Here are seven novels that tell stories of empowerment. In their different ways, however, these are also seven stories about stories. They refer, sometimes subtly and sometimes explicitly, to well-known literary patterns such as fairy tales, as well as to particular works of literature. The allusions in these novels serve to inform readers about the novels’ literary contexts, but I will argue that they also serve another purpose perhaps more vital to young adult literature: they extend invitations to young readers to look beyond the story they are reading, thereby encouraging discoveries both literary and personal.

Since Julia Kristeva first used the term in 1967, “intertextuality” has remained the subject of ongoing
debate and discussion by scholars. In his essay *Semiotics for Beginners*, Daniel Chandler offers a very basic definition: “the term intertextuality would normally be used to refer to allusions to other texts.” Perry Nodelman writes that “to focus on a text’s intertextuality is to focus on the ways it depends on the reader’s knowledge of its connections with other writing” (*Pleasures* 75). In this discussion, I will focus on just that: the ways these novels make demands on readers’ knowledge of those kinds of connections. Specifically, I will show how the novels entice, and sometimes challenge, readers with allusions to other stories and works of literature.

Stories that refer to other stories are common in children’s literature and in young adult fiction in particular. In her critical study, *Diana Wynne Jones: Children’s Literature and the Fantastic Tradition*, Farah Mendlesohn uncovers a “multiple overlay” of story in Jones’s *Charmed Life*, explaining that “there are two texts to be read: one written to tempt the ignorant, the other to create delicious collusion with the knowledgeable” (xxviii). Tim Wynne-Jones concurs in a discussion of his novel *The Boy in the Burning House*, which incorporates references to Stephenson’s *Treasure Island*: “these allusions are not meant as a sly literary conceit. It is not meant to exclude the kid who does not get the reference, but rather to encourage the kid who does” (19).

Allusions like those described by Wynne-Jones are to be found in all seven novels. Although it is a common literary device, it may be especially well suited to young adult fiction. Rosmarin Heidenreich points out that when patterns of allusion are employed, “[a]ttention is . . . focused in large measure upon the readers’ own perceptual and cognitive processes as they attempt to construct meaning in their reading of the text” (122). This strategy is definitely one that encourages young readers to approach reading actively, thereby helping to prepare them for further analytical reading. “Some texts allude directly to each other . . . This is a particularly self-conscious form of intertextuality: it credits its audience with the necessary experience to make sense of such allusions and offers them the pleasure of recognition” (Chandler). This pleasure, as well as the validation that arises from solving intertextual puzzles, may also increase the appeal of literature to young readers.

**Waking Beauties**

Fairy-tale elements resonate through each of the seven novels. Alyxandra Harvey-Fitzhenry’s *Waking* and Christine Walde’s *The Candy Darlings* explicitly revisit well-known fairy tales. *The Unwritten Girl* and *Grace and the Ice Prince* (debut novels by James Bow and J. L. Scharf, respectively) follow traditional quest stories and feature fairy-tale characters such as knights and princesses. James McCann’s *Rancour*, with its immortals, vampires, and werewolves, leans toward a
darker world, but still a world of magic populated by the familiar representatives of good and evil. *I’ll Sing You One-O* and *The Dream Where the Losers Go*, by acclaimed writers Nan Gregory and Beth Goobie, are the two works that take place (almost) entirely in the “real” world. But both pit their protagonists against dragon-like foes, who, because of their association with dangerous, magical creatures, appear all the more frightening. In *I’ll Sing You One-O*, Gemma must conquer a demon she calls “Red Boy,” a neon sign in the form of a seahorse, which, in her memory, has transformed into a scaly dragon-like creature; and Skey, in *The Dream Where the Losers Go*, must defeat her dangerous gang of so-called friends, who call themselves the Dragons. References to dragons, vampires, or questing heroes may not necessarily point to specific traditional fairy tales, but rather allude to a popular understanding that centrally identifies fairy tales as being about things like princes rescuing maidens from dragons.

It could be said of *Waking*, as Akiko Yamazaki says of another young adult novel, Adele Geras’s 1991 *Watching the Roses*, “The story of “The Sleeping Beauty” is never mentioned, but it becomes apparent . . . that it underlies this text” (109). Skey Mitchell, the heroine of *The Dream Where the Losers Go*, is another kind of Sleeping Beauty, although her story does not allude explicitly to the fairy tale. *Waking* and *The Dream Where the Losers Go* introduce readers to Beauty and Skey, young women who successfully struggle to recognize and address their problems. For them, the Sleeping Beauty’s passive sleep is transformed into a magical dream realm where action can be taken and answers found. In Beauty’s dreams, she faces her fears, confronting her dead mother; and Skey’s dreams give her the hope and courage to approach the challenges of her waking life. Jack Zipes suggests that “perhaps the major social critique carried by the fairy tale can be seen in the restructuring and reformation by feminists of the fairy tale genre itself” (“Spells” 389); *Waking* and *The Dream Where the Losers Go* follow in the wake of works by writers such as Jane Yolen, who, as Zipes points out, have reframed the often passive roles of female fairy-tale characters. They are both tales of empowerment.

In *Waking*, Harvey-Fitzhenry has rewritten the Sleeping Beauty story from the Sleeping Beauty’s point of view, which doesn’t sound too promising when we consider that she spends most of the story sleeping. Readers quickly discover that sixteen-year-old Beauty Dubois shares more than just her name with “la belle aux bois dormant.” Beauty wants “to be invisible” (22); rather than speak to the boy she admires, she tells herself it’s “better to be a shadow” (10), preferring to eavesdrop on him secretly while he plays the guitar. The song she loves to hear him sing is the Doors’s “Waiting for the Sun”—which, of course, is what the Sleeping Beauty is doing, too. Readers, recognizing
that the novel is framed by the fairy tale, will begin to look out for the clues that the author has strewn about the text, in order to align Beauty’s passive state with the enchanted sleep of the Sleeping Beauty.

Beauty’s journey toward empowerment begins when she admits to herself that she is “tired of lying down” (80). But waking is not easy. Like Skey Mitchell, the sixteen-year-old heroine of The Dream Where the Losers Go, Beauty must first awaken to the fact that there is something wrong. Skey’s story is also one of awakening. Skey attempted suicide five months before the beginning of the novel—but she doesn’t remember why, and what is more disturbing, she doesn’t seem to be very concerned that she doesn’t know. Goobie quietly draws our attention away from Skey’s ordeal by beginning the story with Skey’s return to high school after five months in the “lockup” (a psychiatric unit for teenaged girls). Both Skey and the reader are initially more concerned with how she will fit in at school, and although Goobie plants ominous clues everywhere, it
takes some time for Skey, along with the reader, to realign her focus to look for what is really lacking. Like Adele Geras’s *Watching the Roses*, *The Dream Where the Losers Go* recounts the story of a girl who has undergone an unknown past ordeal, which is revealed only late in the novel to have been a rape; but *The Dream Where the Losers Go* presents a much more chilling and complex account of a young woman’s trauma. The story of Skey’s awakening is a “slow steady groping towards truth” (*Dream* 149). Goobie is the only veteran author in this group, with an oeuvre of more than a dozen published novels, including the acclaimed *Hello Groin*, which, like *The Dream Where the Losers Go*, was published in 2006. *The Dream Where the Losers Go* may be Goobie’s most compelling work yet.

The title of James Bow’s novel, *The Unwritten Girl*, refers to the metatextual issue of a character’s ability to do only what has been preordained by the constraints of the story. The Sleeping Beauty is just such a character—she is a “written girl.” In a fairy tale, as everyone knows, special conditions, such as being born the youngest of three siblings,
determine a character’s fate. When Beauty Dubois asks herself, “I wonder why I feel as though I have no control over my surroundings” (40), the reader knows that it’s because she is in a fairy tale. To become empowered, both Skey and Beauty must rewrite their own stories. They must become unwritten girls, whose futures are in their own hands. Instead of being awakened by a prince’s kiss, Beauty wakes herself with a symbolic kiss to her reflection in the mirror. From there, her real story can begin. Beauty’s empowerment is much like Skey’s, who tells herself consciously: “I love you,” thereby escaping the constraints of the fairy tale story. Skey’s new identity begins with the last words of *The Dream Where the Losers Go*: “I can do anything I want!” (204). The “happily ever after” for these two young women is only the beginning.

**The Princess and the Tower**

*The Candy Darlings* describes the friendship that grows between an unnamed female protagonist who tells the story and the mysterious Megan Chalmers, a classmate who appears at the beginning of the school year and vanishes in the spring. Megan’s fascination with candy is rivalled only by her delight in telling stories. Megan’s stories, which make use of the motifs, language, and structure of fairy tales, each feature candy, along with the other subject that obsesses her: sex.

The protagonist, who listens to all the tales, realizes: “For Megan Chalmers, language was power” (64). Megan uses her tales to transform her everyday life into a magical one. Not only Megan’s tales, however, but also the structure of *The Candy Darlings* itself, draw upon fairy-tale imagery. The story is set in the town of Woodland Hills, and, indeed, a nearby forest in which the characters’ adventures unfold suggests one of those unnamed, endless forests in which fairy-tale children get lost, meet witches, and work magic. The novel is populated by a cast of characters who recall the classic fairy-tale characters identified by Vladimir Propp, such as the “magical helper,” whom we find in Blake Starfield, a boy with uncanny, if not exactly magical, qualities. But Walde’s fairy-tale characters are simultaneously evoked and distorted: her heroine, for example, is a shy girl, unnamed, and at times paralyzed by fear and inaction—not exactly a knight in shining armour. And as for the princess . . .

Well, we meet some unlikely fairy-tale princesses in these novels: Princess Asphodel in *The Unwritten Girl* is a spitting, karate-chopping, stomach-punching princess enraged at the fact that her story did not play out the way it was supposed to; Princess Farren, in *Grace and the Ice Prince*, reverses a stereotype by leaving her kingdom to set out on a quest while her brother, the prince, stays behind to wait for help to arrive. But Megan Chalmers is the most unlikely princess of all. Megan is defiant, irreverent, and downright scary—in fact, she has many of the qualities
of a sensitive person attempting to conceal her vulnerabilities. Although Megan uses narrative in an attempt to gain power, we sense that, rather than becoming truly powerful, she is desperately weaving a spell of defence around herself, putting all her strength into a complex external persona in order to ensure that no one will get in.

Ultimately, neither the narrator nor the reader is fully able to see beyond Megan’s enigmatic exterior, and she comes across as a damaged, fragile person who is unable to become fully empowered, in part because of the unavoidable truth that, as a teenager, she is dependent on the ones who wield the real power: the grown-ups. Megan brags about her mother, but the reader begins to suspect that these boasts are no more true than her fairy tales. Eventually, it is suggested that Megan’s mother is a prostitute. Not so much her mother’s work, but the fact that Megan is forced to keep silent about it and accept the transitory, disturbing, and perhaps shameful life that accompanies it, makes her just as much a prisoner as a princess in a tower.
With her strategy of dreaming up stories that provide an escape from her troubles at home and school, Megan recalls Gemma of *I’ll Sing You One-O*, who dreams that an angel will magically appear to rescue her from her hardships. Gemma eventually realizes that the key to her happiness lies not in dreaming of escape, but in facing her reality—and she is fortunate enough to have a loving family waiting to embrace her when she is ready to accept them for who they are. Megan is not so lucky. Even to her new friend, the story’s protagonist, she never fully opens the door. Like Bow’s Princess Asphodel, she may remain locked in a tower for some time—until, somehow, she is able to find a way out.

“A glance at late twentieth-century children’s books shows that . . . [fairy] tales are still current,” writes Peter Hunt in his *Introduction to Children’s Literature* (41). Fairy-tale rewritings appear frequently in young adult fiction, but why is this so? Zipes suggests that one of the reasons may simply be that the popular perception of fairy tales as being intended for children continues to associate them with children’s literature (despite the fact that most of the fairy tales we are familiar with today were not written for children in the first place) (Why 85). Colin Manlove claims that some authors of British children’s fantasy write “. . . to suggest that life has a way of repeating the patterns of old folk myths” (182), perhaps offering the reassurance of a predictable pattern to teen readers whose lives may seem chaotic.

Zipes further theorizes that “[t]he appeal of fairy tales still has a great deal to do with utopian transformation and the desire for a better life”—two themes that may strike a chord with idealistic adolescents. He notes, however, that “[m]ore than ever before in history we have fairy tales about fairy tales, or fairy tales that expose the false promises of the traditional fairy tales . . .” (Why 106). For authors who seek to engage young readers by challenging them to decipher intertextual patterns, fairy tales may be the obvious hypotexts to employ, since a familiarity with these stories can be assumed for many readers.

**The Candy Darlings and Me, Elizabeth**

When a text places itself within a recognizable literary context, it may invite comparison. When is a text a reworking, and when is it just a rip-off? Nikolajeva cautions that “children’s novels belonging to the same genre are sometimes so similar that you may wonder whether you are confronted with imitation” (34). *The Candy Darlings*, for example, bears a remarkable resemblance to a specific work within its genre of contemporary school story, E. L. Konigsburg’s 1967 *Jennifer, Hecate, Macbeth, William McKinley, and me, Elizabeth*.

Konigsburg’s novel tells the story of Elizabeth, “an ordinary girl” (32) who, like the protagonist of *The Candy Darlings*, describes the story’s action, and whose life is transformed when she meets Jennifer, a girl.
who claims to be a witch and seems to have magical powers. Jennifer and Megan both draw upon powerful literary traditions in an attempt to appear powerful themselves; each protagonist’s quest is to unravel the mystery of her new friend’s true identity. In both stories, Halloween is a significant event in the growing friendship, and a major challenge faced by each young heroine is the attendance of their enemy’s birthday party.

Despite all these similarities, we cannot say that The Candy Darlings is an attempt to copy Jennifer, Hecate, Macbeth, William McKinley, and me, Elizabeth. Nikolajeva reminds us that “children’s literature is by definition marked by ‘sameness’; it is all ‘variations of the same theme’” (34). The Candy Darlings also, for example, shares elements in common with Bridge to Terabithia, in which a false love letter is written to thwart a classmate, and in which a “new kid” introduces the young protagonist to stories that, in Nikolajeva’s words, “initiat[e] . . . the novice into a mystery” (42). Actually, all seven of the novels discussed here share things in common: for example, four of them deal with girls who must come to terms with their mothers’ deaths.

In his seminal article “Interpretation and the Apparent Sameness of Children’s Novels,” Perry Nodelman draws the intriguing conclusion that perhaps “interpretation as we usually practice it” (20) is not as useful as we might have thought it—at least when it comes to children’s literature.

**Whatever You’re Imagining**

After reading The Candy Darlings, I was surprised that there was so much ruckus accompanying the announcement of the 2007 Newbery Medal winner The Higher Power of Lucky, which dared to include the word “scrotum.” The Candy Darlings is more concerned with sexual imagery than most young adult fiction. In the novel, sex is deliberately associated with candy. Walde is not content to report that Megan sucks on a lollipop, but embellishes suggestively: “Megan sucked on her . . . lollipop, taking it whole inside her mouth” (51). Walde uses this phrase and others like it so frequently that they lose their intended impact.

Of course, as we have seen in The Dream Where the Losers Go, which tells the story of a young girl raped by her boyfriend and his friends, it is not unusual for young adult fiction to deal overtly with issues of sex and sexuality. No subject is taboo: as Nikolajeva writes, “Basically, there are no restrictions any longer as to what subjects can be treated in children’s literature; the question is rather how they are treated” (xv). Goobie and Walde each treat the subject of sex quite differently. Walde seems to aim to shock her readers, often by juxtaposing innocence and sexuality, as when Megan gushes, “Iggy [Pop] . . . makes me cream my jeans,” moments before protesting: “Of course I’m not too old [to go trick-or-treating]!” (50).
Explicit sexual references are frequent, as when a false love letter is concocted to fool an unsuspecting classmate: “I want you to . . . I need you to . . . Suck . . . Yeah . . . My throbbing gristle . . . Loving you, my Miss Meat Joy . . . my Miss Juicy Quivering Meat Joy” (21); it’s a long way from Bridge to Terebithia’s fake love letter. In The Dream Where the Losers Go, on the other hand, Lick’s—and the reader’s—imaginations are powerful tools that Goobie’s writing takes into account. Skey and Lick, whose minds are connected in a mysterious dreamscape, can talk with each other but cannot see each other. When Lick asks Skey suggestively what she is wearing, she doesn’t miss a beat, answering wryly, “Whatever you’re imagining” (73).

In The Unwritten Girl, James Bow’s character Peter, who has “bounced around foster homes” (23), comments on more than one occasion, “I’ve seen worse” (45). Leaving out what Peter has seen, Bow invites the reader to fill in the details. Beth Goobie also uses strategic omissions in The Dream Where the Losers Go. Skey hears Lick swearing, and describes it to herself this way: “a long string of swear words, slowly and meticulously phrased, as if pronouncing them with the utmost care was keeping everything in place, containing the hurt until it subsided” (11). “It’s not the words,” says Lick later; “it’s how you use them” (73). Lick voices Goobie’s own narrative strategy. This technique of calculated omission mirrors the puzzle Goobie has set up for the reader. What happened to provoke Skey to attempt suicide? “Whatever you’re imagining.” Goobie plants clues, while drawing the reader’s attention away from the answer like a master of detective fiction. She intends to shock the reader with the discovery that Skey was raped, thereby hitting home one of the themes that underlies her story: that people can fail to notice such horrors, even when they are right before their eyes. The degree to which a reader will be surprised and horrified to discover the story’s secret depends on his or her alertness to the text, but, just as much, upon his or her own imagination.

A New Wrinkle in Time

If, as Nikolajeva asserts, children’s literature “abounds in hypotexts” (38), James Bow’s The Unwritten Girl contributes significantly to that abundance. In the space of a relatively short novel, Bow takes on metatextual issues in a manner reminiscent of texts, such as The Neverending Story or The Phantom Tollbooth, that operate on a grand scale. This is an ambitious task, but ultimately Bow has woven a suspenseful and thought-provoking story.

The Unwritten Girl takes twelve-year-old Rosemary and her new friend Peter to the Land of Fiction, where they must save Rosemary’s brother Theo from a magical threat that has caused him to become, literally, lost in a book. In The Unwritten Girl, we find fairy tales in general (a princess held captive in a castle) and young
adult fiction in particular (*The Outsiders*). Rosemary and Peter meet characters from literature who, although unnamed, are recognizable (such as a man in a deerstalker hat whom readers familiar with Sherlock Holmes will identify), and characters to whom they are introduced in no uncertain terms, such as Puck: “Like from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream? That Puck?”* (50). They also meet fictional characters Bow has invented, such as Rosemary’s adversary, Marjorie. Marjorie is a character in a book that Rosemary stopped reading when the story became too distressing for her to continue. This is Rosemary’s unique challenge: she feels the pain of fictional characters so strongly that she can’t bear to read about their hardships. “To me they are [real people],” she explains (140). As a result, she leaves books half finished, and, as she discovers in the Land of Fiction, characters can become upset when their stories are not allowed to run their course. Bow has given himself a challenging task; he must not only write convincingly of Peter and Rosemary, his own protagonists, but of Marjorie, the protagonist of an imaginary story the reader has not read. Bow explains that Marjorie is the “unwritten girl” indicated in the title (“although technically she would be the ‘unread’ girl”) (Bow, “Re: Some Questions”); Marjorie is unwritten in another sense, however, as a character in a novel that does not exist! Bow succeeds in portraying the elusive Marjorie by showing her to the reader through Rosemary’s eyes. Indeed, Rosemary and Marjorie, who at times seem to be flip sides of the same character, merge together at the story’s climax to become “Rosemary/Marjorie,” as Bow demonstrates how a reader needs the characters in a story as much as the characters need the reader in order for the story to be told.

Linguist Michael Issacharoff discusses the Pandora’s box that is opened when we employ “referential mixing.” Although his essay “How Playscripts Refer: Some Preliminary Considerations” concerns drama, not literature, he points out that literary references in a play function in much the same fashion as in other texts. Referential mixing occurs when an author or playwright combines “definite singular extratextual reference” (that is, reference to real persons such as S. E. Hinton, or geographic locations such as the Bruce Peninsula); “story-relative reference” (that is, reference to entities, such as Bow’s character Marjorie or *The Unwritten Girl’s* fictional town of Clarksbury, that exist solely within a given fictional universe); and “intertextual reference” (that is, “reference to other texts by the same writer or other writers or to literary conventions”—such as Puck, or the works of Madeleine L’Engle [to which Bow frequently refers], or metatextual references that remind readers that Rosemary’s challenges mirror their own). Issacharoff cautions that authors who concoct such referential mixtures leave themselves open to the danger that “either the reality . . . of the definite reference may
rub off onto the story-relative referent(s), or the fictionality of the latter may affect (and possibly undermine) the former” (92).

When Rosemary learns that she has an apparent responsibility to the characters in the books she reads, Bow’s readers have the opportunity to consider how this lesson is reflected in their own reading habits. Such contemplations, while provoking, also remind the reader that *The Unwritten Girl* is, after all, a story in a book, and that its characters are not real people. Still, Bow prefers to take the risk that his readers will perhaps not quite lose themselves in his book, since his referential mixture enables him to play with the boundaries of literature. By sending Rosemary on a quest through the Land of Fiction, he sets his own young readers the same task, preparing them for an enhanced critical appreciation of works such as *The Neverending Story*.

*The Unwritten Girl* tips its hat to one author in particular: Madeleine L’Engle. Allusions abound that reveal Bow’s commitment to L’Engle’s work: Peter’s middle name, Calvin; Marjorie’s transportation by folding out of existence; Marjorie’s story (the one that Rosemary
failed to finish), which seems to be a disguised *Wrinkle in Time*; etc. Bow acknowledges that L’Engle has inspired his work, explaining that “Peter and Rosemary’s story was directly inspired by my desire to see a relationship like Meg Murry and Calvin O’Keefe’s flourish” (“Journal”). Devotees of L’Engle will especially delight in discovering these allusions because of L’Engle’s own mastery at creating what Charles Butler, in a 2001 interview with Diana Wynne Jones, calls “a series in which characters migrate from one text to another” (Jones 164).

The challenge for authors like Bow, who explicitly foreground the relationships of their texts to other texts, is not to ensure that readers will “get” every reference: as Diana Wynne Jones concurs, “I think it’s very good for children to notice that there’s something going on that they don’t quite understand. This is a good feeling because it pulls you on to find out” (172). The challenge for writers who play Bow’s game is that, having set their standards high, they must not disappoint readers’ raised expectations. Bow entices his readers with intertextual references, and the active reader will put his or her nose to the scent and join in the hunt. But while some references serve to “direct us into, through, and out of the text” (Issacharoff 10), others are dead ends. Peter’s apprehensive observation, “I’ve got a bad feeling about this” (Bow 105), is a reference to the *Star Wars* films that most fans will recognize. But does *Star Wars* have anything to do with, or contribute anything to, the plot of *The Unwritten Girl*? Bow seeks to empower through the act of reading, but the many threads on the loom of his book (cf. Egoff and Saltman 121) at times present distractions along the reader’s journey.

**Going Back Different**

In a classic YA work that is not a fantasy, E. L. Konigsburg’s *From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler*, the young heroine Claudia realizes that she has run away from home so that she can “go back different” (119). Farah Mendlesohn identifies two types of fantasy, the portal quest fantasy and the intrusion fantasy (xxxi), which provide protagonists with the opportunity to “go back different” after their adventures, having achieved something they could not accomplish in their everyday lives.

*The Unwritten Girl* and *Grace and the Ice Prince* are portal-quest fantasies, in which characters from the real world cross over into a world of magic. In *Grace and the Ice Prince*, Grace faces the task of saving the inhabitants of the Ice World from an evil witch; the dangers she faces, however, do not seem to daunt her nearly as much as the act of simply accepting her task. Two hundred pages in, she is still resisting: “I need . . . to go home, back to my old life” (218). Grace’s challenge, like that of the other protagonists, is to learn to believe in herself and to trust those who believe in her; acquiring this newfound confidence is just as vital.
to the success of her quest as is the defeat of the witch.

James McCann’s *Rancour* is an “intrusion fantasy,” a work, according to Mendlesohn, “in which the fantastic intrudes on the fictive normal worlds, creates chaos, and is negotiated (or managed) by the protagonists who return the world to an altered normality” (23). The appearance of Rellik, a thousand-year-old werewolf, in the prairie town of Minitaw at first disrupts the “normal year of high school” the protagonist, Alix, has hoped for, but results in enabling her to gain a new awareness of herself and of her relationship with her father. *Rancour*, like *Grace and the Ice Prince*, relies more on the twists and turns of its storyline than on the development of its characters. Minitaw is a town where tears “slip down the cheeks” of every teenaged girl at the slightest provocation, yet where a whole high school remains surprisingly unfazed when vicious murders are carried out on a fairly frequent basis. In *Grace and the Ice Prince*, many of the Ice World’s inhabitants are stereotypical fairy-tale characters, such as an old crone and a gallant knight. More development of each individual’s traits would help the reader to distinguish between the various Watchers, Seekers, Travellers, Flyers, and Guardians who are referred to throughout the story. Although the Ice World’s inhabitants are eventually introduced to the reader, early allusions to them that mention them only by their titles leave the reader little by which to distinguish them. Grace and Alix do succeed in “going back different” from their adventures. Our other heroines—Beauty, Skey, Rosemary, Gemma, and the unnamed protagonist of *The Candy Darlings*—“go back” transformed by the empowering experiences they have had and the self-knowledge they have gained. Just as importantly, it is to be hoped that, by sharing in these adventures, the reader may also “go back different.”

Both *Rancour* and *Grace and the Ice Prince*, published respectively by Simply Read Books and Thistledown Press, suffer from a lack of editing unworthy of their complex and well-conceived storylines. Each is overrun with typographical errors, along with faulty grammar, punctuation, and spelling; the errors in *Rancour*, as in “well roasted leg of dear” (200), are particularly distracting. In both works, the use of supposedly archaic stylized speech is disappointingly unconvincing. Rancour, an immortal werewolf, is depicted in his youth of a thousand years ago as using language that mingles modern expressions with archaisms: “You are getting on me nerves” (161). The inhabitants of the Ice World also speak an apparently archaic English littered with conspicuously contemporary clichés: “Send word to the Watchers. I trust they will be sympathetic and not penalize mine oversight” (34). McCann’s attempts to create a historical atmosphere by means of authentic speech frequently result in amusing misreadings, as when an admirer addresses Rancour with the title of
supposed respect, “your bravado” (107). When this technique succeeds, it creates a mood that can convincingly transport readers to magical places, but when it fails, it serves rather to remind readers of the artifice—that these are simply made-up stories.

**One is One and All Alone**

Nan Gregory’s debut novel, *I’ll Sing You One-O* takes its title from the song that twelve-year-old Gemma repeats to herself in an effort to remember her mother, from whom she was separated when only a baby. Gemma makes peace with her memories, and in doing so remembers the end of her mother’s song: “One is one and all alone/ And ever more shall be-o” (202). The lesson that Gemma takes with her when she “goes back different” to her new home is that she is all the stronger when she actively welcomes alliances with those who love her and stops trying to take on the world all by herself.

*I’ll Sing You One-O* presents us with one more example of a way in which a text does not exist “all alone”: unlike some of the other works we have looked
First, *I'll Sing You One-O* aligns itself within a larger literary context by mentioning existing texts (for example, *Charlotte's Web* and *Pippi Longstocking*). Nikolajeva points to this technique in Katherine Paterson’s *Bridge to Terebithia*, in which a “covert allusion to [Lloyd] Alexander provides an informed reader with an additional interpretative strategy” with which to understand the story (43). Gregory associates Gemma with a story of true friendship, as well as with a girl hero of incredible strength who gives the people around her a wild ride they won’t soon forget. Both Wilbur and Pippi are characters who start out alone in the world but become part of loving families.

Second, the story is in a recognizable genre: it is the tale of a foster child, a staple character in young adult fiction, whom we have met before, for example, in Julie Johnston’s *Adam and Eve and Pinch-Me*. Gemma, proud and independent, secretly struggles with questions of self-worth: “I’m just another kid abandoned by
her mom. A piece of garbage to be tossed away and forgotten” (204). Gemma tells her story from her own point of view, in the present tense. This format is appropriate, since it would be hard to imagine the fiercely independent and mistrustful Gemma letting someone tell her story for her; it also suggests her desperation. There is no past or future for her—just what she can hang on to at the moment. Gemma has been taken from foster care to live with her uncle and aunt, who have raised her twin brother as their son. Misunderstandings ensue as Gemma struggles to re-evaluate her identity.

Each text resonates with references, conscious or unconscious, to the works and the world surrounding it. “[L]iterature and art,” agrees Nikolajeva, “are created in a continuous conversation . . . between creators, where every new piece of art or literature is a new line in the conversation” (35). Waking adds to a conversation about The Sleeping Beauty; The Unwritten Girl adds to a conversation about (among other things) Madeleine L’Engle. I’ll Sing You One-O adds a fresh new story to a well-worn genre. Gemma herself calls to mind characters whom readers may have met elsewhere: her unquenchable optimism reminds me of The Maestro’s resourceful Burl Crow, and the well-intentioned lies she rattles off for the sake of her own self-preservation make me think of Lyra Belacqua or the young Dicey Tillerman. But Gemma is her own person, and the reader feels assured that she will remain so, even after she has embraced her new family.

Conclusion

Each of these seven books deals with a young woman who struggles with the ordeal of becoming brave enough to face her internal fears, after at first having tried to ignore or deny them. The unnamed protagonist of The Candy Darlings, mourning her mother, clings to her belief that “a new reign of normalcy . . . would save my father and me” from having to confront their grief (11). But numbness and normalcy are only covering up what’s underneath. In The Dream Where the Losers Go, Skey Mitchell initially confronts her fear with the philosophy that “if she didn’t think about it, it would disappear, almost as if it hadn’t happened” (84). Goobie slips in that “almost,” itself almost unnoticed but dreadfully present, calling all these young protagonists to account for the various truths they are trying to ignore. Each heroine rises to the challenge, however, ultimately realizing her own responsibility to take charge of her fate. It is this realization that empowers each heroine to face her fears and defeat her dragons.

All of these novels, especially The Unwritten Girl and The Candy Darlings, assert the power of stories. The heroines learn to take up the authorship of their own life stories, not settling for the pre-determined fates of “written girls.” Each is empowered to do so
by hard-won self-knowledge; Skey realizes: “. . . she knew her own stories now, she knew the truth” (202), and the protagonist of The Candy Darlings discovers: “I could write my own story” (301). Rosemary, Grace, and Alix find themselves in the middle of stories they don’t know but ultimately make those stories their own. When each heroine “goes back different” from her adventures, she brings maturity and self-awareness that will help her move toward adulthood.

Beauty, Skey, Alix, and the protagonist of The Candy Darlings, each of whom have struggled with parental authority, use their newfound self-confidence to drive home an important message to their parents—in Beauty’s words: “I’m not a little girl anymore” (46). In turn, their parents, for the most part, are able to see the young protagonists with new respect. Gemma’s uncle tells her, “. . . we didn’t take into account . . . what a complex and beautiful person you are” (212). Judith Saltman observed in a 2003 article: “Canadian writers for the adolescent . . . all depict the young as being in charge of their
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own destinies, courageously and sensibly” (75). While this rather sweeping statement can be said to apply to the seven novels discussed here, it is the process of taking charge that encompasses much of the struggle for each of these young women.

These seven authors have drawn upon contextual literary references to tell their stories of empowerment. Nikolajeva cautions the reader: “like many other aspects of children’s fiction, intertextuality should be regarded as a means of reader manipulation. By using myths, fairy tales, and literary works as hypotexts and by alluding to other literary pieces, authors exercise control over readers’ interpretation” (44). Heidenreich offers a more optimistic interpretation to counterbalance Nikolajeva’s warning: “generic allusions themselves perform communicatory functions, and their recognition by the reader determines the effect of the novel” (141). Rather than control or manipulate, the examples I have discussed seem to show how authors have used references to guide readers and to expand their horizons, bringing new stories to their attention, and arming them with contextual tools for future reading. I have also argued that works that incorporate patterns of allusion may be appealing to young readers since the challenge of piecing together an intertextual puzzle can be accompanied by an empowerment of its own. Northrop Frye affirms that “ . . . the journey towards one’s own identity, which literature does so much to help with, has a great deal to do with escaping from the alleged ‘reality’ of what one is reading or looking at, and recognizing the convention behind it.” (166). Novels that point young readers toward this kind of discovery are welcome additions to young adult fiction.

Notes

1 Gérard Genette, to whom the terms are attributed, defines hypertext and hypotext as follows: “By hypertextuality I mean any relationship uniting a text B (which I shall call the hypertext) to an earlier text A (I shall, of course, call it the hypotext), upon which it is grafted in a manner that is not that of a commentary” (5).
Works Cited

Email.


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