

Emma Musson

Thesis: *The Truth as I Know It*

Exegesis: Young adult fiction: the *truth* about writing teenage
fiction as I *now* know it

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Primary supervisor: Michael Johnson

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Table of Contents

Attestation of Authorship

Acknowledgements

Intellectual Property Rights

Confidential Material

Ethics Approval

Abstract

Exegesis: Young adult fiction: the truth about writing a teenage fiction as I now know it

Bibliography

Thesis: *The Truth as I Know It*

Dream a Little Dream

It'll Be '*Fine*'

The Girl Who Lived

Not the Worst Thing That Could Have Happened

One Step Forward, Two Steps Back

Baby Steps

Survivor's Guilt

Strangers

Expect the Unexpected

Hell, and Back

Breathing Easy

Like Riding a Bike

The Scars You Can See...

...And the Ones You Can't

Keep On Keeping On

My Own Worst Enemy

The Let Down

Reality Check

The Truth as I Know It

New Horizons

When the Past Comes Calling...Don't Pick Up

Return to Sender

A Little Help From My Friends

Stronger

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“I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgments), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.”

Candidate's signature

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a stylized initial 'E' followed by a long horizontal stroke.

NAME: Emma Musson

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I would very much like to acknowledge the guidance given to me by Michael Johnson. With his tutelage, I learnt how to 'just keep writing' and forge through self-doubt, gaping plot holes and last-minute rewrites. Fortunately, we reside on the same motu so help was never far away. Nga mihi ki te kaiako.

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Ethics Approval

This research project did not involve human participants or any other potentially contentious elements, and as such did not require approval from the AUT Ethics Committee (AUTEK).

Abstract

“I like to write for and about teenagers, because young people are thinking about so many important questions, about love and meaning and justice.” – John Green

Young adults. On the brink of adulthood, they wait, sometimes impatiently, for that day to arrive so they can be older, wiser, free of the constraints they often feel hold them back. It is during these years of growth and change that adolescents will often experience situations or events for the first time. Not all of them will be positive. These may change their perception of the world around them and force them to face realities that are harsh but avoidable. All the while, they are building an armour of self-awareness, resilience, strength and compassion. Constantly learning strategies to cope when ‘the going gets tough’ and doing the best they can with the little resources they have.

This is why it was important for me to write *The Truth as I Know It*. A story about a teenage girl named April who is coping with a life-changing event that forces her to deal with and accept grief, loss, guilt and forgiveness as a part of her life. Her world has become ‘April before the accident’ and ‘April after the accident’ – essentially two very different people. April embodies the spirit of many teenage girls that I have met in my years as a high school teacher. Her confidence and identity have been shattered by a tragic accident that leaves her both physically and emotionally scarred. Not yet having built the skills to cope with her situation, she does the best she can to navigate her journey, which is sometimes solitary and often isolating as she searches for understanding. This is an all too common response to the experience of trauma.

Like any ‘coming of age’ journey, April has times when she feels like she is making strides ahead and then times when she is stationary, caught in the net of her own negative thoughts and memories of her past. Donna Schuurman and Amy Barrett Lindholm put it quite aptly when they write, “When teens experience a violent death such as a murder, a drunken driving crash, or other violent act that leads to death, their basic belief system is thrown into turmoil... Suddenly their innocence and certainties are shattered, and their world no longer feels safe.” (‘Teens & Grief’, *The Prevention Researcher*, 2002) This is very true for April’s character, who has been made a villain following the incident and feels the need to run from the harassment she faces at the hands of members of her small community.

Young adult novels can be a means for adolescents to connect and identify with. They may see aspects of themselves or their lives in the characters. From this there is the opportunity to reconcile their feelings. This can be the power of this type of fiction. Hence, the novel *The Truth as I Know It* is a story written for teenagers that shows them that everyone copes with the more complex events in their life in different ways. There is both hope and guidance to move through most situations, but this will take time.

Exegesis:

Young adult fiction: the *truth* about writing teenage fiction as I
now know it

Synopsis

April cannot forgive herself for the part she played in the tragic accident that ended the life of someone dear to her. Desperate to get away from a hometown that is suffocating her with its lies and blame, she relocates to Southport to try to piece together her fractured life. This is

easier said than done. Soon, April realizes that a change in location may only be relocating her problems, not fixing them. April doesn't need everyone to forgive her. She needs to forgive herself.

The motivation for *The Truth as I Know It*

I am a teacher. A high school English teacher. I have been in the profession for almost twenty years – on and off. During this time, I have interacted and come to develop relationships with many teenagers. As a group, by and large, I find them both frustrating and inspiring. They are vulnerable, immature, emotional, hormonal, impetuous, naïve, passionate, hilarious, caring, fiercely loyal, self-conscious, conflicted – the list could continue well past the length of this exegesis. For these reasons, and many more, my writing has always presented the struggles of this age group. There is a heightened and charged energy that encompasses young people. And this is where I believe the best stories can be found.

When I set out to write *The Truth as I Know It*, my intention was not to write a novel to redefine the genre or break down boundaries or expectations when it comes to specific literary theory that often plagues the young adult genre. I placed no expectation on myself to revolutionise the literary canon. Plainly worded, I set out to write the type of story that I, as a teenage reader, would sink into with enthusiasm. The kind that embodies and embraces the stereotypes of young adult fiction: loss, love, pain and growth– to name a few.

The concept for my novel, *The Truth as I Know It*, was borne from a real-life tragedy that took place in a small community where I previously taught. The story is not unheard of: young men driving home from a party, under the influence of alcohol, doing well over the legal speed limit. They collide with an oncoming vehicle and instantly kill the innocent driver of the other car, along with two out of four people in their own vehicle.

It is such subject matter that we wish we were never familiar with, but sadly, it happens. In fact, renowned New Zealand poet and general practitioner, Glenn Colquhoun, writes about such a thing in his emotive poem, '*Mothers Love Your Sons*', (2003) focusing on the impetuous

and ill-thought-out actions of male youth. Over the years, I have introduced and taught this poem to my students. I preface it with a true story of a boy I used to babysit in my younger years. An 'awkward son' who hopped in a car with a bunch of mates and never went home again. It hits hard. The students are silent. This is because the subject matter is a very present reality in our society. It would be preferable to say that we didn't know of such stories. That we never knew anyone who had been involved. Unfortunately, that is not the case for many of us.

*Mothers, love your sons,
Love your big, dumb sons,
Your idiot sons,*

*Your swaggering sons,
Your awkward sons,
Your irresponsible sons and their indestructible limbs.*

Because they die so fast,

*So awkwardly, lankily, idiotically, swaggeringly fast,
With everybody staring at them,
On a Friday night, with a wicked grin,
In the moment of triumph*

The story I mentioned earlier made headlines in the local papers. I followed the story of a father who was a decorated war veteran, and two young boys who made a regrettable decision. What made this situation worse was the fact that the teenage boys in the vehicle were friends with the son of the man who was killed. I knew the family of the man who was killed, having been involved with his wife and boys through a sports team I managed at the high school. Likewise, I knew one of the occupants in the car – a troubled teenager with a cheeky smile and a pigeon-footed swagger. It seemed to add to the tragedy that these people's lives were intrinsically intertwined, and the deaths were bound to cause a rift amongst many in the community.

It wasn't long before statements like "*I reckon they're all at fault because they just let it happen.*" and, "*He's no longer a mate; I hate him.*" began to surface in the newspapers. Perhaps the most punishing and raw coming from the wife of the deceased man. A sentiment filled with anger and hate: "*To me, those kids murdered James (not his real name). They're just larrikins on booze. They all jumped in the car when the driver shouldn't have been driving.*" (The Waikato Times, 2011)

Like so many of these tragedies, the media reports the truth that will sell. Often neglecting the actual truth that lies somewhere in the middle. It was the circumstances surrounding this accident and the subsequent fallout from the families and members of the small community that got me considering the larger ideas of guilt and forgiveness, fate and providence. I eventually toyed with the questions: what would happen if one of the people in the teenagers' car was there against their will or against their better judgement? How would they react and cope with the guilt? What would be the outcome for them if they lived?

The Truth as I Know It speaks of these tragic events that occur late at night, on a country road, where fate places people in the wrong place at the wrong time.

The Battlefield of Young Adult Literature

When I began my novel, I was aware that Young Adult (YA) fiction was a hotly contested genre that battled like an army on the frontlines to gain the recognition and autonomy it deserves. This is because there is a stigma attached to YA fiction that makes it a 'literary lesser species' than other genres. Certainly, some YA novels being produced in the 21st century are not getting the kudos they deserve. Critics and scholars cast these novels off as simply being 'teen fiction', which has a negative connotation and lacks depth and sophisticated, literary writing. This is a discourse and opinion that I strongly disagree with, because these novels are helping our youth make sense of complex emotions and real-world issues.

"The young adult literature as a genre bridges the gap between children's literature and adult literature with its distinguished characteristics that have been listed by Pam B. Cole *Young adult literature in the 21st Century*:

- The protagonist is a teenager.
- Events revolve around the protagonist and his/her struggle to resolve conflict.
- The story is told from the viewpoint and in the voice of a young adult.
- Literature is written by and for young adults.
- Literature is marketed to the young adult audience.
- Story doesn't have a "storybook" or "happily-ever-after" ending.
- Parents are noticeably absent or at odds with young adults.
- Themes address coming-of-age issues such as: maturity, sexuality, relationships, drugs, and teenage problems. (2009, p.49).

As a high school educator, it is my job to not only have a working and active knowledge of what my students are reading, but to choose texts for literature study which have themes that teenagers can connect with in some way and link to their own experiences or to the world at large. A world that is changing at lightning speed. Even in my years in the teaching profession, there has been a movement away from teaching traditional novels such as *Lord of the Flies*, *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *The Catcher in the Rye*, to focusing on more relevant literature that adolescents can relate to on an existential level: *Everything, Everything*; *A Monster Calls*; *Noughts and Crosses*; *The Hate You Give* and *Paper Towns*. That is not to say that the former are not outstanding novels with endearing adolescent protagonists, but times continue to move forward and so should the texts that teenagers read.

Adolescents are exposed to gritty, raw and non-apologetic content through several mediums: social media, books and video games, to name but a few. More than ever with the production of various technologies, we can see the rise in instances of bullying, self-harm, depression, anxiety and suicide. Barbara T. Bontempo tells us in 'Exploring Prejudice in Young Adult Literature Through Drama and Roleplay' that, "Young adult literature provides rich literary material for exploring issues and dilemmas of the human experience as perceived by the young." (1995) The key phrase here is 'as perceived by the young'. Critics and theorists alike must not forget that the issues and problems that are facing adolescents are not the same as the were seventy years ago, when it is widely acknowledged the first YA novel was published.

In *The Truth as I Know It*, death and trauma are the catalysts that lead to a breakdown in both the emotional and social wellbeing of the main character, April West. April is the driver of a vehicle that is involved in a head-on collision. Also, in the car, is her ex-boyfriend, Xavier, distracts her attention from the road. The driver of the other car is her best friend, Clara, who is out late at night searching for her disturbed and wayward brother. The reader will learn later in the novel that Xavier is also Clara's brother, and that he is in fact the one who caused the accident. Although he denies his part in it, due to the guilt he feels over his sister's death.

One of the issues I found challenging when writing *The Truth as I Know It* is that it is almost impossible to avoid cliché and tropes in young adult fiction. And should I even try to? I

realised the answer was ‘No.’ With an abundance of coming-of-age novels saturating the market, it seems almost inevitable that your characters will bear similarities with those from other texts. Not only this, but recurrent themes and motifs seem to be widespread, with these novels frequently touching on issues such as forgiveness, guilt, survival, death and grief. Jay Asher, author of the controversial novel *Thirteen Reasons Why* (2007), has said, “When death is presented in teen novels, it’s often as a way to discuss issues and questions many people have at that age.” From this, I gleaned that as authors and readers we can be open to many ways in which death and associated themes are presented to adolescents and begin to offer various strategies to help people cope. No one way is best.

When it came time to write *The Truth as I Know It*, I drew on my knowledge of YA fiction and looked back at the history of the genre. This meant reading and re-reading texts that had defined not only the genre itself, but also my strong view that YA fiction has every right to be considered a standalone literary canon. To help with my belief in the validity of the genre, I looked to the pioneering novels that led the way for others. Novels written by authors such as S.E. Hinton, Judy Blume and even the great J.D Salinger. Like I mentioned above, these texts are ones that I have encouraged my students to read and love. All texts I mention hereafter are novels that have spurred me forth into this category of literature and informed my writing of *The Truth as I Know It*.

In “Teaching young adult literature: *Catcher in the Rye* as a language maker and breaker”, Meryem Ayan attests that “J. D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* signalled the start of a young adult literature concerning the language and psychological problems of an adolescent.” (2017) Holden Caulfield, the protagonist, is clearly facing some significant problems when the text opens and he sub-textually reveals that he is a patient in a facility where he had to go to ‘take it easy.’ From here, a flashback ensues where we are welcomed into the world of a 16-year-old boy who has been ‘given the ax’ from his private school, spends a weekend alone in a seedy hotel and on the streets of New York and, while he’s there, attempts to get laid... or not. However, overshadowing this ‘shocking-for-1950s’ content is the fact that Holden is a deeply depressed young man who has failed to cope with the death of his younger

brother, whom he immortalises. The extent of Holden's grief and failure to deal with his emotions around his brother's death may well be the impetus for the significant events that play out in the novel. The reader experiences his descent into depression and anxiety which leads him to deteriorate rapidly and be hospitalised eventually for his troubles. A first-person, limited interior monologue gives us exclusive and uninhibited insight into Holden's mind, thus allowing the reader to create empathy with this troubled teenage boy.

In much the same way that Salinger and Holden paved the way for young adult novels that dealt explicitly with the problems of teenagers and their psychology, S.E Hinton's *The Outsiders* came to be a pivotal text in creating the young adult novel that dealt with 'gritty' content and issues that were, at the time of publication, not widely socially acceptable. Ponyboy Curtis, our young narrator, documents the events that occur in the lives of adolescents who make up the 'Greasers'. A 'gang' of misfits who are left largely to their own devices due to the death of older family members or significant disinterest from parental figures. Ponyboy, through first-person narration, tells the reader of the ups and downs of their lives. The fights and the fun. The others they meet, and the social divide between them. In the end, the book is about enduring friendship and the fallout of violence and grieving. Grieving for parents. Grieving for a life that could have been. Grieving for friends. When both Dally and Johnny die simultaneously, Ponyboy knows that "two friends of mine died that night: one a hero, the other a hoodlum." (1967)

This premature loss of life is something that has continued as a fixture in many young adult novels. Including my own. In the article "YA books on death: is young adult fiction becoming too dark?" written by Sian Cain (2014), she writes:

Despite what you may hear, young adults are adults too. Sometimes they die, sometimes they know people who die. To deny YA readers the chance of finding comfort in literature is only a comfort for those denying them, out of some misguided pomp of moral authority. Whether they are grieving or curious about death (or life), young adults can be reassured by the power of knowing that their innermost feelings can be mapped on to others; that despite whatever feelings they are feeling, it is not unimaginable that someone else (fictional or real) has felt it too.

Cane tells us in the article that some young adults may not have had the experience of a close person dying, but there will be elements of a story that they can all connect to because they should be able to understand some of the psychological aspect of the characters involved.

More recently, in the latter twentieth century and early twenty-first century, novels written by authors such as Sarah Dessen, Autumn Doughton, Gayle Forman, Jessi Kirby, Jandy Nelson, Huntley Fitzpatrick, Jay Asher, John Greene and more delve into the complex feelings of adolescents as they cope with death and the aftermath of death experienced for the first time. It is from these texts that I also draw inspiration and I feel strongly and confidently that *The Truth as I Know It* would, on its completion, sit alongside these young adult novels.

Female protagonists and embracing unavoidable stereotypes in YA

In *'The Truth as I Know It'*, I set out to enter the mind of a teenage girl trying to navigate grief and trauma a year past a shocking incident that irrevocably changed her life. There was never any other option for me but to write the novel in the first-person present tense as it creates a sense of intimacy and allows the reader a focused insight into the protagonist's mental state of mind. I was also clear that the protagonist would be female. This is mostly because I felt confident in writing my first novel from a gender point of view that I understood. One thing I did not comprehend when considering my point of view was the discussion around female protagonists and how they are portrayed to young female girls. On further reading there seemed to be a large discourse around the idea that female protagonists had a responsibility to their readers to not conform to gender stereotypes or other stereotypes that are prevalent in YA fiction. I found this challenging and thought-provoking on several levels.

The first challenge arose when I considered the fact that many critics believed that female protagonists were often placed in a 'gender box' that renders them stereotypes. Often, young female characters are written as weak or subservient, image obsessed, boy obsessed, with conflict arising between themselves and other female characters trying to assert their ranking in the social order. On the other hand, there are female protagonists who are intentionally strong,

independent, kill-your-own-food-and-eat-it-raw types that openly attempt to subvert gender bias and give a sharp nod to feminism. The irony with these completely opposite ‘genderisations’ is that they have both become stereotypes in today’s YA fiction. Yet, they both sell novels in large quantities. This is where I asked myself the question: How far do I want to take the gender-stereotypical aspects of my female protagonist so that she doesn’t irritate or frustrate or even anger the reader?

Firstly, I was aware that I didn’t want to abandon *all* stereotypes and gender roles attributed to young female protagonists. This was a conscious choice on my part. Mainly because I knew from early on who I wanted to read my novel. It is written primarily for females aged twelve to eighteen who are looking for a story that shows growth of character and forging ahead despite difficulty. I want them to be able to see glimpses of themselves in April. Therefore, I did not or could not get away with abandoning all stereotypes regarding April’s character. I wanted to make sure she was a character that the audience would see as someone who was weak and struggling (I was not afraid of this), but also that she had the desire, determination (and eventually strength) to make things better for herself. If she was complacent about her position, she ran the risk of being dull and annoying.

In her thesis ‘Female Characters as Role Models in Young Adult Literature’ (2012), Julia Stamper observes that the female characters in the novels she read as a child fall “across a whole spectrum, from active, fiercely independent characters, to weak, passive, horribly stereotypical”. As I’ve said earlier, I agree there are elements of this in YA novels, but I think that the ‘fiercely independent’ characters are also stereotypical in fiction today. Genre dictates the target audience of the novel, in YA fiction’s case, by age group. Sometimes writers play up to stereotypes to make these novels more appealing for their readers. Take, for instance, the YA novels in the dystopian genre. Female characters such as Tris in the *Divergent* series and Katniss in *The Hunger Games* are portrayed as strong female protagonists because their fear is overridden by the necessity to save the lives of others. They live in worlds that are in turmoil and they fear death and destruction. Throughout the texts, these characters become strong,

independent women, like Stamper says. But this in and of itself is almost a stereotypical female representation in these types of novels.

Whereas, my novel falls under what Stamper would call 'High School Drama'. Whilst not set in a high school, it is set over a summer break with the intention of April returning to school to complete the year she has missed. Often the females in these novels "can be viewed as shallow, and therefore not the best role models, but the overall subject matter of the book also plays a large role in determining whether or not a character actually needs to be deep, depending on if the issues the novel is featuring are everyday stresses or larger, more lifechanging events." This idea resonated with me because, while I was afraid that April would come off as weak and self-deprecating far too often, I think the outside influences that are impacting her life help make her a character that the reader will root for and will feel sympathy towards, without feeling like she is a pathetic whiner who needs to get on with her life. Therefore, I am not concerned that I have written a character who is frustrating to the reader in terms of being a female that is vapid or unlikeable. Just because she is not actively saving lives or fighting political regimes doesn't make her a cliché.

In novels that I consider similar to my own such as *Things We Know by Heart* by Jessi Kirby and *Breathe, Annie, Breathe* by Miranda Kenneally, the female narrators are each dealing with loss and healing respectively. Both have suffered the tragic deaths of their teenage boyfriends. Quinn, in the former text, portrays teenage heartbreak and allows the reader to imagine the absolute grief one goes through when unexpectedly losing someone you love when they are a massive part of your world. She is withdrawn and alone, holding onto a memory that an adult reader would consider 'childish'. But for her, the romance was very real. Much like it is for adolescents experiencing first love. Annie, in the latter novel, endeavours to train for a half-marathon race to honour her boyfriend who died in a vehicular accident and was training for the same race at the time of his death. At the end of the novel, the reader is rooting for her to not only complete her goal, but also to move on with her life and let go of her past. Despite them both being characters that are probably stereotypical of teenage female protagonists in the YA

genre, insofar as they are concerned with relationships and the opposite sex, they are both heroic in what they accomplish, even if this is a more personal growth than one that benefits others.

Stereotypes are seen in such a negative way in YA fiction, particularly in relation to females, that it started to plague my writing process and make me second guess how I portrayed April. In the article 'Gender Issues in Young Adult Literature' (2004), Kathryn Jacobs writes about how both males and females are 'genderised' and stereotyped in YA. She discusses how unintentionally gender roles are weaved into texts, but that this is avoidable if you adhere to Masha Rudman's (1995) criteria:

First, fiction should avoid stereotypes, portraying characters as individuals. There is no shame in presenting a male or female character with negative characteristics, as long as that character is clearly drawn and unique, avoiding implications that he or she is typical and representative of his or her entire gender... Females need not always be portrayed as weaker, smaller, more delicate and exceptionally attractive. Males need not always be tall, strong, muscular and dreamy. Finally, males and females should be depicted as being both logical and emotional, depending on the situation and independent and dependant when appropriate.

I don't believe that April's character is 'representative of her entire gender'. She is an individual because she is a young woman in her own right with her own set of complex feelings, problems and issues. Her experience is different from those around her, as can be exemplified by her friend, Stella, the opposite of her in many ways. These female characters are very different, but they are girls who care about the way they look, have crushes on boys and have their own insecurities.

Some of April's anxiety in the novel surfaces because she is scarred from the accident. She is left with a scar along her left cheek and a more significant scar on her thigh that can inhibit normal function. Both physical aspects are part of the psychological make-up of April and therefore needed to be discussed and described, sometimes at length in the novel. Likewise, with other characters such as Stella, her description as a girl with a bohemian appearance and her unique fashion sense adds to her carefree personality and contrasts her with April, which was my intention.

Maria Nikolajeva writes in her essay, 'Memory of the Present: Empathy and Identity in Young Adult Fiction' (2014), "Fiction takes on the challenge of representing a physiological and

psychological condition through the only means fiction has – words.” You must write characters with their own persona and identity, a person that the reader can envision in the mind’s eye. A writer in YA real-life fiction should create a persona that is believable and relatable in some way. However, in doing so, I have found that it is almost impossible not to impart certain stereotypes that pertain to gender, because some aspects of behaviour are indeed stereotypical. April is a girl who is told what to do by other people (sometimes males), because she has lost her confidence. She does befriend a male who becomes her ‘rock’ and a love interest (although this is not a love story.) She has a best friend who she meets and ‘clicks with’ in a short amount of time. But for the story to work, all these things were conscious choices and needed to happen to show the growth, resilience and strength in April’s character.

How the birds came home to roost

The American playwright, Arthur Miller, once said, “The structure of a play is always the story of how the birds came home to roost.” (1958) Whilst I am clearly not writing a play, structure was something I naïvely assumed was an organic process that was propelled outward from the story as opposed to the story being propelled from the structure. While it is all well and good to think that one can sit down and write a novel without planning or focusing on the structure in any great depth, I found as I moved further along in the writing process that attention must be paid to the sequence of events of a novel and thematic development if you want to develop an interesting character arc and a worthwhile plot.

Early in the Master of Creative Writing course, my mentor, Mike Johnson, gave me Christopher Vogler’s *The Writer’s Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers* (2007). Within this was the well-known ‘Hero’s Journey’

Christopher Vogler "The Hero's Journey"

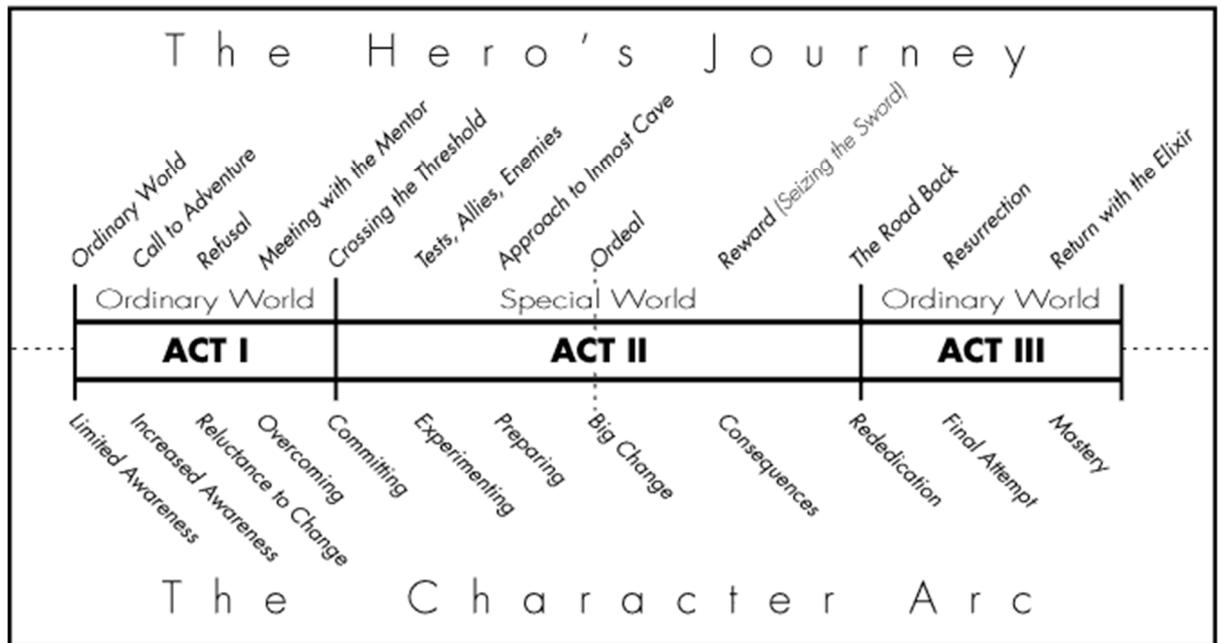


Table 1: A visual representation of Christopher Vogler's 'The Hero's Journey' retrieved from <https://jmjwilliamson.com/2017/02/11/mythic-metaphors/>

Many YA novels follow a three-act structure and a hero's journey. This structure is discernible, particularly among the novels with themes of grief, loss, forgiveness and guilt. Novels such as *If I Stay* by Gayle Forman, *The Sky is Everywhere* by Jandy Nelson and John Greene's *Looking for Alaska* all exhibit elements present in Vogler's narrative pattern. As my novel deals with the protagonist attempting to resolve conflict or deal with change, it is almost as if by osmosis that this structure was created.

In the beginning, I had the character, the conflict and a general outline of what may happen to April on her journey. The story starts with her attempting to begin a new life by moving in with her aunt, Tess, in a new town. She is trying to create some distance from a community that has rejected and humiliated her. April suffers from low self-esteem, anxiety and has withdrawn from social contact before the story begins. Initially, my drive for her character was that ultimately the most important thing was to forgive herself and let go of the blame which infects all aspects of her life.

The 'Call to Adventure' comes when her aunt Tess's partner, Joel, offers her a job working at his hire shop. Initially, she declines, not ready to 'put herself out there' and start

interacting with people again. An early moment of self-awareness comes when she realises that if she carries on hiding, she will never become the person she is longing to be. Thus begins her road to the forgiveness she needs.

In respect to the writing, the first half of the novel progressed in a straightforward way, filling in plot moments and scenes that aimed to build April's confidence and show that there is promise and hope for her character. Such as when she meets Stella, an open spirit who welcomes April into the fold of the small seaside town. Or when April buys herself a bicycle to gain back some of the freedom and independence that she feels she has lost.

Somewhere in the middle of the novel (Act 2), it became clear to me that the story was not gaining the momentum that it should be. The plot wasn't being propelled forward or driven in the right direction by the protagonist. April wasn't facing enough conflict on her journey. It wasn't like Pudge, the protagonist of *Looking for Alaska* who carries out a series of pranks on fellow classmates and teachers, gets into a sexual relationship with one girl whilst being in love with another and takes up both smoking and drinking for the first time. It also wasn't similar to the protagonist Lennie Walker, in *The Sky is Everywhere*, who starts a secretive dalliance with her dead sister's boyfriend whilst pursuing the new musical prodigy in her high school band. April did have internal conflict and it was apparent that she felt guilt, which continuously plagued her, but nothing was really *happening* to her that would make a reader emotive towards her. It was all happening a bit too smoothly. At this point, I became despondent. The only way forward was to consider structure in a much more focused way than I had done previously. This is where I turned to Vogler's Hero's Journey and paid closer attention to April's character arc.

If April was to gain the redemption that she desired, there had to be more obstacles in her way. There needed to be stronger external conflicts – or at least *some* external conflict. She had to be let down by those around her, and she needed to let people down herself. Otherwise, her character ran the risk of becoming stale and not worth the time reading about.

In other words, I had to have more tests, allies and enemies enter the story so that they could serve her character's growth and change. This meant writing in scenes that weren't there

before, such as the group therapy at New Horizons, the confrontations with Hutch and revelations about his own trauma and the character of Lori, a possible challenge to any relationship that may be building with Hutch. But the most important thing I needed to do was bring the silent antagonist, Xavier, into the story. It was my intention to have him floating at the periphery as a player that had the potential to derail all the good that April had done to get her life back on track. This is where the mysterious letters are introduced. They seem to be of concern to April and are clearly something she wants to hide.

Xavier is a character that is very much threatening April's journey and growth. He is the first boy she believed she was in love with. Like so many adolescent relationships, often the (fledgling and intense) feelings of closeness and intimacy can be all-consuming. More- often than not, they do not last. When these relationships end, there is a significant emotional fallout that can affect the adolescents involved in various ways. It can often have an impact on how they cope with other areas of their life and any subsequent romantic relationships moving forward. All this I know from the time I spend with teenagers and witnessing their interactions and reactions with one another.

Subsequently, the process of writing Act 2 was not easy for me. Bestselling writer, Stephen King in his memoir *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft* quoted William Faulkner: "kill your darlings, kill your darlings... even when it breaks your egocentric little scribbler's heart" (2000). So 'kill' them, I did. I changed plot events, added characters, subtracted characters, added meaning to symbols such as the plants and sketches and created real tension between Hutch and April. In the end, playing close attention to this crucial part of the structure in terms of tension and plot development was fundamental to the story as it is.

Moving on to Act 3 also necessitated change. Whilst this part of the novel did not prove to be as difficult because I knew that April would return to her hometown to confront Xavier, I did have some decisions to make. The first being, how far did I want a romantic relationship to develop between her and Hutch? I could have delved further into their relationship, made it the focal point of the end of the novel, but I was reluctant for the novel to end with a 'happy ever after' love story – even if that goes against the YA grain. The novel was always about April and

her struggles. The goal for April was to realise that the forgiveness that she desired and needed was her own.

In both 'The Road Back' and 'The Resurrection' of *The Truth*, April makes the decision to return to Fairmont and confront Xavier and walk away the 'victor' of the 'battle' between them and the 'battle' of April within herself. I intentionally ended the novel with April walking into his hospital room to confront him about the lies and the devastation that he caused her because I wanted her character arc to speak to her courage and for the reader to know within themselves that she 'wins'. There was a sense of coming 'full circle' as the novel as April returns to the place where it all began and the person it began with.

What's the Big Idea?

Thematically, *The Truth* touches on universal themes that are often seen in the genre: Loss, grief, forgiveness, guilt, and love are all present in the novel. Guilt and forgiveness being the driving force of April's journey. As mentioned in the section on 'Motivation' in this exegesis, this story is imagined from a real-life incident that led me to wonder about the repercussions of tragic circumstances and how the effects can be far-reaching and hard to overcome. Especially when it touches members of a small community who are connected by friendships and family.

April feels like the blame, at least partially, rests on her shoulders. She talks in the novel about how choices we make can be the catalysts of tragedy. One of the things she struggles with is her failure to make responsible choices in the months leading up to the accident. Therefore, April's behaviour throughout the novel stems from the fact that she feels a massive amount of guilt playing a part in her best friend Clara's death. She has been used as a scapegoat by Xavier and his parents to steer the focus away from his actions and his involvement in his own sister's death. The fallout of this is that she was harassed, blamed and bullied by people in her town, leading her to become withdrawn and hide away in her home for the better part of a year.

In an article printed in *The New York Times* in 1979, titled 'Guilt Is a Recurring Theme in Literature and Drama', David Crossen writes about the fact that 'Guilt' is one of the oldest

themes in literature, going as far back as the Greek tragedies and their treatment of guilt. He says:

Guilt is a solitary experience. "It represents the noblest and most painful of struggles," writes Dr. Willard Gaylin, president of the Hastings Center in Hastings, N.Y., and professor of psychiatry at Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons. "Guilt is between us and ourselves," he says.

When we feel guilty, we also feel profoundly isolated. "Guilt is the most personal of emotions," Dr. Gaylin says. "It is internalized and intensely so." Society judges us with all of its inherent conservatism, but ultimately we judge ourselves."

This article could have been written in the present day, and it sums up April's character and the struggle she has coping with guilt. The emotion is a large facet of her personality throughout the novel, as is the fact that she is shy, anxious and will not allow herself to get close to people. In the initial scenes in the book, the guilt she feels drives her to react to situations such as when she says yes to the job at Sea & Sail, or when she agrees to go to the beach with Stella. April's guilt about what she has done puts a lot of pressure on her to change, but at the same time it also prevents her from changing because she worries that people will dislike her because if they find out about what she did, they could blame her like everyone in her high school did. This is what she fears.

In Gayle Forman's novel *I Was Here*, the main character Cody is in a similar situation to April in that she feels responsible for her best friend's death because she was not aware that her friend was suicidal. The guilt that Cody feels leads her to undertake a journey recovering the steps and movements that Meg took before she took her own life. Guilt drives Cody in her pursuit of the truth, much in the way it drives April in her pursuit of self-forgiveness. Eventually, both characters realise that guilt is a redundant emotion when you need to be healing. Once they let go of the guilt, this is when progress is truly made for their characters.

Forgiveness and acceptance are the themes that I examine by the end of the novel. Not just forgiving people for the wrongs that they have done to you, but more relevantly, forgiving yourself as a critical stage of moving on and regaining a sense of self-acceptance. Accepting that you are not the horrible person that others have convinced you that you are, or that you have convinced yourself that you are. This comes about for April when she has the realisation that anger, resentment and avoidance of Xavier and her hometown will not take away the pain

she feels. The moment she is aware that she must go back and confront him is when she forgives herself because it was not her fault. She accepts that the time has come to let go of the blame that she places on herself and let it lie with the person who it needs to. April is young. She is naïve. She made bad choices. Everyone has. Humans tend to be their own worst enemies when it comes to forgiveness. This is a universal theme, and I feel one that is relevant to all readers, especially teenagers, because they are often their own worst judges and jury.

One more sticking point

As I bring my exegesis to a close, a last fact worth pointing out is that the story's country of origin is never mentioned outright. This is a deliberate choice on my part. In a way, I wanted to create a type of ambiguity whilst still leaning towards a North American setting. I have used American spelling throughout the novel. Likewise, I have used many 'Americanisms' such as 'counter' instead of 'kitchen bench' and American products, such as Dr Pepper™. There are references to April moving hours away from her home, perhaps even across state lines, which indicates a larger continent. This is intentional because I envision the book will be accessible to a wider audience if it is not stymied by a specific, isolated location that some people may have limited knowledge of.

In an article by Catherine Sheldrick Ross titled, "Young Adult Realism: Conventions, Narrators, and Readers"(1985), she discusses the formula for writing YA Realism novels, a category I very much believe *The Truth* is a part of. One of the aspects she discusses in her article is setting and where these novels are typically placed:

The setting for these books is the contemporary world, usually North America, as it might be known to adolescents: in particular, the school, the home, the sports field, and the street. In these settings, through various recurring situations such as the showdown with parents, the first sexual experience, the first close encounter with death, taking responsibility for one's guilty involvement in a harmful action, the making of an

important ethical decision, or the near betrayal of a friend, the adolescent protagonist comes to some recognition of his or her maturing identity.

These points that Ross makes are extremely representative of my novel insofar as all the elements she lists here also take place in Southport and Fairmont's ambiguous settings and are easily relatable to the audience I am targeting.

When all is said and done

As I stated earlier, my intention for this novel is that it will be read by females aged twelve to eighteen who enjoy stories about young women who overcome personal obstacles. Hopefully they will find aspects of April's character and parts of her story they resonate with.

Once again, in his memoir, Stephen King had sound advice in regard to the art of storytelling that resonated with me:

Writing isn't about making money, getting famous, getting dates, getting laid, or making friends. In the end it's about enriching the lives of those who will read your work and enriching your own life as well.

Having completed the initial drafts of *The Truth as I Know It*, the word 'enriching' resonates with me. The process, from the story's conception to where it is presently has enriched my life both as a learner and writer of fiction. It has not always been easy or straightforward, the words have not always flowed, ideas have not always been forthcoming, but it has been worthwhile. The sense of accomplishment at having come this far is immense.

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