I Am Where I Want to Be: Identity Formation in Two Young Adult Novels

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The process of identity formation (the development of a sense of self which is distinct from the social and cultural discourses which position, define and constrain an individual), and a sense of agency in negotiating those discourses, is often a thematic preoccupation of adolescent and young adult novels. Of particular interest to the discussion of subjectivity is the way in which authors handle the concepts of an inner sense of identity, or selfhood, gendered models of identity, subjectivity in relation to others, and subjectivity in relation to the structures of society.

Martine Bates' **The Dragon's Tapestry** and Berlie Doherty's **Dear Nobody** present a striking contrast in the extent to which young adult characters negotiate their own subjectivities. In her fantasy about a young woman who, by cultivating her inner resources and huge innate capacity for working magic, is transformed from village outcast to dragon-conqueror and national hero, Bates represents the movement from solipsism to intersubjectivity as a struggle with the self, a struggle which is affected by other forces, but is ultimately won from within. Her characters' 'perception of contradiction between the expectations constructed by their positionings and their subjective experiences' (Cranny-Francis

1992, p. 14) serves to empower them in reconstructing and renegotiating their own subjectivities. Doherty, on the other hand, represents this process as something which happens to characters as a result of experiences, and in which they may or may not actively participate. Unaware of other discourses and the positionings they construct, her characters become what Anne Cranny-Francis describes as 'the prey of dominant discourses' (Cranny-Francis 1992, p.15), remaining largely constructed and constrained by the sociality within which they have been positioned.

In **The Dragon's Tapestry**, the question of an inner sense of identity as a struggle with the self is presented early. In Marwen's world, personhood is tangibly defined by the tapestry woven for each individual at birth, but Marwen's tapestry is first hidden by her stepmother, Grondil, and then burned by her stepfather, Cudgham. Lacking a tapestry, therefore, and consequently considered by her society to be without a soul, she must grapple with inner conflict. From the outset she struggles with an awareness of her powers, an integral part of her true identity and sense of purpose, and the identity imposed upon her which is in direct opposition to the very existence of that true self. When alone, or with Grondil or the

magic, she is 'as big as a world, powerful, important and beautiful' but in the presence of the villagers she becomes 'small, insignificant, almost invisible' (Bates 1992, p.18). In contrast, Doherty's characters, Helen and Chris, are being acted upon. Although the story is told from their viewpoints, they are struggling to deal with a specific problem, on a fairly basic level (that is, how Helen's pregnancy will affect their studies, how to tell their parents, worries about their future, etc.), without the inner recognition that they must begin to develop as individuals. Subjectivity is presented as an eventual, inevitable result of events, rather than something with which they are actively engaged. The positioning of Doherty's characters is consistent with McCallum's argument that there is a common tendency in contemporary adolescent fiction to represent the move out of solipsism 'as one which situates that individual within dominant social and ideological paradigms, a prestructured social order within which they are ultimately represented as disempowered and passive' (McCallum 1992, p.100). This perceived lack of agency is mirrored in a conversation between Chris and his brother, when Chris says:

You don't know anything. We're proving how powerless

we are. Our planet is set on self-destruct, and we haven't got the power to stop it happening. Everything's controlled by fate. It's all been planned.
(Doherty 1991, p.31)

Knowing that Marwen does have a tapestry, and in a sense, having been a witness to its weaving, readers of The Dragon's Tapestry are positioned to empathise with Marwen's struggle, and to participate in the interpretation of events. Doherty fails to provide the audience with such an empowered position, leaving readers, just as the characters, at the mercy of the events and circumstances which define the story.

Marwen's solipsism at the outset of the story is quickly brought into question, both to her and to readers, who have access to her point of view. How she views herself in relation to the magic might be seen as symbolic of her sense of identity and maturity. Early in the story, her absorption with herself and her power has a high price. It causes first the maiming and then madness of one of the hostile village women, Sneda, which forces Marwen into exile, and leads to the death of Grondil. As she encounters difficulty and opposition she goes through a process of re-interpreting

herself, of constructing her true identity. As she begins to mature, she begins to ask questions of herself:

Marwen did not smile. For the first time, she was getting what she had always thought a fitting price for her art: gratitude and honor. Now, however, it felt burdensome. She wondered what this gentleman could want from her, and a silent secret place inside her wondered if she had anything to give.
(Bates 1992, p.76)

As she continues to develop, seeing herself more in perspective in relation to the magic, she is able not only to question herself, but also to begin looking for solutions from within. 'Perhaps she could never have been made to feel so small, if in her magic, she had not thought herself so big,' and, 'no matter what magic he would have her do, she would try and stay her right size' (Bates 1992, p.79). She has begun to negotiate her own subjectivity, despite the restraints put upon her by society.

The solipsism of Doherty's characters, Helen and Chris, is also brought into question by means of a negative situation, namely an unplanned teenage pregnancy. Helen and Chris seem to be unaware of their own egocentrism until much

later in the story. It is really the implied reader who is asked to question the dilemma of the characters, and to interpret their behaviour. Chris is consumed by his desire to be with Helen, his worries about study, and the emerging relationship with his estranged mother. He does not ask questions of himself, about the appropriateness of his behaviour, about the tensions within Helen's family, or about his role in the changing nature of his relationship with Helen or as father to an unborn child. He merely cycles through the course of events, longing to make sense of them, to have everything work out. Helen is equally solipsistic, a 'scared schoolgirl' (Doherty 1991, p.51), consumed by the fear of pregnancy and the consequences it will bring to her life. Her unborn child becomes the means by which she begins to move toward intersubjectivity, evidenced by her refusal to go through with the abortion organised by her mother. This is a significant point in the story, as Helen has allowed herself to be acted upon by events and other people until this point. Although Helen begins to assume more responsibility for herself (telling her grandparents of her pregnancy, for example), the author still refrains from empowering her in any significant way, leaving readers with the impression that Helen's subjectivity will be a by-

product of motherhood, constructed for her by the events of her life, rather than by active participation in her own development.

Gender is defined by Cranny-Francis as 'a configuration of practices, beliefs and value judgements which define and delimit the relationships between individuals, and between individuals and institutions, a discourse about or of sexuality' (Cranny-Francis 1992, p.23). The way individuals negotiate gender discourses plays a central role in identity formation. These concepts are handled quite differently by Bates and Doherty. There is a distinct element of feminism in **The Dragon's Tapestry**, seen when Marwen rescues the Prince not once, but twice, and in her conclusion to pursue her study and her role as Oldwife rather than to 'live happily ever after' with him, thus maintaining control of the way in which the relationship will take form in her life. Bates also treats the development of gender identity as a mechanism for understanding Marwen's progression toward intersubjectivity. Marwen's attraction to Camlach coincides with her emerging maturity and sense of purpose. Prior to this time her femininity has been the source of victimisation. The point at which this is perhaps best illustrated is her first meeting with the impris-

oned Camlach (the future), while Maug (the past) looks on:

Marwen could feel the young man's eyes on her in front and Maug's eyes on her in back. Her skin quivered, tense in a desire to throw her head back and smile, and in an equal desire to lower her head and shrink away.
(Bates 1992, p.81)

As she awakens to, and is empowered by, her purpose and sense of self, she awakens to her sexuality. This is validated by the Oldwife Politha, as 'a sacred thing' (Bates 1992, p.93) and, like Marwen's use of her power, 'it must be tamed and bridled before it can serve us' (Bates 1992, p.94). Her sexuality, like her power, is a part of her identity development over which she must gain mastery.

Doherty's characters are more obviously positioned according to social constructions of gender. Readers' responses to the characters and their dilemma are largely determined by the individual's schema for gender and sexuality in relation to teenagers or young adults. Readers are not positioned by the author to view the story in ways that contradict what might be generally expected. Like others of its genre, the book is more concerned with asking readers to consider a problem

and its solution than with developing discernment at an individual level.

The development of subjectivity involves perceiving the self as distinct in relation to others (McCallum 1992) and may be examined through the way characters are positioned in relation to others, their response to that position, and the position of readers in relation to the text. Bates has positioned Marwen in relation to other characters in keeping with the argument that the movement toward intersubjectivity is a struggle with the self, a process of active negotiation of the relationship between self and other. This is seen, in particular, when examining Marwen's relationship with Grondil, with Cudgham, and with Maug.

Having loved and raised Marwen from birth, Grondil occupies a motherly position. The parent-child relationship between them is consistent with Marwen's egocentric state, and it is a result of her self-assertion that the relationship is brought to an end. Marwen's inner struggle begins in earnest at this point, as does a change in her position in relation to others. Her step-father Cudgham affords an example of this change in position. He is, in one sense, representative of the society which has deprived Marwen of identity and power.

In burning her tapestry he further robbed her of identity in the eyes of others, and of her hope for an easy solution. Indeed, had he not burned her tapestry, Marwen would have had little or no incentive to pursue the inner struggle which would lead to her intersubjectivity. Her response, turning him into a lizard, may be seen as an act not of self-assertion but of immaturity. This view is supported by her inability to return him to his human form. More significant, though, is that this solipsistic act at once reverses her position from that of passive victim to that of a person with a difficult predicament of power. Unable to leave him behind her, she is confronted with the reality that power over others is not necessarily to be equated with freedom. A significant part of her struggle for selfhood is what she does with this position of power, with her changing perceptions of the responsibilities toward others that accompany power.

The relationship of Maug to Marwen is a mirror image of this struggle, with Maug in the position of power without freedom. Maug, however, is representative of failure to move away from solipsism, failure to engage in his own inner struggle. He remains, as Marwen ultimately concludes, one who 'sees the world from his own eyes, and he sees a world of ugliness. There is no spell to change that' (Bates 1992, p.125). The change in Maug, like the change in Marwen, is something required from within, one which external forces are ultimately powerless to bring about. Because readers are given access to the struggle from Marwen's point of view, like Marwen they become aware of this struggle for self-empowerment. This position invites contemplation and interaction with the theme of the text.

The story of **Dear Nobody**, told through the eyes of Helen and Chris, treats the question of subjectivity in relation to others as the result of events, in which the characters occasionally participate. In examining this process through the relationship of Helen and Chris, we see Chris as unable to view either of them outside the context of their relationship. He continually defines himself through his love for Helen, and interprets each event and circumstance as it relates to their relationship. Helen's responses to Chris, as she shuts him out without explanation, is to some extent an indication of her own immaturity, but she clearly views herself quite separately, independently of their relationship: 'You don't own me, you know . . . You have no rights over me at all' (Doherty 1991, p.22). Her subjectivity in relation to Chris allows her to make objective decisions about the future of their relationship.

Doherty offers Helen and Chris the opportunity to participate actively in the development of their intersubjectivity through their relationships with their mothers. This is seen most clearly as Helen acts as agent in changing her position in relation to her mother. As events unfold, she shifts from allowing herself to be controlled by her obsessive fear of pregnancy toward a growing awareness of the identity of her child, which corresponds to an awareness of her own identity. As she comes to a conclusion about the question of an abortion, this correlation is brought into focus:

> *I felt as if it was me who was clinging on, as if you were my tiny self. I felt as if you knew something that I would never understand. And I felt as if I had become two people.*
>
> (Doherty 1991, p.90)

Helen's decision to continue with the pregnancy in spite of her mother's wishes is indicative of the strength of her emerging self-perception. She is thus enabled to contend with her mother's reaction to her decision about her pregnancy. When told she has let her mother down, her internal

response, 'I had to let somebody down' (Doherty 1991, p.95), indicates that Helen has succeeded in making this transition in favour of her own identity. In refusing to stay positioned as the person who will protect and please her mother at the expense of her own personhood, Helen has begun to negotiate her own subjectivity. She continues to recognise her own changing self-perception from this point in the story: 'I'm not the same person, and I never will be ever again' (Doherty 1991, p.125). This recognition enables her to embrace her identity. and her position in relation to others, leading her to conclude, 'I think I'm exactly where I want to be, at this moment of my life' (Doherty 1991, p.200).

Chris' decision to contact his estranged mother is indicative of his beginning to view himself in perspective, although the outcome is far more gradual. As he contemplates renewing contact with her, it is clear he is looking not so much for a mother-figure, but for knowledge of the person his mother is:

I felt as if I was peering through a door into another room in my life. I wanted to know now what kind of person my mother was; even if it hurt, I wanted to know.

(Doherty 1991, p.15)

His decision is the beginning of movement from solipsism, and is the only aspect of his life in which he actively participates in this development. He is able to realise his goal, to learn who his mother is, with himself in perspective, through '. . meeting [his] mother again, seeing her not as a ghost or an ogre or as some wonderful enchanted being but as a woman' (Doherty 1991, p.112). It is a significant step, which gives readers an insight into his capacity to reconstruct his identity. We see the full significance when Chris is told of his parents' divorce and his mother's remarriage, and understands his father is 'letting her go' (Doherty 1991, p.187). The turning point in his self-perception occurs here, at the turning point in the definition of his family:

It's strange how you can go for years letting other people be responsible for the way you think and dress and eat, what you learn, how you speak, and all of a sudden you find you've broken away from all that web of protection and you're free.

(Doherty 1991, .188)

From this point, Chris is empowered to think for himself, and to perceive himself as an individual, rather than only in the context of his relationship with Helen.

Another aspect of the process of intersubjectivity is the way in which characters are positioned in relation to the structures of society, and their response to that position. Bates has positioned Marwen in opposition to the structures of her society, and has positioned readers to empathise with her position. This is a common feature of adolescent literature, and functions as a powerful literary and cultural tool in the construction of schemata for adolescent development.

Marwen has been defined by her society, because she did not fit into its cultural constructions. She has an unacceptable past (signified by her illegitimate birth), an unacceptable present (signified by her use of magic and power which is feared and misinterpreted), and an unacceptable future (signified by her having no tapestry, no soul). As her own sense of identity develops, however, she is empowered to view in perspective the way she has been constructed by her society, and to affirm her own personhood in spite of the limitations that have been imposed on her:

She was not the same little girl who had cried when people hated her. In those days the people told her about herself, as a mirror did. They had defined her, had given her size and form, had erased

her with one word: soulless.
But now, though she had no
tapestry, no one could take
her soul away from her nor
the reality that she was the
white wingwand and the
wizard's heir, the Mother's
child.
(Bates 1992, p.165)

As well as being a journey of self-discovery, her quest is to do with establishing the link between self and society, and where she belongs in the struggle between them. Her resolve to return and vindicate herself to her home village of Marmawell indicates that the affirmation of her selfhood has empowered her to establish that link, and to bring the struggle to resolution.

Less is made of social structures in **Dear Nobody**, except perhaps as seen through the attitudes expressed by some of the adults in the story. Helen's mother's concern for 'decency', for instance, is an echo of attitudes held by some in society. While some other adults express concern about the effects a baby will have on their study and their futures, generally Helen and Chris are free of the kind of pressure that might have been created by a stricter social setting. They are not expected to marry, for instance.

Readers have been positioned to interpret the story within the context of some socio-cultural constructs. Helen, for example, holds all the power of decision making in the story. Chris is not consulted about whether to continue the pregnancy, or about what role he will play in the life of his child. It is Helen, not Chris, whose studies will be postponed while she assumes the primary parenting responsibilities. There will be financial support for her child, paid into an account by the family of the child's father. These examples are all fairly consistent with what might be expected to occur in a similar situation in most modern western cultures.

Bates and Doherty treat the concept of subjectivity quite differently, as seen in this discussion of personal identity, gendered models of identity, subjectivity in relation to others, and in relation to the structures of society. Bates presents the development of subjectivity as a process involving inner struggle, in which individuals actively participate to achieve satisfactory personal outcomes. Doherty presents the development of subjectivity more as a gradual learning process, reliant to a fair degree upon events and circumstances, and the way an individual's responses are shaped by them. While Doherty does not adhere rigidly to this view, the characters of **Dear Nobody**, nonetheless, have a less proactive participatory role in their progression to intersubjectivity than do the characters of **The Dragon's Tapestry.**

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