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'I Need to Learn – *Am* Learning': How to Use Inexperience to Craft a Young Adult Voice

Elizabeth Train-Brown

Abstract
What is it that separates the young adult voice from the adult voice in prose? Both might engage in alcohol, sex, crime, war, violence. Both change, grow, love, fail, fall apart. And yet there is a distinct, gut-driven sense of when we're reading (or writing) the wrong voice. Through a practice-based methodology analysing the evolution of my drafting process and using extracts from my YA novel *Bleed*, and informed by a close reading of Rainbow Rowell's *Carry On* and Suzanne Collins's *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes*, I argue that one of the crucial elements that truly shapes a young adult voice in prose is inexperience. While young adult narrators may be approaching the same experiences as adult narrators, they are (usually) approaching them, if not for the first time, then without the depth of long experience, which gently codes narrative voice, tone, and language choice. Young adult narrators confront these experiences with all the bravado of someone who has never failed and all the anxiety of someone who has never succeeded, and this is an insight I would like to offer to other authors.

Keywords: *creative writing for young people, narration, narrative voice, young adult literature, point of view, inexperience*

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WHAT MAKES A young adult narrator different from an adult narrator? They both might engage in restricted activities such as consuming alcohol and drugs; they both might experience sex, prophecies, even murder. Some take down entire governments. Yet there persists a certain *sense* in their voices which makes us as readers (and perhaps especially young readers) recognise exactly when a writer attempting a young adult voice misses the mark and strays into adulthood. As Karen Coats writes:

> Literature has a powerful effect on human understanding. [...] It acts as a mirror, reflecting experience back to us in a framed and manageable way [...] If this is true for adults, it is even truer for children and teens, whose apprehensions of the world are less overdetermined by habit and long experience.[1]

Young people deserve to have a young adult voice reflecting back at them in their fiction; they have a right to expand their imagination and emotional awareness in the safe, controlled environment of a story. Yet how does one achieve the young adult voice? While writing my Young Adult (YA) fantasy novel *Bleed*, I determined that sometimes the narrator's voice sounded too old and sometimes too young. Over many rounds of edits, I sought to understand why this might be, and how I could fix it. Through the immense value of beta readers and a Writing for Young People module at Lancaster University, it took workshop discussion and feedback on my writing to finally identify the tool I had been missing – *inexperience*. As Coats observes, young adults' 'apprehensions of the world are less overdetermined by habit and long experience';[2] thus it makes sense that the way they approach stories is, too. Through this article, I will be expounding my argument using a practice-based methodology – offering insights acquired through reflecting on my writing practice, analysing other texts (Rainbow Rowell's *Carry On* and Suzanne Collins' *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes)*, and synthesising theoretical writing.

When I began writing this novel, I was thirteen and my narrator (Cadmus) began as an arrogant thirteen-year-old with me. Each time I returned to him, I launched into another round of ruthless editing. Over time, Cadmus started to age up with me until I found myself at twenty-three staring down a supposedly seventeen-year-old Cadmus who seemed as old as I was. Here is an extract from that early draft; readers can likely feel instantly that something is not quite *young adult* about Cadmus as a narrator:

> Last month, I joined Father for a publicity event at the opening of the 'brand new' police station in Lochwald, attended by the Police Crime Commissioner, local MP, and a host of other people who did a worse job than I did at camera-smiling. It was a tedious affair. Nicole Williams, MP shook hands and chatted to the locals, put on a good show at hiding the fact that it was her office who closed the police station in the first place. Two years shut without an inch of work done on it but a well-spun opening event later and her constituents are none the wiser. It's like giving voting slips to cattle. After enough Old Lochwald

constituents had grumbled in her direction, we retired to the after-reception hosted at a blessedly larger and cleaner venue in Newcastle.

It's about two hours of my life that I'll never get back but, now, it might pay off. Bored tabloid journalists are some of the leakiest people I've ever met and it didn't take much to press Joan Something of *The Sunday Sun* to get some gossip on the station. She was ready to burst.

'Tory MP, facing down an election with a Labour candidate in a northern mining town that no one has a chance of beating, out of nowhere announces she's opening a brand new police station for Lochwald,' Joan Something drawled at me, tilting her head in that predatory way older women do when they see me in a suit at a function. I smiled. It felt like a grimace. 'Of course,' she said, behind her hand as if we're in a conspiracy film together, 'it was her office that shut the police station in the first place. New name. Same station.'

I sipped my wine. A white, cheaper than I was hoping. It went down like vinegar and I sighed, not bothering to pretend I was impressed. 'Think you'll find everyone's guessed that.'

Then, the corner of her purple-lipsticked lips quirked upwards. There was more. 'Sure, everyone knows that. But they don't know that the new station was opened so fast that they're too understaffed and underfunded to be legally operational. It's all smoke and mirrors. They can't even get the CCTV running because the old station had a contract with a security company that no one can find.' She grinned. There was lipstick on her teeth.

Bored and disappointed that I'd hoped for a drink that didn't taste like a Co-Op aisle, I hummed, noncommittal, and made to turn away. If nothing else, perhaps I could find someone interesting to speak to. I'd heard that there was a Lord around here somewhere.

In workshopping this piece, the most consistent criticism I received was that Cadmus sounded too old to be a young adult narrator – which, in turn, warped the target market for the book and the entire genre, turning it into more of a crime thriller than the YA intrusive fantasy it should have been.[3] When I asked the obvious, 'Why does it sound adult-y?', the response was mixed. The occasional archaisms: yes. The drinking wine (and understanding wine): fair point. The overly flirtatious journalist: sure, that makes sense. But there was also this underlying *ness* that didn't fit into words. Something that rang more in the back of the mind than appeared on the page. It didn't *feel* like a teen who just happened to know a strange amount about wine. It read and *felt* like an adult.

This inspired a conversation among the workshop of what really separates the young adult voice from the adult. Again, among a diverse room of writers and researchers, we had a diverse round of answers, from structural formatting to colloquialisms and imagery choices. One person cited what Coats writes about G. Stanley Hall, who believed 'that the teenage years will be full of turbulence and

dangerous behaviors',[4] while another argued that, on the contrary, they had spent their teenage years calmly studying and enjoying gardening. I began to despair that there was no great unifier that would make my narrator's voice pull itself back down to being young adult until I realised that of course there wasn't. Nor should there be. The very joy of writing books for young adults is that our narrators, our stories, our characters, and our worlds change all the time. Because there are as many unique people among young adults as there are among adults.

With this in mind, and despair not too far around the corner as I returned to the drawing board, I engaged with the one thing from the discussion that had really stood out to me. Our workshop convenor, Dr Elen Caldecott, talked about the role of incompetence when it comes to young narrators, how they are approaching things for the first time. Cadmus, no matter how grown-up he tried to sound, was approaching these things for the first time. While not universal among young adults, this is a key tool in our writing that can make the difference between a young adult and an adult: inexperience.

Young adults can and certainly do get involved with all of these very adult activities – drinking wine, being harassed by lipsticked journalists, learning valuable information about how to break into police stations – but the difference is that the way young adults approach these things are usually 'less overdetermined by habit and long experience'.[5] They usually haven't done it before. As Lorraine Green puts it, young adulthood is a 'transitional, semi-dependent state.'[6] Teenagers often don't yet have the confidence that comes with maturity, with having an assurance about the self as its own entity. It is worth saying at this point that the *usually* is doing a lot of heavy lifting in this argument: there are as many adults who buck this trend as there are young adults.

For example, children from different socioeconomic backgrounds and countries face different likelihoods of alcohol exposure;[7] girls are 30 per cent more likely to experience verbal harassment than boys of the same age;[8] and while there's little statistical data on the rates at which young adults break into police stations, become 'chosen ones', or take down corrupt governments, we can safely assume there are important variabilities in experience and temperament.

However, generally, young adults are in a state of turbulence as the body, the mind, and the self changes; their 'brains are more busily engaged in synaptogenesis and synaptic reorganization and pruning' than adults.[9] Then, the world (family, school, media, laws) changes its relationship with that young adult's self. They are given higher stakes and less downtime at school. Their social media algorithms start funnelling them more videos about make-up, sex, weight loss, 'gains'. Their legal protections shift as they reach the age of criminal responsibility, they age out of statutory status and outgrow defendant anonymity.

Young adulthood is generally an ever-changing transitional period even for the most level-headed young adult (which Cadmus is not). So, when Cadmus drinks terrible wine, avoids journalists, and breaks into police stations, he does so having never done

any of it before. He does it terribly. He does it with all the bravado of someone who has never failed and all the anxiety of someone who has never succeeded, and this is an insight I would like to offer to other writers striving for a plausible young adult voice. It is by keeping this in mind that I started to edit this scene with more confidence, knowing what his voice was missing. The following extract became the final draft:

> Last month, I joined Father at the opening of Lochwald's 'brand new' police station, attended by the Police Crime Commissioner, local MP, and a host of other people who did a worse job than I at camera-smiling.
>
> 'Tory MP,' Joan Something from The Sunday Sun drawled at the reception, 'facing down an election against a Labour candidate in a northern mining town, out of nowhere announces she's opening a brand-new police station for Lochwald.'
>
> Father gave us a rapid introduction, mumbled something about publicity, and slid into the small crowd. I was left pinching a glass of wine while Joan tilted towards me conspiratorially.
>
> I smiled. It felt like a grimace.
>
> 'Of course,' she said, 'it was her office that shut the station in the first place. New name. Same station.'
>
> I glanced towards where Father had disappeared and steeled the muscles in my face, mirroring the blank slate of his. I forced down a sip of wine to avoid replying. It tasted like a Co-Op aisle.
>
> The corner of her purple-lipsticked mouth twitched. 'The station was opened so fast that they're too underfunded to be legally operational. They can't even get the CCTV running because the old station had a contract with a security company that no one can find.' She grinned and stepped into my personal space, lipstick on her teeth.
>
> Across the room, I spotted Father disappear through a door with the Police Crime Commissioner. I gulped down the rest of the vinegary wine.

By adjusting Cadmus's voice for that tone of inexperience, I fought to balance it against the arrogant young man of privilege I wanted to keep. It's essential to his character that this is a teenage boy who comes from immense wealth and self-image. But pressure also comes with that. Cadmus is a young adult whose wealth comes from above – from his father. Already in the novel, I'd presented Cadmus's father as an untouchable, unbreakable man. During the editing of this extract, I explored what that would mean for a son at that man's whim, and it transformed the scene. Cadmus is still holding wine and being accosted by lipsticked journalists, but now he seeks out and tries to copy his father, constantly keeping an eye out for him, actions that seem motivated by fear and rescue in equal measure. By removing some of his confident inner monologue and making the scene feel more grounded, I could make his actions a degree more passive, removing just enough of his power in the situation to feel vulnerable. As I kept going, I

found that this bled into the structure itself. Shorter paragraphs made it feel as though situations were speeding away from Cadmus even as he clung to control. It made scenes like this feel more as though they were happening to him, as he struggles to conjure the correct responses, rather than engineered by him. Reducing his dialogue meant that I could retain some of that cocky inner monologue while contrasting it with an external quiet that felt nervous and unsure.

Delighted with the journey and destination of this extract, I returned to the rest of the chapter with a big red pen, ready to eviscerate it. But when I started, I discovered that one can also go too far the other way. This extract, after Cadmus has been caught trying to break into a police station and lies to cover himself, was redrafted in the same style as above before I realised I was starting to lose the spark of arrogance that made Cadmus who he was:

> I cringe. It takes an effort to keep it on the inside. To her, I flutter my eyelashes and stutter a nod. With her back turned, leading me into the main room, I take the opportunity to shake a hand through my hair, finger-comb as much product out as I can. There's nothing I can do about my face but hope she doesn't recognise it.
>
> 'You just sit down there, pet,' she says, patting the most uncomfortable metal chair I've ever seen, 'and, uh, I'll be right back.'
>
> She busies herself in the pocket kitchen and I perch on the chair. It screams with every movement. I go rigid but she doesn't return. I can't even leave while her back is turned. She's talking on her radio. I can't make out what she says through the door. The sweat that had been rolling down my temples returns in earnest, despite the cool night air circling the office.
>
> Too much time passes. She's not making a cup of tea. My underarms are icy with cold sweat. I've found out nothing. I should've run out the door. Sod the chair, sod this. The chair screams as I stand but a buzzer drones through the station and at first I think it's me, an alarm for me, but then I see that the front door has opened.
>
> Father's driver. Head tilted like a predator in the frame of night behind the doorway.

I'd applied the same tools I'd used for the previous scene – so why wasn't this one working? It had lost that balance of inexperience and arrogance, but why?

In order to answer this question, I turned not to my workshop group, but to successful examples of inexperienced but arrogant young men in literature; I sought out the Cadmuses of the genre who had achieved this balance to see what I was now missing. *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes*[10] by Suzanne Collins is a prequel to her earlier *The Hunger Games* trilogy, this time following a young thrown-to-the-vipers Coriolanus Snow who will later become President Snow.[11] But in *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes*, he is eighteen and at everyone else's mercy as he tries to coach a

young District-12 girl through the deadly trials of the Hunger Games. I also looked at Rainbow Rowell's *Carry On*[12] which stars eighteen-year-old orphan Simon Snow who was groomed to be the magic world's Chosen One until his guardian was exposed as a false prophet. He spends the second and third books in the series navigating the post-trauma of having been a fantasy hero.

These two YA novels both star eighteen-year-old narrators whose voices maintain that balance between inexperience and arrogance. Coriolanus was originally from a family of immense power, wealth, and privilege before the war that stripped them of wealth. His narration style is third-person limited perspective with intense intimacy, what John Gardner refers to as close *psychic distance*.[13] Emma Darwin explains the concept of psychic distance by explaining how it takes: 'point-of-view, voice, showing and telling, and so on, and integrates them into one, single, question: how far-in or far-out should we be here?', referring to how close the reader is inside the main character's head.[14] Coriolanus's main goal is to win back the status that his family once had. His internal monologue is arrogant, frightened, and not unlike a cornered dog. In comparison, Simon of *Carry On* narrates his story in first-person present tense, again with a vivid intimacy and very close psychic distance, which benefits from the internal monologue that this style offers. Simon's main goal begins as a heroic, if naïve, desire to save the magic world from a vague threat and fulfil his narrative purpose as 'Chosen One'. After the end of *Carry On*, the first in a three-book series, this goal shifts and Simon struggles to find new purpose. Where his narrative voice begins with an at times obsessive and blind drive, it destabilises wildly once Simon's world has been shaken and he's forced to contend with the immense consequences of his so-called guardian's betrayal – all without the 'habit and long experience' an adult might have. Rowell portrays this by derailing Simon's narration into a lot of uncertainty, confusion, and lack of confidence in its writing style.

The reason we feel these narrative voices so intensely is because of their extreme psychic proximity. Towards the climax of *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes*, we get to see Coriolanus's entire build-up towards killing his lover within one stream-of-consciousness soliloquy that makes his external actions wildly unpredictable in-world but wholly authentic for the reader:

> He looked down at the loaded gun in his hands. Maybe he should've left it in the shed. It looked bad coming after her armed. As if he was hunting her. But he wasn't really going to kill her. Just talk to her and make sure she saw sense.
>
> *Put down the gun*, he told himself, but his hands refused to cooperate. *All she has is a knife.* A big knife. The best he could manage was to sling the gun onto his back. "Lucy Gray! Are you okay? You're scaring me! Where are you?"[15]

Collins presents Coriolanus's rapid, logical leaps and shows us his deranged rationality, wielding syntax and sentence structure to maintain panic. She also uses a

contradictory internal monologue, ('he told himself, but his hands refused to cooperate') to show a desperation married unsettlingly with a loss of control.

Similarly, in *Carry On*, we get to hear Simon's voice in real time, speaking to us with no wall between reader and character:

> Away. There is no away.
>
> There's only here and Normal. Did Penelope think that would be an escape for me—to run away from magic?
>
> I don't even think it's possible. I *am* magic. And whatever I'm doing, running away won't stop it.
>
> 'I have to fix this,' I said. 'It's my job to fix it.'
>
> 'I don't think you can,' she said.
>
> I let go of her hand. 'I have to. It's why I'm *here*.'
>
> But maybe that's not why I'm here. Maybe I'm just here to fuck everything up...
>
> It doesn't change what I have to do next.[16]

Rowell flips between single-line paragraphs, using stop-start punctuation to fragment short simple sentences on a structural level. This ramps up the pace, making Simon's voice feel rushed, panicked, on uneven footing. On a language level, Rowell uses repetition to emphasise this sense of uncertainty but she also mirrors the internal contradictions used by Collins – '"I have to. It's why I'm *here*." / But maybe that's not why I'm here. Maybe I'm just here to fuck everything up…' Yet, as with Coriolanus ('But he wasn't really going to kill her. Just talk to her and make sure she saw sense'), we observe that little note of inexperienced arrogance in his voice: 'I *am* magic'.

From this, I returned to my extract, ready to make use of the first-person perspective, incorporating close-in psychic distance. The following is an edited draft of the previous extract:

> I push my shoulders back like I'm meant to be here, like this policewoman's walked into *my* office, like I've seen Father do a thousand times. He could waltz into any office in the world and take the Director's chair. Chin up, tense the shoulder blades together until the hands stop shaking.
>
> 'You just sit down there, pet,' she says, patting the most uncomfortable metal chair I've ever seen, 'and, uh, I'll be right back.'
>
> *Pet*. I'm the heir to a fortune that could buy your house.
>
> The room she's led me to is a main reception that someone's dragged a usable desk into. Fluorescent lighting flickers, illuminating a brown tiled floor and a row of chairs along the wall that might have been here since the 90s if the dust and cracked seams are anything to go by.
>
> The police officer busies herself in a pocket kitchen, filling a kettle and setting it to boil. I perch on the chair. It screams with the movement.

> Five minutes pass. This is ridiculous. I need to get out of here before she can remember my face.
>
> I turn to glare through the glass of the kitchen door when I realise that she hasn't put any cups out. The tea isn't out, either. She's talking on a radio, watching me from the corner of her eye.
>
> My underarms go icy with cold sweat. I snap my gaze back to the desk in front of me. Chin up, shoulders back. My office. *My* office. Why won't my hands stop shaking? Sod the chair, sod this. I push to my feet, ready to bolt, and the chair screams as I stand at the same moment a buzzer drones through the station and at first, I think it's me, an alarm for me, but then I see that the front door has opened.
>
> Father's driver stands in the doorway. Head tilted like a predator in the frame of night behind him.
>
> An acidic rush of panic burns the back of my throat and my body stills so suddenly, so automatically, that I almost vomit.

Following what I'd found so successful about Simon and Coriolanus's narration, I exploited an intense psychic proximity by juxtaposing snide internal asides to create an air of self-assured arrogance ('*Pet*. I'm the heir to a fortune that could buy your house') with conflicting bodily descriptions of fear ('heart jumping like a fox in a trap'). My workshop group consistently responded well to the use of internal comments as an effective technique for revealing Cadmus's character. It succeeded because it feels as though a teenager is directing what information the reader is fed. This helped me to identify which aspects of the story were making it *feel* adult. Anywhere Cadmus wasn't challenged by external or internal forces was a moment he was too competent – the external forces became the world railing against his bravado and the internal became the crippling anxiety.

While editing the above extract, and in using inexperience to carve the word *young* in front of *adult*,I realised I could take the concept further still. I realised that inexperience is a multi-faceted tool. It doesn't mean simply that one breaks into police stations terribly. It means that there is an opportunity to peel back the facade and ask what lurks behind a young adult's inexperience: *what* is the thing that makes this specific young adult so incompetent at breaking into police stations? As I typed up comments from my workshop group about how strongly they felt about Cadmus's father, I paused at this comment: 'It's clear to see where Cadmus'[s] almost stifling self-loathing comes from.' An inexperienced young adult is not as clear-cut as I first assumed. Inexperience could be the vehicle through which I explored precisely where Cadmus's inflated bravado and anxiety come from. I went back and added in a scene of Cadmus in the car with his father's driver after having been caught:

> Father's driver didn't say a word while he drove. Like Father, he can't be read. It used to drive me to tears. Our Psychology A Level teacher once showed us a

> video of the Still Face Experiment, how the baby raged and screamed when its mother didn't blink. Now, I watch Father in awe. It's a trick I need to learn – *am* learning – and one day I'll be able to do it as well as the pair of them.

The first-person narrative perspective allowed me to betray Cadmus's arrogant sense of self by revealing hints to the reader about the neglectful relationship he has with his father. His internal comments, dressed up as Cadmus bettering himself as a businessman, becoming less of a child, and learning the trick of a poker face, began offering a glimpse of a young Cadmus driven to tears by his stoney-faced father.

Trying to find one of the keys to the young adult voice had therefore revealed a second tool, one which Coats describes as the mirror/door/lamp effect:

> A mirror reflecting experience back to us in a framed and manageable way [...] and as a door and a lamp, enabling us to see beyond surface appearances and behaviors in other minds and motivations, and beyond actual worlds into possible ones to explore and extend our sense of ethics.[17]

When young adult readers have a mirror, door, or lamp in the narrative voice they're reading, they get to explore difficult situations in a manageable way, in the safe environment of a book. With this tool of inexperience, I was able to create not just a vague sense of young adult-ness but a multidimensional young adult *voice*. Not just by having a character inexperienced at everything but investigating *why* they're inexperienced (Cadmus comes from a position of privilege) and *how* that matters to them (Cadmus wants to impress his neglectful father). From this, I crafted a voice inflated with self-importance and riddled with anxiety. In other words, I didn't need to write a universal young adult voice to craft Coats's mirror-door-lamp, I needed to effectively construct a particular, individual one. One that could invite a reader into Cadmus's life, to see through the door of this voice that *feels* more young adult than before, and also to empathise with him as a complex human being.

Notes

[1] Karen Coats, *The Bloomsbury Introduction to Children's and Young Adult Literature* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), pp. 52–53.
[2] ibid., p. 53.
[3] Farah Mendlesohn, *Rhetorics of Fantasy* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2008).
[4] Coats, p. 52.
[5] Coats, p. 53.
[6] Lorraine Green, *Understanding the Life Course: Sociological and Psychological Perspectives*, 2nd edn. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010).
[7] Susanna Esposito, et al., 'Too young to pour: the global crisis of underage alcohol use', *Frontiers in Public Health*, 13.1 (2025), DOI: 10.3389/fpubh.2025.1598175.

[8] G.J. Melendez-Torres, et al., 'Sexual Harassment in Early Adolescence: Findings From a Cross-Sectional Survey in Secondary Schools in England', *Violence Against Women* (2025), DOI: 10.1177/1077801225139113.
[9] Coats, p. 53.
[10] Suzanne Collins, *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes* (New York, NY: Scholastic Incorporated, 2020).
[11] Suzanne Collins, *The Hunger Games* (New York City, NY: Scholastic, 2008).
[12] Rainbow Rowell, *Carry On* (Croydon: Macmillan Children's Books, 2015).
[13] John Gardner, *The Art of Fiction* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1991).
[14] Emma Darwin, 'Psychic Distance: What It Is and How To Use It', *This Itch of Writing* (2024), <https://emmadarwin.substack.com/p/psychic-distance-what-it-is-and-how> [accessed 05 March 2026].
[15] Collins, p. 389
[16] Rowell, p. 331.
[17] Coats, p. 53.

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Author Biography

Elizabeth Train-Brown (they/them) is an AHRC-funded PhD researcher at Lancaster University specialising in the representation of Deafness and sign language in fantasy fiction, working on a YA fantasy novel narrated by two Deaf characters. This article was originally written for the Writing for Young People MA module at Lancaster University, which is where Elizabeth completed their first novel. Their debut poetry collection, *salmacis: becoming not quite a woman* (Renard Press, 2022), uncovered gender dysphoria through Ancient Greek myth. They are currently co-editing an upcoming science-fiction and fantasy poetry anthology (Hay Press, 2027).