

TWISTS & CHANGES

in the young-adult novel

Some alternative story structures offer fresh ways to hold a teenage audience

By Mindy Hardwick

ARE YOU THINKING of writing for young adults but haven't picked up a young-adult novel since you were a teen? If so, you may be very surprised to find that the young-adult novel has changed—a great deal! Cell phones, computers and video games compete for a teen's attention. As Lauren Myracle, author of *TTFN* and *TTYL*, two novels written in Instant Messenger (IM) format, explains, "When I was in high school, the drill was to come home from school and call our buds to discuss the day: who wore what, who flirted with whom, etc. But now it's more likely for a high school girl to come home and IM her friends to discuss the same things."

As young-adult writers, how do we compete with a teen's fast-paced world and create novels teens want to read? One way is by exploring alternative story structures such as novels in verse, multiple-voice novels and novels in "tech-speak."

Such stories fill the young-adult shelves of bookstores and libraries and include such well-known young-adult authors as Sonya Sones, Ron Koertge, Jacqueline Woodson and Ellen Wittlinger. Possibilities for story format in the young-adult novel are endless. It's just a matter of knowing where to start.

Novels told in tech-speak

IM, e-mail, text messaging—it's all a part of a teen's daily life, but it can also be a way to tell a young-adult story. Myracle's novel *TTYL* is about three best friends, Maddie, Angela and Zoe, who pledge to have a great 10th-grade year. They struggle with teen issues such as boyfriends and the wish to be popular. The book's pages appear as an IM conversation between the three teens, complete with screen names (mad maddie, SnowAngel and zoegirl), IM language (g2g, u) and IM emoticons (: -)). According to Myracle, "The reader feels as if they're eavesdropping on Angela, Maddie and Zoe as they talk about their innermost thoughts. Writing the novel in IMs let me play with language by using IM lingo and techniques such as Angela's tendency to include stage directions in her conversations. For example, she might type, 'ack, feeling like such a loser. +sticks head in toilet bowl out of patheticness+.'"

Writing a novel in IM is not easy. "The girls had to be sitting at a computer in real time whenever I wanted them to

talk," Myracle says. "In *TTFN*, the sequel, this broadened to sitting in front of a computer or texting on their cells. Because of this need to be at a computer, the action was relayed after the fact, unless the action took place as they were IMing. This made it hard to create immediacy sometimes. And exposition was tricky since I could only write it in if I could find a way to do it naturally through dialogue."

Why write a novel in IM? Myracle, who confesses to very rarely IMing herself, said, "Writing *TTFN* and *TTYL* broke me out of my normal patterns as a writer, and in my opinion, that is always worthwhile."

Novels told in verse

Young-adult novels in verse burst onto the scene with Virginia Euwer Wolff's *Make Lemonade* trilogy in the 1990s and have included Ron Koertge's *The Brimstone Journal* and Sonya Sones' *What My Mother Doesn't Know*. Meg Kearney, poet and author of *The Secret of Me*, explains why she chose the format: "I'd been interested in writing a novel for a long time, but never was sure how I would be able to sustain a piece of writing of that length. As a poet, I'm used to working in a form that gets its power from its compression." Kearney's final push was after Jacqueline Woodson asked her to read an early draft of her novel *Locomotion*. Kearney says she "was blown away by Woodson's novel-in-verse, told in the voice of an 11-year-old boy. I thought, wait a second, Jackie is supposed to be a fiction writer—I'm supposed to be the poet. I felt as if Jackie had thrown down the proverbial gauntlet."

Kearney's *The Secret of Me*, a heartwarming novel, tells the story of 14-year-old Lizzie who writes poems in an attempt to make sense of her life and her being adopted. "Writing a novel in verse is not the same as writing a collection of poems," Kearney says. "When a poet puts together a conventional collection of poems, there are threads or themes that run through the book, and the order of the poems is very important. With a novel in verse, order is not only important, it is essential. The narrative depends on it."

If you think you want to try a novel in verse, where should you start? Read poetry! It's important to understand different poetry forms such as sonnets, free verse and sestinas. Kearney advises writers to "play with poetic forms and to get a good



Lauren Myracle



Meg Kearney



Liza Ketchum



sense of the genre before diving into a novel in verse.”

Novels in multiple voices

What if more than one character wants to tell the story? Don't despair. Young-adult novels with multiple viewpoints are another option.

Many multiple-voice novels take a single incident and tell it from different sides of the story, such as Liza Ketchum's novel *Where the Great Hawk Flies*. In this story, Daniel Tucker and Hiram Coombs live in Vermont during the 1780s. Daniel, a 13-year-old half-Pequot and half-English boy, gets a new neighbor in Coombs, whose family has lost nearly everything in the Vermont Indian raid of 1780. Each character tells his side of two cultures. Telling her story in two voices, Ketchum says, gave her the “chance to see their conflict from both sides, and this is an asset, since any conflict is often more complex than just a black/white, right/wrong, good vs. evil situation.”

Novels told in multiple voices allow a writer to explore a story from different viewpoints. According to Ketchum, her book “actually began as a single narrative from Daniel's point of view, but two things happened. First, every time Hiram appeared in a scene the action became livelier, and it even seemed as if he might steal the story from Daniel entirely. Second, I was afraid that Hiram might become a stereotypical bully. I wanted to find out what made him tick, why he was so

prejudiced against Indians, and what had traumatized him. As soon as I let him speak, he became a more fully rounded character and his intentions and motivations were more clearly defined. I ended up liking him, which surprised me.”

In a multiple-voice novel, each voice must be distinct from the other. “The most difficult challenge I faced in writing this book,” Ketchum says, “was to try and capture Hiram and Daniel's speech. The story takes place long before recorded speech, and the British made it a crime for the Pequots to speak their language, so it is almost extinct.” At the Massachusetts Historical Society in Boston, Ketchum read a diary written by a boy Daniel's age. As she read, she jotted down contemporary phrases, idioms, unusual vocabulary and syntax. She pasted the phrases above her desk so that every time she looked up they were in front of her, and then repeated them in her head until they became a familiar melody.

“Writing in two voices was definitely a switch for me, and it made plotting more complicated,” Ketchum explains. “I had to keep track of two story lines and try not to backtrack in time, so that the story kept moving forward while the viewpoint changed. That was actually a puzzle I enjoyed solving.”

In closing, let me suggest that you consider these questions as you shape your story in an alternative format:

- Why am I choosing this format to tell *this* story?
- Do I know enough about the format I have chosen? For example, do I know and understand IM or poetry enough to write an entire book in this form?
- Do I have a character with a strong emotional arc? The rules of storytelling still apply when using alternative approaches.
- If I've chosen a novel with multiple voices, does each character have its own arc or am I simply retelling and summarizing the story when I change points of view?
- Have I considered alternating between third and first person to help emphasize the shift in point of view?

Mindy Hardwick

Mindy Hardwick holds an MFA in writing for children and young adults from Vermont College. She has published many articles on the craft of writing for young people and is currently working on her own multiple-voice young-adult novel. Web: www.mindyhardwick.com.

RESOURCES

HERE ARE SOME additional young-adult titles that use an alternate format.

- **Heart on My Sleeve** by Ellen Wittlinger: a novel in e-mails
- **Monster** by Walter Dean Myers: a novel in film script
- **Seek** by Paul Fleischman: a novel in the form of a

- multiple-voice radio play
- **Where I Want to Be** by Adele Griffin: a novel in two voices
- **Worlds Afire** by Paul B. Janeczko: a novel in verse
- **Year of Secret Assignments** by Jaclyn Moriarty: a novel in journals and letters