



Reconfiguring the Sick Girl in Young Adult Literature: Worlds Where We Might Belong

—Dunja Kovačević

Avery, Lara. *The Memory Book*. Poppy, 2016. 355 pp.

\$21.49 hc. ISBN 9780316283748.

Garvin, Jeff. *Symptoms of Being Human*. Balzer + Bray,

2016. 335 pp. \$21.99 hc. ISBN 9780062382863.

Kletter, Kerry. *The First Time She Drowned*.

Philomel Books, 2016. 352 pp. \$17.99 hc. ISBN

9780399171031.

Reichardt, Marisa. *Underwater*. Farrar Straus Giroux,
2016. 279 pp. \$17.99 hc. ISBN 9780374368869.

Smith, Amber. *The Way I Used to Be*. Margaret K.

McElderry Books, 2016. 367 pp. \$23.99 hc. ISBN

9781481449359.

The YA novels under review in this essay focus on characters pathologized or socially constructed as “sick” or genderqueer. The importance of these texts in the constantly evolving landscape of YA literature is that they help to challenge assumptions about who is entitled to and deserving of a fully fleshed-out subjectivity. The protagonists in these texts grapple with the question of their survival in worlds generally poorly equipped to protect or help them, and, with one exception, they survive. In Amber Smith’s *The Way I Used to Be*, Eden is raped by her older brother’s best friend in her home during freshman year; Jeff Garvin’s Riley Cavanaugh struggles to embody their gender-fluid identity under the microscope

of their father’s political career in *Symptoms of Being Human*; Marisa Reichardt breathes life into Morgan Grant, a survivor of a school shooting whose trauma confines her to the safety of her apartment in *Underwater*; Kerry Kletter’s Cassie O’Malley is newly independent after spending years at a psychiatric institution at the behest of her mother in *The First Time She Drowned*; and finally, in Lara Avery’s *The Memory Book*, Sammie McCoy fights a terminal diagnosis. Moreover, the protagonists of these novels are the facilitators of their own radical survival—however temporary—empowering themselves to heal wounds wrought by trauma through embodied action and process.

The “Sick Girl” in Literature

In 1998, I wrote in a journal every day: banal accounts of schoolyard marriages and daily skirmishes with antagonistic girls who bid me “go back to where you came from”; ruminations on the broader strokes of becoming a Canadian citizen, made important by a congratulatory card from my favourite teacher; and secondhand stories about people and places belonging to a different landscape that had by that time mostly receded from my memory. I also wrote about other things, details I was only just beginning to find words to articulate—the way my father had to relearn to smile after sending my grandparents back overseas, how the competing pressures of family and friends made me dream of fading away. Stress fractures were forming in the too-tight window of my childhood innocence and in the American dream narrative it engendered, so I retreated into distant worlds—the diaries of Anne Frank, Harlequin romances my mother hid at the back of a closet in the basement, encyclopaedias—praying that each upcoming page would sketch a world I recognized and into which I could project myself.

I would not gain access to worlds like my own—filled with trauma, chronic illness, dislocation—until much later, and I would not recognize this lack as one of representation until later still. Scholar-artist Johann Hedva, in her project Sick Woman Theory, names this pain created through lack, “the trauma of not being seen,” which becomes a characteristic

central to her “sick woman,” in turn an extension of Instagram artist Audrey Wollen’s “sad girl, when, if, she grows up.”¹ Wollen developed Sad Girl Theory as a way of rethinking and re-historicizing the sadness of girls as a site of resistance and a response to repressive patriarchy. She says, “Basically, girls being sad has been categorized as this act of passivity, and therefore, discounted from the history of activism” (qtd. in Tunncliffe). Hedva’s sick woman figure arises out of a desire to render visible those of us who possess “traditionally anti-heroic qualities—namely illness, idleness, and inaction” and to present them as “capable of being the symbol of a grand Theory.” The project of simply placing at the centre (and before that, of even considering) an individual possessing some, or all, of the aforementioned qualities is radical, because it challenges entrenched values of capitalist productivity and neoliberal individualism, both of which seek to fix normative bodies as healthy, economically productive, and accountable to their own success. Sick Woman Theory not only draws attention to systemic barriers that limit the physical and social mobility of certain segments of the population, it also reveals capitalism’s investment in maintaining a sick/well binary, with sickness represented as deviant and passive.

One of the linchpins of Sick Woman Theory is its conception of mere survival in a sick, deviant body as embodied resistance. Historically, resistance has

been theorized as political, agential, and active. Sick Woman Theory, like the Sad Girl Theory from which it drew inspiration, proceeds on the premise that “protest doesn’t have to be external to the body,” and that sick bodies are *capable* of resistance (Wollen qtd. in Tunnicliffe). This concept poses many interesting questions, namely: what possibilities are opened up by applying capability, as a measurement of alternative capacity and an active process, to a person deemed by society to be “sick?” How can a girl be both sick and capable in the hyper-mobile world of YA literature? And what possible benefits does this type of representation produce?

The Power of Release: Admissions and Omissions

We meet Eden, the protagonist of Amber Smith’s debut novel *The Way I Used To Be*, recollecting the moment of her assault, beginning with the statement: “I don’t know a lot of things” (1). Despite the assertion that she does not know much, Eden proceeds to list the many things she has come to believe she could have done to prevent her rape at the hands of her brother’s best friend, in her childhood bed, during her freshman year of high school. Her taxonomical examination of details and her futile search for escape routes seem to suggest that post-assault Eden re-treads this mental path often, looking for ways to further blame herself for the events of that evening. Self-blame is often a response to trauma; retroactively incriminating oneself becomes

a strategy to resist victimhood and retain some illusion of control.

Through this outright admission of her violation, we, as readers, are invited to become intimately linked to Eden—*her* secret is *our* secret—and we witness helplessly as the aftershock of this traumatic event threatens to consume her. The novel is structured in four sections, each one corresponding to a school year that follows the impact of Eden’s trauma as it ripples outward. Eden becomes increasingly isolated from her family and friends, none of whom notice that she is no longer sleeping in her bed, the site of the assault, but in a sleeping bag on the floor. The people in Eden’s life respond to her behavioural changes with annoyance, assuming they are a byproduct of adolescent hormones rather than a manifestation of trauma. Dismissal is a common feature in these texts, as young protagonists struggle for validation and visibility among insular adults and self-interested peers. In Eden’s case, the moralizing outcry against her increasingly risky sexual behaviour is a form of slut-shaming that arises from a lack of desire to understand why a young woman might suddenly begin to compulsively seek out casual sexual encounters.

Smith illustrates the total impact of trauma, which, if left unchecked, has the ability to seep into every arena of Eden’s life. Nothing works, and by senior year Eden is left spiralling, so isolated that she considers ending her life:

Everything suddenly seems to have become so messy, so gray, so undefined and terrifying. All I know is that things went terribly awry, this wasn't the plan. The plan was to get better, to feel better, by any means. But I don't feel better, I feel empty, empty and broken, still. (282)



The path to self-destruction can certainly be quick work when compared to the long plod to recovery, a truth often glossed over in many sick girl narratives



Trauma has wreaked havoc on Eden's subconscious; she feels untethered, her certainties shattered, and without any fixed or stable sense of self. Of course, to experience intermittent periods of unease is a natural part of existence, but the assault and resulting trauma have left Eden ill-equipped to contend with the emotional debris. Eventually, she is forced to disclose her traumatic past after discovering her rapist has assaulted other young women. Eden shares her secret with a person she has come to trust, then a family member and finally, a police officer who—perhaps too readily to be plausible, as survivors know—believes her. It is somewhat frustrating that we leave Eden at what feels like a beginning—newly reconnecting, thinking of the uncertain future with less trepidation—after sitting with her trauma for the length of the novel. The path to self-destruction can certainly be quick work when compared to the long plod to recovery, a truth often glossed over in many sick girl narratives, which tend to favour the overly simplistic “truth shall set you free” fantasy.

I am twenty-eight years old and a survivor of sexual assault. I cried often throughout *The Way I Used To Be*, drawing out new connections between my teenage assault and subsequent behaviour through and with Eden. While it may be unproductive to think too much about the possible benefits that exposure to characters such as Eden might have had on my own world, there is something to be said for including “difficult” or “unruly” characters in narratives geared toward young

readers, and in providing readers with mirror worlds to step into that might resemble their own experiences.

For this reason, Riley Cavanaugh, Jeff Garvin's gender-fluid protagonist in *Symptoms of Being Human*, is a significant addition to the YA queer canon. Riley, who feels unable to come out or perform their shifting gender identity for fear of negatively affecting their father's political career, turns to blogging anonymously as Alix. Unlike Eden in *The Way I Used To Be*, Riley is considerably more privileged: Riley attends therapy regularly, has friends who support them effectively, and is connected to a queer support group. This is not to say that Riley's journey to self-acceptance is without hardship: we discover that Riley had previously attempted suicide after a violent assault by their peers. Despite this, Riley acknowledges their relative advantages:

I feel lucky to have figured myself out at sixteen instead of waiting until I was married with kids. Some of these people grew up without the internet; they had no way of reaching out, no way to find out *why* they felt the way they felt, or even to discover that it had a name. (Garvin 156)

Here, Riley addresses how access to the Internet has provided them with tools and resources previously unavailable to genderqueer and non-binary individuals. As reiterated by Hedva, in order to honour

the experiences of those who experience oppression or marginalization, they must first be "made visible."

Garvin deliberately refrains from gendering Riley in the novel, casually sidestepping the issue of their biologically assigned gender and allowing Riley to dictate how they identify from moment to moment. As a considerable amount of Riley's daily energies are spent resisting categorization, it would be inappropriate to fix Riley at either pole of a gender binary structure. This allows readers to project onto Riley and identify with their buzzing anxiety as they constantly meet the limits of their own socio-culturally influenced thought process: "This is the second time in as many weeks that I've misjudged someone else's gender identity. I feel a pang of shame; like everyone else, my instinct is to put people in a category" (Garvin 154). Even Riley runs up against the limitations of representation in the form of a gender model that does not cater to their experiences. That being said, however, Riley's various supports consistently remind them that their gender fluidity is not an aberration or a problem—rather, the problem lies with our culturally restrictive, hetero-normative approach to gender and sexuality. It is important to make clear that Riley does not consider themselves "sick;" rather, Riley belongs to a social category historically pathologized or constructed as "sick." Hedva's "sick woman," by contrast, speaks to all those "who are faced with their vulnerability and unbearable

fragility, every day, and so have to fight for their experience to be not only honoured, but first made visible.” The sick woman is not gender-restrictive or simply diagnostic. Riley’s struggles with severe anxiety at the outset of the novel are largely the product of their fear of rejection by their larger community. Further, Riley, at the urging of their therapist, is encouraged to “find a cause” as a means of healing their traumatic past and participating actively in the betterment of society. The novel ends with Riley confronting their anxieties by speaking on a queer panel openly about their experiences, casting aside the need for an anonymous Internet moniker. Riley actively resists victimhood through direct action and activism.

Like Russian Nesting Dolls: The Imprints of Trauma

Working through trauma with the help of an invested and professionally qualified adult is a major feature of Marisa Reichardt’s *Underwater* and Kerry Kletter’s *The First Time She Drowned* in addition to *Symptoms of Being Human*. *Underwater* focuses on Morgan Grant, a competitive swimmer whose traumatic experience of a school shooting has left her with severe agoraphobia that confines her to the apartment she shares with her mother and younger brother. Morgan sees a therapist, Brenda—an adult whose rejection of the mainstream makes her easy to relate to—who not only validates her pain but also


gently pushes her to work through it using a number of different strategies. As with *Symptoms of Being Human*, this novel engages the challenging work of following a character through recovery and simulating a therapist-client relationship that carries with it the immense responsibility of providing sound, plausible, advice with real consequences for readers.

Underwater confronts an important issue not represented enough in YA literature: the reverberations of inherited trauma. Morgan’s father is a military veteran who struggles with addiction as a side effect of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). She is haunted by her father’s absence as well as her own trauma, and fears she has “pathetic DNA” (Reichardt 118). As a result, she worries that the onset of her psychological issues are genetically predetermined rather than environmentally produced and are thus out of her control. She expresses this fear, saying, “My dad still isn’t the same. And neither am I” (118). Brenda reassures Morgan that seeking help is an act of agency and, eventually, through therapy, Morgan is better able to understand her father: “I understand more now. I understand how my dad might’ve felt the same way I do at this moment. I understand how humiliating it is to see the look of disappointment on people’s faces when they realize what you’ve become” (149). The experience of the lingering effects of trauma helps Morgan humanize her father’s issues, a move, which, in turn, brings about forgiveness.


Many of the young people in these texts have to contend with the failures of the adults around them, suffer the consequences of these failures, and, in some cases, surpass their parents in maturity and experience. In *Underwater* Morgan must extend herself to mend the relationship with her father; in *The Way I Used to Be* Eden suffers the obliviousness of her family, which repeatedly fails to protect her; it befalls Riley to walk their parents, especially their father, through the particularities of their gender identity in *Symptoms of Being Human*; and, in *The First Time She Drowned*, Cassie O'Malley is forced to set boundaries in dealing with an emotionally abusive and unstable mother. Kletter's novel is unique in this respect, as Cassie's primary psychological issues stem from her strained relationship with her mother, who has her committed to an institution against her will. For years, Cassie struggles to assert her sanity against a team of medical professionals who do not believe her, and in a restrictive setting that effectively robs her of her childhood. At eighteen, Cassie is released and must attempt to build a structure independent of either her mother or an institutional setting. To do so requires a great deal of self-sufficiency and self-assurance, neither of which Cassie has had the freedom or encouragement to develop during her adolescence. Having internalized much of her mother's criticisms and abuse, she struggles to navigate a minefield of trauma, self-doubt, and fear:

It's as if all the same questions I've had for years—quelled for a time in mother's absence—have just now reemerged, demanding answers: Am I acting crazy or am I just protecting myself? Which threats are real and which are imagined? Whose perception is accurate, my mother's or mine? And at the core of all of these questions is the biggest one, the only one really: Am I lovable or unlovable? (Kletter 248)

The First Time She Drowned represents a departure from traditional YA narratives precisely because it tackles intergenerational trauma. Unlike other sick girls, Cassie's trauma does not result from a pathologized illness or a traumatic event; Cassie is born into a cyclical pattern of trauma, imprinted onto her as it was onto her mother before her, like an inherited set of Russian nesting dolls. Cassie's mother is deeply traumatized by the memory of her own neglectful, hypercritical mother, whose cruelty she is doomed to repeat on her own daughter. Healing for Cassie is not straightforward: the medical system has failed her, that is, the people who had been enlisted to help her, all of whom robbed her of the foundational tools necessary to succeed. Water plays a supportive role in the text as a site of near-drowning, a manifestation of Cassie's suicidal tendencies and, finally, as Cassie learns to surf, as a symbol of renewed hope. This metaphor is a useful one, a tangible embodiment of life's ebbs and flows, demonstrating "how life moves despite our



Many of the young people
in these texts have to
contend with the failures
of the adults around them,
suffer the consequences of
these failures, and, in some
cases, surpass their parents
in maturity and experience.



greatest efforts of resistance” (Kletter 214). Among various heroines in these texts and, more broadly, among many of us—real people—there is the temptation to think that we can avoid trauma or anxiety by not confronting it. But, as Cassie in *The First Time She Drowned*, and as Morgan in *Underwear* ultimately learn, water—like life—is in constant motion, even as you attempt to stand still. Cassie discovers that progress is less about mastery and more about learning to accept a loss of control and adapt to a situation. She realizes while surfing that “[s]uddenly I don’t even care that I fell, because of that brief moment when I stood, and I wonder if this is what other people seem to have that I do not—this courage to fall because they have the memory of standing” (Kletter 216). This is ultimately the message that all the texts under review here attempt to impart on their heroines and their readers: life does not exist without struggle, without barriers, but these barriers are not the sum total of life. Nor do they necessarily diminish your intrinsic value, regardless of whether or not others attempt to make you believe that they do.

Sammie McCoy, the protagonist of *The Memory Book*, is determined not to allow a terminal diagnosis to prevent her from living. *The Memory Book* is the only text in this grouping to take on the traditionally configured sick girl battling a terminal illness. Characterized as a tightly wound overachiever, Sammie’s ambitions must be revisited in the wake of her diagnosis with the rare fatal degenerative disorder, Niemann-Pick type C. While initially in denial about the severity of her illness, Sammie, like Cassie before her, must eventually learn to surrender to larger forces at work in her life. Determined to navigate her illness on her own terms, Sammie begins writing a Word document—her “memory book”—in journal form, with the hope that it will aid her flagging memory as the disease takes hold. As with Riley in *Symptoms of Being Human*, the use of technology provides a means of agency, an outlet, and a form

of resistance. As her illness progresses, Sammie is required to give up precision, then control, then independence, forcing her to contend with the reality that she will never be the “same” again. Concerns about being lessened, “not the same,” or somehow reduced by trauma or illness are echoed throughout these five texts. With the notable exception of Sammie, the others progress, move out from under their trauma, perhaps not the same but certainly not diminished.

Conclusion

YA fiction geared toward girls is overwhelmingly concerned with personal growth: what it looks like and how to navigate it. Embedded within these concerns is the larger issue of who is granted access to personal growth and, more broadly, who is granted girlhood. The stakes are increasingly high, as in our capitalist society girls have become representative of the self-inventing, constantly becoming, neoliberal citizen consumer. Marnina Gonick historically situates the emergence and subsequent importance of the girl subject in “Between ‘Girl Power’ and ‘Reviving Ophelia,’” arguing that “girls have come to represent, for the first time, one of the stakes upon which the future depends” (5). However, not all girls satisfy the parameters of the idealized neoliberal girl subject fantasy; the ideal neoliberal girl is white, educated, middle class, and, through the Girl Power narratives available to her, believes she can become anyone or

anything. It is critical to draw attention to the failings and possible dangers of an ideological subtext that ignores systemic barriers and encourages girls to believe that self-fulfillment and empowerment are only a product or service out of reach, even if the service in question is therapy or something other that promises self-betterment. While all the protagonists in this selection of texts experience marginalization as a result of largely invisible illnesses, all of them are white or white by default; that is, we assume they are white simply because the issue of race does not arise. Refusing to read racial difference into narratives that either whitewash race out of the story or simply fail to write race into the story is a privilege only granted to white and white-passing individuals in our racially divided world. Omitting race—either wilfully or ignorantly—matters because it begs the question of who is *allowed* to be sick but still capable of possessing a fully developed and embodied subjectivity. Criticisms of virtual “sad girl” poetics and performances centre on the predominate whiteness of the movement, which Hedva attempts to subvert with Sick Woman Theory. She argues that women of colour must grapple with everyday racism, prejudice, and the inherited trauma of colonization and displacement in addition to chronic illness. Why then, are girls of colour excluded from sick girl narratives and texts? The implication is that illness and victimhood—already marginalized categories—demand innocent (read:

white) protagonists to maintain our empathy. However, by excluding large swathes of *other* girls, already so sorely underrepresented, we reproduce an only slightly less-narrow portrait of girlhood.

Further, with its investment in individual empowerment, neoliberalism demands “success as a feature of individual effort” and “leaves these girls few other explanations for their lack of success except for their own individual failings” (Gonick 18). Increasingly, products and services marketed toward children and young adults are becoming an ideological battleground, since childhood and adolescence are the screens onto which we project and instil cultural beliefs and values. It is for this reason that the issue of representation is crucial to texts marketed toward young people—girls, youth of colour, and non-gender-conforming individuals especially. We need these texts

to confront difficult knowledge, to name systemic inequalities, and to remind girls that it is crucial to fight for those brief moments of standing in a world not built for their survival. *The Way I Used to Be*, *Symptoms of Being Human*, *Underwater*, *The First Time She Drowned*, and *The Memory Book* are all important, complex, and multiply layered contributions to the expanding realm of YA heroines whose stories will have major reverberations for generations of girls to come. That being said, the work of representation in YA literature is not yet done; we are still in need of more stories about more types of young people: capable sick protagonists, with alternative gender presentations and a variety of abilities, and characters of colour who are every bit as deserving of our admiration, empathy, and attention as white characters. We need their stories too, for those of us still turning pages, seeking worlds where we might belong.

Note

¹ Audrey Wollen ceased posting on Instagram in June 2016. In her final post, she expressed frustration at the reception of Sad Girl Theory, stating “i worry my ideas are eclipsed by my identity as an ‘instagram girl’ and i watch as ppl whose work i really respect write

me off and ppl whose work i don’t respect cite me as inspiration. ‘sad girl theory’ is often understood at its most reductive, instead of as a proposal to open up more spacious discussions abt what activism could look like.”

Works Cited

- Gonick, Marnina. "Between 'Girl Power' and 'Reviving Ophelia': Constituting the Neoliberal Girl Subject." *NWSA Journal*, vol.18, no. 2, 2006, pp. 1–23. *Project Muse*, doi: doi.org/10.1353/nwsa.2006.0031.
- Hedva, Johanna. "Sick Woman Theory." *Mask Magazine*, www.maskmagazine.com/not-again/struggle/sick-woman-theory.
- Tunncliffe, Ava. "Artist Audrey Wollen on the Power of Sadness: Sad Girl Theory, Explained." *Nylon*, 20 July 2015, www.nylon.com/articles/audrey-wollen-sad-girl-theory.
- Wollen, Audrey. *Instagram*, 2016, www.instagram.com/p/BFPejuZMzZg/?hl=en.

Dunja Kovačević is completing an MA in Cultural Studies at the University of Winnipeg. Her research interests include transnationalism, trauma, and feminist media histories.