

# Floating Minds: How Young Adult Fiction Represents Forgetting in Old Age and Adolescence

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**Abstract:** YA novels increasingly tell stories about memory loss, from adolescent amnesia to cognitive decline in older age. This article examines the representation of forgetting in Jenny Downham's *Unbecoming*, Clare Furniss's *How Not to Disappear*, and Emily Barr's *The One Memory of Flora Banks*. Drawing on liberatory psychology, queer phenomenology, and theories of creative embodiment, it argues that dominant narratives of dementia and ageing might be challenged by analysing symbolic scenes of floating and falling.

**Keywords:** young adult fiction; memory; ageing; dementia; amnesia

Young adult (YA) novels increasingly tell stories about memory loss, from adolescent amnesia to cognitive decline in older characters. The growing number of narratives about dementia in books for children and young adults may be a response to broader cultural narratives about ageing and memory (Zimmermann), whilst the trend of 'suppressed traumatic memory' has been ascribed to the value of unreliable narrators in a body of literature that aims to make its readers think (Nikolajeva). YA authors growing up alongside the 'memory boom' – the cultural turn

towards examining the past through public and private records, including personal memory, that took place in the 1980s and 1990s (Winter) – may also be peculiarly well prepared to write about matters of forgetting.

Forgetting certainly provides fertile ground for imaginative literature, as characters do unpredictable things and memories become landscapes of revelation. In addition, protagonists who experience sudden or gradual loss of memory offer readers personal insights into what Mary Watkins and Helen Shulman call ‘psychological rupture’, which can ‘thrust’ an individual into ‘a radical space of pilgrimage’ (134). Liberatory psychology foregrounds the idea of life as a purposeful journey and a difficult life experience as a meaningful stage in this trip. Memory loss might be read, then, as one such challenging experience to be explored in fiction. The figurative language of the pilgrimage also corresponds with common conceptualisations of transitional age stages – in particular, adolescence as a liminal state in the process of becoming a full adult subject (McCallum; Waller *Constructing*) and late life as a movement towards the fourth age of dependency (Laslett; Gilleard and Higgs). The very notion of forgetfulness troubles the directional quality of the pilgrimage at both ends of the life course, since adolescent development relies on memories being laid down, and older age depends on the remembered past as a means of resolving issues around identity and finding meaning. Literary gerontologist Heike Hartung notes that narratives of dementia push against the limits of development and age narrative, ‘questioning notions of progress, autonomy and personhood’ (3). It is thus hard to reconcile memory loss with valuable moments of revelation and growth.

Memory problems as a narrative trope can function in another way, however – not as a stumbling block in a clearly defined journey, but as a shared discursive field in which the ground shifts and where bodies (as well as minds) become weightless, floating, or falling through airy,

watery, or snowy environments. Rupture here manifests as an undoing or unbecoming, whatever the age of the characters facing cognitive challenges, since forgetting (specifically dementia and other illnesses of the mind) ‘fundamentally upsets our imagining and experience of time itself’ (Falcus and Sako 6). In this article I make use of critical insights from ageing and memory studies, and from theories of creativity and movement, to examine the different social assumptions embedded in three recent British YA narratives of forgetting. I consider a pair of very similar novels featuring ageing characters with dementia and a third that centres around an adolescent figure with anterograde amnesia. Mary in Jenny Downham’s *Unbecoming* (2015) and Gloria in Clare Furniss’s *How Not to Disappear* (2016) are older characters portrayed as living with forms of dementia, and their stories interweave with a third-generation teenage protagonist to integrate the perspectives of old and young. Emily Barr’s *The One Memory of Flora Banks* (2017), on the other hand, features a teenage character living with trauma-induced anterograde amnesia. Previous studies of dementia in children’s and YA fiction have tended to investigate the depiction of those living with a degenerative condition and the individual and social implications for young people interacting with them, with a focus on the relative accuracy of portrayals or the value of fictional representation in aiding children’s emotional responses to lived encounters with dementia (Manthorpe; Sakai, Carpenter, and Rieger; Webb). Here, I am more interested in the imagery and language deployed in the creation of characters who forget; how this symbolic realm provides entry points for alternative ways of thinking about memory loss and ageing; and what the intersection of narratives about ageing ‘forgetters’ and youthful ones can illuminate about fictional minds across intergenerational divides. I argue that shared symbolism across these novels opens up fissures in conventional understandings of discrete life stages and life journeys. These narratives work to collapse divisions between generations and represent

forgetting as a creative act of radical pilgrimage that calls for disconnection from the material world. In particular, the dynamics of floating and falling suffuse these novels and provide a valuable framework for analysis. This framework offers a challenge to dominant images about memory and ageing, and underpins a radical and enabling reading of forgetting across the life course.

I begin by setting out what cultural critic Margaret Morganroth Gullette calls ‘age narratives’ (10) and show how these intersect with ‘dementia narratives’ in cultural discourses, especially children’s and YA literature. I then establish my analytical framework of floating and falling, spinning, and drifting, drawing on liberatory psychology, queer phenomenology, and theories of creative embodiment. In the main part of the article, I examine conventional ways that ageing and forgetting are represented through characters in *How Not to Disappear* and *Unbecoming*, before approaching these themes from a different angle by analysing symbolic scenes of floating and falling. Turning then to *The One Memory of Flora Banks*, I show how these same methods of reading allow us to ‘join the dots’ between youth and older age as they feature common moments of symbolic suspension.

### **Age Narratives and Dementia Narratives**

YA authors write into a body of work that is thematically concerned with growth, maturation, and looking ahead (Seelinger Trites; Waller *Constructing*) but that is structurally focused on the contained period of adolescence and subsequent early adulthood. For Downham and Furniss, the task of creating older protagonists alongside teenage heroes and heroines involves a tension between a forward-moving trajectory related to adolescent character development and disrupted temporalities engendered by memory loss and the anticipation of death in older characters. This

tension presents technical and ethical difficulties, as readers of *Unbecoming* and *How Not to Disappear* need to be fully engaged in the inner lives of younger and older figures and find points of connection with the realities of both those life stages. By attempting to represent the authentic lives of older characters living with ‘conditions that challenge the perception of and experience of time in various and very significant ways’ (Falcus and Sako 6), these authors also engage implicitly with age narratives, which help to organise cultural knowledge about ageing. Memory loss is also linked to ageing identities in cultural narratives, including fiction for young people. It is usually older characters who experience forms of dementia: the range of symptoms related to declining brain functions most commonly associated with memory loss and most often portrayed as Alzheimer’s disease. As Sarah Falcus and Katsura Sako note, ‘it is impossible to disentangle the discourse of dementia from discourses of ageing’ (5).

Popular age and dementia narratives can, as Rebecca Bitenc puts it, ‘perpetuate harmful myths’ and ‘foreclose possibilities of envisioning other modes of acting and being in the world’ (220). In the broad field of children’s and YA fiction in the later part of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, a number of age stereotypes have been prevalent. These include the wise old person, the hyperactive old person, the victim and the evil older person (Pinsent ‘Depiction’, ‘Crone’), and the ‘ageist tropes’ of the decline narrative, the infantilised senior, disregard of the old body, and the wise old mentor (Joosen). Those working in critical dementia studies have likewise identified common imagery that pervades cultural narratives of chronic cognitive disorders, such as Alzheimer’s, and encourages stigma and marginalisation. These include metaphors of plague, war, disaster, and invasion (Goldman; Zeilig; Zimmermann) and gothic tropes such as zombies, monsters, ruined houses, and fearful transformations (Behuniak; Goldman; Zimmermann). Although some of these tropes – particularly gothic elements – might

be found in the texts I analyse in this article, as I shall show, other ways of reading ageing through memory offer some respite, especially when forgetting plays a part in shaping the interior lives of both older and younger characters. Reading the memory loss of the youthful protagonist in *The One Memory of Flora Banks* alongside more conventional narratives of ageing and forgetting in *Unbecoming* and *How Not to Disappear* exposes alternative discourses and possibilities, and provides new spaces to ‘rewrit[e] the cultural dementia narrative’ (Zimmermann 143).

### **<A>Floating and Falling: an Analytical Framework**

The rupture of memory loss for older or younger characters in these YA novels divides those individuals from their past selves and locates them in the ‘radical space of pilgrimage’ that Watkins and Shulman consider to be potentially liberatory. Using insights from psychoanalysis and anthropology, these scholars argue that such rupture can result in disassociation and fatalism, but may also ultimately lead to transformation and a community of participation, and is, in fact, a crucial part of a life well lived (Watkins and Shulman 142–7). During the liminal period of rupture itself, they explain, ‘many people report a sense of floating in a space of meaninglessness and alienation without orientation’ (138), and while this state can be unsettling, it is essential in order to avoid ‘calcification’ over time. As Sara Ahmed puts it, in her *Queer Phenomenology*, ‘moments of disorientation are vital’ (157). Floating may seem to have no immediate or obvious tie to either the forward thrust associated with early stages of the age course or the decline into dependence commonly attached to the final stages. However, it does chime with the discourses of liminality that circulate around adolescence and around dementia, both being ontological states of uncertainty that might also be described as being unmoored and untethered.

Floating can also be aligned to falling, in terms of ‘prolonging a movement in mid-air’, and this action, according to dance theorist Ann Cooper Albright, gives us ‘an opportunity to think about moments in-between the beginning and an ending of a leap’ (39). These suspended moments are dangerous, of course, but they create possibilities. Albright sees falling or floating as ‘a dance with gravity’ (37). Extending her claim, I propose that living at any stage of life might be conceived of as a dance with ageing and memory. The processes of getting older (heading from the beginning towards the end of that leap) and the cognitive changes that may come with them are not necessarily things to be avoided, but inevitable forces that actually shape the way we are in the world. Albright’s work uses a photography exhibition by French artist Denis Darzacq called ‘La Chute’ or ‘The Fall’ (2006) to illustrate her ideas. This project captured young men on the streets of Paris performing dance moves, freezing them in dramatic poses that appear to show them hovering or floating just inches from the pavement below. One interpretation noted by Albright is that these individuals are marginalised – because they are young, dispossessed, and from the poorer parts of the city – but she explains that their images can also be read as full of potential, since they are just about to land and respond in dynamic ways to the forces of gravity. Older people are often perceived to be more likely to fall than teenagers. Indeed, ‘having a fall’ is seen as one of the everyday risks of ageing bodies. However, if the idea of falling is symbolically rendered as floating moments, in the way Darzacq’s photographs rendered the young men’s dance moves into suspended images, then the result is more liberatory than chronic. As Judith Halberstam argues, ‘under certain circumstances falling, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world’ (2–3). The acts of floating and falling are associated with a range of symbolic landscapes in my chosen novels, as

locations in which embodied realities can be cast aside: the airy, watery, or snowy environments portrayed in my focus texts do not feed into gothic tropes of fear, but instead represent places of escape and suspension from pedestrian life. Related states of spinning and drifting also offer forgetting characters, young and old, unusual forms of agency and enable them to reclaim some kind of control over their cognitive and temporal experiences.

### **<A>*Unbecoming and How Not to Disappear***

Downham's *Unbecoming* and Furniss's *How Not to Disappear* were published in close proximity and relate strikingly similar stories. In each novel, a seventeen-year-old girl is introduced to an older family member they did not know existed who is struggling to cope with early-stage dementia. Both teenage heroines get to know these female relatives through a mixture of caregiving impulses and the need to escape their own personal issues, discovering family secrets in the process. In *Unbecoming*, Katie is coming to terms with her attraction to her best female friend, while in *How Not to Disappear*, Hattie is pregnant and wondering whether to keep the baby. These crises are reflected in the back stories of Katie's grandmother Mary and Hattie's grandmother Gloria (who Hattie initially thinks is her great-aunt), whose youthful sexualities and traumatic experiences of having illegitimate children taken away from them are revealed to readers through flashbacks and fragments of memory. The novels display common tropes of dementia narratives, particularly in the use of detective or mystery elements, as Katie and Hattie try to discover the key to their grandmothers' identities (Sako; Harris; Meeks), and the themes of caregiving and familial dramas such as illegitimacy (Falcus and Sako).<sup>1</sup>

Furniss's *How Not to Disappear* overtly engages with stereotypes of ageing and dementia, allowing Hattie's culturally informed misconceptions about older women to be voiced and then



debunked. When she first learns about ‘Great-Aunt Gloria’, she imagines her as ‘a sick, lonely old lady’ (29) and fantasises about her being a fairy-tale grandmother ‘who probably had one of those shopping trolleys and possibly some kind of a paisley shawl’ (51), while her friend Reuben feeds the clichéd image by warning Hattie that visiting Gloria will involve ‘looking at old photos of her long-dead cats and changing incontinence pads’ (38). In fact, the reader discovers that Gloria is ‘old but not ancient’, which means ‘at least seventy’ (67), and if she falls into any category of ageing stereotype in the early parts of the novel, it is the ‘hyperactive grandmother’ (Pinsent ‘Crone’, 43) who denies she is old. In *Unbecoming*, Mary more obviously embodies tropes of decline and infantilisation. When Katie first meets her, she is thin, frail, and smells of decay. Until she finds out Mary’s name, Katie describes her as ‘the old woman’ (13, 17) and thinks she looks ‘vulnerable’ (14).

In both novels, the older characters are represented from the outside, through their granddaughters’ eyes, and from the inside, through first- or close-third-person narration that offers insights into their present-day perspectives and their younger selves in the form of retrospective chapters detailing events from the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s. Furniss and Downham also include extracts from diaries and letters that help the teenage characters piece together the past in a way that provides a satisfactory narrative for them and their older relatives. These narrative strategies provide a range of options for portraying the ageing self, ensuring that readers are not left with a single stereotypical version of older womanhood and are allowed to develop more nuanced attitudes alongside the youthful protagonists. I want to suggest that the novels go further – purposefully or not – in unpicking narratives of different life stages through their treatment of forgetting. Taking a closer look at the way that the texts figure memory loss can reveal ways of uniting youth and old age. Symbolic moments of floating and falling, airiness

or buoyancy, present narratives of memory and age that are both terrifying and liberatory.

Furniss begins and ends *How Not to Disappear* with the same image (or the fleeting and fragmented recollection of it) of a defiant youthful game: Gloria as a child, spinning ‘round and round’ with her ‘head thrown back towards the pale sun’ (1):

I close my eyes and turn my face up to the sky to the warmth and light and it fills me up and I want to spin, round and round. I can feel how it would feel, the world whirling, my hair flying. ‘Stop,’ Mum says, but I never will, I will keep on for ever. (406)

The game creates patterns of undoing and unbecoming, as Gloria’s whirling perspective reveals the world around her ‘disappearing and reappearing, disappearing and reappearing’ (1). Spinning also produces the effect of rising upwards and floating just above the ground like the participants photographed for ‘La Chute’. As well as unwinding Gloria, the whirling action generates a centripetal force that might hold an identity together over time. Other memory scenes throughout the novel function through symbolism in a similar way, to interrogate standard ideas about ageing and forgetting in their images of suspension. In one of Gloria’s flashbacks to childhood, a jam jar of roses offers up a watery prism through which to see reality: ‘tiny bubbles, each bubble perfectly round, like the Earth’ allow the young Gloria to imagine different worlds for herself and her family, worlds in which she is ‘more like [her sister] Gwen, prettier and less naughty’ (106). At the same time, the flower water also obscures the scene of Gloria’s father beating her mother, bending the room like a ‘Hall of Mirrors’ (107). A later flashback recalls Gloria giving birth to Hattie’s illegitimate father in a dreamlike state of pain in which she imagines her bed ‘floating along a river’ towards a waterfall, where she will be ‘carried over the edge in a violent thunder of spray and rainbows’ (255). These moments connect Gloria to the painful experiences of her past and are the key traumatic memories retrieved in the novel’s discovery plot, as Hattie

uncovers the truth about her own identity by understanding her grandmother's story. That they are also moments somehow suspended in water gives Gloria's narrative a disorienting quality that highlights the creeping nature of her dementia. In the present day, she worries again and again about the time when she will not be able to remember important truths, and this anxiety is somewhat realised towards the end of the novel when she visualises the jam jar and roses, knowing there is 'something sad about them' but not understanding what (402).

At the novel's narrative climax, Gloria revisits the spot where she had considered committing suicide decades before. A present-tense, first-person segment recounts the original episode from the perspective of Gloria as a young woman. She stands on the cliff edge at Whitby Abbey holding her illegitimate baby, born from the rape she suffered by Gwen's husband:

A few steps forward, just a few steps, a breath in and out, eyes closed, a drop through darkness like in a dream, and we will be a part of it. We will be together, without the world, without the thinking and the guilt, *without the memory*. The weight of all that is too much. It is too heavy. It will drag us down quickly beneath the waves into the silver and the grey. It won't take long to fill us up and make us part of it. Yes. That is what I want. It is what I need. To be free of everything. To be rid of this body that was his body too. To be light and free ... (368, my italics)

The perspective is not simply intimate and desperate: it has a symbolic quality that resonates with the portrayal of ageing Gloria throughout the novel. The young Gloria looks out across the North Sea from an elevated prospect, notably one linked in the popular imagination with the gothic horrors of Count Dracula's arrival in England. In this moment, she is specifically seeking to escape the memory of her baby's origins and her violation at the hands of her brother-in-law – who represents a kind of updated version of Bram Stoker's (1897) seductive vampire – but the concept of being 'without the memory' is one explored elsewhere in relation to other points in

time when being 'light and free' offers unsettling and creative possibilities. The reader's initial encounter with Gloria in the present day occurs when the novel's teenage protagonist, Hattie, has just visited her grandmother for the first time. Gloria is in the early stages of dementia and recognises that she will soon forget Hattie – 'I will forget her name, and then that she ever came, and then that she ever existed in the first place' (77). She muses on her encroaching future, explaining, 'I lie back and close my eyes and allow myself to drift' (78). Drifting, light and free as she would have been in her death flight from Whitby Abbey, gives Gloria's damaged faculty for memory an ambiguous status that is simultaneously devastating in its descent into oblivion and uplifting as an escape from the journey of life into a radical and liminal space. In these ways, Furniss reveals life to be a complex dance with ageing and forgetting, connecting memory loss with other kinds of gains.

Spinning, floating, falling, and drifting function to both bind and detach Gloria from the world around her, while the sea offers opportunities for welcome relief from memory and a more disturbing erasure of the self: the final line shows Gloria and Hattie walking towards the North sea, 'down towards the deep, terrifying darkness' (406). Downham's *Unbecoming* also closes at the seafront. Katie takes her grandmother Mary to the beach to help her relive teenage pleasures of paddling in the water. Mary's thoughts and conversation range across the past, her dementia bringing elements of her youth vividly into the present moment. Like Gloria, she has enough capability to think of the future too, however, and asks that when she dies her ashes be scattered in the sea. Katie imagines the day:

They'd wade into the shallows to tip her into the water. She'd spread everywhere. She'd be washed up on the beach, swooped at by gulls, eaten by sharks. She'd sink to the bottom and lie there with all the treasure ships and mermaids. She'd wash away to Scandinavia and lap along the

fjords to the mountains. Mary's adventures would go on and on. (431)

Mary's personal pleasures and traumas, reported in the novel in close third person, are tightly connected to the sea and other marine objects and images: the miniature sailing boat 'made from a Dutch clog' (61) that formed part of her late husband's collection of trinkets brought home from abroad to please her; the memory of a childhood day at the beach when she 'lay on her back in the water and watched the clouds spin' (288), dreaming of being a mermaid; her truth about her older sister, Pat, whose depression drew her to the 'nothingness' of the sea with 'a desire to walk into it and never come back' (318); and Mary's own 'blue blank' (156), the remembrance of her past losses merged with the fear of inevitable future forgetfulness. Making plans for a watery resting place presents Katie – and the reader – with the opportunity to consider how Mary's disintegrating identity is integrated in the natural world. By floating and 'spread[ing] everywhere', her remains will connect with her younger self but also resolve any urge towards the dark fate of her sister's suicide: in contrast to Pat, Mary's adventures will 'go on and on'.

Depression and memory loss seem to go hand in hand in *Unbecoming*, but Downham's narrative encourages its readers to make some attempts to disentangle the two. Mary's blue blanks are moments of trauma not fully remembered but relived as emotion – 'blue for sad and blank for forgetting' (306) – and the exhaustion she experiences in trying to deal with grief without knowing what she is grieving for dramatises common repercussions of developing dementia in relation to mental health. Katie's perspective offers some of these normalised narratives. She envisages Mary's memories 'running out of her head like sand' (310) and, when she herself experiences a moment of confusion in looking at a photo from her own childhood that she has never seen before, she wonders 'is this what dementia felt like? It was horrible. It felt

like going mad' (339). Yet elusive memories can also represent beauty and meaning, giving a purpose to living that counters depressive tendencies. Mary views her individual memories much in the way that the narrative portrays her: as floating and full of potential. She describes them as 'like a slippery fish' (151) or even a 'rock pool', into which a hand can be plunged to discover cold water rich with 'bright fish threading your fingers' (287). Her moments of blue blank are the ruptures or suspended moments that ultimately lead her and her granddaughter to a greater knowledge and sense of themselves. As Katie investigates the photograph that shows Mary carrying her four-year-old child self, she also discovers truths about her mother, who had temporarily deserted her family in a period of post-natal depression and resented Mary turning up to help with the crisis. In turn, all three generations recognise that they share a loving bond that has been hidden or eroded by secrets and misunderstandings.

Hattie experiences a telling anxiety dream halfway through *How Not to Disappear*, in which she and her brother are standing on a balcony as the sea rises up around them. Ollie sinks and Hattie wakes in terror (162), panicking because she does not know where she is. She reflects 'That's what dementia must be like. I feel the hollow fear that must be with Gloria all the time' (162). The watery dream evokes terror because, rather than floating safely and tranquilly, as Gloria does in her imaginings, Hattie envisions herself sinking like her brother and being obliterated. In *Unbecoming*, too, Katie initially foresees only the dangers and devastation of the symptoms of dementia that Mary displays in losing track of time: 'She hoped that being stuck in the past wasn't like being dragged down by anaesthetic, unable to wake up, sinking despite yourself' (80). I have argued elsewhere that 'forgetting for the teenager [...] offers a nightmare vision of loss of self' (Waller, 'Amnesia' 289), and in these glimpses of the realities their older relatives face, the youthful protagonists of these novels articulate both the cultural fears around

dementia more generally and the specific horror they might experience themselves in losing the capacity to remember while still in a very early stage of life.

By the end of each novel, the young protagonists are able to reconcile themselves with their older relatives' conditions and explore, to some degree, the creative potential for floating and falling, rather than simply sinking. It could be argued that this insight will equip them well for their own life journeys and prime them for the kind of generative disorientation that Ahmed considers to be vital and Albright signals as a marker of potential and growth. Moreover, the reader in these novels is offered multiple perspectives on memory loss: as a chronic condition linked closely to ageing and the final stages of life, and as a phenomenon that may accompany them along their life journeys in varied and unpredictable ways. Nevertheless, the kind of forgetting Katie and Hattie experience is fleeting, giving perhaps only a partial insight into Mary's and Gloria's lived realities and into forgetting as part of the dance of life. In contrast, works such as Emily Barr's *The One Memory of Flora Banks* tackle memory loss as an intrinsic part of youthfulness. While the premise is quite different, tropes of floating and falling remain central.

### **<A>*The One Memory of Flora Banks***

*The One Memory of Flora Banks* differs from *Unbecoming* and *How Not to Disappear* in that the character experiencing memory loss is the young protagonist, and her amnesia has been caused by a head injury in an accident rather than chronic cognitive degeneration. Barr's is not the only recent YA novel to explore adolescent amnesia. *The One Memory of Flora Banks* sits alongside Gabrielle Zevin's *Memoirs of a Teenage Amnesiac* (2007), Mary E. Pearson's *The Adoration of Jenna Fox* (2008), Teri Terry's *Slated* (2012), E. Lockhart's *We Were Liars* (2014), and Lara

Avery's *The Memory Book* (2016). All create teenage protagonists with unstable memories.<sup>2</sup>

*The One Memory of Flora Banks* offers an interior account of life lived predominantly in the present. Flora's inability to form new memories following a car accident in her childhood means that her daily life depends on routine, repetition, and written reminders, as well as the help of her friends and family. The story introduces rupture in the protagonist's capacity for change, but in this instance it is Flora's sudden and exceptional ability to recall a single memory – of kissing her best friend's boyfriend on a beach – that sets her on a new pilgrimage. In addition, her parents, who have been the constant and stifling authorities in her life, are called away to tend to their dying son in France. In a reversal of the increasing dependency of Mary and Gloria plotted into *Unbecoming* and *How Not to Disappear*, Barr's novel follows Flora as she breaks away from the care of her parents and the dulling effects of medication, adventuring beyond her home in England into the Arctic and back. The surface ideology of this work is that through rupture and pilgrimage, not only can identity be shored up, but the problem of memory loss may be overcome. The final part of the novel leads Flora to a neurological doctor who takes her on as a case, explaining that her recent 'island of memory' could be 'the beginning of [her] amnesia lifting' (300). The novel closes with the refrain '*Flora – be brave*' (302), a sentiment that has offered the heroine sustenance throughout her adventures but here is a motto for youthful growth and fulfilment.

This superficially hopeful ending reflects a common 'medical model' approach to disability, which sees physical and cognitive differences as deficits to be improved or redressed (Saunders; Butler; Dunn). This deficit model might also be folded into attitudes towards ageing: Flora's forgetfulness is positioned as a temporary affliction for which hope is a reasonable antidote, set against the hopeless inevitability of memory loss in older age. Flora's story is not



intimately integrated with the older generation, as Katie's and Hattie's are, and the narrative perspective is wholly hers. But Barr does introduce an older secondary character with dementia who lives next door, and who serves as a tragi-comic foil to Flora as they interact without awareness of their shared condition in the first part of the novel. Their routine greeting has an unchanging rhythm:

'Do you know where my parents are?'

'Do you like strawberry jam?'

'You used to take the jam jars.'

'Come in!' (85 and 98)

The exchange is humorous but also acts as a kind of initiation into a narrative of forgetting and ageing. While Mrs Rowe endlessly makes jam and offers it to Flora, Flora's regular visits are communicated to readers by the repeated action of her taking a pot of mouldy jam and putting it at the back of her kitchen cupboard, where 'there are already two like it there' (98). Flora's own burgeoning collection of jam jars suggests that without a change of course she will ultimately become like Mrs Rowe, whose 'eyes are cloudy' and who is 'so much older' (85 and 98). Her brief retreat into medicated stupor towards the end of the novel can be read as an age narrative, anticipating the perceived horrors of final-stage dementia.

In its symbolism, however, Barr's novel stretches beyond this discourse, as I have shown Furniss's and Downham's works to do, and the treatment of forgetting at different age stages in these novels can be read side by side to illuminate these extended meanings. The prologue to *The One Memory of Flora Banks* begins *in media res* on the top of a hill:

I am standing on the ridge of a mountain in an impossibly beautiful icy place. Far below me on one side is a stretch of water, with two rowing boats pulled upon the shore beside it. On the other side there is nothing; mountains stretch as far as I can see. The sky is the deepest blue, the sun

dazzling. There is light snow on the ground, but I am hot, because I am wearing a big fur coat.

This is a bright snowy place. It cannot be real. I am in a place inside my head, hiding. (1)

Although Flora has some help from friends and her dying brother in understanding and managing her amnesia, her pilgrimage towards self-realisation is ultimately a solitary one. This scene is not unlike the one in which Gloria contemplates suicide at Whitby Abbey – although here the literary allusion might be Mary Shelley's Romantic hero in *Frankenstein*, surveying the 'sea of ice' surrounding Mont Blanc (124) and agonising over the creation of his monster. It is not until chapter 21 of Barr's novel that the reader finds out what is happening at this moment and why Flora is on her own. The exact same passage is repeated at the culmination of a melodramatic sequence of events in which the heroine travels from England to the Arctic Circle to pursue Drake, is rejected by him, and starts to question her own sense of reality and certainty. Like Frankenstein's misunderstood monster, Flora runs away from Drake and flees into the snowy landscape. Evoking notions of the Arctic landscape as a wasteland, symbolic of a kind of timeless inertia (see Lopez), this scene dramatically represents Flora's desolate sense of self as worthless, disintegrating, and likely to 'stay here, in this cold place, for the rest of [her] life' (245). It also has parallels with the moments of gothic fear, despair, and depression related in *Becoming* and *How Not to Disappear*. The vantage point is high and airy, and Flora wants to 'disappear, to swoop away through time and space [...] to float up into the sky' (246). Flora feels upset and confused, thinking 'I want to leave my body, to float away' (255), a desire to untether her interior self from its physical reality that has parallels with the death fantasies of both Gloria and Mary.

Flora's anxious urge to float away is closely associated with the protagonist's anterograde amnesia, and it may also bring to mind the response of the characters with early stage dementia I have analysed as they face up to their condition; but it also indicates a more uplifting attempt to

gain freedom from the social realities she finds challenging. In other moments in the novel, floating offers respite and comfort rather than erasure. Forgetting her previous actions and most of her life history after her childhood accident means that Flora constantly ‘floats’ in the present, untethered from her temporal being rather than her physical one. As she adventures out to Svalbard where Drake is attending college, this suspended status is repeatedly represented as a fulfilling state rather than a morbid one. Her first glimpse of this Arctic landscape is a dynamic one from the air, as her airplane travels over the ‘snowy wilderness’ with its ‘sweeping patterns and swirls and peaks and valleys’ (113); and her sense that there is a ‘flicker of movement on the surface’ (114) reflects a more nuanced understanding of this frozen world where climatic stasis is not to be confused with ‘biological stasis’ (Lopez 382).

Later, Flora explores her surroundings further on a tourist boat, which acts as a floating oasis. It takes her far from the social world of humans into an environment of seals and polar bears. More than that, it suspends time and memory for everyone, as ‘the pace of the whole world slows down’ (173). The motion of the sea returns her to a pre-accident memory of childhood, where she feels safe with ‘the world enfolding [her]’ (173). With time collapsing into a single present moment in which ‘there is nothing but this’ (173) and where the ‘new universe encloses [her] entirely and the old one melts into nothingness’ (176), the scenes at sea offer an alternative response to the ruptures in Flora’s life than those suggested at the novel’s close. Indeed, they hint at something beyond even the notion of floating or suspension as a kind of temporary generative disorientation.

Albright admits that ‘all suspensions come to an end, of course, and what matters then is how we hit the ground’ (40). Flora has to return to land – she must find Drake, learn about the kiss on the beach, demonstrate her ability to act independently, and eventually be given the

chance to be ‘cured’ of her illness. Nevertheless, the brief moment of liminality offered by the boat trip – what might be called ‘slippage through time and space’, to use Albright’s phrase (36) – presents a different trajectory in which floating – or falling – does not need to come to an end. The implications for an understanding of memory loss are considerable. If Flora’s amnesia is framed in terms of her symbolic moments of aerial and oceanic floating, rather than as a drift towards deathly stasis, then there is no need to consider the beginning or the ending of her ‘leap’. Reading Barr’s novel alongside Downham’s and Furniss’s may also open up those narratives to new interpretations.

### <A>Conclusion

Chris Gilleard and Paul Higgs describe the fourth age of life as a symbolic space and a ‘terminal destination – a location stripped of the social and cultural capital that is most valued and which allows for the articulation of choice, autonomy, self-expression, and pleasure in later life’ (123). Those characters represented as heading towards this terminal stage of life through cognitive impairment, then, are in danger of undoing all the ontological work performed in youth, while fictional teenagers with memory problems risk the premature loss of self. Read through a different lens, each life stage offers opportunities for liberatory moments of rupture: where floating and falling, spinning and drifting, signify suspension from social norms and the conventions of a life journey in which past, present, and future can only be conceived of in a linear fashion. Introducing teen readers to works such as *Unbecoming*, *How Not to Disappear*, and *The One Memory of Flora Banks* (along with other YA narratives of dementia and amnesia<sup>3</sup>) as a set of cultural narratives that can enlighten them about other life stages as well as their own may be a valuable enterprise. Gullette points out that ‘whichever accounts you and I find

ourselves living with and seeing the world through make a fundamental difference to the quality of our lives, starting with our willingness, or reluctance, at any age, to grow older' (10). Thus, this opportunity to naturalise forgetting as intrinsically linked to all ages in patterns that open up positive ways of being as well as narratives of decline is not only a matter of interest for textual scholars. Countering dominant discourses of ageing and memory that link forgetting to gothic and fearful imagery, these YA texts add to a growing body of fiction that invites more ambiguous, often more enabling visions of forgetting.

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<sup>1</sup> It is also important to note that they reflect to a degree Falcus and Sako’s observation that narratives of dementia often ‘concern the experiences of educated, middle-class, white people’ (21).

<sup>2</sup> See also Cat Patrick’s *Forgotten* (2011), Dan Krokos’s *False Memory* (2012), Jessica Brody’s *Unremembered* (2013), Cal Armistead’s *Being Henry David* (2013), Kate Karyus Quinn’s *Another Little Piece* (2013), and Demetra Brodsky’s *Dive Smack* (2018).

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3 There is room for further study of this body of work, using the framework of floating and falling. For instance, the trauma narrative of Lockhart's *We Were Liars* can be nuanced with a reading of the liminal space of the novel's island setting and the sustaining theme of diving into the ocean. Additional research might be undertaken to examine novels that tell stories of and for neurodivergent teenagers, such as *The One Memory of Flora Banks*, in relation to narratives of dementia, within the context of burgeoning disability studies or enquiries focused on diversity and inclusion in literature for young people.