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Learning Curve: The University-Set Novel Made Palatable, and Appropriate, for Young Adult Readers

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Abstract

From brooding Dark Academia to steamy New Adult, the university setting and the young people inhabiting that space have proven consistently newsworthy. To read the headlines, one might assume that dark, edgy, or boundary-pushing content is the only way the post-high school demographic is being depicted and catered to in current literature. There is, however, a contingent of authors whose work is gentler in its approach, offering readers a softer potential vision of their late teens. This subset of novels proves that the university setting has its place in Young Adult literature, in a way that's appropriate, relatable, and/or inspiringly aspirational depending on the reader's current phase of life. That trend is examined in this article, using a trio of standalone novels published in the past decade which primarily focus on teen protagonists' first year at college or university: *Fangirl* by Rainbow Rowell (2013), *Loveless* by Alice Oseman (2020), and *Begin Again* by Emma Lord (2023).

Keywords: *creative writing for young people, young adult, new adult, dark academia, university, campus novel*

From brooding Dark Academia to steamy New Adult, the university setting and the characters studying there have proven consistently newsworthy. *The New York Times* has reported on the rise of “Dark Academia [...] a thriving subculture devoted to all things scholarly – but with a gothic edge” (Bateman, 2020). Curated reading lists within Dark Academia include selections such as Alex Michaelides’ *The Maidens* and Leigh Bardugo’s *Ninth House*, moody university-set tales marketed to adults. As for the broader New Adult (NA) category, *The Bookseller* describes it as “Young Adult’s sexier older sister,” with offerings “filled with older teenage characters” facing “some of life’s seminal issues,” such as “going to college for the first time, with of course a heavy helping of steamy sex” (Wood, 2013).

The aforementioned sex is a major factor in aging-up New Adult literature from Young Adult (YA). The category includes titles like Casey McQuiston’s runaway hit *Red White & Royal Blue* and Hannah Grace’s college-set hockey romance *Icebreaker*. Stories which are known, and beloved, by their readers for spicing things up with numerous on-page sex scenes between their young-ish (often 20-something) romantic leads. These are also titles whose youthful protagonists, whimsical covers, and even their campus settings have led to numerous Public Service Announcement (PSA) Reddit threads urging readers to “learn the difference” between NA and YA before they complain about material being “mostly smut” or overly “graphic” for younger teen readers they were never intended for in the first place (u/Clueless_Know_it_all, 2021).

To read the headlines, one might assume that dark, edgy, or boundary-pushing content is the only way the post-high school demographic is being depicted and catered to in current campus literature. *Book Riot* suggests this is how it is perceived, remarking, “When we encounter books about teens in college [...] people tend to hit the brakes and say, ‘no, that’s New Adult,’ or ‘that’s not YA’” (Price, 2018). There is, however, a contingent of authors whose work is gentler in its approach. These writers offer readers a softer potential vision of their late teens post-high school or -secondary school. This subset of novels offers reassurance to writers wondering whether the university setting can still maintain its place in YA literature in a way that’s appropriate, relatable, and/or inspiringly aspirational depending on the reader’s current phase of life.

To narrow this investigation, I chose to look at three standalone novels published in the past decade which primarily focus on a young woman’s first year at college or university, and whose experiences in that setting comprise the entirety of the novel. These criteria excluded texts whose protagonists are first depicted in high school or during secondary education. This examination also excluded installments in series which eventually depict familiar characters transitioning from high school to college (e.g., Jenny Han’s *The Summer I Turned Pretty* series or Becky Albertalli’s *Simon*

sequels). The texts selected for this study are *Fangirl* by Rainbow Rowell (2013), *Loveless* by Alice Oseman (2020), and *Begin Again* by Emma Lord (2023). While the protagonists of these three works are unquestionably unique, I argue that they also represent a version of the “aspirational YA college student” who can successfully operate within the YA category and its familiar coming-of-age structures. In turn, these protagonists offer a model that writers can consider – in terms of emulation or mindful deviation – when choosing to explore the university setting within their own work.

In discussing the three chosen texts, it is prudent to first clarify the current tropes that these university-set YA novels deliberately avoid. Deliberate, one can argue, in that the authors insert playfully self-aware cultural references into the mouths of their characters. Oseman does this in *Loveless*, when protagonist Georgia, jokingly wonders whether her college experience will resemble Donna Tartt’s 1992 novel “*The Secret History* or some other deep and mysterious University drama with lots of sex and murder” (2020, p.24). This nod is especially meaningful in helping cheekily define what *Loveless* ultimately strives *not* to be, since *The Secret History* has been singled out by journalists as “Dark Academia’s essential text” (Bateman, 2020). In the case of *Begin Again*, Lord does not go so far as to call out a text by name as a foil to her own novel, but her protagonist Andie does express a great sense of relief when she learns that her campus’ “secret societies”, of which her alumni parents were both members, are actually very wholesome “Volunteer Societies” and not “anything bad” (2023, p. 292). In doing so, Lord alludes to texts like Donna Tartt’s *The Secret History* and other more recent Dark Academia offerings in the same vein, like *Ace of Spades* by Faridah Àbíké-Íyímídé or *Ninth House* by Leigh Bardugo.

One distinct element of recent YA university-set novels is that none of them make study their focus, despite their campus setting. Work in the classroom is never presented as the protagonist’s greatest obstacle or area of required growth. This is not to suggest that any of these main characters are inherently stellar students without academic foibles – their classroom performance just happens to be ancillary, if not non-existent, in the journey each author has mapped out for their student characters. Instead, the broader university setting is used to foster interpersonal skills, combat social anxiety, and explore young love.

Fangirl’s Cath is a strong writer but much more engaged with her fan fiction efforts and pleasing her massive online audience than concerning herself with the Creative Fiction writing course she has talked her way into as a freshman. Emma Lord’s Andie (nicknamed “A-plus” even if that has not been her academic track record of late) is a middling student who is far more focused on following in her late mother’s footsteps to win her way into one of the university’s elusive secret societies through a series of convoluted student competitions (2023, p.60). Andie spends nearly all her remaining time helping to produce a provocative student radio show which is coyly described as being “not necessarily school sanctioned” and is, in fact, in constant conflict with the university’s actual academic Broadcasting department (Lord, 2023, p.60). As for *Loveless*’ Georgia, her academic experience is hardly mentioned, instead

the focus is fully on her interactions with the university's extracurricular societies. Readers follow her entry into the thriving Pride Society as she explores her own sexuality, as well as her friends' scrappy efforts to reinvigorate "The Shakespeare Society" which has died from inactivity prior to their arrival.

Writers aspiring to explore the university setting in their own work might take heed of these strategies, to appropriately age-up the obstacles facing their protagonists. Worries over menacing teachers, failed assignments, or the academic expectations of parents have been left behind in the halls of middle and high schools. On campus, their main stressors become those of the social and interpersonal variety.

Setting aside academic prowess, or lack thereof, the authors of these three novels deftly establish backstories for their respective characters which suggest they are in some way behind when entering university. Thus, the authors create characters who are ready-made for learning and discovery in their new setting, albeit in a way that has nothing to do with the traditional classroom. With *Fangirl*, Cath is "a girl who doesn't think she's good at life" (Estrella, 2013). Plagued by social anxiety, she struggles through basic daily interactions with her roommate, fellow dorm residents, and university peers. Meanwhile, Oseman's Georgia is more specific in the self-examination of her perceived shortcomings, citing a complete lack of prior romantic or sexual experience which puts her markedly behind her fellow students. "I hadn't realised how behind I was," Georgia laments in the novel's opening chapters. "Everyone else was growing up, kissing, having sex, falling in love – and I was just a child" (Oseman, 2020, p.14).

Begin Again's Andie is arguably the most socially adept of the three young women. She made a name for herself as her high school's revered advice columnist in the student newspaper, she enters college with a longtime boyfriend from her hometown, and she is self-assured enough to dub herself "one of the hardest-working" people she knows (Lord, 2023, p.15). Thus, Lord introduces the unique narrative hurdle that Andie is a "midyear transfer" into her dream university, following an initial rejection and a semester spent at her local community college (2023, p.10). Andie enters the new collegiate environment halfway through her first year and viewing herself as being 100% behind in social standing and extracurricular involvements. In fact, she even earns the moniker "new kid," which will stick with her throughout her college experience, even as its use grows more affectionate (Lord, 2023, p.31).

All three novels introduce a creative and nuanced set of circumstances and obstacles for their late-teen protagonists from the outset, deftly circumventing the New Adult assumption of novels that will be "driven by the sexual content first, and plot second" (Wood, 2013) or offer a "sexy and fun [...] antidote to the stresses of the real world" (Allen, 2012).

That said, this strategy suggests authors interested in writing the socially adept "golden boy/girl" or "chosen one" narrative might steer clear of the university setting if desiring to keep their work firmly in the YA category. If a late-teen college student

protagonist is cocky, well-adjusted, or in any way advanced, they just might risk earning themselves a “New Adult” classification as a result.

The close-knit residential dormitory environment proves an essential plot element for these university-set YA novels, a necessary catalyst for the protagonists’ evolution. In *Fangirl*, Cath finds herself in a co-ed dorm with a stranger for a roommate since her twin sister has refused to accept the seemingly easier option of rooming together. In *Begin Again*, Andie similarly finds herself paired with a stranger for a roommate, one who has already completed a semester at the university and thus possesses exponentially more experience and ease on campus. Andie’s hallmates and her Resident Advisor (RA), Milo, all become central to her social growth. They form a miniature cohort known as the “All Knights” and Andie’s enthusiastic assumption of the role of ringleader for “dorm sponsored events” become a large part of her social life in this new setting (Lord, 2023, p.249; p.40). Even *Loveless*’ protagonist, Georgia, finds herself paired with a stranger for a roommate. This is a key narrative element for depicting her university experience, even though the reality fills Georgia with “panic,” as she asserts that “hardly anyone in the UK had roommates at uni” (Oseman, 2020, p.25).

Within the dormitory setting, teenagers are situated in an environment where they must autonomously define and enforce the rules of their world. While there are, naturally, adults overseeing their education and administrators leading the college community, the authors in question make it very clear that those figures play a minimal role in their protagonists’ daily lives. “It’s like a science fiction story. No little kids [...] Nobody over thirty,” Cath observes when she arrives at her Nebraska campus in *Fangirl*, “Where are all the old people?” (Rowell, 2013, p.9). Andie makes a similar observation when she arrives on Blue Ridge State’s campus and is “dumbstruck by the sheer number of *kids*. It feels like someone raptured all the authority figures” (Lord, 2020, p.18). While Andie may imply that adults are exclusively synonymous with authority figures, she soon learns that there are still plenty of mentor figures to be found in her slightly older peers.

With these findings, writers considering the campus setting can take comfort in knowing that many familiar tropes of the boarding school narrative, or the magic school adventure, often a staple of works for younger readers, can translate to university-set YA. However, don’t let the adults get too involved – whether as stern authority figures or wisdom-bestowing mentors. In lieu of parents, or other adult authority figures monitoring these students’ daily lives, mentorship falls on the shoulders of the protagonists’ peers. In *Fangirl*, Rowell pairs Cath with a roommate, Reagan, who is two years older and required to live with a freshman as a stipulation of her scholarship program. Reagan comes as a package deal with an older on-again-off-again boyfriend named Levi, who takes Cath under his wing, and who she views as a “big brother” before developing a romantic relationship with him (Rowell, 2013, p.52). In *Loveless*, Oseman uses the “College Parent” program – a real-life offering of some UK universities – where older students “pair up to act as a mentor

team, or 'College Parents' for a small group of incoming freshers, who [become] their "college children". (2020, p.36). In *Begin Again*, Lord employs the traditional authority figure in US-based college dormitories, the Resident Advisor, and lets her protagonist, Andie, enjoy a mentorship-turned-romance with her RA, an older student named Milo.

As noted above, two of these college mentorships happen to develop into romances midway through the novel, demonstrating "relationships that blur and combine the romantic, the filial, and the academic" (Van Tuyl, 2016). This offers an interesting twist on the familiar enemies-to-lovers trope, presenting instead the notion of authority-figures-to-lovers. In addition to appealing to late-teen readers – who crave a bit of romance in their fiction but might not be ready for the steam level associated with the New Adult category – these plotlines also play a valuable role in the characters' emotional, sexual, and interpersonal development. The fact that their romances unfold with semi-authority figures ensures a slow burn, and a romantic partner who proceeds with both care and a healthy respect for boundaries. These findings offer reassurance to aspiring writers of the campus-set novel that their protagonists have leeway to flirt, play, and push boundaries – within reason – without fully finding themselves excluded from the YA category.

All three authors in question avoid the trope of the "white knight" male figure helping a hapless female (Urban Dictionary, no date) by allowing these three young women to offer equal support to their male mentors. For Georgia, this takes the form of welcoming her College Parent, Sunil, into her friends' Shakespeare Society, giving him the chance to express himself creatively. She also ends the novel seriously considering a request to take over Sunil's leadership role in the Pride Society, which would prove she is ready to fulfill a mentor role for others. For *Fangirl*'s Cath and her big-brother-figure-turned-boyfriend, Levi, she helps with his studies after learning about an unnamed learning disability that has left him unable to "focus" and "not much of a book person" (Rowell, 2013, p.168). She literally reads novels aloud to Levi to make sure he is prepared for tests and assignments. With Andie and her RA-turned-boyfriend, Milo, in *Begin Again*, she offers an emotional support system, counseling him through a rift with his brother caused by a stolen girlfriend, and conferring with him about his potential transfer to another school to flee the emotions and family drama. Andie realizes that "if there's one thing [she and Milo] have in common, it's that [they] both want the other to soar" (Lord, 2023, p.275). This sentiment could just as easily apply to each of the mentorship relationships in the three novels, regardless of whether those relationships ultimately evolve into something romantic. These dynamics ensure that all depicted relationships remain respectful, healthy, and mutually beneficial – useful for teen readers to observe and aspire to in their own lives and impending college experiences.

The campus setting is presented as its own sovereign nation in these novels, with life there described as "being dropped into another country" (Lord, 2023, p. 18) and having "border[s]" all its own" (Rowell, 2013, p.90). This dynamic requires young people to establish their own culture and allows formerly straight-and-narrow

protagonists to experiment with, and learn from, relatively tame and introductory transgressive behaviors in a controlled and judgment-free environment.

Fangirl's Cath has "never even been to a bar" when the novel begins, and initially stays isolated in her room when "the whole campus was out partying" (Rowell, 2013, p.114; p.7). In my view, Rowell does not entirely condone Cath's hyper-cautious (and fear-based) decision making. Instead, she gently guides her protagonist into outings to the campus pub, Muggsy's, (beloved by students for never checking IDs) with older friends as her de facto chaperones. *Begin Again*'s Andie enjoys what is essentially an alcohol-enhanced tea party in her dorm room (in the company of her RA who chooses to turn a blind eye), where she and her friends enjoy "room temperature rosé, Tastykakes, and Goldfish" crackers, resulting in fond memories and "mild hangovers" (Lord, 2023, p. 248; p. 256). In the case of Georgia in the UK-set *Loveless*, where students are already of legal drinking age when they begin their university education, her experiences are less about bending any stated rules and more about growing comfortable in new social situations. This is best seen when Freshers' Week schedules inherently involve "endless drinking" and "visiting gross clubs"– the epitome of controlled revelry, whether or not Georgia develops a taste for it (Oseman, 2020, p.68).

While not overly centered on sexual relationships between their protagonists and their love interests, the authors are also careful not to present sexual activity as transgressive behavior – instead, it is just another lesson to be learned in college. This type of intimacy is uncomfortable at first for Cath. Her sister assures her, however, that sex is an activity where "the first few times you do it, you only get graded on attendance", using fitting verbiage for describing yet another of the non-academic life lessons that Cath is poised to learn in her college setting (Rowell, 2013, p. 389). As for Georgia, apart from an early and ill-fated attempt at dating her childhood best friend, sexual relations fade from prominence on her list of concerns once she comes to terms with her aromantic-asexual identity. The supporting characters of Georgia's roommate, Rooney, and her childhood friend, Pip, do become romantically and intimately involved over the course of the book, even resulting in their own bonus scene which appears as a short story titled "Hands Against Our Hearts" printed at the end of the American edition of *Loveless*.

The closest a character comes to activity that could be deemed transgressive is when *Begin Again*'s Andie develops a relationship with her hall's Resident Advisor, Milo, an authority figure in the dorm, but also a peer and fellow student. While Andie and Milo do little more than kiss within the pages of the novel, they speculate about the implications of a future where they became more intimately involved. Thankfully, theirs is a situation with an easy workaround to avoid any perceived wrongdoing. Andie states outright that "so long as the housing committee knows, it doesn't really matter" (Lord, 2023, p.244). This is worlds apart from more mature university-set fiction where illicit student-professor relationships are a familiar narrative element.

Overall, these findings suggest that writers interested in exploring the university setting do have room for some behaviors that could be considered deviant

or transgressive – either based on social norms or the literal letter of the law, depending on the country in which the work is set. There is room for the inclusion of sex and drinking – even to a greater extent than one might find in high school-set YA, without aging oneself out of the category. That said, it's useful to have such activities perceived and considered through the eyes of a less-experienced protagonist, and often as something that's discussed in the abstract rather than shown in action.

The protagonists of all three novels in question experience rapid growth and evolution in their respective stories, a phenomenon that the authors deftly rationalize and attribute to the unique nature of that first year of university. “Months are different in college [...] especially freshman year. Too much happens,” Cath muses in *Fangirl*, “Every freshman month equals six regular months – they’re like dog months” (Rowell, 2013, p.174). In *Loveless*, Georgia’s roommate, Rooney, observes a similar expedited change in herself, joking how she’s “at uni for three months and suddenly [she’s] not straight anymore” (Oseman, 2020, p.150). This observation could have just as easily been made about Georgia herself, who discovers her asexuality for the first time at university, following years of confusion about her romantic life or lack thereof.

Each character has metrics by which to measure the success of their first university year, in relation to their initial goals. *Loveless*’s Georgia hopes to “reinvent [herself] into someone who could fall in love,” relying on her mom’s assurances that “lots of people meet their life partner at university” (Oseman, 2020, p.20-23). For late arrival Andie in *Begin Again*, she realizes that after all the “time [she] spent worrying about what kind of person [she]’d have to be to fit [...] it turns out it was just [her]self from the start,” an affirming lesson for any late teens reading Lord’s novel before embarking on their own college experiences (2023, p.305). As for *Fangirl*’s Cath and her alter ego as the prolific fan fiction author MagiCath, she manages to meld her online existence with her real-life one, overcoming her aversion to meeting new people while still realizing the goals of pleasing her online audience. Cath’s “world gets bigger and warmer,” notes Rowell in her author message at the beginning of the book (2013, viii). This is a tremendous accomplishment for someone who has been, primarily, an “internet-induced hermit,” thus offering a “much-needed exploration of living as an introvert in an extrovert’s world, and of a young person’s willingness to accept others by accepting herself” (Nordling, 2013).

The authors of these three novels are careful not to resign their characters to a perpetually stunted or sheltered existence. They each make a point to mention what their protagonists’ lives will look like as they prepare for year two of university, armed with the lessons they have learned throughout their respective first-year exploits. One crucial factor is the mention of each character preparing to leave the protective nest of the dormitory when they return after the summer. By the end of *Loveless*, Georgia is “house hunting” in “dodgy adverts” alongside the friends she has cultivated through her extracurricular societies (Oseman, 2020, p.195). Similarly, Cath and her stranger-turned-best-friend roommate, Reagan, are seen considering non-dorm options for housing at the end of *Fangirl*. As for *Begin Again*, Andie details how she and

the All Knighters gang have moved into “off-campus apartment[s]” by the end of her first year at school (Lord, 2023, p.327).

In *Fangirl*, Cath articulates the significance of this transition in residence when she observes that the students who “lived in a house” were inherently seen as “adult”, whereas she previously lived “in a dorm like a young adult. Like someone who was still on adult probation” (Rowell, 2013, p.301). These narrative arcs fit quite tidily into the traditional coming-of-age story where a character leaves a quiet life “to strike out on [their] own” in a new environment where they are initially “excluded from society but, through the help of an older friend, learn to find [their] place in the world, emerging at the novel's end as a full adult” (Fleischmann, 2022). This reading suggests that the heroines will be ready to progress into true adulthood after their formative first year, and perhaps, metaphorically speaking, into the more mature realm of what would be considered New Adult narratives, also.

The implication for writers considering a similar setting is that they likely only have a single year to work within, in order to tell their tale and still keep it YA. Despite the prevalence of works and/or series that cover numerous years of the middle or high school experience, the same sort of structure doesn't lend itself to university-set tales in the YA category, despite it being a traditionally structured three- or four-year experience in a young person's life.

A review for *Fangirl* frames the novel as “aspirational reading” for teens, which one could argue is also a fitting descriptor for the other two university-set novels examined here (Piedmont, 2014). While experiencing ample discomfort along the way, each character is introduced into their new environment with warmth, care, and a realistic amount of awkwardness. These elements combine to form an assuring recipe for students embarking upon their first university year, or for a slightly younger contingent looking ahead to that next phase of life with a mix of trepidation and anticipation. One journalist reflecting on the college novel's place in the YA category even offered personal sentiments supporting the value of this small but mighty subcategory, stating how “as a teen,” she was “intensely curious about what to expect in college, and woefully unprepared for [her] freshman year” (Price, 2018). Thus, it is worth celebrating that future incoming university students who happen upon novels such as those discussed here might be a little *less* unprepared as a result.

Interestingly, the desire to gift these literary lessons and reassurances comes from very different places in regard to these authors' own university experiences. Rowell describes school as her own “oasis” where her memories are “full of friends” despite having spent those years as a self-described “misfit” (Bartel, 2014). Oseman, on the other hand, candidly admits that she “didn't have a good university experience” and “didn't enjoy the social aspect of it”, yet she was similarly motivated to reflect upon university life in her fiction (Aroesti, 2022). Lord is the most unabashedly enthusiastic in her reminiscing, openly calling her college years her “glory days” in a personal essay, and asserting that her alma mater, the University of Virginia, is “the kind of place you can't help but love” (2014). Thus, a writer's motivation for embracing the university

setting can clearly be quite varied, even if the prescribed strategies for success do include several consistent beats.

When read and assessed together, the unique lessons and charms of *Fangirl*, *Loveless*, and *Begin Again* combine to demonstrate that standalone Young Adult titles can successfully explore a world beyond the traditional high school or secondary school setting. This variety of university-set story provides a satisfying and edifying literary experience for older teen readers without having to delve into the level of steamy scandal that is often associated with the YA category's more mature New Adult foil. For a late-teen reader faced with a new life at university, it is invaluable to have novels affirming that the collegiate experience can provide a challenging and nurturing environment to seek growth and cultivate a community of one's own design. Writers considering the setting for their own work can take comfort in knowing that there are proven entries into the YA market that have been embraced. As for the intended readers of these campus-set tales, they can find reassurance in knowing they will have the opportunity to mold their university years to best fit their identity, needs, and goals, instead of dreading the impulse to change or compromise to fit in. What better lesson to learn at such a tenuous and thrilling moment of transition?

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Author Biography

Caitlin Clements grew up in Oklahoma, exploring dusty corners of cowboy ghost towns and the kitschy neon trappings of Route 66. As a screenwriter and film historian, she earned a BA in Film Studies from the College of William & Mary and an MA in Cinema Studies from NYU's Tisch School of the Arts. She will soon complete her MA in Writing for Young People at Bath Spa University. A Tony and Olivier Award-winning theater producer, Caitlin's career has focused on celebrating and empowering the stories and voices of young people on stage, with credits including the Broadway, West End, and touring productions of *Dear Evan Hansen*. Caitlin lives in New York City with her dog Gatsby, where she spends her free time mentoring teen storytellers, amassing too many library cards, and dreaming up convoluted meet-cutes for the colorful cast of strangers she shares the subway with each day.