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# Wimps, dorks, and reluctant readers: Redefining literacy in multimodal middle grade diary books

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Wimps, Dorks, and Reluctant Readers:  
Redefining Literacy in Multimodal Middle Grade Diary Books

by

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Thesis

Submitted to the Department of English Language and Literature

Eastern Michigan University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

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in

Children's Literature

Thesis Committee:

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## Abstract

Since the release of Jeff Kinney's *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*, the multimodal, middle-grade diary book has gained popularity. The series features "handwritten," journal entries and drawings and has elicited many imitators, the most prominent of which is Rachel Renee Russell's *Dork Diaries*. While the diary form is not new to children's literature, these series reinvent the established conventions through drawings and supplementary online environments. Both series are routinely identified as for reluctant readers; however, their diversity of form actually leads to complex reader engagement. My purpose is to refute the idea that the books are useful only as precursors to "better" books. I will do this by exploring the popularity of these books, by examining the types of reading the books ask for, and by showing how they encourage innovative writing experiences. Ultimately, the series demonstrate how texts for child readers are changing to fit a dynamic literacy landscape.

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## **Introduction – The New Diary: Using Cartoons to Redefine the Diary**

In late 2010, Scholastic released a list of the top ten trends in children's literature from that year. Alongside acknowledging the wave of dystopian fiction and a continued expansion of paranormal romance, Scholastic named the number eight trend: "the rise of the diary and journal format" ("Scholastic Experts"). Looking through the current middle-grade section of bookstores and libraries reveals that this trend is still going strong. Hardcover books of lined, "handwritten" pages claiming to be the diary of someone – a "totally lame vampire," a "schoolyard bully," or just your average "wimpy kid" fill the shelves (Collins; Katz; Kinney). Although diary books (both fictional and nonfictional) are not new to children's literature, as recent series like *Dear America* and *The Princess Diaries* as well as classics like *The Diary of Anne Frank* indicate, this new wave of diary books, that feature writing alongside illustrations, has taken over middle grade literature. This trend is routinely dismissed as the latest fad to appeal to reluctant readers; however, the reality of what the books offer for young readers is much more complex.

The origins of this most recent iteration of diary books can be traced in large part back to Jeff Kinney's *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* (2007), which records Greg Heffley's adventures over the course of his first year of middle school. The story, told through first-person diary entries, is narrated not only through Greg's often-humorous written perspective on the daily events of middle school but also through his simple line drawings. The front cover of the first book bills *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* as "a novel in cartoons," a very fitting description given its origins. Jeff Kinney, who counts among his inspirations Charles Schulz and *Big Nate*'s Lincoln Pierce, began drawing a Greg-like character in college through a cartoon called "Igdoof." After college, Kinney wanted to create professional cartoons but struggled with drawing in a professional manner, so he decided that if he wanted to get published he would have to take a different route:

“I realized that if I acted like I was drawing like a kid on purpose and created this character who was a kid that maybe I could get away with [it?]. And so that’s where the idea for Greg Heffley came from – was my failure to break into real cartooning” (quoted in Wheeler Centre). Many years after the college cartoon, Kinney began to draw Greg; however, he did not initially envision the book as a work “for” kids. At the onset, he wrote Greg’s experiences in middle school as a reflective look back for adults. As he reached out to publishers, though, they saw it as a text for younger readers. Eventually, *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* was released as a daily comic on FunBrain.com, an educational website created through Pearson, where Kinney worked, and, following this release, the cartoons were assembled into the first book of the series.

Since the release of the first print book in 2007, the *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* series has exploded in popularity. The eight-book<sup>1</sup> series has sold more than 100 million total books, and the release of each new book has been accompanied by large release parties at bookstores and libraries. The eight books in the series follow Greg through numerous middle-school issues including attempting to become the school cartoonist (*Diary of a Wimpy Kid*), outmaneuvering his older brother (*Rodrick Rules*), trying to redefine what “manliness” is (*The Last Straw*), surviving a summer vacation (*Dog Days*), navigating (or rather, not navigating) puberty (*The Ugly Truth*), being snowed in (*Cabin Fever*), conquering a school dance (*The Third Wheel*), and, most recently, finding new friends in the wake of his former best friend finding a girlfriend (*Hard Luck*). Additionally, there have been two non-narrative books released – one is a do-it-yourself diary where readers can replicate the signature *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* style, and the other is a journal that accompanies the first movie adaptation of the books. There have been, in total, three *Wimpy Kid* movies, as well as a board game and an online interactive game through

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<sup>1</sup> The eighth book was released on November 5, 2013, and the series shows no signs of slowing.

Poptropica.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, the audiobooks connected to these texts have routinely been praised, despite the complications that arise from audibly presenting a book that is so visual in nature.<sup>3</sup> On top of all of these texts, *Wimpy Kid* has dozens of different types of merchandise from greeting cards to umbrellas to blank notebooks for would-be writers.

Jeff Kinney's series has prompted a great number of successors that use a similar format. One of the most prominent imitators is Rachel Renee Russell's *Dork Diaries*. Nikki Maxwell, the protagonist of *Dork Diaries*, is, like Greg, in middle school and uses a combination of writing and drawing in order to record her experiences in her journal. Published in 2009, the first book appears to be marketed as a "girl" version of the genre (for example, the first book's cover is bright pink rather than *Wimpy Kid*'s deep red<sup>4</sup>). The books are also physically similar in many ways with primarily hard covers, lined pages, "handwritten" font, and relatively simple black-and-white illustrations. Both the language of the written text and the style of the drawing are composed to suggest that they could have been written by real middle schoolers (Shine). *Dork Diaries* has also become immensely popular, with more than 10 million books in the *Dork Diaries* series sold prior to the release of the most recent book in June of 2013. Like *Wimpy Kid*, *Dork Diaries* has morphed into a series – currently six books with contracts for at least two more – and has expanded beyond books to include a board game, an online blog and vibrant web

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<sup>2</sup> Jeff Kinney designed the online world Poptropica, which is run through Pearson. He manages this site in addition to writing the *Wimpy Kid* books. Poptropica will be discussed in much more detail in my third chapter.

<sup>3</sup> The audiobooks draw primarily from the books; however, at times the visuals are read – especially in the case of illustrations that have words in them.

<sup>4</sup> The later books in both series change colors; however, *Wimpy Kid* books tend to maintain gender-neutral colors with no accents while *Dork Diaries* gravitates toward shades of colors typically associated more with girls, like pink and purple, and, when gender-neutral colors, like yellow, are used, features some type of ornamentation like glitter or confetti.



community supplementing the storyline of the books, and, as of October 2013, two do-it-yourself journals.

Nikki's books chronicle her life as she transfers schools (*Not-So-Fabulous Life*), orchestrates a Halloween party (*Not-So-Popular Party Girl*), attempts to win her school's talent show (*Not-So-Talented Pop Star*) and ice-skating competition (*Not-So-Graceful Ice Princess*), secures a spot on the school paper (*Not-So-Smart Miss Know-It-All*), and tries to figure out the feelings of her crush, Brandon (*Not-So-Happy Heartbreaker*). Rachel Renee Russell purports to write from the real experiences of her own middle school years and those of her two daughters, and, in keeping with this, the writing – complete with catch phrases (“SQUEE!”), all capital writing, and emotional ups and downs – is, at times, frustratingly realistic.

Both Nikki and Greg – and indeed most protagonists of this emerging subgenre of middle grade literature – are white and middle class.<sup>5</sup> They go to church, play video games, live in evidently safe suburbs where they sneak around at night with little concern, go shopping at the mall, and, although Nikki brings up economic issues as her father is an exterminator whose work has gotten her a scholarship to her private school, are relatively unconcerned with money. The books cover the same central issues – “popularity, mean girls/bullying, self-concept and self-esteem, friendship, and adult naiveté” – and, according to Nancy Taber and Vera Woloshyn's exploration of gender in the two books, “promote heteronormative gender roles for boys and girls” (227). Despite the problematic nature of these depictions of gender roles, the inherent similarity is that both Nikki and Greg seem to be meant to be blank slates – representing any

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<sup>5</sup> It is worth noting that Rachel Renee Russell is, herself, African American. She chose to make Nikki white, she says in a *New York Times* interview, in order to avoid being typecast into a certain classification of children's literature and to attain larger appeal. According to Russell, Nikki's two best friends in the novel are African American and Latina respectively; however, their race is more or less ambiguous as they are not drawn much differently than Nikki, and, as a whole, race is not addressed at all in the text.

child reading the books. This notion is, perhaps, problematic, as it seems as though in order for Nikki and Greg to be considered as blank slates they must not be “othered” in any way.

Therefore, both protagonists are white, middle-class, and heterosexual, which is very much the norm in children’s literature with very few characters of color, of different socioeconomic statuses, or of different sexualities. However, beyond this conception of what it means to be a blank slate, the two series’ illustrations use simple drawings to create a character readers can place themselves into. As Scott McCloud points out in *Understanding Comics*, the simpler a drawing is, the more opportunity there is for the reader to read himself or herself into the drawing (30-31). It seems that the line drawings used by both Kinney and Russell’s books attempt to evoke this principle.

There are, though, notable differences within the two books. For instance, the demographics of the readership vary. According to Jeff Kinney, his books have appealed largely to boys.<sup>6</sup> There is a large contingent of girl *Wimpy Kid* readers, though, and the series was even cited in a *Horn Book* list of “Books with Diverse Gender Appeal” (Luecke). In comparison, the intended readership for Rachel Renee Russell’s books is almost entirely female. The marketing for the books frequently uses feminine pronouns, and the *Dork Diaries* fans who comment on the website almost all identify as female. Anecdotally, several teachers have observed stray boys reading the books; however, the readership does appear to be mostly girls.

Another difference in readership demographics is the age range of readers. *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* has a general interest level of 3<sup>rd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> graders; meanwhile, the interest level of the *Dork Diaries* books is slightly higher – usually attributed as 5<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> grade. Interesting, the Lexile Framework for Reading, a controversial yet widely used tool for establishing the reading

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<sup>6</sup> According to Jeff Kinney, 60% of the children in attendance at his book signings are male (Renaud).

comprehension level of books<sup>7</sup>, gives the *Dork Diaries* books a lower Lexile number than the *Wimpy Kid* books. Thus, even though the *Dork Diaries* books are recognized as being less complex in regards to reading comprehension, they generally are read by an older age group and tend to feature slightly more mature themes than *Wimpy Kid*.

Lastly, one notable difference between the two texts is the attempt made by the authors to place their texts in a specific culture. In an interview with Comic Book Resources, Jeff Kinney stated that he makes a particular effort to make his books timeless: “I made a rule that all things that happened in the book could have happened 20 years ago or could happen 20 years from now. I was always turned off by old comic books that my dad had that had technology or something anachronistic that didn't exist anymore, so I try to make them very general” (Renaud). In keeping with this, although Greg does play video games and use the internet, he never plays with a specific system, and the technology in the books is represented very vaguely – both in regard to the written text and the line drawings. In sharp contrast, *Dork Diaries* is full of cultural references. The first book from 2009 contains references to *High School Musical*, the Jonas Brothers, and other trendy items. The most recent books now reference Lady Gaga and Selena Gomez. Already, the 2009 references are outdated; however, the books continue to be popular among new readers. This use or lack of use of popular cultural elements does, though, lend itself to the question of which – if either – of the series will be able to maintain popularity as time goes on.

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<sup>7</sup> The Lexile system tries to evaluate the difficulty of reading comprehension based on word and sentence lengths. It has become part of the *Common Core State Standards* and is very widely used in schools. However, there has been a great deal of controversy lately as the system fails to take into account lots of factors that could affect the reading comprehension level of the book. For instance, a recent *Chicago Tribune* article compared the Lexile score of one of the *Wimpy Kid* books to Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying*, with Kinney’s book receiving a higher score, at about a sixth-grade level, while Faulkner’s was ranked as being more appropriate for fifth graders (Warner).

For the time being, though, the two series are at the forefront of the trends in middle grade literature. Their content and how the middle school experience is portrayed are immensely interesting, but it is the format that is even more worthy of attention. Both series are grounded equally in text and images, and this multimodality is an essential component in reading and comprehending the books. Indeed, it is not the content of the books as diary entries so much as the format of the books as diaries with words and pictures that seems to have set off the wave of imitations.<sup>8</sup> Whereas older diary books were only, or at least primarily, text-based, nearly all of the most recent reiterations of this form are filled with illustrations that look like they could have been done by a middle-school-aged author and illustrator. Barnes and Noble has even dedicated a section of its children's department to "Diary Books for Young Readers," almost all of which feature the same hardcovers, lined pages, first-person narratives, and middle-grade-esque drawings as *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* and *Dork Diaries*.<sup>9</sup>

### **Multimodality and Literacy**

According to Liesa Abrams, the Simon & Schuster editor of the *Dork Diaries* books, *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* was only helpful to the success of *Dork Diaries* because "the market already understood the format of text and art" (quoted in Kaufman). And while the claim that a reader understanding the form of the genre was the *only* way that *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* informed *Dork Diaries* and, by extension, the other similar books for readers is, perhaps, a

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<sup>8</sup> Diary books are, of course, not new to children's literature as the range of diary books from *The Diary of Anne Frank* to Meg Cabot's *Princess Diaries* series can attest. There are, also, a few illustrated diary-type books that came out prior to the release of *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* – most notably the *Amelia's Notebooks* series and *Dear Dumb Diary*. However, these books are both aimed at a slightly younger audience, and differ in form from the *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*-style of books.

<sup>9</sup> Other examples of this trend include, but are definitely not limited to, Rose Cooper's *Gossip from the Girl's Room*, Farley Katz's *Journal of a Schoolyard Bully*, H. N. Kowitz's *The Loser List*, and Nancy J. Cavanaugh's *This Journal Belongs to Ratchet*. Several of these books have been expanded, like *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* and *Dork Diaries*, into series with multiple diaries.

stretch, Kinney's series does seem to have paved the way for an understanding of these types of books which are somewhere between graphic novels and picture books. The genre is part of an expanding range of middle-grade illustrated books, which Abrams attributes to "a wider recognition universally that stories with art aren't only for young kids at picture book level, or for the stereotyped adult 'comic book geek'" (Murphy). As Taber and Woloshyn point out, *Dork Diaries* and *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* – as well as the books like them – "are not as reliant on images as graphic novels, but do rely on images more than illustrated books" (229). Greg and Nikki's stories are told through the combination of the words and the pictures, and the books' meanings would be significantly altered were the pictures removed.

While studies of comic books and graphic novels have gained increasing attention in the field of children's literature, this emerging genre – not an early reader, comic, or illustrated novel, but some new, hybrid form – as well as its implications for middle grade readers deserve attention. The argument can be made that these books are merely a trend that, like other trends, will quickly fade; however, I believe this trend deserves careful consideration, as it is indicative of several issues in relation not only to children's literature but also to literacy, education, and composition. Whether or not *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* and *Dork Diaries* are lasting classics in children's literature, they are currently pushing the boundaries of what children's literature is and are a force that must be acknowledged within the field. Most notably, the sheer number of child readers of these books and the fact that they show up repeatedly in best-seller lists as well as in lists of books recommended to give to reluctant readers suggests that they are worth further exploration. I am going to explore the role these illustrated diary books have in children's literature, and, in particular, I seek to show that they are much more than books for reluctant readers. Rather than "fluff" which can be used to draw readers in and prepare them for more

complex (and, by extension, “better”) texts, these books are extremely complex in and of themselves and lead to a complex engagement between reader and book.

First, though, it is important to establish the conventions of these books, which I am calling multimodal diary books. Multimodal and multimodality have become buzzwords in the fields of literature, composition, and education, so defining precisely what I mean by this term is essential. In their breakdown of the terminology surrounding multimodality, Jeff Bezemer and Gunther Kress define a mode as “a socially and culturally shaped resource for making meaning” (171), and any text that relies on two or more of these resources can be considered multimodal. It is worth noting that nearly any text can be considered multimodal as the act of interpreting a text brings in another mode, and the factor of time can also be considered a mode (Balzalgette and Buckingham); however, for the purposes of this essay, multimodality will be used when referring to multiple genres through which meaning can be made.

In these multimodal diary-based books, the story is told through at least two different modes, and this multimodality complicates an easy reading of the books. In the words of Frank Serafini, one of the leading scholars in multimodality in relation to children’s literature, “the world shown is different from the world told” (86); the pictures – despite being supposedly drawn by the same narrator writing the diary entries – often show a scene that complicates the story the narrator is telling through his or her words. The multimodality of the books also complicates an easy categorization. Some bookstores and libraries categorize them along with comics and graphic novels while others shelve them alongside more traditional, text-based narratives in the middle grade section. Other times, due perhaps either to their immense popularity or to the difficulty of categorization, they are shelved entirely separate from other books. Even the cover of *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* hints at this difficulty in categorization with its

pronouncement that the book is a “novel in cartoons,” notably *not* a graphic novel. The cartoon images that accompany the books are vastly different than those in comics or graphic novels, both in style and the way they are presented. Panels are not used regularly in either *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* or *Dork Diaries*, and the images are rarely “sequential art” as comics are often defined (McCloud). The writing of the diary entries is the predominant means of telling the story, and, as will be discussed extensively in my second chapter, the way that images must be read in relation to the text changes throughout the books. Beyond these two modes, though, the books also incorporate other genres of writing such as letters when Nikki becomes the school’s advice columnist (*Tales from a Not-so-Smart Miss Know-It-All*), advertisements for Greg’s “VIP Lawn Service” (*Dog Days*), and assorted school assignments, newspaper clippings, “photographs,” and more in both series. Further, Greg and Nikki’s narratives extend beyond the pages of their journals. Their stories are told through other “modes” including online interactive experiences and do-it-yourself books which provide spaces in which the readers can become writers, immersing themselves more fully in multimodality.

At the same time that these multimodal journals combining text, drawing, and interactive online environments are gaining popularity in the world of publishing, multimodality as an academic concept is experiencing continual growth. The Common Core State Standards have placed an increased emphasis on multimodality in composing (Wilhelm, Smith, and Fredricksen), asking students as young as fourth grade to “include formatting (e.g., headings), illustrations, and multimedia when useful to aiding comprehension” in their writing (“Common Core State Standards”). While the ways this and other Common Core standards are interpreted differs greatly by school and by teacher, numerous articles have been popping up specifically directed at teachers and librarians, encouraging them to use both print- and web-based

multimodal texts in order to help their students understand and reproduce compositions which combine words and other media. These sorts of compositions can help to meet language arts standards, albeit in sometimes-untraditional ways (Bitz).

Literacy, rather than being defined as simply the ability to read and write alphabetic texts, has become a wider concept with more definitions of literacy (or literacies) changing in order to include the ability to read, understand, and produce multimodal texts. In today's world, one is not considered literate unless he or she is able to interact with multimodal compositions (Langer; Elmborg), and schools have been called on to increase the work they do with multimodal texts (Schwartz and Rubinstein-Avila). While in past decades reading took place largely through print texts, daily reading in the twenty-first century takes place more often than not in the multimodal environment of the internet where pictures, text, sound, and video exist simultaneously, and even the writing encountered in today's textbooks tends to contain a greater degree of multimodality with less text and more pictures than older textbooks (Bezemer and Kress 167). With the Common Core State Standards specifically requiring students to create multimodal texts and more and more college classrooms asking students to produce compositions in online formats, multimodality is no longer a suggestion; it is a necessity. Indeed, one of the most recent and pervasive trends in first-year composition is that of the e-portfolio, which requires students to accumulate their writing digitally and arrange it in a way that provides a comprehensive view of what they have learned. This is quickly becoming the norm, and, as *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* and *Dork Diaries* readers enter college, I have little doubt that digital writing and multimodal assignments across classes will have become relatively standard at the university level.

The popularity of both Kinney and Russell's books both reflect and enforce this stress on multimodality. In a world where students are used to reading in online environments and where



they are constantly digesting pictures and text at the same time, the skills required for comprehending the multimodal journals of Greg and Nikki are already in place. The series, then, are able to act both as a tool for teaching kids how to interact with multimodal texts and as a reflection of the types of multimodal texts with which readers will already be familiar, prompting the kids to see the act of writing the types of multimodal texts they are used to reading as within their grasp. However, perhaps more interesting is the way that these multimodal texts reflect a shift in how the process of composition is viewed. Writing, as an act, has been increasingly referred to as composing – putting together pieces in order to make meaning for an audience – similar to the way one would compose a piece of music or compose a painting, and scholars have increasingly argued that examinations of what different modes within a text can do for that text are not only possible but relevant (Bezemer and Kress). Not only are Nikki and Greg both skilled writers, recording their thoughts regularly over a sustained period of time in order to tell a story to their audiences, but they are also composers of other media. Throughout the two series, Greg draws cartoons and sees himself as an artist and Nikki takes pride in a wide variety of artistic abilities – from music to photography to drawing. Thus, the multimodality in Nikki and Greg’s journals is essential not only in setting both protagonists up as decidedly twenty-first-century kids and writers, but also in revealing their development as artists.

One of the central premises of multimodality is that composition is best if it allows for meaning to be made through more than just text. Good composition means taking time to craft the best argument – moving around pieces, allowing for large-scale revision, thinking of both small and large-scale concerns, etc. – and “more closely resemble[s] the ways choreographers or engineers do work” (Shipka 300). Writing that combines pictures and text allows for a different type of engagement – both for the author and for the reader. The reflectivity that multimodal

composition requires allows writers to engage more critically with their own writing and to understand how they are making meaning, perhaps even allowing for more invention within that writing (Albers and Harste). Researchers like Kathy Mills have pointed out the necessity of the development of more non-traditional literacies:

This is an age of multimedia authoring where competency with written words is still vital, but is no longer all that is needed to participate meaningfully in the many spheres of life. Adolescents need fluency with an array of multimodal and digital literacies for different social purposes: critical inquiry, creativity, and communication. (36)

However, despite the attempt to turn classrooms in the direction of multimodality, diary-based books with multimodal and interactive elements are still generally seen as “less” than many other books. The *Wimpy Kid* and *Dork Diaries* books, though, are prime examples of complex, multimodal engagement and are not simply texts meant to move reluctant readers from one phase to the next.

In my first chapter, I will explore the hype surrounding both series, particularly exploring the “coolness” surrounding the multimodality of the texts and how this suggests an ideal reader. I will examine why adults seem to have balked at these books (deeming them “uncool”) while kids have flocked to the words and pictures. The “ideal” child that adults seem to picture when reading and responding to these books is vastly different than the children that actually appear in the books, and, because of this, the books have become defined almost unanimously as being “for” reluctant readers. Simultaneously, though, both series send unique relational literacy messages of what it means to be “cool” in middle school, messages which are connected intrinsically to the multimodal form.

Next, I will move beyond how the books teach relational literacy to begin to refute the idea that the books are for only reluctant readers by looking at the complex engagement these texts require as students read them. My research draws on theory surrounding graphic novels and other texts that have been historically marginalized or considered “less” because of their use of visual images in addition to text. However, I argue that the actual experience of reading texts with images – and particularly the experience of reading first-person diary entries with “autographic” drawings – is far more complex than the “reluctant readers” label implies.

Lastly, my third chapter explores the engagement that these multimodal books are inspiring through composition. An in-depth look at the do-it-yourself journals published within the two series as well as the interactive online spaces the books use to encourage writing confirms that these books are providing more than just mindless entertainment; they are inspiring composition in ways traditional education does not and facilitating the transition of multimodal readers into multimodal writers.

## Chapter 1 – Free to Be (Dorky) You and (Wimpy) Me: Un-defining Popularity in *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* and *Dork Diaries*

The study of children's literature consistently returns to the question of what children's literature is and why that term is so problematic. From Jacqueline Rose's *The Case of Peter Pan, or the Impossibility of Children's Fiction* onward, these considerations have often revolved around what "childhood" exactly is and how the child can be defined. These considerations are intrinsically connected to children's literature because saying that a certain kind of literature belongs to someone implies not only a clear definition of who that someone is but also a certain level of ownership over that literature. This becomes entirely problematic in the case of children's literature as children are not writing the literature they are asked to read and often read things outside of what is considered children's literature. As Jack Zipes points out in his chapter aptly titled "Why Children's Literature Does Not Exist," children "do not particularly want to possess what we adults, especially those of us who specialize in children's literature, mean when we use the term *children's literature*" (40). Zipes goes on to claim that adults often attempt to encourage children to read certain kinds of books that present an ideal take on what childhood is; however, children tend to read more "everyday" materials: board games, magazines, video game instructions, and, notably, series books. In other words, Zipes argues that children are much less likely to pick up Newbery award-winning texts, considered high-brow within the world of children's literature, than they are the "low brow" books they can find near the checkout counters of grocery stores. And, he ends his chapter by suggesting that children's literature scholars turn their study to not only the ideal children's literature but also the actual books that kids are reading.

Children's literature scholars have increasingly heeded Zipes's call. For instance, Jackie Stallcup's "'The Feast of Misrule': *Captain Underpants*, Satire, and the Literary Establishment,"

uses Dav Pilkey's enormously popular books, which are often viewed as low brow within the field of children's literature, as a gateway to discuss the position of children's literature in academia. She points out how Pilkey satirizes adults to a, presumably, child audience that in reality often includes adults. The *Captain Underpants* books are routinely found on lists of banned books precisely because of their depictions of adults, and Stallcup points out that certain readers of her essay may see the books as the "lowest rung on the already-debased ladder of children's literature" (192). However, as Stallcup's stunning essay proves, there is far more to these books than meets the eye. The popularity of the books is not just because they make reluctant readers laugh; rather, Stallcup shows that the *Captain Underpants* series not only "engage[s] in the subversive traditions of both satire and children's literature" (176) but also draws in older readers perhaps through its carnivalesque depictions of adults and raises questions about the categorization that separates adults and children (as well as adult and children's literature).

In many ways, Rachel Renee Russell's *Dork Diaries* and Jeff Kinney's *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* occupy the same murky territory as Pilkey's *Captain Underpants* books. They are massively popular among children at the same time that adults frown on them. *Dork Diaries* is routinely criticized on online reviews for the language Nikki Maxwell, the protagonist, uses, the seeming shallowness of the topics, and the focus on materialism:

The cover of the book looks cute enough, but the content is toxic...It has very rude language, and the main character is a terrible role model for girls. (Sadie)

I would be very wary of this book. You can literally flip through page after page of negative vocabulary words, rap music expressions that are infiltrating the common vernacular, and even an extended section (with illustrations) devoted to tattoos. This book

is representative of what is being done to our young people in this country by popular culture and unaware or unwitting parents. (Engel)

It would be easy to write these reviews off as outliers that reflect the unimportant opinion of a minority sector of perhaps overly concerned and overly conservative adults, and, certainly, Amazon reviews are not held to a high level of rigor. However, the books have also received criticism within published book reviews, as Nikki is found to be “immature” for the intended audience (Green 53), “one-dimensional” (Moody 60), and even downright mean:

Although occasionally amusing, Nikki is not a very likable character. She is shallow and self-centered and fails to show any growth in the book, even as she one-ups popular and cruel MacKenzie in the end. In fact, Nikki, who steals her neighbor's hearing aid and plays pranks on her little sister, is somewhat of a mean girl herself. (Lawler 92)

One common thread of both the negative online reviews and the negative journal reviews is that they tend to take small elements of Nikki's behavior and use these small things to discredit the books as a whole. Similarly, online blog and Amazon reviews of the *Wimpy Kid* books express distaste for how Greg refers to the adults in his life, for how he treats other kids, and, like the *Dork Diaries* criticisms, for his language:

Gregory represents the young postmodern or anti-hero whose center of gravity is not traditional morality, but rather how others view him (think popularity, not reputation)...Gregory repeatedly seeks to advance his own interests and needs and not surprisingly bumps up against rules that have been imposed by parents, principals and teachers – all of whom are constantly ridiculed and dismissed as out-of-touch with youth-based reality. (Spring2Life)

When the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> page start-off [sic] with words like jerk and morons that was enough for me. Totally inappropriate language... (Tina)

When condemning the two series, adults repeatedly return to the same concerns: negative words (jerk, moron, skank, etc.), shallow behaviors, and self-pity. Many criticisms stem from the fact that the books are marketed as books for 8-14 year olds, and the reviewers are skeptical of younger (8-10 year-old) children reading about middle school scenarios. Others focus on the fact that these protagonists represent that absolute worst of middle school kids – particularly in regard to their speech. Still others seem concerned that these books will take away from kids’ tastes for “real” literature.

Meanwhile, though, others, including middle school students themselves, have lauded the books for their voices. Brandi Shine points out in her review of the first *Dork Diaries* book that “Russell does a remarkable job of making [the] book seem to be a real teenage girl’s diary” (338), and Forrest Simpson, who was a sixth grader at the time he wrote a brief article on Jeff Kinney when Kinney was named as one of Time’s 100 Most Influential People of 2009, gave similar praise to the *Wimpy Kid* series, stating that middle schoolers “love these books because of Kinney’s ability to vividly describe the life and problems of an average middle-schooler, with pictures and language that capture our sense of humor and perspective” (Simpson).

Obviously, the scathing reviews of the books – which are not as uncommon as one might think – have not stopped the series’ popularity. Both series have high average ratings, and both have sold millions of copies worldwide. However, while only a minority of parents see the books as damaging to their children, many others see them as throwaway texts, or books that their children will, hopefully, move past to more advanced literature. They are largely ignored by children’s literature scholars, are not taught in schools, and are seen as the equivalent of other

series books of the past like *Goosebumps* that appealed to reluctant readers but were never considered “good” children’s literature.

The *Dork Diaries* and *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* series might not, in the eyes of most adults, be “uncool” literature that children should entirely avoid reading, but they are also not necessarily the “cool” literature adults want to see children engaging with. Meanwhile, though, the sheer number of books sold, not to mention the release parties, online communities, and additional products, reveal a steadily growing readership. The books are not just somewhere between “cool” and “uncool” for kids, they are some of the “coolest” books out there for tweens.

The difference in what adults and kids see as cool literature does not escape Jeff Kinney’s work. In the fourth *Wimpy Kid* book, *Dog Days*, Greg is trying to survive the beginning of his summer vacation. After his mom’s dismay at how he is spending his summer she decides to start a “reading club” for the neighborhood boys in order to “teach [them] about all the great literature [they are] missing out on” (33). All the boys bring their favorite books, which consist of a Sudoku book, a book of “Ultimate Video Game Cheats,” a book entitled “Green Wasp” with a “A Major Motion Picture” sticker on the front, and a pop-up book of “Xtreme” sharks. (35). To compare, Greg’s mom brings out what she considers classic children’s literature – *Little Women*, *The Yearling*, *Old Yeller*, and *Anne of Green Gables*, causing Greg to question what makes a book a classic: “I think it has to be at least fifty years old and some person or animal has to die at the end” (37). Ultimately, the book Mrs. Heffley picks for the book club is *Charlotte’s Web*, and Greg “guarantee[s] either the girl or the pig doesn’t make it to the end of the book” (42). The irony of this particular exchange is that over the course of the book Greg gets two pets – a fish and a dog – and, by the end of the book, the fish has died and the dog has been given to Greg’s grandmother. This subtle nod to Greg’s definition of “classic” children’s literature can easily



escape readers' notice; however, it is a reminder of the line the *Wimpy Kid* books walk. They attempt to maintain popularity among child readers while simultaneously advertising quotes from *USA Today* and the *School Library Journal* praising the books for their ability to appeal to reluctant readers on the back cover, a calling card to would-be adult purchasers.

The appeals to both child and adult readers also hint at one of the central reasons why the disparity between adult expectations for children's literature and child expectations for children's literature exist: varying definitions of what an ideal child ought to look like. While the children in the books that adults often prize may possess some negative characteristics, they typically learn from these characteristics – while, in the process, perhaps losing an animal or a friend – and, oftentimes, become potential role models for kids in some way or another. However, children in some of the most popular works of children's literature are oftentimes far different. Neither Greg nor Nikki really seems to ever learn from their mistakes, and, because of this, they are often categorized in the same light as George and Harold from Pilkey's *Captain Underpants* as potentially dangerous influences or, less harshly, as “lesser” protagonists that will hopefully serve as guides toward the children's literature canon and, eventually, adult literature. The millions of books sold, though, show that something about Greg and Nikki seems to hit home for child readers, perhaps in a way that doesn't always resonate with older audiences.

Most interesting, though, is the fact that the books have become so popular in spite of the journaling form that seems removed from modern middle graders and titular adjectives that most middle school students want to distance themselves from if at all possible. The act of writing in a print journal seems incongruous with modern kids – and particularly modern “reluctant readers” – who supposedly are spending their days playing video games (like Greg) or chatting with their friends online (like Nikki). Similarly, middle school is a time in children's lives that has become

almost synonymous with attempting to fit in and be cool, and, in doing this, avoiding anything that might be classified as wimpy or dorky. In spite of all this, though, both the protagonists of *Wimpy Kid* and *Dork Diaries* and the two series themselves have become regarded as cool, and, in being regarded as cool, Nikki and Greg have redefined what popularity is and how to achieve it. Throughout this chapter, I will identify how journaling is and isn't connected to popularity within Greg and Nikki's lives and how Kinney and Russell have reworked the diary form through multimodality in order to make it cool to child readers. This multimodality and its link to creativity and creation is linked to Greg and Nikki's popularity in the series as well as their ideals of what exactly popularity is, and, ultimately, it seems to be this same multimodality that causes adults to question the "coolness" of the books for the children in their lives.

### **All the Cool Kids Are(n't) Doing It**

The act of journaling is seen almost as a unanimously positive thing by adults. Journaling promotes reflection, increases emotional awareness, develops writing skills, and more. Journals are staples of English Language Arts classrooms as they allow students to develop their writing skills by engaging in a less formal and more easily accessible form of writing, and, increasingly, journaling has been used to collect and process learning in a variety of other subject areas such as science (Cornell and Ivey; McGough). While forms of journaling continue to be massively popular online, as the growth of Tumblr and its subsequent use by many teens and pre-teens shows, print journaling still seems largely connected to classrooms, and keeping a paper based journal resides, seemingly, well within the territory of "uncool."

The mothers of both Nikki and Greg ascribe to the idea that journaling will be a "cool" – read: beneficial – thing for their kids, while Nikki and Greg themselves are initially resistant to the idea that they should actually use these print journals, seeing the act of keeping a diary as

decidedly uncool. At the opening of the first *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* book, Greg makes sure that his readers know that “[t]his is a JOURNAL, not a diary,” that “this was MOM’s idea,” and that he has no plans of “writ[ing] down [his] ‘feelings’ in [t]here or whatever” (*Diary of a Wimpy Kid* 1). This is accompanied by a drawing of a bully punching Greg and calling him a “sissy” for keeping a diary. Later in the text, other “non-sissy” activities are included like playing video games, lifting weights, and listening to certain types of music. Similarly, in the first *Dork Diaries* book when Nikki’s mom tells her that going to her new school is “going to be a ‘stressful time of tremendous personal growth’” and that the “best ‘coping mechanism’ would be to ‘communicate’ [her] thoughts and feelings” (Russell 5), Nikki hopes her mom is going to give her a new cell phone and is both shocked and disappointed (“I was like, OH. NO. SHE. DIDN’T! [Russell 7]) when she, instead, receives her diary. Like Greg, Nikki affirms that keeping a diary is decidedly uncool, stating that instead of keeping a journal the “cool” thing to do is put “juicy stuff online in your BLOG so MILLIONS can read it!!!” (Russell 8). For these twenty-first century middle graders, invested in a world of video games and blogs, keeping a journal is foreign task.

In the way the journals are given to Nikki and Greg and through the reactions both protagonists have, journaling is immediately both gendered and aged. It is connected to older, adult women and is assumed to be a nurturing act – a way for the mothers to help their children “communicate” their feelings as Nikki’s mother surmises. Similarly, as the series continue, the act of keeping a diary is connected to Nikki’s “dorkiness” and Greg’s “wimpiness,” and both are almost constantly in fear of having their writing discovered. In later books, Greg goes to great lengths to avoid having his brother, Rodrick, get his hands on Greg’s diary, and the entire plot of the supplemental *How to Dork Your Diary* book centers on Nikki’s fear that MacKenzie – the

mean-girl antagonist of the book – will find and read Nikki’s lost journal.<sup>10</sup> Although both Greg and Nikki spend much time writing about their quests to be popular in not only the first books of their respective series but throughout the series in their entirety, they also seem very aware that keeping a journal will not help either character achieve this goal. In fact, both protagonists believe that should their journals be read their “cool factor” will head in the exact opposite direction.

However, despite the fact that writing in journals is apparently something “uncool” that moms encourage you to do, both Greg and Nikki warm up to the idea, as evidenced by their eight and six completed journals, respectively. Oddly, though, Greg rarely mentions the actual act of writing in the journal after the first few pages of the first book. The diary quickly shifts to recording event after event and reads like a novel in cartoon form, as the cover suggests. In the second book of the series, *Rodrick Rules*, a central plot point is that Greg has to hide in the women’s bathroom of his grandfather’s apartment building in order to avoid Rodrick reading his journal, but aside from this brief mention, Greg only mentions writing once: “I guess Mom was pretty proud of herself for making me write in that journal last year, because now she went and bought me another one” (*Rodrick Rules* 1). There are also a few moments in the text when Greg begins entries with “remember” in order to refer back to previous events; however, times when he actually talks about writing are extremely rare. Later books contain similar brief instances of

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<sup>10</sup> As is discussed in more detail in my third chapter, the *How to Dork Your Diary* book is labeled number 3 ½, contains journals that – unlike the other books in the series – are undated, and fits within the book series without necessarily actually taking up time in the narrative. It occurs when Nikki misplaces her journal and then decides to write herself a guide about how to keep a journal (hence the title). Once Mackenzie finds out that Nikki’s journal is replaced she goes on her own hunt for the journal, leading to many panicked pages of Nikki worrying about Mackenzie potentially finding it first.

reflection. For instance, Greg says, “I guess I’m out of paper” at the end of *The Last Straw*, but these occasions are rare.

In *Dork Diaries*, though, Nikki routinely mentions the actual act of writing in her journal. Many of her journal entries begin with a brief summary of her feelings on an event (for instance, “OMG ☹!! I have never been so HUMILIATED in my entire life!” [*Not-So-Graceful Ice Princess* 147]) before actually launching into describing the event in her journal. Russell also routinely uses Nikki’s comment on the length of a particular entry to seemingly justify the oftentimes extremely long entries that narrate long sequences of the plot (“This is going to be my LONGEST diary entry EVER!” [*Not-So-Fabulous Life* 188]). Ultimately, this awareness of the use of the diary form seems to show Nikki attempting to do what her mother hoped she would. Despite her initial aversion to the idea of recording her life and using reflection as a step to personal growth, she seems fully on board with the act of writing and most entries end with a brief paragraph or two about Nikki’s feelings on whatever has just happened. She does exactly what Greg refuses to do through his journal as Greg only rarely uses his journal to reflect on his day and learn from it; instead, his journal is merely a place to record stories and his humorous commentary on whatever is happening.

While neither Nikki nor Greg sees their journal keeping as a way to attain popularity, the form of the diary may be part of what has attracted readers so firmly to the books. As children move toward adolescence, they increasingly wrestle with questions of identity and increasingly seek to find where they fit in. At the same time, though, one of the most pervasive feelings of adolescence seems to be that no one else is able to understand what the adolescent is going through. Both Nikki and Greg exemplify this in their journals. Oftentimes, in writing the things they “only say in their heads,” to use one of Nikki’s catchphrases, Greg and Nikki reflect this

belief. No one understands them because, in reality, they don't tell anyone anything. This is exemplified in Nikki's treatment of her friends. For example, the third *Dork Diaries* book, *Not-So-Talented Pop Star*, features Nikki keeping many secrets from her friends, including the fact that she is only attending her school because she has a scholarship, because she thinks they won't understand and will look down on her. When she finally does tell them, they don't think any less of her; however, over the course of the series, she repeatedly tries to keep things from her friends for fear of how they will respond while simultaneously sharing all of her thoughts in the journal. Perhaps this use of the journals to express inner thoughts is why pre-adolescent readers flock to the books – they allow the readers to see how inner monologue is oftentimes much different from external action and to feel connected to a main character who, like them, is perhaps unwilling to actually communicate with the people around him or her.

### **Bringing New Life to an Old Form: Multigenre Diary Writing**

Regardless of whether or not the two protagonists see the act of writing in a journal as “cool,” though, they do seem to circumvent the “uncoolness” through the multimodality of the journals. *Dork Diaries* relies on a manga-esque style of drawing with the characteristic large eyes and other exaggerated features while *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* has a simpler, cartoonish character through its stick figures. The drawings in both of the books are black and white, and the fact that Nikki and Greg are supposed to be both writing and drawing in their journals is explained by showing how both of them see themselves as artists, as will be discussed later in this chapter. The “cool factor” of the combination of text and pictures is deeply connected with the main plots of the books. At their core, both *Dork Diaries* and *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* are stories of two middle graders' attempts to be “cool” and gain acceptance, oftentimes done by using art, and the attempts to dress up the traditional style of journaling reflect these efforts.

For today's middle graders, multimodality is seemingly inseparable from popularity. Before receiving the freedoms and privileges of older ages, many teens must resort to connecting with their friends via multimodal social networks where they can share videos, pictures, and more. Despite many Internet guidelines that specify that users must be over the age of 13 to join, social networking sites like Twitter, Facebook, Kik, Tumblr, and more are populated by scores of pre-teens.<sup>11</sup> In order to be popular, one ought to have an active social-networking life, and while a 2011 report from the American Academy of Pediatrics cautioned against the dangers that can arise from excessive social media use and from young and inexperienced Internet users accessing these sites, they also commented that "a large part of this generation's social and emotional development is occurring while on the Internet and on cell phones" (O'Keeffe and Clarke-Pearson 800). These social networks encourage the use of multimodal writing to connect, and provide spaces for users to engage in creating their own, unique multimodal profiles. Both series, thus, imagine an ideal reader who is familiar with all that being a modern tween entails and has attempted online writing, or at least who wants to be familiar with these things. Although Kinney does not specifically mention social media sites, Russell writes social media into the *Dork Diaries* books. Nikki uses social media frequently, and in *Not-So-Talented Pop Star*, is extremely embarrassed when mean-girl MacKenzie uploads a video of Nikki singing and dancing with her younger sister, Brianna, to YouTube, as she is worried that her friends will view the video and that it will lessen her popularity. This social media interaction is portrayed as being deeply connected to Nikki's attempts at coolness.

The narratives of the books, then, are perhaps popular because they read less like traditional diary entries and more like social media profiles. Both Nikki and Greg intersperse

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<sup>11</sup> Data from 2009 showed that 38% of 12-year-olds use social networking sites, and a 2011 Consumer Reports study found that about 7.5 million Facebook users are under 13 (Weeks).

their writing, which is often written in slang and all-caps, with pictures. Their stories are told through this combination in the same way that social media profiles are developed not only through the words users choose to say but also through the pictures, videos, and links they decide to post in order to inform friends about their lives. Readers of the *Dork Diaries* and *Wimpy Kid* series both read and see Nikki and Greg's searches to attain popularity, and this has, in turn, helped the books to redefine exactly what a diary ought to look like, connecting traditional notions of the diary (print journal) to modern ideas of diary-keeping (online blogs and social media).

### **Popularity and Middle School Creativity**

While the scenarios that take place in each book within the two series differ, they share a common theme: both Nikki and Greg are constantly seeking some type of acceptance, whether through attracting the attention of the opposite sex, winning school competitions, or just finding loyal friends. Notably, the way each series represents acceptance is highly gendered (Taber and Woloshyn). Nikki's focus from the first pages of *Dork Diaries* is to be like MacKenzie, a certain member of the "Cute, Cool, and Popular" (CCP) clique at her new school Westchester Country Day (WCD). MacKenzie is wealthy, beautiful, and the reigning queen of the school. To Nikki, acceptance means becoming part of this crowd, and even when she obtains two seemingly great friends, Chloe and Zoey, through shelving books at the library, she still wants to be one of the CCP kids. As the series goes on, Nikki acknowledges through one of her many catchphrases ("I mean how juvenile would THAT be") that envying and wanting to be accepted by MacKenzie is unproductive, even as she looks at MacKenzie as the epitome of middle-school girlhood. In her entries throughout the series, she consistently chronicles both her attempts to obtain acceptance and her various ruminations on whether or not the goal is actually a worthy one. Even as



MacKenzie increasingly proves herself to be a despicable character, at one point locking Nikki and her friends in a closet in order to avoid having them perform in an ice skating show (*Not-So-Graceful Ice Princess*), Nikki still dreams of joining the CCP crowd.

Conversely, with Greg there is not a specific boy who he wants to be although he is very aware of popularity, noting that he is “somewhere around 52<sup>nd</sup> or 53<sup>rd</sup> most popular” (*Diary of a Wimpy Kid 7*). He merely wants to be “popular” in general, which means different things throughout the course of the series. At various times, it could mean being liked by girls, becoming treasurer of the class and having access to money, appearing competent in the wrestling unit in gym, becoming the school newspaper’s cartoonist, becoming the city newspaper’s cartoonist, attracting the attention of Holly Hills or her sister, Heather, or merely avoiding the “Cheese Touch” (which is similar to the idea of “cooties” and gets passed around if you touch a piece of old cheese on a basketball court outside of the school).

Similar to the gendered definitions of acceptance, even the drawings within the books are gendered. Nikki’s drawings of people are often manga-influenced. Femininity, particularly of the popular girls like MacKenzie, is drawn through the typical manga style of “large eyes and pupils; long lashes; slim torso, limbs, and hips; and the petite noses, mouths, and breasts” (Schwartz and Rubinstein-Avila 45). It seems as though the drawings are chosen specifically to demonstrate the femininity that Nikki desires. For instance, in the second book, Nikki imagines creating an enchanted lip gloss that would reveal one’s inner beauty externally. The picture showcasing this features Nikki in the manga-style described above with the addition of flowing hair. Conversely, *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* uses simple line drawings that have less of a tendency to idealize a certain male body type. Although there is one moment in the first book where Greg is drawn as having bigger muscles, this is done in a comical way because none of the characters in the book is

repeatedly portrayed with this physique. At various moments the body is referenced, and particularly in the book *The Ugly Truth*, which deals with puberty (“She said I was getting ready to enter ‘the Awkward Years’ and that my lips were gonna get all puffy and my skin was gonna get bad and my head was gonna look too big for my body until my junior or senior year of high school” [209]); however, his physical looks are not nearly as much of a focal point for Greg.

While writing and drawing in their diaries is a private act, both Nikki and Greg view art as a potential medium through which they can gain public popularity. Both Nikki and Greg embrace their artistic tendencies and emphasize their creativity in their journal entries – in the actual pictures they draw and in what they say about their abilities. Greg’s creativity is a central plot point throughout the books: he creates campaign posters when he decides to run for treasurer (*Diary of a Wimpy Kid*), draws comics in order to be the new cartoonist for the school newspaper and, later, the city newspaper (*Diary of a Wimpy Kid*, *Rodrick Rules*, and *Dog Days*), and works as a yearbook photographer (*Hard Luck*). Similarly, Nikki identifies herself largely by her creativity. She discusses spending multiple summers at art camp (*Not-So-Fabulous Life*), starts a rock band where she helps write the lyrics to a winning song – which is available for purchase on the *Dork Diaries* website (*Not-So-Talented Pop Star*), writes an advice column for the school’s newspaper (*Not-So-Smart Miss Know-It-All*), and discusses eventually wanting to have a career as an illustrator (*Not-So-Graceful Ice Princess*). With each arts-related challenge that comes along, Nikki believes she will attain popularity. For instance, in the first book she thinks that winning first prize at the “Random Acts of Avant-Garde Art” show at her school will “transform [her] from a ‘socially challenged ART DORK’ to a ‘socially charmed ART DIVA’ practically overnight” (*Not-So-Fabulous Life* 46). Similarly, in the first *Wimpy Kid* book, Greg sees an opening for a new school newspaper cartoonist as an opportunity to “get in on some...kind of

fame” (Kinney 165). Art is the method through which both believe that they will be able to gain notoriety.

Interestingly, Nikki does gain popularity in the books, but not always for the reasons that she hopes to. In the first book, while giving her two friends, Zoey and Chloe, pen tattoos in order to help them stand out and get chosen to go with their teacher to National Library Week at the New York Public Library, one of the popular boys asks if he can get a tattoo as well. The three girls come up with a scheme that has their classmates donate books in exchange for getting tattoos from Nikki. This plan takes off in a storm and Nikki says she feels “like a pop star” (227). Other students praise her for her artistic abilities, and she is the center of attention. However, the joy doesn’t last when business picks up as Nikki sees her friends get to talk to the popular kids and even receive invites to Mackenzie’s birthday party while she is forced to work in the “WICKED TATTOO SWEATSHOP” (236). Nikki questions who her friends are and withdraws from them completely. Then, to make matters worse, the piece of art Nikki was going to enter in the art contest she initially believed would allow her to become a member of the CCP is ruined the day she has to drop it off.

After a dramatic encounter with mean-girl classmate, MacKenzie and the apparent loss of her only previous friends, Nikki decides to switch schools. However, the day she goes to leave, she discovers that her friends have actually entered her in the art competition through photos of the tattoos she had drawn. Her tattoos win first prize, and, with the realization that she actually is a successful artist and that her friends actually do care for her, Nikki decides that “WCD was not such a horrible place after all” and she “actually had real friends” (269). Thus, although Nikki doesn’t attain the popularity she wants, her artistic ability is an essential component of her adjustment into her new school and her acceptance among her group of friends.

This is repeated in the later books in the series. Nikki believes that various things, usually related to creativity, will get her popularity – planning a Halloween party, winning a talent show, getting first place in an ice skating show, being on the school’s newspaper, going to a school dance with her crush, Brandon – however, these attempts don’t bring her close to the CCP group. Instead, they make her even closer with her friends. What is interesting, though, is that Nikki is insistent on the fact that she is a dork even as she successfully does many “un-dorky” things. For instance, after becoming the WCD Sweetheart Princess at a school dance in the most recent book, Nikki still is unconvinced she is popular: “How could this have happened? And why would anyone vote for me, the BIGGEST DORK in the entire school?” (*Not-So-Happy Heartbreaker* 329). It seems as though, because Nikki does find true friends and stays (relatively) loyal to them while embracing various forms of art, she is able to find acceptance, or at least the acceptance of others. Nikki never seems to truly embrace and accept herself, as evidenced by her above assertion, which takes place at the end of the most recent book. Nikki is still convinced that she is the “biggest dork” in her school.

Conversely, although Greg makes similar attempts to try to use his artistic abilities to gain acceptance, he is less successful. In the first *Wimpy Kid* book, disagreements with his sometimes-friend Rowley prevent him from collaborating on creating a comic that the two of them initially attempt to work on. Then, after Greg’s own comic is chosen, it doesn’t receive the popularity he expects. According to Greg, the teacher who runs the school newspaper, Mr. Ira had “told [Greg] he had made some ‘minor edits’” which Greg takes to mean fixing “spelling mistakes and stuff like that;” however, Mr. Ira changes the comic completely and, in Greg’s words, “totally butchered it,” transforming the comic from mocking the student to praising traditionally positive behaviors (*Diary of a Wimpy Kid* 177). Ironically, after Greg decides not to

continue writing comics because of the censorship, Rowley takes over the job with a variation of the comic that he and Greg had initially collaborated on, and the popularity of the strip helps Rowley to win the superlative of Class Clown that Greg had been vying for. Greg's refusal to collaborate results in not gaining either popularity or artistic credit, an interesting twist to Nikki's success in the first book, which comes from surprise collaboration.

Nikki, as the series progresses, is, despite her repeated protests, unquestionably cool. She does all of the things most middle school girls could only hope of doing: winning an ice skating show, a battle of the bands, the crown at a dance, and the affections of her crush. In spite of constantly being in awe of MacKenzie, it appears that she is the one who actually is cool, and her various artistic abilities are the gateway to this popularity. Meanwhile, though, she does exhibit many of the "dorky" attributes that seem so prevalent in middle schoolers, describing herself as having "three zits, two left feet, one cruddy social life, and zero popularity" (*Not-So-Talented Pop Star* 1). She also fumbles over what to say to her crush, trips and exhibits other clumsy behavior very regularly, and never seems confident in how she looks. Rachel Renee Russell defends this discrepancy in what is and isn't dorky in an interview with NPR. She has repeatedly said that her inspiration comes from her own life and those of her daughters, and she ultimately shows that being a dork is cool:

When [her two daughters] were in middle school, they were smart. They did their homework on time. They enjoyed having a nice relationship with the teachers, and they answered questions. And they were considered by a lot of people to be dorks. And they were teased and not invited to parties, and kids made fun of their clothes and the way they talked. And it was just horrible, horrible, horrible. And one morning, Erin just had enough. Erin is my older daughter, and she's like, you know what, I'm proud to be a dork

and being a dork is cool, and I'm unique, and I'm different, and I'm creative. So I took that whole concept and basically just channeled it into “Dork Diaries.” (“Dork Diaries”) Russell connects dorkiness to creativity, and this ideal has very much become a part of who Nikki is and how her fandom responds. As will be discussed in my third chapter, creativity is not just an attribute that Nikki possesses; it is something that *Dork Diaries* fans attempt to showcase through fan stories and art.

In contrast to Nikki, Greg never really finds popularity. He is always uncool, which raises interesting questions beyond the scope of this thesis about how popularity is constructed for males and females and whether or not art can ever truly be a gateway to male “coolness” in a society that tends to value more traditional notions of masculinity above artistic abilities. Greg also, though, seems to want popularity without actually caring what others think of him. For instance, he is fine with being a “bad person” if it means he doesn’t have to listen to other people’s vacation stories (*Rodrick Rules* 16) and owns up to the fact that he is lazy, although he counters that it isn’t his fault because he’s “been lazy ever since [he] was a little kid, and if someone had caught it early on, maybe [he] couldn’t be the way [he is] now” (*The Last Straw* 69). Interestingly, while the term “dork” is sort of reclaimed by Russell – to the point that in *Not-So-Talented Pop Star* Nikki and her band write and record a song called “Dorkilicious,” the term “wimp” is never exactly reclaimed by Kinney; it remains negative throughout the books. As the series goes on, Greg never really becomes more popular, perhaps because he is unwilling to actually commit to a friend and maintains a high level of extremely humorous but self-destructive selfishness, even within his creativity. The creativity of the books, though, has made *Wimpy Kid* cool even as Greg’s creativity and wimpiness have never actually won him the popularity he desires.

## **Creativity, Popularity, and Reluctant Readers**

The attempts to accurately capture the middle school experience through drawing on the author's own experience as well as the experiences of his or her family is one of many striking similarities between *Dork Diaries* and *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*, and perhaps one of the reasons that the books are so popular among kids. Both Kinney and Russell claim that the events they use – while highly fictionalized – are based on actual events from their pasts. Russell has claimed that around 80% of the events in the books have happened to her or to her daughters ('Dork Diaries'), and Kinney says that the experiences he mentions are from his own life (Renaud). This allows both Greg and Nikki to feel real in many ways. They are fairly typical middle school kids, and it seems as though this middle-school-ness, the very thing that adults are resistant to seeing in their child characters in children's literature and sometimes in actual children, is one of the things that make the books so popular. This seeming authenticity combined with the multimodality of the books makes the series irresistibly cool to child readers.

Meanwhile, this same authenticity and multimodality means that adults often relegate the books as being for reluctant readers, an idea that will be explored in my next chapter. The widespread idea seems to be that books that portray a child that adults do not necessarily want their own child to model are "cool" only in that they will perhaps appeal to reluctant readership while books that feature ideal children are the ones that non-reluctant readers will enjoy and are unquestionably cool in adult eyes. These ideas of reading and readership, though, are far from the case. As my second and third chapters will show, the actual reading done in these books is much more complex than the label "for reluctant readers" gives them credit for, and, on top of this, the books are encouraging readers to engage in multimodal writing, an essential skill as they progress in life.

## **Chapter 2 – Reading the Words and Images of Middle School: Multimodality and its Importance in *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* and *Dork Diaries***

In 2010, the *New York Times* published an article exploring the downward trend in picture book sales in the United States. According to the piece, the current move in education toward increased standardized testing is one of the reasons for the decrease in the number of picture books sold: “Parents have begun pressing their kindergartners and first graders to leave the picture book behind and move on to more text-heavy chapter books. Publishers cite pressures from parents who are mindful of increasingly rigorous standardized testing in schools” (Bosman). The article goes on to give quotes from a mother complaining that her son, despite being able to read longer texts, is still a “reluctant reader” because he continually tries to “go back” to “easy” picture books.

This idea that picture books are somehow the opposite of the “rigorous” demands of standardized testing echoes larger beliefs about the role of illustrated texts, whether they be picture books, graphic novels, or something in between. In their review of some of the best illustrated texts to use in classrooms, Barbara Ward and Terrell Young state that “illustrated texts often lure in would be readers” (Ward and Young 147), suggesting that books with pictures are useful first and foremost for drawing in readers who are not willing or able to read texts without pictures. It seems that many parents and educators believe that there is a linear progression in which a beginning reader starts with short books with many pictures and works toward long books with no pictures as he or she reaches adolescence and adulthood.

This belief is echoed in the way that texts for adults that include pictures have historically been relegated to the outskirts of literature. Although the view of graphic novels in the larger field of literature has become increasingly positive in recent years, which I will discuss in greater detail later in this chapter, historically these texts have been undervalued, and ultimately, it



seems that books with pictures are seen as somehow less than books without them within the field of education. This can be seen on different levels – the idea that children’s literature is less than “real” literature, the idea that graphic novels have less of a place in schools than novels without any illustrations, the push of parents to move their kids quickly past picture books, and, for that matter, the near complete lack of a visual literacy component on standardized tests.<sup>12</sup> Books with pictures are not tested on, are rarely taught in college classrooms, and are excluded from the canon of “great” literature.

Admittedly, this is somewhat of an exaggeration, but the fact is that, in my experience, when first-year college students are presented with *Understanding Rhetoric: A Graphic Guide to Writing* by Elizabeth Losh, Jonathan Alexander, Kevin Cannon, and Zander Cannon, a textbook on composition and rhetorical devices in graphic novel form, they are shocked and hesitant to believe that a work with pictures could possibly convey important or difficult information. These college freshmen seem assured that pictures are easy to understand; words are difficult, and, because of this belief, are shocked by the complexity that can be contained within the graphic novel format. They seem unaware of the fact that, according to recent research, they are doing extremely complex work. In this chapter, I will explore the complex work younger readers are doing as they engage with the *Wimpy Kid* and *Dork Diaries* books. I will show how a variety of different texts with pictures have been marginalized and will ultimately use theory surrounding graphic novels and picture books to show the exact complexities taking place through the multimodality of the journals as well as the unique first-person narration and illustration.

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<sup>12</sup> The exception to this is a recent addition to the AP English Language exam, which requires test takers to read an image.

## Literacy and Illustrated Texts

As Scott McCloud argues, there is a widespread belief that “the combination [of words and pictures] is somehow base or simplistic” (141). McCloud further asserts that while society tends to believe that great works of art can either be entirely visual (paintings, sculptures, etc.) or entirely text-based (literature), it is hesitant to believe that there can be great artwork that combines the two forms. And, in keeping with this notion, students are educated in literature and art history (although admittedly this is decreasing), and one is considered cultured when one is able to discuss the two; however texts that combine words and illustrations have historically been pushed to the margins. Meanwhile, the importance and use of illustrated texts has been a topic of recent focus within academia. Increasingly, scholarship that centers on classrooms and libraries has advocated for the increased use of picture books at older age levels (Osborn) and graphic novels as texts in upper-level classrooms (Letcher). This has, in turn, led to waves of graphic novel versions of high-school literature classroom staples. Graphic novels are enjoying increased popularity and respect as evidenced by a number of different recent occurrences that Dale Jacobs points out in his book *Graphic Encounters: Comics and the Sponsorship of Multimodal Literacy*:

Graphic novels are now reviewed in major newspapers and featured on the shelves of both independent and chain bookstores. Major publishing houses such as Pantheon now publish work in the comics medium, including books such as Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis*, David B.’s *Epileptic*, David Mazzucchelli’s *Asterios Polyp*, and Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home*. Educational publishers such as Scholastic are also getting in on the act; in 2005, Scholastic launched its own graphic novels imprint, Graphix, with the color reissue of the first volume of Jeff Smith’s highly acclaimed *Bone* series of graphic novels. At the book fairs of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and

American Library Association (ALA) conferences, graphic novels and comic books are seen in ever greater numbers every year. School, public, and academic libraries are building graphics novels collections. (3)

As these texts have gained increasing recognition, especially as potentially useful texts within primary and secondary school classrooms, they have begun to be explored within the field of children's literature.

One of the primary questions that has been raised as graphic novels have entered children's literature discussions is where to draw the lines separating them from picture books. In their introduction to the special section of the Winter 2012 edition of *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* titled "Why Comics Are and Are Not Picture Books," Charles Hatfield and Craig Sovkin acknowledge that despite the fact that numerous picture book scholars have addressed comics in large and small ways, comics are still seen as somewhat outside the realm of children's literature. Meanwhile, nearly every discussion of the place of graphic novels within the field of children's literature acknowledges anomalous texts that bridge the gap between the two genres. And, this attempt to find bridge texts makes sense as it shows that the distinctions we make between picture books and graphic novels are, ultimately, quite arbitrary. There is not an easily-found line between the two forms, and an increasing amount of hybrid texts – many published over the past ten years – don't fit easily into any one category.

The most commonly cited of these hybrid texts are Shaun Tan's *The Arrival* and Brian Selznick's *The Invention of Hugo Cabret*, both of which occupy some space that is not quite picture book and not quite graphic novel (Hatfield and Svonkin; Johnston; Letcher; Nel). It seems that virtually any time the discussion of picture books and graphic novels arises that these beautiful texts are mentioned. Mentioned less often, but still quite frequently, is Jeff Kinney's

*Diary of a Wimpy Kid*. Like Tan and Selznick's books, Kinney's also lies somewhere between picture book and graphic novel (Letcher, Foster), and as the format of *Dork Diaries* is nearly identical to that of *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*, this book also occupies this space, although it is almost never mentioned as an example of a book that blurs these boundaries.<sup>13</sup>

The difference between mentions of Selznick and Tan's work and mentions of Kinney's as in-between spaces is that the work of both Selznick and Tan has received widespread scholarly attention and acclaim as well as recognition from major children's literature awards and book lists<sup>14</sup> whereas *Wimpy Kid* has been largely ignored by these critics, perhaps for some of the reasons detailed in chapter one. Its drawings are said to be "simpler yet no less effective" (Letcher 93) and it is said to "borrow heavily from graphic novels" (Foster 70) like Selznick's and Tan's texts, yet it has not received the same attention. Almost no work has been done on the literacy skills required for reading the *Wimpy Kid* and *Dork Diaries* books and what those skills mean for readers. In reality, though, when it comes to the illustrated texts that are actually being read by child readers, these two series are at the forefront.

The implications these books have for middle grade readers deserve attention because they are some of the most widely read series at present. *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* currently has eight books released, and the most recent book *Diary of a Wimpy Kid: Hard Luck*, which was released

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<sup>13</sup> There are several possibilities for why *Dork Diaries* is excluded. First, it came after *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*, so it may simply be seen as an imitator. Second, as described in the introduction of this thesis, while it is extremely popular, it is less popular and read by a more narrow audience than *Wimpy Kid*. Third, there is a possibility that *Dork Diaries* is seen as more of a "silly" book than *Wimpy Kid* due to Nikki's tween crushes and preoccupations. As is explored more in my second chapter, some of what makes Nikki "cool" to middle grade readers makes her rather off-putting to adult audiences.

<sup>14</sup> *The Invention of Hugo Cabret* won the Caldecott Medal in 2008 and was a National Book Award finalist, among other accolades. *The Arrival* has won several awards in Australia, where Shaun Tan is from and where the book was initially published, and was named to numerous "best" lists of books for children in 2007.

in early November of 2013, sold 1.3 million copies worldwide in its first week (Deutsch). *Dork Diaries* has sold fewer, but a still impressive number of books, but both series routinely top the bestseller lists of children's books. It is worth noting that while neither *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* nor *Dork Diaries* has won any major awards given to children's literature, the newest *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* book has been nominated for the Nickelodeon Kids' Choice Awards for "Favorite Book" every year since 2008 and won the award in 2010, 2011, and 2012, beating out the immensely popular *Twilight* series in 2010 and, amazingly, *The Hunger Games*, *Twilight*, and *Harry Potter* (the other 3 nominees) in 2012. Additionally, in 2011 *Dork Diaries* was nominated for this award. Unlike other awards, this award is chosen based on votes collected on Nickelodeon's website, where, presumably, actual children are voting. Nickelodeon is aimed largely at preteen audiences, so although the books are not garnering adult-chosen awards, they are soaking up the preteen votes. They are, in short, undeniably popular.

### **Complexity of Form and Connection to Reluctant Readers**

According to traditional notions concerning genre, books containing illustrations should fit into some distinct form:

Comic books, graphic novels, picture books, wordless picture books, illustrated books, and novels—as distinct genres—abide to specific conventions. Word-image interaction in each genre is guided by conventions and can only vary within a preset range. These identifiable conventions assist the interpretation of stories; the reader knows what to expect and how to receive it. (Panao and Michaelides 63)

Being able to identify genre conventions is an essential skill young readers and writers must possess (Horning and Robertson); however, I believe it does a disservice to the critical thinking skills of children to attempt to enforce these categories onto books that elegantly mix genres and

blur genre lines. By allowing readers to look at how the books borrow from a variety of genres and use different methods to tell the story, the books are asking readers to engage in a deeper level of work. The *Wimpy Kid* and *Dork Diaries* books, as well as others like them, defy Petros Panou and Frixos Michaelides's idea concerning the lines of genre entirely; they are not early readers, comics, or illustrated novels, but some new, hybrid form which the first *Wimpy Kid* book labels as a "novel in cartoons," although later books in the series do not advertise this categorization. This hybridity is not only beneficial for academic discussions of bridge texts but is also beneficial to young readers who can learn at an early age how to access texts that blend genres to create new and innovative spaces.

Both *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* and *Dork Diaries* are routinely identified as being for reluctant readers (Young and Ward; Juchniewicz; Risko, Walker-Dalhouse, Bridges, and Wilson; Hunt), and even Jeff Kinney has stated that his books are mainly directed toward this audience. The term "reluctant reader" means different things to different people and can be used when referring to those who are very capable of reading yet lack the desire to read as well as those who lack the literacy skills necessary for reading certain texts. Further, the distinction between those who do not want to read and those who cannot read can be difficult to make as oftentimes those who lack reading skills masquerade this deficiency by feigning indifference toward reading. Jeff Kinney, the author of *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*, jokingly defines reluctant readers as boys ("Jeff Kinney: Diary of a Wimpy Kid"), alluding to the numerous studies within education that have shown whether anecdotally or statistically that boys are less apt to read than girls (Serafini). He even includes this idea within the *Wimpy Kid* series, particularly in the fourth book, *Dog Days*, when Greg's mom attempts to start a "Reading is Fun" club for the boys in the neighborhood and all the boys subsequently drop out, with the exception of Greg who is left reading *Charlotte's*

*Web* on his own. Some of the potential reasons for this “reluctant reader” status in relation to adult expectations are described in my first chapter, but the reality of why the books are considered good for reluctant readers encompasses a number of considerations. The term “reluctant reader” is often used in conjunction with the term “hi-lo” books, meaning books that are of high interest to readers at a certain level but require a “lower” level of skill. This lower level of skill is often connected to vocabulary, readability scores, or reading levels. Both the *Wimpy Kid* and *Dork Diaries* books routinely show up as great “hi-lo” books for middle grade readers.

I am not arguing that the books do not function on some level as texts that draw in those who are less likely to read. The aforementioned articles defining *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* and *Dork Diaries* as appropriate texts for reluctant readers simultaneously explain that the books fly off of the shelves as soon as they reach the library. The books are, as the number of books sold tells, immensely popular and seem to appeal to even kids that seem least likely to read independently, and I do think that these books can open up doors to the vast array of literature out there for children and adolescents. And, especially in the case of *Wimpy Kid*, the series can even function as a gateway to reading for the notoriously reluctant readers: adolescent boys (Jones, Fiorelli, and Bowen). Anecdotally, it seems that the *Wimpy Kid* books remain beloved by some boys even as they exit Greg Heffley’s native middle school and enter high school. The books clearly do serve this purpose, and serve it well. What I am arguing, though, is that these books are not *only* important because of their potential to encourage reading. They are also important because of the fact that, while the pictures used in the books are commonly thought to make the books easier, they are actually allowing for a distinct reader experience to take place.

I believe that because the books have been so popular and because they use the voices and drawings of middle schoolers, they have been brushed off as a fad that is relatively unimportant, in much the same way that middle school is often written off as an unimportant stage in between childhood and adolescence. Much scholarship has been done on the fact that graphic novels more generally can not only motivate students to read and support those who struggle with reading but also can teach literary devices, assist students in understanding classic works of literature, and promote critical literacy by exploring the limitations of language (Dallacqua 366). And, like graphic novels, *Wimpy Kid* and *Dork Diaries* contribute more than just another series motivating kids to read. Several complex types of reading are taking place through these books. Both *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* and *Dork Diaries* use multimodality to promote complex literacy skills, and both of the books use a diary format to encourage readers to interact with the texts in a different way than more traditionally structured narratives.

### **Multimodality and Multiple Literacies**

Multimodal texts, or any texts that use two or more socially and culturally shaped resources in order to create meaning (Bezemer and Kress), have been lauded because of the literacy that they expect. It is worth noting that some have questioned the term multimodal as nearly any text can be considered multimodal if the act of reading and interpreting a text is seen as another way that meaning is made, and “the factor of time can also be considered a mode because it changes how a text is read” (Balzalgette and Buckingham). However, for my purposes, multimodality will be used when referring to texts that use multiple genres in order to tell parts of the same story.

In *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* and *Dork Diaries*, the writing of the diary entries is the predominant means of telling the story, and several other genres supplement this, exposing



readers to complex and varied rhetorical situations, and, ultimately, trusting the reader to navigate a changing genre landscape. If, as Panao and Michaelides stated, “the reader knows what to expect and how to receive it” when looking at traditional genres, *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* and *Dork Diaries* play on the fact that readers will not know what to expect. The types of pictures and genres of writing that are included change not only throughout the books but between books, and both Kinney and Russell have added different genres of writing as their series have continued. For instance, in the fifth book of the *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* series, *The Ugly Truth*, which focuses on Greg’s desire to “grow up” and finally hit puberty, the reader encounters a diversity of forms including a page from a textbook, a letter from Greg to his grandmother, newspaper clippings, and advertisements. Each of these different genres plays a distinct part in the narrative and is done in addition to the numerous diary entries filled with text and pictures that make up the book.

When multiple genres are at play, the reader must work to piece together the meaning made from each of the different genres and must make connections among them. For instance, the diary entries in *The Ugly Truth* are all written from Greg’s perspective (as they are in all of the books); however, the newspaper clippings and posters are from other perspectives, and, oftentimes, Greg does not explain them. It is up to the reader to interpret what they mean and how they fit into the narrative. When Greg’s mom hands him a book titled “What the Heck Just Happened to My Body?” (51), Greg states that he does “not need to see the pictures in that book a second time” and throws the book into the trash. The readers must activate prior knowledge to understand this particular genre of issue books. Almost immediately after this, Greg includes a newspaper clipping supposedly written by his mom referencing puberty. Greg’s words alone

don't show that this is what he is going through; the multiple genres add up to provide readers with an understanding of what is happening in the text.

Readers must use visual cues to realize when a different genre from a different narrator is occurring. Although this task may be simple, being able to recognize differences in visual construction and how those differences reflect different types of writing is an essential component of multimodal literacy. The ability to recognize these differences in form demands reader engagement, and readers must understand how to process each genre differently. The inclusion of these multiple genres raises questions of perspective (who is talking), content (what is being said), and reliability (what can and cannot be trusted based on the genre). These questions repeatedly come up whenever different genres are introduced in both *Dork Diaries* and *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*. Whenever a new genre is introduced, the reader must be able to place it in the context of Nikki and Greg's narration and decide how it changes the reading that is taking place.

While both series use genres written by fictionalized others at various points – like notes, newspaper clippings, and posters – what is more interesting is when the protagonists actually write in different genres. For instance, in the *Dork Diaries* books Nikki routinely switches to a paneled comic form in order to describe a certain scenario. About halfway through the fourth *Dork Diaries* book, *Not-So-Graceful Ice Princess*, Nikki moves away from her narrative concerning the upcoming ice show to talk about a sledding adventure with her younger sister. While the page starts like all the other dated entries, it's immediately obvious that something is different. Rather than left-aligned text, there is what appears to be a title in the center of the page: “Brianna and I Go Sledding (A Terrifying Experience)” (278). This is followed by one illustration without lines and then pages of panels with thick black lines illustrating the girls' trip

to “Dead Man’s Drop,” with a brief “TO BE CONTINUED...!! ☹!!” between two distinct entries telling the same story (278-284). Readers must understand the genre conventions that separate the story telling through comics (including panel construction, reading facial cues, and understanding movement through panels) from the main narrative. The only written words Nikki provides hint that they are going sledding on some type of named hill; however, from the picture it is clear that they’ve been sledding off the roof of their home. The comic form here signifies not only an aside from the story but also a potential fictionalization of the events that took place, two facts which require more in depth reading comprehension skills in order to understand.

The multimodality within the books changes the way the books are read. Multimodal reading has been repeatedly shown to be extremely complex. Multimodal writing is linked closely with reflection because including multiple modes almost automatically forces a writer to think about which piece of information ought to be shown through which mode (Shipka). This transfers to the ways multimodal texts are read. Serafini states:

The semiotic resources used to create multimodal texts are different from the ones drawn upon to create printed texts, and bring with them different potentials for making meaning. This shift from a linguistic focus to a multimodal one requires readers to navigate, design, interpret, and analyze texts in new and more interactive ways. (86)

As readers consume multimodal texts, they engage with the texts in different ways than the ways they engage with alphanumeric texts. This engagement requires readers to use analytical processes to understand, interpret, and discuss multimodality which relies on more complex language and thought processes than the standard ones taught in language arts classrooms like visualization, summarization, and prediction (Serafini).

Readers are often taught that the best way to make sense of a text is to visualize it or to summarize what is happening, but these concepts are made much more difficult when a visualization is already provided via the picture and that visualization does not necessarily match with what the reader expected to see. At times, the pictures contradict the words, supplement the words, clarify the words, or work in a number of other ways. Scott McCloud goes as far as identifying seven different ways that pictures and texts can work together – “word specific, picture specific, duo specific, additive, parallel, montage, and interdependent” (153-155), and both the *Wimpy Kid* and *Dork Diaries* series use five of these different forms at various places throughout the text<sup>15</sup>.

Word-specific and picture-specific combinations are those where the words or pictures, respectively, tell the main story and the opposite component does not add meaning. For instance, picture-specific combinations are those in which the image tells the story and the text may only add sounds, such as in the aforementioned sledding example when Nikki and her sister are shown with looks of terror on their faces while the accompanying text provide the “EEEEK!” sound the girls are making (*Not-so-Graceful Ice Princess* 282). These two combination styles are used in the books but do not necessarily require as much work, as the meaning can be understood without working to put the words and pictures together.

Instead, the majority of the books in both series use combinations that require more mental work, oftentimes relying on inter-dependent interactions, which McCloud deems the “most common type of word/picture combination” (155). This combination basically means that

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<sup>15</sup> The two forms not used are parallel and montage. Parallel combinations have words and pictures that “follow very different courses – without intersecting” and montage combinations have words that are “integral parts of the picture” (McCloud 154). These combinations tend to be more experimental and perhaps are not used because they would interrupt the narrative flow of the *Wimpy Kid* and *Dork Diaries* series.

the words and images are both essential – not just saying the same thing as in duo-specific but working together to create one unique meaning that neither the words nor the images could accomplish alone. However, both series switch between combinations, and the *Wimpy Kid* books particularly do this in a very interesting way. At times the books employ duo-specific text-image combinations where the pictures and words say essentially the same message, as when in *Hard Luck* Greg tells readers that he often spends Easter locked in the bathroom and the image shows Greg sitting in the bathroom (125). However, just above this image, there is an example of an additive interaction in which the pictures or words “amplify or elaborate” the image (McCloud 154). Here, Greg explains the various options for where he can spend Easter, ending with the staying in the basement with the kids. The words imply that this would be a boring task; however, the image shows the young kids creating quite a ruckus – chewing on books, popping out of the drier, climbing on top of shelves, and more (125). This variety in interaction requires readers to constantly be on the lookout for changes in how words and images and combined. Because there are switches between different combinations, the reader must stay aware of the images and read them as closely as he or she does the text.

It is easy to assume that young readers will be able to navigate these shifts in how meaning is made smoothly, given the types of reading they are familiar with through online environments where words and images are routinely combined in a variety of ways. However, many studies have shown that this is not the case. In particular, Kathy Mills argues that teachers ought to “extend the range of multimodal practices with which students are conversant” as “although many youth are discovering certain multimodal literacy practices through informal networks, they are not all experts of many important multimodal and digital practices” (42-43). Mills touches on one of the most important aspects of the *Wimpy Kid* and *Dork Diaries* series:

the books are not important because they allow readers to access more difficult alphanumeric texts by practicing reading skills; they are important because within the seemingly silly books, readers are developing skills that will allow them to execute a variety of multimodal reading and writing tasks.

The multimodal, multigenre diary books even serve a complex task that goes beyond the idea of literacy as it relates to the act of reading texts, whether or not they contain pictures or other genres. As Nathalie op de Beeck observes in her comparison of picture books and comics,

Traditionally, picture books have been perceived as denotative, acting as licensed aids to children's reading, while graphic novels have been perceived as connotative, giving access to information that is not mainstream-approved...Graphic novels may be understood as instilling critical and political literacy, serving a countercultural function unwelcome in the ostensibly sweet and safe picture book form. (475-476)

In keeping with the tradition set by Dav Pilkey's *Captain Underpants*, both *Wimpy Kid* and *Dork Diaries* move toward dispersal of information that is, in some ways, countercultural. While both Kinney's and Russell's books tend toward more conservative ideologies (Taber and Woloshyn), they do encourage readers to question authority figures (typically parents and teachers), and they portray middle graders who have an increasing amount of autonomy in regards to their choices. Adults are, oftentimes, mocked for a seemingly endless number of reasons, and the books use a "tell-it-like-it-is" format to defy what one might expect from books intended for kids. Further, in asking readers to question the terms "wimpy" and "dorky," especially in the case of *Dork Diaries*, the books allow readers to become more aware of cultural norms surrounding popularity and the potential negatives of these standards. Thus, the literacy skills developed by the books

are not just the reading-related ones that are so often ascribed to these diary books but extend beyond this to include a wide range of literacy abilities.

### **Reflective Writing and Autographic Texts**

Diaries are, by their very nature, linked to self-reflection. The nature of diaries is that they are not actually revisable; however, the writer can revise his or her life based on the diary through reflecting back on what he or she has experienced. Interestingly, the extent to which this reflection is actually demonstrated in *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* and *Dork Diaries* is questionable, but is represented largely through the drawings Nikki and Greg use. Despite the supposed purpose of diaries to allow the writer to reflect back on his or her life, the levels at which Greg and Nikki reflect vary greatly. Greg's journals feature short entries with almost no reflection. For instance, when Greg hits his friend Rowley with a football in the first book, knocking him off a big wheeler, he has almost no remorse. Aside from saying that he "tried to cheer [Rowley] up" and "knew [Rowley] must be hurt pretty bad" (141), Greg's entries do not feature him reflecting back on what he has done so much as they are simply a moment to moment recollection of his actions. Conversely, every *Dork Diaries* book features a great deal of reflection and, with this reflection, comes much longer entries. Greg's daily entries are typically 4-5 pages in length; however, Nikki's entries have a larger degree of variance. Some entries are short (3-4 pages), but others are extremely long (15+ pages). In the longer entries, Nikki usually tells an anecdote about her day and ends her diary with reflection back on what happened. For example, after slipping in the cafeteria, Nikki runs to the janitor's closet to hide and write in her journal; however, her friends come and find her. After giving the moment-by-moment action, Nikki reflects back: "In spite of how bad things went at lunch, I definitely feel a lot better now. I guess maybe I don't hate this school quite as much anymore" (*Not-so-Fabulous Life* 118).

Similarly, the images the two protagonists use to record their experiences demonstrate reflection. Greg's quick, stick-figure drawings are, generally, illustrations of what happened or what Greg perceives as what happened. For instance, between text saying that a crowd gathered and that the kids in school were constantly urging kids to fight, Greg uses an image that shows Rowley and him surrounded by boys yelling "Fight!" (*Diary of a Wimpy Kid* 206-207). Meanwhile, Nikki's drawings are often hypothetical or reflective in addition to having captions explaining the drawings. For instance, in *Not-So-Smart Miss Know-It-All* when Nikki is preparing for the Presidential Fitness Test, she features illustrations explaining the correct way to do exercises and the incorrect way. An illustration of Nikki completing a curl-up while sweating is accompanied by the word "\*GROAN\*" and the caption "Correct Way: Tones and strengthens abdominal and back muscles" (181). Below this, another illustration of Nikki curling her hair is accompanied by the text "Incorrect Way: My CURL-UPS make my hair curly and bouncy. They are easy to do with exercise equipment like a curling iron. After fifteen minutes of these, you'll look superCUTE!" (181). These illustrations are not telling the story; instead, they are providing a side commentary on why Nikki thinks she is going to fail the fitness test. Greg's illustrations typically are simply part of the story while Nikki's drawings are commentary on what is happening in the story.

The different types of word-image interactions used in the books help to define this difference. For instance, Greg's journals tend to switch between words and pictures regularly, with very rare instances of words taking up a full page or an image taking up a full page. Instead, the words and pictures combine in largely additive, duo-specific, and interdependent ways, with heavy use of interdependent word-picture interaction. Although the words and pictures combine in different ways, they consistently work to move the narrative forward. Meanwhile, Nikki's



journals tend to rely very heavily on additive combinations where the images elaborate heavily on the words. Nikki's journal entries can, at times, go for several pages without an image, and, oftentimes, images take up the majority of a page or all of a page. This allows for the images to contribute greater depth of meaning and provide more introspection.

In *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud argues that the simpler a drawing of a person is, the more universal it becomes and that the more realistic drawings are, the more they will cause readers to see them as a series of disjointed images rather than a series illustrating one story (31, 90-91). The aforementioned simplicity of Greg's drawings fits with this idea. Simplicity allows the reader to become more invested in the story, to move quickly from page to page, and to actually use the story as a means of reflection. Although Greg himself does not reflect on his experiences, there is plenty of space for the reader to use the multimodal entries to envision himself or herself in the same situation and to reflect on what he or she would have done differently. Nikki's drawings, then, do not need to be as simplistic because they are already showing reflection and because they require the reader to linger longer to understand that reflection. There is not as much space for the reader to envision herself as the main character; however, this is not as essential because the book's entire format – a more explicit cultural setting, more detailed drawings, and more of Nikki's thoughts on what she is experiencing – gives a different reading experience than *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*. Although both are multimodal, they use their multimodality in different ways.

Beyond the complexity attained through reflection, the books use illustrations done in “first person” to bring even greater complexity. According to Andrea Wylie, first-person narration is an effective delivery style for children's and young adult literature because of the immediacy of the narrative. It allows for a narration to be told in the immediate aftermath of a

story – an idea she characterizes as “immediate-engaging-first-person narration.” Diary forms of books are immediate in that the retelling of the event happens nearly immediately after the event takes place and engaging in that they are secretive – told solely between the narrator and the reader who is, in effect, taking on the role of the diary. In these first-person texts, “reliability is difficult to measure, primarily because of the immediacy of the narration and because of the lack of other voices and information” (187). First person narrative is a frequent piece of children’s and young adult literature; however, first-person illustration – referred to as “Autographics” in comics’ terms (Hughes, King, Perkins, and Fuke) – is more rare. Instances of the narrators drawing themselves or their experiences are fairly limited within children’s literature, and the reading of first-person illustration alongside first-person narrative brings new meaning to the term “unreliable narrator,” especially when the illustration and the narrative seem to contradict or complicate one another.

For instance, the most recent *Dork Diaries* book features a section where Nikki loses her sister, Brianna. In her journal entry, she claims to be holding Brianna’s hand as they walk through the grocery store; however, the accompanying image shows Nikki focused on cereal while Brianna is smirking and running away along with the caption, “Me, trying to figure out which cereal to buy while watching Brianna (sort of)” (*Not-So-Happy Heartbreaker* 132-133). Similarly, Greg’s illustrations often don’t exactly line up with his words. In one instance, he says that he and his brother Rodrick “probably” took wearing their Christmas gifts of Body Blankets (think a Snuggie/footie pajama combination) “too far” (*Hard Luck* 178). The image shows the two of them asleep and snoring in the pews of what appears to be church. The small qualifying statements both Greg and Nikki use (“sort of” and “probably”) clue readers in to the fact that their narratives may not be completely reliable, and the accompanying pictures tend to tell the

other half of the story. Ultimately, this complicated narrator-illustrator relationship teaches readers new literacies and new ways of interacting with the text by cluing readers into key words and context clues and trusting readers to actively engage with both the words and the images. The added level of having both the words and the images done in a middle school voice may even lead to a greater empathetic connection as readers can get into the narrators' heads and understand their motivations at the same time as they literally see how the narrators represent themselves in their drawings.

### **Multimodal Reading Development and Popularity**

It may be the case that *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* and *Dork Diaries* are immensely popular not because they are easy but because they mask complexity. These books and their “simple” line drawings, actually contain an influx of different information conveyed through several different modes. The books adapt to contemporary ways of reading and thinking, giving kids lots to process as they read. Perhaps in this busyness, though, it is worthwhile for the texts to be used as a way to teach slowing and processing. It is precisely for these reasons that the books ought to actually be taught: to be used as a means of critically taking in the media children encounter every day.

Beyond just encouraging more deeply complex types of engagement through the reading than is expected, the *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* and *Dork Diaries* series are important for a number of other reasons. As was hinted at earlier, the books are immensely popular among readers despite being frequently discouraged by parents and other adults. While the multimodal reading is difficult and complex, the books simultaneously encourage readers to view artistic abilities and the act of writing as “cool,” something not frequently done in other media. Further, beyond simply showing that writing is an important act, the books also encourage multimodal readers to

turn into multimodal writers through use of paratexts that accompany or parallel (yet are distinct from) the primary texts on which they are based. In short, the popularity of these two series masks an amazing level of complexity.

### **Chapter 3 – Are You An Artist Like Me?!: Reader Interaction within the Worlds of *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* and *Dork Diaries***

The *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* and *Dork Diaries* books have been routinely relegated to reluctant readers (Young and Ward; Juchniewicz; Risko, Walker-Dalhouse, Bridges, and Wilson; Hunt) and have even been routinely criticized, sometimes quite adamantly, because of the questionable behavior of the protagonists (McCabe). As a rule though, the books are accepted as “junk food” that will hopefully turn readers on to a more steady (and, apparently, healthy) diet of “real” literature. Like their almost-counterparts – comic books and graphic novels – the series have been met with skepticism in the educational community as “good” children’s literature. They are seen at best as “fluff” that hopefully will encourage readers to love to read so they can move past the books into more complex texts and at worst as destructive “garbage” that hurts young readers through portrayals of bad behavior. However, the books are extremely complex in and of themselves and lead to a complex engagement between reader and book. This engagement can be seen in particular in the supplemental spaces or paratexts associated with these books, which provide opportunities for students to develop critical literacy skills as they actually write alongside Nikki and Greg and interact in a variety of other participatory ways with the books.

According to Jen Curwood, paratexts, or texts that accompany or parallel (yet are distinct from) the primary texts on which they are based, “often serve as a way for readers to access schema, critically understand themes, construct knowledge, and engage in multimodal content creation” (423). For the *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* and *Dork Diaries* series, these paratexts consist of the do-it-yourself books published to supplement the series as well as the online environments created by the authors and publishers that delve further into the worlds of the texts. These spaces allow readers to participate in discussions of the texts that increase their reading comprehension and engagement while allowing readers to become coauthors – sometimes quite literally – and to

explore the act of composing multimodally. For the purposes of this chapter, I will examine the ways the paratexts that are produced by the authors and publishers of the books allow for and encourage reader interaction and exploration of multimodal writing.

One of the primary indicators of the complex types of interaction supported by these multimodal diary books are the supplemental do-it-yourself books produced by both series. *Dork Diaries* and *Wimpy Kid* both have supplemented the narrative books in their series with added print texts that ask readers to turn into writers who create their own diaries, just like Nikki and Greg. The first edition of *The Wimpy Kid Do-It-Yourself Book* was published in 2008, with a newer edition with updated content released in 2011. Similarly, *Dork Diaries* released *How to Dork Your Diary* in 2011 and another interactive supplemental book, the *OMG! All About Me Diary!*, was released in 2013. For avid fans of the books, these interactive texts completely change the types of participation the books expect from readers. Rather than giving readers a traditional narrative to follow, the books produce transmedia environments where the readers are able to turn into co-writers alongside Greg and Nikki and to become fully immersed in the modalities the two protagonists use (Toffoletti).

### **“This is NOT a Diary:” *The Wimpy Kid Do-It-Yourself Book***

From the title page of *The Wimpy Kid Do-It-Yourself Book*, the reader is placed immediately into the text along with Greg. This page features the title and, in the bottom right-hand corner, an illustration of Greg. In the bottom left-hand corner, there is the text “Your Picture Here” with an arrow pointing to a space for the reader to draw himself or herself into the text. The fact that the prompts ask for drawing before the reader is even asked to write his or her name in the book, which comes on the following page, says something interesting about the modalities in the book. Drawing is made equal to writing, and, like Greg who is portrayed as an

avid cartoonist across the series, the reader is encouraged to explore his or her artistic abilities – no matter how limited they may be.

The first page of the DIY book echoes the opening pages of Greg’s own first journal. In the opening page of the first *Wimpy Kid* book, Greg clears up how he feels about the term “diary”: “First of all, let me get something straight: This is JOURNAL, not a diary.” The first page of the do-it-yourself book says the same thing as Greg introduces the premise of the book to the readers, who have now become reader-writers: “But if you write anything in this journal, make sure you hold on to it. Because one day you’re gonna want to show people what you were like back when you were a kid. Whatever you do, just make sure you don’t write down your ‘feelings’ in here. Because one thing’s for sure: This is NOT a diary” (*Do-It-Yourself Book 1*).

And, it really isn’t. The rest of the prompts call for a wide variety of types of writing, none of which exactly matches the diary entries Greg uses across the series. Reader-writers can make lists of what they would bring with them to a desert island, answer “have you ever” questions, draw their dream homes, create a family tree, tell a story of the worst nightmare they have ever had, create their own greeting cards, and more. The book also contains a personality test, a version of the popular elementary and middle school future-predicting game MASH (Mansion-Apartment-Shack-House), and lots of pieces that tie into Greg’s various adventures throughout the *Wimpy Kid* series, such as an opportunity for reader-writers to design their own haunted house like Greg does in the first book. It does not ask the reader-writers to describe their days or to finish certain entries on certain days. Instead, the many different prompts give opportunities for writers with different creative strengths to explore the process of composing from various entry points. The variety of entry points, in turn, encourages composition as a complex undertaking, not a linear, one-size-fits-all process. The multiple activities and entry

points allow writers to participate in what Jody Shipka calls an “activity-based multimodal framework,” which places writers in a “position of considering the various ways in which, and conditions under which, a task might be accomplished,” ultimately challenging writers to work “differently,” providing moments to learn by doing (49-51). Reader-writers are not passive observers of writing but active participants in their own learning.

At times, the writing prompts do become instructional, with Greg modeling whatever the reader-writer is supposed to do. For instance, one prompt features a comic Greg and his friend Rowley first come up with in the first *Wimpy Kid* book – entitled “Zoo-Wee Mama!” – complete with panels, illustrations, and filled in speech bubbles. The next page contains a different “Zoo-Wee Mama!” comic, whose panels feature an almost identical scenario in regards to characters and order of events, but with empty speech bubbles, asking the reader-writer to imitate this form. The page after that asks reader-writers to make their own comics. This type of scaffolded composing experience mimics the instruction one might see in a classroom when a student receives a new writing assignment, allowing the reader-writer to experience an increasing amount of autonomy. The expectation is that reader-writers will not just read and understand Greg’s comic as they are expected to do in the *Wimpy Kid* books; they will read, understand, and interpret the skills necessary for composing the comic in order to be able to reproduce it. Fitting with this, every so often in the book, a prompt for the reader-writer to produce a new comic pops up. While the more standard writing prompts the book asks reader-writers to complete are all unique, boxes for comic creation are returned to frequently throughout the book.

This repeated encouragement of comic creation may feel didactic and heavy-handed, but the use of comics to develop literacy skills has been widely lauded. In “The Comic Book Project,” Michael Bitz and others from Columbia University launched an after-school program,



where children throughout New York City could create comic representations of their lives with help from instructors, including artists from Dark Horse Comics. At the end of the project, it was found that student writing had improved widely both on large-scale concerns (structure and voice) and lower-order issues (grammar and mechanics). Additionally, the project fostered increased understanding of the writing process – especially the necessity of planning, motivation to accomplish more complex writing tasks, and substantial improvement amongst writers with lower levels of English proficiency. Other research has noted that the creation of comics allows for increased understanding of genre conventions and increased writer confidence (Hammond).

Greg's examples function as a type of scaffolding for the reader-writers while simultaneously giving them a different view into his character, furthering interaction with and understanding of the texts. For instance, a prompt that asks the reader-writer to divide what is in his or her brain (the things he or she thinks about most) also shows Greg's divided up brain, the largest portion of which is taken up by video games, which should come as no surprise to fans of the books. The book also offers prompts that allow reader-writers to interact with other characters. A prompt from Greg's sometimes friend Rowley features questions such as "Do you believe in unicorns?" reinforcing Rowley's childlike nature, an essential piece of his character throughout the series, while later questions from reoccurring character Fregley posit ridiculous scenarios like "Do animals ever use their thoughts to talk to you?" emphasizing Fregley's haphazard and often disconcerting behavior. Another section by Greg's older brother and repeated antagonist Rodrick features impossible activities like a maze with no exit labeled as an "Intelligence Tester" ("Do this maze and then check to see if you're dumb or smart" [*Do-It-Yourself* 52]). These pranks are similar to those Rodrick pulls on Greg in the series, which are often aimed at making Greg look dumb – convincing Greg that his father is taking him to an

orphanage, for instance (*Dog Days*). Rodrick's section also contains a piece on creating one's own band (Rodrick's band, Löded Diper, is a key feature across the series), which includes coming up with a name, identifying band members, writing a song, and designing a tour bus. The book ends with excerpts from Rowley's diary and a variety of full-color comics from various characters throughout the series, including Rowley and Fregley. Comics, written by Greg and by secondary characters, are a reoccurring feature across the series, and this book is the only print opportunity fans have to see any examples from these series in full color.

The inclusion of a variety of pieces of writing from multiple characters provides opportunities for fans to compare narrative voices. The various prompts do not just encourage writing; they also provide an interwoven and remarkably complex narrative structure, with prompts often referring to those both earlier and later in the DIY book. For instance, one question from Greg asks if it "get[s] on [reader-writer's] nerves when people skip," accompanied by an illustration of Greg staring disgustedly at Rowley as he skips along. Later, one of Rowley's questions asks if reader-writers have friends who are jealous that they are "a really good skipper," featuring a similar illustration in Rowley's childlike style with an arrow pointing to Greg explaining that he "can't skip." Because readers are actively engaged in writing alongside the characters, these sidebars provide dedicated fans an opportunity to learn valuable skills about writing. Greg's journals in the main *Wimpy Kid* books only provide his perspective, but the DIY book gives pieces of writing – each with their own style of handwriting, tone, and content – that can allow for reflection on how style and point-of-view change from writer to writer. It also alludes to skills writers must develop such as the ability to alter one's writing to fit a given context or purpose. When different viewpoints of the same incident are depicted – such as the skipping incident – Greg's perspective is not necessarily given any more weight than the other

character's, allowing the potential for acknowledging multiple viewpoints as valid. Additionally, by including viewpoints of multiple characters, writing is normalized. Greg is not the only one who writes; it is something everyone within the *Wimpy Kid* world – and presumably outside of the *Wimpy Kid* world – can and should do.

The multiple narrators and interwoven narrative also allow reader-writers to be immersed even more into the *Wimpy Kid* world, a prime example of what Henry Jenkins calls convergence culture, exemplifying the way “new” consumers read and respond to media:

If old consumers were assumed to be passive, the new consumers are active. If old consumers were predictable and stayed where you told them to stay, then new consumers are migratory, showing a declining loyalty to networks or media. If old consumers were isolated individuals, the new consumers are more socially connected. If the work of media consumers was once silent and invisible, the new consumers are now noisy and public. (32)

This immersive, active participation in consuming the *Wimpy Kid* world is encouraged through the published DIY book but is simultaneously mediated by Jeff Kinney and the *Wimpy Kid* editors and publishers, avoiding some of the controversy that has surrounded participatory culture and other book series<sup>16</sup>. The multiple narrators and varied prompts in the DIY book call for active – if different – reading because the narrative is not linear or told from one perspective; it jumps back and forth and relies on reader-writers' past knowledge of the various books in the series in order to fully comprehend the text's nuances. Thus, active reading and participation in *Wimpy Kid* fan culture are rewarded.

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<sup>16</sup> For more information on this, see Henry Jenkins' description of the controversy surrounding “the Potter Wars,” in which Warner Bros. attempted to control fan responses to and uses of *Harry Potter* (Jenkins).

While the opening assures reader-writers that this book will not be a space to express their feelings and the book resists a typical “diary” form, it does consciously push the participants into reflection. Many prompts ask reader-writers to think about what they would like to accomplish in the future as well as to process events from their pasts. Questions such as “The baddest thing you ever did as a little kid” and “What’s something you wish you were brave enough to do?” imply that the act of writing in the book can inspire change. The encouragement to consider the future includes subtle attempts to move the reader-writers to further develop their literacy. For instance, a list of “Things you should do before you get old” includes “Read a whole book with no pictures in it” and “Mail someone a letter with a real stamp and everything” alongside other items like “Get in a food fight” and “Use a porta-potty.” Despite many claims from concerned adults that Kinney’s work will have a bad influence on the children who read it, in reality, it advances literacy, pushing reader-writers to become active readers of texts outside of the *Wimpy Kid* series and writers who can write both traditionally and multimodally. This push is, in many ways, reminiscent of the encouragement comic books once gave their readers to engage in reading other books by including book lists and reviews in the comics. Like those insertions, it attempts to appeal to the parents and institutions mediating children’s reading material while simultaneously building readers who are active participants in their own literacy development (Tilley). The final pages of the book provide ample blank, lined pages for the reader-writer to “keep a daily journal, write a novel, draw comic strips, or tell [his or her] life story,” giving readers a variety of options and a safe space to explore multimodal writing.

### **Embrace your Inner Dork: *How to Dork Your Diary***

The first companion book in the *Dork Diaries* series, *How to Dork Your Diary*, appears at first glance to be somewhat similar to *The Wimpy Kid Do-It-Yourself Book*; however the work it

attempts to do for reader-writers is much different than that of the *Wimpy Kid* book.<sup>17</sup> The cover encourages using the book to “write the stuff you only say inside your head,” echoing one of Nikki’s catchphrases at the same time as it directly calls for self-reflection, something Greg’s book shies away from. Rather than having a series of discrete prompts like *The Wimpy Kid Do-It-Yourself Book*, *Dork Your Diary* combines a new narrative about Nikki’s life with fewer yet lengthier opportunities for writing and engagement with a series of scaffolded prompts. The book is numbered 3½ in the series, and, unlike the other *Dork Diaries* books, contains journal entries that are dated with days of the week and times rather than dates of the year. The narrative takes place only over a couple of days, fitting into the series as a whole without actually taking up space in the narrative trajectory of the books. The narrative occurs after Nikki loses her diary at school and begins to use her sister’s doodle book as a diary. After much panicking (“I can’t imagine NOT writing in my diary! It’s like I’m addicted or something!” [3]), she decides to use the doodle book to “write very specific instructions to [herself] about HOW to keep a diary” (13) which leads to prompts inviting the reader turned reader-writer to create a diary alongside her.

First, Nikki prompts the reader-writer to “Discover Your Diary Identity” – a process that is accomplished through a quiz to determine what type of diary is best suited for the girl’s personality. Consisting of eight questions, the quiz gives four options for each question that will help them identify their personalities. The answers all fall into distinct categories. For example, for the first question (“It’s a Saturday afternoon. Your homework is all done and you have an hour to do whatever you want. You decide to:…”), you can choose the tech-savvy “A” (“Play an

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<sup>17</sup> The second *Dork Diaries* supplemental book, *OMG! All About Me Diary!*, is much different. It is a 365-day journal, where each day has its own prompt for the reader to answer and then space for a Year One and Year Two response. It contains much less narrative than *How to Dork Your Diary*, and will not be discussed at length, but it still encourages active and consistent writing. Notably, though, this journal does not provide prompts that ask the reader to draw; the prompts are primarily writing based.

exciting round of your favorite computer or video game.”), the introverted “B” (“Spend time relaxing by reading that new book your BFF has been raving about.”), extroverted “C” (“Check in with your friends via e-mail, text, or a social-networking site like Everloop.”), or artsy “D” (Let your creative juices flow by drawing your favorite anime characters.”) (15-26). The intended reader-writer is clearly a heterosexual girl as, throughout the quiz, Nikki refers to the reader-writer’s crush as a “him” and best friend as a “her” and gives advice to “rush to the *girl’s* bathroom” (17 [emphasis added]) while the *Wimpy Kid Do-It-Yourself Book* does not have any clear gender indicators about its intended readership, matching with the intended readership of the series as a whole.<sup>18</sup> The quiz to determine diary type is in and of itself problematic when it comes to questions of its portrayals of identity as the four personality types it identifies – “smart and curious” A’s, “kind and sensitive” B’s, “friendly and outgoing” C’s, and “creative and independent” D’s (25-26) – are oddly seen as entirely distinct. However, the advice the text gives concerning choosing a medium for journaling is really interesting.

Apparently, tech-savvy girls might enjoy keeping a diary on a computer while “kind and sensitive” B’s might like using a paper journal. Outgoing C’s can keep an online blog where they can share their experiences publicly with friends, and D’s who answered many of the questions with arts-related responses might want to get a sketchbook where they can combine “poetry, beautiful art, and hilarious doodles” (25-26). However, Nikki encourages girls to try out the form suggested by the quiz results but to also “try the others and select the one you’re most

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<sup>18</sup> The *Dork Diaries* series as a whole is directed toward girls through feminine pronoun use in marketing as well as appearance (lots of pink and glitter) and content (much gushing about fashion and boys). Anecdotally, several teachers have observed stray boys reading the books; however, the readership does appear to be mostly girls. Meanwhile, although Jeff Kinney has stated that his books appeal more to boys (who he describes as synonymous with reluctant readers) (“Jeff Kinney”), the marketing lacks gendered pronouns, and the *Wimpy Kid* books have even been cited in a *Horn Book* list of “Books with Diverse Gender Appeal” (Luecke).

comfortable with” (26). These concerns for writing space, audience, and publication are often more difficult pieces of the writing process for younger writers to grasp, and the move to consider and experiment with them early on is positive, although the narrow categories leave much to be desired regarding the discussion of publication medium.

At times, Nikki’s advice on how to keep a diary veers very directly into the didactic:

It’s always fun to write about things that make you happy. But did you know that writing about a bad experience or a disappointment can sometimes make you feel a lot better about the situation? If you’re having a really cruddy day, remember to use your diary as a way to help you vent and work through your frustrations. (28-29)

Afterward, the diary provides space for the reader-writers to write about the best thing that ever happened to them and notably how they *felt* about that experience. The next page prompts the reader-writers to draw a picture about that thing, mimicking Nikki’s signature style, followed by prompts asking about the worst and most embarrassing things that ever happened. While the original *Dork Diaries* books model reflection on positive and negative events as Nikki routinely reflects on all aspects of her life, this book is explicit in teaching the use of a diary as a means of processing and reflection.

The didacticism of this encouragement parodies the form of standardized tests. In one section, Nikki urges consistent writing: “Make sure you write in your diary every single day. Even if you LOSE your diary, just keep writing in a spare notebook or in your little sister’s annoying doodle book” (37-38). Then, Nikki gives a “pop quiz” asking the reader-writer to write a diary entry “RIGHT NOW” about her day. The directions are ended with “Keep writing until you see the word “STOP,” which is oddly reminiscent of the directions popularized on many standardized tests. And, sure enough, the space for writing ends with a stop sign that looks very

similar to those that pop up on standardized tests. The tone of this section is fairly serious and doesn't appear to be mocking standardized testing as much as giving opportunities for the reader-writer to practice her writing skills while becoming used to the format of standardized tests. This potential conservative ideology in relation to education oddly contradicts the less traditional style of writing used in the books themselves but does align with the conservative ideologies concerning other sociopolitical topics that the books present (Taber and Woloshyn)<sup>19</sup>.

The *Dork Diaries* series as a whole has received some criticism because Nikki isn't necessarily considered a strong role model for girls, especially in regard to speech. She sounds (and writes) very much like a stereotypical middle school girl – lots of abbreviations, squeals, slang, and all-caps – and reflects on the same sorts of problems which plague the lives of many middle school girls – her crush, her popularity, her friends, and her family. She speaks in catchphrases and uses incorrect grammar freely. In short, much of the criticism seems to be a sign that Rachel Renee Russell is capturing what it means to be in middle school. Nikki's voice is unabashedly that of a middle schooler who, perhaps like many middle schoolers, doesn't always speak in Standard English about deeply meaningful issues.

The *How to Dork Your Diary* book, though, changes Nikki's voice slightly. The diary entries chronicling Nikki's attempts to find her diary are written in the same voice as the other diary books – grammatically incorrect, emotional, and full of catchphrases; however, the places where Nikki teaches how to keep a diary sound different. For instance, when Nikki discusses the mean-girl at her school potentially finding her diary, she is distressed:

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<sup>19</sup> Taber and Woloshyn point out that gender roles in both series are very conservative and “promote heteronormative masculinity and traditional femininity” (249): Nikki desires to be “feminine, pretty, and part of the in-crowd while Greg wants to be masculine and avoid being bullied” (246). Meanwhile, both protagonists are white, middle-class, and Protestant, and despite potentially resistant readings in regard to adult-child relationships, the texts have largely conservative stances in regard to economics, race, and gender.



Even if at some point my diary IS turned in to the lost and found, there's a VERY good chance MacKenzie is going to intercept it, read it, and then plaster pages around the school – just to make my life more miserable than it already is. And there's nothing I can do about it. Except rush straight to the girls' bathroom and have a massive mental meltdown...AAAAAHHH ☹!! (46)

However, just pages later when addressing how the reader-writer ought to view keeping a diary, the tone is different:

Never let anyone tell you that keeping a diary is a silly or childish thing to do. Reflecting on your feelings and experiences is actually a very mature activity. If someone said something rude about you having a diary, what would your response be?

The book as a whole repeatedly shows this contrast between middle-school Nikki who is more often than not experiencing some extremely positive or negative emotion and instructor Nikki who sounds suspiciously like an adult providing writing advice to the reader-writers. Middle-school Nikki uses all-caps in the middle of sentences and smiley faces; instructor Nikki does not. Middle-school Nikki melodramatically bemoans that her life is going to be “more miserable than it already is;” instructor Nikki describes reflection as a “very mature activity.” Middle-school Nikki is often drawn as frazzled and screaming; instructor Nikki is drawn with a pointer stick in her hand. This difference in language and tone is seen repeatedly throughout the book. The text encourages girls to “discover” who they are, urging them to “be very comfortable with writing about YOU!” and pushes consideration of the future because “a diary can be a great place to figure out your future goals in life.” At times, the book even seems to mimic the language of textbooks as it clearly explains why a writing prompt exists before getting to the prompt itself. The repeated returns to Nikki's traditional voice in her hunt for her journal, though, do ground

the book in the same middle-school style that has made the series so popular.

In keeping with the series' focus on multimodality, the prompts in *Dork Your Diary* ask reader-writers to do more than write traditional narratives. How to Dork Your Diary Tip #7 is "Release Your Inner Artist," leading to the opportunity to create a cartoon. First, Nikki explains how a comic works by defining what a panel is, followed by an example. Then, she asks reader-writers to plan their own comics: "Now you're going to make your own four-panel comic strip! But before you get started, plan what it is going to be about" (81). These guidelines use the same type of scaffolding technique as the *Wimpy Kid* book but allow for even more engagement with the writing process through prompts asking for prewriting. While the majority of the prompts feature some type of traditional narrative, many also feature opportunities for the reader-writer to engage in other modes of writing like designing fake book covers to conceal their diary or inventing alternate meanings for common web acronyms like "TTYL," and, like *The Wimpy Kid Do-It-Yourself Book*, the book ends with ample blank, lined pages for the reader-writer to create her own journal.

One of the most interesting differences between *How to Dork Your Diary* and *The Wimpy Kid Do-It-Yourself Book* is the amount of space allowed for creation within the guided portion of the text. For instance, the *Wimpy Kid* book will ask a question and then provide two or three lines for a response. The *Dork Diaries* book, on the other hand, provides, as a whole, much more space, sometimes pages at a time, for longer responses. Perhaps additional writing space is provided because the book seems to take its role of coaching readers to turn into avid writers more seriously, as evidenced by the language used in introducing the prompts or perhaps because of a traditional expectation that girls will be more willing to write than boys. In both books, though, reader-writers are encouraged to interact with the characters by participating in the same

processes the characters do – especially when it comes to multimodal writing through comics, which both Greg and Nikki model more extensively than any other type of writing used in the books. It seems to be assumed that writers will be less familiar with comics and will need this type of writing to be broken down, a belief that is backed up by research on what kids actually know about creating multimodal texts (Risko, Walker-Dalhouse, Bridges, and Wilson). By breaking up the narratives within these supplemental books with opportunities for reader interaction, and, particularly in the case of *Dork Diaries*, taking readers step by step through the mentalities surrounding journaling and the processes through which Greg and Nikki write, the two books guide readers toward looking at the different modalities present in the texts with a more careful eye.

### **Reading the World of *Diary of a Wimpy Kid***

The published books produced by the two series are not the only spaces where readers are encouraged to engage in different ways with the texts. The worlds of both *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* and *Dork Diaries* extend beyond the pages of the books to encompass additional mediums where literacy is encouraged. Jeff Kinney's *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* website is primarily used to advertise the books. It includes news about the books and videos of Jeff Kinney as well as games that are meant mainly to advertise upcoming books, such as a virtual fortune-telling eight ball which promotes the "luck" theme of the most recent *Wimpy Kid* book: *Diary of a Wimpy Kid: Hard Luck*. In Jeff Kinney's Poptropica online game, though, the world of *Wimpy Kid* does extend into two gaming environments, called "islands" on the website: "Wimpy Boardwalk," which features the boardwalk Greg visits with Rowley in *Dog Days*, and "Wimpy Wonderland," which was released in conjunction with the sixth *Wimpy Kid* book, *Cabin Fever*.

Poptropica was created by Jeff Kinney and is owned by Pearson Education, Inc. The ownership hints at the site's goal of "edutainment" to simultaneously educate and entertain the users. It is a free site, but if users pay for a membership they have access to additional content and are often given first-access to new content. According to the "Poptropica Parents" section:

Kids create a 'Poptropican' character to travel the many Islands of Poptropica and use gaming literacy to enjoy a narrative that is often rooted in factual history... There are always new areas to explore in this ever-expanding world where kids can collect objects, read digital books and comics, watch movies, and compete in head-to-head competition. Parents can always trust that their children are playing-and learning-in a safe, online environment. ("Poptropica Parents")

The emphasis on the "safe" environment where learning can take place draws attention to the dual audience of this website. Poptropica attempts to teach multiple subjects while also allowing kids to interact in mediated ways with other kids; for instance, participants may "speak" to others playing the game, but they can only use controlled text options and cannot type their own messages. Poptropica is specifically intended for kids under the age of 15, which is the highest age a player is allowed to select when creating his or her character.

Poptropica offers many worlds for users to explore, each with its own challenges (called quests) related to a variety of educational experiences. For instance, Virus Hunter Island asks users to find Patient Zero of a strand of influenza and then takes them inside the human body to contain the virus. Other worlds explore popular children's texts like *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* and the *Magic Tree House* series, and two of the islands are dedicated to two of the texts Kinney cites as his biggest influences – Charles Schulz's *Peanuts* and Lincoln Peirce's *Big Nate*. Most notably for this essay, though, two of the islands are dedicated to *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*.

These islands subscribe to Beverly Clark's idea of "edutainment" as they "combine the pleasure and entertainment of traditional storytelling and the playfulness of games with educational elements" (345). The *Wimpy Kid* worlds pick up on the more traditional narratives of the book but also allow for reader interaction through gameplay.

As Dorothy Clark explores in her discussion of the translation of children's literature into video games, translating the world of the books to any type of digital media causes "reading and literacy [to] *appear* to be displaced" (emphasis in original article) (338). Unlike traditional text-based narratives, users do not necessarily read words within a given world or follow a set plot described by the author. Rather, Clark points out that the reader is turned into a user, allowing him or her to interact with the text through his or her character within the game. Ultimately literacy is not displaced; it is merely modified to encompass different elements of the story as users "read" the images on the screen as well as their interactions with characters and environments from the texts. This reading may be the "gaming literacy" that the Poptropica parents' section hints at above.

Both "Wimpy Boardwalk" and "Wimpy Wonderland" feature the characters from *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*; however, the experiences that they give to users are quite different. These new narratives do not star the characters; rather, the user is the center of the action. In "Wimpy Boardwalk," the user explores a boardwalk and can interact with all major characters – Greg, Rowley, Rowley's parents, and more. The ultimate goal is to get money back that was stolen from Greg by older teenagers – the same older teenagers who chase him and Rowley in the first *Wimpy Kid* book. Just as one of the pleasures readers obtain from the *Wimpy Kid* books is that readers often identify as being more capable than Greg and can laugh at his fumbled attempts at solving his problems, one of the pleasures of this game is that users are more able to solve

Greg's problems than he is. Users complete a complex series of tasks that requires much trial and error in order to accomplish this goal.<sup>20</sup> While accomplishing these tasks, readers are turned into interactive users who must "read" scenarios and images rather than just words; thus, the literacy expected from participation in the gaming environment takes multimodality a step further than the *Do-It-Yourself* book did. Rather than engaging in various modes of pen and paper writing, the user is now interacts through virtual modes, which move even further away from print text. The purpose of this world in the context of Jeff Kinney's books and the Poptropica universe, though, seems twofold: Kinney hopes to attract readers of the *Wimpy Kid* books to Poptropica through links on his website and users of Poptropica may be drawn to the *Wimpy Kid* books through the "Wimpy Book Nook," a section within the "Wimpy Boardwalk" world that allows readers to click on the books within the series, opening up each book's Amazon page. Aside from this connection as a marketing tool, it also calls back to Jenkins's idea of convergence where entry points to a text are spread amongst different media.

The newer *Wimpy Kid* world, which was released in 2012, "Wimpy Wonderland," is a bit more interesting in the context of the discussion of the types of literacy put forth by the multimodal, interactive elements of the website. "Wimpy Wonderland" accompanies the sixth book in the *Wimpy Kid* series – *Cabin Fever*. The book features a blizzard that keeps Greg inside his house, and the world of "Wimpy Wonderland" uses this setting. Unlike "Wimpy Boardwalk," which features full-color and looks like many online video games, "Wimpy Wonderland" is set within the world of the journal. The background is a lined page, and the characters are in the same black-and-white line drawings with which readers will be familiar.

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<sup>20</sup> Conversely, readers can look up a guide on YouTube or on any number of websites with "walkthroughs" of the worlds. Many are available online and have prompted even more interaction amongst fans of the books.

The quest in “Wimpy Wonderland” is to find Greg’s younger brother Manny who has escaped out of his bedroom window while Greg was supposed to be watching him. Unlike “Wimpy Boardwalk,” where users visit a scene that is only briefly mentioned in *Dog Days*, “Wimpy Wonderland” takes place within the spaces readers of the books will be more familiar with – Greg’s home, neighborhood, and school. As users explore, they can find a piece of Greg’s journal, interact with Greg’s grandparents, and ultimately help Greg to find Manny. Again, readers can take pleasure from helping Greg and effectively executing a plan to solve his problems as Greg, unsurprisingly, sits in the living room of the online game, playing a video game.<sup>21</sup> Considering literacy more broadly as the skills needed to “read” the world around oneself, both *Wimpy Kid* worlds on *Poptropica* allow readers to develop problem-solving skills essential to successful interaction. Additionally, as many children and adolescents view “literacy” and “reading” as concepts solely constrained within education systems, and, thus, claim to hate reading, the small acts of literacy brought about by the many tiny pieces of text that the user finds as he or she goes through “Wimpy Wonderland” can reinforce the idea that reading encompasses more than just full-length books.

The transmedia world of *Poptropica* can potentially be a space for readers to engage critically with texts in meaningful ways. As Annette Lamb and Larry Johnson argue in “Divergent Context: Teaching and Learning in a Transmedia World,” online environments that allow readers to experience a text in multiple genres allow for more complex engagement and interaction. Lamb and Johnson define transmedia worlds as those that include media that

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<sup>21</sup> The implication of Greg playing a video game while the user fixes his problem is, presumably, that Greg playing the game is not a good thing to do. This almost seems to undermine the “edutainment” idea of *Poptropica* as the users who are doing what Greg isn’t because he is playing a game could potentially also be avoiding responsibilities that they ought to be doing instead of playing the game.

immerse readers in the experience and allow for participation in the media. Henry Jenkins affirms that the convergence of multiple types of media leads to transmedia storytelling where different media offer “distinctive and valuable” contributions to the world of a text (109). The value of these worlds is that “the strengths of each media create synergy” and “can be motivating for young people because they immerse students in meaningful tasks” (Lamb and Johnson 64, 67). Readers learn more about the characters through the games and, in turn, must develop critical literacy skills in order to understand, apply, and combine their knowledge into one cohesive picture of the world of the texts they enjoy. A key aspect of the *Poptropica* world is paying close attention to the small details. Users must look carefully and critically at the scenes presented to them in order to successfully beat the games; they are not straightforward. If users learn to apply these types of skills to the games on *Poptropica*, they may also be able to apply these noticing skills to their reading habits in the *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* series and ultimately to their own writing.

Most interesting is the fact that the exploration of the two worlds in *Poptropica* is from the user’s own perspective, removing the reader from Greg’s first person narrative. Typically, the reader-turned-user is only able to witness Greg’s thoughts on what is happening in his life, and any outside perspectives are mediated through Greg’s voice in his journal, and, even in the DIY book, Greg is still the primary narrator. However, now Greg is just another character with whom the reader-user can have limited interactions. This allows the reader to see certain things like a small portion of a newspaper clipping titled “Puberty can be a difficult time” from Susan Heffley, Greg’s mom, in which she discusses Greg’s adolescence:

When a child begins to experience the changes that come with adolescence, the transformation can be uncomfortable, awkward, or even frightening. But given the right



guidance, a child can learn to welcome, and even celebrate, the transition into adulthood.

My second-born son recently began his wondrous journey into his new... (Poptropica Worldwide)

Although this same newspaper clipping is featured in the narrative books of the series, here readers encounter it on their own, unmediated by Greg and his thoughts on his mother's writing. As this is usually encountered while Greg is happily playing video games away from the user, it gives new meaning to the familiar words. It also allows the reader-user to get a more thorough picture of characters like Rowley's parents and their feelings as they reveal, for example, how they believe Greg is a bad influence on their son in a conversation. Ultimately, the *Poptropica* worlds encourage more critical engagement with the *Wimpy Kid* series as they also encourage readers to become active participants in the *Wimpy Kid* world.

### ***Dork Diaries* and Mediated Fan Fiction**

Recently, many conversations surrounding literacy and reader engagement – especially in the field of children's literature – have turned to the participatory culture of fan fiction and affinity spaces. These spaces have largely been shown as beneficial to readers for many reasons. As Angela Thomas points out in her exploration of an online fan fiction community that was founded and run by two teenaged girls, fan fiction can have multiple benefits for those who interact with it:

[F]an fiction writing online...provides a site of new hybrid textualities where writing is a response to reading, an exploration and critique of texts, an assemblage of new ideas about texts, and an active collaborative process of understanding, creating and imagining. Beyond writing, the fan fiction communities provide spaces for exploring, discovering and celebrating the strengths of individuals as they play together to create a culture that

ultimately values writing, narrative and story. (237-238)

Fan fiction is sometimes downplayed because of its lack of originality as the writers are using pre-established characters from other works, but in allowing readers to explore pre-established characters, events, and worlds, fan fiction writers are gaining the benefits of deep reading comprehension as well as writing practice. Young adults are often motivated to both read and write because of online affinity spaces (Curwood), and these spaces can allow for learning environments with access to consistent feedback (Kell 33). Oftentimes, fan fiction communities are deeply protective of the types of writing produced through them, leading to productive reader reviews from peers who are invested in the writing growth of one another. Fan fiction, then, becomes a method of both story exploration and story interaction.

Most pieces on fan fiction have explored its role in the development of older teen writers. Thomas's research, for instance, looks at girls who are in their mid-teens. Caroline Land's research on Cecily von Ziegesar's *Gossip Girl* series also examines older teenagers and their uses of fan fiction. Now, though, younger and younger users are becoming involved in these types of experiences. This is evidenced in particular by the fan fiction solicited by the *Dork Diaries* website.

Unlike the *Wimpy Kid* website, which provides little space for reader interaction outside of a link to *Poptropica*, the *Dork Diaries* site has turned into an online community of fans. One of the main features of the website is Nikki's blog, which is updated about once a week with a story that combines elements from the canonical books in the series with new adventures. The characters featured in the blogs are the same ones that are in the books; however, the narrative of the blog runs on a different plane than that of the books. Readers do not have to read all of the books in the series in order to understand the blog, and the stories that take place in the blog do

not make their ways into the books. These stories are, instead, a paratext that readers can use to understand the characters even more.

At the end of each blog post, Nikki invites feedback from readers: “What do you guys think? I’m in DESPERATE need of help!” Then, in the comments section, many readers seem to take their responses very seriously – they oftentimes commiserate with Nikki (“brianna is so spoiled!!! @ least my brother and sister don’t act like that so sorry nikki!!!! [zion watkins]) and respond with helpful advice, often reminding Nikki of her own past experiences in the *Dork Diaries* books. For instance, an October 2013 post laments the fact that Nikki’s mom has asked her to take her little sister trick or treating on the same day that Nikki and her crush, Brandon, are having a Halloween party. This echoes the second book in the *Dork Diaries* series where Nikki attempted to wear three different Halloween costumes in order to appease her crush, her friends, and her family. Many commenters remind her of just how stressful that experience was, telling her to choose one activity or the other and to speak to her mom. While much criticism of *Dork Diaries* stems from the fact that Nikki is disrespectful to her parents and that this behavior may rub off on readers, those who comment on the posts seem to display the opposite mentality. They are not disrespectful to each other, and oftentimes attempt to go out of their way to be polite and constructive even when disagreeing with other commenters. The posters tend to sympathize with Nikki but also offer advice that attempts to be helpful.

The *Dork Diaries* website also allows users to listen to music from Nikki’s band in the third book in the series and to look at book covers from many of the countries around the world where *Dork Diaries* has been published. The most vibrant and interactive part of the website is labeled “for fans” and allows readers to communicate even more directly with “Nikki” and with each other. Unlike the users of *Poptropica*, who appear to be a mix of boys and girls, the

commenters on these posts are nearly all girls – or, at least, they represent themselves as girls. Each user chooses a username, which is connected to an email, and can upload a photo. When the girls comment, the number of times they have commented appears next to their names, allowing users to easily see who is and isn't an active member of the community.

One of the features that elicits the most comments is an advice column with responses to problems readers write in. Nikki's advice column allows readers to email Nikki questions about their lives, which often parallel the struggles Nikki herself is going through. Like Nikki's blog, this section often gives advice to readers and then encourages the other readers to interact with Nikki and with each other by opening the question up to the larger *Dork Diaries* community. This leads to many conversations between readers. In the summer of 2013, as the site was gaining even more traffic, the chat changed in response to reader irritation at not being able to interact in real time. Users are moderated for a while when they are new to the site, but if they have proven themselves to be upstanding members of the *Dork Diaries* community, they are able to post freely.<sup>22</sup> This encourages a lot of dialogue between fans of the book, something that they have taken to quite positively, extolling the merits of Nikki, *Dork Diaries*, and the website. The community has also moved off the space of the site as well, with many girls using kik, an instant messaging program, to communicate as well as posting links to their own blogs hosted by a variety of other sites.

A more recent addition to the *Dork Diaries* website is the "Fan Stories" page. On the fan stories page, beginnings of stories are posted in Nikki's voice, and readers are asked to complete

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<sup>22</sup> In order to have free access to posting, users must post a certain number of times, although the exact number isn't specified by the website. Then, according to one of Nikki's blog posts: "after you've been on the site for awhile and you've proven you're going to comply with the rules, you'll be able to chat in real time." The site, though, claims to have a zero-tolerance policy for any inappropriate content, and, this policy seems to be maintained fairly well as there really is no inappropriate content.

them. In the introduction to the page, Nikki comments on the reason for the inclusion of this new space: “I’ve seen all the super creative stories you guys write in the comments on my blog posts. I know you’re totally talented writers, and here’s your chance to show it!” Most of the stories feature hundreds (and sometimes thousands) of comments with readers writing both short and long responses to the texts. Then, other readers will comment on and rate the stories (usually on a 1-10 scale). Like in other fan fiction communities, the raters often provide helpful feedback regarding both content and form. As Thomas points out, this type of collaboration is important:

The process of reviewing each other's individual work, recognising each other's strengths and then using each other's strengths has given them the opportunity to produce writing that truly excites them and motivates them to write further. As they write together and work to produce the best piece of writing possible, they have developed a relationship of trust and provide each other with open and honest critique...Sometimes the issues dealt with in the narrative through the role-playing also reflect the issues faced by the girls in their everyday adolescent lives. (231)

Caroline Land echoes this, emphasizing how the writers of *Gossip Girl* fan fiction she studied often include identifying information that makes it easier for the readers of the fan fiction to connect to others who are not only fans of the series but are also writers (41). And, as Rebecca Black notes, using fan fiction also allows readers to “gain firsthand exposure to how individuals, especially those from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, can interpret messages differently – another 21<sup>st</sup>-century media literacy skill” (CITE). Like the participants in Thomas’s, Land’s, and Black’s studies, the participants in the fan stories section of *Dork Diaries* often use the site to become friends with each other and to deal with actual issues in their lives. The girls often bond over their experiences as *Dork Diaries* fans and as avid writers.

These fan stories allow for not only reader-to-reader collaboration but also author-to-reader collaboration and interaction. Just as readers become participants, to some extent, by writing in the *Dork Your Diary* book, they can here become actual participants in forming the story for Nikki. While one of the key ideas stressed throughout *Dork Your Diary* is that writing can be a means of self-reflection, the writing on the *Dork Diaries* website emphasizes creativity and external publication. Because the content is mediated by Rachel Renee Russell and her two daughters, who help her to write and illustrate the books, the content is “safe” to some extent. It is also, though, a way to validate the writing of the readers. Rather than offsite fan fiction websites where other readers are the only means of establishing validity, the encouragement of Rachel Renee Russell for readers to become writers echoes the same instructional mentality of the *Dork Your Diary* book. Readers are being encouraged to believe that their ideas are valid and should be expressed. At the same time, though, the placement of the fan stories as a response mediated by the authors and publishers of the books raises questions of agency and who actually is in control of these literacy experiences.

In keeping with the emphasis on multimodality, the site also provides a section where readers can upload fan art. This art sometimes mimics the manga-esque drawing of the *Dork Diaries* series and sometimes does not. There is a mix of hand-drawn and computer-drawn images on the page, and the drawings are accompanied by the reader’s first name and country. Like the space which celebrates the global reach of the books through the showcase of book covers from across the world, the fan art page features art from across the globe: Canada, the United Kingdom, Hong Kong, Ireland, the Philippines, China, and more. The *Dork Diaries* community is still developing, and its creators seem bent on making it a space that readers will want to return to again and again.

## Readers, Writers, and Users of Multimodality

The literacies the communities surrounding *Dork Diaries* and *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* promote extend further than this essay can cover. While I chose to focus exclusively on those types of participation directly encouraged and moderated by the authors and publishers, fans have also taken to sites such as fanfiction.net to publish fan fiction on both of the series. Additionally, wiki pages exist for both of the series, which allow readers to post information and make connections within the worlds of the texts.

By encouraging participation with the texts through the paratexts provided by the print journals and online environments, the *Dork Diaries* and *Wimpy Kid* series allow places for increased user interaction, and, consequently, increased critical thinking. The reflection that is inherently included in keeping a journal extends to the readers who are processing these journals and reflecting on their own participation in a wider community of readers and, ultimately, on their experiences as denizens of a global culture.

As the readers consciously and unconsciously interact with fans worldwide, they develop multiple literacies that will help them to more expertly navigate online communities and other multimodal environments. Many assume that today's middle grade readers are technologically savvy because they have grown up surrounded by technology; however, this is only true in some instances. Children do not necessarily innately "know" internet culture, and providing them with opportunities to practice this – especially in the context of practicing a variety of literacies – is one of the key (and complex) benefits of these seemingly "light" books. Whether or not the readers engaging with these series are "reluctant" when it comes to reading and writing, the books offer different modes of participation and a variety of entry points to participate through the paratexts, enabling both weak and strong readers to learn critical thinking skills in

conjunction with the texts. Greg and Nikki may not be “ideal” middle schoolers, but their diaries and the paratexts surrounding them are fantastic models of the multimodal engagement essential for success in modern reading and composition.



## **Conclusion – Reading, Writing, and Creativity: Where Do We Go from Here?**

There's nothing wrong about a book being for reluctant readers; however, problems arise when a book is talked about only in conjunction with reluctant readership. My goal is not to say that *Dork Diaries* and *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* are not books that can inspire readers who otherwise have little interest in reading. My goal is to show how the books appeal to a much wider audience and how there are numerous reasons for this appeal – reasons that are important to literacy development. I also seek to show that these books have a place in the larger spectrum of children's literature. At present, neither *Dork Diaries* nor *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* would be considered within the canon of children's literature; however, they are the books that children are reading, and they deserve to be looked at closely.

In spite of adult criticism about whether or not the *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* and *Dork Diaries* series are beneficial in regards to content and style, the books are becoming groundbreaking trends within the field of children's literature. They have become the benchmark standard to which many popular books are held, and neither series shows any signs of slowing. And, it is not simply child readers who are enjoying these books. In numerous conversations with adults concerning this project, I've come across the same response. Adults who have read the books – and especially *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* – are pleasantly surprised by just how funny and enjoyable the books are. This alone suggests that there is much more at work than just a text to move readers to the next level. If adults who are presumably already at that level are enjoying the text then certainly there is much room for younger readers to find purpose in reading the books beyond simply helping them advance to the next reading level.

As I have suggested, the books redefine what popularity means for readers, focusing on the creativity of the characters in order to raise questions surrounding how popularity can be

attained at the same time that the creativity of the books is part of what has made them so popular. Beyond this though, the books creatively employ multimodal conventions, leading to a type of reading that traditional texts cannot offer. This multimodality expands even further through the use of paratexts to draw readers in and invite them to become writers alongside of the protagonists. These key moves illustrate just how important these books are for twenty-first century readers. They cannot be dismissed as inconsequential, and their ability to attract both skilled and unskilled readers, who are then given opportunities to practice the types of reading that will become essential to them in their daily lives, cannot be ignored. As the series continue, it will be interesting to see how ideas of literacy continue to be explored.

Already, other diary books for young readers have expanded on these conventions in new and interesting ways. For instance, Nancy J. Cavanaugh's *This Journal Belongs to Ratchet* has eschewed the combination of words and pictures in favor of a different sort of multimodality that combines many different genres of writing – various types of poetry, third-person narration, letters to the editor, research, and more. Rose Cooper's *Gossip from the Girl's Room* expands multimodality even further, as the book is set up as a “pre-blogging” journal, emphasizing the continued role multimodality will play in the books. Amy Ignatow's *Popularity Papers* uses dual narration and full-color illustration to show collaborative writing and to explore how different talents can come together to create one product. What is, though, notably missing from the wave of books is characters of color or of different socioeconomic classes. While white and middle-class middle-school boys and girls are writing up a storm, there is a complete vacancy of other races and ethnicities in this emerging genre, leaving much room for expansion.

These multimodal diary books for young readers not only can draw in reluctant readers; they can also teach important skills to readers at all levels. Perhaps more importantly, though,

they can function as a gateway not only to the more “highbrow” literature but also to an increasingly wide range of genres. For instance, these books can provide the beginning instruction for how to access graphic novels, and can prepare readers for understanding and enjoying these unique texts. The importance of this introduction cannot be overstated as graphic novels are enjoying a surge of popularity and the beautiful texts that are being produced deserve widespread recognition. Perhaps *Wimpy Kid* and *Dork Diaries* readers will be some of the ones to encourage new and innovative forms within this field for older age groups and for future young readers.

Even more than the types of literacies discussed or the possibilities for further innovative development, though, the books can provide another important task. By using first-person narration and giving readers visuals while reclaiming the words “dork” and “wimp” as cool, the books allow for access to a certain level of emotional literacy. While Greg may not learn from his actions and Nikki may seem to repeat the same mistakes over and over again, perhaps readers can see themselves in the characters and develop empathy through understanding the two characters’ mental processes. One of the benefits of reading is learning about characters who are, oftentimes, vastly different from the reader. By understanding characters whose actions and motivations are far from perfect, the readers of the *Dork Diaries* and *Wimpy Kid* books have an opportunity to continue to develop their own emotional literacy.

*Diary of a Wimpy Kid* and *Dork Diaries* cannot be written off as just another passing fad; they are an important step in the history of children’s literature as a whole and especially in the history of diary books in children’s literature. There are much worse things to be than wimps and dorks, and, hopefully, both series will inspire a generation of creative (and wimpy and dorky) readers and writers.

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