
‘Like Columbine! Viva Columbine!’ Abjection and the Representation of School Violence in Young Adult Fiction

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Young adult literature has long been characterised as a genre concerned with the process of coming-of-age, and as such is implicated in Western cultural notions of *teenagers*: who they are, what is important to them, what they are capable of. When real-life events affect the way we see adolescents, what can we learn from the way such events are explored in young adult fiction?

On the 20th of April 1999 a massacre took place at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, USA. Teenagers, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, killed 12 students and a teacher, wounded 24 others and then shot themselves. Although there have been school shootings before and since, it was the Columbine massacre that propelled into the cultural realm the idea of white, middle-class, murderous teenagers capable of planning and enacting extreme violence in a school setting.

School massacres possess a certain ideological elasticity. David Schmid, in a discussion of serial murder, notes that particular cultural figures and practices are susceptible to being used in support of different and often contradictory rhetorical messages, and as such become highly visible in culture (Schmid 2005, p.6). This observation brings to mind the notion of monstrosity: monstrous Others pervade culture in part because they have the capacity to embody any number of threats or fears (Kearney 2003; Ng 2004). Harris and Klebold have helped to shape ‘the teenage gunman’ as a new incarnation of the monstrous Other that can be used in support of various causes and agendas. School massacres have generated discussion regarding such issues as parental responsibility, the role of religion in society, violence in popular culture and mass media, the stretching of school resources, freedom of information, the notion of inherent evil and the role of peer groups in development. In the entertainment and publishing industries, school massacres have been dealt with in song lyrics, films, episodes of television shows, fictional books and non-fiction books ranging from true crime narratives to pedagogic, preventative texts. It is beyond the scope of this paper to tease out the various ideological roles the school massacre is called upon to play in each of these works, but they do reveal the way school massacres and teenage gunmen have become part of the cultural lexicon.

In this paper I will focus on fictional representations of school massacres in young adult books and what they might reveal about the ways in which the genre engages with cultural ideas of the (male) teenager. There are a number of young adult books which have school massacres as their theme but many of them are only in print overseas. I will discuss two young adult books that are currently in print in Australia: *Big Mouth and Ugly Girl* by Joyce Carol Oates and *Give a Boy a Gun* by Todd Strasser, both published in 2002.

There is much debate over the definition of young adult literature. However, certain key elements have been commonly identified. The exploration of contemporary issues or taboos that are relevant to adolescents is one such characteristic (Cart 1996; Donelson and Nilson 1997): it is not surprising, then, that school massacres have been dealt with in young adult books. Another key element of young adult literature agreed upon by many critics is a concern with the process of maturation and the development of identity in adolescence, often expressed in terms of the formation of subjectivity (Donelson and Nilson 1997; Nimon and Foster 1997; McCallum 1999; Trites 2000). Adolescence can be characterised as a liminal space between the more stable categories of ‘child’ and ‘adult’ (Donelson and Nilson 1997; Scutter 1999; Coats 2000; Trites 2000). The theme of identity formation in young adult literature thus has a tendency at times to take on a curative or facilitative slant in critical theory. Take this passage from the 1997 edition of Donelson and Nilson’s textbook:

The person who fails [to come of age] grows older without growing wiser and faces ostracism, insanity, or profound sorrow ... In affluent societies, books are one of the items that the community provides to young people in the hope of helping them succeed in their journey to adulthood.
(Donelson and Nilson 1997, p. 3).

As critics such as Trites have pointed out, young adult literature reinforces the idea of adolescence by helping to construct it as a separate category worthy of a specific body of texts, while simultaneously undermining it by portraying adolescence as an inferior category, a kind of recuperative period: to grow up is to get better (Trites 2000). Although it is difficult to discuss young adult literature in light of this contradiction without appearing to either champion the



genre as a coming-of-age tool or condemn it as a mechanism for the ideological colonisation of youth, I will attempt to avoid such judgements in this paper.

Representations of school massacres in young adult literature illuminate a number of interesting issues to do with adolescent identity, including questions of race, class and gender, the impact of technology on adolescents and the relationship between teenagers and consumerism. However, in this paper I will focus on the idea of adolescent subjectivity in terms of abjection. A number of critics including Karen Coats (2000) and Kim Wilson (2001) have shown that the concept of abjection provides a useful perspective on young adult literature and the nature of adolescent identity. According to Julia Kristeva, abjection is that which: '...disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite' (Kristeva 1982, p. 4). Kristeva states that the repression of the unconscious posited by Freud is never complete, that the dividing line between the unconscious and conscious mind is blurred and therefore subjectivity is never stable. The subject adopts a defensive position, constantly struggling to keep the abject at bay. Therefore what arouses horror and disgust, what must be excluded or denied, is anything that might compromise the stability of this sense of self. Abjection can exist at all levels, from an individual's disgust at bodily secretions to a nation's fear of terrorism.

Adolescence is related to the abject in two ways. First, adolescence is a stage that has emerged as not quite one thing or the other, potentially threatening to the stability of the categories 'child' and 'adult' or at least to the characteristics ascribed to those categories. Second, as Wilson and others have shown, the adolescent search for identity in young adult literature can be expressed as the intensification of abjection as the adolescent struggles to find a stable self (with different adolescents experiencing different degrees of abjection) and usually with the subsequent resuppression of abjection as maturity is successfully gained. Wilson points out that in this abject state, the adolescent is a metaphorical threat to the stability of society and a literal threat to themselves, in that to succumb to abjection is to embrace insanity or suicide (Wilson 2001, p. 29). I would argue that there is further tension in books that recognise

the existence of Columbine-like violence, because the abject individual is potentially a literal mortal threat to others as well as to themselves.

I will draw on these ideas to discuss the way *Big Mouth and Ugly Girl* and *Give a Boy a Gun* depict school massacres. *Big Mouth and Ugly Girl* tells the story of average, popular, 16-year-old American high school student Matt, who is accused of threatening to blow up his school and massacre his fellow students after some exuberant jokes are taken out of context. He is later defended by a seeming social outcast in his grade named Ursula. In *Give a Boy a Gun*, journalism student Denise Shipley returns to her home town of Middletown to investigate a violent incident at the local high school involving her stepbrother Gary and another tenth grader named Brendan. Columbine and other real-life massacres are specifically mentioned in both books. When Matt is delivering the stream of jokes that lands him in trouble, he cries: 'Like Columbine! Viva Columbine!' (Oates 2002, p. 43). The school principal also cites such incidents to answer claims that he overreacted in suspending Matt (p.72). *Give a Boy a Gun* features quotes from real-life articles and books on Columbine and other real massacres, and various characters also refer to them. For instance, in an email expressing his violent desires, Brendan claims: 'Littleton was just the beginning' (Strasser 2002, p. 71).

The two books have different narrative styles, which have a marked effect on the way each explores the same contemporary issue of school massacres. *Big Mouth and Ugly Girl* is typical of young adult literature in that it privileges the adolescent point of view (Cart 1996; Donelson and Nilson 1997; Nimon and Foster 1997; Cadden 2000). Ursula, Matt's defender, is the dominant voice in the novel, narrating about half the chapters in the first person. The majority of the remaining chapters are written in the third person with Matt as the primary focaliser. The book also includes emails, mostly written by Ursula and Matt. The narrative style of *Give a Boy a Gun* is atypical of young adult literature in that it does not privilege the adolescent perspective (Gillis 2002). The book consists of brief opening and closing statements from Denise, with around two hundred and thirty quotes from students, teachers, parents and neighbours, and about eighty excerpts from

real-life articles, internet postings and books related to school shootings. The perspective of the fictional gunmen is limited to a handful of emails and instant message conversations, as well as their suicide notes.

The main effect of the privileging of the adolescent point of view in *Big Mouth and Ugly Girl* is to deny any possibility that Matt could be a threat to others. In the opening scene of the novel, when two police detectives brusquely pull Matt out of class to question him, Matt is more threatened than threatening. The detectives are portrayed as sinister figures, misconstruing everything Matt says and dominating him completely: '[Matt] was frightened, his mind wasn't working right. None of this made sense to him, yet (it seemed) it made sense to the Rocky River detectives' (p.29). Matt's innocence is reinforced when we are given Ursula's opinion of the situation, since Ursula possesses a great deal of narrative authority. Although she barely knows Matt, she heard his jokes and thinks the allegations against him are ridiculous: 'This had to be wrong ... It was just too crazy' (p.26). Matt's jokes are taken seriously by the authorities and he finds himself in what he calls 'Quarantine/Solitary Confinement' (p.80). Branded a potential threat, he is suspended and all his friends abandon him. Metaphors and similes of ill health help to convey his abject state. For example:

It was like Matt had been wounded somewhere on his body he couldn't see, and the wound was visible to others, raw and ugly. When they looked at him, they saw just the wound. They weren't seeing Matt Donaghy any longer.

(p.102)

Forced into this abject position, Matt loses his old wholesome identity and takes on the identity that has been forced upon him, exhibiting some of the antisocial behaviour associated with violent individuals. He is sarcastic, withdrawn, disillusioned: 'They think I'm "depressed". I'm not, I am only seeing now the truth' (p.109). Still, at no point does it seem that he could be a literal mortal threat to others; rather, he becomes suicidal. However, Ursula saves him from his abject state by recognising him as a valuable person. Drawing on this friendship, Matt is able to forge a superior, more mature identity. This is conveyed partly by a change

in his writing ability. John Stephens (2002) notes that the act of writing can serve as a metonym for the formation of subjectivity. At the beginning of *Big Mouth and Ugly Girl*, Matt's writing is 'silly, sophomoric' (p.58), 'raw, childish, clumsy' (p.265). On the other side of his crucible experience, he writes a play that is 'extremely clever and funny' (p.262), and a column about his experience that is accepted by *The New York Times* (p.272). Ursula's role in this is made clear when he gives her credit for his writing success: 'You were my inspiration' (p.273). Ultimately, Matt is exonerated but does not go back to his old personality or friends. He is wiser and happier, with a true friend and possible girlfriend in Ursula.

Matt's treatment at the hands of his school and peers is an acknowledgment of the potential threat posed by adolescents: Kristeva states that '[t]he potency of pollution is ... not an inherent one; it is proportional to the potency of the prohibition that founds it' (Kristeva 1982, p. 69). The extremity of the reaction to Matt is proportional to the intensity of the stigma attached to ostensibly threatening behaviour in light of school shootings. However, the threat is undermined because it is presented as completely unfounded. Since the book makes it clear from the beginning that Matt is innocent and encourages us to sympathise with his perspective, the reactions of his school and friends come across as cowardly, histrionic and unnecessary. The threat of the school massacre is a shadow threat, used in aid of the representation of coming-of-age as a necessary if not always pleasant process.

Give a Boy a Gun is also concerned with the adolescent search for identity, but in a different way. Gary and Brendan are abject figures: they are losers, bullied outcasts in cliquy school social strata. For each boy, the label 'loser' overwhelms any other possible identity. Allison, a similarly unpopular female friend of Gary's, states:

He'd say, "Hey, doesn't matter, I'm just a loser." I'd tell him no, he wasn't a loser. But it was like he couldn't hear me. The rest of the school said he was a loser, and that just drowned me out.

(p.36)

In this story, the real threat posed by such individuals is acknowledged. It is evident from the very beginning that Gary

and Brendan have done something terrible and violent. Near the end of the book we find out that they trapped students and teachers in the gym during a school dance, using bombs and guns to terrorise their captives. They shot the principal in the arm and a football player who bullied them in both knees. Neither of these victims died. Gary then shot himself, and Brendan was overcome and beaten into a coma by a group of male students. Gary and Brendan serve as negative examples: they fail to overcome abjection, fail to navigate adolescence successfully, and their attempt to exact revenge against the people who seemingly forced them into this abject state leads instead to the annihilation of self.

The effect of the dispersed narrative perspective is to present Gary and Brendan and this failure in an ambivalent light. The narrative style does not encourage the reader to identify and sympathise with Gary and Brendan the way the privileging of the adolescent view encourages us to take Matt's side in *Big Mouth and Ugly Girl*, because our impression of the two boys is made up of varying perspectives: different characters view the boys with sympathy, frustration, hatred, bewilderment. Instead of depicting a particular adolescent's successful journey to maturity, *Give a Boy a Gun* shows us two failures and tries to point out some of the elements of modern culture that may have helped to cause this failure: bullying, jock culture, violent video games, depressing music, uncaring teachers, limited school resources. The school counsellor believes that students who commit such acts are trying to send a message. Generally, the book does not try to give definitive answers about what this message might be: for every character who puts forward a possible explanation there is someone to dismiss or problematise the idea. For example, the idea that the boys were provoked into action by bullying is raised by a number of characters. Gary's mother, for instance, states that her son would still be alive if schools had been made 'Teasing/Bullying-Free Zone[s]'. This notion is problematised by the perspective of another, equally bullied student, Ryan. Although on some level he understands why they did it, the reality of their actions is beyond his comprehension:

I truly believe that if Gary and Brendan could come back now and see what they did—to themselves and their parents and everyone else—they wouldn't have done it. No one would.
(p.183)

Although the book is ambivalent about most possible factors, it does have an overt didactic agenda when it comes to gun control. No character expresses a wholly pro-gun attitude. Most of the excerpts from real-life texts relate to the ease of getting guns, the unethical behaviour of gun companies and so forth. There is even a statement from author Todd Strasser at the end of the book in which he implores the reader to help change gun laws. In *Give a Boy a Gun*, the ideological flexibility of the school massacre allows it to serve two agendas at once: the exploration of adolescent identity and the condemnation of American gun culture.

Big Mouth and Ugly Girl and *Give a Boy a Gun* show that young adult books deal with issues relevant to cultural constructions of the teenager in different ways. In *Big Mouth and Ugly Girl* the issue of school massacres is subordinate to the representation of successful maturation. In *Give a Boy a Gun* school massacres are depicted as a possible symptom of various social problems that are making it harder for adolescents to successfully forge an identity.

I would like to end with two quotations. The first is from a real newspaper article about a proposed memorial at Columbine High School, published in June of this year. The second is from a fictional instant message conversation between Brendan (TerminX), Gary (Dayzd) and Allison (BlkChokr) in *Give a Boy a Gun*.

The interior circle, the "Ring of Remembrance", will include tributes to each victim. The two students responsible, who killed themselves in the school, will not be mentioned.
(Reid 2006).

Blkchokr: U think that's why they did it? 2 B remembered?

TerminX: It's part of it ... 13 kids went down at Littleton. Who do U remember?"

Dayzd: Klebold and Harris.

TerminX: I rest my case
(Strasser 2002, pp.83-84).

Harris and Klebold's names may be left off the proposed memorial, but it cannot be denied that they have made an irrevocable mark on Western society. The school massacre, like terrorism and other threats that pervade contemporary

culture, can be called upon to play any number of different ideological roles. In young adult literature, the school massacre is implicated in various ways in the representation of the adolescent search for identity. Investigating the depiction of school massacres and teenage gunmen in young adult literature can shed light on the way the genre engages in cultural meaning-making.



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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Emma Wortley is a PhD student at the University of New South Wales. She is researching the representation of subversive and violent behaviour in young adult fiction, with a particular interest in the way such representations might reflect on the modern idea of the adolescent.