

Presenting the Past:

How the Novels of A.S. King Provide Temporality to the Teenage Experience

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Introduction

Stereotypes about adolescents pervade popular culture. Typical teenagers, according to many adults, ingest a noxious cocktail of rebellion and prurience. They dedicate themselves to defying their parents' orders and social decorum; they "are perceived by many adults to be loud, obnoxious, [and] irresponsible" (Anderson, 2004, p. 2). Their thoughts center not on academic achievement but on sexual gratification: Finders (1999) quotes a preservice teacher who comments, "puberty kicks in, and the kid becomes nothing but a bundle of raging hormones" (p. 254). These stereotypes manifest themselves in a variety of media. Consider, for example, *Mean Girls*, the quintessential teenage movie... written by adults. Though the movie satirizes many stereotypes (e.g., the beauty queen, the nerdy math whiz), it uses these same stereotypes to define its characters and their motivations. Cady, the main character, feigns academic ignorance to earn a boy's attention; she allows her hormones, her eagerness to ensnare a man, to dictate her behavior. Regina, one of the titular mean girls, treats people cruelly seemingly because she can. The movie and countless others thus reflect the broad, reductive stereotypes that surround teenagers.

These stereotypes produce many unfortunate consequences, but on one front they prove particularly harmful: they rob teenagers of temporal participation and past, present, and future relevance. Obviously, these stereotypes cannot erase teenagers from the annals of time; young people have existed in every era. Rather, they separate teenagers from world events and diminish teenagers' influence on past, present, and future. A hormonal teenager, caught in the midst of physical and emotional changes, might not care about the wider world. An apathetic teenager, mired in relentless self-absorption, certainly lacks the capacity to shape the future. These stereotypes not only portray teenagers inaccurately and monolithically but also divest them of social and temporal relevance. They become afterthoughts rather than active players in time: they might have *lived* through a certain event, but did that event truly affect their mindsets and perceptions of the world? They will one day benefit from or be harmed by current social

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policy, but do they really have an interest in that social policy or worry about the state of the future? Popular culture seems to have relegated teenagers to an atemporal role; it assumes that teenagers exist in a vacuum of self and cannot grasp temporal implications – how the past has produced the present, how their actions will mold the world.

Young adult literature (YAL) can remedy this issue by placing teenagers within the temporal world and its events. As its name implies, this genre focuses on teenagers' challenges and lived experiences, and it arms adolescent readers with insight into their complex, changeable emotions. YAL novels thus serve as a gateway to the world at large; they help teenage readers to situate their personal feelings within wider sociopolitical contexts. However, YAL also fulfills another invaluable function: it shows that teenagers can have temporality and hold awareness of and power over past, present, and future. Moreover, it removes teenagers from the stereotypical vacuum to which adults have consigned them. YAL novels feature adolescent characters who contend with social (racial discrimination, same-sex relationships) and economic (poverty, college debt) problems, and they demonstrate that teenagers, like adults or any age group, must invariably navigate and be affected by a complex world. These novels not only educate teenage audiences but also adult audiences: they refute temporal stereotypes and show older people that younger people care about the world at large. YAL thus works to humanize, deepen, and temporalize the teenage experience.

YAL writer A.S. King's novels accomplish this goal. King's work abounds with sociopolitical references, predictions, and scenarios. Her characters navigate traditional adolescent obstacles – puberty, depression, relations with family and peers – but she links her protagonists' inner conflicts to developments in the broader world. In *Everybody Sees the Ants*, for instance, she alternates between contemporary Arizona and the jungles of 1960s Vietnam. The book's protagonist likewise vacillates between the two settings, and his visits to Vietnam illuminate his life in the modern era. King's historical foundation adds depth and nuance to a typical teenage story.

This novel and King's other novels - *Glory O' Brien's History of the Future* and *Please Ignore Vera Dietz* – demonstrate the temporality of teenage life. Specifically, King's reliance upon historical foundations connects her teenage characters to myriad events and scenarios. Each novel bears the mark of a historical event or movement, and each novel forces its characters to confront and consider sociopolitical issues. This narrative strategy raises several

questions pertaining to teenagers' temporality: why did King choose to associate a certain character with certain historical events? How do her historical references reinforce the books' respective themes? What real-world events might have prompted her to insert a particular reference? What do her books imply about teenagers' role in time? King's novels answer these questions – and refute common stereotypes – by placing teenagers within temporal contexts and showing their concern about and participation in world events.

Everybody Sees the Ants: Ghosts of PTSD Past

The past governs the present. Today's world – its cultures, its languages, its practices, its prejudices – has arisen from the indelible influence of previous generations, social movements, and transformative world events. The AIDS epidemic, for instance, precipitated a safe-sex movement that remains embedded in the national consciousness. The 1970s feminist movement secured reproductive autonomy for future generations of women. Governmental deceit (e.g., the Watergate and Whitewater scandals) continues to leave many citizens suspicious of their leaders. Often the past's influence manifests itself implicitly: individuals accept certain truths – “You should marry someone you love!” or “We need an obscene defense budget to prevent terrorist attacks” – and subconsciously teach those truths to the next generation. The present thus reflects the innumerable seconds, months, years that have preceded it.

This influence also occurs on smaller scales. Humans enter this world in a state of *tabula rasa*, or clean mind: at birth they have no fears, no prejudices, no emotional damage. Through experience they acquire their personalities and beliefs, whether positive or negative, and their behaviors and idiosyncrasies convey the specific events through which they have lived and struggles they have endured. An abused child, for example, might become a fearful, distrustful adult. A man raised in a racist home might perpetuate a cycle of racial hatred. A neglectful parent might beget another generation of distant, inadequate parents. In all of these examples, past experiences dictate present behaviors and characteristics.

Everybody Sees the Ants addresses the influence of the past on both literal and symbolic terms. At many points King links real-world, historical events to her fictional characters' actions and emotions. Lucky Linderman, the protagonist, comments on his grandmother, a Vietnam widow: “[Grandma Janice] was a big-time member of the POW/MIA [Prisoner of War/Missing in Action] movement who spoke at rallies and national meetings and worked with

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families of the missing” (King, 2003, p. 39). This quotation shows how the past always affected Janice’s present beliefs and activities. She never quite accepted her husband’s death, and this past trauma prompted her to join and remain with POW/MIA organizations. Such work rests fundamentally upon hope: Janice – and presumably every other member – clung to the unrealistic notion that her loved one would return. The anguish in her past shaped her character and focused her life on a particular objective – a situation that occurs to varying degrees in every life.

Janice’s plight mirrors the plights of many real-life families and reinforces King’s point about the past’s heavy influence. The National League of POW/MIA Families offers the following statements on its website (underlined emphasis present in original text):

The League, a nonprofit, tax-exempt, 501(c)3, humanitarian organization (FEIN #23-7071242) is financed by contributions from the families, veterans and others. The League’s sole purpose is to obtain the release of all prisoners, the fullest possible accounting for the missing and repatriation of all recoverable remains of those who died serving our nation during the Vietnam War.

This mission statement echoes the language found in *Everybody Sees the Ants*. Like Grandma Janice, the League’s members strive to redress a past wrong: they want to find soldiers abandoned or forgotten by the US government. Beneath this noble enterprise, however, lies an emotional motive that borders on delusion. For example, the League wishes to obtain “the release of all prisoners.” Such language assumes that prisoners would still be alive forty years after the Vietnam War’s conclusion. Likewise, “fullest possible accounting” conveys the hope, no matter how faint, that a father or brother might still be living; the phrase connotes a thorough search, one that might – just *might* – uncover evidence of a family member’s whereabouts. King’s book refers explicitly to no organization, but her characters and choice of historical reference convey the same emotions as these real-life organizations. She thus uses war and its aftermath – strong, even transformative events – to underscore the past’s power to affect the mind.

Direct, literal references to the past also help to characterize Lucky’s father, an aloof chef. Early in the book, Lucky notes, “Dad is required to stick around all day [on Sundays] if possible, though he usually only makes it until midafternoon before something we do makes him mad” (p. 46). This sentence conjures images of the quintessential distant father and hints at

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strain between father and son. Moreover, its bitter tone communicates Lucky's resentment toward his parent. At this point the book offers little insight into the father's character, but he seems to display behavior consistent with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). The Mayo Clinic lists "[a]voiding places, activities or people that remind you of the traumatic event" as a primary symptom of PTSD. This symptom exactly matches the father's behavior: he seeks to avoid contact with his family, perhaps because his son reminds him of his own lost father. Again, King never explicitly mentions the disorder or whether it affects Lucky's father. However, this particular context – missing Vietnam veteran, explicit references to the war, psychological and emotional issues – seems designed to conjure thoughts about the disorder and its prevalence among veterans and their families. King's direct references to the war thus illuminate the father's character and tacitly acknowledge a social issue.

Later, the novel shifts from literal to symbolic references. Lucky, the teenage protagonist, has no direct knowledge of Vietnam; he knows only what he has read or heard. In lieu of direct recollection, the novel features a number of elaborate dream sequences set in Vietnam. Lucky, socially awkward and relentlessly bullied, finds solace in this eidetic war zone. Under his grandfather's – or, rather, his *dream* grandfather's – guidance, he acquires the grit and determination to conquer the real world. These dream sequences accomplish several goals: within the novel, they serve to advance Lucky's character development. In broader terms, they establish thematic parallels between past and present, and they create symbolic links between current events (i.e., events relevant to teenagers' lives) and historical events. King's literal references remind audiences of the Vietnam War – its dates, its players, its controversies – but these symbolic references reveal the emotional connections, the common struggles, between the two time periods.

Lucky's first visit to the dream-Vietnam equates wartime imprisonment with modern bullying. In "Jungle Dream #1," Lucky encounters both his missing grandfather and a "mean-looking Asian man" with a "rifle" (p. 22). The situation seems immediately clear: Lucky's grandfather has become a prisoner of the Vietnamese. On a literal level, this episode reminds readers of real-life prisoners of war and their prison wardens. According to Craig Howe (1993), by 1973, when the Vietnam War ended, the Vietnamese had captured approximately 600 American POWs (p. 3). Even after the prisoners' eventual release, MIA organizations still "demanded a full accounting for those missing in action" (p. 6). This segment of *Everybody Sees*

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the Ants contains hints of this controversy: it shows Lucky's grandfather, a soldier, still being held hostage after the war's conclusion, and it thus alludes to those real-life uncertainties concerning POWs and MIA soldiers.

On a figurative level, however, this dream sequence identifies the similarities between teenage bullies and Vietnamese soldiers and connects past to present. The Asian man, named Frankie, becomes a recurring character. In many dream sequences, Frankie abuses and degrades Lucky's grandfather. For example, he imprisons Grandpa Harry in a "prison camp" (p. 34), and he has "tortured [Harry] for [his] whole life" (p. 44). In other words, Frankie acts as a bully who simultaneously demeans and restricts Grandpa Harry. Lucky, too, contends with a bully: Nader McMillan "makes [his] life a living hell" (p. 9) and even inflicts violence upon him (p. 51). Lucky's bullying occurs in a different context, surely, but the two situations contain many parallels. Both grandfather and grandson face oppressors who exercise force and intimidation, and this similarity forms a thematic link between past and present. Lucky, like any present-day child, has served in neither Vietnam nor any other war, but he has endured stress and trauma, two travails common to soldiers and teenagers. Likewise, he has dealt with a constant enemy who denies him a moment's peace. The parallels between Lucky's and his grandfather's respective predicaments underscores those powerful emotions – fear, hopelessness, pained resignation – that transcend historical boundaries. This first dream sequence draws parallels between past and present and links a historical event to the YAL audience's experiences.

Elsewhere, Lucky uses his jungle dreams as a dissociative tool. To his grandfather he remarks, "I love it here," and he clarifies this comment with narration: "I refer to my dream physique with my hands. I am completely buff, wearing a sleeveless T-shirt, and my deltoids are firm, small cantaloupes" (p. 74). This dream Lucky differs markedly from the real-life Lucky, a bookish, introverted boy. Lucky titles these interludes "Operation Rescue Mission." Ostensibly he wishes to rescue his grandfather, but the title's ambiguity lends itself to a different conclusion. What if he wishes to save himself? These dream sequences offer him an escape from his daily problems; they allow him to dissociate temporarily from his bully, his aloof father, and his unsympathetic schoolmates. Moreover, they allow him to become momentarily his ideal self – a strong, "buff" man rather than a meek, mild boy. Lucky's dreams allow him to see and help his grandfather, but they also enable him to leave his painful existence behind.

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Lucky's dissociative tendencies might indicate a mental illness. Elizabeth Howell (2011, p. 3) describes the symptoms and behaviors of individuals afflicted with Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID):

The person with DID essentially lives with various simultaneously active and subjectively autonomous strands of experience that are rigidly and profoundly separated from each other in important ways, such as in memory, characteristic affects, behavior, self-image, body image, and thinking styles. These different segments of experiencing have their own sense of separate identity – their own sense of an “I” – including a sense of personal autobiographical memory.

This description matches Lucky's accounts of his jungle experiences and rescue missions. He maintains two active strands of consciousness, one in the real world and one in the dream world. Additionally, he displays disparate behaviors in each context. The real Lucky struggles to assert himself, to face his challenges directly, while the dream Lucky, masculine and fearless, traverses the jungle and conquers his enemies. Occasionally these two lives cross, such as when he somehow brings a “winning hand of gin” home from Vietnam (p. 44). For the most part, though, he erects a boundary between his lives and informs no one about his adventures. Like the classic DID sufferer, he lives two distinct existences, each with its own setting (suburban vs. jungle), thinking style (passive vs. active), and self-image (weak vs. strong). Though the text never mentions DID, Lucky's actions and mental fragmentation seem consistent with the illness, and his two worlds might serve as a figurative representation of the disorder.

These potential struggles with mental illness reflect the struggles of many real-life teenagers. Kessler et al. (2005, p. 93) state that many DSM-IV mental disorders (e.g., anxiety and mood disorders) first manifest themselves in childhood or adolescence. In many cases, external triggers such as bullying cause or exacerbate stress disorders. Weaver (2000), for example, recounts the story of a teenage girl who experienced routine bullying at her school. Though the girl's family had no history of PTSD, she developed the disorder due to the bullying she endured; once an outgoing child, she became “housebound” and “constantly anxious” (p. 80). This case study sounds similar to Lucky's situation. Like the unnamed girl, Lucky faces constant bullying and threats to his physical safety. These incidents might have caused or awakened in him a mental illness of some sort – DSM-IV stress disorder or otherwise. This interpretation adds another dimension to his character: it presents him not as a hero but as a

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damaged teenager in need of help. King situates Lucky's fantasies within a particular historical context, but the emotional circumstances that necessitate these escapist episodes bear heavy similarity to the struggles faced by actual teenagers.

Lucky's escapist dreams and the mental problems they indicate reinforce the formative influence the past exercises on the present. The first jungle dream occurs shortly after he suffers his first bullying incident; he calls that incident "the day that changed everything" (p. 21). This crucial moment, viewed in the context of the whole novel, illuminates the link between past and present. Lucky's past abounds with disappointment and insecurity. Ergo, he dedicates his present to avoiding that past. His dreams assist in this endeavor and show that he has yet to vanquish his troubles.

The knowledge Lucky gleans in these dreams might symbolize teenagers' attempts to cope with their problems – or, in temporal terms, to overcome their past travails and create a better present. For much of the novel, Lucky's masculine, muscular ideal self remains confined to his dreams, but eventually he tries to bring this persona into his real life. Under his uncle's tutelage he embarks upon a weight-training regimen and learns how to be a "normal" man (p. 100). King might have chosen this particular activity for a reason. Paluska and Schwenck (2000) write, "clinically depressed men and women of all age groups found substantial decreases of depressive symptoms following both long and short courses of exercise" (p. 169). In other words, exercise may not function as a panacea, but it can elevate mood and alleviate negative feelings. Lucky's exercise regimen appears to have these effects: he reports feeling "awesome" after "lift[ing] fifty-five pounds thirty times" (p. 123). His new hobby represents his determination to overcome his past obstacles. In his dreams he acquires the wisdom of the past; his journey through Vietnam teaches him the importance of physical and mental strength and perseverance. The weightlifting symbolizes an effort to implement that wisdom, to shape the present to his liking. In broader terms, it shows young audiences that they need not be limited by past hardships; like Lucky, they can examine history, learn from it, and acquire techniques to create a brighter present.

These links between Lucky's past and present imbue him – and many teenagers, by extension – with temporality. He certainly displays many attributes, such as moodiness and grouchiness, associated with the "typical teenager," and he engages in a healthy amount of introspection... or navel gazing, in blunter terms. However, at many intervals he turns his

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introspection toward his family and country's past. He documents how the Vietnam War has affected his grandmother, his father, and ultimately him, and he tacitly equates the effects of bullying with the debilitating effects of warfare. Lucky's thoughts and the book's overarching metaphor demonstrate that teenagers learn from and display the influence of the past.

Please Ignore Vera Dietz: No Time Like the Present to Struggle

A popular saying encourages people to live in the moment, but this charming aphorism ignores a painful truth: living in the moment can be inordinately trying. Each day brings a plethora of trials: loved ones die; capricious employers issue pink slips; students attempt to balance work, school, and family life. Furthermore, the present functions as the temporal epicenter of stress: though we cannot change the past, neither can we perfectly foresee the future. Consequently, we focus our nervous energy, our fears and concerns, on the immediate moment; we feel seconds rather than minutes as time slows to an anxious, interminable crawl. Consider the example of a nervous speaker delivering a presentation. Sweaty and jittery, he feels as though his speech lasted an hour, but after leaving the stage he discovers that he spoke only for five minutes. His distress caused him to elongate the time and lengthen the experience. This example emphasizes perpetual struggle of the present, the pain of living moment by moment.

Please Ignore Vera Dietz dedicates its entire plot to exploring and underscoring this idea. The novel documents the titular character's struggles as she holds a job, copes with her friend's death, and attempts to connect to her distant father. Some of Vera's life experiences seem a trifle idiosyncratic. After all, most teenagers never deal with (a) their erstwhile stripper mother leaving their accountant father or (b) peculiar visions of their dead best friends. Vera's story, like Lucky's, combines the natural with the supernatural; it provides intrigue and commentary that transcends the typical YAL plotline. Specifically Vera's tale examines the present lives and concerns of today's teenagers, and the novel's allusions – to the student-loan crisis, to the epidemic of teenage substance abuse, to the dangers of domestic violence – reflect the experiences of innumerable teenage readers.

At many points the novel alludes to past and present issues plaguing the education system. Vera sarcastically dispenses the following narration:

People believe it because people are stupid. Apparently, that's adequate now. There are kids in my class who can't locate Florida on a map and they're going to get the same

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diploma I'm going to get. They're going to get accepted to college and become physical therapists or kindergarten teachers or financial analysts and they still won't be able to locate Florida on a map. (p. 71)

This statement conveys contempt for lackluster education and the society that permits it. Vera's grievance focuses primarily on the societal tolerance of anti-intellectualism. As the quotation indicates, she cannot fathom why legitimately unintelligent people often succeed in education. This passage echoes the longstanding sentiments and fears of many real-world writers and thinkers. Hofstadter (1964), for instance, wrote about the "slackness of American education" and observed that the public wanted to "[produce] more Sputniks [i.e., more results], not [develop] more intellect" (p. 5). Gardner (1983) famously declared, "If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose upon America the mediocre educational performance that exists today..." (n.p.). Vera's inner monologue reiterates these concerns: its focus on students who "can't locate Florida" communicates her disdain for mediocre education and anti-intellectual classmates. Moreover, her complaints show that certain educational problems and opinions have persisted over time. Vera's commentary thus underscores the current state – or, at least, society's perception of the current state – of education.

The novel also spotlights the financial burden of modern education. When Vera muses about college, she says, "Sure beats being one of those kids at school who don't yet understand what 'college loans' mean ... [They] discover that they owe a hundred grand, and they can't buy groceries or health insurance" (p. 91-2). Vera's thoughts identify a burden familiar to many college-age individuals: inordinate college tuition and student-loan debt. According to Fox (2015), American families now spend on average \$24,164 for college-related expenses. This hefty amount reflects the exponential increase in average college tuition. College Board (2015) reports, "[From 1984-1985 to 2014-2015], [t]he increase for in-state students at public four-year institutions was 225%, from \$2,810 to \$9,139." Vera's internal criticisms, though aimed at her peers, allude to the dire financial situation that now accompanies higher education. Specifically, her mention of "a hundred grand" indicates the immense financial burden of a college education. Moreover, her failure to name any specific peers might show how excessive tuition has affected an entire generation – how it has plunged innumerable names and faces into insurmountable debt. Though Vera herself plans to attend an affordable university (p. 91), her college plans tacitly acknowledge a broader socioeconomic reality.

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Vera's father – and his reluctance to *pay* for college – highlights a modern generational conflict. At one point Vera explicitly states, “Because Dad has made it clear that I am paying” (p. 91). Initially this predicament seems rather ungeneralizable: Vera's father Ken may be unwilling to pay for college, but surely most parents feel willing to assist children with educational expenses. A cursory social analysis, however, reveals that many real-life parents share Ken's austere ideas about education and finance. Holland (2014) writes, “But in 2014, 47 percent [of parents] held that view [that children should pay most or all of their college costs]” (n.p.). Similarly, Bodnar (2004) quotes a parent who asks, “Since when did paying for college become a parent's responsibility?” (p. 82). These sources show that Ken's stinginess transcends the boundaries of fiction; his position, though not held by all parents, appears quite frequently in the real world. King's novel draws inspiration from and addresses this costly reality, and these parallels between reality and fiction imbue Vera's situation with wider significance. Like many teenagers, she faces an uncertain, financially perilous future, and though she respects Ken's decision, she must still contend with monetary and financial obstacles. Unlike some teenagers, Vera expresses no resentment toward her father, but the novel alludes to real-life conflicts between parents and students.

Elsewhere, the novel uses Vera's substance abuse and domestic unrest to comment upon challenges of contemporary teenagers. Many times throughout the novel, eighteen-year-old Vera illegally imbibes. “After my third vodka cooler,” for instance, she straddles a man's lap (p. 116), and she keeps a supply of alcohol stored in her car. She tries to justify this illicit consumption by saying, “Don't judge. I'm not getting drunk. I'm coping” (p. 11). This statement, though sarcastic, identifies a troubling reality: teenagers often mitigate pain or anxiety with illegal substances; they drink or smoke or snort to distract themselves from social, personal, and domestic difficulties. Zullig, Valois, Huebner, Oeltmann, and Drane (2001) link underage drinking and drug consumption with reduced life satisfaction, and Vera's home life evinces a dearth of parental support and an abundance of reduced life satisfaction. Ken “doesn't listen when I explain that working [a full-time job] isn't very good for my grades” (p. 10); he appears “annoyed that [Vera] was on the couch with the remote control before noon on a weekday” (p. 61). He encourages Vera to work doggedly and to pursue productive activities, but he ignores her need to relax, to study, to sleep. His rigid demands might explain Vera's need to “cope,” and

their strained relationship, as well as its effects on Vera, seems reminiscent of many families' internal conflicts.

Vera's drinking also emphasizes the emotional trauma caused by a close friend's suicide. Throughout the novel, Vera attempts to cope with her friend Charlie's untimely death. In the novel's opening chapter, she inquires, "Is it okay to hate a dead kid? Even if I loved him once? Even if he was my best friend?" (p. 1). Beneath Vera's questions lies powerful, unexpressed emotion. The word "hate," forceful and vitriolic and venomous, conveys a burning fury, as though she cannot forgive Charlie's deserting her, as though she wants to scream but finds herself muted by his death. Likewise, her claim that she "loved him" reveals the depth of her affection – affection she will never share and that will never be reciprocated. This noxious cocktail of emotions occurs frequently in individuals whose loved ones commit suicide. Williams (2002) says, "[Suicide] causes grief they may never resolve, guilt in a way no other death does, even raising the risk of suicide in others" (p. 107). Suicide kills the victim, but it hurts the victim's loved ones by disrupting their lives and plunging them into emotional uncertainty: what might they have done? What might they have done *differently*? Vera's destructive actions might stem from this emotional turmoil. Perhaps she drinks to dull the pain of Charlie's suicide or to quiet her restless thoughts. Whatever her motivation, her actions indicate her emotional damage. Vera's unresolved grief and harmful coping habits arise from her unique situation, but they also transcend the novel and reflect many real-life individuals' experiences.

Though the novel centers on Vera, her friend Charlie's predicament focuses attention on domestic abuse, another prominent social topic. Charlie delivers several messages from the afterlife, and in one of these interludes he says, "[Vera's] father didn't swear or drink like my father did" (p. 49), and Vera often hears "Mr. Kahn drunkenly lambasting Mrs. Khan for missing a spiderweb in a dark corner or not beating the rugs properly" (p. 99). Such domestic turmoil accomplishes two goals: it helps to explain Charlie's drastic actions, and it reinforces the prevalence of domestic abuse in contemporary society. The National Coalition Against Domestic Violence (n.d.) estimates that "more than 10 million women and men" suffer domestic abuse in a given year. This number seems astronomical in scope: how can any authorities possibly hope to quell such an epidemic? King's novel, like many others, humanizes domestic violence by presenting it on a smaller scale. Charlie's home life occupies the periphery of

Vera's story, but the "hints" of domestic violence hold great significance. A reader, for instance, might see signs of Charlie's life in a friend's turbulent home. The novel thus serves as a fictional pamphlet for domestic violence; it uses Charlie's story to identify the signs of abuse and arm readers with information.

Please Ignore Vera Dietz maintains a narrow focus on its protagonist, but it also functions as a veritable guidebook to modern teenage life and a refutation of atemporal stereotypes. Vera's challenges, though individual and idiosyncratic, contain themes present in almost every teenage life. She worries about college; she deals with a stubborn, aloof parent; and she attempts to balance a work life – school and a job – with a tumultuous personal life – one defined by her friend's suicide and her own substance-abuse issues. Her story might be any teenager's story, and her emotions might occur in any teenager's life. King's novel skillfully bridges fiction and reality; it centers on fictional characters but situates those characters firmly within many readers' troubled, present lives. It fulfills a central function of literature by helping its audience relate to the current world and its current trials. Moreover, it reminds adults that teenagers must also contend with this challenging world. Adults may have lost jobs, but teenagers must worry about obtaining them, too; adults struggle to pay for college, but teenagers must deal with student loans. Vera's situation emphasizes that teenagers' complex emotions arise from a complex, diverse present.

Glory O'Brien: Planning for the Future or Avoiding Doomsday?

The world *future* has a deceptively simple definition: what happens after now – tomorrow, next week, next year, next century. This definition, however, leaves in its wake a universe of uncertainty. How will the world look twenty or thirty years from now? How will society have changed? Will people behave any differently? These questions seem nigh impossible to answer. These questions seem less intimidating however, when viewed from a more local, humanistic perspective: with every passing moment, we determine the future. Current events and movements lay the foundation for future developments, and our present decisions will shape the world for decades to come. In other words, the future happens now.

Glory O'Brien's History of the Future acknowledges this fact and attempts to relay it to a teenage audience. The novel ostensibly addresses such teenage issues as parental conflict, relationship dramas, tension between friends, etc. However, the novel's main trope – the main

character's ability to envision the future – adds a dimension of social awareness and future prognostications. Glory's visions rarely concern frivolous matters. Rather, they depict an alarming future marked by oppression, violence, and sexism. King uses Glory's supernatural power to provide social commentary: upon first glance, the novel contains typical YAL fare, but further inspection reveals a wealth of historical information adapted to intrigue and engage a young audience.

Glory O'Brien's History of the Future features a largely conventional, modern setting, but the main character's special power infuses the novel with speculative – and, in this case, eerily prescient – elements. The titular character gains the ability to divine individuals' histories and futures by gazing into their eyes. She sees a wide array of visions: one man, she learns, “never got a word in edgeways [with his father]” and so “took the role of the quiet kid” (King, 2014, p. 162). Another man “will steal girls from over the border even though there are border patrols” (p. 163). Her visions, whether oriented toward the past or future, involve significant events. For example, she glimpses both the Vietnam War and the forthcoming Second Civil War precipitated by Nedrick the Sanctimonious (p. 105). Glory's power represents speculative fiction in the truest sense of the term: her gift enables her – and, consequently, the readers – to see the future consequences of humanity's current actions. The connection between present and future underscores the link between speculative fiction and historical context: Glory's premonitions frequently mention social issues prominent in today's media and public consciousness. King roots the book in modern America but uses this setting as a foundation for future predictions.

Many of Glory's visions focus on feminism and forecast the repercussions of a weakened feminist movement. Early in the novel, Glory recounts a conversation with her friend: “Ellie told me the feminist years were over” (p. 26). Ellie's ideas suggest apathy toward feminism. Such apathy – or even outright opposition – also occurs among real-life women: Passno (2001), for instance, writes, “We've been duped ... We bought into a lie that sounded so good ... [F]eminism as a worldview has wreaked havoc on our culture” (p. 3, 169). Passno perceives the feminist movement as detrimental and desires a society divested of feminist influences. *Glory O'Brien* envisions such a society: Glory witnesses a dystopian future in which “it [is] illegal for women to work” and “[there is a] massive rise in random assaults ... against women and even young girls” (p. 110, 128). This vision tacitly equates the disappearance of feminism with abridgement of women's rights, and it examines the economic and social repercussions of a

diminished feminist movement. This passage proves relevant not only to the novel but to the real world; it sounds a dire warning for real-life women who dismiss the importance of feminism. Glory's speculative vision thus shows a distant future but responds to a modern social debate.

The novel also comments on another ongoing social debate: the controversy regarding homeschooling. Ellie, Glory's friend, also gains the ability to see individuals' pasts and futures. Unlike Glory's visions, however, Ellie's visions yield only mundane revelations. For example, Ellie learns that a man's grandfather "insisted on using the same fork and napkin ring at every meal" (p. 158). The girls' disparate visions reflect their respective levels of education. Glory, a recent high school graduate, can conceive of a future marked by war and oppression; her thoughts encompass matters of grand scale and scope. Ellie, a product of homeschooling, has a provincial outlook on life; she lacks the knowledge to consider events more distant than "ten miles from here" (p. 161). These limited visions communicate popular conceptions about and criticisms of homeschooling. Robin West (2009) gives this critique: "If you want to teach [your children] from nothing but the Bible, you can. If they want to skateboard all day, and you choose to let them, you can" (p. 7). West's writing notes the lax curricula and nonexistent standards that plague some homeschooling endeavors. Ellie, with her communal upbringing (p. 8) and early withdrawal from public school (p. 14), fits many stereotypes about homeschooled children: ignorant and sheltered, she lacks the capacity to strive for life beyond the commune. The girls' visions, the novel's key speculative component, functions as a commentary on American educational attainment.

Glory's visions and her boyfriend Peter's research highlight the social and economic dangers of technology. Peter hypothesizes that "humans are becoming less and less interested in other humans and more and more interested in stuff on their computers" (206). He reasons that technology has erected divides between and among individuals; it has destroyed common manners and rendered civility a chore. Glory's visions reaffirm Peter's theory: she meets a woman who will "lose both her daughters to the machine" (p. 217). The phrase "the machine" seems especially important. It connotes a heartless, all-consuming technology devoid of humanity or compassion. The woman's "[losing] both her daughters" forecasts an impending technological takeover in which people become less valuable than machines. These passages yield a variety of interpretations, but one might be particularly salient to modern times: the

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potential for automation and human obsolescence. Bui's (2015) article, provocatively titled "Will Your Job Be Done By A Machine," indicates popular concern about future job losses resulting from automation. Glory's visions couch these fears in vague terms (e.g., "losing" people to the machine), but they betray wariness of current technology and its effects.

Glory O'Brien grounds its speculation in the present – the true, immediate present – and its unavoidable, imminent impact on the future. The novel has neither futuristic settings nor advanced technology; its story unfolds within the confines of the modern world. It operates on a cause-effect scenario. Whenever Glory observes some flaw of the modern world, her subsequent visions illustrate the consequences of this flaw. This technique transforms the novel into a piece of social analysis. Like the other books, it forecasts the future, but it solidifies its predictions by examining the long-range ramifications of current trends and issues. These contemporary events have a clear influence on the speculative future: the decline of feminism leads to female oppression, the advancement of technology and machines erodes humans' common decency. Such reasonable prognostications afford the novel a high degree of verisimilitude, and they reinforce the notion that YAL literature, though intended for young readers, can make mature predictions. It can incorporate current concerns and act as cultural commentary and as a fictionalized companion to history.

The book's plot again conveys central functions and advantage of YAL: it can ignite teenagers' interest in the world and concern for the future, and it can show teenagers' role in shaping the future. Furlong and Cartmel (2007) observe, "Party politics are perceived as boring and as something which has little relevance to their [teenagers'] lives" (p. 124). In other words, teenagers perceive politics and social policy as "adult" struggles; they see little reason to care about – and believe they have little control over – the laws that govern their country. YAL functions not as a simplification but as a translation of these complex concepts, and it places politics and social movements within the context of young readers' lives and experiences. *Glory O'Brien*, for instance, updates such concepts as feminism and economic uncertainty for a new generation. The future Glory sees – one in which women live in total subservience – arises from the teenage characters' apathy toward feminism. This plot development shows teenage readers connections between the present and the inevitable future. Like King's other novels, the book also challenges stereotypes about teenage apathy. Glory lives not within her own head but within the wider world; she worries sincerely about the fate of humanity and the effects of

current social trends. Her character shows that teenagers can have an outward orientation and concerns about worldly and temporal issues.

Conclusion

Popular culture abounds with clichés about time and history: “Those who don’t learn their history are doomed to repeat it” or “Time waits for no one.” Human beings have a peculiar fascination with time, its passage, and its effects. We view it as one of the few inexorable forces. No matter how much we fight, the past cannot be changed; no matter how much we protest, the present continues to unfold; no matter how much we plan, the future unfolds on its own terms. We cannot delay, change, or manipulate these processes, but we can attempt to explain and learn from them.

Popular culture abounds with an equal number of stereotypes about teenagers. Teenagers, it says, often prove most resistant to time’s lessons. They concern themselves with their own lives and daily affairs, and they sometimes engage in precious little reflection or forethought. Often this myopia stems from their inability to relate to time, to history and its influence on the present. They wonder, “How does this apply to me? Why should I care?”

A.S. King’s novels answer these questions and refute these stereotypes by placing teenage protagonists within specific temporal contexts. Her three novels – *Everybody Sees the Ants*, *Please Ignore Vera Dietz*, and *Glory O’Brien’s History of the Future* – focus on the past, present, and future, respectively. Each work features a protagonist who contends with some temporal challenge or situation. Lucky Linderman, attempts to cope with a past marked by bullying and self-esteem issues. Vera Dietz navigates the dramatic life of a modern teenager. Glory O’Brien tries to prevent an alarming, oppressive future. King loads each novel with references to actual persons or events: the Vietnam War, the student-debt crisis, the dearth of feminism. These issues color and guide the protagonists’ lives; they show how everyone, even teenagers, must contend with the world that humans have created. Even better, they present teenagers as active participants in these temporal events.

This vital message emphasizes the power of King’s novels and of young adult literature in general. A “good book” has relevance and relatability. It prompts readers to think about the world they inhabit and perhaps to think about changing that world. In this case, it prompts readers to think about the role that teenagers occupy in the broader world. If a reader sees Lucky

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Linderman traipsing through Vietnam, for instance, he might realize teenagers can ruminate on and display the effects of the past. Likewise, a reader might relate to Vera's troubled relationship with her father and understand the complexity of teenage lives. YAL explores the same issues as "traditional," canonical literature, but situates these issues within a nuanced adolescent framework. King's novels offer a look at teenage stories as well as a temporalization of these stories; they show that teenagers can participate in and reflect upon world events – current, past, or forthcoming.

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