



Beyond the Digital Border: Modern Life on the Network — Christina Fawcett

Barnard, Sara, Holly Bourne, Tanya Byrne, Non Pratt, Melinda Salisbury, Lisa Williamson, and Eleanor Wood. *Floored: When Seven Lives Collide*. Macmillan Children's Books, 2018. 320 pp. £7.99 pb. ISBN 9781509862306.

McCulloch, Amy. *Jinxed*. Simon and Schuster, 2018. 336

pp. £7.99 pb. ISBN 9781471169960.

Owen, David. *All the Lonely People*. Atom, 2019. 308 pp. £7.99 pb. ISBN 9780349003191.

Steven, Laura. *The Exact Opposite of Okay*. Electric Monkey, 2019. 352 pp. £7.99 pb. ISBN 9781405288446.

To consider our modern world as technologically mediated could be an understatement, as I type on my laptop a review I will submit through an online portal and people will read on the journal's webpage. Technology's growing ubiquity has shaped the way we define ourselves and live in modern society. Four YA novels take up the questions of how technology has changed us and, more importantly, how it has changed our relationships: these texts articulate how technology challenges, disrupts, or removes borders. The novels *Jinxed*, *The Exact Opposite of Okay*, *All the Lonely People*, and *Floored* engage the spaces of technology. Ranging from realistic fiction to wholly science fictional spaces, these novels approach technological intervention in daily life. Each novel engages with a digital existence, showing the power, potential, and danger of our technologically grounded relation to the world.

Donna Haraway's 1985 article "The Cyborg Manifesto" has become more prescient as modern technology has become a more constant element of our everyday life. The incorporation of the digital into our everyday space has resulted in a world that is networked, integrated, and defiant of boundaries and norms. Haraway argues that the figure of the cyborg disrupts barriers between the human and animal: the categories of living things are blended

through technology. She considers this science-fictional trope as a means of thinking through our relationship with technology. The hybridization of our reality appears reflected in our integration and embrace of technology, as “[l]ate twentieth-century machines have made thoroughly ambiguous the difference between natural and artificial, mind and body, self-developing and externally designed, and many other distinctions that used to apply to organisms and machines” (Haraway 152). The physical aspects of technology become integrated into our own bodies, as medical or voluntary devices join the network, from blood sugar monitors and pacemakers to fitness trackers and wireless headphones. The miniaturization of technology and tools of distribution make it more ubiquitous and thus more pervasive, which Haraway articulates as an examination of how technology is no longer simply physical objects: “Modern machines are quintessentially microelectronic devices: they are everywhere and they are invisible. . . . Our best machines are made of sunshine; they are all light and clean because they are nothing but signals, electromagnetic waves, a section of a spectrum, and these machines are eminently portable, mobile . . .” (153). The embrace of this technological ubiquity is something in which modern youth have had no say: this is the world they are growing into. Each of the four novels addresses the potential of technology to shape, define, or disrupt the lives of young people, who have neither the option of opting out nor the luxury of avoiding technology: phones, internet, and perpetual connectivity are central elements in each narrative. The texts examine the complexity of late modernity, characterized by fluidity of boundaries and the power of the virtual community.

Interestingly, while the texts do identify positive elements of digital connections, an underpinning threat drives the narratives of *Jinxed*, *The Exact Opposite of Okay*, and *All the Lonely People*. These texts reflect adult social anxieties, as numerous news sources discuss the dangers of screen-time, social media, internet use, and cyberbullying and popular press highlights the prevalence of both harmful content and contact in online spaces: “One in three (34%) UK children have experienced cyber-bullying, accessed harmful content such as a website promoting self-harm or had some other type of negative experience when using social media” (Campbell). The body of statistics lionize adult anxieties about harassment and mental health, the reception of unwanted images or messages and the potential threats that perpetual

connectivity presents. Adult views of digital spaces stand in opposition to how teenagers view connectivity, which is positive; the Pew Research Center found teenage respondents described online access as fundamentally a positive space: “A plurality of teens (45%) believe social media has a neither positive nor negative effect on people their age. Meanwhile, roughly three-in-ten teens (31%) say social media has had a mostly positive impact, while 24% describe its effect as mostly negative” (Anderson and Jiang, “Technology”). The power of connectivity and the ability to engage with people is a powerful element of online spaces, as young people themselves have remarked:

Some 40% of these respondents said that social media has had a positive impact because it helps them keep in touch and interact with others. Many of these responses emphasize how social media has made it easier to communicate with family and friends and to connect with new people: . . . “*I feel that social media can make people my age feel less lonely or alone. It creates a space where you can interact with people.*” (Girl, age 15) “*It enables people to connect with friends easily and be able to make new friends as well.*” (Boy, age 15) . . . “*It has given many kids my age an outlet to express their opinions and emotions, and connect with people who feel the same way.*” (Girl, age 15) (Anderson and Jiang, “Technology”)

Although young people pursue connectivity in digital spaces, adult lenses frame engagement with such spaces as potentially harmful, as the studies on internet use and digital access often centre around the dangers of screen time (Dunckley; Mayo Clinic Staff; Sample), including how the internet is changing how we think or remember (Mills; Näsi and Koivusilta) or how young people are at risk of bullying and harassment (Anderson; RCMP). Each of the novels considered here expresses anxiety, but also gesture toward what young people articulate as being at the core of the digital age: connection.

Amy McCulloch’s *Jinxed* is the most science fictional of this set of texts, reaching into an imagined future space where everyone has moved away from the smartphone and instead has a baku. She describes a world which is divided between two competing companies:

Moncha, begun by Monica Chan, and BRIGHTSPRK. The focus remains firmly on Moncha, where the protagonist Lacey aspires to work. Lacey, a young student, seeks to get into Profectus Academy of Science and Technology, which is a funnel school for Moncha Corp. Her rejection from the school draws attention immediately to the economic structures that mediate the bakus themselves. A sales pitch takes up the book's rear cover:

TIRED OF YOUR PHONE?

LOOKING FOR THE PERFECT COMPANION?

Then BAK-UP YOUR LIFE with the newest, cutest must-have accessory.

Our 'bakus' are state-of-the-art robotic animals that function as a smartphone but make the perfect pet too. Visit your nearest Moncha Store to upgrade your life today.

This promotion, offering to upgrade one's life through state-of-the-art technology, highlights the corporate and capitalist nature of the baku: it is a product, offered as a perfect pet and best friend, that also functions as a status symbol. There are tiers of bakus, levels one through five, which have an increasing visual and technical complexity and thus increasing social status. As the tiers of baku are priced accordingly, the most advanced baku cost the most money, making one's wealth constantly visible through the ever-present digital companion. McCulloch allows for a very clear line to be drawn between current phone culture and the ranking of the bakus when Lacey is forced to get a level one baku after smashing her phone. Unable to afford a more expensive baku, Lacey must settle for an insect baku, the simplest and cheapest option.

At the Moncha Store, Lacey has to deal with the "vets"—employees who sell the bakus. She questions the artifice of the sales system and the people involved: "They call themselves 'vets' because they think it's hilarious, as if they have real medical degrees or something, but the actual geniuses behind the bakus are the companionees, not the faux-hip guys in white lab coats and lens-free, plastic-rimmed glasses with no real understanding of what makes their bakus tick" (11). Lacey's awareness of the economic system that is wrapped around the fabricated animality of the baku is heightened by her own limitations: she can only afford a

level one baku. The process of purchasing her insect baku is disrupted by a Profectus student purchasing a high-level baku:

A loud crash from beside me snaps me from my thoughts. . . . On the counter two down from ours is a stunning high level baku—an eagle—its wings spread so wide they've knocked over a display case of customizable butterfly wings. The companioning work on display is on a level beyond anything I've seen. The feathers are made up of individual filaments of steel-sprayed-gold, giving it a rich, sparkling texture. It tosses its head—so lifelike—and lets out a screech that almost pierces my eardrums. It's magnificent. It's absolutely top-of-the-line. Must be at least level four, if not level five. Who could *afford* something like that? (16)

The textual emphasis on *afford* highlights the baku's position in economic, status, and technological systems. McCulloch's engagement with the complex reality of our modern technology, bound up in corporate structures, has her story move into the ensuing politics of corporate espionage and struggles for power and market share. Situating the baku in economic terms reflects the current markets, where the latest, shiniest devices have ever increasing price tags and where having the newest technology can show social status. The shift of this market from the phone to the baku keeps this economic element at the centre of the text, as the financial and social limitations are part of the inequality against which Lacey needs to struggle.

Lacey discovers Jinx, a highly advanced baku, who hacks the Profectus Academy to gain her admission to the school, opening the space of the elites and the technical developments fostered in that system. Unfortunately, the novel overlooks much of the material taught at Profectus in favour of a focus on the Baku Battles. These competitions are physical interactions between the baku and emulate a kind of Pokemon battle, where the trainer sends their baku to fight other teams' bakus. Tapping into the arena-style fighting connects to other popular media like *The Hunger Games* and *Pokémon*, while narratively, the battles provide a reason to bring Lacey into contact with elite and upper-year students and show

her skills as a companioner. The potential to have her work recognized in a format that eliminates social distinctions is a key element to Lacey forming connections beyond just Jinx.

Framing the baku as a tool of communication and a companion provides a commentary on the high levels of phone use among young people. As the Pew Research Center notes, an overwhelming percentage of American teenagers have phones: “95% of teens now report they have a smartphone or access to one. These mobile connections are in turn fueling more-persistent online activities: 45% of teens now say they are online on a near-constant basis” (Anderson and Jiang, “Technology”). *Jinxed* takes this ubiquity of the phone, of online connectivity, and moves a step further, showing everyone developing relationships with the devices themselves. While human dependence on the device reflects our current phone-centric culture, the capacity for personality and engagement on the part of the baku complicates this. Bakus are neuroleashed to the user; that is, they are slaved to their user in both a digital and social sense. This tethering feels uncomfortable as the book frames Lacey and Jinx’s relationship as a partnership. Upon meeting Monica Chan at the end of the novel, Lacey discovers that Jinx was a pet-project of Monica, who sought to design “something that chose to be [a] friend. Not a slave—but a true friend” (316). This perspective from Monica complicates how the other characters in the novel engage with their baku, relying on and tinkering with these digital beings. This issue of enslavement versus agency does not get explored, as the novel breaks off rather abruptly after this point, which feels like an arbitrary split rather than natural conclusion leading into a sequel. This concept of the companionship as obligation or choice, and the economic systems wrapped up in that relationship, are left unaddressed.

Laura Steven’s *The Exact Opposite of Okay* and David Owen’s *All the Lonely People* both address the potentially devastating impact of the internet. The two texts both address the transgression of women’s privacy, either with real or generated images. Owen’s book opens with Kat, the young woman at centre of the narrative, driven off the internet by trolls, while Steven writes a narrative from the defiant perspective of Izzy, who is slut-shamed and attacked online. Each text frames the online world as a hazardous space for young women due to misogyny: Kat’s website is hacked and the landing page is replaced with an image of a woman

masturbating with Kat's face superimposed on the body. Izzy, on the other hand, has an entire website set up about her sexuality, which circulates through the school community and beyond. These two texts focus on how digital spaces can be leveraged to shame and isolate women, though the reactions of the two protagonists are fundamentally different.

The Exact Opposite of Okay is a first-person narration situated in the voice of the protagonist, Izzy. She opens her story with an introduction, entitled "Hello," which sets up the book as a retrospective of a scandal: "Look, you probably bought this book because you read the blurb about how I'm an impoverished orphan and also at the heart of a national slut-shaming scandal . . ." (1). The story is thus Izzy's recollection of the scandal, which reassures us that she will come through the devastating experience. Dispelling the anxieties around bullying leading to suicide or social withdrawal, Izzy's voice comes through clearly to inform us that she will piece together her story from her own blog posts and chat conversations. While she jokes that this is easier and lazier, it highlights the significance of the digital in Izzy's sense of self and expression. The novel itself is thus Izzy's digital representation of herself: the blog takes the place of a journal. While her recounting of conversations is her own interpretation of events, the text also includes chat conversations in bold to highlight the verbatim element in contrast to Izzy's voice. Izzy defines herself using the same tools used to attack her, constructing her own identity and space in the novel. At the end of the text, Izzy sets up a response site with Ajita and Meg; "Bitches Bite Back" is their answer to their experiences of misogyny. By defining themselves in online spaces, Izzy, Meg, and Ajita reclaim the offensive term "bitch," because "[w]hat teenage girl can't relate to being called a bitch?" (329).

Izzy is a high-school student who is interested in pursuing comedy and screenwriting. As a young woman with a self-proclaimed high sex drive, she chooses to engage in sex at a party: first with Vaughn, the son of a senator; second with Carson, a classmate she has a crush on. After this party, a blog appears online—"Izzy O'Neill: World Class Whore." It is a series of posts commenting on Izzy's sex life, providing personal details of her body and the specific events of the party. The blog is shared initially through the student body and staff and then reaches a broader audience, impacting Izzy's personal and professional life. The use of an open platform, and the anonymous nature of the site, points to fundamental elements of the

internet: anonymity and ubiquity. The power of the internet is also its threat, as the capacity for broad reach and the democratized access results in Izzy's personal information and images being shared beyond her control and without an identified source. The internet is both her means of processing her own thoughts and a tool that violates her privacy. The novel, however, also highlights the internet as a positive space of communication and connection. After the scandal breaks and as Izzy is trying to piece together who put up the site, she looks to the blog and Twitter for information: "There's support from other teen girls fighting my corner, saying I'm beautiful and unapologetic and deserve respect no matter what. From feminist organizations discussing consent and misogyny. From columnists exploring gender inequality and slut-shaming, demanding Zachary Vaughan be held to the same level of public scrutiny for his dick pic" (277). The internet is a space of connection and sharing, for good or ill. Pew Research Center notes that, of the American respondents who viewed digital spaces as fundamentally negative,

The top response (mentioned by 27% of these teens) is that social media has led to more bullying and the overall spread of rumors. *"Gives people a bigger audience to speak and teach hate and belittle each other."* (Boy, age 13) *"People can say whatever they want with anonymity and I think that has a negative impact."* (Boy, age 15) (Anderson and Jiang, "Technology")

The concerns about the potential spread of information and the power of the anonymous voice echo what Izzy faces in the novel, as she faces bullying and rumours through the novel. This negative framing, however, is the minority of young respondents; the majority saw the potential of digital spaces as positive:

Roughly eight-in-ten teens ages 13 to 17 (81%) say social media makes them feel more connected to what's going on in their friends' lives, while around two-thirds say these platforms make them feel as if they have people who will support them through tough times. And by relatively substantial margins, teens tend to associate their social media use

with positive rather than negative emotions, such as feeling included rather than excluded (71% vs. 25%) or feeling confident rather than insecure (69% vs. 26%).” (Anderson and Jiang, “Habits”)

While Steven shows the attacks that Izzy faces, as Izzy is objectified and shamed, she ends on the optimistic focus on positive spaces of self-definition and reclamation. As such, Izzy O’Neil reflects real-world teenagers who see the digital as a means of self-definition and community rather than simply as a realm of bullying. Izzy’s comfort with sex, despite what her community tells her to feel, makes her a defiant feminist voice. She is furious and embarrassed by the blog, which begins with a series of posts of real and fabricated sexual activities she’s engaged in, then adds screencaps from her phone. This progressive violation of her privacy leaves Izzy struggling with isolation and social judgement, despite her own strength and confidence. The novel shows her working through the trauma, relying on friends and family, learning to trust allies, and recognizing toxic relationships. She maintains her self-awareness and, interestingly, continues to maintain a blog-journal and active text conversations despite breaches of her digital spaces.

While addressing the inherent threat of online life to women, *The Exact Opposite of Okay* addresses the real danger behind the technology: toxic masculinity. “Izzy O’Neill: World Class Whore” is initially anonymous and Izzy must face various objectifying and shaming gestures trying to find out who attacked her. The two men she slept with have different responses, yet both fail to support her. Vaughn, the son of a senator, distances himself and publicly denies having engaged in sex with Izzy; Carson continues to spend time with Izzy, but does not stand up for her with his friends. Her friend Danny consistently appears the most toxic male in Izzy’s life: he begins showing a romantic interest in Izzy and demonstrates how entitled and dangerous men’s behaviour can be. Danny has wealth and luxury, while Izzy struggles with poverty, creating opportunities for him to gift generously. His pursuits of Izzy become increasingly aggressive and Izzy confronts him about being a Nice Guy and expecting her gratitude. When he comes to forgive her for “sleeping around,” he explains to her that “you should be grateful to have people like me in your life. Not every guy would put up with this shit, let alone *still* want to be with you. And the others? Well, where are they now? On CNN

talking about what a waste of space you are?” (247). Izzy responds with great passion, calling out his behaviour and expectations: “I should be grateful? . . . To be treated with basic fucking respect? Get the fuck out of my house, Danny. Right now” (247-48). This confrontation takes place before Izzy uncovers that Danny, her friend and supposed white knight, set up the blog and attacked her. Her discovery puts into stark relief his sense of entitlement and how that impacted her life: “My former best friend has ruined my life, sparked a national sex scandal, made me feel like a worthless piece of shit—all because I rejected him. All because I put him in the Friend Zone” (282). While his behaviour is not caused by access to digital spaces, his disruption of Izzy’s life is heightened by it. The brutality of the action is highlighted in the text, as Izzy confronts him and identifies it rightly as revenge porn. The refusal to mince words enables the novel to be impactful and relatable to a young reader.

All the Lonely People also focuses on the threat to women in digital spaces resulting from a culture of male entitlement and the danger of incel movements.¹ The book opens with Kat singled out for arguing against misogyny, which draws the attention of three classmates: Luke, Justin, and Wesley. They engage in an online attack, driving her off her online communities and eventually forcing her to remove her personal website. The novel moves between Kat’s and Wesley’s perspectives to give us access Wesley’s struggles with dislocation and identity without actually forgiving or dismissing his behaviour. Wesley works with Justin and Luke to engage in a campaign of harassment before the book begins, chasing Kat off her gaming communities, fan sites and online spaces. They progressively isolate her as a form of punishment, trying to drive her off the internet: “their” space. Their final attack is a deepfake of Kat, a sexual image that leaves Kat feeling exposed, despite not being the actual subject in the picture:

A photograph of a dark-skinned woman, naked but for long white socks, her hand between her legs. And Kat’s face, deftly superimposed over the woman’s own so you could hardly see the join. . . . The images were doctored, fakes designed to mess with her head. Still, seeing herself like that, *everybody* seeing her like that, made her body feel as if it might disintegrate, and she would let it so that everybody would stop *looking*. (Owen 10-12)

¹ Incel is an abbreviation of “involuntary celibate,” an online subculture defined by the idea that people are unable to find romantic partners or sexual satisfaction due to unfair or unreasonable social expectations. This community, which grew out of a term coined by a young bisexual woman, (Alana’s Involuntary Celibacy Project), is now firmly grounded in misogyny and

Her wish to disappear, her willingness to disintegrate to escape the gaze, is the moment when she begins to fade. The attack on Kat is Wesley's way of gaining status with Luke and Justin, as his way to impress TrumourPixel: an internet personality and streamer. The use of an attack to draw attention is part of the negative social potency, trolling to gain attention and status. As Naomi Cracker and Evita March address in "The Dark Side of Facebook®: The Dark Tetrad, Negative Social Potency, and Trolling Behaviours," the appeal of trolling is widespread and pervasive: "The attraction to be a 'troll' and engage in this type of online misconduct is enormous, with current statistics suggesting that over a quarter of Americans have engaged in trolling behaviour at one time or another" (79). Wesley's effort to draw attention to himself, seeking Kat's destruction and Luke and Justin's approval, is an attempt to fit in and gain social reward. Wesley's involvement with incels, however, highlighted with their lingo like "no fap"² at the beginning of the novel and reinforced with misogynist references and actions, places him with a group that are driven by an interest in causing hurt. As Cracker and March describe, "individuals who seek negative social potency are likely to enjoy inflicting psychological pain and distress onto others through exerting negative social influence, power, and strength. . . . Social reward, specifically negative social potency, offers a classification and acknowledgment of motivation to engage in face-to-face antisocial behaviours" (80). Wesley participates in the attack on Kat to gain that social reward and status with the misogynist TrumourPixel. The narrative opens with his perspective and the deepfake, a constructed false image of the female body, to focus on the weaponization of women's sexuality against them. The boundary between the real and the digital is blurred, as Wesley, Luke, and Justin prepare to post the image: "The photos transferred in a handful of seconds, morsels of naked flesh flickering across the progress bar as the three boys shielded the screen with their bodies. Every tab open in the browser was a weapon, armed, the images their ammunition. Target locked" (1). The picture of the woman's body is literally a weapon, being leveled against another woman. This moment positions us with the toxic males, setting up their view of women, technology, and power. It provides a framing for the reader to look at how digital spaces are weaponized against women. The digitally constructed image creates real damage in Kat's life.

hatred. For analyses on incel culture, see Beauchamp.

² "No Fap" is a slang term for individuals who choose not to masturbate. There are no fap groups on Reddit and other internet communities, some of which are linked to incel beliefs through a refusal to participate in pornography culture that maintains unrealistic masculine ideals, while others are framed as positive groups who seek individuals to give up harmful PMO addictions: Pornography,

Masturbation, and
Orgasm.

³ Amusingly,
thelonelypeople.com
is an active url for a
Beatles cover-band.

After this attack, Kat begins to disappear, achieving the disintegration that she so desperately wants when the deepfake appears on her site. Kat's entangled online and daily lives have her defined primarily in online spaces and result in her gradual disappearance. The final deletion of her website to remove the trolls' post is the final destruction of her online presence, which appears foreshadowed when she opens Twitter: "Kat tabbed to Twitter. Muscle memory. *Oops . . . That person doesn't exist!*" (7). The language of non-existence reflects how dissolving her digital identity leaves her hollowed out. After disappearing, Kat discovers a note stuck to the back of her shirt: "*I see you. contact@thelonelypeople.com*" (21).³ The website, The Lonely People, describes what Kat experiences:

Are you disappearing and don't know what to do? . . . You know that feeling, . . . of living in a house with no door and no windows, and knowing the world is rolling along outside but it doesn't matter because it will never come calling for you? You are just too irrevocably separate. . . . The fade is loneliness made material, for a time. You have detached, a hot air balloon lifting steadily upward, and soon you'll be out of sight. . . . The loneliness isn't death, . . . Have you ever wanted to become somebody else? This is your opportunity. This is your second chance. (42-3)

The process of dissolving, fading away from society, is not an experience unique to Kat. She becomes visible only to other "Lonely People," a designation given to her by Safa, a fellow Lonely Person. While the other Lonely People do not necessarily disappear through losing their online personas, they all fade from a lack of connection, an isolation from community. Wesley's narrative follows him trying to find Kat out of a sense of guilt, but instead connecting with members of The Lonely People club that Safa led at their school: Jae, Robbie, and Aoife. Safa, who faded just before Kat, leads Kat through the city and takes joy in living outside the edges of society. They move unencumbered by usual social pressures, and even learn to dip into other people's bodies. The process of immersing yourself in another person reflects the online personas and avatars people take on, yet on a more permanent level. Wesley and the other Lonely People seek a former member, Aaron, and discover that he lost himself in

his brother. The longer people are faded, the more they are pulled into other bodies, as Kat discovers at the women's march. Feeling a craving for contact, Kat reaches out to touch a boy's hand at the march and "[i]n one swift movement, she pulled the boy around her like a shroud" (183). This connection draws Kat and Safa back from the fade, as Kat finds purpose by saving her YouTube idol Tinker and offers Safa connection by drawing on the friendship they've formed.

The need to connect is fundamental in Owen's *All the Lonely People*, though the narrative importantly does not prioritize face-to-face connection: while the book ends by highlighting Kat forming more active personal relationships, going out to a convention with Safa, the online community of The Lonely People is still important. Safa and Kat will meet members of The Lonely People at the convention for the first time "if they all show up" (304). The significance of this ending is that online connection, the community formed there, is just as valid as in-person meeting. Safa and Kat reform The Lonely People website,

strip[ping] out the cryptic sixth-form poetry and instead detail[ing] everything they had learned about the fade in a way that made it clear it was not to be aspired to. They had seen the effect that finding connection could have for the detached—for them, for Aoife and Robbie and Jae—and they responded to anybody who contacted the site to try and help them find it too. (304)

The site facilitates connection, a way of reaching out to isolated people at risk of fading. The internet as a space of self-definition and potential threat to women appears in both *All the Lonely People* and *The Exact Opposite of Okay*. In each text, the women are attacked and driven off digital platforms, but find a way to fight back by claiming female spaces and common ground. While toxic males post sexual imagery to debase and discredit them, both Kat and Izzy use digital tools to form true communities.

Floored, a collaborative project between seven authors, features six teens who meet by chance in an elevator at the UK Broadcast Network. As the only of the four texts that consistently frames technology positively, the seven authors create a novel where technology

enables and encourages community and personal growth. The six teens, Velvet, Kait, Dawson, Hugo, Joe, and Sasha, are all at the UKB for different reasons; they load into a single elevator with UKB staff Steven Jeffords, who collapses from a heart-attack, leaving the teens handling the shock of a shared trauma. Two weeks later, they all attend the funeral and, meeting again, make a WhatsApp group chat. The shocking experience draws the six teenagers together, and the book follows their meetings over the next six years. The narrative highlights that, while the novel focuses on the annual gatherings, most of their relationships are formed and maintained through text. The novel, divided into sections titled Year One, Two Weeks Later, Year Two, Year Three, Year Four, Year Five and Year Six, gives snapshots of the characters, allowing growth and change to happen off the edge of the page. These bursts of contact show glimpses of the six lives and their relationships. Each segment is established through a set of lenses: beginning with narration of the context for the yearly meeting and moving into each of the characters' individual stories. The separation of the story into six character perspectives gives us a constant rotation of subjective experiences across their six-year relationship, as Sara Barnard, Holly Bourne, Tanya Byrne, Non Pratt, Melinda Salisbury, Lisa Williamson, and Eleanor Wood each take on a voice and create a distinct character. The collaborative project of the book brings together seven writers to articulate seven voices, keeping distinction between each character and the narrator.

The narrative centres WhatsApp, Facetime, and digital communication; while each year is focused on the face-to-face moments shared between the group, the focus through and around technology remains. Each year after "Two Weeks Later" is framed through text messages, as the group chat grows and morphs over time. The group chat, entitled "Lift People" before becoming "Shouldve [*sic*] taken the stairs," is separate from other individual chats; yet, online and text communication remains key to the development and maintenance of the friendships between the six. The book recreates the WhatsApp conversations in text bubbles with the slang, acronyms, and emojis that pervade modern communication. This communication is part of daily life for the digitally integrated teenager, as networked and online interactions are just as significant to a relationship. Pew Research studies in teen online behaviours note the predominance of online contact over in-person contact:

Sizable majorities of teens spend at least one day per week with their friends online (88%) or in person (77%). But when it comes to daily interactions with their friends, teens are much more likely to report that those interactions take place online. Six-in-ten teens say they spend time with their friends online every day or almost every day, compared with 24% who spend time with their friends in person with the same frequency (not including school or school-related activities). (Anderson and Jiang, “Friendships”)

Floored normalizes digital interaction through the once-a-year snapshots, as conversation captures and imparts the familiarity and immediacy of the contact. From the beginning of the chat, the six teens begin making jokes with one another, as the format invites an easy and casual tone. The formatting of the chat pages has all the text-bubbles coming from the left side of the pages, meaning conversation is wholly external: no one person owns the “phone” that the messages are coming to. We watch the chat rather than participating in it, ensuring readers are not positioned with any one character. The six voices remain in balance with the narrator, rather than implying a core protagonist. The teens’ connection through chat shapes their interactions, sense of self, and position in the group.

The different characters come from different social and economic positions, highlighting technology’s capacity as an equalizer. Dawson is a former television star and Hugo is the son of an MP and a television producer, while Kaitlyn is middle class and Sasha, Joe, and Velvet all struggle with poverty. The economic and class disparity initially filters into their interactions, as Dawson’s fame causes the group to treat him differently and Hugo is egotistical and flaunts his wealth. This class separation appears an initial point of conflict, but breaks down over the six years of friendship. Hugo’s gradual transformation is highlighted in his relationship to money, as he offers to pay for Joe’s family’s debts: “He rolls his eyes. ‘It’s only money. I just blew ten grand on a trip to Goa. . . . My mother’s spent more on a handbag. . . . She still isn’t happy’” (320). His recognition that money is not a means to achieve happiness shows real growth, contrasting his early obsession with his appearance and conspicuous consumption. His shift away from relying on money for his identity is encouraged by his text-friends, who bring him back into the chat after he hits rock bottom.

The technology acts as an equalizer, as wealth, status and location are absent from the democratized digital space.

The lack of privacy in messages appears a few times in the novel: while communication may feel direct and private, the chance of a message being seen or a phone being taken shows potential breaches of privacy. The Year Two gathering is a house-party at Hugo's home. He and Velvet sneak away to have sex and he goes to shower afterwards; while he's out of the room, his phone lights up with a message. The message is from a friend of his, who crassly asks Hugo if he "pulled the peasant yet?" (134).⁴ After seeing this message, Velvet storms out of the party (134), upset at how Hugo's intentions were to get her into bed: nothing but a meaningless "pull" he had bragged to his friends about. The conflict that follows, when the other four confront Hugo for Velvet's departure, results in Hugo leaving the text group. Hugo's disconnecting magnifies an emotional spiral, corrected only when he runs into Dawson and Kait, who are travelling in Ibiza at the same time. Dawson and Kait take care of him as he cathartically engages in drugs and alcohol after the news media attacks his father for having a secret gay affair. His return to the chat is simply announced by the message "Guess who's back? 😊" (258). This statement concludes Year Four, and the beginning of Year Five shows his return and rehabilitation fully cemented. The rebuilt relationship is clear in the opening chat, when Sasha and Joe tease Hugo about the dough balls at the Pizza Express they plan to meet at:

Sasha: OH MY GOD, HUGO DELANEY YOU HAVE NEVER KNOWN TRUE PLEASURE.
YOU DEPRIVED HUMAN

Hugo: A ball made out of dough is "true pleasure"? My, oh my... Hang on. Trying to
override my urge to be a dick about this...

Joe: Once you go dough ball, you never go back! (265)

He playfully references his previous behaviour and attitude, which is immediately accepted by the others on the chat. The digital connection creates a friendship and interdependence that they each gradually recognize over the last two segments of the book, as what began

⁴ "Pulled" or "pulling" is British slang for sex: the term has broad application, as "pulling" can be both the act of obtaining a sexual partner and the act itself. "Being out on the pull" is pursuing a sexual partner for the night.

as a texting group becomes a real supportive network. The technological mediation of real friendships is highlighted by the narrator's description of Sasha's arrival at the restaurant: her need for the group's support appears highlighted in language of safety and trust. The digital contact they share results in real connection:

It doesn't make much sense—[Sasha] never sees them, and her only real contact with them is on WhatsApp—but in that moment, as she follows Velvet through the busy restaurant, she realizes that she'd follow her anywhere. Sasha trusts them. That's why they've kept in touch since that day in the lift—even Hugo—because this awful thing happened, and they survived, and she feels safe when she's with them. (311)

The importance of the support and presence of her friends, even if it through digital tools, is something most readily highlighted by Sasha's challenging relationship with her father. His paranoia about Sasha leaving, as Sasha's mother did, results in him using guilt, passive aggression, belittling comments, and emotional abuse to try to control her. This escalates as Sasha tries to get out of the house and into her own life. He steals her phone in Sasha's Year Five narrative, highlighting her dependency on the device for contact, navigation, and information. She starts deleting her texts, as she realizes she's being surveilled. She explains her mistrust of her father, and his threatening observation:

Sasha: I'm kind of paranoid about my phone these days. Probs gonna have to delete this chat, tbh

Joe: Seriously??

Sasha: Well... since I'm deleting this... you know it was him who took my phone when we were meant to be eating at Pizza Express? Said he'd mistaken it for his. But he didn't.

(332)

The smart phone is a tool of liberation and communication, particularly for the young, and *Floored* highlights the positive potential of connection. The phone is a tool of access that

provides a means of breaking boundaries and class separation. The six teens from very different economic and social backgrounds, even different cities, are coincidentally in the elevator and witness to Jeffords's heart attack. But beyond that initial contact, which could have happened and passed, digital tools of WhatsApp and FaceTime break any divisions that could exist between them.

Each of the four novels contends with the complicated experiences of digital spaces. While the boundaries of privacy and identity can be breached, communication across distance and class divides creates positive outcomes. While bakus may be status symbols and wealth may be leveraged in relationships, technology enables young people to cross the limitations of barriers and create community: whether it be a chat-group that crosses economic differences or "Bitches Bite Back" or *The Lonely People* offering online spaces for support, the books articulate a hopeful message of technology defying social and economic divides. McCulloch, Steven, Owen, and Barnard et al. all reflect the modern anxieties of the modern world from an adult perspective, while showing the potential for claiming space, finding community, and connecting. The boundary, the border, is a construction that digital spaces defy and explode, as the modern world means "both building and destroying machines, identities, categories, relationships . . ." (Haraway 181). After all, we live in a time beyond borders. We live in a time of cyborgs.

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