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Growing Up:
Julia Green's fiction in the context of the
tradition of realist writing for young
adults

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PhD by Publication (Creative Writing)

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Abstract

The PhD by Publication consists of two parts: Part One is the collection of seven novels by Julia Green, published between 2003 and 2013: *Blue Moon* (Puffin, 2003); *Baby Blue* (Puffin, 2004); *Hunter's Heart* (Puffin, 2005); *Breathing Underwater* (Bloomsbury, 2009); *Drawing with Light* (Bloomsbury, 2010); *Bringing the Summer* (Bloomsbury, 2012) and *This Northern Sky* (Bloomsbury, 2013).

Part Two is the contextualizing thesis. This explores the contribution that these novels make to contemporary realistic fiction for young adults. Julia Green describes her development as a writer. She traces the themes and preoccupations in her young adult novels which link them as a significant body of work, and explores the connections with an older tradition of writing in terms of narrative style, language, depth of characterization and issues of interiority. Green writes as a practitioner critic, drawing on her close reading of texts (her own, and others') and using her own journals and other forms of writing such as blog posts and online articles as evidence of her writing process, alongside academic books and articles. The thesis is likely to be of interest to other writers as well as those studying children's literature.

The Introduction (Section One) begins with a discussion of the term 'young adult', and an examination of what marks this out as a distinctive category of literature. Julia Green explores the idea that the term 'YA' is chiefly a publishing phenomenon: a way of identifying, marketing and selling fiction to a specific audience. She argues that it is important to continue to make room for quieter, literary fiction which deals with character and emotion and thought – the interior world – alongside the plot-driven, high-concept novels which are easier to market and sell. She describes the background to her own writing.

In Section Two Green examines an older tradition of interiority in fiction for young people through the close textual analysis of four novels: *I Capture the Castle* by Dodie Smith, *The Greengage Summer* by Rumer Godden, and *Goldengrove* and its sequel *Unleaving*, by Jill Paton Walsh. These are examples of fiction for young adults which focus on the interior lives of the adolescent characters and their relationships within their family, and where the story might be considered to live in the style and language as much as the plot. This is the tradition that Green hopes her own work takes forward for a contemporary readership.

Section Three offers a narrative account of Julia Green's fiction for adolescents, showing her development as a writer over ten years, and exploring her themes of growing up, family relationships, and the creation of teenage protagonists with strong interior lives. She discusses the process of writing each novel and the range of adolescent issues she explores. These reflect the realities of life for contemporary adolescents, including the big issues of birth, death, family break-up, friendship, falling in love and searches for identity and meaning.

Julia Green hopes to sustain for a contemporary readership a tradition of attention to the nuances of language and qualities of interiority – reflecting and representing the inner, emotional landscape of adolescence, as part of a rich, diverse literature for young people.

‘Growing Up’:

Julia Green’s fiction in the context of the tradition of realist writing for young adults.

Section One: Introduction

Scope and methodology

The aim of this study is to provide a narrative context for the novels I have written over the last ten years. As this is a PhD by Publication (Creative Writing), the creative component is fulfilled by my published novels for teenagers and young adults: *Blue Moon* (Puffin, 2003), *Baby Blue* (Puffin, 2004), *Hunter’s Heart* (Puffin, 2005), *Breathing Underwater* (Bloomsbury, 2009); *Drawing with Light* (Bloomsbury, 2010), *Bringing the Summer* (Bloomsbury, 2012) and *This Northern Sky* (Bloomsbury, 2013). My published fiction for younger children (pre-teen) is not the main focus of this study.

I intend to describe my development as a writer over the ten years 2003 - 2013, to trace themes and preoccupations in my novels and to find the threads that link them as a significant body of work. I will investigate the contribution my creative work makes to contemporary realist literature for young people and attempt to establish my links with an older tradition of writing for this audience. I will argue that my novels make a significant contribution to contemporary Young Adult fiction, with strong evocations of place, complex characters with rich interior lives, emotional and psychological depth of insight and layered use of language.

The voice for this thesis will be informal and personal rather than more academic and formal, in a continuum with my fiction and also with the writing I have published which engages with critical issues. I will use my own writing journals and other forms of writing (blog posts, online articles) as evidence of my writing process, alongside academic books and articles. I have attempted to find a discourse for my discussion of texts which is a synthesis of the creative and the literary-critical and reflects my roles both as a published author and a creative writing lecturer (Programme Leader, MA Writing for Young People), with a background in the study of English Literature (a BA in English and American Literature, and an M. Phil in English Studies 1798-1880). So, I write as a ‘practitioner critic’.

Definitions: What do I mean by ‘Young Adult’ fiction?

In 2011, I was invited by the Writers’ and Artists’ website blog to discuss aspects of ‘Young Adult’ fiction with another author, Bridget Collins. We opened with our definitions of Young Adult (YA) fiction. I began the debate as follows:

It’s a publishing category, really, rather than a genre with particular characteristics, although we might find some of those if we look closely enough. It’s fiction that’s published by **children’s** (as opposed to adult) book publishers, aimed at the top age group of young readers, ie. for readers about 14 years upwards, as distinct from ‘teenage’ fiction which is often read by younger readers (from about 11 years), although these are very blurred categories...

YA (Young Adult) is a handy way of signposting content which might contain material of a sexual nature, for example, that you might not think appropriate for younger readers. Booksellers seem to like those signposts: it makes life easier. Some adult ‘gatekeepers’ – such as parents or librarians or teachers – like them too, although young people will inevitably be reading a whole range of books. (2011, Green & Collins)

Bridget Collins agreed. She added,

I suppose YA books are the closest thing to an adult book without actually being an adult book – that is, the last moment where the age of the reader influences the subject and content ... And equally, the last moment where the person buying the book may well not be the projected reader. As Julia says, there are gatekeepers – and I often feel that some of the things I associate with YA books (a toning down of swearing, for example, or sexual content) are done for their benefit, not the readers’!

On the other hand, as Julia says, the concerns and style of YA novels definitely are about the readers. One of the reasons I love YA fiction – reading and writing it – is that it has a great intensity and passion, and I think those often come from the characters experiencing something (love, death, success, failure, glory, grief) for the first time. The questions of who you are and where you fit in the universe come naturally to the genre because generally you start to think about them when you are a teenager... (2011, Green & Collins)

Further into the online debate, recalling my own reading in my teenage years, I suggested that YA novels might be seen to act as a ‘bridge’ over to adult fiction. ‘Readers might cross back and forth for a while.’

In her glossary to *Children’s Literature Studies* Kim Reynolds defines Young Adult fiction as ‘that part of children’s literature targeted at adolescent readers. Generally speaking, it consists of relatively long and complex novels about teenage central characters and their concerns’ (2011, Grenby & Reynolds: 212). Put simply, Young Adult fiction is *a fiction for and about adolescents: a fiction concerned with an adolescent viewpoint*. There are numerous novels *about* adolescence, written and published for adults, but which might also be read and enjoyed by young people. I would suggest that the key difference, and it’s a very subtle one, lies in the narrative viewpoint. Generally speaking, the perspective of the narrator in contemporary YA fiction is close up in time to the events as they unfold, as experienced by the teenage protagonists at the centre of the story. The narrative perspective is rarely that of an adult looking back to their teenage years (unlike Leo Colston, in L. P. Hartley’s *The Go-Between*, for example) and adult characters are rarely given a central role, although there are some notable

exceptions to this, such as Mal Peet's *Life: An Exploded Diagram* (2011), Linda Newbery's *Set in Stone* (2006), Aidan Chambers' *Dying to Know You* (2012) and Jo Nadin's *Eden* (2014). I have not done a full survey, but there are some indications that this focus on the teenage protagonists is something that is beginning to change, as YA develops and diversifies as a literature and as authors question its conventions.

I find it interesting that even now, when YA fiction is so well established, the novels selected for young people to study for GCSE and A Level exams are exclusively novels written and published for adults, rather than YA fiction. The new GCSE Literature Syllabus (AQA) modern prose texts for 2015 are *Lord of the Flies* (Golding, 1954), *Animal Farm* (Orwell, 1945), *Never Let Me Go* (Kazuo Ishiguro, 2005); *Anita and me* (Meera Syal, 1997) and *Pigeon English* (Stephen Kellman, 2011). These texts are all published as adult fiction: there are 'No YA novels on the list' (2014, Carroll). It might just be possible for a teacher to choose a YA text for study, subject to the approval by the subject moderator at the exam board, which would involve demonstrating the 'literary qualities of the text' (2014, Carroll). The majority of the 'adult' novels featured on the syllabus have protagonists who are children or adolescents, but the narrative viewpoint is retrospective: an adult looking back.

At the Bath Children's Literature Festival in October 2014, on a panel with David Almond and Melvin Burgess, Mal Peet dismissed the idea of putting labels on fiction, and questioned the particular 'categories' which have developed around YA. The problem, he said, was that conventions become rules, 'and then the fundamentalists emerge' (2014, Peet). He was challenging the idea that YA novels must have teenage central characters, use a teenage viewpoint, and be

‘about’ teenage concerns. Melvin Burgess, however, spoke up for books aimed specifically at teenagers. He sees a problem arising from the recent trend of adults reading YA fiction, not because there is anything inherently wrong in that, but because, ‘It’s wrong when people start writing for the adults reading it. Then who is writing for the teenagers?’ (2015, Burgess: blog interview with Liz Flanagan).

I discuss issues of audience and narrative perspective with my students on the MA in Writing for Young People, partly because it is something that visiting industry professionals talk about, and it can be helpful for a new writer to understand the fine distinctions made by agents and publishers. I question how helpful it really is for an author to be thinking about audience at an early stage of the writing process. My concern is that thinking too much about what publishers and potential readers ‘expect’ can interfere with the creative process. And yet, conversely, as I will go on to discuss, changing my perceptions about who I was writing for (young people, rather than adults) had a significant part to play in the development of my first published novel, *Blue Moon*. Even though the term ‘YA’ is a publishing phenomenon - a way of identifying, marketing and selling fiction to a specific audience, and a development of something that has happened for a long time in the children’s publishing world, it can also, sometimes, be useful for an author. I will explore this in more detail later, with reference to my own novels.

Lucy Pearson identifies the 1960s and 70s as the time when young adult literature became a separate category, closely linked to a move towards increased social realism in children’s literature. ‘The rapid pace of social change in Britain and America during this period heightened adult anxieties about the new ‘teenage’ demographic, and many commentators argued that a specialist literature

was needed to help teenagers deal with the increased complexity of the modern world.’ (2011, Pearson: 171). Elaine Moss, writing in 1980, suggested that

the needs of the reading adolescent became a preoccupation in the seventies – as a counterbalance, perhaps, to the alarmist press reports on illiteracy among school leavers... But could the teenage reader who had read literary children’s books avidly jump into modern adult fiction with its avant-garde themes and experimental techniques? A century ago the progress from Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland to Dickens, Bronte and Thackeray was natural and gentle... Some kind of bridge literature was thought to be necessary (...) Was there not a place within the widening area of so-called children’s publishing for literary books, perhaps technically unconventional, with a strong adolescent theme? (Moss, 1980:8-9).

Aidan Chambers was an early advocate for a literature for teenagers, written *for* them:

I do *not* believe that young people should *only* read what is published for them, and nothing else. Far from it. The sooner children and teenagers reach into the mainstream of our literature the better. But I do believe that most people will reach into it more vigorously, more willingly, and with deeper understanding of the pleasures it offer if they have encountered a literature which is for them ... and which is written and published with as much dedication and skill as the best of the mainstream work. (Chambers, 1985: 87)

Chambers established Macmillan’s Topliners, initially an imprint for reluctant adolescent readers. He soon realised that teenage literature was ‘not simply about bridging, a kind of literary remedial course’ (1985, Chambers: 88). The adolescent readers of Topliners led him to recognise the possibilities of teenage literature: ‘It could do and should do, what any literature that is whole does: grow to satisfy writers and readers in increasingly multifarious ways, responding to its own history, to other arts, and to the needs of its own time’ (1985, Chambers: 88). Letters from readers showed him that the majority liked best stories which were about ‘people roughly their own age’ and set in ‘contemporary times’, with themes such as ‘parental relationships, challenging authority, establishing one’s

own personality and future, relationships with peers and (when allowed in a literature still puritanically controlled by the intermediary adults) sex' (1985, Chambers: 88). Talking about his own experience as an author for adolescents, Chambers explained:

It was about the adolescent-still-in-me and it was for the adolescent-still-in-the-reader. If I had wanted the book to connect with the adult-in-me, I would have done it differently. There would have been a shift in the point of view, changes in the assumed and explicit references. In short, the tone and the rhetoric of the book would have been handled in a different way. (1985, Chambers: 90).

This description of the difference in the tone, language and viewpoint in a book for adolescents resonates strongly with me, echoing my experience of writing *Blue Moon*, my first YA novel, discussed later in the thesis.

Aidan Chambers' novels were published by Bodley Head under their new imprint 'New Adult Fiction', begun in 1969. Other publishers, too, were concerned about how to keep teenagers reading. Kaye Webb, editor at Puffin Books, created 'Peacocks' in 1962 to be a bridge between Puffins and Penguins. The first title published as a Peacock in 1962 was *National Velvet* by Enid Bagnold; others included *Walkabout* by James Vance Marshall, *The Greengage Summer* by Rumer Godden, *I Capture the Castle* by Dodie Smith (I discuss these texts in section 2), and *Fifteen*, by Beverley Cleary. In fact, Kaye Webb herself was not enthusiastic about a literature written specifically 'for' teenagers (2013, Pearson: 58) and it is still not unusual to hear adult readers questioning the need for a specific literature for adolescents, describing their own progress as keen readers who moved directly from children's books to adult literature without the need for anything in between. In his account of growing up as a reader, *The Child That Books Built*, Francis Spufford describes that moment when children's books

lose their appeal and no longer 'do' what you need a book to do. 'To reformulate reading at thirteen, you jump to adult books. One entry is via the classics. Amid the baffling profusion of grown-up possibilities, a reassuring sense of order adheres to the novels from the past that have already been sifted through and declared good' (Spufford, 2002:164).

Until recently in the UK, the term 'teen fiction' has been more widely used than the term 'young adult', often to describe the same thing, although some British publishers use the term 'teen fiction' for books aimed at a younger demographic (11-14) and 'young adult' for fiction aimed at readers over about 14 years. Very few young people in the UK would describe themselves as 'young adults'; in a recent consultation with a self-selected group of young people at the Bath Children's Literature Festival (with Gill Mclay, Festival co-founder), they unanimously declared their dislike for the term. This too appears to be changing: the title of the recent London conference was 'YA' rather than 'teen'; and book bloggers use the term widely. There's an online group called UKYA formed specifically to promote UK fiction for adolescents. A new category of fiction has recently been devised, called New Adult. Published by adult publishing houses in the wake of the 'Fifty Shades of Grey' phenomenon, these books usually have sexual or erotic content and are aimed at the top end of teenage/early twenties readers.

Book covers are the clearest, most obvious way of signalling content more suited to readers in their teenage years, and within the last ten years or so, bookshops and libraries have made a new physical space for YA fiction, located more closely to the shelves for adult fiction and well away from 'children's', as an attempt to appeal to teenagers keen to leave childish things behind them. As

fashions come and go, so do the names of these shelves. ‘Teenage Fiction’ was replaced in Waterstones’ bookshops by ‘Young Adult’; in their Bath store this has been recently been renamed ‘Teen Fiction’. A further sub-division – Dark Romance – sprang up around the commercially popular *Twilight* and other vampire books, and more recently there was a short-lived attempt at grouping Dystopian Fiction as a sub-genre of YA in branches of Waterstones, in the wake of the success of Suzanne Collins’ *The Hunger Games*. The inclusion of (YA) books intended for teenaged readers in children’s book prizes has been the subject of lively debate in recent years – there was a twitter exchange in response to a blog by Shoo Rayner, July 9th 2013 in which Rayner attacked content in YA novels for lacking ‘morality’ – with specific reference to Patrick Ness’ *Chaos Walking* trilogy and *Boy Nobody*, which has a sixteen year old hero who has been trained to kill since he was about twelve:

this is not a children’s book. It’s a standard, adult action thriller, with a boy as the hero, wrapped up for kids and sold to kids in the marketing genre we now call ‘Young Adult’ ... ‘Young Adult’ books are really the books that adults crave so much but can’t find. (2013, Rayner)

Worried that these books so easily get into the hands of younger children, he argued that they have no place on the book prize lists for children. Patrick Ness defended his *Chaos Walking* trilogy and the importance of writing about the darker side of things for teenagers. As is so often the case, ‘gatekeepers’ worry about what’s ‘suitable’ for young readers, and are strangely fearful for the harm that a book might do. Their anxiety often seems to be an expression of their own nostalgia for a ‘lost’ childhood innocence, which is itself a cultural construction. Young readers talk about wanting to read books that ‘reflect their own experience’ and are honest and truthful about contemporary life (anecdotal: from audiences of young people aged 14/15, at my visits to schools in Southampton,

Reading and Lancashire June/July 2013). Debate in the media (Bradbury, 2014; Flood, 2014) about the 2014 Carnegie – award winning YA novel, *The Bunker Diary* by Kevin Brooks, raised the same question about the Carnegie award, along with the issue of whether fiction for children and teenagers should offer hope and happy endings, but the voice of young readers was notable by its absence. The debate led to a renewed call for a separate Carnegie award for teenage fiction, to separate it from children's fiction. In September 2014, *The Bookseller* decided to create the first ever prize for YA book in the UK and Ireland, with judges to include a group of teenage readers, along with Waterstones' buyer Melissa Cox and YA author John Green's personal assistant, Rosianna Halse Rojas (*The Bookseller*, September 25 2014).

Fiction for young adults is always likely to be in a state of flux, like adolescence itself. I consider this to be one of its strengths – its openness to change, to new ideas, to questioning what has gone before. YA literature is a place where we actually first see reflected the changes happening to young people and to society. The current exciting debates about diversity in fiction and the representation of other cultures are happening right now in the YA fiction world of bloggers and twitter and at the first major YA Conference in London, summer 2014.

Discussions about the suitability of content in fiction for young people are part of a bigger debate about childhood, and concerns over the pressures on children to grown up 'too soon', over the commercial pressures on children and parents, over young people as consumers, markets, commodities. YA literature in particular is frequently in conflict with cultural ideas and conservative ideologies of what childhood and adolescence 'should' be like. These are not new concerns,

but we have moved a long way from a time when publishers openly defined their aims in terms of commitment to quality rather than profit – the desire to publish the ‘best’ rather than the ‘best-selling’ children’s books (Pearson, 2013: 8). In his book *Relentless Progress* (2009) Jack Zipes suggests that an increase in production has led to a ‘decrease in quality’:

For children’s and young adult literature, the increase in production and the decrease in quality have been highly visible, but it is not so much this phenomenon that is of concern. Rather, it is the way reading and viewing are framed by the (...) culture industry that configures children and teenagers into its calculations as consumers (2009, Zipes: 5)

Zipes fails to provide evidence for this perceived ‘decrease in quality’, and I have yet to meet anyone working in the children’s publishing industry who talks explicitly about young people as ‘consumers’. The individual agents and editors I know are passionate about books and readers, and supportive of authors.

However, I have observed for myself a shift in attitudes in children’s publishing over the eleven years since my first novel was published (2003). Commercial pressures are driving decision-making processes away from editorial to sales and marketing departments. It is quite common, these days, for an enthusiastic editorial team to have a book turned down by the sales team who prefer books with a strong ‘concept’ that can be neatly described in two sentences, which they find much easier to market and sell in volume. I would argue that this is skewing the kind of books that are now being sold to young people, the books receiving the big publicity and promotion budgets. And yet, despite this, the ‘quieter’ literary novels are still often those that appear on the short-lists for book prizes – often selected by librarians, reviewers, and sometimes by young people themselves.

In an editorial discussion in 2013, a new editor talked to me about ‘choosing which way to go’ for my next book for Bloomsbury – to aim at more commercial, lighter, genre fiction for teens, or to try to write a bigger, important ‘prize-winning’ book – as if it were possible to second-guess such a thing. The examples she gave me were John Green (*The Fault in Our Stars*), Annabel Pitcher (*My Sister Lives on the Mantlepiece*) and R. J. Palaccio (*Wonder*). It was an odd moment, encapsulating for me the very different ways we approach the writing of a new novel. I will discuss this further in Section Three.

The idea that books can or should be categorised by the possible age of their readers is anathema to many writers. The boundaries are blurred and publishers themselves take different views of what they are. David Almond’s novel *The Tight-Rope Walkers* is published by Penguin in the UK as an adult novel, but as YA in the USA. My guess is that the sexual content of parts of the novel marked it out for an adult audience for Penguin UK, but it might also have been the broad time span and scope of the novel (childhood to adulthood) and the retrospective narrative voice, less usual in YA fiction here in the UK. At a lecture I attended in Vermont USA, Amy King attempted to dispel the idea that teenagers today only want to read about teenagers today, as claimed in 1967 by S. E. Hinton in the *New York Times Book Review* (1974, Townsend: 295) and subsequently repeated by many editors and agents, including my own, and that YA readers are not interested in ‘adult’ characters (King, 2014). She made a compelling case for the inclusion of three-dimensional adult characters in YA fiction; adults are a key part of teenagers’ lives, after all: adults run their lives in many ways as parents and teachers. Fiction offers a helpful way for teenagers to examine, inspect and understand adult behaviour as they learn to navigate the adult world for

themselves. King cited older texts where an adult features as a main character – Paul Zindel’s *The Pigman* and *Confessions of a Teenage Baboon* for example, and some very recent novels which do the same – Meg Rosoff’s *Picture Me Gone*; David Levithan’s *Two Boys Kissing*, and her own YA novel *Please Ignore Vera Dietz*, which includes the father’s viewpoint in five sections. This novel went to auction, and three out of seven editors said she would have to omit the sections with the father on the grounds that ‘teens only want to read about teens’ (King, 2004). I have had a similar experience; both my editors at Puffin (Yvonne Hooker) and Bloomsbury (Emma Matthewson) have been adamant that the protagonists in my YA fiction should be no older than 16/17 and that I should include only the teenage characters’ voice/viewpoint. I have nonetheless tried, particularly with my most recent novels, to present adult characters as a significant presence – the parents, teachers and other adults in my teen protagonists’ lives. I would suggest this is one of the strengths in my recent novels, and part of my contribution to contemporary literature for young people.

Many children’s authors write without thinking about the age of the reader, and readers will select and read what is ‘right’ for them, at whatever age. The age-range debate (whether or not it should be signposted on book covers) comes and goes: it flared up again in 2008, when more than eighty authors led by Philip Pullman and supported by Michael Rosen, Michael Morpurgo and Jacqueline Wilson amongst others claimed that age-banding on books for young people was ‘ill-conceived and damaging’. Pullman wrote, ‘I write for whoever is interested. When I write a book I don’t have an age-group in mind’ (Pullman, quoted in Singh, 2008).

Back in 1971, Frank Eyre discussed K. M. Peyton's *Flambards* trilogy (1967-9), Alan Garner's *The Owl Service* (1967) and John Rowe Townsend's *Goodnight Professor Love* (1970) and wondered whether these novels had become necessary 'to take the place of a kind of adult novel that has disappeared.' He asked: 'Are we witnessing the birth of a new kind of book, that is neither a children's book nor an adult novel, but something in between?' (1971, Eyre: 156). If this were so, he suggested, then a new production style would have to be evolved, which distinguished 'this kind of novel for young adults both from other children's books, and from adult books' (1971, Eyre: 156).

By the late 1980s those issues of production style had been largely addressed. In 1988, Julia Eccleshare wrote, 'Teenage interests are reflected in readable fiction because it is well written as much as topical. And now it is being properly packaged. Teenagers have recently been identified as a group with strong purchasing power. Since then books have been directed expressly at them. They are published as paperbacks with suitably attractive covers' (1988, Eccleshare: 92-3). On her list of 'well-written' fiction for teenagers, Julia Eccleshare included novels by Jill Paton Walsh, Jane Gardam, Jan Mark, Janni Howker, Paula Cox, Robert Westall, Robert Swindell, Peter Dickinson and Robert Cormier. 'These many and diverse titles show convincingly that just because children are younger than adults they do not need to be addressed at a lower literacy level' (1988, Eccleshare: 92).

The 1980s and 90s saw a huge expansion of YA fiction in the UK. While there was lots of activity in terms of publication, the critical scholarship has not yet been done and therefore is not discussed in this study. In his 1995 edition of *Written for Children*. John Rowe Townsend revised his chapter 'How young is an

adult?’ to include developments in this field. In an earlier edition (1974) he had commented that, ‘In Britain, up to the time of writing, the Young Adult category has not established itself’ (1974, Townsend: 296); in the new edition he added a section on Aidan Chambers’ novels *Breaktime* (1978) and *Dance on my Grave* (1982), Berlie Doherty’s *Dear Nobody* (1991) and Robert Swindell’s *Stone Cold* (1993). The Carnegie medal, he noted, ‘counter to my impression of the general trend’, was ‘deservedly won in 1992 and again in 1994 by books that could properly be described as young adult, in that they dealt with subjects of special concern to teenagers in a way that would best suit an adolescent’s degree of maturity rather than a child’s’ (1995, Townsend: 288). Janni Howker won the Whitbread Children’s Book Award in 1985 for *The Nature of the Beast*, Celia Rees was short-listed for *Sorceress* in 2002 and Anne Cassidy for *Looking for JJ* in 2004. Many of these novels dealt with challenging social issues.

Melvin Burgess considers his novel *Junk*, published in 1996, to have a historical position as a ‘very early, proper YA book.... The teenage fiction at the time was really for younger kids and not for teenagers’ (2014, Burgess; interview for the Guardian Children’s Books Site). He describes himself as ‘setting out the territory’ in a ‘genre that was just developing’; ‘I got to explore a territory which hadn’t been explored before’ (2014, Burgess).

I do not find it useful to describe YA fiction as a ‘genre’, simply because it encompasses so many different genres of writing. But I do like Eyre’s description of a literature that is ‘*something in between*’; it provides a useful way for me to think about the fiction that I choose to write, for and about adolescents. And as part of my writing process I too find myself working out what that place is, ‘in between’; I’m crossing back and forth between child and adulthood, testing

out in the writing itself what's appropriate, or relevant, or sufficiently engaging, for my readers. In this sense, the category 'YA' does have a use for me as a writer, beyond marketing. I'm crossing and re-crossing the boundaries as I work out for myself how far to go, sometimes in discussion with or in response to my publisher's concerns (the depiction of sex, for example, in my first novel, *Blue Moon*, or the scene in the Neolithic burial chamber in *Hunter's Heart*, and the edited shower scene in *Drawing with Light*, which I will discuss later in Section 3). I'm engaged, often, with the question of why I'm writing for young adults, rather than simply 'adults', and what that means, and whether that's even a useful question for me as a writer. As I go forward with my next novel, I want to see what happens if I *don't* have my publishers' expectations in my mind. Over the years, I seem to have internalised many of these expectations, exercising a form of self-censorship. I return to this issue in a discussion of my plans for a future novel, at the end of Section Three.

I have written three novels for younger children (*Tilly's Moonlight Fox* (2012), *Sylvie and Star* (2013) and *Seal Island* (2014) where few of these questions about content and style and audience were in my mind: it seemed much simpler and more straightforward to be writing stories 'for children'. Nonetheless, I am powerfully and repeatedly drawn back to the material of adolescence, to this most extraordinarily vivid and exciting period of change and transition in our lives, where so much is being experienced and thought about for the first time: the time of 'in between', of growing-up.

The Background: my writing

I did not set out to be a writer for young adults. My first published work was a poem about my mother (Green, in *Writing Women*) and a short story, *Higgledy Piggledy*, about a young mother and her feckless husband, which won the Wells Literature Festival short story prize judged by Jane Gardam and awarded by Iris Murdoch, and was subsequently broadcast on Somerset radio.

Murdoch advised me to ‘write a novel next’, which I did. My first completed novel, *Tide Line*, was literary fiction for an adult audience, about a woman with small children, one of whom nearly drowns. It wasn’t published, despite receiving favourable comments from agents and editors, and in the meantime I went on to write a second novel with a child protagonist, for children (8-11 or so). I was learning about writing, about *my* writing: circling around the material for my fiction, which seemed to have children and families at its heart. At this time I was teaching in a comprehensive school, learning counselling skills and working with young adults for the LEA home-tutor service for young people in difficult circumstances, including work at a pupil referral unit.

I was teaching English to young people aged 11 to 18. The book stock in the school, from which I was expected to choose texts to read in class, seemed to these young people out of date, boring and irrelevant. Most of them did not read for pleasure and had few books at home. Faced with classes of real young people, I started to think about audience in a new way. A parent myself by now, I was reading lots of new fiction for children and young adults, to keep my own children supplied. I knew that there were plenty of good new contemporary stories for young adults being written and published: they simply hadn’t made

their way into this particular school, and the teachers there had no time, it seemed, to keep up-to-date with contemporary fiction for young people.

Was all this in my mind when I began writing *Blue Moon*? Possibly. I can remember the precise moment, in a writing exercise on the course I attended at Ty Newydd, taught by David Almond and Kara May, when I made the conscious mental shift in viewpoint and character, from an unexpectedly pregnant thirty-year-old woman, to an unexpectedly pregnant *fifteen*-year-old school girl. Mia.

The effect on my writing was dramatic. Something fell away: the result was a clearer, cleaner and less pretentious prose style, and a new focus on audience. I could see the young people in that former GCSE English class in my mind as I wrote; several of them inspired characters in my novel. I still wrote the story I wanted to tell, but I narrowed my focus, seeing the world through the eyes of a fifteen-year-old girl, and the new focus strengthened the themes in the story. The story was better: not 'less', or watered down, or simplified because of its audience, but actually 'more'. It was a revelation. In getting under the skin of my fifteen-year-old character, creating a convincingly teenage sensibility, I found a voice and a way of writing that made my writing much more effective.

How did that happen, exactly? I think it was because, by getting inside the head of that fifteen-year-old character, I somehow reconnected with myself at that age. I have been trying to do this in my fiction for young people ever since. I aim to be as true as I can to the experience of being an adolescent, and what I see (and experienced myself) as the important interiority of that state between childhood and adulthood, where we reflect and grow and change and become 'ourselves'. The act of reading fiction can support and nurture the growth of that

inner self, where thought and reflection, the intellect and the emotions, can flourish. Francis Spufford talks at length about this process in *The Child That Books Built* (Spufford, 2002).

At an early stage of development of my PhD study, I asked myself questions about the nature of my fiction for young people, in an attempt to understand what significance it might have. Through early drafts, I found the core material which I wanted to address: the argument that there is a tradition of imaginatively rich writing for young adults exemplified by a certain kind of psychological exploration, expressed in the texture of the writing and in the structures of the story, which is somewhat under threat by conditions in the contemporary market for YA fiction. It became clear to me that my particular contribution was as part of this tradition, taking it forward alongside other writers into the twenty-first century for a new generation of readers. These were the sort of novels that had nourished me as an adolescent, based in the real world, with a focus on the inner lives of the characters, their emotions, thoughts, imagination and reflections, expressed in layered, complex and subtle language.

I believe that this kind of fiction is important, alongside all the many other kinds of fiction available for contemporary young people. I have become concerned that the increasing emphasis in the children's publishing world on books which can be sold in huge numbers, promoted by social media and conveniently packaged and marketed by a strong 'concept', is changing the nature of the fiction being published today for adolescents.

I have a sense that 'quieter' (the word agents and editors often use) literary fiction, which deals more with character, emotion and thought (the

interior world), rather than plot, action and ‘high concept’, is in danger of being side-lined. I am concerned that we lose something significant when we stop valuing the texture of language, its subtle and allusive qualities: the form and style of a novel as well as its content. These are some of the qualities that I have gained from my reading of an older literature, discussed in Section Two. It is my hope that this layered, literary quality is one aspect of writing I take forward in my fiction for a contemporary readership.

I want my fiction for adolescents to feed that interior process of reflection and thought that I consider to be an essential component in ‘growing up’. It is not so easy to ‘package’ and ‘sell’ this kind of fiction in the huge numbers that publishers like, because each book is different and this is fiction that makes demands - sometimes uncomfortable ones - on its readers. However, I would argue for the importance of sustaining this tradition inside our culture. I want to speak up for the ‘quiet’ novels where character is as important as plot, and where a story partly lives in its language. I want to champion stories that challenge young readers and invite them to think and feel: to go through a kind of journey themselves. I believe this might be a fiction that really is transitional between childhood and adult reading. I have started speaking out more publically about these beliefs: in the opening night debate with authors David Almond and Cressida Cowell and librarian Gill Trueman at the Bath Festival of Children’s Literature 2013, for example, and in an online interview with Rebecca Davies for the *Independent* (Julia Green, interview with Davies, 2013).

Brought up in a family of readers, where books were central to family life, I read widely and prolifically as a child. By the time I was a teenager, I was reading ‘adult’ fiction alongside books written and published more specifically

for teenagers/young adults: across genres, too - both 'literary' and commercial/popular fiction. I enjoyed Elizabeth Stuckley's *Magnolia Buildings*, Alan Garner's *The Owl Service* and *Red Shift* (a natural progression for a young person who had read his earlier novels for children – *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen*; *The Moon of Gomrath*; *Elidor*). I read 'back and forth': *Jane Eyre* alongside the Flambards series by K.M. Peyton; Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*, Alain Fournier's *Le Grand Meaulnes*, Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and Beverley Cleary's *Fifteen*; the popular historical romance novels of Georgette Heyer and Jean Plaidy alongside *Great Expectations* and *Bleak House*. And when I was sick with glandular fever, doing my mock A levels, I 'comfort' read a favourite series from my childhood, the Laura Ingalls Wilder books.

Looking back now, as the author of seven published novels which all deal with teenage protagonists with strong interior lives, I see how this central theme in my work is an echo of my own teenage reading and my attempts to define and understand my identity as a young woman. It was in books, in my reading, that I grew up.

SECTION TWO:

A tradition of interiority in fiction for adolescents: space inside to grow.

I set out to explore whether there is a tradition of novels for adolescents from the twentieth century to which I could see myself as belonging, and which I take forward through my own novels into contemporary YA fiction. I have chosen to make the case *for* the tradition by analysing three novels *from* the tradition, because they exemplify its strengths, and demonstrate both what writers in the tradition have in common, and how individual their talents are. I am aware that the selected texts are all rather middle-class and can at first encounter sound a bit dated; they have the traces of the sensibility of that era everywhere and belong in a historical and cultural moment that is past. I would argue that, nonetheless, they represent a tradition of real value, worth taking forward for a new generation of young readers.

At a very early stage of the PhD, I thought that I would be exploring family relationships in my novels and the work of others, as a way of examining my contribution to the field. The process of critical thinking and analysis of my fiction, in conjunction with the discussions I had with my supervisors and other authors, helped me to understand that the qualities which distinguished my work had more accurately to do with my settings, characterisation and - in particular - the expression of the inner lives of my characters.

In the process of selecting the novels for close study, I re-read widely in adolescent literature, following my own tastes as a reader in my teenage years,

and as an adult author with a professional interest in teaching creative writing for young people. I was looking for realist novels for adolescents which I thought best exemplified a sophisticated attention to nuances of language (a ‘literary’ style), which did not patronise the readership, where characterisation was complex and layered and where the interior life of the character was a significant part of the story. Novels which I considered in some detail included Jane Gardam’s novels *Bilgewater* and *The Summer After the Funeral* (1973), described by Julia Eccleshare as ‘elliptical novels which reflect a highly perceptive teenager’s view of life’ (1988, Eccleshare: 91), Grace Hogarth’s *As a May Morning* (1965), Beverley Cleary’s *Fifteen* (1956), Penelope Lively’s *The House at Norham Gardens* (1974), Jan Mark’s novel *Handles* (1983) K.M. Peyton’s *Flambards* (1967), Janni Howker’s *The Nature of the Beast* and novels by Paula Fox (*A Place Apart*, 1980; *The Lost Boy*, 1987). I considered writing about a range of novels which spanned the entire period from the 1940s to the present day, to include more recent realist novels which I had enjoyed and had been influential early on in my writing career, such as *Dear Nobody* by Berlie Doherty (1992), *Walk Two Moons* by Sharon Creech (1994), *Lucas* by Kevin Brooks (2002), *What the Birds See* by Sonya Hartnett (2002) *Carwash* by Lesley Howarth (2002) and *A Swift Pure Cry* by Siobhan Dowd (2006). This was too wide a reach for this thesis, however, and would have changed the focus of the PhD into something more like a historical survey. I refined my criteria, and focussed on an older tradition of realist novels which focus on the interior life of the adolescent characters and their relationships within their family, and where the story might be considered to live in the language and style as much as, or more than, in plot. I finally selected *I Capture the Castle* by Dodie Smith (1948);

Greengage Summer by Rumer Godden (1958); *Goldengrove*, by Jill Paton Walsh (1972) and its sequel, *Unleaving* (1976).

Lucy Pearson in *Children's Literature* describes how both the phenomenon of the teenager and the development of books written explicitly for them emerged first in the United States and was heavily influenced by Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* (1951), published for adults but quickly adopted by adolescent readers. 'Quite rightly,' Aidan Chambers wrote in 1985, 'for it is in teenage that the books carries most impact' (1985, Chambers: 87). Holden Caulfield's direct address to the reader – colloquial first-person narrative – left a lasting mark on YA fiction, where first person narrative has been a consistent feature (Pearson, 2011: 169). I read *Catcher in the Rye* as a teenager, but I also read *I Capture the Castle*, and Smith's character Cassandra Mortmain (age 17) resonated with me much more than Salinger's Caulfield.

I Capture the Castle was first published for adults (1949), but was one of the Peacock titles later published for 'teenage' readers, and it has remained in print, still widely read by adolescents. The first-person, present tense narrative feels intimate and close-up. The tone is confessional, and yet there's a witty, ironic edge to the voice. The novel is character-driven, and the voice of the narrator, Cassandra, is perhaps its most memorable feature. 'I write this sitting in the kitchen sink', she begins, and the first chapters set up the story - how will the Mortmain family resolve their dire financial situation, now that the writer-father is failing to write? This is a novel about Cassandra growing up, watching the moves her sister Rose makes in her desperate bid to secure a husband and financial security, but it is also a novel about writing. Cassandra states that she is partly writing to 'practise my newly-acquired speed-writing and partly to teach

myself to write a novel – I intend to capture all our characters and put in conversations. It ought to be good for my style to dash along without much thought, as up to now my stories have been very stiff and self-conscious’ (p.6). The device of the journal allows her to record her thoughts and perceptions as they happen, in present tense, but also to narrate events in retrospect, in past tense, using all the techniques of the novelist, including the dialogue, action and detailed description which bring these scenes alive for the reader. Sometimes there are set pieces, such as the extended passage of backstory describing ‘How we came to the castle’, and an ‘essay’ on castles. Sometimes the retrospective account of events or a passage of reflection is interrupted by the reporting of present moment action – ‘Oh! Oh my goodness! They’re here – the Cottons - they’ve just come round the last bend of the lane’ (p.75). Frequently, Cassandra talks about the *process* of writing: ‘It must be half an hour since I wrote that last line’ (p.75), or, earlier,

while I have been writing I have lived in the past, the light of it has been all around me –first the golden light of autumn, then the silver light of spring, and then the strange light, grey but exciting, in which I see the historic past. But now I have come back to earth and rain is beating on the attic window, an icy draught is blowing up the staircase and Ab has gone downstairs and left my stomach cold. (p.46)

The language here is lyrical and literary, and then changes back to the ordinary and mundane. Cassandra never allows herself to stay lyrical for long: she makes fun of her own literary pretensions and shortcomings as a writer. On another occasion, she writes, ‘I have never felt happier in my life (perhaps it is because I have satisfied my creative urge, or it may be due to the thought of eggs for tea)’ (p.15). The sentence follows a similar movement, where a kind of adolescent hyperbole is brought back down to earth. It’s funny, effective and engaging.

The journal form allows other kinds of narrative to be included, such as extracts from letters and poems, itemised lists of her thoughts (p.128), and a list of the sounds and smells she and Simon experience as they sit outside the pub in the village of Godsend (p.178). As events become more dramatic, Cassandra writes longer passages of narrative with fewer of her ‘interruptions’, so that it reads more like a novel and less like a diary, but she draws the reader’s attention to this, too: ‘It took me three days to describe the party at Scoatney – I didn’t mark the breaks because I wanted it to seem like one whole chapter. Now that it has become so much more exciting, I think of this journal as a story I am telling. A new chapter happened yesterday’ (p.157). Life itself is now ‘story’.

This is sophisticated story-telling, moving between past and present tense, showing us events directly, as well as providing commentary on them, so the reader can see and understand more than Cassandra can sometimes articulate for herself. This is evident, for example, in the way she talks about Stephen, the boy she has taken for granted (he works for the family, but without pay, and is devoted to her in particular) and about whom her feelings are increasingly ambivalent, as she begins to notice his sexual attractiveness, mainly through the way other women respond to him. The reader is clear that she is ‘jealous’ of Ivy, and Mrs Fox-Cotton, long before Cassandra understands that this is what she is feeling. But even that emotion is more subtle and complex than the word ‘jealous’ would suggest. It’s through subtle use of language that the author conveys this. Cassandra’s father has advised her to ‘be brisk’ with Stephen, to avoid any misunderstandings, but she begins to notice how she likes the feeling of being ‘dizzy’ around Stephen. She doesn’t go for a walk with him, knowing this will encourage Stephen to assume she welcomes his attentions, but she allows herself

to take that walk in her imagination, and in her own imaginative version he kisses her. Afterwards, looking at the real Stephen, she writes in the journal, 'I'm not quite certain that I don't want him to kiss me' (p.129). The double negative in the sentence expresses the hesitant, equivocal nature of her feelings at this moment.

The vicar describes Cassandra as 'Jane Eyre with a touch of Becky Sharp. A thoroughly dangerous girl' (p.134). The frame of reference for her is the spirited, independent heroine of nineteenth century fiction, with which Smith expected her readers to be familiar. The vicar is speaking in response to Cassandra's own observation that she is not 'spectacular', which is how he has described the Mortmain women in their evening gowns, on the way to the dinner party at Scoatney Hall in chapter eight. Like Jane Eyre, Cassandra is not pretty (her sister Rose is). She is so much more than this: intelligent, funny, imaginative and creative, a properly three-dimensional female character. To many of the adult characters in the novel, she is still a child. Neil Cotton calls her a 'cute kid'; Simon mistakes her for a much younger child when he first sees her. But she is seventeen, and growing up. She buys her first grown-up dress (green linen). She becomes increasingly aware of her own sexual feelings, and a sense of self. The novel evokes that moment between childhood and adult hood, where everything wonderful and exciting seems poised on the edge - is about to happen but hasn't quite yet. And then, for just one moment, something wonderful and hopeful *does* happen. Cassandra records it afterwards in the notebook, but first she writes about the difficulty of expressing what she feels, shown here in the broken sentences, the hesitations and questions and struggle to find the right words:

... I must set it down today so that I shall have it forever, intact and lovely, untouched by the sadness that is coming – for, of course it *is* coming; my brain tells me that (...)

Is it wrong for me to feel so happy? Perhaps I ought even to feel guilty? No. I didn't make it happen, and it can't hurt anyone but me. Surely I have a right to my joy? For as long as it lasts...

It is like a flowering in the heart, a stirring of wings – oh, if only I could write poetry, as I did when I was a child! I have tried, but the words were as cheap as sentimental songs. So I tore them up. I must set it down simply – everything that happened to me yesterday – with no airs and graces. (p.237)

She moves into past tense as she begins her account of Midsummer Eve: 'my lovely day began when the sun rose'; she describes previous midsummer evenings and the back story of the ritual with Rose ('We first held the rites when I was nine'), before moving back to the beginning of this day: breakfast, Stephen's and then her father's departure, and the realisation she will be alone for the night. The detail of the unfolding day is minutely observed - what it's like to be alone in a house, her awareness of everything, and the tone and the language changes:

I became very conscious of all my movements – if I raised my arm I looked at it wonderingly, thinking, 'That is mine!' And I took pleasure in moving, both the physical effort and in the touch of the air – it was most queer how the air seemed to touch me, even when it was absolutely still. All day long I had a sense of great ease and spaciousness. And my happiness had a strange, remembered quality as though I had lived it before. Oh, how can I recapture it – that utterly right, homecoming sense of recognition? It seems to me now that the whole day was like an avenue leading to a home I had loved once but forgotten, the memory of which was coming back so dimly, so gradually, as I wandered along, that only when my home at last lay before me did I cry: Now I know why I have been happy!

How words weave spells! As I wrote of the avenue, it rose before my eyes – I can see it now, lined with great smooth-trunked trees whose branches meet far above me. (p.242)

The style of writing becomes more abstract as she reaches for the words to capture her heightened state. And then, as she 'writes' the word 'avenue' she is reminded of the real physical avenue of trees which is before her (now, in the act of writing about the day before). This is complex narrative, with its subtle shifts

in time and place, between then and now, remembering and evoking the feeling and then reflecting on the process itself ('How words weave spells'), that makes demands on a reader. The passage is the preamble for the physical awakening that follows, as Cassandra takes off her clothes and climbs the tower:

I had a sudden longing to lie in the sun with nothing on. I never felt it before – Topaz has always had a monopoly of nudity in our household – but the more I thought of it, the more I fancied it. And I had the brilliant idea of doing my sunbathing on the top of the bedroom tower, where nobody ... could possibly see me. It felt most peculiar crawling naked up the cold rough stone steps – exciting in some mysterious way I couldn't explain to myself....

... After a few minutes I seemed to live in every inch of my body as fully as I usually do in my head and my hands and my heart. I had the fascinating feeling that I could think as easily with my limbs as with my brain. (p.244)

Even as she delivers this powerful evocation of a significant moment of sexual awakening and awareness, Cassandra's debunking, ironic tone slips back in. She describes getting too hot, and beginning to get bored. It's so quiet she begins to wonder if she's gone deaf - until she hears 'a tiny bead of sound, tap, tap' (p. 244) which is her bathing suit dripping into the moat.

In the middle of the midsummer rites she shares with Simon, she has the realisation that this might be the last year for the rites – she is leaving childhood behind. She only feels 'the slightest pang of sadness' because of her sense of what is to come – the world opening up. And this scene leads into the one where Simon dances with her, and kisses her, and she is changed forever. It is a highly charged scene, described from Cassandra's adolescent perspective ('All I can recall is happiness, happiness in my mind and in my heart and flowing through my whole body') – and yet even as she's recalling the scene, the reader is already alert to the difference in Simon's perception of events compared to Cassandra's. The way the

scene is so fully evoked through dialogue and action allows a space for readers to interpret events for themselves. Simon still refers to Cassandra as a ‘child’ throughout, albeit an ‘astonishing’ one after they kiss (p.264). But the kiss means nothing to him, or at most, is just ‘friendly’. He is still engaged to Rose, after all.

At this key moment, Cassandra takes her own feelings seriously. She allows them the respect they deserve. It’s her first kiss, ever. She really does love Simon, unlike her sister Rose. The reader is entirely sympathetic to her. The ironic edge to her voice is absent for a short while. It comes back at the end of the chapter. Cassandra records her thought ‘that perhaps it is the loving that counts, not the being loved in return – that perhaps true loving can never know anything but happiness. For a moment I felt I had discovered a great truth’- but she immediately undercuts it. ‘Miss Blossom’ (the mannequin) speaks with the humorous, debunking tone which is really Cassandra’s, of course: ‘Well, you just hold on to that comforting bit of high-thinking, duckie, because you’re going to need it’ (p.267).

The novel does not offer a happy or romantic ending. Rose realises she is love with Neil rather than Simon, leaving Simon ‘free’ for Cassandra. But Cassandra is wise and aware enough to refuse to go with him to America when he asks her, because he doesn’t love her in the way she needs or deserves. She could give him ‘a sort of contentment’, but ‘that isn’t enough to give. Not for the giver’. (p.406). And although some readers might be disappointed, it is the only ending that is consistent with the trajectory of the story, the characterisation of the protagonist and the tone of the narrative: Cassandra must be true to herself. She deserves more than Simon is offering.

By the end of the novel, Cassandra says she has ‘grown out of wanting to write about myself’ (p.406). By implication, this process is over. The journal is full. The story is over. And yet the words that linger on in the reader’s mind are the final ones Cassandra writes ‘in the margin’, with their rhythmic, poignant repetitions: the words that can only be written down and won’t be spoken or read, at least by Simon: ‘Only the margin left to write in now. I love you, I love you, I love you’ (p.408).

The language of this novel is subtle and allusive and self-aware, the characters are psychologically complex, including the adult characters. The narrative voice is compelling and distinctive, and the elements of metafiction make this a sophisticated read. *I Capture the Castle* is a story about a girl growing up, but it is also a story about writing: about the process, the joy and the struggle of it, too. Cassandra’s father’s book, which he finally begins with versions of the phrase ‘The cat sat on the mat’, is apparently about reading and the nature and limits of literature and language.

Rumer Godden’s semi-autobiographical novel *The Greengage Summer* (1958) was another of the novels republished under the Peacocks imprint. The story is set in one significant summer in France and describes the processes of change and ‘growing up’ of the two teenage characters, Joss and Cecil, closely based on Rumer Godden and her older sister. The narrator is thirteen-year-old Cecil, who, like Cassandra in *I Capture the Castle*, loves words, and spends a lot of her time observing the actions of others. The novel is narrated retrospectively, and has a nostalgic tone as Cecil recounts the events of that last summer of her childhood, powerfully evoked by the image of the greengages: ‘On and off, all that hot French August, we made ourselves ill from eating the greengages’ (p.3).

The early chapters set up the family situation, and also establish why Cecil is telling the story:

‘You are the one who should write this,’ I told Joss, ‘it happened chiefly to you’, but Joss shut that out, as she always shuts out things, or shuts them in, so that no one can guess.

‘You are the one who likes words,’ said Joss. ‘Besides...’ and she paused. ‘It happened as much to you.’

I did not answer that. I am grown up now – or almost grown up – ‘and we still can’t get over it!’ said Joss. (p.4)

This is not simple retrospective narrative, however, as we can see in this paragraph and the ones that follow on page four. One sentence belongs to this moment (‘If I stop what I am doing for a moment’), another is quoted speech (Joss’s dialogue, and a fragment of Uncle William’s speech), another takes us back to a previous episode, the time before the holiday nested inside the time of the holiday, which is nested inside the future point from which the narration comes (‘I am grown-up now – or almost grown up’). Each sentence seems to come from a different place, and the reader has to work hard to follow these shifts in narrative points of view. We meet Eliot before we know where we are or who he is and why he is significant. We hear things before we have the information to understand them.

The novel is a sensuously detailed account of life in a French hotel in the Marne valley from the perspective of a young teenager encountering an adult world – its deceptions and betrayals, pleasures and passions - for the first time. She is also witnessing the physical and emotional changes in her older sister that are about to happen to her, too, and about which her feelings are ambiguous:

she would not undress with me any more, and I was glad because my pinkness was still distressingly straight up and down while she had a waist now, slim and so supple I could not help watching it, and curves that tapered to long slim legs, while her breasts had swelled. . . . As Joss grew, she grew more irritable, with flashes of temper that were sometimes cruel; she was restless too, as if she were always excited, which was odd because her face was serene and withdrawn, almost secret. (p.10)

Joss's physical and sexual attraction for the men at the hotel will provide a key scene in the story (chapter seven), when the newly recovered, washed and freshly dressed Joss comes down the staircase to the rapt attention of Eliot, as he properly sees her as a sexual creature rather than an annoying child for the first time. This scene focuses, rather effectively, on the feet of the two women, Joss's pretty and slim in white sandals, her toes straight and unblemished, contrasted with Mme Zizi's high-heeled open-toed black shoes, revealing the deep red nail varnish, her 'brown and twisted' toes, 'thickened with corn marks'. Everything to do with Mme Zizi is connected with artifice, where Joss stands for youth, purity and simplicity. Cecil is jealous when she notices the effect Joss has on Eliot, in particular, and this is the emotion aroused in Eliot's lover, Mademoiselle Zizi, too. Cecil's youthful perspective brings a particular clarity to the account of events, and one of the pleasures of reading the novel is that viewpoint: its directness and honesty. Cecil can see how Mme Zizi shows Eliot too readily how much she loves him, and panders to his moods: 'It was surprising a grown person could be so stupid; even I knew that the best thing to do was to leave him alone' (p.64).

Their mother's motivation for the trip to France was to show her daughters the battlefields of France as a cure for their adolescent selfishness and self-preoccupation. When she becomes seriously ill, Cecil, Joss and their three younger siblings are left to their own devices. The novel evokes their delight at

the differences in this new place, their new freedom and discoveries, all seen through Cecil's fresh eyes: 'To wake for the first time in a new place can be like another birth' (p.25). Other things are being 'born', too. The beginning of Cecil's 'awakening' to the adult world and the move from innocence to experience is embodied in the image of the greengage she eats on the first morning. As she steps out into the orchard and reaches up to touch a warm, ripe greengage, 'I looked quickly around, but no one came, no one scolded, and after a moment I bit into the ripe golden flesh' (p.35). Cecil herself (the slightly older Cecil, writing after the events of the summer) makes the connection explicit in the following paragraph: '... as if the greengage had been an Eden apple, I was suddenly older and wiser'. It seems she instinctively knows she should avoid speaking to Eliot, who has just appeared in the orchard. But the seriously sick mother has asked Eliot to be temporary guardian for her children, and he agrees, because, as Cecil overhears, they will be 'useful' to him. They will stop people talking, give him a reason to be there, and provide 'camouflage'. Cecil doesn't know what this means, at this point of the story, but she knows she does not like it. The novel follows a series of discoveries and new experiences – Cecil's first cigarette; the possibility of a 'lady loving a lady'; seeing Mademoiselle Zizi's false eyelashes, artificial breasts and dyed hair; hearing about Paul's first sexual encounter aged fourteen (following which he touches her breasts and laughs – '*Deux petits citrons*' – an experience which leaves her feeling as if it's her, not him, who is 'bad'). She learns more about religion, and about the war, and about race: 'Can a black person be beautiful? Such an idea had not occurred to our insular little minds' (p.79). Later, she will ask the question, 'Can one love someone who is not good?' (p.111).

These scenes are narrated with freshness and simplicity, reflecting the perspective of a teenager experiencing these things for the first time. But there is much Cecil doesn't understand, particularly the confusing behaviour of the adults, their complex relationships and the unspoken undercurrents between them, and part of the pleasure of reading the novel comes from this 'gap' between Cecil's understanding of events and our own, our reading between the lines. The subtle and layered use of language allows this to happen. Events are shown to the reader, rather than simply told.

The orchard and outside world seems to Cecil 'an older and more truthful world', and offers a welcome refuge with its 'older simpler scents':

the smell of box, of mint, syringe, roses, dew on the grass, warm ripe fruit, smells of every summer. There was peace in the overgrown grass walks and heavy bushes, in the long orchard alleys where the greengages ripened in their own time, and were neither forced nor pruned; here everything was itself, exactly as it seemed.'(p58).

Here, Cecil can be a child again.

There are some things from which she cannot escape. One of these is the knowledge that her sister is beautiful, 'and I was not' – Eliot looks at Joss and does not even notice Cecil. Now, Cecil is no longer jealous, because she understands for the first time that there is a price which Joss will pay for this. Things change for Joss after the big domestic fight between Eliot and Zizi, Eliot's rejection of Joss, and Joss' drunken night, which leads to her being steered in a different direction by another man: the artist, Monsieur Joubert. His interest in her is deemed more acceptable and safe, because it is directed towards her developing skill as a painter. But that too sours, and M. Joubert is sent away. Cecil describes her sense that the house is a 'hotbed' of feelings, full of love and hate 'and the love seemed as bad as the hate' (p. 125). Joss's sense of her new sexual power

over men leads her further into trouble; she joins the adults in their 'games' - pretence, lies, secrecy – all the time watched closely by Cecil. Joss is the centre of male attention. She flirts. There is something ugly about the adult behaviour Cecil observes. This same night Cecil herself, in her own words, 'becomes a woman'; she realises she has started her period and that this was the reason for the aches that Joss had called her 'growing pains'. At this key moment of growing up, she feels 'inexpressibly lonely' (p.131). Growing up, becoming a woman, is another of those things which will happen whether she likes it or not - 'no matter how reluctant, one was pushed into the full tide' (p.131).

Events after the party turn dark and melodramatic – Eliot apparently 'saves' Joss from sexual attack by the drunken Paul, but in doing so he kills him, in what appears to be an attack fuelled by jealousy and fury. Eliot then disappears. Cecil witnesses it all. The police come looking for Eliot on another charge - a robbery; the children are questioned, their uncle miraculously turns up at the right moment, and the children – they are all children at this point, even Joss – unite to protect Eliot. The answer to whether you can love someone who is not good turns out to be 'yes'. At this point of the novel, however, it feels much less like a story of growing up, and much more like a children's adventure story, where the values of family are reaffirmed and the children and adults in a family are united against the rest of the world. Nonetheless, the novel as a whole evokes very effectively the feeling of being young, on the verge of adulthood, seeing and experiencing the world in new ways, asking the big questions about love, and death, and goodness and honesty, and revealing the complexity of any answers.

The Greengage Summer was originally published for adults, but re-issued as a Peacock for teenagers. Novels can cross the other way, too: written for

teenagers but read and sometimes re-published or simultaneously published for an adult audience. This is a phenomenon we have become familiar with in recent years – David Almond’s *The True Tale of the Monster Billy Dean* was given two different cover treatments, one targeted at teenagers and the other at adults, though I confess I had difficulty in knowing which was which. Mark Haddon’s *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night time* had a similar treatment.

Jill Paton Walsh’s novel *Goldengrove* (Macmillan, 1972), was originally written for teenagers, and later re-published for adults in 1997 by Black Swan together with its sequel, *Unleaving*, in one volume. The author added a note:

Goldengrove and *Unleaving* were written in the 1970s and published in the then-new category of ‘young adult’ novels. I am glad to offer them for a wider readership. I was and am deeply interested in the strange light cast on adult life seen with partial understanding by young and vulnerable minds. (Author’s Note, 1997)

The titles of the novels refer to the poem by Gerard Manley Hopkins, and might suggest that the author (and publisher) in the 1970s could presume a tradition of reading, a world of literary reference with which a teenager might be familiar. Or perhaps the intention was to induct a young reader into this world. When I make such references in my own novels, I cannot be sure that my adolescent readers will be familiar with them, and at my editor’s suggestion I now provide ‘notes’ for the back of the novel, which make the references explicit and invite ‘further reading’. I discuss this further in Section Three.

At the centre of Paton Walsh’s *Goldengrove* is teenage Madge, growing up, changing physically and emotionally. Gran, watching her, describes the process, with the knowledge and hindsight of the adult woman who has been through this painful experience herself and come through the other side:

And oh, it's beginning again, thinks Gran, I see it beginning again. Only a dress this morning, at first only dresses and smiles, and then will come longing and yearning, and wanting too much of someone, and raging, raging against what cannot be. It is always the same. Where does it come from, all this? All over long since for me now, and not yet begun upon for them, and in between, such storms! She remembers the storms, not wanting to, so that her mind skitters rapidly through years like moments (p.70)

This is a novel for teenagers, and Madge is at the centre of the novel's action and events, but the sections from Gran's point of view give an interesting perspective on the teenage drama that unfolds.

Madge is coming to terms with changing relationships, both with her 'cousin', Paul, - who is in fact, we discover, her brother - and with the adults around her. The family at the centre of the story has been 'broken' by the acrimonious divorce of Madge and Paul's parents, both now re-married, - and everyone has been damaged in the fall-out. Their grandmother, a central character in her own right, is determined to bring the children together at her house 'and heal the breach and right the wrong' (p.71). Up till now, none of the adults have been honest with Madge.

At the beginning of the novel, as she travels towards her grandmother's house, Madge is longing to see Paul again, as well as the place. She wants everything to be the same as it has always been, but all the signs of change are already there. It's later in the year than usual for her annual visit - early September rather than August. The light is more golden, the trees already beginning to turn. And she herself is changing, physically and emotionally. She no longer wants to 'play' with Paul in quite the same way; he, younger than her, resents her visits to read to the blind man who is staying in her grandmother's cottage. These meetings, and the conversations she has with the man, Ralph, take

her on a journey of awakening sensibility and a growing sense of self. It's a story about the inevitable loss that comes with time; about change, and about the transition from a kind of childish innocence into a more troubled, awkward self-knowing. There are few 'dramatic' events: the small danger of an adder's bite, the drowning of a French sailor at sea, Madge's abortive attempt to sail to the lighthouse which results in illness and means she has to stay behind when Paul returns to school at the end of their ten-day holiday.

The novel is almost entirely concerned with the small minutiae of the changing self, and relationships, and the present moment. And to express this, the author has to use language in a different way, which I will go on to analyse later. I did not read this novel until recently: I know I would have relished it as a teenager, and found much in the character of Madge with which to identify. The setting echoes Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (a house on the same stretch of coast near St Ives, overlooking Godrevy lighthouse, where Woolf spent her childhood holidays, and which is the real setting for *To the Lighthouse*, even though it's thinly disguised as the Hebrides in the final text). There are strong echoes of elements of Woolf's style, too, as Paton Walsh attempts to convey the present moment (Woolf's *moments of being*), and the movement of inner thought and consciousness, switching fluidly between the interior states of the girl, and the boy, and, at times, the grandmother and the blind man, Ralph.

The first page of the novel moves effortlessly from a kind of omniscient third person narrative ('Rhythmically, like a runner, the train gasps and pants as it pulls up the long rise'), into a perspective close-up to Paul, one of the passengers on the train: 'Sitting near the end of the train, looking and looking through the window – it has made his nose dirty – for the moment when the line turns

suddenly and you can see the sea, Paul knows it is nearly there', and then inside his head, in first person:

They get me to the train, just in time, for Daddy to kiss me once, on my left cheek, and for me to just leap into the last carriage ... and so we always are, together and apart, going there together and meeting when we get there. Of course, my people don't want to meet her people, that's why it is, of course... 'There it is!' he interrupts himself, for now the train is turning, and suddenly the sea is there, Oh wider than you ever expect, though of course, thinks Paul, I know it is and a fantastic blue, like the ultramarine in my paintbox. (p.13)

Within the next few paragraphs, the narrative perspective has shifted to Madge, on the same train, thinking about Paul – and we are inside her head, in a first person voice quite distinct from Paul's (more literary, her head full of quotations, with a different sensibility and frame of reference – exams, mother, school). And a few paragraphs later, the narrative shifts again, to the grandmother, waiting at Goldengrove, seeing the train: 'They are here, she thinks, my dear Madge and Paul, together. Their parents make me so angry ... no, I won't think about that' (p.16).

Like Woolf, Jill Paton Walsh tries to convey the way more than one thing is happening at the same time, by moving fluidly between characters, in and out of thought and observation and dialogue. Mostly, the story stays with Madge, but the other perspectives bring a rich layering to the novel, and a larger resonance to the experiences evoked. Paton Walsh effectively conveys the shifting, interior experience of her characters and in particular, the real feel of adolescence: the obsessive preoccupation with self. Alone for once in St Ives while Paul is out in the boat, Madge wishes she'd gone too and feels that poignant sense of loss, time wasted. She thinks:

nothing happens to me when I am alone. Miss Adams went on and on when we were reading Wordsworth, about how good for you it was, and Jenny Martin said you were only truly yourself when you are quite alone ... so I ought to be really myself-est right now, at this very moment, and am I? What am I? A great wave explodes in her attention, and casts a swift lace coverlet over the naked rock. I'm not like that, that's all. I'm a mirror; I just reflect. And all sorts of things happen in a mirror when there are people moving around it, but when it's alone it's empty, glassy and still. When I'm alone I'm just a weather-watcher. Who would I be with no weather, all alone in the dark? She shudders. I just don't like being alone. I think I'll go home now, and have tea with Gran! (p.80)

Instead, she meets Ralph, and he talks to her about the 'aura' she gives off, to which, as a blind man ('all alone in the dark'), he is sensitive: 'it makes me feel perfectly at peace' (p. 83). And thus begins Madge's emotional attachment to a man who, she thinks, sees her as she really is and who needs her. The revelation in a letter from her mother that Paul is in fact her brother, that her father is not dead, after all and that her father chose Paul to live with, rather than her, comes as a terrible betrayal and makes her life lived so far seem a lie. She throws herself at Ralph, in an adolescent fantasy of keeping house for him, reading to him, writing down his books for him; when he turns her down, he calls her a 'sweet shallow child'. And his response – born from the bitter experience of losing his wife - that 'the best of us cannot be trusted with another's happiness', is shocking to her: something even worse than going blind.

'I have liked your company, Madge. You have a lovely voice. But even if you loved me, I wouldn't trust you, or wish to rely on you.'

'That's it – that's what's worse – feeling like that is worse than darkness!'

'Oh that, Madge,' he says, shrugging his shoulders. 'That happens to everyone. That's called growing up.'

'It won't happen to me,' says Madge. (p.106)

And in a way, it doesn't. Of course, she grows up in a physical sense but she does not become cynical or untrusting of people. In Paton Walsh's sequel to *Goldengrove*, her novel *Unleaving* (1976), she presents the story of what actually did happen to Madge when she grew up. The 'Gran' in *Unleaving*, making her way downstairs for tea at the beginning of the novel, is not the Gran of *Goldengrove* but Madge herself. This is not explained: the reader gradually works it out. Madge has inherited her grandmother's house, and is being visited this summer by her own grown-up daughter Harriet, her son-in-law, Tom, and the grandchildren Peter, Sarah and Beth. Madge has retained her youthful enthusiasm and optimism – she still loves to go to the beach and is more open minded than the other adults about the sexual relationship between niece Emily and her boyfriend. But even though she has retained her openness to life, she has lived a long time and has learned much from experience. In reply to her grandson, Peter's, question about the point of things ('first we grow up and have a lot of worries. And then we die and I don't see the point') her response is: 'it's not where you're going, it's what you see on the way. *When you set out for Ithaca, ask that the voyage be long... what's that from? I forget so much*' (p.236). When her grandson asks her to explain more, she recalls in thought a series of special moments:

Patrick for example, lying asleep beside me in rumpled sheets, every muscle in his body slack, and on his face that shining serenity that never came to him awake. And knowing that was my doing. One can't tell such things to a child...A piano playing in a downstairs room; Harriet in a cot beside my bed ... a car going over the top of Exmoor; I am singing: *But not so deep as the love I'm in; I know not where I sink or swim.*' (p. 236)

What she explains to the child, instead, is that we all die, 'but first we all live. Don't worry about what's the point. Just take your share. Take it two-handed and in full measure. You have to clap your hands and sing'. And that sentiment acts as a coda for the novel: the injunction to seize life in both hands and to celebrate the present moment: 'What shall we clap? The life boat in the storm. What shall we sing? The beauty of the world' (p. 237).

The story loops back and forth in time, in a series of extended scenes, moving from this moment, now, back to the death of Madge's grandmother, her funeral, and the first summer at the house where she met Patrick, the man she will later marry. It captures the 'present moment' at each of those times, while the novel as a whole is framed by the perspective of Madge's older self (as Gran) who can see 'the eternal aspect of the momentary now' (p. 174). As she stands at the window, watching the rain, she finds in this moment an image for life itself, but is also encapsulates for me what Paton Walsh is trying to convey about experience through the style and language of the novel:

Gran looks and smiles, holding the window catch and never dreaming of shutting the window. And in her mind the rain is an element of eternity, showing in its brilliant light-catching instant of fall the eternal aspect of the momentary now. Just let it catch the light in such a way, and the whole world shows this double aspect, an immortal brevity, an infinite particularity. (p.174)

The perspective is one of hindsight - the older woman is recollecting her younger self and the wisdom that comes with experience and maturity. And yet the extraordinary fresh style - the use of the present tense, the moving of the perspective into present moment and first person, the mingling of thought with memory - also evokes the feel of being adolescent and a teenage sensibility. This

novel does not offer comfortable certainties, or shy away from painful experience (for instance, the death of Molly, a disabled child, possibly caused by adolescent Patrick, her older brother), but engages with the big, real life philosophical questions which many young people (and some adults) grapple with. There are aspects of this novel that would seem out-dated to a contemporary YA reader – the house party of philosophy students from Oxford, for example, and attitudes towards Molly’s disability. The challenges that the stream-of-consciousness style and language present might put off some readers; the very interiority of the novel would probably be questioned by a publisher today. And yet it offers an adolescent reader a depth of insight into adult and teenage behaviour as well as a rich, engaging and satisfying story.

It is not within the scope of this thesis to provide a history of literature for young people. However, I do think it might be possible to trace a distinctive tradition of realist English language fiction written for adolescents running from the 1950s to the present. The novels in this tradition reflect the challenges of growing up, and express the interiority of this experience by using language in subtle and multi-layered ways. They focus on ‘ordinary’ lives in realistic settings, and present psychologically complex teenage characters. The UK writers in this tradition would include, among others, Jane Gardam, Penelope Lively, Jan Mark, Jenni Howker, Berlie Doherty, Linda Newbery and Lesley Howarth.

Young adult fiction as a literature of its own has grown and developed during the same period of time that I have been writing my novels. It continues to do so, as a healthy literature must necessarily do, in response to ‘its own history, to other arts, and to the need of its own time’ (1988, Chambers: 88). There has been a huge increase in the volume of books published as YA, and a proliferation

of fantasy novels in particular, including paranormal romance and dystopian fiction. More recently, new YA novels such as *The Killing Woods* by Lucy Christopher (2013) and *The Year of the Rat* by Clare Furniss (2014) take the realist tradition forward again for a new audience of readers. Though based firmly in the real contemporary world, Clare Furniss's novel about a teenager's grief at the death of her mother uses a fantasy element as a way to heighten emotion for the reader (the dead mother speaks - it's a comic voice, we laugh, it lifts the mood but at the same time allows teenage Pearl's deep sadness to come through even more powerfully) and also as a way to express the teen character's unspoken, unexpressed interior conflict. Lucy Christopher uses techniques of suspense and horror borrowed from the genre of the psychological thriller in her dark explorations of adolescent sexuality and the 'shadow' self. Both these novels explore the relationship of the adolescent protagonist with her parents, and are more concerned with interior states than in action. Both authors pay attention to the layers and nuances of language, alert to the sounds and rhythms of words and sentences.

In the next section, I will describe in some detail how my own writing for adolescents has developed over the last ten years. Through my discussion of the writing process I will illustrate in my own novels of 'growing-up' similar qualities to those found in the four older novels I have discussed above: including complex, well-developed characters, effective evocation of external settings and the interior lives of my teenage characters, subtle and nuanced use of language which makes demands of its readers; novels which offer insight into teenage and adult behaviour, focused more on the shifting interior experience of character rather than on plot, action and high drama.

SECTION THREE:

A narrative account of the development of my writing, and my exploration of themes of family and ‘growing up’ and the creation of teenage protagonists with strong interior lives.

In this section, I discuss my own novels for young adults, showing my development as a writer for young adults. In presenting this analysis, I am assuming familiarity with the body of work submitted as the creative component of this PhD by publication. I intend to show how my own work can be seen as belonging to an older tradition of realist writing for adolescents as described in Section Two, with its focus on the real world, on psychologically complex adolescent characters with rich interior lives and expressed in layered language, and takes it forward for a contemporary readership.

i. Blue Moon (Puffin, 2003) and *Baby Blue* (Puffin, 2004)

In my first two novels for young adults I explored the experience of pregnancy and motherhood from the perspective of a fifteen-year-old protagonist, Mia. This focus gave me the opportunity to address aspects of adolescence and coming of age in sharp relief: I imagined an accelerated version of ‘growing up’, catapulting a teenage girl into womanhood through the ‘accident’ of an unplanned pregnancy,

rather than through the more usual, gradual process of adolescence, where a girl crosses back and forth between childhood and adulthood.

The process of writing *Blue Moon* was a revelation to me. It came directly out of a series of writing exercises on a week's course at Ty Newydd with authors David Almond and Kara May, designed to connect at a deep level to the writing self. Without any planning, I plunged in with a first scene: the first words in my notebook show me inching towards the substance of the story: a character (Mia), and a situation (early pregnancy, unwanted).

~~She~~ Mia stands, bare feet on the cold kitchen floor. Red tiles, uneven. Dirt caught in lines along the joins. ~~Crumbs unswept around the table.~~ White feet. ~~Twists~~ She stands still for a long time – minutes, hours – she doesn't know. Through the window the garden in early morning sun. A blackbird, wing stretched out like a fan. A brown blackbird. A female blackbird. Mia's hands smooth over her belly.

So quiet. So still. The house waiting, ~~like her.~~ But there's an echo, too, of raised voices, angry hurting words dropping like cold pebbles. She rolls them over and over in her mouth. Spits them out they roll across the hard floor like marbles... (Journal entry, Appendix A)

I was writing in the third person, present tense. In the final draft, I moved to a more conventional past tense, but I kept the close-up, third- person perspective, and it's clear that the essence of Mia's story and the language and imagery of the novel were there in the notebook from the very beginning. I later added a prologue, which establishes the setting, a teenage perspective and mood ('*There was nothing to do in Whitecross; nothing there except a stone market cross and a straggle of houses, a petrol station and an off licence, one grocery shop... From Mia's house in Church Lane you could walk to the sea – not the sort of sea where people come for holidays, just a long strip of pebbles and, at low tide, a stretch of gravelly sand...*') and introduces the bird imagery which acts as leitmotif through

the novel: ‘*in the spring, they’d find the splatted pink mess of baby birds fallen out of nests in the lime trees*’ (p1).

The female blackbird appears in that first notebook entry; later, I made a more conscious and ‘literary’ decision to use the bird imagery as a powerful way of underlining my exploration of the issues of freedom and entrapment in relation to motherhood, in a way similar to Godden’s use of imagery of the garden and the greengages to convey innocence and experience in *The Greengage Summer*.

I added the scene of the ‘angry, hurting words’ – the argument between Mia and her schoolteacher dad became the opening of chapter one, in a deliberate attempt to have a more dramatic opening for a novel aimed at teenage readers. It establishes Mia’s voice for the reader, an important component in a fiction for adolescents, and her point of view. The dramatization of the scene allows a space for the reader to interpret events in their own way: as in both *The Greengage Summer* and *To Capture the Castle*, there is an implicit, subtle gap between reader and narrator. The ‘journal’ scene remains, moved further into the chapter on page 4. I edited it to make Mia’s pregnancy more explicit in this version: ‘She felt a little surge of hope. Maybe things were going to be all right – her period would start today, and everything would be normal again’ (pp 4-5).

I wrote the first three chapters of *Blue Moon* at Ty Newydd; back home, I continued to work in the same free, loose way, letting the story come as a series of scenes with lots of dialogue. I started to plan, I made notes on characters, I thought more consciously about what Mia wanted, or needed, and in particular about her family relationships. I thought in particular about the roles of the adult female characters in the novel, and what they might show about the options open

to a girl growing up. Mia's own mother left the family (three small daughters) when Mia was only six: in chapter three, Mia is remembering the moment when she left; fragments of her mother's voice (*'nothing left ... the children... you try it ... really like'* p. 27) hint at the desperation that her mother was feeling at the burden of bringing up children. The scene is partly to show the background to Mia's relationship with her mother (a sense of anger and betrayal as well as deep loss, and even guilt – why hadn't she tried to stop her mother going?), but also to show how difficult it can be to be a mother. Later in the novel, Mia comes across a letter from her mother to Dad – she has a new life in Bristol, a new man and a new house – and feels rejected all over again. In a second letter, addressed to Mia, sent by her mother after she thinks Mia has had the abortion, she spells out more explicitly the burden of motherhood and exhorts her daughter to find her 'wings and fly':

The sheer exhaustion of looking after another human being twenty-four hours a day, never getting enough sleep, never being able to go out by yourself...The whole world's out there, Mia. It's taken me a long, long time to find it. I feel I'm only just taking off now at my grand old age! But it will be different for you. You won't be tied down like I was. (pp. 151-2)

I made the decision to show other versions of motherhood in the novel, as a way of 'offsetting' Mia's absent mother. Her friend Becky's mother represents the opposite extreme of the stay-at-home, full-time mum: I show her cooking in the 'warm kitchen', a nurturing and caring woman who puts her family first, and who extends that care to Mia. Mia finds it 'too hard, having Becky's mum all concerned and motherly about her. A bit of her longed to stay and linger in the warm kitchen, and be fussed over and taken care of. She felt her eyes brim. It wasn't fair. Why couldn't she have a mother like that?' (p. 42).

Evie, one of the women on the canal boat who helps Mia to run away from home, represents another extreme: she has her own very dark story of ‘failed’ motherhood. Hearing what happened – high on drugs and alcohol, Evie neglected to watch her toddler daughter who fell overboard and drowned – is one of the catalysts for Mia’s decision to return home to her dad, and safety, at Whitecross.

Will’s mother, Annie, is a more balanced mother character: she will, eventually, offer money and support to Mia, and she respects her choices, but she also wants to protect her son, Will, and ensure that he takes his exams and fulfils his own potential, even though she recognises he shares some responsibility for the situation. She tells Mia about a school for pregnant schoolgirls where she could continue her education and not give up on her ambitions for herself. For Annie, education is the key to the future. She doesn’t know Mia very well, or she would realise that she had few ambitions and hated school, unlike her clever, academic sisters.

In the penultimate chapter, I bring all these characters together: Mum, Becky’s mum, Will’s mother Annie. ‘*All these mothers*’ Mia thinks (p.225). It is Dad who ultimately provides the love and security and care that Mia needs, but he points out that they will need the support of all these other people, too, to get through the difficult months ahead: ‘These are our friends, Mia. We are going to need them’ (p.225). And one of these ‘friends’ will be the unmarried teacher, Miss Blackman, whom Mia dislikes but who becomes Dad’s new girlfriend. None of these adult characters are presented as rounded individuals because I deliberately limit myself to showing Mia’s flawed, partial view of them. I wanted to stay very close up to Mia’s viewpoint in this novel; everything is framed through Mia’s limited understanding of the other people in her life, particularly

adults: she is still caught in that obsessive preoccupation with self which I understand to be a stage of adolescence, and which Jill Paton Walsh conveys so effectively in her character Madge in *Goldengrove*, as discussed earlier. Mia may be forced into a very grown-up situation, but she is far from grown-up herself. She lacks empathy; she fails to recognise her father's own emotional needs. She is not yet able to see how hard things might have been for her own mother, because she is still hurting, still feels like the small child version of herself, abandoned and powerless to change things. A reader might see and understand these complex issues more readily than she can. They are implicit in the text rather than overtly stated.

In my novel, I dismantle the 'conventional' family, but I show a kind of alternative 'family of friends' that can offer support and care of a kind, to replace what has been irrevocably lost. It is my attempt to show my young readers a helpful way forward which is more realistic than a magical 'return' of Mia's mother, for example, would have been. In a novel about a teenage girl's life-changing choice to be a mother, I needed to be realistic about the serious responsibility that motherhood entails. I wanted to show how important the job of the mother is. That meant that I had to be honest and truthful about the consequences when it goes wrong: the deep and lasting damage wreaked by a mother's abandonment of her children. And knowing about the influences of our own experiences of being 'mothered' on our capacity to mother a child ourselves, I was concerned to show some small but hopeful movement and change in Mia's relationship with her own mother by the end of the novel, to offer some sense of hope. Mia's mother attempts to explain to her more about why she left, and to

make some steps towards an apology. ‘You can be a good mother,’ she tells Mia. ‘Better than I have been’ (p.220).

As part of my research for this novel and its sequel, *Baby Blue*, I talked at length with Carol Bowery, head teacher of the school for young parents in Bristol, The Meriton. Our detailed conversations helped me shape my fiction and make the details more realistic. Carol told me about one young mother at the school some years before, who had given up on the possibility of having her own dreams and ambitions – her response, when pushed to think about these things in an exercise which involved therapeutic drawing, was that it might happen ‘in a blue moon, maybe’. Her words helped to focus my own narrative themes, and gave me the title of my first novel. I already knew the song, ‘Blue Moon’; another friend told me about the Billy Budd libretto written by W.H. Auden that I quote at the end of the novel – possibly, with hindsight, an overly intrusive and rather too ‘literary’ attempt to underline the theme:

But once in a while the odd thing happen
Once in a while, the dream comes true
And the whole pattern of life is altered
Once in while the moon turns blue (p.233)

I have been back to The Meriton school regularly since 2003 to work with the young women, leading writing workshops to facilitate them telling their own stories, and to talk about my novels which the girls read for their GCSE English course. For some of these young women (aged 14 -16) reading *Blue Moon* and *Baby Blue* has been hugely significant – the first time they have read a whole novel themselves, to the end, and have found a novel in which aspects of their

own lives were explored. My experiences as a tutor at a pupil referral unit, and my training in counselling skills, in combination with my research, helped to inform and deepen my fictional depictions of a pregnant schoolgirl for a contemporary readership, but the form and style of the novel come from my many years' apprenticeship as a reader.

I have become aware how strong the desire for happy endings is, in this particular group of readers. They would have liked Mia and Will to come together with the baby to make a strong new family unit. Against all the odds (very few of the young fathers were going to be involved with the new babies), these girls longed for romantic endings. At the time of writing, I thought the ending of the novel came with Mia's father accepting her decision; for me, this was a novel about a young woman making her own active choice, marking a significant stage of growing up. The final scenes celebrated friends and family, and their acceptance of the prospective child. It was realistic, but expressed optimism. The very last chapter showed Mia on the beach; the language conveyed a sense of hope with the image of flight, which links to all the other bird imagery in the novel: 'For just this moment, Mia felt almost light enough to fly' (p. 233). The brief moment of joyful self-acceptance is expressed through her connection with the natural landscape: 'she was part of it all, the beach, the sea, the sky' (p.233). This is a theme to which I returned in future novels.

Blue Moon was marketed by Puffin as one of their 'new talent' novels, and was short-listed for the Lancashire Children's Book of the Year award 2004. It was translated into Italian (*Un'estate, una vita*; Mondadori), Lithuanian (*Labai retai. Kai melynās menulis*; Vilnius) and Czech (*Rozhodnem Sa Sama*; Mlade Leta). I enclose some of the reviews of the novel in Appendix B. Reading this

novel again, ten years later, I can see how far I have come in terms of style and voice over those years. *Blue Moon* as a novel says much about family, and about mothering, but is less effective in conveying Mia's inner world. The literary aspects of the novel which I couldn't shed at that point (the Prologue, the Auden quotation, the rather self-conscious use of imagery) get in the way of the voice, and I had chosen a character who lacked self-knowledge, made mistakes without seeing why, failed to interrogate her own behaviour or really learn and grow from her mistakes. This was intentional in so far as I was concerned to write a teenage character as realistically as I could: someone as 'like' the young people around me as I could manage, with all her flaws. Some of the reviews of this novel by teenage readers express irritation with Mia's short-sightedness, her impulsiveness; others relate strongly to these aspects of character and love the story. The third- person narrative, although very close-up to Mia's viewpoint, still allows a gap or 'distance' in which I, as author, reside and I think, now, that this is less effective than the first person, present tense voice I have used in my more recent fiction. But perhaps, at the time, this was the book I needed to write, the only way I could manage that distance between my adult, 'writerly' self and my teenage character. I was at the beginning of my own journey as a writer for young adults.

Baby Blue, the sequel to *Blue Moon*, takes up Mia's story just after the birth of her baby, Kai. I found I had more to say about Mia and her 'choices'. Again, my intention was to tell the truth as I saw and felt it, about early motherhood - the demands and exhaustion, the precious moments of connection and joy, the miracle of a new life, and the value of friends and family - all from a teenager's perspective, which gives these issues more poignancy and throws them

into stark relief. The subject seems still to appeal strongly to young adult readers: in terms of sales, this is the most successful of my novels for young adults.

Running alongside the realist narrative in *Blue Moon* is one strand that crosses over into something slightly fantastical or supernatural – possibly influenced by my reading of *Skellig*, by David Almond, at the time. Lainey is the mysterious small girl who nobody sees but Mia and who turns out to be the exact age that Mia’s baby sister would have been, had Mia’s mother not miscarried. Lainey in some way carries and expresses Mia’s ‘unconscious’ desire to keep and care for the baby; she could be seen as a device for expressing the interior states that Mia herself doesn’t explicitly reveal or discuss. I don’t ever explain Lainey’s presence or role in the novel, but young readers often respond to and talk to me about Lainey in these terms, as if they have fully understood and accepted this magic-realist part of the story.

In *Baby Blue*, however, there is no need, and no place, for Lainey. Mia has made her decision and that initial interior conflict (whether or not to keep the baby) has been resolved. This second novel keeps its feet firmly in the real world. The Foreword explains my motivation for writing the novel:

I wanted to say something about being a mother: how hard it is, how important, how life-changing, whatever age you are. And I wanted to show the magic, the miracle, that all babies are.

The challenge for Mia is to love and look after her baby, but not give up on her own life. That’s one of the real challenges for all mothers, I think, balancing those two things (prelims).

In chapter one I tried to convey Mia’s interior state just after giving birth, when she is barely awake, on the fringe of consciousness, by changing my language: at

this one point of the novel it is more poetic and uses unconventional sentence structure, imagery and metaphor. She is 'marooned' in the bed:

washed up, scoured out like a shell, that's her. Empty. Bone-clean.

It's as if she's just arrived at a completely new destination. The sole survivor of a terrible storm, newly washed up on an island shore. (p.1)

This is not the language that Mia herself would use; it's not the same as the language she uses in dialogue, and doesn't sound 'teenage'. The third-person voice allows me sufficient distance as author so that I am able to convey a state of mind and emotion as truthfully as I can, and the reader who has not had this experience (childbirth) can get a glimpse of it. To do this, I draw on the language I've absorbed from literature, with echoes of *The Tempest*, a play about loss and redemption. It doesn't matter that many of my readers won't pick up the literary allusion - though I do leave a clue for those who might make the connection, when Dad talks about teaching the play to his Year 12 pupils, at the end of the novel (p.239). Later in chapter one, and elsewhere in the novel, Mia's direct thoughts are conveyed in passages printed in italics, and here the language *is* hers; a more 'teenage' vernacular:

Typical. Even here he's at it.

...

Why can't they go away and leave us alone? (p.12)

The narrative is close-up to Mia throughout, so we simultaneously have action and her reaction; all events, action and other characters are filtered through her sensibility:

It washed over her; the dreary, everyday ordinariness of home. She was back. This was it now. Her life, how it was going to be. Like a huge grey wave, swamping her.

Suddenly she was stricken with sobs which wouldn't stop. She was flooded with them, shuddering and heaving and sobbing her heart out.

It's too much. I can't do this. I've made a terrible mistake. (p.42)

Reading this novel now, twelve years or so after writing it, some of the more literary sentences seem out of place, and the writing seems most effective where it is most closely allied to Mia's voice, in the direct first- person thoughts and the dialogue:

So while I've been in hell in hospital, having a bloody baby, Dad has been sleeping with my old teacher. Great welcome. Some home. (p.43)

The novel develops further themes I began in *Blue Moon*, showing different versions of 'family'. I show teenage mother Mia's life in minute detail, closeted with the newborn baby at home with her father (now in a relationship with Julie, the teacher), while her friends' lives continue as normal – the round of school and exams and plans for 16th birthday parties. For these friends, the baby is a cute distraction, a novelty and an excuse to buy presents and for a social gathering (chapter six); when Mia tries to breastfeed the baby, Ali reacts to Mia's milk-engorged breast with horror ('Oh my god! Look at you! Bloody hell, Mia, they're HUGE!'). One of the girls, Tasha, who comes from a much bigger family, is familiar with babies and feeding and offers more understanding. I show other more positive and supportive reactions from characters such as Vicky, the young health visitor, and the 'mothers' – Becky's mum (the way she handles the baby so calmly and confidently is contrasted with the way Mia's own mother picks up the baby on a visit), and Will's mother, Annie, who symbolically gives Mia a sling to

carry the baby so that she can walk around with him and ‘still have both hands free’ (p.78). Like *Goldengrove*, this novel does not present great drama or complicated plot twists, but is concerned with the minutiae of everyday life, self, relationships, the present moment. It presents scenes, showing character through small actions and dialogue that allow a space for the reader to enter the story and interpret it in their own way.

Meeting Colleen, another teenage mother, is a turning point for Mia and it is their friendship which I try to show as the most significant for Mia, as a way of getting moral and practical support, as well as showing a way towards a possible future – sharing a flat, going to college to gain the qualifications that will enable them to financially support their children and themselves, longer term. Colleen comes from a very different background to Mia: her mother travels with the fair, and is loving and accepting of her daughter having a baby. It’s Colleen who tells Mia ‘you’ve got to remember there’s lots of different ways of being a mother’ (p. 219). Despite this, many of my young readers seem to focus on the relationship between Mia and Will, the baby’s father, and hanker after a romantic, happy-ever-after ending. Mia and Will do eventually come to see each other, and Will makes some contact with the baby. Will’s life has simply carried on as planned – he’s about to start A levels, is playing in a band – while Mia’s has changed forever. This feels unfair – and is of course true to life. And even while Will shows himself to be irresponsible and selfish, Mia can’t help yearning for more from him:

She kept on doing it, drifting into this romantic dream where everything turned out all right: Will and her deeply in love, setting up home together – the fantasy didn’t quite stretch to the details, like money and houses, and jobs – and it all being exciting and fun, with lots of other friends dropping

in, and her discovering this amazing talent which had somehow never shown up at school.

But it wasn't going to be like that, was it? Why couldn't she get it?
(p. 201)

One of the aspects of the older tradition discussed in Section Two that I found helpful was the emphasis on more open endings, similar to what might be expected from literary adult fiction. As a writer for young adults there is a tension for me in balancing my desire to be 'truthful' and realistic with the knowledge that many young adult readers hanker for more romantic, feel-good endings. There are commercial imperatives to offer these, too. I have a personal inclination towards hopefulness and optimism. In *Baby Blue*, I compromise. The final image is of Will walking along the beach towards Mia and Kai (and Colleen and Isaac), and the last words express Mia's optimism – 'Everything's going to be all right...'. I try to leave it ambiguous: I've already sown the seed that Mia's romantic dreams are misplaced, but a reader can choose to ignore this. In any case, things can turn out 'all right' for her in many different ways, and they may or may not involve Will and her as a couple.

It is Mia's father who is shown to be the real rock and support to his daughter, through both *Blue Moon* and *Baby Blue*. This is what Mia comes to understand, eventually:

He'd been there when mum had left and he still was, in his own way, even though it was all changing now. *Children need fathers*. That was what Becky had said, and it was true. It was true for her, wasn't it? And so it must be true for Kai, too.

Mia lay in the dark, thinking about Will. Colleen had been right when she said he wasn't ready yet, but he still might be. She'd have to take it one step at a time. (pp. 233-4)

Writing for young adults on the sensitive subject of teen pregnancy and motherhood, I became aware of my responsibilities to my audience. I tried to show the realities of the situation, mindful of the experience of the girls I met and talked to at The Meriton school, and taking care not to romanticise pregnancy and having a baby. I had my own agenda, too, inevitably: a conviction that moral judgements on sexual behaviour should have little place in fiction for teenagers. I defend the young mothers in my novels, as I would the real young mothers I know, believing that being a ‘good’ (or indeed ‘bad’) mother has very little to do with age. And I wanted to demonstrate the importance of fathers alongside the significance of the job of mothering a child. Possibly some of this sense of responsibility to my readers comes from my position as an adult, writing for people younger than myself. It’s part of who I am, as a parent and teacher, too. As Michael Rosen pointed out in his inaugural lecture as Professor at Birkbeck college, writing for young people occupies a very particular space, ‘within or in very close relation to two social institutions of massive importance: nurture and education’ (Rosen, 2009). Nonetheless, I am writing fiction, and the demands of story and character have to come first.

In the complexity and range of the family relationships I describe, I believe my novels made a significant contribution to YA literature. Berlie Doherty’s *Dear Nobody* remains an outstanding novel on the theme of teenage pregnancy, written as a letter to the unborn child. The *Megan* series by Mary Hooper, which I read later, after finishing my own novel, also deals with the teenage pregnancy theme. Two recent YA novels have been written from the father’s perspective (Nick Hornby’s *Slam*; Malorie Blackman’s *Boys Don’t Cry*). One of the novels on the shortlist for the new YA Prize mentioned in Section One

is Non Pratt's *Trouble*, about teenage pregnancy, sex and friendship, written as a dual narrative. However, my novels are still read and reviewed, and have taken their place in a literature about teen pregnancy for young adults (Reviews, Appendix B). In these first two novels, I was still learning the craft of the novelist, and finding my way with voice, viewpoint and structure. I was writing about issues of 'growing up' for a contemporary readership, but drawing on an older, sophisticated tradition of writing, building on my own reading history. I used my real experience of working with young people to 'ground' and give authenticity to my imaginative work.

i. *Hunter's Heart*, 2005: Gender and YA fiction: girls and boys on the inside

After *Baby Blue*'s publication in 2004, I received many requests from teenage readers to write a third novel, where Mia and Will and Kai would be a happy family moving on with their lives. But I had already moved on to a new idea and a new challenge for myself, that of writing a book about/from the perspective of a teenage boy. I made one small concession to developing Mia, Will and Kai's story when I was commissioned by Bliss magazine and Waterstones Bookshop to write a short story for a new collection for teenagers. The story I submitted, *Will's Story*, was narrated in the first person, from Will's perspective, describing a key moment when Will makes a decision to be a proper father to Kai. This story was published in a collection (*Short Stories*, 2004) sold by Waterstones to raise money for the Dyslexia Institute. It was republished in an anthology called *Turning the Corner: a collection of post-millennium short stories* (edited by David Hill, pp. 47

- 52) alongside stories by Colm Toibin, Helen Dunmore, Helen Simpson, Matthew Neale, Rose Tremain and others. The collection is aimed at a schools' market, with notes and 'activities' and a resources CD for teachers, and is designed 'to introduce students to a variety of genres, issues, styles and voices' through 'high quality texts'. Mine was the only story in the collection written specifically for young people, as noted in the preface by David Hill:

This story was specifically written for teenagers and deals with one of the most difficult situations teenage girls and boys can have to face. Julia Green carefully explores the feelings of the people involved through the eyes of the male protagonist, Will. (Hill, 2007: 47)

This was the first time I had written in first person and present tense, and from a male viewpoint. The story takes the form of an interior monologue, in effect, as Will waits for Mia: 'I'm waiting for Mia in the beach café. I'm the only customer, even though it's lunch time. It's the end of the season. End of the summer. Mill Cove campsite will be closing this weekend'.

With hindsight, it might have been a better decision, commercially speaking, to write a third 'Mia and Will' novel next. But I had already committed to the new idea, a novel in a wild North Cornwall setting over one long hot summer, exploring the pressures that society places on adolescent boys to be 'tough', to suppress or deny emotion which might make them look 'soft', and examining some of the available options open to young men in terms of behaviour. As a mother of teenage sons, this was a particularly pressing concern of mine. My editor at Puffin, Yvonne Hooker, declared this was my best book so far – my agent, Maggie Noach, also loved it. So did adult readers; but some of my established audience of young women did not. Perhaps this was a book ahead of

its time. Perhaps I took on too much, trying to get inside the head of a fourteen-year-old boy. Perhaps it was too much to expect of young women of that age, to empathise with a confused, sexually naive, disturbed adolescent boy. It became clear that my readers *were* young women, not young men, however much I wanted to believe that books shouldn't be 'gendered' in this way. And my publishers evidently realised that the market for my writing would be girls: they changed the initial idea for the cover, which I had loved, showing the silhouetted figure of a boy running from a tree, to a photo of a girl swimming (not naked, as she is in the actual story), with random flowers scattered over the dark background, and the title and author name in looping yellow and pink script. Not a book a boy would consider was aimed at him, then. The title of the novel had already been changed, too: my title *The Coffin Path* became the publisher's choice: *Hunter's Heart*. I still preferred my title, but the team at Puffin said it sounded too much like the title of a horror story. Trying to make the best of things, I decided I liked the literary echo of '*The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*', which summed up my character Simon's situation rather well. But the word 'heart' in a title speaks only to girls, it seems, and few of my teenage readers, not surprisingly, had heard of the 1940's American novel by Carson McCullers.

The story begins with Simon hunting and killing a rabbit: probably enough to put off some of my readers, and at least one reviewer, who commented rather squeamishly about this not being suitable for vegetarians. The narrative viewpoint is third person, again, very close-up to the protagonist, 14-year-old Simon. I used the present tense for the first time in a novel, thrilled by the way it increased the tension and vividness of scenes and how well it seemed to serve this particular story of 'secrets, betrayal and obsession' (front cover catch line). One

reviewer commented: ‘the present tense narrative does much to establish immediacy of action but Green also manages a devastatingly detached style that highlights the distance between Simon and the rest of the characters’ (*Viewpoint*, 2006). Here, rather than aiming for the intimacy found in *I Capture the Castle* and *The Greengage Summer*, I was trying to evoke a sense of isolation and separation between my adolescent protagonist and the rest of the characters.

The challenge for me was how to convey convincingly the inner life of someone (a boy) who is confused and troubled, who says little and has no real way of voicing his emotional state or understanding it himself. Third person seemed the best way to proceed: again, it allows that small gap between character and author which a first-person voice would not, which gives me room to ‘comment’. For example:

It’s not that he doesn’t know what to do – he’s read it often enough in the survival handbook: *The way to dispatch a rabbit humanely and certainly*. It’s just that it’s different now, here. For real. And of course there isn’t anyone around to help. No one for miles. Just him and the wounded rabbit on the grass....

... Why won’t it die? He takes a step forward, crouches over the rabbit, reaches out a hand. The terrified animal trembles violently, tries to run, can’t. Simon grabs it, one hand around the neck, the other round the hind legs. *A smart, firm, stretching action*. He breaks its neck. Feels it crunch.

Now the rabbit is silent, limp, a small grey-brown strip of fur, unbearably soft. Its eyes have glazed over. His throat tightens, aches. *No, not here, not now. Ridiculous to feel like this*. Dry sobs rise in Simon’s throat but he won’t let them out, even though no one is watching, no one could possibly know. (p.2)

I use Simon’s own language in the direct thought (shown in the third set of italics), to show the way he attempts to manage and suppress his actual, real and genuine emotion. He can’t let himself cry, even though he is upset at having to kill the rabbit, and no one is there to see. He has to squash the feelings down, and

punish himself (*Ridiculous to feel like this*). But in the third person narrative, I can show Simon's real feeling and make the reader feel it too ('unbearably soft'). This is quite subtle and complex writing. It requires quite a degree of sophistication in the reader, as well as some psychological insight into the behaviour and socialisation of boys.

Simon is already changing the narrative in his mind, working out how to retell what happened in a way that will impress his friends, Johnny, Pike and Dan, and make him out as the survivor-hunter hero. But he also unconsciously knows he has to negotiate different territory with his mum – her (female) sensibility will need handling, as will little sister Ellie's. Simon is the only son of single parent mum, Nina, and this intense, powerful relationship has to change in order for Simon to grow up, to be fully male and adult. He has to deny his feelings when he is with her (the love and dependent relationship of the child, who needs his mother's approval as well as her love and protection) as part of growing up. The mother, on the other hand, has to learn to let go the son. It's a painful and complex transition that happens in all families as boys hit adolescence, but it is perhaps more intensely felt between a single mother and her son. So, again, I choose to set up in my novel a family dynamic which will allow the most intense focus for the issues I am exploring: not the conventional nuclear unit of mother, father and children, but a single parent family. In all the novels discussed in Section Two, the family set up could be described as unconventional: in *I Capture the Castle*, Cassandra's mother has died, and she has a most 'unmotherly' step-mother in Topaz; Cecil's mother is absent for most of the story in *The Greengage Summer* due to illness; the young people find themselves in an unusual situation alone at the hotel, cared for by strangers. Madge's parents have

separated; this is the painful background to her story in *Goldengrove*. The absence of parents allows a 'space' in which the actual story can happen, where the adolescent learns to navigate her or his own path.

I add to the dynamic in *Hunter's Heart* by making the absent father a man who died in a motorbike accident – the 'classic' mid-life motorbike which some men seem to crave (the fast car or the affair being other options), in what appears to be a last ditch attempt to seize back their own adolescent dreams and fantasies: another 'crisis' of masculinity. This means Simon is still also coping with feelings of grief and loss of his father as he moves into adolescence. And then I add to this potent mix the mother's beginning a new relationship with the art teacher / sculptor who encourages Simon in his own artistic endeavours, which increases the pressures and sexual confusion for Simon. I don't 'explain' any of this in the novel: it's shown through the story events and characters, in the tradition of the literary novels I discuss in Section Two. I wonder, retrospectively, whether it was too confusing, too demanding and even too 'adult' for my intended audience, although I am loath to think that way: I want to have high expectations of my young readers. Possibly the complexities of these emotions are too far outside most teenage readers' experience. Simon himself has no real understanding of what is happening to him, and no way of verbalising the experiences and emotions he is subject to. His inner life does not include a reflective, analytical aspect or any means of processing these things as a way of understanding them, so I have no real means of explaining what is happening to help my readers, either. It has been good to talk recently at a school visit in Devon to some teenage readers who tell me they did understand these complex psychological aspects of the novel.

As the hot summer wears on, Simon becomes more fascinated by the older girl who lives opposite him – sixteen-year-old Leah. She, too, comes from a troubled family background. Little is shown of her parents: gradually the reader comes to understand that her mother is alcoholic. The child has to be a carer for her own mother. The ‘Leah’ scenes are mostly written in the third person (with first person diary entries), but allow much more access to her thoughts, dreams, fantasies and motivations because this inner life is so intensely important to her: Leah lives in her head so much partly because her real life lacks any interest or fun. She imagines living in Nina’s house, plans how she would decorate it: ‘fine white curtains to blow in the breeze’ (p.72). The images are out of magazines. Leah’s own home is horribly different from all of this. A scene later in the novel shows Leah cleaning up the kitchen, stacking up empty bottles. From her diary, we learn that there are ‘rows’ between her parents. ‘She is getting worse. He says he’s going to leave...She’s been sitting in the dark with the curtains drawn, drinking herself stupid’ (p.172).

Supremely bored, deeply manipulative and aware of her own sexual power, Leah decides to make Simon ‘her summer project’, to draw him out of himself, while also idly planning to seduce Nina’s lover, the artist. Her diary entries offer the reader additional insights into how her mind works:

He (Simon) is an outdoor freak. I haven’t a clue what he’s talking about most of the time. He knows lots of facts about things. We have quite a laugh. He is much nicer than I expected.

Matt Davies.

Has the bluest eyes. Dark hair that curls over his collar. His blue linen collar!! Mature.Sensitive. With the most soooo kissable lips. When he left their house this morning he looked right at me. That’s twice now. The time in the bookshop, and today. (p.132)

The reader, because of the sections from Leah's diary, has much more of an idea about what is actually happening than the main protagonist, Simon – who is mostly confused and out of his depth as Leah spends more time with him and exerts her own sexual magic. The beginning of chapter sixteen, for example, shows Simon trying to read: he can't concentrate because

every time he looks at the pages on Neolithic burial chambers, he sees Leah's face close up. Not that he could see it, there in the dark. And he feels peculiar, because of what happened. What he did, without planning it or meaning anything. It was because it was so hot in there and she was so close. Her mouth tasted like ... like nothing at all he can think of. There was a sensation, like falling, and a smell, something remembered from a long time ago. It's just out of his reach. So now it seems it does mean something after all. That kiss. (p. 151)

The broken sentences, the searching for words, are all attempts to capture the slow, hesitant processing of an experience that Simon is wrestling to understand. He has no one to talk to about this. I am aiming to convey the absolute loneliness of the teenage boy when it comes to the development of his emotional life. When most upset or anxious or confused, he turns to the war-games he can play on the computer, or to physical outlets ('His head's all muddled up. He needs to run, or get on his bike, or swim, or shoot something' (p.151).

Events come to a heady and dramatic climax, when Simon – jealous, betrayed – fires his air-rifle, injuring Leah as she sits as a life model for sculptor Matt in his garden studio. No one knows he is to blame. The strange, war-damaged man, 'Mad Ed', who rambles over the wild landscape throughout the novel, stalking Simon, takes responsibility instead. Even this act of apparent generosity turns sour, when the man is later discovered at the foot of the cliffs,

drowned. These dramatic events at the end of the novel leave Simon chastened, brooding: ‘there’s a darkness at the heart of it all ’(p.258). Rather than offering any happy resolution, the novel ends on a very ambivalent and muted note: Simon’s reflection that there’s always a choice on how to see things (‘the dark or the light’); thinking about his dad, and about the past: ‘Five thousand years of people being born, and growing up, and dying; the messy business of being alive’ (p. 259). The final paragraph evokes the wild and beautiful landscape of North Cornwall, as if that has the last word in permanence. The last sentence simply shows Simon moving on – ‘He’ll go surfing this afternoon.’

The novel was well-received (Reviews, Appendix B). It was picked by the *Bookseller* as its ‘top title’ for Teenage Reads: Contemporary Life and widely reviewed in the national press. Jake Hope from the Young People’s Library Services, Lancashire, wrote to my editor at Puffin to express his view that ‘This truly is a remarkable book’ ... ‘the emotional scope of the book is at points breathtaking... I work with a number of teenage reading groups and think this would be a superb book to promote discussions and thoughts’ (Hope, 2005).

It seems to have hit a chord with adult readers: Dinah Hall writing in the *Telegraph* recommended it for ‘any mothers wanting insight into the psyche of teenage boys’ (Hall, 2005). The initial impulse for the novel came from my own experience as one such mother, and the desire to share the insights I felt I had gained from parenting my teenage sons, as well as from my counselling training in family work, and my role as a home tutor for disengaged adolescents. Commercially speaking, this was my least successful novel for young adults, but I remain convinced that it was an important novel for me to write, and makes a unique and significant contribution to writing about adolescence. I know it

continues to have its adult supporters too, including YA author Lucy Christopher who has recently written her own novel on a similar subject (*The Killing Woods*, 2013).

ii. *Breathing Underwater* (2009) and *Bringing the Summer* (2012): Death of a sibling: responses to loss in the family

The Cornish setting was an important backdrop for the events that unfold in *Hunter's Heart*; for the novel I wrote next, the setting was my starting point. Reading back through my journal for this time, I can see how my own experiences – a significant trip to the Isles of Scilly with my children, marking the beginning of my recovery from the separation from their father – contributed to my choice of an island as the location for the new novel, which was to become *Breathing Underwater*. The first mention of the story in my journal is the image I had in my mind: ‘a girl on a beach, looking out to sea and it’s stormy and something unexpected turns up. Set on St Agnes, perhaps. Or somewhere like that. An island’ (Appendix A, Journal entry, November 11th). A few pages further on, I wrote of a ‘child coming to terms with grief or loss’ and then the first sketches of her character:

a girl, dark-haired, about 12/13. Small, thin. White face. It’s cold, she’s on a beach. Pebbles... Kicking along tide-line, and also looking out to sea. Someone has died? Or someone grieving? Lost? Parents separating (in background, not forefront of story). She’s staying at grandmother’s house while something gets sorted. Left alone a lot. Needs to find: hope/future? Adventure? Fun? Memory (boat?brother/drowned. Fear: never laughing or having fun again! Hope/wish: laughter, love, happiness (Journal, Appendix A).

The writing in the journal teases out aspects of the story: the main character and the situation, as I begin to get glimpses of scenes (‘the girl on a train, travelling

down to Penzance, alone'). I'm drawing on my own emotions at this time, and real physical journeys I'd made. I'm recording things and fragments that catch my attention – a radio programme about ghost stories 'being within bounds of possibility for some people: fresh water mermaid stories from East Anglia – stories of warning'; another about 'inner sounds, like landscapes we feel happy in'. By December, the journal shows me fleshing out details of other characters in the story (Evie, the grandmother); in January 2006, I'm making notes about the campsite, the scene with the lanterns on the beach, Izzy and Matt in love with each other ('they represent something so joyous and free and hopeful – they keep this alive for her'), and another character, Danny. I'm making a note about fictionalising the islands and giving them different names, and realising that my main character, Freya, 'has to do something scary and dangerous' (19 January). I'm making notes about *The Tempest* around this time, and thinking about the Persephone myth, for another book commission for younger readers (a re-telling of the myth, published by A & C Black: *Sephy's Story*): themes of loss and renewal. I wrote: 'It's about growing up (again!) and finding a way forward without her brother. Coming to terms with a death – understanding it. (renewal myth – cycles of life – being happy – surviving.' By March, the novel was well under way, but I continued to write notes and work out details in the journal.

I find it useful to observe this process, articulated in the journal, and to be reminded of how it happens so gradually over a long period of time, how little I have to go on, at the very beginning, and how I have to proceed 'in a condition of doubt and trust' (Journal, Appendix A). It's through the writing itself that I discover what the story is:

The story – like a wild animal in the forest. You have to keep very quiet and still, so as not to startle it and make it run, and if you are very lucky it will come closer, right out of the forest and into the clearing, and you will see it in all its vivid beauty.

So right now I'm waiting, quiet, for the story animal to step out of the forest. I've glimpsed it between the trees – never all of it – just parts – I know it's lurking (Journal, Appendix A).

I must have been thinking about Ted Hughes' poem 'The Thought-Fox' when I wrote this, a poem I loved when I first came across it as a teenager, and which I revisited when reading Hughes' poetry as a student, and again as a student teacher, reading Hughes' *Poetry in the Making*. An image from a different Hughes' poem 'Wind' made its way into the prologue of the novel; his opening line ('This house has been far out at sea all night') lies behind my description of Freya lying 'in the dark for hours, listening to the storm moan and howl round the house, tugging it as if it's a boat to be torn from its moorings' (p.1). Later, I used the fox analogy in an article for *The Guardian* about my writing process (Green, 2012, 'Top Writing Tips').

The island setting gave me much of my material for events in the novel – the campsite, the characters, the storm and the death by drowning, as well as the language that creates the strong atmosphere of the novel. I wanted to weave the sound of sea throughout, so the reader was always aware of its presence, as is Freya, and as I was, when staying on St Agnes, the smallest and wildest, most south-westerly of the islands of Scilly, twenty miles off the coast of Cornwall. For Freya, the sea is a constant reminder of her brother, who drowned, but it is also a consolation. Freya swims like a fish; she loves the sea's different moods. She knows that the sea gives, as well as takes. For the islanders, the sea has a long history of providing – including the bounty from shipwrecks, like the freight of beads that Freya searches for, later. In the prologue scene, she and Joe go down to

the beach to see what the storm has washed up – and find the body of a drowned boy – a stranger, a fisherman – an event foreshadowing Joe’s death a year later: I added this prologue at a late stage of writing, drawing on a memory from my early twenties, when I discovered just such a drowned fisherman on a beach in Brittany:

There’s a bare foot, and then another, in a sodden trainer. Jeans, T-shirt, sea-weed hair. The waves roll the heavy figure slightly, pull back. They leave the bloated body belly down on the silver sand and shingle, head twisted awkwardly to one side. I can’t stop looking. I stare at the mottled skin of the naked foot, and the bruised cheekbone. (p.3)

Freya feels neither horror nor fear or even pity at this point: she’s simply ‘curious’: the first person narrative is explicit about this, simultaneously offering a reader the body, and Freya’s response (‘seeing something for the first time’ p.3). The repetition of sounds, the alliteration and the rhythm of sentences are deliberate. Freya’s child-like, simple reaction, and her sense that he is ‘at peace now’ is contrasted with her brother Joe’s scramble to get help, but the real resonance of these lines comes from the fact that the novel will take us, through the process of Freya’s terrible grief and loss of her brother, to a point where she can understand something profound about him, too: ‘Nothing can hurt him any more’ (p.3).

The dramatic point in the novel at which this comes is near the end: chapter twenty-four, where Freya swims out into the bay at night, and pushes herself almost to the point of drowning. It’s as if she is compelled to take herself as close as she can to her brother, to share what happened to him in order to understand it. At the moment of extremis, the ‘real’ world collides with something else - the imagination, or a spiritual dimension, or a projection of Freya’s own need and desperation. As we get right inside this place deep in her

head – deeper than thought, even, and closer to the subconscious – language itself has to change. The very short or broken sentences and single words are my attempt to show this. At the point of crisis, when Freya is exhausted, far out at sea, in danger of drowning herself, she comes closest to understanding what happened to her brother. She’s so close to him, it’s as if she conjures him up in her imagination, or maybe – there is space for this interpretation, too – she actually does, and Joe really is there. Feeling so close to him brings Freya the strength she needs to swim back to shore against the tide. The effect afterwards is one of release. At last, she can let him go. Or rather, *he* lets *her* go. Professor Richard Francis wrote to me about this scene: ‘I love the climactic idea – that Freya has to go to the brink of death herself to share her brother’s experience before she can say goodbye... That swim is quite wonderfully done, lyrically beautiful yet exciting and disturbing too. The book works like a poem, it is so beautifully written’ (Francis, 2009).

My journal at the time records the difficulty I had in writing this scene. I wrote of my ‘huge feeling of reluctance to go to the place where the accident happened’, and my fear of confronting Joe’s actual death. I worked through that feeling of being blocked by several pages of ‘free writing’ in the journal which took me, eventually, to the loss of my brother when I was five years old: ‘and that seemed to be the key, to unlock it all. 4,000 words by the end of today!’ (Journal, 2 August 2006).

The form of the novel, with the interleaving of past and present narratives (‘Last Summer’, ‘This Summer’) allowed me to tell two parallel stories, as Freya unravels the mystery of what actually happened to Joe. The reader never has information outside what Freya knows, although a perceptive reader might ‘see’,

understand and interpret those events slightly differently to her. I wanted the reader to feel very close up to Freya, to experience her emotions by being immersed in Freya's interior life, and the first person narrative is a useful device for this. One of my challenges was to show a step difference between Freya last summer, before Joe died, and Freya now, 'after'. I originally wrote one chronological story, of 'this summer', and only later, after long discussions with my agent at the time, the late Maggie Noach, did I decide to write the 'last summer' sections not as backstory or flashback, but as a narrative that moves forward and unfolds its drama in the same way as the present day story. At one level, these sections can be read as Freya 'remembering':

That's the whole point. I want to remember everything, all the tiny details, and I want to work something out. There's this big horrible question mark hanging over it all, about Joe. Gradually, the question's got stronger The question is this. Was it an accident, really? (p.7)

However, I wanted these scenes to have the same intensity and drama as the others, and the device I found worked best was to write the 'Last Summer' sections in first person and present tense, but to flag up the time difference with that title, a different type face, and no chapter head illustration, to make things clear for my readers.

There is much more of Freya's interior life – her thoughts and awareness, in the 'this summer' sections, partly because there is so much more for her to think about: Joe's accident, its causes; the whole idea of death) but also because she is a year further into adolescence, age fourteen now, falling into something like love, or infatuation, for the first time. Freya is articulate about her thoughts and feelings, but not so much so as to render her unrealistic as a teenage character. I lay the foundation for her articulate awareness by showing how this is

part of her experience, growing up with an architect father and a grandfather given to literary quotation - even if he is getting slightly muddled in old age. Freya keeps a journal, like so many of my girl characters, and like Cassandra in *I Capture the Castle*; in Freya's case it's for drawing. The pen and ink sketches used as chapter heads were drawn by my artist sister as representations of Freya's sketches.

'Family' is important in this novel: the extended family in particular, as Freya's grandparents provide a solid foundation when Freya's parents' own grief threatens to overwhelm them. The marriage, under the huge stress of loss, is close to breaking up – as often does happen in real situations like this. As part of my research for the novel, I talked to a counsellor for young people about the impact of a death on siblings and a family. In my novel, I show how the mother's grief at the loss of her son has removed her emotionally from her daughter, isolating Freya further and leaving her to struggle alone. At the very beginning of the novel, Freya describes her mother as a ghost: *She was wearing the same sleeveless grey linen dress she's worn all week, so now it was all creased and limp. Ghost-mother. She didn't speak. Didn't notice us, even* (p.7). Freya's mother is absent from most of the action of the story, but she too is changing, moving forwards in her own emotional journey. She sends Freya a letter, trying to explain her own actions, and she finally manages to make the journey to the island, to come to the place she swore she'd never visit again. In a small but significant scene at the end of chapter twenty-seven, Freya's mother seeks out Freya in her room:

We're both quiet.

'Were you writing when I came in?'

‘Yes.’

‘Your notebook? With the blue cover?’

‘Yes.’

‘Do you write about Joe, ever?’

‘Sometimes. This summer, last summer.’

‘Will you show me?’

‘Sometime. Perhaps.’

The soft light outside fades to dusk.

‘It’ll be better from now on,’ Mum says. She reaches out, takes my hand in hers, holds it tight.

We sit close together like that in the darkening room. I lean into her, rest my head against her. She strokes my hair, over and over, gentle as breathing (p.197).

In this scene I tried to show what the mother has to do, to break through the barrier with her daughter: that it takes persistence, staying there, meeting her daughter on her own ground, and a kind of courage to reach out physically. Her final action is that of a mother with a much younger child; the deep comfort of touch is exactly what Freya needs. She hasn’t been a ‘bad’ mother, she has simply been lost in her own grief, and her instinct here is sound. The language I use here echoes the imagery I use for the sea elsewhere in the novel. The stroking hand is ‘*gentle as breathing*’ - necessary, life-giving, for both mother and daughter.

The other adults in the novel all go through their own journeys, in their own ways. Loss affects the whole family. Evie, Freya’s grandmother, is a warm, consistent and strong presence for Freya, but she also shares her sense of grief and is not afraid to show Freya her deep sadness. Her quiet presence is a comfort to Freya (p.52); she gently encourages Freya’s new friendships with Izzy and Danny which will be the catalyst for change and her recovery. And she articulates

what they are all feeling about Joe: ‘He isn’t here any more, not in the same way at least. Because in another way he’s always here. Everywhere. I see him. Hear him. We all do, don’t we?’(p.179). Each character feels in some way guilty and responsible for Joe’s death, including Gramps, who taught Joe to sail. Gramps’ increasing confusion and his illness are a physical manifestation of his grief. By the end of the novel, each character has come through the raw worst of grief: one year on, they are beginning to talk about Joe, and in the final scene on the beach I show the family and the wider island community coming together for a party (one ‘enchanted’ night (p.198) with lanterns, and music and dancing), and a final act of remembrance, with the candles set floating on the water. Freya has come, through acceptance of Joe’s accident, to understand that the way forward for her is to remember Joe, but also allow herself to seize each small moment of happiness: ‘Good things will happen again. They’ve already started’ (p.202). Like Jill Paton Walsh’s novels, this novel celebrates the beauty of the world, and the importance of seizing the moment.

Bringing the Summer (Bloomsbury, 2012) takes up Freya’s story two years later. The story is set three years after her brother’s death. I asked myself a set of questions. What would it be like for Freya as she became the same age that Joe was when he died (sixteen)? How would she feel about her family, and about being now the ‘only’ child? What would have changed for her parents, and how would their relationship with Freya have changed? I wanted to show how far Freya has accommodated that defining tragic event in her life, how she is growing up and dealing with new emotions and events common to many adolescents: starting at college (studying for A levels), making new friends, falling in love, working out who she is and what she wants. I thought about the way different

people cope with the loss of someone they love deeply, several years after the event. Some people seem to stay sad, or become depressed or bitter. Others find courage to embrace life and all it has to offer in a new way. It seemed consistent with my earlier characterisation of Freya that she would be like this. She'd value her own life and want it to have meaning and purpose. I wanted to show that she has come to terms with Joe's death but it still informs many of her actions. In particular, I wanted to explore how the sense of her own small, fractured family impacts on her choice of friends: the way she is drawn to Gabriel (Gabes) and later to Theo, precisely because of the large, warm loving family to which they belong. It was an impulse I had observed in some of the young people close to me who had experienced loss and grief: the reaching out towards large, loving families as if to make up for the apparent deficit in their own.

In this novel, then, family relationships became a central preoccupation, and setting was less important. The novel is book-ended by scenes set back on St Ailla, the island evoked in *Breathing Underwater*, to help readers make the connection with the earlier novel, and as a kind of short-hand to convey Freya's character (the strong swimmer, independent spirit, outside-loving girl with deep connections to place and to her grandparents), but the main part of the novel is set in a city in the west of England not unlike my home city of Bath. The scenes at the river are based on the river Avon at Warleigh Weir, the college is similar to the FE college where I first worked as a teacher, and Gabes' and Theo's house, Home Farm, is a fictionalised version of the house at Totleigh Barton, Devon, where I had been a tutor for the Arvon foundation - but transported into the countryside south of Bath. This is the physical setting for the events of the novel, but I don't use the place as metaphor in the way I do in *Breathing Underwater*,

where the liminal landscape of island and sea shore and places ‘in between’ might be seen as an image of adolescence itself - an idea I explored in a panel event at the AWP Conference in Boston, 2013: ‘Crossing Boundaries: landscapes of childhood and adolescence’.

I needed a strong scene early in the novel. The suicide of a young person, who stepped in front of the train on which I was travelling up from Cornwall, provided it. I knew it seemed ruthless, almost exploitative, to ‘use’ a real tragedy in this way. And perhaps it was just too upsetting for my teenage readers? Even as I sat and waited on the train, I was writing it down. I attribute that action to my character too: Freya says, ‘It’s as if I’m noting everything down, committing the details to memory, as if I might be called upon as a witness, later. Or is it my own way of keeping the real truths at a distance, so I don’t feel anything?’ (p.7). But Freya can’t avoid feeling it: she weeps when she sees the dented front of the train, and it sets her off on a search: ‘I kept thinking about it, and wondering *why*, and wondering *who*.’

These questions are the ones I asked about my own developing story and answered through the creation of the character Bridie. I realised that her life story offered a strand or sub-plot which could strengthen my exploration of family relationships in the novel by showing what happens when a young person doesn’t get the mothering she needs, when she doesn’t have a loving family to support her. It brings a darker element to the story, possibly echoing the darkness in *Hunter’s Heart*, where teenage Leah has an alcoholic mother and an exhausted and overwhelmed father. Growing up isn’t always an easy time of life, and for some people adolescence is unbearably hard, through no fault of their own. At an early stage in thinking about the novel, I made a family tree to help me chart the

complicated relationships in the story and in my notebook asked the question ‘Where does Bridie fit in?’ I answered it: ‘the dark side, opposite Freya’s ‘light’ and joy (Freya now a bit like Izzy was, in some ways)’ (Journal entry, Appendix A). I knew she would be connected to the family in some way – possibly fostered or befriended by Gabes’ and Theo’s mother – and that there would be a particular affinity between Bridie and Theo. I wanted to show a large, loving and open family at Home Farm, the warm, messy and expansive household a deliberate contrast to Freya’s own home, where everything is meticulously clean and tidy, beautiful but somehow cold, everything expressing the loss from which the family are still recovering. The reader sees it all through Freya’s eyes; the descriptions of her arrival at Home Farm are filtered through her psychological state:

The door is open. I will discover, later, that it’s almost always like this, unlocked. That Gabes’ parents trust that things will be all right, that there’s no need to worry about locks and property and possessions. We step over the threshold into a big kitchen with a wooden table in the middle, a jumble of plates and mugs and books and piles of paper, and a china jug of the wildflowers I saw outside, spilling dusty yellow pollen over the wooden surface. The cushions on the chairs – all different, not matching – are faded as if they have been left out in the sun too long. I take it all in: the row of boots by the door; a big dresser with china plates and cups and saucers, bits and pieces from different sets, as if they’ve been picked up over many years from different places, or handed down through many generations. Tiled floor. Double stove, a row of wooden cupboards. A big bowl of ripe fruit – Victoria plums, from their own orchard, his mum tells me later, and another bowl, of their own eggs. (p.34)

Freya romanticises the house; she’s desperate to join this warm and welcoming family group, where she feels accepted and not judged and where she can relax and be looked after. She falls in love with this family and the place – and (mistakenly) imagines she has fallen in love with the boy, Gabes. At the end of this first visit, she goes back to her own home with her heart ‘singing. This is the beginning of my new life at last’ (p.44).

Over the course of the novel, I show Freya coming to see that even this family has its issues and problems and is not the idyll she has imagined, and to realise that it is not Gabe she is attracted to after all, but his more complicated and troubled older brother, Theo. And she isn't sure about that, either. Perhaps she just wants to be friends with them both, or perhaps, she realises more astutely, it is 'the family, all of them, that I want to be a part of? Because my family is just too ... small? It doesn't feel like a family at all, any more' (p.83).

Freya will stop blaming her parents – particularly her mother – and begin to understand that it isn't her fault that the house is so empty and quiet – many of her parents' friends 'just seemed to vanish away, after Joe died, as if grief was contagious. Or simply too hard to witness, perhaps' (p.99). She gradually learns more about Bridie's story – Gabe tells his version, of the child who lied and stole and played dangerous games, and later, when Freya visits Theo in Oxford where he's a student, he reveals the extent of his own unhappy involvement with Bridie. He tells her how Bridie made him feel *alive* – the irony not lost on Freya – with her dangerous, risk-taking behaviour. It's through her intense, serious talks with Theo that Freya can articulate what she has learned: 'Sad and terrible things happen. It's how you react to them that makes a difference ... I think that's why I so want to make my life matter, to live a good life: because Joe didn't have the chance' (p.127-8). The moment brings them very close, but even as they kiss – 'deep and dark and dangerous and delicious' - she knows that this is a mistake (p.129).

The lies, secrecy and deception involved alienate Freya's best friend, Miranda, and isolate Freya. She has difficult choices to make, and resists them at first. 'Why do things get so complicated?' she asks herself (p.138). 'I wish

Miranda and I really were just ten years old, ice skating, scoffing chocolate, best friends for ever and ever' (p.138). What seemed like an idyllic Christmas day at Home Farm tips into something much darker as Theo goes missing and Freya realises at last that 'this isn't my family, however much I wish it was' (p.203). The place she most longs to be at this moment is her grandparents' house: the solid stone house on St Ailla where she feels most safe. Eventually, Freya hears from Maddie, Theo and Gabes' mother, the final piece of Bridie's story which will help her understand why she committed suicide, and which helps explain Theo's behaviour. Freya makes one last attempt to help Theo to say goodbye and truly 'let go' of Bridie, but she saves herself too – she mends her friendship with Miranda, she sees her own family in a more realistic and positive light. She confides in her own mother about what has happened, which leads to a more honest emotional connection between them. Her mother says: 'You've brought it all back to me so vividly, what it was like for me being sixteen, seventeen. First loves, the terrible complications! And how exciting it all is too. Life opening out, and all the different possibilities!' (p.225).

The end of this novel, then, affirms the value of Freya's own family. The final scene projects into a more hopeful future for her, and hints at the possibility of a more balanced, equal relationship with Dan, back on the island of St Ailla. I use the future tense for this final scene. Freya's grandparents have the last word: 'No need to be in such a rush about everything, either,' Evie will say. 'Take your time. Friends, boyfriends: don't ever settle for less than the best' (p.247-8).

iii. *Drawing with Light* (2010) and *This Northern Sky* (2013):

lies, secrets and silences in the family; the healing power of art and nature

My original intention was to write a love story next ('I want to write about the transformative power of love: the way it changes you and opens you up to the world', Notebook entry). I wanted to show a life-affirming and positive experience of first love, loosely based on my own experience aged sixteen. I wrote notes, remembering specific details from this happy time of my own adolescence, as a source from which to draw inspiration, even though I knew this needed to be a contemporary story that would resonate with teenagers, set in the twenty-first century not the 1970s. I was re-reading Dodie Smith's *I Capture the Castle* at the time. I made notes on the opening chapter – 'first person, present tense narrative, with lively, lovely, literary, funny narrator (Cassandra) ... *I write this sitting in the kitchen sink* and the structuring device of Cassandra's three notebooks; Book I The Sixpenny Book March; Book II The Shilling Book April & May; Book III The Two-Guinea Book June to October' (Notebook, Appendix A). I borrowed this device for my own novel, as a good way of structuring my story and handling the passage of time. Possibly the development of my protagonist Emily was influenced by the character of Cassandra: I wrote notes about having as the main character a 'passionate, creative, intelligent teenage girl'. The house would be important – 'like in *Rebecca*, *Jane Eyre* and *I Capture the Castle*' and there would be 'some kind of loneliness at the heart A mix of loneliness and longing' (Journal entry, Appendix A).

Gradually I came to see that I was writing about many different kinds of love: between sisters, friends, the love between a homeless man and a dog, and the love that holds families together, including step-families. Cassy, Emily's father's new wife, is a significant adult character in Emily's life, even though her role is very 'quietly' written: as Professor Tessa Hadley commented: 'Emily takes for granted the intimacy and warmth she isn't aware of because it's simply a given' (Hadley, 2010). One of the motivations for Emily's search to find out more about her real mother is the discovery that Cassy is pregnant, and a feeling that Dad's priorities have changed. Her sense of rejection, and her emotion – jealousy, and the anger that for teenagers often covers up hurt - is understandable but also over the top – a teenage version of the tantrum a jealous toddler might throw, faced with a new sibling. She runs from Moat House into the woodland close by and hides – soothed, little by little, by her absorption into the natural world: 'I'm just another wet thing in the wet wood' (p.174). This moment connects her through memory to another – when she was very small, with her sister Kat, deep in the woods: this is one of three remembered moments from her early childhood. It prompts reflections about the nature of memory:

That's what memory is like: layers, one overlapping another, and compacting down the way old leaves slowly crumble and turn to rich, peaty soil, nourishing the new things that will grow. It's why it's important, remembering things. It's why it matters, when the memories aren't there, and no one fills in the gaps for you. (p175)

The gaps in Emily's memory are all to do with her mother; her father, even when he does come after her, fails to fill them in for her. Instead, he talks about his own hurt and bitterness at Francesca's behaviour and reaffirms Cassy's significance for him – 'she turned things back to good'. Later, it is Cassy who helps Emily to

see the photographs that fill in some of the gaps in Emily's childhood and which provide a clue as to where Francesca is now.

The story is driven by Emily's quest to find the mother who abandoned her and sister Kat early in their lives, and the big narrative questions: what could possibly happen to make a mother leave her children? Could you ever forgive a mother who did that? In all my earlier novels for young adults, mothers have been significant characters, but in *Drawing with Light* the mother's story is the central mystery to be unravelled. The last section of the book is set in the French Pyrenees, when Emily finally meets her mother, and puts that adult story centre stage and gives her mother a voice. But of course the mother's story is an important part of Emily's story, too. Early in the novel, her friend Rachel is surprised by Emily's apparent lack of curiosity about her real mother. She says, 'I think I would want to know everything about my mother. I would think it was a way of finding out something about myself. I'd want to know the ways I was like her, and the ways I was different' (pp 40-41), and by the end of the story Emily has come to see how true this is. I wrote this final section of the novel first, basing the setting on a real house and landscape in the Pyrennees Atlantiques I had visited, and worked out that the story would be Emily's emotional, interior journey towards this ending. The love story between Emily and the boy, Seb, was one strand of the novel; it is this loving relationship that provides her with the emotional support she needs to embark on the search for her mother.

One of the connections between mother and daughter is their interest in and talent for photography and the visual arts. Almost all my teenage protagonists have some connection with the creative arts: even Mia, the least academic, writes in a notebook from time to time. Simon is good at art, even though his drawings

are a disturbing reflection of his inner conflict, and Freya draws and paints. Emily is studying photography for A' levels at college, and keeps notebooks to record her creative process. In *This Northern Sky*, Kate is writing in a notebook she calls 'The story of my heart'. To some extent, this is a literary device, offering an 'explanation' for the first person narrative: we are reading what she is writing down day by day, although not *exactly* the words of her journal or diary. Diaries, paintings and photographs provide a convenient, additional way for me to reveal the inner world of my characters. They reflect my own adolescent practice of keeping diaries, and seem to connect with the teenagers I meet in schools who often do the same. I 'make up' the paintings and photographs I ascribe to the characters, but I also reference real artists and writers (Emily Carr; Charlie Waite, Ansel Adams, Winifred Nicholson, Robert Frost, Dylan Thomas, Shakespeare, Keats, Julian of Norwich). It's a way of adding layers to my own novels but also offers my readers an extension of their own experience, opening other doors for them they might at some point choose to step through. The publisher's idea of adding 'Notes' at the end of the novels provides more of these reference points.

Another faint literary echo in *Drawing with Light* is the fairy tale of Hansel and Gretel, where the children are cast out of the family: it is this story which Kat is reading to little Emily in the prologue, and which older Emily refers to at the end of the last scene: 'in spite of everything the adults did to them, the children found their own way home, their pockets full of precious stones and pearls that gleamed and shone in the light.' Emily, older and wiser, finds an alternative reading to the tale of darkness and abandonment, one that empowers the children. Over and over, I see now, my novels articulate that choice my characters have in the way they see the world: the choice between darkness and

light. In *Drawing with Light*, the imagery of working either with stone (Seb's new profession) or in photography (Emily's interest, and her mother Francesca's) suggests something different to this opposition: the need for a synthesis of both.

With stone, the line of the chisel makes the darkness and the shadow. As the shadow of each mark gets stronger, the light in the stone seems to get brighter. It's the opposite with a photograph; it's the light you draw with, rather than the dark. But you still need the two: the dark and the light. You can't see one without the other. (pp.246-7)

The reconciliation between Emily and Francesca is neither easy nor straightforward. Emily's initial reaction is one of anger; even when her mother has told her the full story, Emily cannot forgive her. But they have taken the first steps towards getting to see, know and understand each other, and Emily is the one in charge of the process. Francesca's paintings show Emily something that her mother could not easily express in words: in all of them the two small 'ghost children' are present, hovering, haunting the mother who left them behind. Francesca has never forgotten her small daughters. When Emily leaves, it will be to return to her family who have been there all along – to Dad and Cassy and Kat and the new baby – but with the new photograph of Francesca, so she can work out for herself 'the ways we are like each other, and the ways we are different' (p.247).

In my initial version of this novel, I wrote a more fully sexual relationship between Emily and Seb. To me, this was simply a realistic part of the loving relationship between them. I felt pretty sure that teenagers would enjoy reading these scenes, which to my mind were tender and loving, and responsibly described with an eye to my audience. My editor asked me to change these parts of the story, which I reluctantly agreed to do. I hope I left enough of a 'gap' in the

scenes set in France, in particular, so that a reader can fill it in with their imagination. The closeness and intimacy and tenderness of Seb and Emily's relationship is apparent in the published version, but a more realistic representation would have shown sex as one of the ways in which these teenagers would express their feelings for each other. The reason my editor gave for removing the more explicit sexual content was that she was concerned about the objections of other gatekeepers (teachers, parents, librarians) and thought it might limit my readers to 'older' teenagers. Puffin Books were braver about such things (there's sex in *Blue Moon*, and in *Hunter's Heart* - rather ambiguous and bungled in the Neolithic burial chamber). It seems odd to me that sex is still seen as more taboo than violence in novels for young people. Now, looking back, I wish I had been braver about defending those particular scenes in *Drawing with Light*. I read one of them aloud as part of my paper for a panel discussion of 'Sex and Censorship in YA fiction' at the AWP conference in Boston 2013, to audience applause. The sexual nature of Emily and Seb's relationship was an important part of my original idea for the novel and a more truthful representation than the censored version. I imagine teenage readers might be disappointed by its omission. My compromise with my editor on this occasion was a compromise too far. With hind sight, I might also have challenged the publisher's design concept for the novel: in a novel where photography plays an important role, a photographic image for the cover would have served it better than the pale pastel image of trees and a girl on the first cover, or the bright pink cover with a drawing of a heart on the most recent version.

In a scene in chapter thirteen of *Drawing with Light*, Seb tells Emily how he takes comfort from the fact that trees would quickly cover England like they

used to, if something happened to wipe out all the people: ‘If we mess up the world, it will just recover. Nature will, I mean’ (p.120). It’s a small exchange between two teenage characters in this novel, but global warming and the bigger and increasingly urgent questions about what humans are doing to the planet play a more significant role in *This Northern Sky* (2013). In interviews with reviewers and blog writers I was frequently asked about this aspect of the story as if it was something unusual or unexpected in a YA novel (Green, interview with Davies, 2013). The environmental strand of the novel comes from my choice of setting (a Hebridean island) and the interests of a particular character (teenage boy Finn), but perhaps the seed was planted by something my editor said to me when we were talking about what I might write next: ‘Could it be something to do with growing something? Fighting to save a woodland/seashore? The beauty of the natural world seems to permeate your writing, such a strength’ (Matthewson, email correspondence, 2011).

I knew what I wanted to explore in this novel: loss and change and family break-up from the perspective of a teenage girl caught in the middle, and I wanted a setting which would further isolate my teenage protagonist, Kate, and put her into close proximity with her parents. I could use the changes in Kate’s perception of the landscape as one of the ways of charting her emotional growth and change. I chose a place I first visited in my early twenties: the isles of Harris and Lewis in the Outer Hebrides. In the end the island I visited for my research trip was Tiree, in the Inner Hebrides, for the simple reason that I could actually travel there by public transport in October, the only time I could go (the novel would be set in the summer holidays). I hadn’t bargained on the high winds and storms that prevented the ferry from landing for two days; but, as so often seems to happen,

this too became part of my story. It gave me the idea of using the shipping forecasts to show passage of time during the storm, for example, and it made me think about how to use the wind as an image for change in the novel.

During the many hours at sea I was taken under the wing of a group of islanders who told me stories about the islands, and informed me about a controversial proposed new wind farm, the Tiree Array, which was dividing the island community. This gave me the extra strand the novel needed: one that reinforced the theme of change. I read a lot about the issues and talked to the islanders I met; I followed the development of the project online, afterwards. Very little of this research appears in the final version of the novel: I was writing fiction, not polemic, and the issues are complex. I wanted to keep my reader engaged at the level of character and story, and those became the guiding principles for what to include and what to leave out: what would Kate think? How would she approach this? Her growing interest in the island community is one of the ways I show her changing. At the beginning of the novel, Kate doesn't want to be there at all. She's been dragged on holiday by her parents who can't leave her at home – they don't trust her, following the near-fatal accident in a car with her reckless boyfriend, Sam. She's away from friends and from her sisters, with parents who are making a last attempt to heal a broken marriage, and her own heart is hurting, too. She is angry with her parents and deliberately obstructive – she won't queue with them at the ferry terminal: 'Dad's furious. 'Why do you always have to go off at exactly the wrong moment?' / 'So?' I say. 'I'm here now, aren't I? What's the problem, exactly?' (p.8).

The language at the beginning of the novel reflects Kate's bleak state of mind: leaning over the ferry rail, the wind is 'like ice' and the water below is

‘deep and dark... You’d go down, down, down’ (p.8). They arrive at the island in darkness; the next morning, going outside, she realises how truly cut off she is – there’s no mobile phone signal. There’s nothing to do. And she is acutely aware of the tension between her parents: coming back from the beach she sees them standing side by side in the small garden. ‘They’re not touching. Not speaking either. You could fit a third person in the space between them’ (p.18). That ‘third person’ is the unnamed woman whom Dad is phoning from the village phone box, as Kate later observes. It’s one last betrayal; breaking his promise that he would try to mend things with Mum this holiday. Kate becomes the catalyst for the final show down between her parents – her furious outburst forces them to confront the broken trust. At her lowest point, Kate takes herself to a beach on the other side of the island, and gradually the sense of the natural world still carrying on, and beautiful, provides a kind of comfort. It happens in stages: from her initial sense of injustice and anger (‘I’m totally alone on a stupid island and no one even cares’ p. 118) through deep sadness (‘today, my heart is breaking’) through a turning of her attention outwards, away from self, observing the birds running in and out of the sea and the changing light, to a new sense of calm and finally acceptance:

A great stillness seems to spread over the water, over the sand, as the darkness covers the island. Stars begin to appear. The sea roars from the distance, but close up the sound of the waves is gentle and muted. The calm spreads right over me, too, sitting under a blanket of stars....

...There is nothing I can do about Mum and Dad now.

It’s happened, the worst thing.

And I’m still here, and the world’s still here, turning slowly, spinning through space: Sam’s glowing blue dot in the black wilderness. (p.120)

The image of the ‘blue dot’ is a reference to the opening scene in the novel, where Sam shows Kate the photograph of the earth viewed from space. At that time, she

didn't understand how to 'read' the image, but now she sees what it represents: not that human life is ephemeral, but that she is a part of a beautiful, living, natural world. And the final scene of the novel moves beyond that sense of Kate as an individual, towards a broader celebration of the human values of family and friendship: Kate's mother and daughters are holding a party, and the house is 'full of friends, family, conversation. It's exactly how a house should be' (p.230). The final lines make that explicit, with the emphasis on the word 'we': 'Here we all are, on this small blue planet as it slowly turns, spinning through space, infinitely precious' (p.230).

Readers and reviewers responded warmly and favourably to my sensitive and compassionate depiction of the break-up between the parents, and to the depiction of the island setting (Reviews, Appendix B). To my mind, this novel marked a new departure for me, in the sparse, honed style of writing. I worked hard to achieve this: I knew I needed it, to evoke and echo the spare nature of the wild landscape with its sense of space, open sky and clear air. As with all my novels, I wanted to show the story through vivid scenes, to leave space for the reader to enter the story, to imply much more than is stated. I wanted to create a story that is not geared around plot and dramatic action, but takes place in the shifting interior experience of my characters. It's a story of growing up, of an awakening sensibility, about precious moments of 'being', a celebration of the natural world and our connection to it. It is anchored to the real world, and does not offer comfortable certainties or shy away from painful experience. This is the 'older' tradition of writing, described in Section Two, to which I feel most connected.

*

Reading Meg Rosoff's YA novel, *Picture me Gone* (Puffin, 2013) has engaged me in rethinking something I have been facing in my own writing, about the scope and possible limitations of writing realist contemporary novels for young adults with teenage characters. The main 'events' in most western teenagers' lives take place in the head and mind and heart: the yearnings and desires for things that are about-to-be, such as falling in love; sex and relationships; careers: freedom to be the person you really are. David Almond sums this up beautifully in *A Song for Ella Grey*, where the narrator, Ella's friend Claire, talks about being that age:

And it's like I was nothing, too, like I was waiting, too. But mebbe that's just how it is when you're young. You've got all these weird forces in you, but you feel unsatisfied, empty, unfinished. You feel like everything that matters is a million years away, and yes it might come to you but no it bliddy mightn't. It'll be like an unreachable constellation of the stars. And nothing will happen, ever. And you'll never be anything, ever' (p.77).

Those things must inevitably be your material if you are to write a realistic fiction of adolescence. Rosoff has written novels that cross over into other genres, including dystopian (*How I Live Now*) and historical fiction (*The Bride's Farewell*), but her latest story is located much more firmly in the real world of contemporary adolescents. Narrated in the first person by twelve-year-old Mira, the main events of the story are happening not to Mira but to the *adults* around her. Her father's old friend has disappeared; Mira accompanies her father on a road trip, ostensibly to find him, and has to come to terms with some complex, morally ambiguous truths about adult relationships. Apart from meeting teenage boy Jake, nothing much happens to her. She uses her phone to send the missing man messages, she keeps an eye on her dad, she phones her mother - who is elsewhere, on a tour as a musician. She goes shopping for food and blankets

during a snow storm. She texts her friend back home. This is the substance of real teenage life, where young people have little control, no money, limited freedom. The centre of the novel is what's happening in her head. The action and events of the novel circle round the behaviour of the adults.

As I begin the process of writing a new novel, and with the strange words of my new editor at Bloomsbury still resounding in my head (chick lit or prize-winning 'big' novel, as discussed in Section One), I am wondering how I might 'push the boundaries' in new ways for me. Over the last ten years I have developed particular strengths as a writer for adolescents, creating strong, convincing teenage characters with powerful inner lives. I have an original and individual voice. I evoke a powerful sense of place and its significance. The challenge for me in the next book is to have the courage of my convictions, to write the story I want to write without thinking about limitations, real or imagined; the constraints that come from publishers or which I put upon myself. I might write in the past tense, or in different tenses; from multiple viewpoints, with fully-realised adult characters as well as teenage ones. I aim to write honed, elegant prose that leaves space and silence and trusts the reader. I'd like this novel to build on my previous work, but also to take risks and be bold in the territory it explores. It is too soon to say what that might be. I have begun the notebook stage of writing down ideas and images, a few experimental scenes, written from several different viewpoints, including two adults as well as my teenage protagonist. She seems to be someone without the support of family, a character closer to my previous peripheral adolescent characters, Leah from *Hunter's Heart*, or Bridie in *Bringing the Summer*, than the middle class girls I have previously placed at the centre of my stories. I am imagining a journey

structure, a character moving through different landscapes, always at the edge. In my head I am beginning to hear her voice, glimpse aspects of her story. I want the style of writing to be uncluttered, elegant, graceful. I want a sense of space, wildness, raw energy. I will write this novel without a publishing contract, to allow myself the creative freedom that seems to offer. I'll let the story go where it needs to go. I hope to surprise myself. I hope it will be better than anything I have written before.

Conclusion:

Writing this contextualising narrative has been a rewarding and often challenging experience, as I wrestled with how to talk about my own fiction for young adults, and to consider it as a body of work with distinct themes and preoccupations, which makes a valuable contribution to the field of writing for young people. The journey I have taken in the reflective and critical writing has been similar to the one I make when I write my novels: it is through the process of writing, in the *act* of writing, that I come to understand what it is I want to say, what I think, and how I might best express that in language. It has helped me to consider my writing of fiction (which often seems like an intuitive, unconscious process) within a broader social and historical context; to understand that I write the way that I do because of the time in which I write, influenced by my own cultural background, conditioned by the situation in which I grew up as a reader and subject to the commercial demands of the contemporary children's publishing industry.

One of the distinctive qualities in my writing for adolescents is my focus on the real world and on real life, at a time when the YA shelves are stocked with so many fantasy and dystopian novels. For a guest post for the YA blog *Planet Print* I was asked to write about why I write contemporary realistic fiction for young adults. 'There are plenty of brilliant fantasy and historical novels around,' I wrote,

but I've only ever wanted to write realistic contemporary fiction for teenagers. Why? I think it's because those were the stories I wanted and needed to read myself as a teenagers: novels set in the real world, reflecting real, important issues about life, love, relationships. Those were the things that fascinated me at the time (and still do ...) ... I read stories as a way to understand my world and to understand myself and others.

Now, as an author, I use my writing as a way of working things out, of understanding things, and I hope my own stories have the effect of drawing readers in and making them feel and think (...) I'd like to think my novels might make a difference to someone, somewhere. (...)

The most important journeys we make are inner journeys; growing up, learning who we are, how to live, what's most important to us... (Green, 2012, planet-print.blogspot.co.uk).

It is clear to me that adolescents are not solely interested in action and plot. It wasn't true of me as an adolescent, and is not true of many of the young people I meet when I got to schools and festivals. Young adult literature, like literature for younger children, needs richness and variety, a plurality of voices and forms. Like young people themselves, their literature needs to grow and change and develop. We need different kinds of books for different kinds of readers. There is no such thing as a typical teenager any more than there is such a thing as a typical adult. I have tried to make the case for the continuation of a tradition of writing - alongside all the other kinds of writing for young people - which allows for the exploration of the interior states of its teenage characters, of emotion and thought as well as action. I believe that this is a literature that is important in its own right; it might also be transitional between childhood and adult reading for some readers.

YA author Lucy Christopher describes my novels as 'gentle, family-based stories of love and hope, rich in emotion and thoughtfulness'. She suggests that they fill a 'gap' in contemporary writing for young people:

in our increasingly frenetic and social-media-rich age, where our young people are often said to suffer from technological overload, Julia Green's books provide crucial emotional pause. These stories give their readers a safe 'space' to explore their sense of identity, connection and belonging. They also give readers some time out from fast pace and pressure, providing time to think about these interior issues. I believe that there are very few writers, especially in the current fast-paced and dark YA market, who are doing what Green does for our contemporary young people.... The novels are beautifully written, do not condescend to their readers... Green's exquisite novels provide a quiet voice of hope in a world of chaos, shouting and technological overload. (Christopher, by email, February 2015)

For me, it's not enough to talk simply about the increased *volume* of books published for young people (a ten per cent increase in the UK children's publishing market in the first half of 2014, the fastest growing book sector, according to *The Bookseller* 12.09.14; sales of YA as well as children's and picture books had all increased). It is just as important to ask questions about the range and quality of those books, and to continue to make room for a more literate, interior tradition where the story lives partly in the texture of the writing, and encourages a sophisticated reading sensibility.

In this thesis I have described my own journey as a reader and writer of fiction for young adults. I have made a case for the importance of an older, 'quiet' tradition of writing for young people, showing through the analysis of four classic novels how narrative and language can be used in rich and imaginative ways to present the complex psychology and interiority of their teenage characters. This is the tradition I hope I take forward in my own writing, for a contemporary readership.

In Section Three, I traced the origins and development of my writing for adolescents. Extracts from reviews (see appendix) demonstrate the critical

reception my work has had in the children's publishing world, and from fellow writers. It is harder for me to evaluate my own work and to assess its development because so much is invested on a personal level with each novel, and I know that I was writing the best novel that I could at each stage of my journey as a writer. However, the process of the PhD has enabled me to see that I have indeed grown and developed as a writer over the last ten years and continue to do so. My early novels have an uneven quality, as I learned the skills of the novelist. I still had much to learn about story structure, about the balance and rhythm of a novel. I can now see that the 'story within a story' of the two young women on the canal in *Blue Moon*, for example, doesn't fit so well within the whole. My depictions of Mia's parents and her teacher in *Blue Moon* and *Baby Blue* are not as fully developed or three-dimensional or nuanced as the parents in my more recent novel, *This Northern Sky*, but that was partly intentional, as I tried to keep strictly to the limited perspective of my adolescent protagonist. I can see now that I might have used different viewpoints in *Hunter's Heart* more effectively, and could have given Leah much more of a voice than her diary extracts allow. *Breathing Underwater* marked an important stage in my developing understanding of story structure, as I learned how to manage the two time frames, and to show a clear line of emotional development in my character, so the reader has the satisfaction of seeing her go through a significant process of change. I am pleased, too, with the way I used the island setting in this novel. One of the strengths of my writing, and a significant part of what gives it individuality and originality, is my depictions of place. My fictional settings often include water – sea, river, islands, and edges; sky and stars; an ancient, natural world. With my most recent novel, *This Northern Sky*, I knew I wanted a more pared down, honed

style, which I have achieved. My work has gained in confidence and elegance. All my novels take seriously the concerns, emotions and interior lives of the adolescent protagonists. Readers often tell me they become absorbed in the novels, feel strong emotional connections to my characters, and that my stories and characters stay with them afterwards.

This period of reflection and analysis of my own work has helped me to see how often I am writing about young people experiencing change and loss, and surviving those things. I realise I am repeatedly drawn to writing about love in its many different forms - first love, and friendships, and relationships within the family - and to a celebration of our 'ordinary' but beautiful world. The 'setting' of adolescence throws these issues into sharper relief, because this is when so many experiences are happening for the first time; and I suspect that my sense of audience has helped me to write more effectively. When I am at the early stages of writing a novel, thinking about potential audiences - and publishers, and the way books are commissioned and sold - seems to get in the way of writing the book that 'needs' to be written, and puts unhelpful limitations on the imaginative process. But I have also learned, conversely, that a sense that what I am writing will be read by young people makes my writing sharper, sparer, less self-indulgent and more effective. That was my experience with *Blue Moon*, after all, the novel that made me a writer for young adults and set me on a path for the next ten years and more. I realise that I do have a sense of responsibility to my readers – wanting to make a difference, to show options, to provide a space for young people to think and feel – and that may come partly from my background as a teacher and a parent. I would like to think that my books might help foster a new generation of readers and writers, which is why I enjoy writing the 'notes' which

are included in the back of the books published by Bloomsbury, and encouraging young people to explore fiction and poetry and painting and photography as a creative means of expression for themselves.

It seems that other adults are interesting in reading about these experiences, too: I am published as a writer for young people, but many of my readers are adults. In a recent article in the online *FT Magazine*, Gillian Tett talked of ‘category collapse’ between adult and teen fiction: ‘Booksellers now estimate that almost half of young adult books are being read by people who are over the age of 18’ (2014, Tett). This, I suggest, must in part be due to the range and diversity of books being published in the YA category, as well as to the media coverage and publicity generated by particular publishing phenomena (such as Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight* series, Suzanne Collins’ *The Hunger Games*, or John Green’s *The Fault in our Stars*, all of which have been recently made into films). There might be other reasons, too. Some adults talk about the stronger element of story found in YA novels, but it could also be that adults find in YA fiction a place for them to explore the same pressing philosophical issues that adolescents find interesting: issues of identity, human connection, belonging.

In my blog post for *Planet Print*, I wrote about the kinds of stories I wanted and needed to read as an adolescent. These stories were set in the real world and addressed ‘real, important issues about life, love, relationships’: the things that fascinated me then. I added three words almost as an afterthought, in parentheses – ‘(and still do)’. I’m an adult, but I am still exploring very similar questions in my life to the ones I engaged with as a teenager in the 1970s, and which my teenage readers are engaged with now, in 2014. These are the big questions: Who am I? What am I doing? Who do I love? How do I deal with

change, or recover from loss? How shall I live now? Realist young adult fiction offers me a 'home' as a writer, a place to explore these questions. I am still engaged in the life-long process of growing up.

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Appendix A

(Photocopies of extracts from my journals)

Appendix B

Extracts from some reviews of Julia Green's novels for young adults

Blue Moon

'*Blue Moon* discusses teenage pregnancy with great emotional honesty' (*The Times*, 19 February 2003); 'This sensitive, life-affirming first novel well conveys the misery, mood swings, indecision and above all the loneliness of teenage pregnancy.' (*The Bookseller*, 17 January 2003).

'What an excellent book. This should be in all secondary schools and used in PSHE (Personal, Social and Health Education) lessons instead of stale safe sex guides ... The standard of writing is of the highest quality and the subject matter is dealt with in a sensitive and open manner, resulting in a wonderful novel ... There are many novels about teenage pregnancy... but this novel is in another league.' R.Tracey in *Writeaway* (online) Available from: <http://www.improbability.ultralab.net/writeaway/babyblue.html> (Accessed 30 April 2004).

Short-listed for Lancashire Children's Book of the Year 2004.

Baby Blue

'*Blue Moon* and *Baby Blue* (are) books that should arguably be recommended reading for both sexes because of the realistic way teenage pregnancy and parenthood are portrayed...

Julia Green writes about Mia's experience of motherhood with a compassionate realism – the delight and wonder of seeing her newborn baby juxtaposed with the loss of childhood and teenage life as she knew it. The prose is often lyrical, painting a gentle yet compelling picture of a young girl coming to terms with her own shortcomings, facing up to her responsibilities, and with her baby, ultimately making the best of it.' Sue Barrow, 2013 (online) Available from: <http://www.awfullybigreviews.blogspot.co.uk/2012/03/blue-moon-and-baby-blue-by-julia-green.html>. (Accessed 26 August 2014).

'Wonderful writing, strong characters and a powerful and engaging topic: what it's really like to cope with a baby at 16.' (review in *Publishing News*, 9 January 2004)

'Green effortlessly manages to portray Mia's tumultuous emotions – wanting to be a normal party-going teenager, while aware that she has a baby who is dependent on her for everything. This is a beautiful book that is much too good to be pigeon-holed in the "issue" books genre. It is so much better than that.' (preview in *The Bookseller*, 16 January 2004)

Hunter's Heart

Hunter's Heart was picked by *The Bookseller* as its 'top title' for Teenage Reads, Contemporary Life: 'the author has previously written with sensitivity about teenage pregnancy and motherhood. Here the tone is harsher as she deals with the embarrassments and obsessions of a 14-year-old boy during a hot summer' (in *The Bookseller*, February 10 2005).

Kate Agnew, writing in *The Guardian*: ‘The present tense narrative is suffused with the heat and mounting tension of the long summer days, while occasional extracts from Leah’s diary, in which she reveals her naïve fantasies, fuel the sense of impending disasters. The radio in the background tells of war, terrorism and death; sea-currents make swimming treacherous and rumours abound about a local man with a gun. When Simon secretly acquires his own air rifle, the pace quickens inexorably towards the disturbing climax. Simon’s adolescent anxieties and his defiant refusal to engage with family relationships are convincingly drawn, producing a powerfully atmospheric summer read.’ (Agnew, review in *The Guardian* (Education), Tuesday 12 July 2005)

Dinah Hall in the *Sunday Telegraph*: ‘Of all the books I’ve read this year *Hunter’s Heart* by Julia Green, with its undertow of menace and superb portrait of male adolescence, was the one that truly got under my skin. It starts with 14-year-old Simon killing his first rabbit, and the mixed emotions of shame and pride that accompany the kill. Simon is a talented, if morbid, artist, but his sensitive side is contrasted with his growing fascination for weaponry and hunting. As the natural teenage estrangement from his widowed mother and little sister is furthered by his secret obsessions, a 16-year-old girl, with her own complications, introduces sex into the volatile mix. For mature 12 – 16 year olds – and any mothers wanting insight into the psyche of teenage boys.’ (Hall, *Sunday Telegraph*, 17 July 2005)

‘this is a compelling coming-of-age story as Simon faces who he is becoming and makes some life-altering decisions.’ (Flint-Ferguson, *KLIATT* 2007)

‘Murder, jealousy, first love, guilt, betrayal, they are all here in this urgently-written coming of age story... Green is a good writer: engaged, perceptive and

original. This is one of her most powerful novels yet.’ (Nick Tucker, in *Books for Keeps*, 1 September 2005)

Jake Hope from the Lancashire Children’s Book of the Year team (Young People’s Library Services, Lancashire): ‘This truly is a remarkable book (...) the emotional scope of the book is at points breathtaking... I work with a number of teenage reading groups and think this would be a superb book to promote discussions and thoughts.’ (Hope, email to editor Yvonne Hooker at Puffin, 2005).

Breathing Underwater

Mary Hoffman found qualities in the novel that make it ‘stand out’: ‘it is this strong sense of place and season, together with Freya’s own burgeoning sense of self, that give the book its unique flavour. ... Never has that sun-soaked, salt-crusted sense of teenage summer well-being been better described.’ (*The Guardian*, May 8 2009)

Armadillo magazine (Spring 2009) review by Linda Newbery: ‘... There is nothing sensational or contrived about this novel, but instead Green gives us an honest, beautifully-realised picture of the slow beginnings of recovery for Freya, self-reproach giving way to new concern for her family, and the tentative start of romance, all set against the rhythms of tide and wind and seasons. Skilful and memorable, *Breathing Underwater* is as enjoyable for adult readers as for the teenage girls who will undoubtedly love it.’ (online) Available from: <http://www.armadillomagazine.co.uk> (Accessed 8 May 2009).

Author Nicola Davies praised the voice: ‘with that mixture of very mature insight and childlike insecurity’... and called the control of language ‘impressive. The restraint, the cool understatedness, to carry the very opposite of those things is immensely skilled and totally distinctive.’ (Davies, email to J Green, 2008).

Books for Keeps (2009) described the novel as ‘haunting and up-lifting’, a ‘carefully-crafted and hopeful book, which should be genuinely helpful to younger people in coming to terms with bereavement and growing up... and could be appreciated by mature 12 year olds as much as by adults.’

It was a highlighted book for teens in *The Bookseller*: ‘This excellent story comes from an author who, notably, has written unpatronisingly and sensitively about teenagers’ feelings.’ (Agnew, in *The Bookseller*, 2009).

Jill Murphy called the novel ‘tremendously moving. Green draws Freya beautifully... An engaging story of coming to terms with grief. Freya, the central character, is utterly credible and beautifully shaded.’ Murphy, J. 2009, (online) Available from: <http://www.the Bookbag.co.uk/reviews/> (Accessed August 15 2004).

The *Financial Times* summed up its review in a final paragraph: ‘Elegiacally, and with great pathos and skill, Green charts a girl’s passage from innocence to experience, from grief to acceptance.’ (review in *Financial Times*, May 2009).

The novel was widely and favourably reviewed online as well as in the national and local press and magazines for teenagers and was on the ‘recommended reading list for young people’ produced by the Schools Library Service, The Idea Stores and secondary schools in Tower Hamlets, London.

Bringing the Summer

‘Tender and absorbing and truthful, this story will appeal to a wide range of readers, especially the thoughtful, sensitive ones. (...) *Bringing the Summer* is unashamedly arty. Green’s characters discuss classic and modern literature – including children’s literature – and artists. They read poetry. They paint. But they are most definitely not highbrow or offputting. It makes me very happy to see an author introducing all this wonderful stuff to readers, and in an way that makes it interesting and inspiring and not in the last bit stuffy or inaccessible (...) But mostly, it perfectly captures how it feels to be an adolescent on the cusp of adulthood’ (J. Murphy) (online) Available from: <http://www.thebookbag.co.uk/reviews/index.php?title=bringing-the-summer-by-Julia-Green.html> (Accessed 15 August 2014).

‘This book was brilliant at examining grief and learning to cope with it; finding a way to live with it and move on.’ (online) Available from: <http://www.serendipityreviews.co.uk/2012/05/bringing-the-summer-by-julia-green.html>. (Accessed 15 August 2014).

Drawing with Light

Bookseller’s Choice for March 2010. Jake Hope, Reading, learning and development manager for Lancashire County Council, described it as a ‘tender novel that explores the changing nature of the parent child relationship through adolescence. A depth of emotional charge sears through this quietly understated novel. Blood relationships and new family bonds are played against one another, but it is the minutiae of life so deftly observed that truly makes this novel shine.’

Fiona Noble called it a ‘beautifully written coming of age tale’ (*The Bookseller*, 2010).

Marilyn Brocklehurst at the Norfolk Children’s Book Centre commented on the ‘complex slice of family life brought richly into focus by Emily, whose quest to find her birth mother is just one plot in this excellent book’ (*The Bookseller*, March 2010).

The School Librarian: ‘The way Green gives a perspective from both mother and daughter is quite beautifully done’ (*School Librarian*, March 2010).

This Northern Sky

‘*This Northern Sky* is a stunningly beautiful portrayal of loss, change and the power of a place... One of Julia Green’s biggest strengths is her unfailing ability to capture the emotions of her heroines with honesty and precision’ (online)

Available at: <http://www.solittletimeforbooks.blogspot.co.uk/2013/07> (Accessed 15 August 2014).

‘As a teenager I devoured her (Julia Green’s) books and now as an adult I can appreciate them... I really liked that it showed parents as actual human beings which is something you don’t find that much in YA lit, and how the main focus of the book wasn’t Kate’s romantic feelings.’ (online) Available at:

<http://www.muchlovedbooks.blogspot.co.uk/2013/07/review-this-northern-sky-by-julia-green.html> (Accessed 15 August 2014).

a ‘beautiful, lyrical take on a family break-up. The brooding, claustrophobic atmosphere within Kate’s family is contrasted with the vast openness of the sky and the pure air in the far north.’ (Marie-Louise Jensen, email to E. Bradshaw, Bloomsbury Children’s Books)

Elen Caldecott wrote: ‘Green finds beauty in the most messy, difficult of circumstances. Not only do her characters endure their struggles, they somehow celebrate them in a work that is subtle, poignant and exultant.’ (email to E. Bradshaw, Bloomsbury Children’s Books)

Nicola Davies: ‘Julia’s writing is wonderful and distinctive – her voice is quiet but compelling, a storyteller you have to listen to’ (email to E. Bradshaw, Bloomsbury Children’s Books)

Cora Linn on *Good Reads* found the book ‘haunting and beautiful’ and Kate a ‘great character... she is so believable, so real’ (Linn, 2013).

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