
The Art of Being Ordinary: Cups of Tea and Catching the Bus in Contemporary British YA

Alison Waller

ABSTRACT

Young adult novels are full of ordinary things and everyday actions, and these “reality effects”, to use Roland Barthes’ term, can help to build the meaningful connective tissue against which textual adolescents exist. This article examines contemporary British realist YA in order to understand the cultural work it does in creating ordinary worlds its readers can recognise. It shows how narratives produce a shared backdrop of lived experience that can nonetheless reveal certain socio-economic and ethnic differences. Paying attention to the mundane and routine is also posited as a method for locating YA fiction within a much broader literary and cultural context than usual. Existing YA scholarship has tended to focus on ontological questions about extraordinary fictional teenagers and how they are constructed according to universal frameworks of ‘normal’. This article instead demonstrates how textual teenagers are also situated by the common realities of everyday life in ways that need to be understood as specifically inflected by national conditions. It examines two tropes of ‘ordinariness’ – cups of tea and bus journeys – in a range of British YA standalone novels from the last decade, including work by Holly Bourne, Ally Kennen, Muhammad Khan, Patrice Lawrence, Nikesh Shukla, and Lisa Williamson. In doing so, it unpacks the rich cultural meanings and functions that are at play via these apparently non-symbolic textual

Alison Waller is Reader at the University of Roehampton, London, and a member of the National Centre for Research in Children’s Literature. Her publications include *Constructing Adolescence in Fantastic Realism* (Routledge 2009) and *Rereading Childhood Books: A Poetics* (Bloomsbury 2019), and she is Principle Investigator of the ‘Reading for Normal: Young People and Fiction in the Time of Covid-19’ project. She is also General Editor for *The International Journal of Young Adult Literature*.

features, and argues that, although tea and buses often act as reassuring markers of the ordinary, in some cases they represent a narrative mode that can actually question the status quo.

INTRODUCTION

As I write, the very idea of ordinariness is under intense scrutiny. The global Covid-19 pandemic has taken hold of all parts of society and Black Lives Matter protests have spread across the Western world. While many of the previous events of the first two decades of the twenty-first century appeared in their time to be radical and revolutionary – the rise of the internet and social media, swingeing changes in domestic and foreign politics, environmental disaster, and the opening up of personal identity categories, to name just a few – the incredible shifting of sands that recent events have brought in thinking about everyday life threaten to overturn international economies and reshape national stories. Novels written for young people in the coming months and years are unlikely to be untouched by the current historical episode, and now is an ideal time to survey and understand what came before. Examining pre-Covid YA from the UK offers a way of interrogating how normality and ordinariness function in realist representations of British adolescent life.

Much existing scholarship rests upon an assumption that extraordinariness is a defining quality of YA. Roberta Seelinger Trites was one of the first critics to open up the question of how far fictional adolescents can “disturb the universe” (2) in the late 1990s. Since then, Mary Hinton and Maria Nikolajeva have also stressed the remarkable conflict and tension inherent in the stories of fictional young adults, who are often “rebellious, unhappy, presenting a loci of suffering, injustice, of unfulfilled longings and deviant sexualities” (1), and in previous work I proposed a correlation between teenage fiction and models of adolescence that stressed incredible beings and supernatural transformations (*Constructing Adolescence*). Conversely, the appearance of Robyn McCallum’s early study of identity and subjectivity in adolescent fiction in 1999 presented the ontological questioning of YA protagonists and their concerns with being ‘normal’ as another key area for critics to focus upon. In a more recent discussion of YA characters (specifically transgender ones), Jennifer Putzi argues that realist young adult fiction can be understood as modelling a “way to be in the world” (425) for individual readers facing particular challenges or opportunities around their identities, while Antero Garcia has suggested that novels aimed at a teen audience offer guidance on “what youth behaviour looks like and what are *normal* feelings” (6). In this article I want to suggest that our critical lenses might usefully be nuanced to incorporate more quotidian ways of being in the world. It is sometimes important to step away from

questions of extraordinary being and the essential subjectivity of protagonists to look instead at how they are situated amongst the ordinary and everyday.

After all, YA novels are full of ordinary things and everyday actions. Take, for instance, Muhammad Khan's *I Am Thunder* (2018), in which fifteen-year-old protagonist Muzna finds herself unwittingly involved with an extremist group plotting a terrorist attack in London, but in which her unusual and thrilling situation is also firmly underpinned by elements of the commonplace: as when the police detective who visits her home to question her is offered "[t]ea, biscuits and a bowl of Punjabi mix" (301). When fourteen-year-old Kate discloses to her mum and dad that she is transgender in Lisa Williamson's *The Art of Being Normal* (2015), it is a moment that might be expected to revolve around sensational revelation, family tensions, and adolescent angst: however, her parents do not explicitly judge her in this instant, but sit down for a chat, accompanied by "cheese and pickle sandwiches and massive mugs of tea" (316). Patrice Lawrence's *Indigo Donut* (2017) explores the multiple challenges faced by the teenage heroine, whose mother was murdered when she was an infant and who has lived her young life in care; yet much of the novel's impact is generated by the mundane settings in which narrative turning points take place, such as a crowded and smelly bus ride home from school when Indigo encounters her estranged father or the London double-decker buses that are the venue for her first proper date. Familiar objects, such as cups of tea, and routine activities, like catching a bus, function in amongst the drama of YA narratives as examples of Roland Barthes' "reality effect" ("The Reality Effect"), in part merely offering an illusion of concrete reality in the literary world created by a text. But they also represent overlooked aspects of everyday life for teen characters that are worth examining in some detail. Scrutinising ordinary events and objects in YA fiction offers a new way of reading literary adolescence in contrast to the more commonly leveraged concepts of 'extraordinariness' on one hand, and 'normality' on the other. The highlighted scenes in Khan's, Williamson's, and Lawrence's texts perform 'ordinary' through their habitual status and mundane qualities. As I shall show, ordinariness, unlike normalcy, does not primarily imply a value judgement. At most, ordinary actions or behaviours are those that can be identified as part of the usual order of things, and which are often, therefore, ignored. They represent the "connective tissue against which we see concrete experience" (Scott 2). It is this element of the unremarkable – the often unnoticed and apparently unimportant – that is so intriguing about ordinariness, especially in relation to the representation of adolescence and contemporary teen life. Where extraordinariness and normality give emphasis to ideas of individual growth, development, and personal identity politics, ordinariness exposes shared worlds of routine and sometimes boring lives. These, in turn, can offer a readerly experience that is not so much about how YA narratives "enable identification with the narrator" (8), as Craig Hill puts it, but about how they create structures of commonality.

In the rest of this article I examine contemporary British realist YA in order to understand the cultural work it does in creating everyday worlds its readers can recognise.¹ I begin with a brief theoretical discussion of what distinguishes being ordinary from the more familiar theme of being “normal” in YA before turning to an exploration of ordinariness in a range of post-2010 standalone YA novels. While I acknowledge the major part played by dystopian sequences, fantasy trilogies, and other series books in the recent history of UK YA (examples include Malorie Blackman’s *Noughts and Crosses* (2001-2019); Patrick Ness’s *Chaos Walking* (2008-10); Holly Smale’s *Geek Girl* (2013-17); and Teri Terry’s *Slated* (2012-14)), I have chosen to discuss what might be called ‘quiet’ realist standalone novels that have as yet received little critical attention, in part responding to Rebekah Fitzsimmons and Casey Alane Wilson’s observation that “a vast forest of YA texts exists beyond the first few major blockbuster trees” (xxi). These novels provide a counter-narrative to the extraordinary adventures of teen characters thrown into incredible worlds and circumstances, portraying instead a diverse range of characters living in a world that is recognisable as occurring here and now, offering a fictional snapshot of the contemporary Britain in which its implied readers exist and thus suggesting how they might find ways of being in their worlds in ordinary ways.

I analyse ordinariness through two representative figures: cups of tea and bus journeys. These are a small sample of the reality effects at work in British YA, but they function on multiple levels and as pertinent touchstones for contemporary adolescent lives. Through a discussion of these tropes I offer some suggestions about how notions of ordinariness shape the portrayal of contemporary British adolescent experience: how it is structured within an everyday material reality or milieu, as well as through what Pierre Bourdieu might call our “habitus” (72), a habitual “way of being” (214) constructed by external forces and our own daily practices. I also start to unpick assumptions about who the commonplace ‘everyman’ might be in YA, since in a nation defined by its diversity it is important to acknowledge that “what is mundane and ordinary for one person might be quite extra-ordinary [sic] for another” (Scott 2). In many scenes of ordinariness in contemporary British YA, markers of class and ethnicity can be seen at work creating discourses of social respectability or

1 Consideration might be given to experiences that are specific to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, or the devolved nations of England, Wales and Scotland. This article marks the starting point of a larger project in which particular national and regional constructions will be examined further and in more depth. For the purposes of discussion here, I have not, on the whole, distinguished between these constructions and use the terms British and UK more or less synonymously. As my exploration of cultural customs and practices in this article will suggest, much of the incidental and descriptive content of these novels makes assumptions about the level of knowledge and understanding about such practices, and speaks most directly to readers familiar with this world from a position of lived experience. I therefore posit that the implied readers of this body of fiction are British themselves, living in the UK. More practically, British YA—particularly realist fiction—has a less global reach than American YA and its primary market is the UK (Ramdarshan Bold and Phillips).

cohesion, and readers may be alerted to the way that “the habitual, the mundane and the taken-for-granted are [...] capable of performing [...] important cultural tasks” (Procter 64). Cups of tea can equally be served with Punjabi mix or cheese sandwiches, for example, signalling to canny readers the cultural histories that ordinary foodstuffs carry with them. The historical layers of meaning attached to tea as a commodity percolate though into its use as a form of interpersonal bonding, especially in familial contexts that can be fraught for teenagers and the adults they live with. Buses are used as modes of everyday transport and escape from these domestic worlds, but retain something of the constraints of these social environments in the implicit rules and the shared spaces that are attached to cheap public transport and that open up exchanges between people of different ages, classes, and ethnicities. These reality effects play a subtle role in shaping British youth identities and, although there are many other markers of ordinariness that might be analysed, tea and buses offer a suitable way into the personal, familial, and socio-cultural fabric of British teenage life. I end the article by briefly showing how a focus on the ordinary and everyday can help us to move beyond common accounts of YA realism as limited by the genre of ‘problem novel’. I situate these texts within a broader realist tradition of British fiction and suggest ways that ordinariness might provide a framework for examining other national bodies of YA.

BEING NORMAL, BEING ORDINARY

In terms of their titles alone, Williamson’s *The Art of Being Normal* and Holly Bourne’s *Am I Normal Yet?*² (both 2015) arguably represent the most obvious attempts to consider the realities of the British adolescent experience in the 2010s. Both novels deal in recognisable issues faced by twenty-first-century young people who want to figure out their place in the world. They are set in suburban locations that are likely to be familiar to many of their readers, and they reference popular music, technologies, and snacks that ground the fictional events in a timely sense of shared reality. *The Art of Being Normal* tracks the stories of transgender teens Kate and Leo, while *Am I Normal Yet?* follows the romances and friendships of Evie, who is recovering from severe obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD).

What does normal mean for these YA texts and their protagonists? In *The Art of Being Normal*, fourteen-year-old Kate (known for most of the novel as David)³ suggests it means

- 2 Unlike the rest of the works I discuss in this article, *Am I Normal Yet?* is technically not a standalone novel, being the first in a loose triptych called *The Spinsters Club*, but since each book in the set follows the separate adventures of the spinsters, it works much like one.
- 3 There have been critical responses to Williamson’s novel due to this mis-naming of a character who is transgender but does not begin to socially identify as a girl until late in the narrative: see, for example, Butler. I refer to the character as Kate throughout.

“fitting in” (276) and the possibility of going to the end-of-year school ball with a boy. For sixteen-year-old Evie in *Am I Normal Yet?*, it means college, friends, boys, and fun, in that order. Normal for these characters has clear contours, based on what they have observed in others or in the narratives told about the social world they exist within. Normal, in this sense, equals ‘typical’, ‘average’, and ‘expected’: and since typicality can only be understood in terms of relationality, the process of feeling or being normal fundamentally requires that constant comparison with others. Typical soon becomes normative, the active noun derived from normal; that is, a prescriptive activity rather than an innate essence, and one dictated by social forces rather than natural ones. By not conforming to normative ideas of health (Evie’s OCD sees her being hospitalised as unwell) or gendered ontology (Kate’s friend Leo is rejected by his father for being trans), these characters are situated, or situate themselves, as fundamentally abnormal.

“Fitting in”, as Kate puts it, is also a matter of self-observation and regulation, and as such can also be a tool for internalised punishment. Evie manages to achieve all of her aims in the course of *Am I Normal Yet?*, but fails in her internal ambition to feel normal. She explains that she has only managed an “outwardly normal life. Like a swan gliding on a pond” (273). In *The Art of Being Normal*, Leo, who narrates a second thread of the novel, also interrogates himself and falls short according to received notions of normality as he has been presented them. He has spent his whole life “being told I’m the complete opposite of ‘normal’” because “[n]ormal’ kids don’t have six files’ worth of notes on them. ‘Normal’ kids don’t see therapists” (94). Leo and Evie both see therapists, and the fact raises questions about the relationship of being normal to being healthy, and whether health is a standard of being that can be easily measured (as Jeremy Johnston notes in his examination of therapy practices in YA, the “healthy/sick binary implies that there is a standard of ‘health’ that is achievable” (328)). Erich Fromm’s classic 1956 essay on the pathology of normalcy argues that mental health, in particular, is a slippery concept that rests as much upon the political needs of a functioning society as upon the workings of individual minds or brain functions. On the one hand, Fromm suggests, individuals need to face the taxing philosophical questions of their own existence in order to come into maturity in full mental health, a task often considered central to protagonists of YA fiction. On the other hand, society does not always help to provide relevant answers to these questions, and at times it works to stymie the essential ontological process of truly examining the human condition. Indeed, when whole swathes of a population share a similar cultural defect (the lack of “a genuine expression of self”) then there are real losses and false gains: what the individual “may have lost in richness and in a genuine feeling of happiness, is made up by the security of fitting in with the rest of mankind—as he knows them” (Fromm 15). What seems normal is in fact pathological.

On the surface, both Bourne’s and Williamson’s novels take a stance in line with Fromm’s philosophy. Evie thrashes out her condition with her therapist, who presents the

position that “[t]here is no normal, Evelyn. There’s only what’s normal to you” (*Am I Normal Yet?* 419); to which Evie exclaims, “[i]f there is no normal then, if we’re all just massive freaks in our own special ways – why am I here? Why am I on medication? Why do I see you every week?” (420). Yet neither *The Art of being Normal* nor *Am I Normal Yet?* goes so far as to fully engage with the idea that society’s conceptualisation of ‘normal’ is potentially damaging.⁴ Although the protagonists rebel to some degree against dominant cultural norms that surround them as teenagers – recognising the value of friendship and family over boyfriends and romance, in Evie’s case, and reconfiguring the end-of-school ball into a celebration of oddness and outsiders, in Kate and Leo’s – on the whole their interrogation of normalcy stops at their own individual identity. Bourne’s novel turns the notion of being normal and fitting in on its head through the wise homilies of Evie’s younger sister, Rose, who complains that Evie’s obsession with this aim is boring: “and you’re extraordinary, Evie. Promise me you’ll stop trying to stop being you” (413). Kate’s dad offers similar, if less saccharine, advice to his daughter about accepting the non-normative aspects of her selfhood in Williamson’s text: “who wants to be normal anyway? Fancy that on your gravestone. ‘Here lies so-and-so. They were entirely normal’” (317). These motivational speeches guide the teenage protagonists towards an understanding of their own selves as unique and interesting, a fundamentally liberal humanist recognition of their agency and importance as actors in the world they inhabit, rather than a critique of that world itself.

It is notable, too, that both Evie and Kate tackle their identity crises from positions of relative hegemony; that is, middle-class whiteness. These identifiers happen to also reflect the contemporary British YA publishing and academic worlds, as Haru Takiuchi and Melanie Ramdarshan Bold have pointed out. Takiuchi notes that “the voices of the British working class” have been “continually neglected” (3) while Ramdarshan Bold shows how “there is an under-representation of creative works that reflect the changing nature of British identity and society” (4) in terms of race and ethnicity. Such criticism calls into question what being British means, challenging “the notion of a fixed and singular British identity” (Ramdarshan Bold 4) or rendering any attempt to pin down social or cultural unity in the context of nationality into the “equivalent of chasing shadows” (Bradford 177). National identity may not be the primary existential concern of the teenage characters in the texts I explore in this article, but it underlines and subtly directs their ways of being in the fictional versions of the world constructed for them. Since white people and other powerful groups “colonise the

4 Evie’s outburst opens up larger questions about social and political attitudes towards mental health that are dealt with more comprehensively in Melvin Burgess’s *The Hit* (2013) and William Sutcliffe’s satirical YA novel, *Concentr8* (2015). Both are commentaries on class-based discontent and the power of governments and big business to control the masses through apparently legitimate pharmaceutical means. Burgess’s novel was written partly in response to the 2011 London riots, which he also discussed in an article titled “Rioters did what we’ve been doing for years” and Sutcliffe’s novel explicitly draws on the controversies around prescription of Ritalin to children and teens.

definition of normal” (Dyer 127), it is easy to unthinkingly correlate normal adolescence with the benefits of being able to move through space and society without friction and, subsequently, with the personal freedom of individuals to spend time interrogating their own subjectivity. By fitting into a neo-liberal ideology focused on “conceptions of the individual, the self” (McCallum 257), ‘normal’ fictional teenagers only represent part of the full breadth of experience of contemporary British youth. This experience may include erasure or encounters with prejudice and structural inequality. In Karen Sands O’Connor’s study of the role of race in the recent history of British children’s and YA literature, she argues that “Black Britons are a part of Britain, and because of this, their experience is a British experience – something that is not (or shouldn’t be) a niche interest, negatively compared with the ‘universal’ experience of white Britons” (187-88), and the same might be said of working-class Britons and other minority or disadvantaged groups whose lives all intersect with ideas of what normal adolescence means and are embedded to some degree in nationally inflected concepts of ordinariness. As Fiona McCulloch puts it, in children’s and YA fiction there is the potential for “geophysical and imaginative landscapes [to] intertwine, charting new routes and roots of Britishness” (9), and these landscapes inevitably support versions of everyday life shaped by class, socio-economic status, and ethnicity, as well as age and nationhood.

Asking what normal means for teenage characters only gets us so far in understanding textual representations of lived experience, then. Moreover, adolescence is a stage of life often defined by contradictory urges to be normal and to feel different: to be like everyone else and to be unique. The drive to stand out is potentially as damaging as attempting to fit in. Writing in 2011, youth counsellor Nick Luxmoore made a case that young people of the twenty-first century are seduced into thinking they must be extraordinary in ways that are demanding or plain impossible. According to Luxmoore, Generation Z – those just coming into their mid-teens as he was writing – are beset by anxiety about not excelling or, conversely, “set out to be exceptional” (17) through negative means, by acting in ways that are aggressive, selfish, or entitled. The patterns that Luxmoore identifies in real-world conditions have also been noted as shaping YA fiction, particularly the popular fantasy and dystopia trends that emerged in the 2000s and especially in the creation of female heroes (Donnelly; Phillips). Luxmoore’s suggestion is not to transform a potentially pathological society, as Fromm might prefer, but to use social means to teach young people that, “in fact, ordinariness is fine; ordinariness is the glue that holds society together; ordinariness is what we have in common” (17). While it is not the purpose of literary criticism to teach young people or to make a moral case for adolescents to be or behave in any particular way, within the pages of fictional texts or in the real world, Luxmoore’s focus on ordinariness is valuable. For my purposes, it offers up a new perspective on YA fiction and, by focusing on common markers of experiences of the routine, familiar, and mundane, presents new critical tools for examining contemporary representations of youth.

BRITISH ORDINARINESS: CUPS OF TEA

The centrality of ordinary phenomena to an understanding of human experience has been identified by a number of cultural theorists, in projects such as Barthes' *Mythologies* (1957) and Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984), and in the work of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham (1964-), as well as in more recent forays into the everyday that take account of domestic objects, mundane places, and routine activities (for example: Appadurai; Brown; Freedgood; Highmore; Miller; Moran; Scott). My own approach takes on board Joe Moran's conceptual interest in the banal and the importance of observing boringness when "reading" the everyday (11) as a means of understanding shared types of adolescent experience, in particular. Moran's plea for a "necessary concreteness" in the study of the mundane, functioning "alongside an awareness of the increasing globalisation of everyday practices" (ix) frames my concern with British authors and a lived reality that is national rather than international. I also recognise that YA fiction represents a rich body of work in which what it means to be ordinary can be thoroughly interrogated. Fiction, in general, can act as a forum in which the everyday is animated in ways that are "easily recognised by readers" (de Certeau 70): as Ben Highmore explains, books are not just aesthetic objects of contemplation but also "part of the communal circulation of affects and passions" (xi). This to-and-fro between lived experience and recognition of that experience is one reason for continuing to pay attention to the literature offered to young people.

Ordinariness is easy to overlook. Fictional cups of tea like the ones shared by Kate and her parents rarely seem to offer much in terms of plot or character development, or thematic meaning. Barthes might consider them formally and structurally useful only as they signify the illusion of a concrete reality in the literary world created by a text, halting the "vertigo of notation" ("The Reality Effect" 145). To put it another way, cups of tea, like other insignificant gestures and objects in the realist novel, allow a reader time to pause and gather breath, to focus energies elsewhere in interpreting and appreciating. The same function pertains in lived reality. The ritual of boiling a kettle, pouring hot water, adding milk and sugar, and sitting companionably to drink, acts to punctuate the mundanity of everyday life with a burst of easy and recognisable pleasure: it "quenches thirst, heals and sustains [...] brings well-being, harmony, politeness, conviviality and hospitality" (Saber 8). Tea is everywhere in contemporary British YA fiction, to a degree that it at first appears to primarily denote "the dullness of pure referentiality" (viii), as Cyril Fischer puts it; a simple way of invoking a shared socio-material world in which characters exist and one that readers can recognise. Cups of tea appear as forms of comfort, as accompaniments to social occasions, or as markers of pure ordinariness in all genres. In *Am I Normal Yet?*, Evie's friend Amber asks if she is doing "being a teenager wrong" by preferring "a nice cup of tea and a chat" to a night out listening to loud music (108); in Cat Clarke's melodramatic romance *Entangled* (2011), Grace's best friend Sal makes "two gigantic cups of tea" (241-42) to soothe her after she has argued with her boy-

friend; in Juno Dawson's horror novel *Say Her Name* (2014),⁵ Bobbie and her boyfriend visit an elderly woman in the village hoping to find out more about the death of the schoolgirl who is now haunting them, and are offered tea from a teapot in china cups (185-86); while in the first chapter of Melvin Burgess's fantastic realist *The Lost Witch* (2018), the heroine Bea encounters the spirits of three witches and experiences a vision of multiple worlds, but in the second chapter she goes downstairs to find her parents having breakfast as normal, "with cups of tea and bacon butties" (15). Tea, in these examples, is generic, with no further personalisation in terms of the type of tea or amount of milk or sugar added. The specific details do tell the readers something about context though: "gigantic cups of tea" (like the "massive" ones shared between Kate and her parents in *The Art of Being Normal*) help represent an assumed generosity inherent in the beverage, or in those offering it, as does the "nice" cup of tea; whereas a china cup suggests a more fragile interaction.

It is possible, considering the frequency with which they feature in fictional texts, that these 'cuppas' (to use the British English colloquialism) should be left to flounder "in the shallows of the literal" (Fischer viii). Yet, as Daniel Miller states, the less we are aware of certain material objects, "the more powerfully they can determine our expectations, by setting the scene and ensuring appropriate behaviour" (49). Tea is more than a refreshing drink: its brewing and consumption opens up a range of meanings. A focus on mundane objects in fiction, like cups of tea, has been shown by critics such as Elaine Freedgood, Naomi Schor, and Bill Brown to have the potential to be illuminating: not just to reveal obvious relationships between things and meanings that authors make use of to enrich their narratives, but to provide a kind of blueprint for how these things operate both within and outside of the textual world as entities in and of themselves, and contributors to the world of the everyday. There are, moreover, specific ideas of nation that circulate around tea. As cultural critic Stuart Hall once asked, "what does anybody in the world know about an English person except that they can't get through the day without a cup of tea?" (49), an observation I shall return to shortly.

Patrice Lawrence admits that her white foster family "drank a lot of tea" while her Caribbean heritage introduced her to cocoa tea made with condensed milk and green tea leaves.⁶ It is not surprising, then, that her novel *Indigo Donut* opens with an evocative scene from Indigo's early childhood, set in an abandoned sitting room with tea centre stage:

There was the smell: old tea mugs and burnt toast and smeared plastic takeaway boxes. [...] She remembered how the last few jelly beans had rolled out on to the floor in front of her, stabs of colour between the ashtrays and crumpled cigarette papers. Or had they been M&Ms? (1)

5 See J. Dawson in references.

6 In personal correspondence with the author, 12 June 2020.

The infant Indigo is kept silent with sweets while behind the bedroom door her mother is murdered. The remnants of unwholesome meals that blur into each other – burnt breakfast and takeaway dinner, as well as sweet snacks – are surrounded by an indeterminate number of “old tea mugs”. These objects of ordinariness work to destabilise any idea of normality: the potentially cosy environment is rendered dangerous and inhuman, and the ability of tea to soothe is undermined. Immediately following this uncomfortable scene, the reader is introduced to Indigo’s current domestic setting. Indigo, now seventeen years old, is shown in her foster mother’s kitchen, using an empty tea mug to catch a spider, and her foster brother, Felix, is reviewing their house “Chart”, a list of tasks and rewards that keep the household functioning (4-5). This world is pragmatic and sometimes borders on the chaotic – foster mother Keely tells Indigo that they are “out of yoghurts” and that she doesn’t have much to put in a sandwich (7) – but it reveals a dynamic family who ‘make do’ with the domestic tools they have, and includes none of the clear markers of poverty and neglect apparent in the earlier scenes.

The shifts between these worlds emphasises the precarity of Indigo’s young life, as she faces the prospect of turning eighteen and being cut off from the support of foster care. Her life has been defined by the trauma of her mother’s death as well as the internalised fear that she has inherited a predisposition for pathological rage from the murderer, who she believes was her birth father. She is described as “a walking explosion” (28) and “Big Bang Girl” (59) by one peer at school, tapping into racial stereotypes of the ‘angry Black woman’ (see Lorde). Measured against statistical norms, Indigo’s experiences and sense of self are not common, and yet the narrative ensures that Indigo exists within a milieu that is likely to be familiar and recognisable to a broad range of readers. Lawrence, whose parents were Trinidadian and Italian, was fostered by a family in Brighton for part of her early childhood (Lawrence, “An Interview”) and had a career in policy development for the National Children’s Bureau before turning to writing. Her personal and expert knowledge is matched by a recognition of the power of ordinary objects to signify well beyond their everyday function in narratives shaped by race and class.

Indigo’s unstable home life is portrayed in marked contrast to her boyfriend’s. In Bailey’s middle-class household, rather than acting as a means of bodily and psychological sustenance (or the lack of it), tea is weaponised in social interactions. When Bailey brings Indigo home after she gets into a fight at school, his father, Ed, lurks in the kitchen, shakes Indigo’s hand, and generally attempt to be “cool” (85):

Behind Dad the kettle clicked off. Hopefully, he’d make his tea and go. Nope. No such luck. Dad leaned against the work surface, settling in.

Bailey followed Indigo down. “Dad, your water’s boiled.”

“So it has.” Dad looked from one to the other. “So what are you two up to?” (84)

More usually represented as a social lubricant, tea-making in this episode works metonymically to outline the awkward intrusions Bailey’s parents feel they can make into his life. Although Ed and Bailey’s mother, Viv, were left-wing Black radicals in their youths, spending much of their early life together “on protest marches” (251), they represent a more reserved liberalism as mature adults, working as a social worker and special needs teacher. Their apparently laid-back parenting is tested by Bailey’s normal teenage desires and behaviours: later in the plot they burst in on him in his bedroom in bed with Indigo. Here, in the kitchen scene, Ed uses tea as an excuse to loiter conspicuously and probe Indigo for details of her background. Bailey’s passive-aggressive offer to “make your tea for you” finally sends his father “thumping” upstairs (84, 85) in an inversion of the more usual trope of an adolescent tantrum. The angst is relatively mild, however, comically reflecting stereotypes of middle-class British reserve.

A similarly tense kitchen-based exchange occurs between Bailey and his Nigerian friend Austin, who is angry for being abandoned during a pub gig when Bailey disappears with Indigo. Bailey brings biscuits as a peace offering and is subjected to a series of hostile moves via the process of tea making. Austin “snatch[es]” teabags and “thr[ows] them in mugs” (263-64); then he complains about the choice of biscuit, is upset when one crumbles “back into the mug” as he dunks it into his tea (265), and finally launches one at Bailey’s nose (266). On one hand this episode works on the level of slapstick, parodying the supposedly civilised adult custom of drinking tea together as a salve for arguments or catastrophes: as sociologist Kate Fox puts it in her humorous study, *Watching the English*, tea “is still believed, by English people of all classes, to have miraculous properties” (312). On the other hand, Austin’s competency in wielding kettle, tea bags, and even coasters to protect his mother’s impeccable kitchen (Bailey sits at “the only wooden table he’d ever seen that had no rings on it” (253)) reflects the notion that adolescents are in the process of entering the reality of such rituals. This is the habitus of contemporary everyday life for British teenagers.

Lawrence’s Black characters drink tea without explicitly acknowledging its cultural history and links with colonial trade and oppression. Other YA texts hint at this “social life of things”, to use Arun Appardurai’s term, or the “fugitive meaning of apparently non symbolic objects” in Freedgood’s words (4). The teenage heroine of Laura Dockrill’s 2018 *Big Bones*, BB, makes a cup of tea for her sister who has broken her leg because “a cup of tea *can* fix everything” (262), and her description of this ritual taps into broader discourses around the commodity itself:

Dove’s sleeping on the sofa. I try not to disturb her while I make tea, gently pouring hot water on top of the teabags, watching the triangle balloon beneath and the brown

leaves whip up like a tree in a storm. The water, tinted immediately, a lagoon; the teabag, a sleeping sea monster, waiting to surface.

Milk brings on a silent storm of rain and thunder and swirling skies. I spin the spoon quietly, not allowing even a tinkle. Mustn't wake my sleeping sister. (261)

The monsoon imagery offers BB a way of expressing her internal turmoil over her sister's accident, but also implicitly highlights her culinary expertise, connecting the homely comfort of tea with its Indian sub-continental origins. She has learned about the value of drinking tea in hot weather to cool you down from her Filipino-Irish boyfriend Max, thus complicating her cultural knowledge. There is a hint of the addict's ritual in the description, not least because the sea monster and swirling skies bring to mind dragons and clouds of smoke that could easily signify opium use. Although it is likely to be missed by target readers, Dockrill may be making a sly reference to George Orwell's famous line in his 1937 work *The Road to Wigan Pier*, in which he suggests that "tea is an Englishman's opium" (89), an allusion to the emotional dependency on unhealthy foodstuffs and sweet drinks he argued the northern working classes displayed. The ordinariness of the cup of tea transcends these kinds of cultural and historical truths for Lawrence's teenage characters, who are busy navigating their way through personal and social challenges in *Indigo Donut*. Nevertheless, the novel is underpinned by the idea of British youth as it might be defined in these terms. When Hall wrote his tongue-in-cheek statement about tea and Englishness, he went on to remind his reader that "they don't grow it in Lancashire, you know" (48-9). His argument that Englishness is not homogeneous, but rather made up of "outside history" as well as "inside history" (Hall 49), speaks to issues of racial difference and a working-class childhood spent in care that are central to Lawrence's depictions of tea-drinking adolescents. Tea crosses boundaries of race and class, but also of generations. It features equally often in narratives of urban, suburban, and rural youth. Despite significant differences in setting and style, Ally Kennen's *Quarry* (2011) shares many of *Indigo Donut's* concerns with family dynamics, class, and mundane domestic settings. In Kennen's novel, fifteen-year-old Michael, also known as Scrapy, lives with his dad, older sister, and grandfather on the family-owned scrapyards in the semi-rural south-west of England. Scrapy is coming to terms with the fact that his mother has left her husband and deserted their home, inadvertently burdening her son, not only with the emotional fallout of this separation, but also with increased household responsibilities. As his father focuses on business and his sister considers moving out, Scrapy feels compelled to look after his grandfather, who has a form of dementia and is otherwise somewhat neglected. The novel is set against the backdrop of the titular quarry, a local landmark that acts as a sinister setting for some of the action, as well as the key to the dysfunctional behaviour of Scrapy's father.

As in *Indigo Donut*, tea appears early in *Quarry*, as Scrappy makes his grandad Ted a cuppa to settle him after he has gone “wandering” (7) and ended up on the hard shoulder of the local motorway. Ted lives in a dilapidated cottage next to the scrapyards, with an unpleasant cat, Jasper. The cottage kitchen smells of “damp and something rotting” (9): “The room has an old electric cooker and a small table. A sink unit sags in the corner. There’s a tiny twist of something on the dusty old mat by the back door; I think it is mouse intestine” (9). Violence hangs over the scene in the form of the cat’s unfortunate prey, but also in an aggressive interruption from Scrappy’s father, Thomas, who attacks Ted and then locks him in the cottage to stop him getting into further trouble. As Thomas shouts at the old man, Scrappy hovers in the background holding two cups of tea, “gripping one of the them by the rim” (11) so that it burns his hand. The cottage used to be relatively idyllic when Scrappy’s grandmother was alive to keep it clean and pleasant, but under Ted’s uncertain stewardship it becomes a setting more redolent of Orwell’s “mapping [of] class divide” and the living conditions of the poor (Humble 32) or of the ‘kitchen sink dramas’ of the 1950s, such as John Osborne’s *Look Back in Anger* (1959). The kitchen’s bare furnishings are brightened only by mouse guts, and the tension of the scene is marked both by a generational inversion, as Scrappy cares for and offers sustenance to his elders, and by the irony of his well-meaning cups of tea, which cause pain rather than pleasure.

Scrappy’s world reflects a very specific reality, but is that of a kind experienced by many young people living in modern Britain. His home is a flat above a salvage yard, powered with a generator and often strewn with rubbish and bits of old cars. After his mother leaves, his father drifts further into depression, and he is to all intents and purposes left to fend for himself. A point of contrast between Scrappy’s ordinary and everyday existence and others living in different circumstances is provided for the reader in *Quarry* through the home of his best friend, Silva Moxley. Much like Bailey’s home in *Indigo Donut*, the Moxley household is a model of the quintessential liberal middle-class household. It displays a bohemian squalor that Scrappy finds fascinating:

Books are piled up on the floor next to a chewed dog basket and the big dangling light shades are draped with cobwebs and mottled with fly poo. The kitchen has a big cast-iron stove which burns logs all winter, and is laden with drying washing, food debris and a half-eaten pan of stew. (68)

It is worth observing the careful parallels between the Moxley’s kitchen and Scrappy’s grandfather’s. Similar levels of grime and dilapidation are in evidence, but here the effect is excessive shabbiness rather than sparseness and decline. To underscore the disparity and the poor quality of care that he has got used to, Scrappy explains that Silva’s dad Kennet “makes us each a hot bacon roll and a mug of tea. The last time someone made me a meal was over a month ago” (73). This small offering resonates strongly, not least because of the

“miraculous” connotations of the cup of tea understood to be part of the fabric of ordinary English life. Kennen herself grew up in a family who fostered, on an organic farm on Exmoor, which she describes as “[w]holesome with a bit of grit and life” (Pauli n.p.), and her background mirrors Kennet’s artless care, itself an act originating from the unaware privilege that comes with property and security.

Adolescents live out a range of realities in these texts: urban, rural, poor, affluent, multicultural. They share a taste for a good cup of tea, having seemingly developed a sophisticated enough palate to distinguish themselves from younger characters, who might choose chocolate or milk instead.⁷ They are shown to understand the rituals and meanings attached to tea, having imbibed these as a function of living within a specifically British habitus. They are also portrayed as being unknowingly constructed in part via the complex national and classed symbolism of tea drinking, which establishes them as something more than their individual struggles and desires: part of a community of the everyday. As Scrappy tells himself at one point, he needs to do what “normal people do” and “boil the kettle for tea” (199). Scrappy’s words invoke a national activity that aims at a form of communal or personal resolution and harmony. Other markers of ordinariness highlight that common experience is not always nourishing, nor does it always bring unity or parity. Bus travel, for instance, is likely to be a recognisable mode of transport for the implied audience of YA novels that has the potential to evoke feelings of freedom or fear, depending on the social status and lived experiences of individual readers. I turn now to the trope of catching a bus to ask how this ordinary action both establishes a shared fabric of mundane reality and creates a contested space for the enactment of the adolescent ‘everyman’.

THE ADOLESCENT ‘EVERYMAN’: CATCHING THE BUS

Geographer Doreen Massey has suggested that a good deal of British life “consists of waiting in a bus-shelter with your shopping for a bus that never comes” (162). The bus stop and bus journeys feature as markers of ordinariness with similar regularity as cups of tea in British YA fiction, and create a comparative fabric of shared familiarity. At the same time, there are specifically class-based (and gendered) qualities to these places and activities. Moran notes that waiting for a bus is a “well-known British tradition” but that bus travel has a low cultural status and is disproportionately used by “the elderly, the poor, women, children and teenagers” (3). This is a reality reflected in contemporary YA fiction. In *Indigo Donut*, for instance, when Indigo and Bailey go on their first date, they choose the Number 56 and Number 38 London buses as their low-cost venues: the specificity of the route numbers

7 Coffee drinking features widely in YA realism as a shared cultural ritual; there is not space to delve into the connotations of this hot drink here, but scrutiny would almost certainly reveal an alternative narrative of ordinariness offering themes of glamour and worldliness.

contributing to the everyday mundanity of the event. The bus they use to travel home from school is filled with “a mix of younger kids from another school”, an “old woman”, and a “trampy-looking bloke” (67, 68), as well as their fellow teenage pupils, and in Lawrence’s earlier *Orangeboy* (2016), when Marlon takes the bus in central London he is jostled by “backpacker bloke” and a “young mixed race girl” with a kid in a buggy (366). This particular aspect of what Barthes terms “aesthetic verisimilitude” (“The Reality Effect” 145) has implications for the realist form of the novels examined here, marking adolescent experience as part of a wider everyday milieu. In Keren David’s *Salvage* (2014), sixteen-year-old Cass actively avoids getting the bus unless it is raining, when she is forced to use public transport and finds herself crushed on the back seat next to a “large elderly lady, whose cat hissed and spat from a closed basket on her knee” (2). She tracks “the raindrops as they dribbled down the glass” (2) in an act defining boredom, and possibly also as a nod to familiar dreary weather patterns in the UK. In *The Art of Being Normal*, Kate and Leo first discuss their experiences of being trans on a drizzly night under “the bright lights of the bus shelter” (214) and in *Entangled*, teenagers Grace and Nat first meet while waiting for a bus in the rain (of course): Grace can “hear it pattering against the roof of the shelter, and the slick sound of car tyres on wet tarmac” (88). Nat ends up paying for her fare, as she has forgotten her purse, then reluctantly admits “that he still hadn’t passed his driving test. Hence the need to get buses everywhere” (92). These examples all work to construct the lived reality of these teenagers as decidedly non-glamorous.

In contrast with the heroes of the conventional road trip narrative, which “is often viewed as a requisite coming-of-age experience for young North American, white, heterosexual males” in US YA (Vanfosson 81), the protagonists of contemporary British YA are frequently limited in resources as well as being too young to drive, so are consigned to public transport, which is often slow and grubby. Even when a protagonist can drive and access a car, such as in Claire Furniss’ *How Not to Disappear* (2016), the journey is hardly the stuff of a great motoring adventure. Eighteen-year-old Hattie drives her great-aunt Gloria to the northern coastal town Whitby to chase a mystery that has been obscured by Gloria’s dementia, but the trip is not much like the freedom-seeking, high-octane film *Thelma and Louise*, which Hattie had imagined as a model for the kind of friendship and excitement that would develop on their way to Yorkshire. Hattie is a novice motorist, but her fear of driving unsupervised is transformed to frustration and boredom almost immediately when they reach their first motorway and “grind to a complete halt. The car is stifling; there’s something wrong with the air conditioning [...] Gloria is asleep” (141). As Hattie wryly reflects, “Thelma and Louise would have been a v different film if they’d have had to contend with the M25 clockwise” (142). Travel, on the public bus or private motorway, is often portrayed as decidedly boring in these ordinary narratives.

Miller points out that “much of what makes us what we are exists, not through our consciousness or body, but as an exterior environment that habituates and prompts us” (49).

YA criticism has acknowledged the crucial part that social structures have to play in constructing adolescent subjectivity (see, in particular, Trites) but less attention is paid to the built or transport environment as a meaningful part of the habitus. The bus ride provides British YA authors with the opportunity to construct everyday geography in the passing scenery, at the same time as they move the characters and plot onwards. Like the visual images recorded by street photographer Tom Wood in his 1998 collection *All Zones Off Peak*, which documented Wood's "bus odyssey" in the streets and suburbs of 1980s Liverpool, the fictional images of bus culture in YA fiction present a quotidian side of their protagonists' lived environment that inflects their extra-ordinariness. Wood's repeated, mundane images of mostly working-class commuters and the peripheral spaces they briefly inhabit on these public journeys uncovered "historical and political contexts that are never acknowledged as such, obscured as they are behind the apparent inertia of daily routine" (Moran 27). YA realism can reveal similar contexts, albeit in artfully constructed passages rather than the reportage of documentary photography. For instance, waiting for Indigo to meet him for their date outside Dalston Junction – a rail and bus interchange in the north-London area where he lives – Bailey provides a sociological snapshot of the area:

Dad said when he and Mum first came to Dalston, it was rough, with drug couriers on bikes outside the betting shop and prostitutes in the abandoned houses. Now there were fountains in the square by the library and they'd even done up the kebab shop with red leather banquettes. The bar opposite the station was jammed [...]. The workmen's barriers by the station made the pavement too narrow and everyone walking past was jostling him. (*Indigo Donut* 158)

This regenerated north London suburb is a metonym of the socioeconomic and political changes that span the lives of Bailey's parents' generation in this text, as well as the teenage characters at the heart of the narrative. Lawrence makes it clear that the gentrification has its limitations and is not a straightforward indicator of progress: the elegance of an urban square with fountains and a seat of learning such as a library is undercut by the aspirational tone of the leather banquettes in a food outlet more often associated with post-drinking culture than with fine dining. More obliquely, Bailey is "jostl[ed]" by anonymous members of the public heading towards their own bus or train in a manner that suggests the space is not so much a shared one of civilised leisure, but one made practically uncomfortable by its ever-increasing commercial development and the mundane repairs and building work that have to take place for this to continue.

A more radical commentary on the built environment, and an explicitly post-Brexit one, appears in Nikesh Shukla's urban thriller *Run Riot* (2018). Standing on the roof of her home on a high-rise estate, teenager Taran "breathes in the thick acrid pollution, the gaseous exhausts [...]. She breathes in the light from the cars on the motorway a mile or so away [...]"

She breathes in the steely tang of the cranes that loom like mechanised giraffes further out” (12). As with Lawrence’s picture of a north London in development, or Kennen’s backdrop to Scrapy’s story, in which his school has been sold off to a construction company – “[t]his time next year, if they sort out the flood barriers, there will be houses lined up all over the field” (158) – the building works in the distance indicate a “better” future for some ordinary people, although not necessarily those like Taran or her mother, who has to travel 90 minutes on the motorway to get to the hospital where she is employed as a nurse, only to be “racially abused on a daily basis by Leave voters” (*Run Riot* 13). Each of these novels is set against a recognisable vision of a country in the throes of a housing crisis and increasing risks of flooding, and a context of failing social services and public institutions under considerable strain following New Labour’s regeneration projects during the 2000s and more recent Conservative cuts. Yet it is important not to ignore ordinary happiness, which also appears in these quotidian scenes. In *Run Riot*, Taran also observes “the happy kids riding bikes through their estates, the old grannies and nonnies and bas sitting at bus stops with their shopping bags talking about the day” (12). Shukla, whose editorial work and writing for adults – such as the 2016 essay collection *The Good Immigrant: 21 Writers Explore What It Means to be Black, Asian & Minority Ethnic in Britain Today* – is also overtly politically engaged, makes it clear that this is the ordinary fabric of lived experience that YA fiction like his has a responsibility to show, because the local news producers only want to film “the threatening yoots with their hoods up” (*Run Riot* 13). Bus journeys and the infrastructure of stops, shelters, and hubs that support them can be read as a blueprint outlining some of these complex social contexts. Like cups of tea, which can cut across class, race, and age because of their ubiquity – their practical invisibility – public transport offers authors a tool for examining the unexamined everyday and the ordinary experiences of a range of different adolescent characters.

The low status and relatively unmonitored space of the public bus can be treacherous. Buses in *Indigo Donut* do not “glide” (311) like the “new and bright” (309) overland train the protagonists take for a cultural day-trip to a museum; more often they “jolt” (261) or are slow because “the driver decided that the empty bus lane was just decoration” (274). Unlike the getaway car or more extravagant modes of transport such as an aeroplane, which often acts as a signifier of departure at a narrative climax,⁸ buses are not a reliable means of escape. Indeed, they often put individuals into close proximity with each other in ways that can transform dangerously from communal to mob-like. Trying to lose the tramp who has been pursuing him (who is revealed later in the story to be Indigo’s father “JJ”), Bailey jumps on a bus but is soon trapped by his action as surely as the bus is “caught at traffic lights” (201): “The bus shifted a few metres and stopped [...] There was a movement beside Bailey and a flutter of shadow on the window, the smell of old alcohol and stale skin. [...] JJ sat next to

8 James Procter discusses the airport as a signifier of departure in narratives of diaspora, in *The Postcolonial Everyday* (67), noting that they usually appear at the beginning or climax of a story to mark the exotic, but can also be used to disrupt such expectations (in Britflick movies such as *East is East* (1999), for instance).

him, so close their thighs were almost touching” (201). The encounter is uncomfortable because it is so mundane. Every paying traveller has the right to find their own space on a bus, even if that means sitting close to someone who does not want them on the next chair. British cultural norms often also demand minimal engagement on public transport, however threatening a situation may feel, so that the only shared response Bailey receives is a sympathetic smile from the woman across the aisle (202).

In other narratives, ordinary everyday decorum is exposed to be nothing more than an agreed method of maintaining social order. It is no coincidence that the bus functions in a figure of speech meant to articulate this very concept. When the UK’s Attorney General, Geoffrey Cox, referred to the classic legal trope of the “Man on the Clapham Omnibus” in Brexit negotiations over the Irish trade border in 2019 (Barker), he invoked a familiar fictional person meant to denote reasonableness of a particularly British kind, implying the central role such a figure continues to have in creating everyday life – ordinary people doing ordinary things – in a new national future. In Khan’s *I am Thunder*, Muzna takes a bus that stinks “like old basketballs” and is subjected to a racist attack by a “woman with a pixie crop and enough piercings to make her ears look spiral-bound” (258). The bus driver does not intervene, simply demanding that the passengers “Keep it down, back there!” (259), implicitly calling for someone to police the situation with British reason or reasonableness. There is no Man on the Clapham Omnibus in this scene, however. There is a man in a “Ted Baker suit” (259) who brushes past in a hurry to get away, a “cultural hybrid” who might be called “Bluewater Man” instead (Collins n.p.), dressed as he is in middle-of-the-road fashion bought at an out-of-town shopping centre and exuding uneasy middle-class aspirations. Neither the working-class authority figure nor this twenty-first-century everyman representative offer any help or outrage in the face of the everyday racist incident. It takes an elderly woman and a Rastafarian – two identities notably marginalised in modern Britain – to stand up for Muzna and convert the bus from a site of seething hostility to a community of support.

A similar episode plays out in Savita Kalhan’s *That Asian Kid* (2019), when the Indian protagonist Jeeron and his friends are observed with suspicion by a middle-aged woman waiting at a bus shelter. While Muzna in *I am Thunder* wears a hijab that expressly marks her religious beliefs and customs, Jeeron wears a hoodie, the common uniform of urban adolescence, recognising that this signifies “juvenile offender” to the older woman, even though he’s only wearing the hood up because it is raining (128). She looks at them as if they are “carrying an infectious disease” (128), only to be gently corrected by Jeeron’s elderly neighbour who arrives at the bus stop and pointedly states that they are “[s]uch nice boys” (131). In addition to casual racism, Khan’s and Kalhan’s texts explicitly relate their adolescent protagonists’ experiences to wider trends in racially-based discrimination in the last ten years. In *I am Thunder*, Muzna’s boyfriend’s brother nearly succeeds in bombing the London underground, in a parallel to the 7 July London attacks in 2005 and terrorist events such as

9/11. Slavoj Žižek has argued that these events, and others like them, marked a “return to the Real” (19) for Western consciousness, revealing troubling everyday experiences that often seemed hidden from view. As well as being ordinary modes of transportation, buses are political objects. From the Montgomery bus boycott of 1955 and the lesser known, but equally potent, Bristol bus boycott of 1963, the question of who can travel and how was crucial for twentieth-century civil rights movements in the US and UK. The graphic image of a double-decker bus with its top deck blown off in a London square in 2005 resonated for a twenty-first-century British population that had been working hard to reinvent itself as multicultural (Hall) and resulted in fears that “[n]ormality will not be the same as normality was before” (Campbell and Laville n.p.). Although buses have certainly signified in positive ways – at the beginning of the decade, the London bus featured in the closing ceremony of the Beijing Olympic Games in 2008 and the countdown sequence for the opening of London 2012 as a symbol of Britain welcoming the world in, for instance (“London Takes Over as Olympic Host”) – they are more often at the centre of negative news items: as the target for London rioters in 2011, or the victim of the Conservative Government’s economic cuts as rural services are shut down. The novels I have examined here offer a close-up vision of the bus as an ordinary site for re-negotiating allegiance and difference in contemporary Britain. The episodes can be read as efforts to re-examine the lived experience of adolescents as ultimately defined by material conditions, cultural tensions, and a history that stretches back beyond their own existence. In drawing together some of the points from this article, I would like to attempt a brief historicising of British YA itself, as a literature with a past as well as a present.

CONCLUSION: YA REALITY EFFECTS AND LITERARY TRADITIONS

Cups of tea and bus journeys in realist British YA of the last ten years offer subtle commentaries on what it is to be young and British in a society that inscribes class and race in its everyday practices. Not all recent YA novels work with reality effects in this way. Some are littered with self-reflexive commentaries about the constructed nature of identity, the parodic potential of social media, and the instability of reality itself. Laura Steven’s *The Exact Opposite of Okay* (2018) directly addresses its own textual nature by beginning with a preface written by the narrator, Izzy, who explains that the book the reader has bought is made up of extracts copied and pasted from her blog detailing her experience of being at the heart of “a national slut-shaming scandal” (1). This text is also notable for its self-conscious lack of incidental detail. Although there is one scene in which Izzy and her grandmother Betty make tea, using “one of those unnecessarily heavy” kettles and filling “the biggest mugs” they can find (156), on the whole the protagonist expresses an exhaustion with such ordinary objects and mundane descriptions. She defends her artistic decisions in telling her story: “Okay, so

now that I'm turning this into a book I know I'm supposed to describe everything in great detail in order for my readers to be able to visualise the scene, but really, it's a school cafeteria – you all know what they look like” (30).

Such knowingness and self-referentiality can be read as old hat: contemporary reality itself is increasingly self-conscious and fictionalised, and as Sophie Vlacos points out, “postmodernist themes and devices have run out of steam” (102) so that much mainstream adult fiction of recent years has turned to expressing “the new sincerity” (109). Nick Bentley, Nick Hubble, and Leigh Wilson have pointed to the fatigue that might be felt in reading postmodern playfulness in the twenty-first century, as well as its political poverty when set against real-world issues: “it is difficult to ground an oppositional politics” – the kind that has seen a resurgence in twenty-first century Britain – against this kind of “ethical relativism” (16). Although a case might be made for the continued relevance of postmodern deconstruction for relatively inexperienced teen readers today, for whom literary playfulness may still be fresh and shocking, the novels I have explored in this article represent a concern with the real and tangible in their surface themes and in the connective tissue against which concrete experience is viewed. In this sense, I suggest that contemporary British realist YA might be located within a wider literary tradition than is often considered relevant. There are useful comparisons to be made with other national literatures, of course: the novels I have examined here could well be set alongside American realist YA by authors such as John Green or Angie Thomas, for instance. There are also themes that can be traced back to earlier publishing trends in teenage fiction, particularly in the ‘problem novels’ that emerged in the 1970s and 1980s and which addressed issues that continue to be of concern to British writers: identity, body image, mental health, family tensions, and social inequalities (Eccleshare). But in addition, the YA fiction I have sampled in this article writes into a broader genre of social realism, adhering to aesthetic verisimilitude as a way of depicting the realities of everyday life in Britain. In this sense, it enacts the same kind of moves that were considered radical amongst social realist writers for adults during the mid-twentieth century: those “visceral, candid depictions” of the everyday that aimed “to challenge aspects of the worlds they depicted” (Lee 161).

The Exact Opposite of Okay provides very sparse description of any concrete reality through reality effects such as objects or landscapes, although there are indicators of the cultural context of its American setting such as the school cafeteria and lockers and a local diner in which Betty works. Steven herself, who comes from northern England and lives in Newcastle, has explained that she set her story in the US, where revenge porn is illegal, because she “wanted to explore emotional aftermath, not legal aftermath” (“Interview with Laura Steven”); but there is also a case to be made for the increased global marketability of her story if it is not explicitly British. Reviews on Goodreads.com and Amazon.com often contain warnings to other readers that certain novels contain ‘British content’ as if this is a troubling or dangerous thing. The mundane descriptions of tea-drinking and bus journeys

function in a fundamentally different way to those of school lockers and diners, I would argue, which are so saturated with layers of cultural representation in film and TV for British readers that they become self-conscious visual representations of American-ness without necessarily getting at the lived experience of the everyday. Whether British YA authors in general are consciously responding to the prevalence of these dominant codes in constructing their own culturally-specific ordinary landscapes is hard to say, but alternative codes are certainly being laid down in these contemporary works. This is not to say that American ordinariness does not exist. Anglo-American author Patrick Ness deals in specifically American figures of ordinariness in his 2018 *Release*, for instance: his protagonist drinks “raspberry lemonade” at a Red Robin restaurant (156) and drives past a “closed 7-Eleven store” (53): examples of objects and actions that perform similar reality effects to tea-drinking and waiting at the bus shelter in a US context. It is also worth noting that I have analysed realist standalone novels in part as a project to bring them out of the shadows of blockbuster fantasy series and to focus on the portrayal of contemporary reality, but a framework of ordinariness might also be applied to non-realist works set in a recognisable Britain: Burgess’s *The Lost Witch*, to take just one example, locates its community of witches in a fictional version of Yorkshire that is saturated with signifiers of the everyday, including multiple cups of tea and a significant reference to the bakery chain Greggs (194), an expressly British business that has a reputation for cheap meat and pastry products as well as links to the north east of England and working-class culture. Useful work might be undertaken in the future to compare the way that these markers of ordinariness function across different national traditions and genres, a move that might help to debunk the discourse of universality that still underpins so much scholarship dealing in YA and associated theories of adolescence. Moreover, a concerted effort to pay attention to the minutiae of the worlds created by YA authors may present new ways of engaging with questions of difference and commonality in relation to young people, a move that is particularly urgent in the current context of global emergency. By examining the representation of diverse experiences set against that connective tissue of ordinariness which binds individuals and communities to the world in which they live, it is possible to shine a light on national stories of what it means to be adolescent in today’s uncertain world.

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