

A Change of Stars

and

Character and Genre: an exegesis to *A Change of Stars*

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26 November 2010

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A thesis and exegesis submitted to Auckland University of Technology in fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Master of Creative Writing

Table of Contents

Attestation of Authorship	iii
Abstract	iv
A Change of Stars	1
Exegesis: Character and Genre	166
Bibliography.....	179

Attestation of Authorship

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 acknowledgements), 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.

Julie Scott

Abstract

This submission is in two parts. The first part, *A Change of Stars*, is an historical suspense novel aimed at Young Adult readers. Set in the nineteenth century, it follows a young woman named Sarah Price on a voyage of convalescence to New Zealand. It is meant to be a journey of rest and recuperation; however one of her fellow passengers has other ideas. Soon she is embroiled in a web of lies, blackmail and murder and must use all her talents and intelligence to get out. In the process she discovers that she can no longer return to her old life in London. The second part of the submission is an exegesis which examines the role of character and genre in the creative work. The character of Sarah Price was inspired by the writings of the Victorian Lady Adventurers such as Mary Kingsley and Isabella Bird. In the exegesis I discuss how these women defied the expectations of Victorian society, and compare their experiences with those of pioneer women settlers in New Zealand. The depiction of female characters in Young Adult historical novels is a balancing act between historical authenticity and the ability to engage modern readers. I show that it is possible to create a strong, interesting protagonist who remains true to her own time. I also look at the conventions of the Young Adult, suspense and historical genres and examine how these have influenced the path of my narrative.

Exegesis: Character and Genre

Introduction

The development of this thesis had two major strands: character and genre. The thesis started with a character: my protagonist, Sarah Price. Her personality and the circumstances of her life determined the style and form of the story. This led to an exploration of genre and the way in which it interacts with the narrative.

The first part of my exegesis will explore the origins of my protagonist and the way in which her character influenced the path of the thesis.

In the second part, I will consider the constraints of genre on both the form and content of my thesis. My thesis is an historical adventure/suspense novel aimed at young adults, and as such, lies at the intersection of several genres: adventure/suspense fiction, historical fiction and Young Adult fiction. Each of these has its own set of conventions and constraints, and these are not always in agreement. I will outline the various genres that contribute to my thesis and examine their characteristics and differences.

Finally I will discuss how the interactions between character and genre, and also between the genres themselves, have influenced the choices I have made within my thesis.

The Origins of Character

“To my taste there is nothing so fascinating as spending a night out in an African forest...” (Kingsley, 1976)

The idea for this thesis arose from the writings of Mary Kingsley (Kingsley, 1976). Kingsley was an English explorer and amateur scientist who travelled extensively throughout West Africa in the 1890's. Although she had no formal training, she was intelligent and intensely curious. Her writing is full of a dry humour with which she made light of the not-inconsiderable difficulties and dangers that she faced. She travelled among some of the most feared tribes in Africa, learned to pilot a steamer, and was consulted by the British Government on African policy (Russell, 1986; Middleton,

1982). These achievements were entirely at odds with the Victorian view that the role of women was to be housewives and mothers (Flanders, 2003), and yet Kingsley's lectures and books were extremely popular and when she died at the age of thirty eight from an illness contracted while nursing soldiers in the Boer War, her burial at sea was accompanied by full military and naval honours – the first time such honours were accorded to a woman (Campbell, 1957).

I was intrigued by the dichotomy between the humour and life of Mary Kingsley's writing and my previous view of the Victorians as a rather dour and puritanical people. I was also interested in the strength of character needed to overcome the social expectations of the period.

Mary Kingsley was not the first Victorian woman to seek adventure. Isabella Bird travelled extensively and wrote many books to finance her expeditions (Bird, 1983), Marianne North painted botanical specimens all over the world, Kate Marsden nursed lepers in Siberia and May French Sheldon journeyed through Africa (Middleton, 1982). All of these women had a belief in their own abilities and competence that enabled them to ignore convention with a confidence that meant they were celebrated by society rather than censured.

The character of my protagonist, Sarah Price, developed out of the words of these Victorian Lady Adventurers. Their writings contain a real sense of delight in the freedom of travel. For most of them, the opportunity for adventure came later in life after years, even decades, spent caring for others and one of the things they seem to have most enjoyed is not being responsible for anyone but themselves.

But these women are so extraordinary that it would be easy to slip into caricature. Even in their own writings, they do not seem entirely real. There is very little sense of emotion. They never express fear, even in situations where fear would be the only sensible response, such as finding a bag of dried human body parts on the wall of your hut (Kingsley, 1976) or being caught in a blizzard while riding alone through the Rocky Mountains (Havely, 1984). They do not expect censure; they have absolute confidence in themselves and in their right to make their own decisions.

To balance the writings of the adventurous, but unusual, women mentioned above, I also read many journals and diaries written by the ordinary women who emigrated to New Zealand in the 1800's (Dobie, 1992; Hastings, 2006; Hutching, 2008). Although less defiant of the conventions of Victorian society, these women were in their own way remarkable. They were curious about the world around them and had a great enthusiasm for learning new skills and exploring new places (Dobie, 1992; Ell, 1992). Even though

their lives in New Zealand were often much more difficult and tiring than their previous lives in England, many women expressed pride in their new abilities and satisfaction at their accomplishments (Brewis, 1982). They also quickly embraced the freedoms afforded by the necessary relaxation of convention in a pioneering society. One young woman wrote home to England in delight on discovering that not only was it common for women in New Zealand to ride astride, rather than side-saddle, but that she was also allowed to look after her own horse. In fact it was expected that she would (Arnold, 1997).

The late Victorian era was a time of great change in women's attitudes to their own role in society. Suffrage associations were formed and women started to agitate for the right to vote. Women were beginning to gain access to Universities and from there obtained the necessary qualifications to enter professions previously denied them. The Crimean War turned Florence Nightingale into a household name, allowing her to establish her School of Nursing in 1860. The establishment of the London School of Medicine for Women followed in 1874 (James, 1911). The Married Women's Property Acts gave married women a measure of independence from their husbands, although even at the end of the century, single women still had more rights than married women (Mitchell, 2009). Women were even beginning to question the restrictive fashions of the time. The Rational Dress society campaigned to reduce both the weight of clothing (the truly fashionable woman could be wearing as much thirty-seven extra pounds) and the spread of tight-lacing (Flanders, 2003).

This background of awakening awareness and new possibilities is what I wanted to capture in my protagonist. She needed to have the curiosity and self-confidence necessary to depart from the conventional Victorian female role, but to also remain human and vulnerable. I wanted her to be able to challenge the conventions of society when she felt she had no other choice, but to also realise that she would be censured as a result of such transgressions and to regret that censure.

Genre

Young Adult Fiction

“Classic YA novels describe a great crossing, where a person whose values and character have been formed in the smaller world of family, school and native social environment enters a wider world...As characters measure the public world by the

values of the family and re-examine the family in light of new truths found in the world, they begin to work out their individual sense of identity; they 'come of age.'” (Aronson, 2001)

The first recognition that teenage readers might have literary needs separate from those of either younger children or adults came in 1802 when Sarah Trimmer published her periodical *The Guardian of Education*. She divided her book reviews into two sections: books for children (for those aged under fourteen) and books for young persons (those aged between fourteen and eighteen). Similar age divisions are still used today.

Although books were written throughout the nineteenth century that would appeal to teenage readers, such as *Oliver Twist*, *Alice in Wonderland*, *Little Women* and *The Jungle Book*, they were not written specifically for this age range. It was not until the 1930's that publishers began to offer what they called 'junior' novels. Most of these were still written as adult novels and were published simultaneously as both adult and junior books (Cart, 1996).

The modern evolution of Young Adult (YA) fiction as a genre which is written specifically for and about adolescents is generally agreed to have originated in the 1960's with the publication of S.E. Hinton's novel *The Outsiders*. Written by an author who was herself only seventeen, it introduced a new edginess to Young Adult writing and a desire to make the books more relevant to teenagers' own lives and experiences (Aronson, 2001).

Young Adult is the only genre defined by its intended audience rather than by something intrinsic to the writing itself. (Roxburgh, 2005). This makes the particular characteristics of YA fiction inherently hard to define as readers in the 14-18 age group have a wide range of reading abilities and tastes, ranging from chapter books and even picture books aimed at younger children through to adult literature (Aronson, 2001). The boundaries are blurred at both ends of the range. Books such as Mark Hadden's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* and Marcus Zuzak's *The Book Thief* are marketed as both YA and adult books and have won prizes in both areas. Similarly, at the younger end of the YA range, there are books which appeal to both younger children and teenagers, such as *Holes* by Louis Satcher which has won both the Newbury Award (for children's books) and the National Book Award for Young People's Literature (YA).

In general, YA novels centre on the change from childhood to maturity, and the problems of adolescence, as seen from the adolescent point of view. The Young Adult

Library Services Association (YALSA) sees the value of YA literature as threefold (Cart, 2008). It allows teenagers to recognise themselves in what they are reading and to realise that their problems and aspirations are shared by others and are not unique to themselves; it can also allow teenagers to experience very different lives to their own and gain in empathy and understanding; thirdly YA literature can offer a way to portray unpleasant truths that adolescents need to understand in order to develop into mature adults

The protagonist of a YA novel must be a character that the reader can identify with. To aid in this identification, the protagonist is usually a teenager or young adult and the story is often written in first person as this perspective is the most immediate, allowing the reader to engage directly with the thoughts and actions of the protagonist. This requires that the main character have a strong enough personality to hold the reader's interest for the entire book (Browne & King, 2004; Stein, 1995).

The plot structure of YA novels is often simpler than for adult literature. The main plot has a strong narrative drive. There are generally few, if any, subplots and as a function of the first person perspective, the reader is limited to only the protagonist's point of view. They cannot know anything of which the main character is unaware. The protagonist should be active rather than passive, driving the story forward by their own choices and decisions, rather than being manipulated by forces outside their control.

The number of characters is usually limited and the adult characters are kept in the background. The focus of the novel is on the young protagonist and the challenges they must overcome. The story must contain conflict and the protagonist must contend with an adversary, although the antagonist might be society, nature, or even themselves. However difficult the challenges, endings in YA novels are usually upbeat, not necessarily happy, but leaving the reader with a sense of hope (Klein, 2009; Morrisette, 2009).

Of course, these are suggestions rather than rules and there are many books which are considered YA which do not conform to all the above conditions. Not all YA books are written in first person and some have extremely complicated plot structures. Examples of this are *The Bartimaeus Trilogy* by Jonathon Stroud, which uses dual protagonists, one in first person and one in third person limited, and *Holes*, by Louis Sachar which has many different points of view, multiple characters, and several different timelines. However these books still have strong, interesting teenage protagonists on whom the story is centred.

Adventure/Suspense Fiction

'The king died and then the queen died' is a story, 'The king died and then the queen died of grief' is a plot... 'The queen died, no-one knew why, until it was discovered that it was through grief at the death of the king.' This is a plot with a mystery in it, a form capable of high development. (Forster, 1927)

A suspense novel or thriller has elements in common with the mystery novel. Both will have a hero and a villain, and both will usually involve a crime of some sort – usually a murder. The difference lies in the timing and the direction of the plot. In a mystery, the murder or crime will occur earlier in the story and the object of the hero is to uncover the murderer. In a suspense novel, the crime is planned to occur towards the end of the novel; the object of the hero is to foil the villain's plans. (Frey, 2010).

In my view, there are four main elements necessary for a good suspense novel:

1. The consequences of failure must be devastating. If the hero fails to stop the villain, then something terrible must be going to happen, something that will completely change the hero's world.
2. A strong, engaging hero. The hero does not have to be perfect; they do need to enlist the reader's sympathy. If there is no emotional investment in seeing the hero triumph, then it doesn't matter how much trouble they are in – the reader simply won't care.
3. A good villain. Suspense is a balancing act. The hero must be opposed by an antagonist of equal weight so that the outcome of the novel remains uncertain until the very end.
4. Pressure. The tension must be continuously increasing. This can be done in various ways – time limits (the ticking bomb, the hidden victim); ethical dilemmas, complications, things going wrong.

Adventure/Suspense is in many ways a good fit with the Young Adult genre. The protagonist is clearly identified and is strong and active, making choices that drive the story forward. The plot is fast-paced and usually conforms closely to the three-act structure of classic story-telling. The ending is usually satisfying – the triumph of good over evil.

The main difference between suspense novels and YA novels is point of view. To increase the tension, suspense novels are usually written from multiple points of view. The reader is often allowed to see the viewpoints of both the hero and the villain and is

given information that is unavailable to the hero. By allowing the reader to see what dangers lie ahead, there is a larger emotional investment in the hero's decisions.

Historical Fiction

Setting the story in the past does not limit the type of story that can be told, but does place constraints on the way in which it can be told. There are historical romances, thrillers, mysteries, and dramas, but whatever the genre the characters and action must remain true to the time of the story.

Historical fiction allows a way to show the essential truth of a situation which current-day participants may be too close to see. By setting the events at a distance, the reader may find the space to acknowledge their relevance. According to Robert McKee (McKee, 1997) "*Historical drama polishes the past into a mirror of the present...*"

Historical fiction also allows us to bring forth narratives which would otherwise remain hidden – those of women, children and those overlooked by history books. This is especially important for adolescents as a way of making history more relevant to their lives. By understanding that certain human truths, such as the need for love and a place to belong, are timeless, while at the same time experiencing societies and ways of thinking that may be very different to their own, teenagers can begin to understand the connection between the past and the present (Harmon, 1998).

In YA historical fiction, especially books aimed at teenage girls, it is important to strike the right balance between historical accuracy and a strong protagonist. A female character who acts in strict accordance with the customs of the times is likely to be seen as weak and uninteresting by modern teenage girls, whereas a more active, independent female protagonist may be less historically accurately, but is more likely to capture the interest of readers (Boreen, 1999).

The True Confessions of Catherine Doyle by Avi is an example of the differing expectations of historical accuracy for YA and children's books. The book's 13 year old protagonist finds herself to be the sole female passenger on a sailing ship travelling from England to America in 1832. During the course of the voyage, she takes part in a mutiny and is transformed from a sheltered upper-class girl to a fully integrated member of the ship's crew. The book is recommended for both children and younger teenagers. As a children's book it has won critical acclaim and was a Newbury Honor book for 1991. It has won several other critical awards from both adults and children and praise for its energetic and likable heroine. However, when considered as a YA novel, several

authors have criticised the protagonist as historically inaccurate (Brown, 1998; Boreen, 1999). Historical fiction does often involve a protagonist who rebels against the injustices of their society, but it is important, especially for young adult readers, that the characters remain believable and human. If their abilities are inflated beyond reasonable expectation then the reader will lose faith in the narrative. The task of providing authentic characters who act in a realistic way given the social customs and values current at the time of the story is extremely important for Young Adult novels (Glenn, 2005). One example of a novel which succeeds in this is *A Gathering Light* by Jennifer Donnelly. Set in the Adirondack Mountains in 1906 and based on a real-life incident, the novel portrays a young woman struggling to balance her personal needs against the expectations of her society.

Interaction between Character and Genre

Character

My protagonist, Sarah Price, is a younger version of the Victorian Lady Adventurers. Age provided some measure of respectability in Victorian society, even for unmarried women. When this was combined with years of responsibility for organising a household and nursing sick relatives, it sometimes resulted in the confidence to defy convention. Many of the women of consequence in the nineteenth century were middle-aged at the time of their greatest achievements. I wanted my protagonist to have the same drive and passion that were found in these women, but a greater vulnerability. Her age means she has not yet developed the same level of confidence in her abilities and would be more conscious of disapproval. However, at nineteen, Sarah is slightly older than most protagonists in YA novels. This was necessary given the time in which the book is set. Victorian women of her class were treated as children until they left home to get married or until they were in their twenties (Flanders, 2003). To make Sarah younger would require the presence of a chaperone on her voyage. It would also change the dynamics of the relationship between Sarah and Jack Larkin.

When we first meet Sarah, she is recovering from illness and the deaths of both her parents. She has led a sheltered existence caring for her sick mother, but has had a lot of freedom to pursue her own intellectual ideas. She is intelligent, self-motivated and

curious. These are characteristics that will appeal to twenty-first century readers, however she is still a product of her time, not a modern woman placed in the nineteenth century. Although much better fitted for University life than her brother George, she never questions his right to attend while she must stay at home. She sees her life in terms of duty towards others, nursing her mother, and then running George's household. This is completely in line with the Victorian view of women as existing only to serve the needs of the household (Flanders, 2003).

It is not until this need is taken away that Sarah is free to consider her own inclinations. Even then, she must find some way to make her desire for adventure acceptable to those in charge of her. She does this by employing a common technique used by Victorian women – illness. According to Judith Flanders (Flanders, 2003, p. 362): “Invalidism in the nineteenth century appears to have been ready-made to permit highly disciplined people to relax their codes of duty and service in order to permit their putting themselves before society as a whole.” Several of the women explorers mentioned above started their travels by embarking on a voyage of convalescence.

As Sarah travels away from her family and the world she had always known, she encounters new situations and develops confidence in her own abilities; she becomes an adult. This is reflected in the choice of title for the thesis. *A Change of Stars* refers to both the physical shift in constellations that occurs as Sarah sails into a different hemisphere and the idea that the stars can control a person's fate. At the end of the thesis, Sarah has taken control of her life and chosen her own destiny.

Perspective

The thesis is written in first person from Sarah's perspective. This enables Sarah's voice to come through strongly and skews the narrative towards her ironic, slightly detached view of her world. Again, this is a good match for YA fiction, and allows the reader to identify with Sarah. However, the first person narrative was not without difficulties. The first involved the historical setting. Historical accuracy relies upon a wealth of details which may be new to the reader – this is especially the case in YA. A balance must be found between making the actions of the characters understandable in terms of the world of the story and overloading the narrative with information. In first person, where information must be conveyed through either thought or dialogue, introducing this basic background information can be difficult.

Partly to get around this problem, and partly as a way to introduce a little more of Sarah's voice without interrupting the main story, I decided to begin each chapter with a short section in which Sarah comments on some aspect of her life. Although each of these comments has some relevance to the rest of the chapter (for instance, the discussion about photography comes at the start of Chapter Three in which Sarah discovers her father's new camera and the box of plates), they are meant to stand a little aside from the main plot and allow a window into Sarah's thoughts. I found this was increasingly important as the plot progressed and the tension began to increase. As the action quickened, the first person perspective left less room for reflection – a person is not pondering the world around them while they are running for their life – and yet, I wanted to maintain the ironic tone of Sarah's voice. I found the italicised passages enabled me to do this.

First person point of view also increases the difficulty of explaining the motives of the antagonist, because the thesis is confined to the thoughts and actions of just the protagonist. In a classic suspense novel, it would be usual to show some of the action from a different point of view in a way which would throw light on the actions of the villain. Often the villain's perspective is given directly. Even thrillers which are written in first person will often include small sections from a different perspective, for example, *Longshot* by Dick Francis is written almost entirely in first person, except for a few paragraphs in third person omniscient which are used to give the reader information about the murder long before the protagonist even knows that a death has taken place, thus increasing the tension.

I decided to maintain the first person perspective throughout the book to keep the focus on Sarah and her actions. I wanted to highlight her uncertainty and her growing sense of unease as to Jack's motives. Jack Larkin is an untrustworthy character from the beginning and it becomes obvious to Sarah relatively early on that he is the one responsible for the crimes about the Ocean Queen. The mystery is in why. Why does he need her father's journal? Why is he looking for his brother?

This knowledge of his criminal character adds another dimension to Sarah's relationship to Jack. Intellectually, she is anyone's match, but her social skills are lacking due to her sheltered upbringing. She finds him attractive, but at the same time is aware that he is dangerous and this awareness of his true character isolates her from the other passengers on the boat.

Maintaining the focus on Sarah is also the reason behind following a simple beginning-to-end plot structure. The only deviations to this are in the italicised sections

where Sarah occasionally thinks back on her previous life. This allowed me to fill in a little of Sarah's backstory – nursing her mother, how she educated herself, not having the social experience of dances and parties that one would have expected of a girl of her age – without loading down the main story.

Setting

Setting the thesis in the Nineteenth Century was determined by my choice of protagonist; the exact year had to do with photography and the invention of the Dry-Plate photographic process.

Sarah's interest in photography is integral to both her character and to the plot. By giving her something she is passionate about, she becomes a stronger character and the reasons for her actions are more believable. When she finds the photographs left to her by her father (pg 22), they are not just pretty pictures; they crystallise her unacknowledged aspirations and give her the purpose she was missing. Photography also suits her personality; she is an observer, analytical and slightly aloof from the world around her. These are good traits for both a photographer and the protagonist in a suspense novel.

The Dry-Plate process (which came into common use in the early 1880's (Knight, 1971)) enables Sarah to trick Jack Larson (pg 141) and obtain the evidence that proves Mr Whelk's innocence. The much faster exposure times associated with this new process and the ability to delay development of the plates also means that it is realistically possible for Sarah to take photographs outside the studio. This was important for the development of the story. Photography of living birds would have been impossible before 1880.

Sarah's interest in photography is a natural extension of her enthusiasm for science in general. The Victorian era was truly the time of the amateur scientist. People like Mr Whelk did exist and periodicals such as *The English Mechanic and Mirror of Science* regularly published their contributions on a wide range of topics, from velocipedes to nitro-glycerine. The articles published in the Transactions and Proceedings of the Royal Society of New Zealand were written by ordinary New Zealanders as well as scientists. It was a time when science was important and accessible to people's everyday lives.

Non-fiction is the most popular area of young adult reading (Aronson, 2001), so a YA novel which also contains scientific and historical details is likely to have increased

interest for these readers. One novel which attempts something similar is Catherine Webb's *The Extraordinary and Unusual Adventures of Horatio Lyle*, however I feel that in this case, the author's decision to mix science and magical fantasy undermines the factual content of the novel by introducing confusion as to what is true and what is not.

In fiction, the weight of informative detail should never overwhelm the plot and this is one area in which the internet could prove useful. A website associated with the book could be one way to include additional information in a way which is more interactive and extensive than traditional appendices. I should have liked to include diagrams of the ship's layout and a map of her voyage as part of the thesis, but time and resources did not allow this.

Conclusion

My thesis fits well into the older end of the Young Adult genre, with perhaps some cross-over into the adult historical mystery, particularly those written by Elizabeth Peters and Lindsay Davis. There are actually surprisingly few New Zealand YA novels covering the same time period, *A Respectable Girl* by Fleur Beale and *Cross Tides* by Lorriane Orman being two of the closest, although the subject matter is quite different. Among New Zealand historical mystery/suspense novels, Joan Druett's *Wiki Coffin* series is set on nineteenth century sailing ships, but these books are more conventional murder mysteries and less centred on New Zealand. Edmund Bohan's *Patrick O'Rourke* series of historical mysteries is more concerned with nineteenth century New Zealand politics. Both of these series are aimed at adults.

From my reading of YA novels, I have found the genre as a whole to be rather focussed on the negatives of the teenage experience – bullying, social ostracism, self doubt and sexual conflict. While I understand that adolescence is a time in which these issues are of particular importance and therefore there is a need for such books, I also think there is room in the genre for a more light-hearted approach. This is borne out by the popularity of authors such as Terry Pratchett and Meg Cabott.

The writings of immigrant women journeying to New Zealand are full of curiosity about their new world. They coped with disasters and unexpected situations with common sense and a sense of humour that is often lost in modern historical novels. However these details are important. They offer a link to the past, a connection that

enables readers to understand that these were real people living real lives. This connection is what I hope to achieve in my thesis.

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