

# Reading our Bodies in Young Adult Literature

by Jackie Seidel

## Abstract

*What does teenage fiction suggest to us about being a body in time and space? Six popular young adult novels are used to approach this question in this paper. If in the act of reading, the language and text leak into our lives and become an organic part of our relationships, then what happens to us when we read different kinds of books, and what do we learn from our readings about living in the world? In some young adult novels, we come face to face with characters who are absolutely individualistic and self-centred. What is it about these books that makes us want to read them? Do these books sever our bodies and living from relationships which might be possible? And then there are other books which remind us of the ways our identity is caught up in and tangled through how we live in our bodies in the world. Does it make a difference what books adolescent readers in our classrooms have access to?*

Recently in a Large Chain Super Bookstore, while browsing with my sister, sipping too-sweet grandemochalattafrappynappycinnos, we stopped before the shelves containing literally hundreds of series books written and published for the teenage (mostly female) readership. While I knew many of these books only through child readers in my classroom, my sister, ten years younger than I, remembered reading many of them with great fondness. She walked down the shelves and pointed to the books, recalling in significant detail certain characters and story lines. *Why did you read so many of them?* I asked her. *Why did you like them so much?*

Her response: The books (in her case mostly *Sweet Valley High* and *Babysitter's Club*) gave her an imaginary world where she could be everything she wasn't: Thin. Beautiful. Popular. She explained how the characters in the stories, while usually not extremely rich, were well enough off to afford the kinds of clothes and activities she could not. They had boyfriends and great families. They were relatively intelligent and successful in school if not the top students. Everyone liked them. They were *all-round perfect girls*. They lacked nothing. Their lives were easy and fun. That was her fantasy world. That was where she could live when immersed in the books. While she read, my sister could pretend to be those girls in all their popular thin pretty pink perfection confectionism. Yum.

When I decided to take up the topic of this paper, I had something specific in mind, a line of discussion I planned to follow. I knew I wanted to address the ways (female?) bodies are represented in teenage fiction, and I knew I wanted to say something about the ways we “read” our bodies as we read fictional literature. I had the idea that certain books portray “bad” images and stories of bodies and experiences of relationships with our bodies, and I wanted to suggest that there might be some books which offer alternative representations and readings of our bodies, “good” books that is. I chose a few to fit in this category, with no specific criteria in mind other than I thought they might represent the human body, its experiences and relationships with the world, in interesting ways, in ways to make us stop and think about what it is to be/have a body living in this world:

*Out of the Dust*, by Karen Hesse (1997)

*Owl in Love*, by Patrice Kindl (1993)

*Eva*, by Peter Dickinson (1988)

So. These were to be in the category “good”. All I needed to do was to find some books to fit neatly into the category “bad” and I could prove my point in a fine academic manner. I knew from experiences teaching teenagers that I would have no difficulty finding some of the types of books I thought would represent bodies in limited and perhaps dangerous ways. These kinds of books to which some teenage girls seem to be addicted, mostly focusing on (female) characters who have eating disorders, are pregnant, or are dying of life-threatening illnesses, the cousin or companion teenage fiction about which my sister had so lovingly reminisced. I headed down the street to the Same Enormous Local Bookstore, browsed for awhile, selected a towering stack of recently published books quite at random which I hauled to the cafe and, while munching a stale almond chocolate biscotti dipped in my half-decaf Americanisimo, read a few pages here and there. Brushing the crumbs off the pages, I selected several novels to take home:

*Walking a Thin Line*, by Sylvia McNicoll (1997)

*Life in the Fat Lane*, by Cherie Bennett (1998)

*Fearless #1*, by Francine Pascal (1999)

I dreaded reading the books and *knew* I was going to hate them.

And then I was humbled, one after the other discovering that I didn’t hate any of them. In fact, I rather enjoyed reading one or two. Or maybe all three! They were funny and touching. In places. With one, I sat up half a night reading, far into the darkness. What on earth was I going to write my paper about? But then again, maybe I didn’t really enjoy reading the books. Because something else happened to me as I read. I started to feel FAT and UGLY. And boring and unpopular. I just knew something was *lacking* in my life. I knew it wouldn’t be easy to eat only lettuce for dinner, like 16 year old Lara in *Life in the Fat Lane* (Bennett, 1998), but I *could* do it, I really could. I could lose some weight. I would look better. I would look better than better. I would look great! I would be in control. I would have that lovely empty floaty feeling you get when you don’t eat enough. That great feeling when your clothes sag around the waist, your bra gets too big, your hip bones stick out. I started to crave the feeling. And when I looked in the mirror what I saw was ME, FAT: Fat, Me.

Now, since I was reading these books for this project, so I could justify having to read them no matter what my response. But I also could have put them down and read something else. If I didn’t like them, if they didn’t make me feel well, I could have stopped reading them. But would I have? What if I had just picked them up to read, for personal reading? Would I have read them until 2:30 in the morning? Yes, of course I do think I would have. They were not terrible books, not full of grammar mistakes or inane dialogue, not really. And I could recognize myself in the text. There I was, fat and ugly, just like those girls. And unpopular, too. With messed up relationships everywhere. The stories showed me the truth about myself.

My intellectual graduate student mind told me to stop being so ridiculous! To get over it and act my age, to stop being affected in such a silly way by these stories of fictional teenagers. What was going on here? Why this strong emotional response to reading these books? Of course I have long since come to terms with my body and am happy with pretty much everything in my life (*I have? I am?* says my reader mind. *Shut up*, I demand and make that voice go back where it belongs). I commanded myself to get on with analyzing the books and comparing them to the other books I had chosen (the “good” ones). But something had been revealed to me through the reading of these texts, and it changed the way I wanted to talk about the books. Reading them myself ripped me out of my intellectual haughtiness and reminded me what it is like *to be a reader* of these books; why we “like” to read them, and don’t put them down no matter how we feel. I have not had the opportunity to speak with teenage readers about any of these specific books, but I do not imagine that they are reading them as interested observer anthropologist graduate students looking at an alien culture as I planned to do. From my teaching experiences I know that some teenage girls read a fair amount of this kind of fiction. A colleague who teaches High School says that some of his female students read copious stacks of these books, passing their battered copies on to friends and re-reading them many times themselves. “You should read this book,” they say to him, “It’s my favourite book.” Perhaps they read them because they are finding themselves there, somehow? Alan Block (1995) suggests that there are certain books which cause us to hate ourselves because we cannot recognize ourselves in the narrative; the text erases us and our experiences of the world. I carefully considered whether such an analysis might apply in this case, but have decided that this is only half the analysis. I think what we might recognize in these texts is the Self we (already) hate. *There You Are*, reflects the text, *Look At Yourself*. Yes, *Life* is the way you experience it. Like this. And you are not the only one.

It is easy to forget that a mirror shows only a limited view of life, that it turns a complex three dimensional world into one flat image. Mirrors distort – we know this but we don’t usually choose to believe it when gazing into one. To see things from other angles you would need at least one other mirror. The other books I’d like to talk about are the other mirror(s), other views, other representations/reflections of the body in literature.

After reading all the novels I had chosen to talk about, and thinking on them for a few weeks, about what I could say about them and my own experiences reading them, I knew that “bad” and “good” were not exactly the appropriate categories - but how to refer to them then? I decided to call them the “me” books and the “us” books, where necessary, to distinguish between them, although I generally despise this kind of artificial dualism and categorization of books which can always be read and re-read and responded to and interpreted in nearly infinite ways. However, and probably against my best judgement, I decided to stick with these categories as, for the purpose of this paper, it seemed to make sense to separate the books in some way. I will just offer one comment on them at this time. The books I call the “us” books are texts that offer us multiple mirrors. In these books we can read the ecological body, the body that is not merely ME (me fat: fat me), but the body that is also “us”. The “us” body has a history and a past, is genetically pulled back by time, held to the earth by gravity. The time-bound relational body.

One of the questions I wish to pose, about the reading of all of these texts, is: Does our reading shape and contribute to the meaning making that is possible in our lives, to who we are able to imagine ourselves to be? I really wonder if reading indoctrinates us into a certain construction of body/family/culture that *seems real* if our reading diets consist solely of a certain kind of text with no particular challenge to that construction of reality. If all you/we/I read about is bodies – and what makes a ‘good’ body – is it possible to see outside of that, or to be able to reflect on the experience of reading those books? Alan Block (1995) suggests that reading might be a significant activity because, in part, it determines what identities are possible. He says of his own reading: “I am what I read; I am when I read; I am by reading” (p.119). If this is “true”, if what we read influences our identity in the world, the ways we are able to imagine and live in the world, then there is some responsibility to address these various texts, their readers and possible reading experiences. I have chosen not to enter into any of the debates surrounding eating disorders and the pathologies which could - and probably should - be raised when discussing what I am calling the “me” books. I only hope to point out that there are many of these books being published for the teenage reader (girl?) and made popular through marketing and availability, and that there are other mirrors that might be good and healthy to gaze into – and that adults (readers/teachers/librarians/parents, and even booksellers) might have a role to play in making these other books available and attractive to the teen reader.

## **Booktalk:**

### ***Life in the Fat Lane, and, Walking a Thin Line:***

The books I have chosen to call the “me” books, and I believe I could find literally hundreds - or more - of these in the bookstores, libraries and on the shelves of teen readers, these books share one common characteristic: they are obsessed with the Singular Personal Body. Especially with how that body is in space and time, with the shape and appearance of it. Here is an example: In *Life in the Fat Lane* (Bennett, 1998), Lara begins the story: “Which would you rather be, fat or dead?” (p.1). The first line of another book, *Walking a Thin Line* (McNicoll, 1997) has Lauren ask: “Is she fatter than I am? It’s a game I often play. I look at a girl who’s on the chunky side and ask myself that question. Right now I was winning” (p.1). The books begin with the common theme that *fatness*, being fat in body, is the worst possible thing that could happen to any human being (girl?). Being dead, *not being at all*, is preferable to being fat. Thinness, the idea of thinness, consumes the characters in the stories. Being thin paradoxically means being *complete and full*. The main characters in both stories are also obsessed with watching the bodies of other people (girls and women) and comparing them to their own (and how else do we get a sense of who we are but through comparing ourselves with others? who am I without you?). The mirror is everywhere.

These texts are packed full of descriptions of bodies and the specific appearance of bodies in their clothes (never naked), and even with how bodies sound. In *Life in the Fat Lane*, the chapters are not numbered, rather each one corresponds to Lara’s weight, and as she gains weight throughout the book, the chapter numbers rise from 118 to 218 (pounds that is). Lara describes the receptionist at the doctor’s office:

“She hustled out the door, her tree-trunk legs rubbing together as she walked” (p.57). Lauren, in *Thin Line*, describes the swish-swish of her friend’s heavy legs rubbing together. She is disgusted by the sound. She describes her grandmother bending to the oven to get out some cookies, “her bottom stretched against polyester pants” (p.19). She describes herself as the fattest in the room (although she is by no means “fat”) and looks at another girl’s face saying: “her cheeks looked sucked in and her cheekbones stuck out” (p.6). The face of Lauren’s desires.

Through these readings, how do we understand our bodies’ relationships with eating? Both of these texts, besides focusing on the body, how it looks, feels, eats, competes for popularity and boyfriends, are filled with lists and descriptions of food and being hungry and Craving Craving Craving... the girls are never ever full. But what is it that the characters are really craving? Is it really thinness they want?

Another theme these texts, including the one I have not yet mentioned, have in common is that they are full of young people bullying one another and calling each other nasty names. Fatso. Lard-ass. They hyper-inflate the social rules of secondary school, one of the primary settings of the stories, and portray a group of adolescents who are absolutely cruel to one another. They make this school world seem like it is *the only one* that exists. It is in this scene where one must have the right friends, that is, the popular friends who also have the perfect attractive (thin) bodies. You must belong to the right group. You must have the right body. When Lara moves to a new city and attends her new school, she describes some of the students who first approach her in friendship:

I was *surrounded* by losers. They had *gravitated* to me.

Lara Ardeche, former homecoming queen, winner of multiple pageants, the cutest and most popular girl at Forest Hills High, had just been invited to hang out with the geekoids of Blooming Woods High, for one all-too-obvious reason.

*They thought I was one of them.*” (p. 162, last line emphasis mine)

These books might highlight a particular spiritual difficulty. David Loy (1998), describes this as a problem of lack. We perceive, always feel, that we are missing something, that our lives would be complete if only.... if only....if only we had that house, that car, more friends – the right friends that is - , a better body. A better body. These books focus on the idea that a better body might make one feel complete. More real. More like – well - more like one is supposed to feel. Whole. Connected to something. Lara and Lauren try to fill their sense of lack by changing their physical appearances, by being thin. WeightBeautyPopularity becomes a commodity worth something in the exchange of social relations and power

I introduced these books with the thought that they are obsessed with the Personal Singular Self, the Self that is always trying to become more self, the self that always seeks to be something else but never arrives, the self that is always empty, always lacking. There is something profoundly and psychologically unecological about these books. Although Lara and Lauren desire and seek relationship, it is not out of the sense that *in relationship* they are participating in something bigger than themselves, something organic and evolutionary, interdependent, something always in flux and moving. They do not see their bodies, and

their own history, as part of a larger history without which they would not *be* at all. What they seek is the opposite, that relationships (being popular in thinness and beauty) will somehow make them more independent, more singular and important selves, right now in this second. They think they will feel happy and full. Loy suggests: “The self’s sense of separation from the world motivates me to try to secure myself within it, but the only authentic solution is the essentially religious realization that *I am not other than it*” (p.3). My body is not separate from the world. I am not a Singular Self.

The deep inwardness of these books is so profoundly selfish that it cannot open itself up to consider ecological or genetic bonds to life. There is only a Self, one by itself, disconnected from other Selves. The characters never, not once, think about anyone except themselves. They are suspicious that other people are always trying to undermine their “selfness”. The idea of time or earth is, in fact, not given any thought at all. As if there is no time beyond the time the character lives in. Like there never has been any other place. Relationships are treated as competition, as hierarchy. Like Lauren at the beginning of *Thin Line* revealing her game (am I thinner than...?). Lauren actually starts to hate her friends who are thinner than she is. Ideas about competition and being first and best as being the way to being *Someone* are played out. Who will get an A+ in thinness? There is an essential irony to the fact that these stories centre around the culture of schools, often a culture of competition and perfection, of extremes in measurement. Perhaps these books aren’t too bad when we live in a self-centred individualistic market economy. In fact, I would suggest they serve that economy rather well, in the ways they hide the fact that we are all in this life together, make it seem life is every “man” for “himself” – or herself.

The characters in these stories know how to get exactly what they want. In fact, the young women in my last class pointed out that these kinds of novels were excellent pedagogical tools – by reading, they too were learning how to do these things. Lara says:

“Zillions of girls binge and purge, or swallow hundreds of laxatives, or starve themselves so much that they turn into walking skeletons. Because everyone knows that *anything* is better than being fat. *Anything*. I vowed to become one of those girls.” (p.146 -Chapter 218)

Full of the trials of a certain kind of teenage culture, of cults of popularity, beauty and belonging, these texts present no challenge to that culture at all.

### ***Fearless***

The third book I have crammed into the “me” category is Francine Pascal’s latest book series “Fearless” (*Fearless #1*, 1999). The irony of the teenage heroine’s name, Gaia, should not be lost on us. In fact, it has a great deal to do with the comments I am about to make about the other novels and why reading some of them might be important. *Gaia*: the earth personified as Greek goddess. *Gaia*: the earth seen as a self-regulating organism made up of interrelated interconnected processes and organisms. *Gaia*: in *this* novel, is a super-human genetically altered teenager – she is minus the “fear” gene. Her body is perfect. She excels at all martial arts. She is in perfect control. She always wins. She is strong and independent. The superficial plot of the story is simple. Gaia walks around pretending to be a (female) victim, waits to be

attacked by boys/men, and immediately “creams” them. “Her mission (is) to draw out violent behaviour and squash it” (p.41).

Gaia is, however, not perfect. She shares several characteristics in common with the girls in the other books: she is not popular, she is lonely all the time and longs for friends. Unlike the other girls, however, she viciously and constantly deconstructs the “in group”, how they dress and act. She does *not* try to fit in. She describes high school as a “stupid hierarchy” (p.28) and gets away from it to hang out in New York’s Central Park whenever possible. She doesn’t want to be like her peers. She doesn’t really know what she wants. She is not happy or satisfied with her life. She just knows something is wrong with her life, the way it is. Something is lacking. Rather than trying to shed her body, to change her appearance, her greatest desire is to have no “feelings” – she wants to throw them all (humiliation, compassion, hurt, guilt, anger, happiness) where her ‘fear’ went.

WHAT is going on here? These books are rapid sellers at the bookstore. They are very, very popular amongst (female) teen readers. There is a Gaia website (thinly disguised marketing of products, clothes and books) with chatrooms for girls who enjoy reading the *Fearless* series. The chat room comments are filled with statements like “*This is the best book I have ever read.*” Why is that?

I think one of the clues lies precisely with the irony of the girl’s name, Gaia. The name *could* represent the interconnected nature of the earth, a goddess, or some kind of feminine power. I can’t really figure out who Gaia is supposed to be. She does not have any of the “female” traits traditionally associated with women, at least in Western culture. She is strong, independent, fearless. In short, she is “perfect”. Most obviously, she has the perfect body Lara and Lauren in the other books long for and yet she is not *anywhere near satisfied*, and I think this is the important connection. She lacks, *she is empty*, even with her mission of stamping out violence (with violence), which might be something that could give her a sense of purpose in her life. It does not. Also, what Gaia is not, is popular. The secret of her superhumanness prevents intimacy, and she is consumed with an intense anger centering on the death of her mother and the betrayal of her scientist father who has made her who she is (which isn’t obviously the right sort of person). (...nothing more is revealed about this in the first book, we’ll have to read the series to find out the rest of *that story...*).

What seems significant in this story to me, is the fact that Gaia thinks that she can solve her lonely emptiness by getting rid of, by shedding, her feelings, all those things that might connect her to any other human beings, to her body’s experience in the world, and simply to just being alive. It seems to me that the girls in the other stories desire the same things. Through their self-centredness and lack of sense of life being more than just about themselves, they are all consumed by a profound self-hatred. They are completely alienated. On her list of likes and dislikes, Gaia includes *herself* amongst the dislikes, next to skim milk and baking soda toothpaste. She knows kids at school do not like her and she says: “That was one plus about profound self-loathing. Nobody could hate you worse than you hated yourself” (p.124).

Is this among the reason these books are so popular with young readers – is there some sort of consolation in reading about others who also suffer from this sense of emptiness, self-loathing and “there

must be more”? And is there more? And where would we read that? Where would we read about humans living with their bodies, *in their bodies*, with other people in the midst and struggles of life, birth, death, love, joy and suffering? Gaia’s name points us in this direction but we never get there while reading this book, because Gaia, like Lara and Lauren, has/is only the one mirror, a flat one-dimensional image of life. They are powerless to get out of their cycle of self-self-self. That there might be other ways of understanding the world/self/body is not even hinted at in these stories, with their acceptance of the way things are. I think the particular danger (if there is one) in these books is that the representation of the girls’ bodies is completely focused on filling their sense of “lack”, their need to be real. Without any kind of spiritual insight this need becomes completely material, in this case, physically related to one body in time, rather than in the realization that you are only you because I am me and this person over here is this person, and that we are all in this life together and our skin is porous and our lives are written as a multitude of stories. Identity is formed in a relational context and is not the same from day to day.

I would like to suggest that this is exactly what the other books I have chosen might offer to us: the multiplicity of representations of our bodies in the world, in time, in relationship. They are focused on what we might call the ecological body, rather than that singular selfish body in the “Great Here” (Engelhardt, 1991, p.56). In the case of two of the books the representation of body is in fact fantastical and in the other historical. I would like to hope that reading these books might draw us out of the circle of selfish self interest (My Body, My Friends, My Popularity, etc). Perhaps the act of reading these other kinds of books, “us” books, places the reader in a place of obligation not only to oneself and one’s relations in this time, but to persons (and bodies) one doesn’t even know – yet. They are books of imagination about real bodies that cry, die, hurt, love, laugh. They are books of a multifaceted mirror – each way you turn, the view is altered. Identity is not represented as one bodySelf, fixed (fat:me), but is moving and changing. There is space in the text (perhaps Iser’s ‘gaps’ [1978] would be a good way to frame this but I’ll leave that to another time) to construct and find yourself in new ways between language and events. When I read these books, my identity is not distilled and focused down to one thing, down to how my body looks, this bodySelf in relation to popularity and my value everywhere and for all time. Rather, identity, the self in the body in all its complex relationships, is diffused and spread out to many selves, me *and* others, a whole history and future of many many selves. There are probably many reasons why it might be important, if children spend a lot of time reading those “me” books, that we do introduce them to other views, give them other mirrors. Who knows which view they will like better, but in any case, when we read a book it is like we have eaten it, and everyone knows a balanced diet is something to be encouraged.

I chose these other books at random. There are many books I could have chosen, so these are simply illustrative examples. But at the same time, they are specific examples of the ways an ecological-body-consciousness can be written into text, to tell a different kind of story about being a body, in time, living on this earth.

### *Out of the Dust*

This book is the perfect companion and balance to this conversation about *Fearless*. *Fearless* - about the perfect independent need-nobody-else body: *Out of the Dust* (Hesse, 1997) - about the decaying, dying, hungry, connected-to-the-world body. *Fearless*, where Gaia would like to dispose of all emotion, and *Out of the Dust* dripping with the heaviness and emotion that *life in our bodies in our time on this earth* brings to us. All of us. We can't escape it. Not by having a perfect body. And especially not in the ways those other girls try to escape it with their eating lettuce throwing up ultra-controlled selfish lives.

In *Out of the Dust*, Billie Jo knows deeply, with all her body, that she is not separated from the earth. Set in the midst of the dust bowl of the 30's it is as if the earth itself is dying, is becoming thin. There is no sustenance – no sustaining. Everything is dependent on everything else. It strikes me that this all points to an important ecological revelation and that is that question of where food comes from ... does it come from the school cafeteria and plastic packages as it does in the other texts as the girls sit around the table reading the labels on the packages? When we are separated from production and any sense of food having come from this earth, nourished by the sun wind rain someone's labouring hands, and so on, if we don't know about our food and the nourishing earth and decay and how life is bound up in all that, then it is easy to see our own body as a singular entity in time disconnected from everything else. Like Lana. Like Lauren. Like Gaia. Like me, while I was reading those books. Billie Jo's story, on the other hand, of life on her farm suffering the drought, poverty and dust, is a demonstration of the ways we are always inextricably linked with the land (where the food comes from), the weather, relationships, politics, and family. No one is just a singular self. The mirror is not flat.

This book seems to me, in part, to be a poetic meditation on the meaning of the suffering body (those bodies in those other books *are* suffering, yes, but we don't get any sense of having formed any meaning there). When Billie Jo tosses a burning pail of kerosene out the door, it fatally burns her pregnant mother and seriously burns her own hands. This is the central event around which the details in the story circle. There is no room in this story for Billie Jo to contemplate her popularity or her weight. Life is at stake. Written as poetry, Billie Jo's words write the sparseness of the land, the food, their poverty. Rather than statements about being fat or dead (and we *know* death in this book) Billie Joe describes her hands, while she is out walking, passing her mother's/brother's grave, the dusty fields, in a poem called "Birthday":

There is barely a blade of grass  
swaying in the stinging wind,  
there are only these lumps of flesh  
that once were hands long enough to span octaves,  
swinging at my sides. (p.73)

She says awhile later:

sorrow climbs up our front steps,  
big as Texas, and we didn't even see it coming,  
even though it'd been making its way straight for us all along (p.84)

She does not even contemplate – how different than Gaia – the possibility of having no emotions, no fear, no sorrow... it is all here, for us to enter, with our bodies: Come in.

In a poem called “Midnight Truth”, Billie Jo writes of memories and of being relationally bound to her mother, to time, to dust. She writes about what fills her, but also about her emptiness. This book gifts us with honest words to fill the emptiness expressed in the other texts. Billie Jo recognizes the source of her lack for what it is:

I am so filled with bitterness,  
it comes from the dust, it comes  
from the silence of my father, it comes  
from the absence of Ma.  
I could've loved her better.  
She could've loved me, too.  
But she's rock and dust and wind now,  
she's carved stone,  
she's holding my stone brother. (p.195)

A line from Salmon Rushdie comes to mind: "Death is more than love or is it. Art is more than love or is it. Love is more than death and art, or not. This is the subject. This is the subject. This is it (Rushdie, 1999, p.202). *This is the subject* those other books do not even broach. *This is the subject* of Billie Jo's poems. Death, love, art. Life. *This is the subject*.

While I was reading this book, I was thinking about all the ways Billie Jo is aware of more than just her *own* body, even though for a large section of the book she is partially consumed by the pain in her hands, a constant reminder of the terrible (unforgivable?) way she caused her mother's death, and the fact that she may never ever again play the piano, the passion of her life. The relationships portrayed between body-hands-burning-mother-father-dust is much more *real* than anything in those other books suffered by Lana, Lauren, or Gaia. In this text we have the earth's gravity pulling everything back down to death – dust to dust – for all time, yet always giving back life. The fields yield their grain when the rain falls. Billie Jo *does not have to prove that she is real*. Her suffering, hunger, pain, sorrow is her Real(ity). But not only that. This is also a story filled with intense joy in the beauty of the world, in the surprise of sudden snowstorms, in music, and in friendship. And the point is that Billie Jo is not, herself, anything by herself. She is Billie Jo because of all these things and in all these things. There is no Billie Jo without the multiple mirrors her poetry reflects. She is part of the whole *big cosmic thing this life is*. That's the theme of this story – the big thing this life is. This is Billie Jo's revelation. She comes to it through writing her poetry. Rather than coming to terms with a life of being thin or fat or popular or unpopular, she comes to the realization, after having meditated on life, lived life, that life is hard. She doesn't need to try to escape it any more. She doesn't need to be better than she is. She writes:

And I know now that all the time I was trying to get

out of the dust,  
the fact is,  
what I am,  
I am because of the dust.  
And what I am is good enough.  
Even for me. (p. 222)

If we posed, to Billie Jo, the questions from the beginnings of the other novels – *is it better to be fat or dead?* – would Billie Jo have an answer? Would she understand the purpose of the question? These are questions this book cannot ask, because this book understands that life is more than fat or dead – that worse things, much worse things, can happen to human beings and we survive them, bodies and all.

### ***Owl in Love***

Owl, this novel's protagonist, is a shapeshifter: an owl/human. She can shift shapes at any time, but her primary way of being in the world is as an *owl*. This is her true nature. She sees and reflects life through her owl's eyes. She cannot eat human food. Like the first books I discussed, this book is full of conversations about food *and* eating *and* relationships *and* crushes (Owl's life is vastly complicated by her crush on her science teacher, Mr. Lindstrom). The story treats the topics both with complete respect and also with a sort of bizarre irreverence as Owl's differences, her Other(owl)ness, are completely exaggerated. Through this we get a look at ourselves, and it isn't always a pleasant picture. The mirror reflects some truths we don't usually see. Through Owl's eyes, through her way of being in the world, we are reminded of the ways our identity is caught up in and tangled through how we are in our bodies in the world. The story becomes a humorous deconstruction of the culture of teenage girls, especially of the culture of eating, appearance, and popularity.

Like the other girls in the other books, Owl is not always satisfied with her life, her identity. She comments: "Life is a strange and sometimes terrible thing" (p.4), and "Sometimes I would like not to be what I am" (p.6). It isn't easy being an owl, or a human, sorting out relationships, finding friends, just surviving, dealing with parents and all the ways they can – or can't – understand a teenager's life. It isn't easy fitting in at school. The other students ignore Owl. They think she is weird. She wants to fit in so she carefully observes them and tries to be like them. When the other students notice that she never eats at school (of course she is *built like a bird*), she feels she needs to fool them and devises a devious plan:

Next day I took a tasty little mouse and laid it between two slices of white bread (...). I wrapped this bundle, as I have observed is the custom, in a sheet of plastic. I placed it in a small brown paper bag and enclosed a paper napkin. With the opening sealed by a fold, and my name, "OWL," printed neatly across it, it looked quite typical, if a little skimpy in size and weight. (p.8)

The difference between this book, and those other "me" books, is that Owl only attempts to *conceal* her identity at school, she is not attempting to change it, or to change herself, and especially not to change the way she looks. How vastly different this description of food is from the descriptions of greasy

fries, carrot sticks, brownies and rice cakes that represent and fill the desires in the “me” books. Those girls agonize over *what* to eat (if anything). Owl knows what she needs to eat... she takes her (concealed) packaged lunch to school and carefully (so the tail doesn’t show) eats it in public in the cafeteria to prove that she is “normal”. She doesn’t want to “be” normal, only to “seem” normal. And she tries this just once. The bread makes her so ill that she reverts back to her usual eating habits – carnivorous hunting. Dreams of the kill. Blood.

Like the others, this book is also filled with descriptions, images and visions of bodies, eating, and food (in the cafeteria and out), but with a (deconstructive) difference. When students in the cafeteria are eating hotdogs, Owl wonders if she could actually eat one. Could she? Could she pretend it was a garter snake and *gobble* it up? She decides she cannot: “The thing was made of processed pig flesh rather than dog meat as the name “hot dog” implied. It stank of factories and chemicals” (p.43). In one particularly hilarious scene, her friend Dawn wants Owl to cuddle her “sweet” pet hamster. Owl misunderstands the gesture for a moment. She thinks Dawn is offering her a snack! And she is soooooo hungry. “It wouldn’t taste sweet, no. It would be tender, though, and juicy. I sighed” (p.54).

I think the important difference in this book, in regards to eating and bodies, is that Owl TOO, like those other girls, thinks about eating all the time (don’t we all? don’t we need to eat?). She constantly describes her eating habits. She must think about eating all the time - for her survival. Connected with the act of eating as an act of sustenance and sacrifice, Owl must *kill* her own food. Unlike Lara or Lauren, she has intimate knowledge of her connection with earthy dusty life of the ground. She depends on it – truly. In fact, the whole book is about the ways Owl’s crushing hunger and blood desire enables her to observe human foibles and compare them to her predatory existence. After she is mobbed by a group of crows, while in her human form, she explains her furious response:

Usually a conscientious student, I did no homework that night. I flung myself out of the window into the gathering twilight to hunt with a ferocity I had never before experienced. The little cakes I had eaten at Dawn’s held me down no longer. I was nothing more than a consuming hunger, a gaping hole demanding to be filled. The night was dry, the air bitterly cold. I killed again and again. (p.77)

Her friendship with Dawn becomes a place for Owl to reflect on her/their differences, to learn what “being human” might be about. She reads Dawn’s teen magazines and observes: “The ways of humanity are indeed strange” (p.56). She compares her eating habits to those of her peers. She does not understand any of their obsessions, with weight, with appearance, with popularity (she only seeks a partner to mate for life). She comments wisely:

Weight-loss diets are entirely foreign to owls. The great thing, we feel, is to stuff yourself as full as you can whenever you can. It’s always wise to have something put aside for a rainy day.... Dawn, I know, feels that she ought to lose weight. Her excess poundage costs her prestige and mating opportunities. Personally, I cannot see that a wife who is apt to keel over in the first wet spell is much of an asset. (p.92)

The (female) students in my junior high class who read *Owl in Love* responded with fits of laughter – they did see themselves reflected in that mirror – and passed it on to their friends and mothers. The mirror here is not answering the question: “*who is fairest, fattest, thinnest? would you rather be fat than dead? well would you?*” A different conversation is possible when something different is reflected. There is no room here for the noise of legs rubbing together...only the sound of Owl’s wings as she dives for her prey and our laughter at the reflections we see.

### ***Eva***

I have saved this book for last because it does, I think, illustrate best the point I am trying to make. This is a story which makes clear the terrifying ecological implications which would be the result of forgetting our bodies, other bodies (not just human), the body of the earth, and the ways these are held together, one always influencing the others. There is no such thing as the singular body in this moment in time; thin, fat, fearless and superhuman, or otherwise.

When Eva, sometime in our distant future, is crushed, mortally wounded in a car accident, a radical experimental procedure is attempted to save her life. Her memories, her neurons, are transplanted into the body of a chimpanzee. The story is complicated by the fact that Eva’s father works with chimps and that she has often hung about and played with them. She intimately knows the chimp whose body becomes hers – *Kelly*. When Eva awakens in the hospital, months after the procedure, her body and bodily memories are changed at a fundamental level. Did the experiment work? In the beginning she is Eva in a chimpanzee body. But in her dreams, her body remembers being a chimp. And not just being a chimp. Her body seems to carry not only its own memories, but the entire evolutionary and experiential memory of the chimpanzees as a species. The human societies of the future have utterly destroyed the earth. There are no more creatures in the wild. With the exception of a few far-flung remote locations, there are no more wild spaces. There are cities of half a billion, concrete jungles where people sit inside their box apartments and watch television. The Kelly-body remembers things it could never have experienced in its captivity – swinging in trees, green spaces, freedom. As time goes on, Eva realizes she can do other things her human body/mind could not do. With her eyes closed, she can pinpoint the exact place of the sun in the sky, at any time of day, this genetic memory that she didn’t have in her human body.

As time passes, Eva learns to be in her chimp body, how to walk, how to speak with a computer. But inside her mind she struggles – *is she chimp or is she human?* Which does she desire to be? Her human/chimp mind, like Owl, is able to critically enter into observing humans and human behaviour without participating directly in it. Her animal body gives her a critical distance. She can ask questions: what *is* it to be beautiful? Eva is clearly no longer beautiful by human standards, in fact, most humans have quite a lot of difficulty relating to “Eva” in her chimp body. So who is she? What is her body? What is it to have a body? And does it matter how we think about that?

When Eve first awakens in the hospital, she gazes in to the mirror above her head, and examines her new body:

Eva lay looking at the face in the mirror. Me, she thought. Not Kelly, me. Good-bye, blue eyes, good-bye soft pale skin, good-bye, nose. Perhaps Kelly had been pretty – pretty to another chimp. Except that chimps didn't seem to think like that... (p.22)

Her perception of what it is to be/have a body change rapidly as she learns to be in the chimp body. When she meets her therapist Robbo:

People, she thought – they're funny. Her fingers moved caressingly over the furriness of her chest, and somehow the thought in her mind changed from the oddness of people worrying about why they'd stopped trying to colonize planets to the oddness of people not having any real hair on their bodies, being so smooth and shiny. When she thought of him like that Robbo didn't seem pretty at all. (p.35)

Eva's human body is but a ghost body. Her task is to integrate her human self with the chimp self that Kelly was. She mourns the loss of her "friend" Kelly, but somehow her prior relationship with the chimps seems to have contributed to the success of the neuron memory procedure. The doctors are so excited by what they have accomplished, they try it with several other patients. None of the others survive or are able to handle the exchange of their own body for that of an animal. Eva's struggle is, on the other hand, does she want to be a human being at all? She must re-integrate her bodySelf with the world, re-orient herself. Perhaps this is the task for us all. She has difficult choices to make about how she will be in the world. Her recurring chimpanzee body memories, of trees and freedom, remind us that we are always more than our own bodies; we are also a collectivity of bodies and memories and genes and experiences that came before us. Our bodies are a gift from the past, an inheritance. They don't belong only to this time, or solely to us.

When we look into the mirror of Eva, what do we see? What questions does this mirror ask of its readers? When the human body is so entirely altered that it inhabits another form, then do we even know what a body is? The experience of reading our bodies in this book disorients us, reorients us. Is fat, thin, popular important when the planet is destroyed? If we can destroy our own bodies, is it easy to destroy the planet? When we don't see how we are connected to life and time and the earth, then we are truly disconnected, separate selves, lost and lacking. Eva, in this story, does not lack anything. She does not experience that sense of lack or emptiness at all. She experiences the call of the past and the future, in her body. The call to good living. In this case, that call asks her to decide who she will be in that body – Eva or chimp, or both. Which life will she inhabit?

As I read about Eva beginning to experience more and more chimpanzee longings, deep in her body, I wondered if those girls in those other books have any longings at all of which they are aware? I think of Gaia, wanting to throw all her emotions away. Eva's desires for trees, light, leaves, freedom, movement, seem at first to be a kind of backwards evolution. But no – her desire reveals human darkness, pathologies and obsessions for what they are. When Eva realizes that her body is no longer hers, that the sponsorships by World Fruit and Honeybear have colonized her as they have colonized the world, she makes the decision to *be* in her chimp body, to *be* Eva-Chimpanzee, and in the end convinces the humans

to let her and the other captive chimps be free in one of the last inaccessible and wild places on earth. The book raises deep philosophical questions about our evolution and existence, about our science and its ethics, and about the things we will do to and with our bodies in the name of Progress and Life. In a sense, these issues are among *the* issues we are faced with in our time, but they are completely absent from the other stories. The girls in them live in a vacuum of going to boring schools and struggling to fit into the teenage social world as if that is all that exists, and indeed, for them it is. They do not even dream of going somewhere wild, where the body is a free body, not bound.

*Eva* rips us out of singular selfish experiences of time, and allows us to consider life in terms of evolutionary time, which is often forgotten. The hope, for *Eva*, for the chimps, not humans, is for generations in the future. But perhaps the humans will destroy the world, chimps, themselves. Life is not neatly predicted or wrapped up. Neither is the experience of being/having a body, of which these texts remind us. The girls, in the “me” books, who care only about their own bodies are incapable of thinking of, considering, life beyond themselves. That is what got us into this mess in the first place, this radical individualistic thinking, a deeply over-inflated sense of self-significance in the world. I don’t know if reading these kinds of books, the “us” books, imagining these kinds of worlds, in these difficult, funny, sad books, makes us wonder about who we are and what we think we are. The reflection we see in their mirrors is not always the same, not flat, sometimes not even clear, and may be something we don’t even want to see. I don’t know if it makes a difference to read them or not. But I’d like to think it does.

I would suggest, once more, that this is the significant difference between these two types of reading materials; that one type represents desires not only as selfishness but as an unattainable perfection. In so representing these desires, the books offer no alternatives. In the end, the characters come to some kind of neat simple resolution and self acceptance of “the way I am” – but there is no deeper change in the ways the characters experience and understand life. This being a human being on this planet. There is a fundamental assumption in these texts that there is something real and true about “me”, about my identity, outside of relationships with time beyond this time, and places beyond this place, and people I don’t know. They suggest that what I see in the mirror is the true Truth, something real in and of itself. These other “us” books, on the other hand, write an imperfect world, a difficult world, rather more the way life is. There is no simple resolution or tidy acceptance of life in the final chapters. Block (1995) defines reading as an ontological and ethical activity – it is a language based mode of meaning construction, of establishing relationships with self and other – he suggests that an “ethics of reading is concerned with the ethics of the creation and acceptance of self” (p.116). Reading changes us, our relations with the world, our bodies, others, when the text enters us, “we will know – and be – things we could not be without reading” (p.199). Are we then not responsible for what we read, or at least for acknowledging the deep ways it might affect us? Birkerts (1994) describes reading as the “self suspended in the medium of language, the particles of the identity wavering in the magnetic current of another’s expression” (p.78). He suggests that through the act of reading, our relationships to the world around us change, that we hand over our groundedness to a different groundedness. If the boundaries between self and text are porous, then the book, the characters,

text, ideas, will occupy us as we occupy the book. "Its atmosphere bleeds obscurely into mine" (Birkerts, p.100). In the beginning I began by describing what happened to me as a reader, as the books' bodies began to bleed into me... What kind of book/bodies do we want bleeding into us? On what ground shall our feet stand? Which ground(s) do we offer the children in our classrooms?

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## Biography

Jackie Seidel completed her master's degree at the University of British Columbia. She is currently a doctoral student at the University of Alberta where she continues to write poetry and fiction, read young adult novels, teach undergraduate English language arts courses and do research in the area of ethics and ecology.