Image Carl Jorgensen, Unsplash

Weisz, Noah, 'The Niagara Effect: Reimagining Emotional Intensity in Young Adult Writing'
Leaf Journal, Issue 1, Volume 1, April 2023
DOI: http://doi.org/10.58091/c3qq-c748
URL: https://ojs.library.lancs.ac.uk/lj/index

The Niagara Effect: Reimagining Emotional Intensity in Young Adult Writing

Noah Weisz

Abstract
Contemporary Young Adult (YA) fiction often aims to capture and generate "emotional intensity," which is held to be an inherent feature of the teenage experience. To produce this effect, YA authors frequently employ an expressive first-person voice, which is constructed as a mechanism for a certain "immediacy" facilitating the delivery of emotions in their rawest, most powerful form. However, some theorists and practitioners of fiction have pointed out that emotions are actually best evoked for the reader when conveyed in indirect ways. This suggests that the typical YA style may not always be the most effective path to achieving emotional intensity. This essay draws on a framework suggested by Joan Aiken in 1982 in order to open wider possibilities for YA writers to consider. Through an analysis of Julie Schumacher's novel *Black Box* in light of Aiken's principles, and by contrasting it with Jandy Nelson's novel *I'll Give You the Sun*, the essay argues that overtly emotional first-person voices can sometimes actually prevent, rather than enable, emotional immediacy and intensity; and that creative attention to concrete detail and scene architecture, alongside a meticulous restraint of the first-person narrator's own self-reflection and interpretation, can serve as remarkably potent alternative techniques.

Keywords: *YA fiction*, *emotion*, *voice*, *craft of fiction*

Please note: this essay cites and discusses passages that vividly portray depression as well as grief over the loss of a parent. The paper also contains (minor) spoilers for Julie Schumacher's *Black Box* and Jandy Nelson's *I'll Give You the Sun*.

*

In her craft guide, *The Way to Write for Children* (1982), Joan Aiken (1924-2004), renowned author of *The Wolves of Willoughby Chase* and numerous other books for young audiences, makes the following declaration:

> "Really good writing for children should come out with the force of Niagara. It ought to be concentrated; it needs to have everything that is in adult writing, but squeezed into smaller compass, in a form adapted to children's capacities, and at shorter length.
>
> But the emotional range ought to be no less; children's emotions are as powerful as those of adults, and more compressed, since children have fewer means of expressing themselves, and no capacity for self-analysis." (92)

It is not at all certain that Aiken meant to limit her advice here to writers for children as opposed to writers for teenagers. In 1982, the distinction between writing for children and writing for young adults was not as clearly delineated as it is today (*McKay School Magazine*). Aiken herself wrote for young audiences across a wide age range (*Joan Aiken Bibliography*)and referred to adolescents in their "late teens" as "children" within the same craft guide (Aiken, 1982, 76). Her point about emotional self-awareness does hold truer for children than for teens, as the capacity to recognize, understand, and analyze one's emotions matures during adolescence, yet it remains highly context-dependent and incompletely formed within teenagers (*Adolescent Development Explained*, 14). If we allow for a modification from the perhaps overstated phrase "no capacity for self-analysis" to "limited capacity for self-analysis," we can begin to use Aiken's principles to think about contemporary Young Adult (YA) fiction.

This is an interesting and potentially illuminating prospect because some of Aiken's beliefs seem at odds with dominant styles of YA fiction today. She was perhaps ahead of her time in her validation of the full range and force of young people's emotions and in her insistence that nothing in writing for adults cannot be included in some form in writing for younger audiences, yet her ideas about limited emotional expression and self-analysis set her far apart from many current YA authors.

YA literature today is often geared toward a particular intensity of emotion. Author and publishing-industry veteran Valerie Peterson explains that this stems from a certain understanding of the teenage experience: "The emotional stakes and the emotional intensity are commensurate with the raging hormonal intensity of the genre's intended audience" (Peterson, 2018). Kristen Pettit, a YA executive editor at HarperCollins, believes that pulling off this effect is part of what makes a story feel true to teenagers: "one way the author presents themselves as authentic to the YA community, [is] by nailing that keenness of feeling and emotion" (Feeney, 2013). This

goal in itself seems to largely align with Joan Aiken's thinking, but the methods used to achieve it do not.

One of the primary tools authors use to create this intensity is first-person narration, especially an energetic and often openly emotional first-person voice; sometimes this is what makes a contemporary realistic novel instantly recognizable as YA. Children's-literature scholar Mike Cadden stated in 2000, "young adult novels are almost always written in first-person address" (Cadden, 2000); in 2013, YA author Rachel Cohn estimated that 60 to 65% of YA novels were written not just in first-person but specifically in first-person, present-tense (Feeney, 2013). First-person point of view, especially in a tone that "tends to be confessional" (Tilghman, 2011), enables writers to achieve what is variously described as "immediacy and intensity," (Taylor), "immediacy of emotion" (Krause, 2020), or "uninterrupted…direct access to their [the protagonists'] thoughts and emotions" (Morgan). YA author Ingrid Sundberg sums it up as follows: "Emotions don't become filtered through the distance of a third person narrator, instead the emotions happen in the moment, as the protagonist feels them. … A lot of young adult novels use first person for this exact reason, it creates an immediate connection with the reader" (Sundberg, 2011). Though terms like "immediacy," "intensity," "keenness," and the quality of being "unfiltered" certainly overlap and are difficult to pin down, it seems narration that is "immediate" – i.e., literally lacking mediation – is held to enable the transfer of the character's emotions in their most "intense" form so that readers may connect with, relate to, or experience them to the fullest extent. I believe it's fair to say that there is a commonly assumed link between the raw emotional intensity YA is supposed to deliver and the predominance of a directly expressive, heart-on-the-page, first-person narrative voice.

Yet both scholars and practitioners of fiction have noted that emotion is actually best evoked for the reader in *indirect* ways. For instance, a narrator's partial withholding of their own emotional responses can create an "affective gap" or space within which the reader can experience powerful feelings on the character's behalf (Gavin, 2018). In her essay "The Affective Value of Fiction" (2017), Vera Nünning draws on narrative theory and cognitive science to explain that the indirect evoking of characters' emotions in fiction, an approach she traces back to British novels of the 18th century, may be more successful in transferring emotion and stirring a corresponding response in the reader than more direct or hard-hitting techniques (e.g. emotion-naming):

> "Since cognitive narratological studies have demonstrated the importance of a mode of representation that relies on implicitness and suggestiveness, such descriptions of stimuli for or reactions to emotions may be more effective for raising readers' empathy than straightforward presentations or thematisations. Moreover, modes of evoking emotions can strengthen readers' feelings that the story corresponds to their own experiences and rings true. If a reader is invited to make his or her own inferences and to supply his or her own emotions and

> experiences, he or she gets the feeling that the story is convincing and lifelike. …This process depends on some blank spaces and ambivalence, which allow readers to project some of their own attitudes and behaviours onto the characters. This in turn makes them feel that they comprehend the characters on a more than just superficial basis.
>
> Such a feeling of really understanding the characters, which can heighten empathic sharing of their emotions, is accompanied by a reduction of distance between reader and characters." (Nünning, 2017, 43)

Essentially, Nünning is suggesting that something like "immediacy" (in her words, "reduction of distance between reader and characters") might actually be facilitated best through implicit rather than explicit emotion.

Children's-literature expert Maria Nikolajeva, riffing on the old writing advice to "show, not tell," makes a similar point; because emotions exceed the bounds and structures of language, "'telling,' that is, putting a simple label on an emotional state, is less engaging than 'showing' by a wide register of narrative means available to fiction," particularly emotional cues relating to the body and movement (Nikolajeva, 2014, 95-96).

Janice Hardy, author of novels for teens and adults and of several books on the craft of fiction, puts the same idea in more practical terms: "instead of saying 'I was scared,' show the results and outward signs of that fear," such as (to use her examples) trembling hands, a tightening throat, or targeted internal thoughts like "*Please don't see me, please oh please oh please*" (Hardy, 2019). In line with Aiken's advice, she also warns against characters who are overly self-aware about their emotions. For Hardy, as for Nünning, strong writing – including strong first-person narration – leaves room for the reader to interpret on their own the emotions the narrator is going through.

We are left, then, with something of a puzzle – a contradiction captured succinctly by Joan Aiken's image of Niagara Falls. How can we as YA writers create fiction that honors the emotional vibrancy of life as a teenager, that pours itself out in an all-powerful rush, when that rush must emerge from emotions being "compressed" rather than explicitly articulated? How can we produce the "Niagara effect"?

In this essay, I apply Aiken's framework to an analysis of two stylistically opposed YA novels – *Black Box* by Julie Schumacher and *I'll Give You the Sun* by Jandy Nelson – in an effort to open up space and provide practical suggestions for writers attempting to answer these questions and reimagine what emotional intensity in YA might look like. Ultimately, I question the automatic reliance on voice-driven first-person narration to convey and stir up raw emotion and explore the possibility of leaning more on techniques of scene-craft.

Julie Schumacher's *Black Box* (2008) follows Joan Aiken's principles unusually well. In so doing, it demonstrates an almost forgotten approach to achieving the emotional immediacy and intensity to which YA fiction aspires – an approach firmly in the tradition of Nünning's "implicitness and suggestiveness" that agrees with yet

transcends the craft advice of Janice Hardy. At a glance, though, *Black Box* has absolutely nothing in common with the works of Joan Aiken. Aiken is best known for her gleefully inventive alternate-history/fantasy novels, in which, for example, a 1000-year-old queen's enemies steal her high-altitude lake by chopping it up into blocks of ice and carrying it away on llama-back (Aiken, 1981). Julie Schumacher's *Black Box*, by contrast, is relentlessly realistic.

It is the story of fourteen-year-old Elena Lindt, whose beloved sister, sixteen-year-old Dora, develops severe depression, endangering her own life and upending the entire family. In line with Aiken's core ideas, however, Schumacher's novel is uncommonly short (164 pages, or, by a rough estimate, under 40,000 words) and immensely "concentrated" in both narrative and emotional content. Most chapters are single, brief scenes; some are as short as one sentence. Moreover, in accordance with Aiken's beliefs about children having just as powerful emotions as adults but fewer means of expressing and analyzing them, the wide range of acute feelings swirling within Elena go almost completely unnoticed by Elena herself and are practically never addressed or analyzed by her first-person narration. She is characterized as "reserved" and not "much of a talker" (Schumacher, 2008, 7), as "steady" (8) and "unrufflable" (17); she never cries (17) and doesn't "like the word *feeling*" (60). She is able to recognize and begin to look into her own overwhelming sadness and anger only with the help of a therapist (128, 153).

The techniques with which Schumacher creates scenes brimming with intense emotion in spite of her own first-person narrator's near-total unwillingness to notice or think about emotion are what make the novel unusual in the realm of contemporary YA – and particularly instructive in terms of craft. In the following scene, Elena and her parents arrive at the psychiatric ward of a hospital to visit Dora, who has been there almost two weeks. Elena has brought Dora some candy and a favorite pillow.

> "We didn't talk on the way there. We parked and walked through the parking lot and went up in the elevator and approached the metal detector. The security officer—a woman this time—looked at the licorice and squeezed Dora's pillow. 'Just checking.' She winked.
>
> A nurse answered the buzzer and let us onto the ward, then put her hands on her hips and said, 'Dora? Let's see.'
>
> She had us wait in a tiny conference room, big enough for one small round table and four plastic chairs. The metal feet on my chair were uneven; they made me rock back and forth. I opened the licorice strings and started to tie them into knots. I thought about spelling Dora's name with them. I thought about the way Dora would roll her eyes when I told her our parents hadn't wanted to let me come.
>
> 'Here she is,' my father said, and when I looked up I saw the person he had probably mistaken for my sister. She was about the right height but her hair was

> oily and unwashed and her lips were swollen, chapped, and bloody. She was wearing a pair of shapeless green pants and a hospital gown.
>
> 'It's good to see you, sweetheart,' my mother said.
>
> The Dora-like person sat down.
>
> My father threw me a look: *Easy does it.*
>
> 'Did you have a rough day?' My mother leaned forward in her chair. 'You look a little tired. Have you been sleeping?' She tucked Dora's hair behind her ears, wiped something from her face (was Dora crying?), found a tube of lip balm in her pocket, and applied it carefully to Dora's lips. My father and I had both turned to stone.
>
> 'It's all right, Daisy Dora,' my mother said. 'You're just worn out. It'll be all right.' Slowly and awkwardly, because Dora was taller and much longer-limbed than she was, my mother pulled Dora onto her lap. Dora sagged against her. 'There we go,' my mother said. She had turned into the mother I remembered from when I was little, the mother who would come into my room at night when I was sick and scribble pictures on my back with her fingernails. 'Sweet Dora,' she said. 'Lena came to see you.'
>
> My father excused himself to get a cup of water.
>
> I passed Dora the licorice ('Hey, Dora') but she didn't seem to notice.
>
> 'Should I read to you again?' my mother asked. 'Should I read you a story?'" (Schumacher, 2008, 61-63)

In this passage, which is emblematic of the novel's style, we see the power of what we might call a "soft voice." The emotional content of the scene hits the reader with virtually no intervening explanations from the narrator. Elena describes none of her feelings. The closest she comes is, "My father and I had both turned to stone," and that elusive comment may actually serve more to defend herself *against* having to explain or even notice what she is actually feeling. No interpretation or internal reaction is provided after the security guard's wink; we are left to register its gross insensitivity on our own. Similarly, we aren't told what Elena feels when she first sees her sister, only given a detailed description of what the person looks like and informed that Elena isn't sure it's Dora at all. Anger, shock, horror, confusion, awkwardness, bottomless grief – there are shades of all these within those few moments, and Schumacher's refusal to articulate them outright is part of what allows the reader to experience their essentially indescribable admixture firsthand.

Instead of feelings – or even, notably, any pointed and familiar emotional clues like trembling hands, a knot in the throat, or emotionally-transparent internal thoughts, as Janice Hardy suggests – Schumacher uses original and carefully-chosen details rendered with precise physicality to anchor the scene and make the emotional landscape acutely palpable for the reader: the rocking of the chair on its uneven metal feet; the hands tying knots with licorice; the careful application of lip balm; the ungainly pulling of tall Dora onto her mother's lap. The larger-scale orchestration – the

sharp contrast of the mother's nonstop conversation and attempts to comfort Dora like a little kid with Elena's and her father's inability to say or do anything, culminating in the dad's escape from the room altogether – heightens the electric emotional vibrancy of the scene.

Equally important here is Schumacher's choice to frame the most blatant emotional marker, "(was Dora crying?)", both as a question and as a parenthetical comment in the middle of a different sentence. It's uncertain, it happens in passing, and it's over in three words. Perhaps it is narrator Elena's discomfort with emotion that explains this decision, but at the same time it contributes to the formation of this backdrop of *hush*. There is a kind of softening or muting that makes the emotional weight of what is actually happening within the story speak even more loudly.

The only other parenthetical phrase in the passage – "('Hey, Dora')" – further heightens this effect. Are Elena's only spoken-out-loud words to her sister slipped in mid-sentence within parentheses to suggest that they were muttered, or said perfunctorily, or simply ineffective at catching Dora's attention? It's hard to know, but one way or another, this choice preserves and even enhances the crushing weight of quiet within the scene; it renders all the more tangible the heart-wrenching sense that Elena's expression of her emotional pain is being choked off or strangled.

Prose this restrained is rare in today's YA market. As mentioned, YA writing is often described as frothing with an emotional intensity that mirrors a particular view of adolescence as a wild blaze of "raging hormones." And because, within the world of YA, the nearly ubiquitous first-person narration is constructed as a mechanism for directly channelling these potent emotions, YA literature is sometimes recognizable by what we might call the "narration of emotion." *I'll Give You The Sun* by Jandy Nelson (2014), which won the prestigious Michael L. Printz Award among a vast number of other accolades, and which in 2021 was named one of the 100 best YA novels ever published (*Time*), exemplifies this overtly emotional style.

I'll Give You the Sun tells the dual-first-person story of artistic twin teenagers Jude and Noah whose close bond becomes all but severed in the wake of their mother's death and other traumatic events. Noah's passionate and metaphor-laden first-person voice conveys his imaginative and deeply feeling nature. Jude, on the other hand, comes across as a more guarded character who is hiding behind a thick curtain of guilt and grief; she shares one important feature with Elena: she almost never cries (Nelson, 2014, 157). Nonetheless, her voice, too, bubbles with emotion, including both direct emotional cues (emotion-naming) and, more frequently, indirect emotional cues (e.g. Hardy-esque bodily indicators and thoughts). The emotional volume of Noah's voice is virtually always on full blast, but even Jude's is rarely tuned below medium. In the passage below, which occurs near the very end of the novel, we see a crucial moment: sixteen-year-old Jude is finally able to unfreeze her grief.

> "I'm being shoved forward, shoved right out of my skin with just how terrible—Mom ripped out of my life the very moment I needed her the most, the

> bottomless unconditional shielding sheltering love she had for me taken forever. I let myself feel the terrible, surrender to it finally instead of running from it, instead of telling myself it all belongs to Noah and not to me, instead of putting an index of fears and superstitions between me and it, instead of mummifying myself in layers of clothing to protect myself from it, and I'm falling forward with the force of two years of buried grief, the sorrow of ten thousand oceans finally breaking inside me—
>
> I let it. I let my heart break.
>
> And Noah is there, strong and sturdy, to catch me, to hold me through it, to make sure I'm safe." (Nelson, 2014, 348)

In this pivotal moment of the novel, Nelson turns up the volume to the maximum. "Love," "grief," "sorrow," and "heart break" all appear explicitly in the span of a few sentences. The word "terrible" is used twice, among other potent words like "ripped," "bottomless," "forever," and "falling." In addition to the direct emotional cues, there are less direct ones that rely on figurative imagery (an approach used pervasively in the sections narrated by Noah): Jude is "shoved right out of [her] skin" and her tears are "ten thousand oceans finally breaking" within her.

This is certainly writing that spills out "with the force of Niagara," to use Joan Aiken's term, yet it nonetheless diverges dramatically from Aiken's advice. The sharp emotional self-awareness inherent in this passage (see all the emotions named above, and note Jude's awareness that she's been burying her own grief for two years) contrasts with Aiken's recommendations. Aiken might have been especially skeptical of the advanced self-analysis here. Jude independently discovers and articulates the deeper psychological explanations for many of her beliefs and behaviors – her superstitions, her mode of dress, her projection of her own grief onto her brother – and this is all happening in the moment itself, as the scene is narrated in present tense. Nelson's approach here is to make Jude the real-time taxonomist and interpreter of her own emotions for the reader. The first-person narration, heralded so often as a crucial YA mechanism for *immediacy*, for raw emotional delivery, actually becomes a vehicle for the *mediation* of emotion at the very moment when the emotion is at its highest pitch. It stands, in a sense, *between* the character's experience and the reader.

As a result of this mediation – Jude's explicit identification of, sophisticated explanation of, and use of abstract and hyperbolic metaphors for her emotions – some of the emotional "signal" of this passage gets lost in transmission. Her overwhelming emotions might not arise within the reader with the same degree of intensity as they do within her. The reader might end up primarily feeling the power of strong language, rather than the power of Jude's grief itself.

That being said, innumerable readers worldwide, myself included, have found *I'll Give You the Sun* very compelling and powerful. My point is simply to question the broader assumption that automatically links the crucial emotional vibrancy of YA with this first-person "narration of emotion" style. Even in the many moments when Nelson

uses her most inventive indirect emotional cues and describes what is happening within her characters' heads in figurative and/or implicit ways, this underlying principle so common in YA writing seems to shine through: that the emotion should be primarily steered and tuned by the first-person narrator's voice.

Paradoxically, as we have seen, emotional voices can sometimes actually act as obstacles to, rather than vehicles for, emotional immediacy and intensity. This can occur even when those voices are written in present tense, a tool which might seem ideal for maximum immediacy (Taylor). Holding up raw or unimpeded emotional intensity as a goal should therefore not lead us writers of YA fiction to blindly select a certain familiar type of passionate first-person narrative voice, or to believe we must lean so predominantly on that voice for the stirring of emotion. I believe *Black Box* – without throwing out the use of first-person – offers an alternate pathway that is just as worthwhile studying and exploring for authors seeking to create effective emotional intensity.

The comparison can perhaps be made most readily by looking at one more passage from *Black Box*. The ending neatly parallels the above passage from *I'll Give You the Sun*. It is the cold morning after Elena's sister Dora has moved out of state, in the wake of a crisis, to live in a residential treatment center for her depression. Elena and her friend/crush Jimmy get off the city bus and are walking to school. Elena remembers her therapist telling her that people carrying a great deal of sadness can sometimes, in the presence of a person they trust, unpack some of that sadness, set it down, and rest for a moment. She also refers to what "percent water" she is, a kind of running joke between her and Jimmy that begins earlier in the novel when he tells her the body is about 60% water; Jimmy uses this metric as an implicit, gentle check on how sad, or how close to crying, Elena is, and Elena has by this point adopted it into her thinking.

> "I moved my backpack to my other shoulder.
>
> 'Are you getting tired?' Jimmy asked.
>
> When we were little, Dora had helped me attach playing cards to the spokes of my bike wheels. She had showed me how to slice bananas the long way. I had learned to walk by holding on to the back of her dress.
>
> 'I only ask because you're slowing down a lot. We could take a rest.'
>
> Ninety-five percent water.
>
> 'The important thing,' Jimmy said, 'is that you always stood by her. You couldn't fix everything for her, and you couldn't see inside her head, but she knows you love her. Right? You're probably already writing her secret messages.'
>
> We crossed the road to the median strip, a grassy island in the middle of the four-lane. I stopped and adjusted my backpack again.
>
> 'The light's still green.' Jimmy pointed. 'Should we cross?'
>
> I needed to be closer to the ground.
>
> 'Lena?'
>
> Ninety-eight percent water.

> I dropped to my knees. Cars drove past in both directions.
>
> I thought about what the Grandma Therapist had told me. You learn to carry it with you. But sometimes, in the presence of a person you trust—
>
> 'I was supposed to save her, Jimmy,' I said. 'She asked me to save her.'
>
> The traffic streamed by on either side of us.
>
> Ninety-nine percent water.
>
> 'I'm right here with you,' Jimmy said. He took my backpack, my jacket, my scarf, and my gloves and, kneeling beside me in the frozen grass, he helped me put them down." (Schumacher, 2008, 163-164)

Even a first reading of this passage reveals striking similarities with the passage from *I'll Give You the Sun*. Each occurs very close to the novel's end. In both moments – climaxes of a sort – a narrator who has been unable to grieve begins at last to do so. In both, water imagery features prominently. In both, the narrator is falling. And in both, the passage ends with the recognition of how the support of another person makes possible, or at least bearable, an emotional outpouring: a waterfall.

But it is because of these notable similarities that the stylistic differences between these two passages stand out so starkly. Where Nelson turns the volume of the prose way up, Schumacher again turns it down almost to mute. The language is gentle, perhaps even simple. And Elena is barely involved at all in explaining to us what's happening. She tells the reader little more than a percentage – a number – which reflects the physical sensation of her tears coming closer and closer to filling up and leaking out of her eyes. Any words for feelings are left out. The specific word "sadness" is missing, even when Elena references the therapist's metaphor – a metaphor now given aching physicality through the heavy backpack that literally weighs her down and brings her to her knees. It is again the concreteness of this moment that renders words like "sadness" – as well as any elaborate figurative descriptions of it – unnecessary and almost crude; they would only dilute the power of what is actually happening.

This doesn't mean we are reading some kind of stoically emotionless prose or held at a distance from Elena's inner world. On the contrary, we are given exquisite access to Elena's mind, but we are given her thoughts and memories as precise images, rather than being informed of (or strongly clued to) their emotional meanings or psychological implications. What could be more perfectly, complicatedly heartbreaking in a moment like this than to simply read that Elena learned to walk by holding onto the back of Dora's dress?

Furthermore, whereas Jude's "falling forward" and being "caught" by her brother hover in an uncertain heady realm between the literal and purely figurative, making it somewhat difficult for the reader to connect on a sensory level with what is happening, Elena's fall in this passage is viscerally physical. It takes place over so many delineated steps in such a clearly drawn micro-setting that it almost seems to be occurring in slow motion. The scene's physicality, coupled with the absence of narrative

interpretation or explanation, means there is nothing at all between the reader and the events. The emotions hit with unfiltered immediacy.

We can even wade a bit deeper into this analysis of what gives this moment its "concentrated" or "compressed" power: its Niagara effect. Practically every detail in the architecture of the scene, no matter how mundane, contributes something on a subtextual level to the intense emotional knife's-edge of the moment. Elena stops midway through crossing the street. She is quite literally trying to keep moving forward in her life after what has happened, but she cannot make it all the way across to this new part of her life, even though the light is green. She cannot *yet*. She arrives on the "island" in the middle, an image perfectly capturing the emotional isolation she has experienced for the whole novel, but this time she is here with Jimmy. Traffic is *streaming* around this island, completing the water imagery – she is in the middle of a river, but safe enough on this dry island to finally dissolve into water herself. It is here on this island that she sets down her backpack of sadness. It is here that she will take a rest before crossing into the next part of her life.

Finally, unlike in *I'll Give You the Sun*, the novel *Black Box*, which ends with the line, "he helped me put them down," actually stops just before the crying happens. It cuts off before Elena reaches "one hundred percent water." The insistence on understatement, on that pristine *hush*, is taken as far as it can possibly go. It is as though Elena's narration ends at the absolute precipice because what's about to happen feels so huge and so private to Elena that it can only take place after we've closed the book.

This kind of writing offers possibilities that I think are not often explored in the world of YA today. Of course, Elena's story is told the way it is in part because of the unique character that she is. But there are insights about craft that we can glean from *Black Box* no matter the personality of the characters we are writing about. Schumacher's "soft voice" places a premium on restraint and shows us not only that this is not at odds with emotional immediacy or emotional intensity, but that it can actually increase them. Rather than pump all emotion directly from the voice itself, this "soft voice" approach evokes emotion through a relentless insistence – even when we are inside Elena's head – on vividly drawn physicality, precision, and concreteness. Not only does Schumacher avoid (even in climactic moments) excessive emotional self-awareness and analysis, but she is also creative and exacting in selecting for inclusion details which do more work than simply serve as pointed or one-to-one bodily cues of inner emotional states. They form a thickly layered tapestry of implicit meaning and are simultaneously part of the meticulous staging or architectural design of each scene for emotional complexity and richness. The same applies to which internal thoughts are conveyed, and how: little to no explanation, interpretation, or exaggeration, just direct, accurate, little windows into the character's mind.

While working within a literary medium renowned for voice, Julie Schumacher pushes the reader to do so much more than listen to the narrator talking and figuring things out. Instead, she tunes our attention to what is actually happening, what the

narrator is experiencing, and what the narrator *isn't* saying. Perhaps, after all, in Joan Aiken's framework, it is the story itself, not the voice of the narrator, that should thunder and roar like Niagara. We need to be able to hear it – *feel* it – over or behind the narrator's words.

Voice is a potent and often beautiful tool for characterization and reader connection, but it doesn't need to be the switchboard for all emotion, lest it end up actually getting in the way. Schumacher gives us permission to think twice, to hold back, to trust the reader to interpret, to let the scene itself do more of the work. To dare, sometimes, to be quiet.

Works Cited

"Adolescent Development Explained." *Office of Population Affairs*, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Population Affairs, Nov. 2018, https://opa.hhs.gov/adolescent-health/adolescent-development-explained.

Aiken, Joan. *The Stolen Lake*. Dell, 1981.

Aiken, Joan. *The Way to Write for Children*. St. Martin's Press, 1982.

Cadden, Mike. "The Irony of Narration in the Young Adult Novel." *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, vol. 25, no. 3, Fall, 2000, pp. 146-154. *Project Muse*, https://doi.org/10.1353/chq.0.1467.

Feeney, Nolan. "The 8 Habits of Highly Successful Young-Adult Fiction Authors." *The Atlantic*, 22 Oct. 2013, https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2013/10/the-8-habits-of-highly-successful-young-adult-fiction-authors/280722/.

Gavin, Adrienne E "'*Feeling* is Believing': Anna Sewell's *Black Beauty* and the Power of Emotion." *Affect, Emotion, and Children's Literature: Representation and Socialisation in Texts for Children and Young Adults*, edited by Kristine Moruzi, Michelle J. Smith, and Elizabeth Bullen, Routledge, 2018, pp. 52-65.

Hardy, Janice. "You're So Emotional: Describing a Character's Emotions in a First Person Point of View." *Janice Hardy's Fiction University*, 17 June, 2019, http://blog.janicehardy.com/2010/06/youre-so-emotional.html.

"Joan Aiken Bibliography." *JoanAiken.com*, https://www.joanaiken.com/bibliography/. Accessed 13 Oct. 2022.

Krause, Andrea E. "The Tone of Young Adult Literature." *AndreaElizabethKrause.com*, 4 Apr. 2020, https://www.andreaelizabethkrause.com/post/the-tone-of-young-adult-literature.

"Maturing Genres: Teen to New Adult Books." *McKay School Magazine*, Brigham Young University, McKay School of Education, 1 Feb. 2016, https://education.byu.edu/magazine/winter2016/maturing_genres.

Morgan, Kori. "The Third Person vs. First Person Point of View in Young Adult Fiction." *Pen and the Pad*, https://penandthepad.com/third-person-vs-first-person-point-young-adult-fiction-1796.html. Accessed 13 Oct. 2022.

Nikolajeva, Maria. "Memory of the Present: Empathy and Identity in Young Adult Fiction." *Narrative Works*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2014, pp. 86-107. Retrieved from: https://journals.lib.unb.ca/index.php/NW/article/view/22784.

Nelson, Jandy. *I'll Give You the Sun*. Dial Books, 2014.
Nünning, Vera. "The Affective Value of Fiction: Presenting and Evoking Emotions." *Writing Emotions: Theoretical Concepts and Selected Case Studies in Literature*, edited by Ingeborg Jandl, Susanne Knaller, Sabine Schönfellner, and Gudrun Tockner, transcript Verlag, 2017, pp. 29-54.
Peterson, Valerie. "Young Adult and New Adult Book Markets: Facts and Figures to Know About the Young Adult Book Market." *LiveAbout*, 15 Dec. 2018, https://www.liveabout.com/the-young-adult-book-market-2799954.
Schumacher, Julie. *Black Box*. Delacorte Press, 2008.
Sundberg, Ingrid. "Five Reasons to Write in the First Person Point-of-View." *Ingrid's Notes*, 14 Mar. 2011, https://ingridsnotes.wordpress.com/2011/03/14/five-reasons-to-write-in-the-first-person-point-of-view/.
Taylor, Jeannette. "The Writer's Stance: Point of View and Tense Options." *The Scribes*, https://thescribes.ca/choosing-a-point-of-view-for-writing/. Accessed 13 Oct. 2022.
"The 100 Best YA Books of All Time." *Time*, https://time.com/collection/100-best-ya-books/. Accessed 13 Oct. 2022.
Tilghman, Natalie Haney. "Finding a Voice: First-Person Narration in Young Adult Literature and Coming-of-Age Adult Fiction." *TriQuarterly*, 27 Nov. 2011, https://www.triquarterly.org/craft-essays/finding-voice-first-person-narration-young-adult-literature-and-coming-age-adult.

Author Biography

Noah Weisz is a writer and teacher with an M.F.A. in Fiction from the New Writers Project at the University of Texas at Austin. He has won the Sydney Taylor Manuscript Award, the *F(r)iction* Short Story Contest, the SCBWI Magazine Merit Award, and the middle-grade category of the Katherine Paterson Prize for Young Adult and Children's Writing, and has had three novels shortlisted for the Bath Children's Novel Award. His short stories for children and young adults can be found in *Highlights*, *AQUILA*, *Hunger Mountain*, *Cosmonauts Avenue*, and elsewhere. Currently based in Paris, he teaches creative writing to middle-school students as well as to undergraduates at Sciences Po – Le Havre. His website is https://noahweisz.wordpress.com.