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Ngoc Le

Simon Fraser University

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Buddhist Young Adult Fiction

In Search of a Linguistic Connection

Ngoc Le

SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY

I was drawn to *The Astonishing Color of After* by Emily X. R. Pan due to its intriguing premise. The novel revolves around Leigh Chen Sanders, a teenager searching for her deceased mother who has turned into a bird. It follows her to Taiwan where she attempts to reconnect with her maternal grandparents, to learn about her mother's past, and ultimately to make sense of her mother's suicide. With great passion for colors, Leigh describes the world and her emotional journey in vivid shades and tones, painting a grief-stricken yet hopeful portrayal of grappling with loss and finding the strength to go on. I sobbed more than once because it's that good.

If the [Tricycle Magazine's interview](#) is of any indication, *The Astonishing Color of After* is not only a young adult novel, it is also a Buddhist one. The novel weaves elements of Buddhist funerary rituals and images into the coming-of-age story, building the mythical setting for Leigh's emotional journey. Pan, however, initially planned to abandon all Buddhist elements out of concern that they would reduce the book's appeal by making it "too religious."

The delicate balance between religious elements and storyline in young adult literature is a recognized issue. In a paper on Buddhist adolescent literature at the Buddhism and Youth Conference at the University of British Columbia in 2017, Kimberly Beek, a PhD candidate researching Buddhist fiction and author of an [award-winning blog](#) on the same topic, confirms that religious content in Buddhist young adult literature can alienate young readers by disrupting the text's linguistic ability to maintain the readers' suspension of disbelief that is essential for an engaged and enjoyable reading experience.

Buddhist young adult literature belongs to an emerging literary category—Buddhist fiction. Although not yet a formally recognized genre, the label has been used by authors, reviewers, readers, and occasionally publishers to describe a wide range of Western-published English novels infused with Buddhist perspectives. These fictional narratives overlap genres, ranging from adventure, fantasy, historical fiction, mystery, realism, retelling, romance, science fiction, to thriller. Early examples can be traced back to the English translation of *Siddhartha* by Hermann Hesse, whose legacy and popularity has continued paving the way for publication of the genre. Contemporary works of Buddhist fiction have also earned public recognition, notably *A Tale for the Time Being* (2013) by Ruth Ozeki which was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize and the National Book Critic's Circle Award, and *Lincoln in the Bardo* by George Saunders—winner of the 2017 Man Booker Prize.

Despite the growth of Buddhist fiction, Buddhist young adult literature remains obscure. At least, public interest has not picked up on any of the seven Buddhist young adult novels studied in Beek's paper. This disregard is noteworthy because young adult literature is both a popular and profitable genre. As popular fiction (in comparison to literary fiction), it appeals to the masses. Two of Goodreads' [top ten most popular titles in 2017](#), *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas and *Turtles All the*

Way Down by John Green, are young adult novels. The genre sells so well that *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child* by J. K. Rowling topped [Amazon Best Sellers of 2016](#).

In an effort to understand readers' disinclination toward Buddhist young adult literature, Beek looked at research on the genre for clues and discovered that young adult literature is an understudied field. Grouped under children's literature, it often goes unnoticed; and prejudices toward popular fiction, in relation to literary fiction, have limited attention to the genre. By definition, young adult literature offers coming-of-age stories targeting readers from twelve to eighteen years old. But what distinguishes the genre is its adolescent growth formula, according to Dr. Roberta Trites. This formula has two major components—growth as negotiation of power and embodiment based on cognitive mapping.

To Trites, the concept of power is central to young adult literature narratives. Unlike children's literature which portrays growth as a function of what the protagonist learns about his/her self, growth in young adult literature is about negotiating one's power with that of institutions, parents, and authority figures, and realizing the limit of one's power in the face of biological imperatives such as sex and death. Thus, growth becomes dependent on the experience of power (or the lack thereof).

The concept of growth then needs to be present as an embodied experience made possible by linguistic cognitive mapping. This is because, as Trites argues, conceptualization is inescapably embodied.¹ This manifests in language where, for instance, action verb expresses one's conceptualizing ability, like "see" as "understanding." The process of

¹ Roberta Trites, *Literary Conceptualizations of Growth: Metaphors and Cognition in Adolescent Literature* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2014), 15.

transforming embodied experience into metaphor for conceptualization is called cognitive mapping. Language plays an important role in the process, for it acts as a bridge between the experiential and the conceptual. In the context of young adult literature, growth is often a conceptual result of the metaphorical language of spatial movement, of which the most popular form is going on an adventure or a journey. So for readers to understand growth, according to Beek, it is essential for the text's discourse to sustain readers' suspension of disbelief, allowing immersion into the imaginary adventure or journey. This requires the discourse to retain a sense of reality as readers understand it in the story, otherwise they cannot perform the cognitive mapping between embodiment and growth as a negotiation of power. In other words, readers of young adult literature must be so engaged by the narrative that they feel as if they are on the journey with the protagonist.

All seven Buddhist young adult novels Beek studied have elements corresponding to Trites' growth formula. The first four novels, including *Taneesha Never Disparaging* by M. Lavora Perry, *Ms. Isabelle Cornell, Herself* by Carol Farley, *Buddha Boy* by Kathe Koja, and *Zen and the Art of Faking It* by Jordan Sonnenblick, all follow the formula of growth as negotiation of power. Targeting younger audience within the genre's age range, these novels take readers along the protagonists' journey of learning to deal with pressure and stress, especially bullies, in both academic and familial settings. A personal effort of M. Lavora Perry, a Soka Gakkai USA International practitioner, to help her children face problems at school, *Taneesha Never Disparaging* is a retelling of the "Bodhisattva Never Disparaging" in the *Lotus Sutra's* 20th chapter in the guise of a coming-of-age tale of a fifth-grade girl. *Ms. Isabelle Cornell, Herself*, a rare 1980s publication, tells a story of a pastor's kid moving to Korea with family where she navigates the new environment and learns about Buddhism. *Buddha Boy* and *Zen and the Art of Faking It* focus more on the theme of bullies and are heavily steeped in the spirit of Zen Buddhist

pacifism, though Beek cautioned that they ran the risk of oversimplifying the sect to a simple set of values associated with peace, mind-body harmony, and mental concentration.

The embodiment aspect is more prominent in the last three novels, *Lethal Inheritance* by Tahlia Newland, *Excavating Pema Ozer* by Yudron Wangmo, and *Saltwater Buddha* by Jaimal Yogis. They feature older protagonists and more adventurous plots. The characters go on journeys that parallel the life of the Buddha or experiences of Buddhist spiritual adults (e.g. monk or guru), employing the embodied Buddhist mimetic experience to negotiate their power in relation to the power of their parents, authority figures, and that of both old and new social structures. Each novel is set in a symbolic landscape which is heavily informed by Buddhist elements. In *Lethal Inheritance*, the protagonist receives help from a guiding figure similar to a Tibetan wisdom master in a quest to rescue her mother from the demons. *Excavating Pema Ozer*, the first of a four-part novel series, is modeled after the idea of mandala and Wangmo [suggests](#) the story be read as an allegory, or a symbolic journey. *Saltwater Buddha*, a fictionalized memoir that uses the Hawaiian ocean as a symbolic landscape to tell a personal coming-of-age story, builds on the seventeenth-century monk Basho's haiku quoted in the introductory chapter:

Mother I never knew

Every time I see the ocean

Every time.

On the surface, all these novels meet the genre's definition and Trites' growth formula. Yet, playing by the book does not guarantee success. In fact, Beek found that many of them were poorly received on both social and commercial platforms. For some, as Pan anticipated, the religious landscapes in those novels are either confusing (e.g. Newland's *Le-*

thal Inheritance), preachy (e.g. Kojia's *Buddha Boy*), or impractical (e.g. *Saltwater Buddha*). The critique seems to fall into the line of Beek's theory of the text's linguistic inability to sustain the bridge between the experiential and the conceptual. She argues that since the religious context is perhaps not well known or sometimes too specific, it fails to make space for the readers' experience and consequently alienates them. Unless skillfully interwoven into the narrative, religious elements prevent readers from immersing themselves in the storyline. Beek suggests that the constant need to recontextualize religious elements in young adult literature disrupts the readers' suspension of disbelief and prevents cognitive mapping between embodiment and growth as negotiation of power. This points to the problem of language as a tenuous bridge between embodiment and conceptualization of growth in Buddhist young adult literature.

So what makes *The Astonishing Color of After* a rare success in the yet struggling field? It is a [New York Times Bestseller](#) and has been [reviewed favourably](#). The religious elements are there, despite Pan's initial hesitation, and look more as catalysts for success instead of potential hazards. How did Pan's debut novel overcome the challenge of bridging the gap between the experiential and the conceptual, between embodiment and growth?

I knew that Beek had read *The Astonishing Color of After* because she reviewed it on the Buddhist Fiction Blog, so I contacted her to ask if she had any thoughts about the success of Pan's story. Beek responded that even though Pan's novel had been labeled with the genre of "magical realism," the story succeeded as a Buddhist young adult narrative due to Pan's ability and skill with intertextualization—the weaving together of contexts and cultures. She conjectured that Pan is a young author who more easily and readily relates with the growth challenges facing the age range of contemporary, globalized young adult readers. The

key to Pan's successful storytelling is in her characterization, Beek said. The protagonist, Leigh, is forced to face the limits of her own power due to the death of her mother from suicide. Right away, the premise of the novel is believable because the protagonist is confronted with the prominent early twenty-first century issue of mental illness. Further, casting Leigh as an interracial teenager who is grieving the loss of her mother allows space for the "magical realism" of the novel wherein the protagonist learns about her Taiwanese Buddhist heritage. Because Leigh's journey is believable, the reader is able to suspend their disbelief of the "magical realism" and go on the journey through grief with Leigh, learning about Taiwanese Buddhism as the protagonist learns about it, not in a "preachy" manner but in a way that positively affects her own growth and her ability to deal with the loss of her mother. Leigh's experience of Taiwanese Buddhism to simultaneously advance the plot, propels her grief-journey, and has a real impact on her identity. Pan was able to weave aspects of Buddhism in the guise of magical realism into her novel because she created an authentic, relatable character and placed her in a biologically imperative situation that is highly plausible for the twenty-first century situation.

Whether authentic sympathetic character, relevant contemporary issues, or linguistic bridge, after all, there will not be a magical formula for Buddhist young adult works to achieve success over night. The way to readers' heart is complicated, but as Pan's *The Astonishing Color of After* proves, a true connection can be made.

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