characters readers should identify with in order to learn about themselves. As I have suggested, a reader cannot easily identify with two different characters at the same time. The anxiety is resolved when the two different characters can be read as a single complete one—one who *can* be identified with, understood as an un-conflicted whole and learned from, and who thus accords with conventional expectations of how texts for young people work.

But as Nikolajeva reveals, *Seaward* and *Letters from the Inside* are complex and ambivalent enough to challenge those conventional expectations. I turn instead, then, to what appears to be a much more conventional novel. Kevin Henkes's *Words of Stone* (USA 1992) is much like Henkes's other children's novels, like, say, *Olive's Ocean* or *Protecting Marie*. All three are quiet, introspective stories about sensitive children on the brink of adolescence, learning to deal with their emotional problems in ways adults hope child readers will learn from. But unlike the other two, *Words of Stone* has two alternating central characters—and that makes *Words of Stone* a telling example of the kinds of problems stories told twice create.

As the novel begins, Blaze lives on a hill in rural Wisconsin with his grandmother and widowed father, and Joselle has come to visit her grandmother on the other side of the hill. He is small for his age, shy and withdrawn, while 'her arms and legs looked meaty' (Henkes 1992, p. 22) and she is confident and aggressive; he thinks of her as 'this curious girl who reminded him of wild, impish, confident children he had only known in books' (p. 86). But despite their apparently opposite characters, their situations are similar. Both are isolated and solitary. Joselle has been isolated by her mother's decision to leave her at her grandmother's and seems to be rather antisocial, but Blaze seems to have chosen his current solitude, for at school 'he was treated with genuine fondness by students and teachers alike' (p. 16) and readers learn that after his mother's death, he destroyed one of each pair of animals in his toy Noah's ark, 'because a pair of anything didn't seem right' (p. 15)—as perhaps a pair of protagonists does not seem right in a children's novel?

Nevertheless, this pair has other things in common. Both have similar reasons to be unhappy. Not only is Blaze without a mother, but his father is 'a private person' (p. 16), his distance revealed by the art he makes: 'Everyone in Glenn's paintings seemed to be detached, lost in a cool, claustrophobic dreamworld' (p. 41). Joselle has no memory or knowledge of her father, and her mother has grown tired of dealing with Joselle and has dropped her daughter off at her grandmother's in order to be at home alone. Their grandparents seem equally solitary. His says of hers, 'I'm not even too familiar with Floy .... I guess the hill is big enough and our houses are far enough apart to keep our lives separate' (p. 89). Nevertheless, Blaze's father is beginning a new relationship with a woman Blaze likes and who gradually draws him out of his isolation and into a connection with her; and Joselle's mother is also close to the beginning of a new relationship, this one with a man Joselle has little use for and who, oppositely, seems to be pulling her mother away from her.

For readers of texts for young people, the plot that develops here is unlikely to be surprising; the two protagonists meet, and after various misundertandings, become friends. Having heard about Blaze from her grandmother, Joselle decides to 'complicate the life of Blaze Werla' (p. 32) in order to feel better about her own complicated life by arranging stones on the hillside into his dead mother's name; she does not know that Blaze gathered the stones as a memorial for his mother. When they meet and become friends, he does not know she was the perpetrator of what he has rightly understood as an attack on himself; and she lies to him about other

things also, because she believes he would not want her for a friend if he knew the truth. When Blaze does learn the truth, the friendship turns sour—and before a reconciliation can take place, Joselle and her grandmother also learn a truth, this one about her mother not having left as they had thought, and so Joselle is sent back home again. At the end of the novel, however, Blaze reads the words 'I'M SORRY' on the hillside (p. 151), realizes Joselle is back, and sets out to renew the friendship—and also, to tell his own family things he has kept hidden from them. As happens in many novels for young people, a happy ending occurs when characters isolated from and at odds with each other see past their apparent differences, arrive at a better understanding of what they misunderstood before, and come together to form a new relationship based on what they now know they have in common.

But if what happens is not surprising, how it is described might be. Because the focus switches between Blaze and Joselle—a few chapters labelled with his name followed by a few labelled with hers—identifying with one or the other, as texts for young people conventionally invite readers to do, seems difficult. At first, moving from Blaze's understanding of events to Joselle's after he first sees the mysterious words on the hillside might strike readers as an invitation to explore her experience simply to gather more information about Blaze, with whom they have already been invited to identify. Indeed, one of the first things the text reveals is that Joselle has been responsible for what so distressed Blaze, which might well invite distance from her and more sympathy for him. But then this chapter also reveals *why* she did it, how it emerges from her own sadness and isolation, a revelation which invites empathy—and, therefore, perhaps, identification? —with her also.

But as I have suggested, that doubling of identifications is difficult, if it is even possible—and meanwhile, the text seems to be inviting readers to do something different. Most immediately, it moves attention away from what the characters experience onto *how* they experience it. A once-told story focalized through its main character invites readers to see things as the main character does without even necessarily being aware of doing so. But a second focalizer seems to demand an awareness of how the two different characters represented are in fact different—how they perceive and think about their experience in different ways. As the theorist Mikhail Bakhtin suggests of what he understands to be the polyphonic fiction of Dostoevsky, 'those elements out of which the hero's image is composed are not features of reality—features

of the hero himself or of his everyday surroundings—but rather, the *significance* of these features for the *hero himself*, for his self-consciousness' (1984, p. 48). For Bakhtin, the focus in Dostoevsky is on 'the hero's *discourse* about himself and his world' (p. 53); for readers of texts with alternatingly focalized narratives like *Words of Stone*, the consciousness that structure creates of differing understandings of the same events similarly invites a focus on the character's discourse about themselves—on how they understand themselves. As might be expected, then, much of the text of *Words of Stone* describes Blaze and Joselle's efforts to understand themselves and their own behaviour.

In doing so, it invites readers to connect the two. Why provide two different points of view if not to invite a comparison of them? Indeed, Mike Cadden sees that opportunity as a key to the ethical value of Young Adult novels with alternating narratives. In more conventional novels with just one focalized central character, 'by employing an all-too-reliable young adult's consciousness, the YA novelist often intentionally communicates to the immature reader a single and limited awareness of the world that the novelist knows to be incomplete and insufficient. It is a sophisticated representation of a lack of sophistication; it is an artful depiction of artlessness' (2000, p. 146). If a writer feels an ethical need to, as Cadden says, 'help the reader to recognize the contestability of any immature consciousness in the narrative' (p. 147), providing another narrative focused through another character is one way doing so: 'no single position in the text is clearly endorsed or becomes clear at the expense of others, which enables the reader to consider the rightness of the positions based on the specific details of the narrative' (p. 147). Exactly because it creates a distance that prevents easy identification with one character, the opportunity for comparison is ethically responsible.

The text of *Words of Stone* explicitly invites that sort of comparison. When Joselle's mother leaves, her grandmother says, 'It could be worse—that little Werla boy from around the hill doesn't even *have* a mother' (Henker 1992, p. 25). After telling about Blaze, she adds, 'So you see ... you're not the only one with a complicated life' (p. 27). Joselle's response to the comparison is itself comparative: 'She hoped that the skinny redhead's life story would be worse than hers' (p. 26), and her creation of the words of stone emerges from the comparison: 'She wasn't exactly sure why she had done it—except she sensed that if she could make someone else more confused than she was, the weight of her own emotions might be lifted' (p. 37).

As a reader making the kinds of comparison these passages seem to be inviting, I find myself drawn away from empathy with the characters into the aesthetic distance of a more analytical kind of thinking about them. I no longer just experience along with them, I also find myself thinking about the meaning of their experience for themselves and also for me. I can do so because of the expectations I have developed from my earlier experiences of reading literary texts—and most significantly here, an expectation that all the components of such texts fit together, that they cohere as a whole. Certainly texts are, as many readers often claim, open to a multiplicity of interpretations depending on what different readers bring to them. But I suspect that readers who are sympathetic enough with a literary text to have had a positive experience of it have done so on the basis of some conscious or unconscious thinking about, and some overall conviction of having grasped, a sense of its completeness as an experience that they find personally satisfying.

Developing such a sense is a learned skill, and some inexperienced readers may not have learned it yet. But even texts for the most inexperienced readers operate on the assumption that those readers know—or are in the process of learning to know—how to think about texts in ways that will reveal the relevance of the different parts of the texts to each other. Even word books for babies assume that their neophyte intended audience will understand that meaning emerges from making connections between words and visual representations of the objects the words stand for (and, often, teach that skill in the process of assuming it and therefore allowing adults sharing the books to teach it to those who do not yet know it).

Assuming, then, that even the least experienced of young readers operate with (or are in the process of learning) assumptions about a text's cohesiveness, I conclude that I am not likely to be alone in finding myself responding to the alternating narrative of *Words of Stone* as a sort of detective trying to solve a mystery; Nikolajeva has a similar response to *Seaward*. Why this departure from normal expectations? In trying to answer that question, I respond to the text as something to think about, not just something to empathize and identify with.

Having shared Blaze's confusion when he first sees the words of stone, for instance, I then respond to the following but, it turns out, chronologically earlier section that tells of Joselle's thoughts as she decides to arrange them, as the solution to a mystery. I am also aware that it is a solution Blaze himself is unaware of—that I know more than he does, which makes it harder for me to think of myself as being similar to him.

Later, the novel reminds me of my superior knowledge when Blaze decides that the wrong person, his father's girlfriend, is responsible for arranging the stones (p. 62), and when, after Joselle befriends him, he thinks, 'If they did become true friends, maybe he could tell her about the words of stone. Maybe she'd know what to do' (p. 84). I become aware of similar ironies when Blaze concludes, after Joselle tells him her lie that she is an orphan like him, 'And to have Joselle confide in him about her father bonded them' (p. 89). The same dynamic moves in the opposite direction when I read Joselle's sections with a deeper knowledge of what Blaze is thinking than she has. Because the novel so often invokes its readers' awareness of having more knowledge of a complex situation than the characters involved in the situation do, it encourages readers to resist identification with those who know less.

Observing Blaze and Joselle from the outsider's viewpoint created by my knowing twice as much about their situation as each of them do, I can see not only differences in their understanding, but also, threads of connection between them that they themselves are not aware of—for instance, a shared interest in observing life on the other side of the hill: 'Sometimes Blaze lay on the hill and watched the Stark house. Nothing interesting ever happened' (p. 17); or 'Joselle noticed movement on the hill. It was the red-haired boy. Blaze Werla. Joselle watched him intensely . . . ' (p. 30). Indeed, 'Sometimes Joselle tried to see herself through Blaze's eyes' (p. 100).

Since Blaze and Joselle's tendency to observe each other matches what I have viewed as the novel's invitation for me as a reader to observe them, I might, at this point, retract my earlier statement that the characters are not easy to identify with. The structure of alternating narratives has actually created an identification by inviting me to see as they do. But the *way* they see requires, paradoxically, that I empathize with detachment. Observation requires some distance from what one observes—a photograph or painting makes little sense to those who put their noses on it. The observational mode created by the alternating narratives draws attention to the distance, the separation and isolation, that are such key factors in both Blaze and Joselle's experiences. Readers learn through alternating insights into Blaze and Joselle's thoughts how they misunderstand each other and also, how they deliberately and often successfully misrepresent themselves to each other. Each of their stories focuses on what they choose to keep hidden and whether or not they will tell it—and when the secrets become known, it does, at first, draw them even further apart.

The effect is of two solitudes, only barely breached in the brief and even then partially illusory moments of their friendship. By the end of the novel, they have had some contact and developed more understanding of each other than they first had, and they seem to be moving from isolation into connections with each other and with the adults in their lives. But tellingly, the novel ends before their reunion. There is a sense that other people are always more complicated than we ever know, that human beings will always misunderstand each other, be isolated and at a distance from each other even when at their closest. The observational distance that emerges from alternating two narratives turns out here to be a metaphor for the novel's view of how people always interact with each other.

That view seems surprisingly pessimistic in the context of a novel intended for young readers. Fiction for young people usually tends to be more utopian in its descriptions of relationships, less focused on what hampers contact and more determined to assume that how one person comes to understand things is a universal truth—one universal enough to be shared by others, to sustain a happy ending, and to represent how readers ought to understand things also. Perhaps, then, it is not surprising that *Words of Stone*—still, after all, a children's novel—seems to insist on the possibilities of contact and connection between its characters even while reinforcing their isolation and separation. It does so in a number of ways.

First and most obviously, its two solitaries meet and come, at least a little, to understand and empathize with each other. As Joselle helps Blaze past his fear of her grandmother's dog, she thinks, 'He needs me .... Blaze Werla needs me' (p. 98); and in the last paragraphs of the novel, a happy ending involving togetherness does seem to be about to emerge from Joselle's 'I'M SORRY' and Blaze's decision to forgive her and to tell his secrets to his family. Second, the comparisons that emerge from Blaze and Joselle's alternating narratives and reveal their similar isolation also invite readers to think of the two characters in relation to each other, and to see what they share: their detached and absent parents, their lack of contact with other children, their observational habit and imaginative ways of thinking, their pleasure in inventing imaginary people—he imaginary friends, she the characters evoked by differing perfumes in a game she teaches him. Third, the novel contains many symbols of connection. Unlike his father's paintings of 'detached' objects, for example, the one Blaze paints contain symbolic objects that all imply connections between people: 'His key collection also symbolized Joselle, since she had it now.

And Joselle's button represented both of then, too; it was hers, but it was in his possession. We're all linked in certain ways, he thought' (p. 138). Joselle also envisages a similar linkage as she forms the word 'ORPHAN' on the hill: 'she wasn't entirely certain if she was referring to Blaze Werla or to herself' (p. 71).

All of these connections undercut the novel's focus on isolation in a way that brings it closer to the mainstream interest of children's fiction in contact and communication. But the isolation also undercuts the attempts at connection. For me, the final effect is the tension of a happiness not quite achieved by a community of isolates, a happy ending that sadly seems to represent all that we human beings in our inevitable separation from each other can hope for. Furthermore, while the happy ending seems to be there as one of the characteristics necessary to define the novel as a text for young readers, the sadness that permeates it both emerges from and is supported by its structure of alternating narratives. This form of telling the same story twice seems seriously at odds with the more optimistic conventions of literature for children and young adults—just as does the presence of many monologues in *Good Masters! Sweet Ladies!*).

But *Good Masters! Sweet Ladies!* won the Newbery Medal as the worthiest text of American children's literature in its year of publication. And in recent decades, young readers have had a growing number of opportunities to read books that operate in such unconventional ways. Since the 1970s and increasingly in the last few decades, publishers of children's books in the USA, the UK, Canada, and Australia have been producing books with not just one central character, but two, three, four, or more equally prominent characters described in turn in alternating narratives often labelled with the characters' names and often focalized through each of their experiences and responses. As I have worked on this book, I have come upon over 300 English-language novels for children and young adults with two alternating narratives (many of these labelling their alternating narratives with their two central characters' names), almost fifty with three alternating narratives, and at least fifty more with four or more alternating narratives. Furthermore, 'Alternating Narratives' or 'Different Focalizers' are not the sort of terms used in library catalogue classifications, so identifying books of this sort in advance of reading them is not always easy. I know there are many more such novels in existence, and yet more continue to be published.

Not all of the alternating narratives in these novels are obviously or consistently focalized through one of the characters they describe. In Mal

Peet's *Tamar* (UK 2005), for instance, not only are there alternating narratives describing events in the lives of different characters, but also, there are switches in focalization amongst the characters involved within one of the narratives. In Julie Hearn's *The Minister's Daughter* (UK 2006), one of the narratives offers an omniscient narrator who is capable of entering the thoughts of any or all of the characters and does so with different characters at different moments.

Furthermore, other novels for young readers offer other forms of narrative fragments in alternation with each other. Some, like Cornelia Funke's *Inkheart* (Germany 2003) use fragments from other authors or from imaginary texts as epigraphs to each of their chapters. In Jonathan Stroud's *Heroes of the Valley* (UK 2009), the epigraphs tell a continuous story on their own; each chapter begins with an excerpt from the tale of a great hero, and what follows describes what is represented as the real events that the tale is based on. In novels like Teddy Steinkellner's *Trash Can Days* (USA 2013), meanwhile, materials from other sources are interspersed amidst and among narratives describing events as the characters experience them: Facebook updates, IMs, blog entries, handouts from the principal, letters between the principal and a teacher, notes the characters write to each other. And in texts like Jan Mark's *The Hillingdon Fox* (UK 1995), the entire novel consists of alternating diaries or journals written by the characters.

In all these cases, the alternation of differing narrative fragments invites young readers to figure out the connection of the fragments with each other in order to understand the story as a whole. In all of them, what happened once upon a time emerges from what happened differently twice or more within that time or in some related time. While this book centrally concerns novels like *Words of Stone* with alternating chapters or sections focalized through different characters, I also consider a wide range of other uses of alternating fragments, in the belief that they all relate to each other and produce similar problems for readers and similar literary and ideological implications.

While 'once upon a time' is still by far the most common kind of storytelling for young people, twice or thrice or many times upon a time is no longer even mildly unusual. We might well ask why so many novels for young readers repeat the same devices that appear in *Words of Stone*. Might the widespread use of these devices mean that they are less challenging to the norms of literature for young people than they seem? In her study of novels of this sort for young adults, Robyn

McCallum concludes that 'the dialogic potential of multivoiced and multistranded narratives is frequently contained through implicit authorial control manifest in the narrative, and thematic and intertextual structures used to organize and structure the various narrative strands or voices. These strategies also deny characters agency and disable intersubjectivity' (1999, p. 37). Furthermore, McCallum suggests, 'interlaced dual narration [what I am here calling "alternating narrative"] ... can be a particularly problematic form. The tendency to structure narrative point of view oppositionally often entails that one dominant narratorial position is privileged and dialogue is thus subsumed by monologue' (p. 56). Perhaps such novels are less ethical than Cadden believes.

Considered in that light—and in the light of Nikolajeva's attempts to read dual narratives as single ones—*Words of Stone* might actually be more one-sided than it at first appears, more conventionally like more obviously normative texts of children's literature. The apparent balance of equalities that the alternating narratives imply and that keeps Blaze and Joselle isolated from each other even at the end may be undermined by what McCallum identifies as a privileging of one dominant narratorial position. For one thing, the novel offers many hints that Blaze and Joselle represent two different social groups. Blaze's father is a teacher who does art, and his grandmother keeps a comfortable middle-class home, tends a garden, and makes all their meals from scratch. Joselle's mother buys their clothes in thrift shops. Her grandmother's house is messy and her furniture worn, and her cooking consists mostly of reheating pre-prepared products. While it is never said, it seems clear that readers are to assume that Blazes family's lifestyle is preferable. While Joselle aspires to join Blaze's family, Blaze never expresses an equivalent wish to join hers; and it is obvious that Joselle's mother's isolating and self-indulgent ways represent a less desirable form of parenting than the interest, concern, and affection his relatives and his father's girlfriend offer Blaze—obvious, indeed, that any willed isolation from others is less desirable than attempts to empathize and reach out. The novel simply takes it for granted that the habits and values of Blaze's family are superior to those of the one Joselle seems to belong to.

But even if texts with alternating narratives subvert their potential for varying from conventional values, I still have to ask why so many of them exist in the first place. Why express the same familiar values in unnecessarily more complicated ways?

The existence of so many novels with alternating narratives might simply be a sign that children's literature is becoming different and more complicated, possibly because childhood and the children it addresses have become different and more complicated. For Eliza Dresang, technological changes in how people communicate with each other have led to equivalent changes in writing for young people: 'Three digital age concepts underpin and permeate all the radical changes that are taking place in literature for youth: connectivity, interactivity, and access' (1999, p. 12). As my discussion of *Words of Stone* reveals, the use of alternating narratives could certainly represent an interest in connectivity and interactivity. While Maria Nikolajeva accepts that, 'in our time, impulses from film, TV, video, teenage fashion, rock texts, the toy industry, advertisements, cartoons and entertainment are important in the evolution of children's literature' (1996, p. 65), she sees a move towards the kinds of complexity alternating narratives represent as inherent in the way specific kinds of literature operate. For her, it is the pressure of the 'semiosphere' of children's literature—the discreet but evolving collection of codes that define what it is—that makes it ever more complicated. Once a literary code has become established, it becomes standardized, so that 'the longer a code has been central, the greater the risk that it will become petrified and lose its appeal to readers. At this point, peripheral and therefore more flexible codes come and take its place' (p. 63). In traditional children's literature, once-told tales with single main characters readers can identify with have been central; and so, from a point of view like Nikolajeva's, it is almost inevitable that twice-told or thrice-told tales will come to be written, and, simply in being innovative, achieve acclaim.

Elsewhere, in an article called 'Exit Children's Literature', Nikolajeva suggests 'an ever-growing segment of contemporary children's literature is transgressing its own boundaries, coming closer to mainstream literature' (1998, p. 222), and concludes that 'sooner or later, children's literature will be integrated into the mainstream and disappear' (p. 233). In recent years, certainly, the growing number of adults who enjoy what is still called Young Adult literature, and the development of a similar but slightly more sophisticated genre of 'New Adult' fiction, might suggest that Nikolajeva's prediction is coming true, albeit more so because more adults are responding to simple texts than because writing for young people is becoming more sophisticated. By and large, however, children's literature tends to be a resilient genre, quite resistant to change. Despite Dresang's and Nikolajeva's claims about a growing sophistication, a trip to the

children's section of a bookshop will quickly reveal that the vast majority of books published for children or young adults are much like already-existing texts, much like books for young people have always been. Unlike the novels I am discussing here, most offer one central child or teen character's focalization, contain no other narrative fragments, and arrive at something that can easily be interpreted as a moral.

Furthermore, as I have suggested might be happening in *Words of Stone*, many apparently non-conventional books for young people replicate recurring themes and conventional characteristics of writing for young people under their apparently non-conventional surfaces. Perhaps because adult ideas about childhood and youth have not really changed even in an apparently different technological age, the literature resists change, pulls innovation back towards what is conventional.

Nevertheless, some recent writing does at least appear to be multivocal and otherwise unconventional, and Dresang and Nikolajeva suggest why innovations like alternating narratives might bring success to writers and publishers—for instance, awards like the Newbery medals awarded to *Good Masters! Sweet Ladies!*, Louis Sachar's *Holes* (1998), Lynne Rae Perkins's *Criss Cross* (2005), and Clare Vanderpool's *Moon Over Manifest* (2010) as their year's best book for young people by an American; or the Michael L. Printz award for best Young Adult book published in America awarded to Aidan Chambers's *Postcards from No Man's Land* (awarded in 1999), Angela Johnson's *The First Part Last* (2003), Gene Luen Yang's *American Born Chinese* (2006), Melina Marchetta's *Jellicoe Road* (2009), John Corey Whaley's *Where Things Come Back* (2011), and Nick Lake's *In Darkness* (2012); or the Carnegie medals awarded to Robert Swindells's *Stone Cold* (1993), Chambers's *Postcards* (1999), Mal Peet's *Tamar* (2005), and Patrick Ness's *Of Monsters and Men* (2010) for the best children's novel published in the UK; or the Canadian Governor-General's Award for Wendy Phillips's *Fishtailing* (awarded in 2010) and Caroline Pignat's *The Gospel Truth* (2014). Texts of this sort announce themselves as engaged responses to contemporary childhood, as being current and relevant enough to bring great power in the field of children's publishing. But if, in fact, this more complex and sophisticated writing does cleave to conventions enough to represent excellence in the field despite its apparent contemporaneity (and I believe that in order to gain recognition it must do that), then it can accomplish two things at once: It can seem powerfully current at the same time as it reconfirms the older and even more powerful