



Reviews



Exploring Authenticity through Laughter and Performance in Young Adult Literature

—Stephanie Brown

Dugan, Jennifer. *Hot Dog Girl*. Penguin, 2020. 336 pp.
\$13.99 pb. ISBN 9780525516279.

Rosen, L. C. *Camp*. Little, 2020. 384 pp. \$22.99 hc. ISBN
9780316537759.

Rubin, Lance. *Crying Laughing*. Knopf Books for
Young Readers, 2019. 336 pp. \$23.99 hc. ISBN
9780525644675.

Adults often imagine teenagers as confusing, angsty, not-quite-adults who lament over problems we no longer understand or remember. In the cultural imaginary, teens are represented as hormone-ridden basket cases who slam doors and stare at their phones and talk back to their parents. The current generation is anxious, depressed, and facing global catastrophe, growing extremism, and school violence. These anxieties frame and colour much of YA literature, especially in the popularity of dystopian and speculative fiction.

But what I remember most about being a teenager is laughing until I cried. Being a teenager is realizing how dark the world can be, but it is also finding solace in friends, family, and laughter. It is in this register that the main characters in Lance Rubin's *Crying Laughing*, Jennifer Dugan's *Hot Dog Girl*, and L. C. Rosen's *Camp* experience their adolescence. In these works, we find teenagers working through their angst and identity formation through humour. *Crying Laughing* follows Winnie Friedman as she comes to terms with her beloved dad's ALS diagnosis by finding her comedic voice in improv. *Hot Dog Girl* revolves around Elouise, "Lou" to her friends, whose job is to literally dress up like a hot dog at a local amusement park. Throughout the summer, a convoluted plot to make the archetypal dreamboat fall for her leads to the realization that she is actually in love with her best friend, Seeley. Finally, *Camp*, set at a summer camp for LGBTQ+ teenagers, follows Randy, a musical theatre lover who, in a scheme out of a rom-com, forces himself to be a jock to impress his crush and comes to terms not with loving a person but with loving himself and his own authentic gender expression.

While all three novels follow characters as they navigate weighty issues like identity, death, homophobia, self-esteem, family, and loss, they do so with wit and laughter. Additionally, the books share a common theme of performance, both in plot—the main characters are all literal performers in one form or another—and in what it means to perform your identity. Performing improv, dressing in a mascot costume, and working on *Bye Bye Birdie* are not only activities undertaken by the novels' narrators, they also become metaphors for how performance is an integral aspect of our lives. Winnie, Elouise, and Randy recognize the ways in which they are performers both on and off stage, and the novels explore the slippery nature of authenticity in ways that are much more complex than the simple narrative of "just be yourself!" The authors recognize that "yourself" can change depending on the day and that figuring out how to disentangle what you want from what the world tells you to want is a lifelong pursuit. Rather than treating performance like a false consciousness, masking some "true self" from the world, performance becomes a way to play with identity, create community, and uncover emotional truth.

We see the three teenagers at the centres of their stories wrestling with these ideas as they narrate the world around them. All three novels are, like much YA, written in the first

person present from the perspective of “[n]aïve and unreliable narrators” (Blackburn, Clark, and Nemeth 17). This position can be frustrating for a reader who just wishes the protagonist could see how their actions are potentially self-destructive; this naivete, however, also allows for an “ideological diversity and queerness” as we watch the main characters struggle to figure out where they fit into the world (17). The characters attempt to balance their own needs and senses of self with the lessons they have internalized about who they *should* be. They all ultimately find that “fitting” does not mean adhering to socially normative ideas of gender, sexuality, romance, or family but often quite the opposite. What it *does* mean is finding who their people are, where home is, and with whom they are able to play with identity in a way that feels truthful to them.

Seeing the narrators’ thoughts also allows us to see their senses of humour and how they draw on laughter as a source of comfort and power in the face of pain: whether it comes from learning of a parent’s terminal diagnosis, hurting a best friend, or recognizing a crush’s internalized homophobia. Characters make jokes to themselves, recognize the humour in their situations, or laugh at the jokes of their friends and family. While the issues in these novels are difficult, these characters maintain their senses of humour and find strength in them. Some scholars of YA and children’s literature argue that comedic literature does not allow for real character growth due to generic conventions (Cadden); these three novels, however, illustrate the ways in which humour and laughter can be tools for change and growth that is joyful and communal.

Crying Laughing

The theme of humour and pain is front and centre in the title *Crying Laughing*. The author, Lance Rubin, is a former sketch and improv comic turned YA novelist. The book follows aspiring comic Winnie Friedman as she learns to have confidence in her abilities while navigating friendships, first relationships, and most centrally, her dad’s ALS diagnosis. The backbone of the plot involves Winnie’s decision to join the school improv troupe with one of her best friends, Leili. As Winnie learns about improv, she narrativizes her problems through the lens of improv’s rules: Always say “yes, and” (Rubin 53), live in the moment, listen to your

fellow improvisers, and find strength in the community. These rules do not always come easy for her as an only child raised on sketch and stand-up comedy.

Throughout the novel, Winnie works to overcome three major obstacles, all woven thoughtfully into the norms of improv comedy. Winnie breaks the first rule, “listen to your teammates,” by ignoring the difficult fight her best friend, Leili, is having with her twin sister. Winnie, so wrapped up in her own family issues, fails to listen when Leili needs her. The second rule, “always say yes, and” (Rubin 53), is broken by the guy Winnie starts dating. Evan fancies himself the funniest guy on the improv team and starts to resent Winnie as he realizes she is funnier than he is. This comes out in improv practice, when Evan purposefully ruins their scene by denying Winnie’s choices, which her fellow teammates immediately point out: “‘From the second this scene started, Evan wasn’t supporting any of Winnie’s choices,’ Jess Yang says, her strong voice booming across the stage” (218).

In her book *Whose Improv Is It Anyway*, theatre and performance studies scholar Amy E. Seham contrasts “the powerful rhetoric of improv [that] insists on process, mutual support, and individual liberation” with decades of actual comedic improv practice that has tended to exclude marginalized people and wield the rules of improv against women (xviii). She includes examples like the tendency for women to feel forced to “yes, and” being cast in scenes over and over again as bimbos and nags and being put into sexually compromising positions. This novel is cogent of how gender politics and socialization affect comedic performance and pushes back on the ways in which men treat women both on and off stage.

The third and most trying obstacle Winnie faces is her dad’s diagnosis of ALS, a degenerative neurological disease. Winnie thus learns a third rule of improv: truth in improv is more important than humour. Winnie is devastated as she watches her father, a former comedic performer who gave up his dream to stay home and take care of her, lose control over his motor functions and speech. Winnie and her dad share the tendency to use laughter to conceal pain, sometimes to their detriment and the frustration of those around them. Winnie recognizes the benefits to working through pain with humour: “Because, let’s be real, our lives are filled with many unfunny things too. Like, even genuinely upsetting things. But when you filter them through the lens of comedy, you can turn pain into laughter” (Rubin 86).

Winnie and her dad both must learn that there is a difference between concealing pain with laughter and working through pain with laughter.

Winnie takes these lessons with her into her final team performance, in which she finally lets go and submits to the rules of improv. The funniest scene in the book is its final one, in which Winnie's parents are making fun of her for freezing on stage during her improv show, showing the warmth and humour in the family. In both improv and life, we can only prepare so much. We have to rely on each other, listen to ourselves, and live in and respond to the moment. As Winnie's improv teacher, Mr. Martinez, tells the team, in improv, mistakes are just "opportunities for you to support each other as a group and spin what could have been a mistake into a brilliant scene" (Rubin 288).

The book dwells on the issue of authenticity in comedy; unsurprisingly, as the book was written by someone firmly planted within the comedy world. I did wonder, though, if the pontification about Del Close and the ethos of improv was a bit heavy-handed at times, getting in the way of the more interesting story of Winnie figuring out who she wants to be and how to cope with her dad's devastating decline in health (Rubin 85). I found myself admiring the confidence that Winnie and her friends display; while she struggles at times, Winnie knows she is funny and she knows when she is not being treated well. She is called out when she centres herself to the detriment of her friendships and learns to see her parents as fully realized human beings with pasts and personalities.

Hot Dog Girl

Hot Dog Girl by Jennifer Dugan similarly follows a teenage girl as she balances finding her authentic self, maintaining close friendships, and winning over a love interest. While Winnie learns to live in the moment by joining the improv troupe, Elouise learns to deal with change by adjusting to the reality that her beloved theme park and place of summer employment, Magic Castle Playland, is closing. Magic Castle Playland is not just the place she works but a place that has shaped her childhood, the place where her dad and mom went on their first date, and the place where her dad took Eloise after her mom left them. This fear of change also functions as a fear of growing up and moving on, a common theme in YA literature.

The structure of the novel borrows from the common farcical rom-com plot in which the main character convinces a second person to pretend to date them in order to make a third person jealous and/or fall in love with them. Eloise, as the plain-girl protagonist, is cast to dress up in a hot dog costume to entertain kids in the theme park while her crush, Nick, is dating Jessa, a beautiful girl who plays the park's princess character. Eloise convinces her best friend, Seeley, to pretend to date her to get closer to Nick. The problem is that Seeley harbours feelings for Eloise and grows increasingly frustrated that Eloise does not seem to love her as more than a friend. Stories about queer, gay, and bisexual teenage girls are few and far between, and stories that do not treat queer sexuality as spectacle or tragedy are even scarcer. In this novel, Eloise and Seeley's relationship is not played for laughs or tragedy, and so the story is free to play out as a classic rom-com love triangle.

Through her relationships, Eloise explores self-esteem, identity, and authenticity. Specifically, *Hot Dog Girl* and *Camp* both explore the connection between names and the self. In *Hot Dog Girl*, Eloise is called "Lou" by her friends, and her attempts to get people to call her "Elle" are to no avail. Her attempted name shift connects to Eloise's fraught gender exploration; Eloise often laments that her body and lack of grace fail to live up to the kind of feminine standards that Nick wants in a girlfriend. Her unstable name also serves as a metaphor for the way teenagers can struggle to self-actualize and push back against the identities foisted on them by those around them.

Hot Dog Girl shares many of the themes of *Crying Laughing*: an unreliable narrator, a fear of change, centring one's own feelings to the detriment of friends and family, and a struggle with self-esteem. Just as Rubin uses improv as a metaphor in *Crying Laughing*, Dugan uses rom-com archetypes to effectively illustrate Eloise's growth over the course of the novel. At first, Eloise sees a supportive best friend, a dreamy love interest, and the annoyingly perfect dream girl the love interest is dating. As the novel progresses, Eloise realizes that those around her are not characters in her story but fully realized human beings with their own inner lives and problems. I appreciated this clever framing, though while Eloise eventually apologizes to those around her and realizes she is in love with Seeley, it is not clear if she ever comes to terms with her own self-esteem. She recognizes the humanity in those around her but comes up somewhat short of recognizing it in herself.

Camp

My favourite novel of the three, *Camp*, written by L. C. Rosen, follows Randy in his fifth summer at Camp Outland, “a four-week sleepaway summer camp for LGBTQIA+ teens nestled in the woods of northern Connecticut” (12). *Camp* is both poignant and very funny. While *Crying Laughing* and *Hot Dog Girl* delve into gender construction around the edges, *Camp* centres the exploration of gender, sexuality, authenticity, and identity in ways that were delightfully frank and sophisticated. The bones of the plot also resemble a familiar rom-com premise: Randy has been in love with Hudson Lim-Aaronson for four years and spends the year leading into his fifth summer losing weight, cutting his hair, and studying the “bros” at his school to try to become Hudson’s type: masculine and into sports. This becomes the grounds for Randy and the characters in the book to have in-depth discussions about the intersectionality of gender and sexuality within the queer community. Refreshingly, because the book takes place literally outside of the heterosexual gaze, this conversation is able to move beyond the realm of a straight-gay binary. The book wrestles with such questions as: What is authentic gender expression? How does internalized homophobia seep into the queer community? How are femininity and masculinity policed within the queer community? As media and literary scholars frequently argue, when one marginalized character has to stand in for an entire community within a text or group of texts, the burden of representation means that they need to be all things to all people. By setting this book in an almost entirely queer space, a wider range of characters and a deeper range of issues are represented, as alluded to in the first few paragraphs of the novel. Randy makes the subtext literal: being at camp means he’s free from compulsory heterosexuality: “It’s the smell of freedom. Not that stupid kayaking-shirtless-in-a-Viagra-commercial freedom. That’s for straight people. This is different. It’s the who-cares-if-your-wrists-are-loose freedom. The freedom from having two seniors the table over joke about something being “so gay” at lunch” (11). Because it is set in an almost entirely queer space, *Camp* also pushes back against common narratives for queer characters that either focus on them coming out and facing violent homophobia or treat their sexuality as secondary to their character arc, which leaves little room for fuller stories that centre queer youth. These characters’ sexuality and gender are at the forefront in a way that is joyful and exploratory. While the novel’s focus on Randy reinforces the

tendency of LGBTQ young adult literature to centre the experiences of white, gay, men to the exclusion of “lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, and queer identities” (Jiménez 409), the cast of characters around Randy is diverse in terms of race, gender expression, and sexuality.

Because authors of YA understand the ways in which their books can teach their young readers, the characters’ conversations about sex and gender give a glimpse into how discourses around these topics have shifted over time (Wickens 162). Randy and his friends have intricate discussions about intersectionality and the complexity of gender expression: their conversations cover pronouns, the asexual community and how they often feel left out of the queer community, definitions of demisexuality, gender essentialism, bisexuality, consent, and the intersection of identity and performance. They even point out the common contradictions our society has over gender: while the camp has mixed gender cabins, it also has single gender changing rooms by the pool. Rather than being pedantic, these conversations are often playful and funny.

But, in the end, these are still teenagers, and Randy spends the summer going through an existential crisis over his own sense of identity brought on by trying to impress a boy. Specifically, Randy decides that he is willing to give up theatre, nail polish, fashion, and his feminine side to impress Hudson—much to his friends’ and counselors’ dismay. Instead of taking a role in this year’s production of *Bye Bye Birdie*, he joins Hudson in obstacle courses, sports, and nature hikes. The plot takes the familiar trope of pretending to be someone you are not to impress your crush and gives it a gender twist. Over the course of the first few weeks of their relationship, Randy slowly realizes that Hudson’s “preference” for masculine guys belies a deep internalized femme-phobia given to him by his parents’ insistence that he can be gay, but he must not start acting like a girl: a reminder that homophobia does not disappear in queer spaces. Hudson’s discomfort with feminine gender expression illustrates how homophobia is grounded in a fear of emasculation and unmasking. Hudson fears his parents’ anger if he does not act enough like a real man, and their homophobia is manifested in his treatment of friends and partners. Randy’s best friends, George and Ashleigh—a theatre diva from New York and an aspiring stage manager and demisexual lesbian—know this and try to warn him early. But, in the end, they try to support him the best they can as he learns the truth for himself.

Like Elouise, Randy's existential crisis manifests itself in a battle over his name. Usually called "Randy," he asks to be called "Del" this summer in his attempt to fit Hudson's masculine ideal. While in the safety of his own cabin with his friends, he is called "Randy." With Hudson and his new sporty friends, he's called "Del." Names again become a metaphor for the exploration of what identity is and who has ownership over your sense of identity. Even more so than in the other two novels, the characters in *Camp* have explicit discussions about how identity is not fixed and how gender is a complex intersection of an inner sense of authenticity, play, and social performance.

The novel and the adults in the novel are also realistic about teen sex; the counselors, according to Randy, know the campers are going to have sex and try to make it as physically and emotionally safe as possible. An ongoing joke in the book is that their counselor Mark has gotten reprimanded for being too blunt with the campers. The joke seems to echo real world hand-wringing about what's appropriate for YA literature. Mark also serves as a stand-in for us older readers, as it can be emotional and difficult as adults to watch teenagers make the same mistakes that we did. In the end, we have to let them learn the lessons on their own. Because this book is a comedy and not a tragedy, Randy goes back to being called "Randy," dresses the way he wants, and rejoins his theatre friends. Hudson gets to the root of his fear of appearing feminine and accepts Randy for who he is. But even in this happy ending, the book acknowledges that to be safe outside the confines of Camp Outland, the campers often have to hide their true selves to stay safe until they reach adulthood.

Conclusion

Taken together, these three novels are a rich exploration of identity, laughter, authenticity, and performance. Each protagonist's journey of self-discovery is narrativized through the metaphor of performance: improv, costumes, or musical theatre. While the books tread the same ground as YA novels usually do—friendship, being yourself, young love, parents, and sex—the deeper exploration of gender and sexuality in all three novels makes them feel refreshingly contemporary. Though all three books covered in this review do still centre white teenagers, there is racial, gender, and sexual diversity in their communities that are culturally specific, but

not treated as spectacle. I would still love to see more books on laughter and humour centering the experiences of a more diverse set of protagonists, so diversity does not just appear in stories of struggle and oppression.

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