Introduction

Young-Adult Fiction is more than literature written for teenagers and about teenagers with hip language and plenty of dialogue. It is literature with an important purpose; to act as a rite of passage and teach young adults about life and its histories, potentialities, transformations and choices (Proukou 2005).

The transition from adolescence into adulthood is a complex process. It's a time where someone has to 'give up [their] childhood and become an adult— to die, you might say, to its infantile personality and psyche and come back as a responsible adult (Jung 1949). This transformation is something every young adult goes through, and it's how they develop a better understanding about themselves and the world around them.

Interestingly, more than fifty-five percent of today's young-adult fiction readers are adults. That's because in the modern world many adults are still coming of age long after their adolescence has passed, and a young-adult story and its characters are still appealing and relevant (Kitchener 2017). I'm twenty-nine-year-old and I read them all the time. It's one of the reasons why I decided to write one. The other reason is because I wanted to share my experience as a high-school senior who had no idea what he wanted to do afterward. Maybe someone else could learn a thing or two from my experience, or at the very least, be entertained by the story.

But herein lies the problem; I haven't been a high-school student for eleven years, and a lot has changed. It's the same world with different problems and modern-day students are going through the same process in different circumstances. I have as much in common with them as I do with a forty-year old going through a mid-life crisis. I'm sure a lot of the issues are the same, but some would be different too. That's because it's a different youth culture in a different world. This left me with a question: *How do I create characters that accurately depict the circumstances, challenges and uncertainties of modern-day teenagers and students?*

The Scope

How do I go about gathering and storing and presenting data?

There is a lot of data available that can help my research, most of which can be found in popular young-adult literature and secondary sources that explore some of the important themes, issues, literacy theories, and trends in young-adult literature.

I can also gather qualitative and quantitative data about some of the important issues affecting students in the real world today. The includes issues that have always been prevalent in youth culture such as anxiety and depression, peer-pressure, social-media addiction, and bullying. But it also includes issues that are more unique to modern-day teenagers and students such as career uncertainty caused by the discrepancy between an increase in the number of graduates and a decrease in job availability (Kwok 2018; Lee 2019).

All the relevant data I find will be stored in written notes and journal entries. Then, I can then disseminate it into my story and its characters, which is where it will ultimately be presented.

What processes do I use in the time leading up to my knowledge claim?

My knowledge claim is that a writer needs to combine their own recollection of being a teenager and student with the experiences of modern teenagers and students and create multiple characters that are complex enough to capture them all. Only then, can they create characters that accurately depict the circumstances, challenges and uncertainties of a modern-day student.

To demonstrate that claim, I need to make an inquiry through research, exploration and discussion, which can be done in the form of a creative artefact with an accompanying exegesis.

What are the stages of my research?

My research process will be divided into four different stages:

1. The first stage is to try and identify the issues I'm having in my writing practice, and more specifically with creating characters that personify the reality of modern-day students.

2.   The second stage is to learn more about the circumstances, challenges and uncertainties of modern-day students. This will help me slip into their shoes and create and develop characters that represent them.

3.   The third stage is to conduct a literature review on young-adult literature, especially ones set in high-school that have realistic plots and realistic characters dealing with realistic issues. This will help me understand what has worked and what can be improved.

4.   The fourth stage is to draft and edit a story with characters based on the culmination of knowledge gained from my research. In the end, I hope my creative artefact accompanied with an exegesis will find and demonstrate an answer to my research question and contribute to the pool of existing knowledge.

How will I systematically use reflexivity in my data collection?

Reflexivity is the process of continual reflection on the research process by a researcher. It will help me become more self-aware throughout the research process, which will not only benefit my research, but it will also help me develop as a creative practitioner.

Personally, I think the most systematic way for me to use reflexivity in my own research process is to keep a reflexive journal. I will make regular entries during throughout my data collection and research journey, which will include my thoughts and interpretations about data, a reflection on the decisions I made and why I made them, and a reflection on my progress and what has been working and what needs improvement.

In what form will I present my findings, results, outputs, final project or creation?

The findings, results and outputs I make will be presented in the form of a creative artefact with an accompanying exegesis. My creative artefact will be a young-adult fiction story with characters that demonstrate the knowledge I learned throughout my research and creative practice. My exegesis will discuss everything I learned and experienced along the way and explain how my research can contribute to existing knowledge (Barrett & Bolt 2007). Together, they will demonstrate how an author can create characters that accurately depict the circumstances, challenges and uncertainties of modern-day students. And I will be the example.

Literature Review

How do I identify the gap in existing knowledge?

A knowledge gap is something that is under-explored and needs to be filled by new research. To identify the gap, I will need to conduct a literature review on relevant scholarly articles and discussions, as well as popular young-adult literature about teenagers and students dealing with real-world issues. This will include a summary and an evaluation. Once a gap has been identified, it will open a space for me to contribute new research.

In my case, I don't think there is a lack of knowledge on how to create characters that embody the typical experiences of teenagers and students. But there does seem to be a lack of knowledge on how to create ones that accurately depict circumstances, challenges and uncertainties unique to teenagers and students in the modern world. That's the knowledge gap I'm trying to fill.

Here are is an example of a scholarly article that demonstrates the gap in existing knowledge:

What's new in young-adult literature for high school students? by Lois T. Stover.

This was the first scholarly article that showed up in my search for literature to review, and it's a very out-dated one. The author discusses trends in publishing for the senior high audience, which all seem to revolve around an intrigue and concern about social issues and dilemmas experienced in their lives. This most prominent examples were diversity, sex, abuse, technology, environment, death, choices and transitions, and feminism (Stover 1997).

Even though these issues were considered quite new at the time, they are still relevant today. The problem, however, is the fact the article was written twenty-two years ago and misses out modern perspectives and developments on these issues, as well as a plethora of contemporary issues that didn't exist back then. What about anxiety and depression, social media addiction, cyber-bullying, or an over-abundance of graduates and not enough jobs? There doesn't seem to be a lot of discussion about them and in the context of young-adult literature. It's problematic that the first article to show up was something this outdated, and although it's still somewhat relevant, a lot has changed.

In contrast, here is an example of an article that discusses the knowledge gap and supports my knowledge claim:

Young-Adult Literature in the 21st Century: Moving Beyond Traditional Constraints and Conventions by Jeffrey Kaplan

This article explains that young-adult literature needs to be different today than it was fifty years ago because we live in a different world with themes and issues that would have been inconceivable in the past. Teenagers and students are very different from protagonists in traditional young-adult literature. Some of the dilemmas they experience are the same, but the dynamics of their lives are different because they have grown up in different circumstances. Therefore, young-adult literature and its characters need to change and adapt in accordance with the times. The teenage angst represented in characters like Holden Caulfield in The Catcher in the Rye and Ponyboy Curtis in The Outsiders is still an important part of the experience, but it needs to be written into characters who better capture the realities of modern-day teenagers and students.

What can I learn about my own knowledge claim from existing literature?

Not only can existing literature help me identify the gap in existing knowledge, but it can help support my knowledge claim too. Studying recently popular young-adult literature is a good way to understand what worked about characters and why, and what kinds of circumstances, challenges and uncertainties they experience. Clearly, if these characters and their stories were popular recently, it means they are appealing and relatable to modern-day teenagers and students. Therefore, studying them can help me understand how to create my own characters that resonate with modern-day students.

Here are some examples:

The Perks of Being a Wallflower by Stephen Chbosky

This story is about a fifteen-year-old student named Charlie who is coping with the suicide of his friend, Michael. To manage the fear and anxiety of starting high school alone, he writes letters to an imaginary friend. At school, he finds a friend and mentor in his English teacher, Bill, who helps him becomes less shy. Eventually, he befriends a classmate, Patrick, and his stepsister, Sam.

Throughout the year, he has all the typical teenage experiences; a first date, a first kiss, dealing with bullies, trying drugs and alcohol, and all the ups and downs that come with friendship. Towards the end, he becomes more and more anxious about his friends moving away. He kisses Sam when she is packing to leave and they start to have sex, which causes a repressed memory to surface and he has a mental breakdown.

In an epilogue, he writes a final letter to his imaginary friend explaining what happened. It turns out, he was sexually abused by his auntie when he was a child. He comes to terms with what happened and resolves to stop living inside his head, make new friends, and participate in life rather than let it pass on by.

This story explores the ups and downs of a typical teenage experience; friendship, sex, sexuality, drugs and alcohol, individuality, and acceptance. But it also looks at more serious and less common issues such as trauma, molestation and repression. Therefore, it shows that a good way to appeal to modern-day students is to create characters that experience both normal and abnormal circumstances, challenges and uncertainties.

Still, it was written twenty years ago and is somewhat outdated in terms of its ability to capture some of the circumstances, challenges and uncertainties of modern-day teenagers and students. They have an entirely different youth culture that revolves around social media, memes, and other elements not mentioned in the story. Though it's worth mentioning the book was remade into a movie seven years ago, which means the characters and their experiences are still relevant and appealing.

Eleanor & Park by Rainbow Rowell

This story is about two sixteen-year-old misfits who form a special bond. Park is an outsider who doesn't have many friends. Eleanor is a chubby red-headed girl who wears men's clothes. Park sees her on the bus one morning and realizes she is about to get bullied by other kids on the bus, so he quietly offers her a seat.

Eleanor comes from a poor and dysfunctional family with her mother, four younger siblings, and an alcoholic and abusive stepfather. She returned home recently getting kicked out of the house and living with family friends for a year. On the other hand, Park comes from a stable and happy family with two supportive parents and a younger brother.

They eventually start talking and connect with each other. In time, a romance blossoms and they become inseparable, relishing in the time they spend on the bus. But it's not all sunshine and rainbows. Eleanor is constantly bullied by her classmates at school, and her stepfather regularly abuses her mother and younger siblings. To find salvation, she starts spending more and more time at Park's house. Initially, his parents aren't enthusiastic about her and her relationship with their son, but they become more supportive when they learn about her circumstances.

Unfortunately, Eleanor's abusive stepfather eventually discovers their relationship, and it's revealed that he has been writing obscene messages on her schoolbooks. Eleanor decides she needs to leave home once and for all. Park drives her interstate to her uncle's house, and they bid each other an emotional farewell. Although he sends her letters all the time, she doesn't reply. But six months pass, and she eventually sends him a postcard with three words, implied but not revealed to be 'I love you'.

Again, this story deals with the ups and downs of a typical teenage experience; friendship, love, insecurity, bullying, loneliness. And again, it looks at some serious and less common issues too; racism, domestic abuse and abandonment. This makes it even more clear that characters who experience both normal and abnormal circumstances, challenges and uncertainties are appealing to modern-day students. Personally, I think it's because they are all a part of their lives whether it happens to them directly. They might not come from a broken home, but they probably know someone who does. Either way, it's important to educate them about these kinds of issues, and that's something to keep in mind when creating characters.

A problem, though, is the fact the story is set between 1986 and 1987. That doesn't mean the characters and their experiences aren't relatable to modern-day students but limits the spectrum of what can be explored. For example, in the modern world, Eleanor could record her stepfather abusing her mother on Park's smartphone and show it to the police. They could have also communicated via text-messages, emails and social-media posts rather than letters. It's still a wonderful story that touches on important themes and issues, but the characters and their circumstances cannot accurately depict the realities of modern-day teenagers and students.

Backlash by Sarah Darer Littman

This story is about a fifteen-year-old girl named Lara who has been chatting online with a boy named Christian DeWitt. It's her first romance and things are going well until he makes some nasty comments about her on Facebook and she locks herself in the bathroom. Shortly after, her sister, Sydney, knocks on the door but she doesn't respond. It turns out, she tried to commit suicide and overdosed on a combination of pills. While emergency workers are carrying her out on a stretcher, her neighbour and former friend, Bree, takes a picture and posts it on Facebook.

Lara wakes up in hospital and eventually returns home. Eventually, the police inform her there are no local records of a boy named Christian DeWitt and that she was speaking to someone with a fake account. In time, it becomes apparent that she was catfished by Bree and it was supposed to be a prank. Lara's dad finds out and storms her house and causes a commotion until the police come to diffuse the situation, which draws a lot of unwanted media attention.

Bree isn't coping too well with the guilt and she starts receiving anonymous death threats on her phone, which causes her to develop a problematic self-harm habit. In the meantime, Lara's mom campaigns to create laws against cyberbullying and eventually wins an election for city council.

Twelve months later, Lara has recovered enough to return to school and Bree has transferred to a different one. They bump into each other at a sports event but struggle to start a conversation. Lara realizes she needs to move on from her past and eventually makes new friends and finds happiness.

This story is an excellent example on how to create characters that accurately depict the circumstances, challenges and uncertainties of modern-day teenagers and students. It still touches on the ups and downs of a typical teenage experience; mental health, bullying, loneliness and drug use. And it still looks at some less common and more serious ones like self-harm and suicide. But what separates it from the rest is that it combines them with modern issues like cyber-bullying and social media addiction, and even looks at the impact they can have on teenagers and their families.

Another thing I noticed was that it didn't portray the bully as a stereotypical antagonist. Instead, she was portrayed as a misguided teenage girl with her own issues and problems, most of which stemmed from her own mistake. This is important because it humanizes the culprit as well as the victim, which is a valuable lesson and insight into modern-day youth-culture.

On another note, the author demonstrated how to create characters that can be used to comment on the experiences of modern-day students as well as capture them. She expresses her concerns about social media and its implications on teenagers through the experiences of her characters rather than their opinions. That's another thing for me to keep in mind.

What is my practice saying in terms of contribution to theory and/or critical, ethical or political commentary?

Literary theory is a set of concepts and intellectual assumptions that can be used to explain and interpret literature. It's a way for me to look at my own work from a theoretical perspective and assimilate it into the wider world of knowledge. My creative artefact can be linked to three literary theories; ecocriticism, Marxism and psychoanalysis.

Ecocriticism

Ecocriticism studies the relationship between literature and nature. It can be writing based on the theme of nature, but it can also be how writing comments on nature or disregards it, or how humans exploit or neglect it. In my case, it's more what my views and values towards nature are and how it's expressed in my writing (Carter 2006). Funnily enough, nature and human disconnection from it in modern culture is an important theme in my story. This can be seen in first chapter's title, 'Birds, Bees and Trains', which is a reference to the fact that humans and all their modern technologies and problems are still a part of nature and no different to birds and bees. Beyond that, there are plenty of references to natural phenomena in the text; sunlight, tree branches, stars, atoms, time, gravity, and a description of a parkland as a place where nature and civilization come together in harmony. Even in the dialogue, the characters discuss how disconnected people seem to be from the world and from each other in the morning commute.

Marxism

In literary theory, Marxism looks at text as an expression of contemporary class struggle. Since humans are a product of their social and economic environment, they are also bound by them. Therefore, literature is way for writers to reveal the essence of their times and explores the social and economic issues affecting themselves and the people around them (Williams 1977).

My practice is a reflection on current social and political conditions and my thoughts and feelings about them, particularly in terms of how they impact teenagers and students. For example, my story is all about how unreasonable it is to expect a teenager to know what they want with the rest of their lives while they're still in high school, and that too many of them are conditioned to believe monetary and academic success is more important than anything else. This has been an issue for a long time, and it's still an issue today. But it's been worsened by an increase in the number of graduates, a decrease in amount of jobs available, an unrealistically expensive house-market, and a deteriorating environment.

I also comment on my experiences in the morning commute and the contrast between adults, who seem like a horde of emotionless suit-wearing zombies too preoccupied with themselves and their phones to interact with each other, and teenagers, who are still young, enthusiastic and full of life. And what happens to a lot of those people who dedicate all their time to work and the corporate grind at the expense of their own lives? They end up like the brittle, tired, and sad-looking old man on the train in my story. This can all be interpreted as a form of socio-political commentary, which is the essence of Marxism.

Psychoanalysis

Psychoanalytic literary theory is based on the idea that literature is fundamentally entwined within the human psyche and therefore we can read it psychoanalytically to understand more about the text as well as the author (Waugh 2006).

My story is an expression of my reflections and philosophies about life, nature, the universe, and our place within it. It's also an expression of my thoughts and feelings about modern-day culture and the experiences and uncertainties I had as a teenager. In fact, that's what motivated me to write the story in the first place. It can be read in terms of its appeal to the psychological motives of the intended audience; young readers who aren't sure about

themselves and about life and are scared and concerned about stepping into a future of uncertainty. I wanted to reach out to them and let them learn from my experience and know that it's all going to be okay. I wanted them to know that high-school isn't the be-all-and end-all of life, and you don't need to force yourself onto a path that you don't want to be on. Beyond that, even the characters and their experiences touch on a lot of psychoanalytic concepts such as love and sex, fear and death, and an innate need for security, certainty and survival (Tyson 2018). Psychoanalysis is both in the text and in-between the lines.

Methodology

What research methods will I use, and at what stage of the process, and how?

My methodology is grounded in practice-led research, which can be described as 'research initiated in practice, where questions, problems, and challenges are identified and formed by the needs of practitioners; and secondly, that the research strategy is carried out through practice' (Gray 1996). This can be divided into research for practice, research into practice, and research through practice, and they are all a part of my methodology (Andrew 2012).

The first draws on conventional research methods such as archival research (reading and observing) and field research (case studies and interviews). This will be useful in the second and third stages of my research process when I'm trying to learn more about the circumstances, challenges and uncertainties of modern-day teenagers and students, and looking what has worked and what can be improved in existing literature. For example, I might find an article about the increase in mental health issues among modern teenagers and students compared to previous generations due to social media, or an article about the impact a fear of an impending climate crisis has on youth culture today. I could also conduct my interviews and surveys with teenagers and students to better understand their circumstances, challenges and uncertainties.

The second draws on research into the practice itself such as notetaking, planning, analysing and self-reflection, but it can include conventional methods too. This will be useful in the first stage of my research process when I'm trying to pinpoint issues in my own practice, particularly with creating characters. I intend to use a reflective journal to identify problems and find solutions – or at least think about them.

The third draws on using creative practice in accordance with conventional methodologies to learn something new. This will be useful in the fourth and final stage of my research process when I'm drafting and editing my creative artefact. At that point, I will be knee-deep in the creative process, but with all the knowledge gained from the earlier stages in my research process. After all, the only way to find an answer to my research question is to do it in practice and conceptualize the process along the way.

In the end, my research is more about the creation of data rather than the collection of it. The story and characters I create and the practice of creating them is essence of my research, and that's reflected in my methodology (Hecq 2012).

Can I make use of existing strategies, methods and approaches, or do I need to devise my own mixed methodology or even describe an alternative methodology?

Autoethnography

Autoethnography is a form of qualitative research that uses self-reflection and writing to explore anecdotal and personal experiences and how they connect to wider cultural, political, and social meanings and understandings. It explores action, emotion, embodiment, self-consciousness and introspection (Ellis 2004). In terms of my research, I intend use it by looking inward and reflecting on my own experiences as a teenager and student and whether or not they fit into broader social, cultural and political issues that existed back then and still exist today (Bochner & Ellis 1996). Obviously, I haven't been a teenager and high-school student for a while. But I can still use autoethnography to contribute some valuable research. For example, I struggled with anxiety and depression, peer-pressure, a struggle between individuality and the status quo, and career uncertainty. I even knew two students who came from broken homes, and others who took their own lives. In fact, it wouldn't be possible to create characters that resonate with modern teenagers and students without autoethnographic research, because it's one of the best ways to add depth and authenticity to them and their experiences.

Ethnography

Ethnography is the study of social interactions, behaviours, and perceptions that occur within groups and communities. It's about detailing people's culture, perspectives and practices through observation and conversation. This will be particularly useful in my research because

it will help me slip into the minds of modern-day teenagers and better understand their views and perspectives on the world (Reeves et al. 2008). For example, I could analyse social media posts made by teenagers to get an insight into their circumstances, challenges and uncertainties. This would be particularly easy to do since most them use hashtags, a type of metadata tag used to make it easier for others to find messages about specific themes and issues.

What ethical and intellectual property considerations am I required to make? (e.g. in the case of participant research)

I won't need an ethics clearance for my creative artefact because it is a work of fiction. Even if it contains bits and pieces based on people I know or have known in the past, or some of the teenagers and students I surveyed and interviewed in my research process, it will be indistinguishably different when written into the story.

However, I probably will need one to conduct my field research because the participants will be too young to give informed consent. I might need to obtain it from their parents and guardians (Smythe & Murray 2000). What's more is that my questionnaires, surveys, and interviews might unintentionally reveal personal information about the participants and their friends. For example, they might reveal that they attempted suicide, or that someone spiked their drink at a nightclub and took advantage of them. I'm not too sure what would happen in those circumstances, but it seems like it could be problematic to include anything like that in my story and maybe even my exegesis.

Exegetical elements

How can I explain, describe, contextualise, situate or foreground my practice so that others can understand my work?

I don't want to present my research entirely in a creative artefact on its own because I wouldn't be able to explain, describe, or contextualise my practice other than through inferences in the story and its characters. I want others to understand what my problem was and how I solved it, and what happened in the process.

A good way to do that is to include an exegesis that explains, describes and contextualises my practice and discusses the evolution of my creative artefact along the way. This would allow me to integrate my own knowledge and practice with academic theory, where it can then be interpreted and discussed with ease and used to contribute new knowledge (Arnold 2012).

How can I describe the knowledge audiences need in order to gain a fuller appreciation of my achievement?

To describe the knowledge audience's need, I need to determine who the knowledge audience is and what they're interested in learning from my research.

By that logic, the knowledge audience is probably other young-adult fiction writers who want to master the craft. But it could also be modern-day teenagers and students who read young-adult fiction and want to connect more with characters in the stories they read.

That's why it's important to analyse contemporary young-adult literature popular with modern audiences, as well as discussions and articles about young-adult literature written by authors and academics. Then, I can pinpoint what's missing in both areas and demonstrate a solution in my own practice.

What serendipities or discoveries characterise (or could characterise) my practice-led research?

My research has made it more and more apparent that I don't need to create characters that are too different from the ones in traditional and less modern young-adult literature. That's because the typical themes and issues in most coming-of-age stories still resonate with youth today. Since it's a rite of passage that everyone goes through, there are some core themes and issues that are relatable to everyone. I think that realization will characterise my research, but it won't necessarily undermine it. There is still room for improvement, particularly in terms of incorporating circumstances, challenges and uncertainties into characters and their stories that are unique to modern-day youth culture. And that's what I wanted to address.

How can I best describe the links between intention and the final work?

Since my intention is to understand how to create characters that accurately depict the circumstances, challenges and uncertainties of modern-day teenagers and students, and my

final work is supposed to be the culmination of my research and an answer to my research question, the best way to describe the link between them is through a critical explanation of my creative artefact in the form of an accompanying exegesis In the context of my intention, it will explain my thought processes, my choice of themes and literary techniques, and what theories can be used to interpret my work (Duggan 2018). And in the context of my final work, it will comment on my practice and what I learned from the experience, and whether I found an answer to my research question.

What form could my exegesis take to serve my creations the best and set up the clearest dialogue with my work?

I have a specific structure in mind that will help my exegesis capture and explain the essence of my work. First, it will begin with a statement about the purpose and motivation behind the research. It will explain why I wanted to study creative writing and what motivated me to pursue it. Then, it will discuss my research question and explain what the problem is with the depiction of modern-day teenagers and students in young-adult literature and why it matters. Then, it will breakdown the context of my investigation and explain where my work fits into the field, what will be included in my literature review, what has been studied on the topic already, and how it can be filled with my research. After that, it will break down the framework for my investigation and summarize my methodology and approach. Then, it will discuss my results and realizations and explain how others can benefit from them. Finally, it will conclude with a summary of my research and discussion about why it's important, what is left unsolved, and what other aspects could be researched in the future (Brien et al. 2017).

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