

# CREATIVE CONTAMINATION: YA ADAPTATIONS IN REVIEW

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*As Adaptation in Young Adult Novels: Critically Engaging Past and Present* illustrates, young adult literature offers many opportunities for adaptation. Whether the books put a new spin on a classic tale or the books themselves have been adapted into other forms of media, creative contamination abounds in YAL. The reviews here offer a sampling of the forms adaptation can take in young adult literature, namely adapting time and place and adapting format. Besides providing a critical examination of the stories, these reviews also include ideas for classroom use.

## ***PRIDE* by IBI ZOBOI — BOOK REVIEW**

(Published in 2018 by Balzar + Bray)

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I was taken with Ibi Zoboi's (2018) *Pride* from the first sentence: "It's a truth universally acknowledged that when rich people move into the hood, where it's a little bit broken and a little bit forgotten, the first thing they want to do is clean it up" (p. 1). Zuri "ZZ" Luz Benitez has pride. Pride in herself as young Afro-Caribbean-American and pride in her Bushwick, Brooklyn neighborhood. She is hesitant about change, which she wrestles with by writing poetry. Zuri's poems pepper the through the novel's prose and provide insight into Zuri's mind of her criticisms, her hopes, and dreams.

When the Darcy family moves in across the street, the newcomers present a set of challenges to Zuri's life, namely in the form of brothers Darius and Ainsley Darcy. First, they present the growing gentrification of her neighborhood, possibly threatening the close-knit culture of Bushwick. Zuri explains "Something about the Darcys moving in makes me want to hold Bushwick a little bit tighter and for a little bit longer, as if it's slowly slipping away – like Janae, and

high school, and me being small enough to curl into Papi's arm while he reads the *New York Times* (p. 14). The Darcy family's entrée into her neighborhood and her life forces Zuri to accept change surrounding her and her neighborhood. Change isn't always a bad thing, it can bring possibilities, too.

Zoboi authentically remixes Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. In Bushwick, Brooklyn, she presents a new atmosphere filled with music, noise, and food. Zuri muses,

My neighborhood is made of love, but it's money and buildings and food and jobs that keep it alive – and even I have to admit that the new people moving in, with their extra money and dreams can sometimes make things better. We'll have to figure out a way to make both sides of Bushwick work. (Zoboi, 2018, p. 33)

Zuri worries that as people leave Bushwick, the neighborhood loses flavor and noise.

The Benitez are a close-knit family both like and unlike Austen's Bennetts. While Zuri's family is working-class, her dad, who works at the hospital, unlike landowner Mr. Bennett, is an avid reader, and her mother is far from Mrs. Bennett's pushy overbearing nature. The Benitez matriarch feeds the entire neighborhood, organizes block parties, and is close to her husband and children, Zuri explains "she's the heart of the neighborhood" (Zoboi, 2018, p. 15), the author retains Mama's nosy, gossipy nature.

Zuri wants to keep her family together despite her elder sister, Janae's, move to Syracuse University, her twin sisters' budding boy-crazy personalities, and her own move to college soon. She has Lizzie Bennett's pride of family and place as well as Lizzie's feisty personality, but Zeboi's changes to her characterization and environment makes her a relatable and engaging character. I am a proud Janeite – a member of the cult of Jane Austen – but wary of adaptations of her six novels. This being said, I love young adult Jane Austen adaptations. I adored *Pride* because Zoboi remixes a beloved novel into a spicy, noisy, and warm story of challenges and possibilities. Somehow the drama and relationship angst that Austen is known for translate so well to young adults' lives.

Zeboi's *Pride* remixes a classic novel, a romance, a coming-of-age story with a poetic bent. The novel would be perfect pairing to canonical work like Austen, the Brontes, or other female authors. I would have loved to read this with Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* or Judith Ortiz Cofer's "American History." Zoboi's incorporation of the multiethnicities that bring

Bushwick alive would make the text an ideal accompaniment to any novel which characterizes geography. Bushwick truly stands alongside the characters throughout the text.

## ***FOUL IS FAIR* by HANNAH CAPIN — BOOK REVIEW**

(Published in 2020 by Wednesday Books)

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Elizabeth Jade Khanjara (Elle) and her three friends, all from privileged families, relish their power and popularity at school. They are the intelligent, beautiful girls who rule their school. Life at the top can be dull, according to narrator, Elle, who desires adventure on her sixteenth birthday. The “coven of witches,” as Elle refers to her friends, crash a private prep school party. Gaining entrance into the private party is certain for beautiful girls like Elle and her coven, and once in, they attract the attention of the ruling class boys of St. Andrew’s Preparatory School. Several of the boys drug Elle’s drink, separate her from her friends and rape her. Readers quickly discover that rape is a common practice at lacrosse team parties, and Elle was the last of numerous, silent victims.

After the party, Elle’s best friend, Mads, obtains a St. Andrews Preparatory yearbook. Although Elle’s memory is hazy, she identifies the perpetrators from the pictures. Elle and the coven plan a swift, violent revenge. Elle communicates with her parents about the rape, manipulating the details to induce sympathy; her parents agree to support the revenge plan. In fact, Elle’s wealthy and connected father ensures she is immediately enrolled as a new student in St. Andrews Preparatory.

Disguising her appearance, Elle changes her name to “Jade” and immediately works her way into the top tier girls’ clan in order to enact the revenge plan. For the first phase of the plan, Jade attracts the attention of the honorable, trustworthy upper classman, “Mack,” playing to his desire to be “king” of the lacrosse team. The coven works their magic behind the scenes with Jade directing the moves. As the magic takes hold, the St. Andrew’s boys fear that others know about the rapes. When accusations erupt, the team cover-up implodes, resulting in each key player’s violent murder.

Based on Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, the macabre plot of *Foul is Fair* similarly involves obsessions with power, masculinity and violence as the boys fight to become “king” of the school,

turning on in each other when necessary. The characters are named for the competing leaders in *Macbeth*, and Mack represents the tragic hero, Macbeth. Other allusions to the play occur throughout in imagery and language. Unapologetically narrated by Jade, readers are drawn into her thoughts, obsessions, and dark humor. The close friendships among the girls are admirable; Mads and Jade's friendship runs deep, honest, and intuitive. The style is poetic with intense, violent imagery and repetition.

Although abrupt time shifts may confuse some readers, and the explicit violence becomes repetitive, Jade's internal narration demonstrates a logical progression of obsession, abuse, guilt, and power. *Foul is Fair* could be used in the classroom as an introduction to *Macbeth* or as independent reading following class study of *Macbeth*. Educators could ask students to examine and discuss themes of patriarchy and misogyny evident in both this novel and the play.

## ***SPEAK: THE GRAPHIC NOVEL* by LAURIE HALSE**

### **ANDERSON and EMILY CARROLL — BOOK REVIEW**

(Published in 2018 by Farrar Straus Giroux/Macmillan)

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The 1999 version of *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson relays Melinda's horrific freshman year as a pariah, her classmates' fury continuing from her 911 call at a late-summer party bringing police and several arrests. Unable to reveal being raped that night, she becomes nearly invisible at school and home, her depression spiraling until barely functional. She successfully uses art to express her pain, sharpened by the unexpected nightmare of her rapist's harassment at school. Still, she endures silently, but his dating her former best friend eventually forces her to tell her secret and begin healing.

The novel was an immediate must-read for females with its popularity continued; Melinda is a terrific narrator, simultaneously describing her anguish from her assault and its effects while acerbically nailing the high school experience. However, the graphic novel version, also authored

by Anderson who newly revealed herself as a rape survivor in its prologue, is perhaps the better, more powerful format by allowing readers to witness Melinda's story.

This novel's cover is like the original but eerier; Emily Carroll's black/white/gray illustrations are bold, evocative, and sometimes frightening, creating a dark, tense mood that illuminates Melinda's suffocating aftermath from her assault over the school year. Its thoughtfully designed pages and individual panels present the story clearly and characters distinctly, and delineations between actual events and Melinda's thoughts and imaginings are clearer than the sometimes-tangled original's.

The portrayals of Melinda's shock and memory loss after her assault, which emerge through haunting flashbacks that begin to appear more frequently and in greater detail as the text progresses, and her desire, but inability, to quell them, poignantly relay her escalating horror and humiliation. Her attempts of self-preservation through exclusion leads to a solitary existence without the balance of others. This in turn results in increasing feelings of distress and ever-deeper depression, harshly demonstrating the fragility and hopelessness felt after abuse.

Her constant replaying of the party and events leading to her assault with self-reproach rather than blaming her attacker and tacit acceptance of his later contacts are disheartening reminders of her, and others', need for assistance after rape and how little society has changed regarding it. All of Melinda's experiences and thoughts conveyed are tangible and realistic, with additional authenticity from awareness of Anderson's incident.

Language is nearly verbatim from the original and still remarkably contemporary, needing only a few tweaks for currency; cell phones and other later technology are quietly and seamlessly added. Some pages and panels feature black text on darker gray backgrounds and too many illustrations, creating occasionally difficult reading, but these are minor problems. Remaining questionable in both versions is the adults' failure, especially on the part of her parents', to notice Melinda's continual, and significantly different, negative lifestyle changes and in not recognizing as deep depression.

*Speak's* 1999 readers are in their late thirties today; sharing this graphic version with their daughters (and perhaps more importantly, sons) can allow a new generation to visualize sexual abuse's atrocity and subsequent damages but also show that hope and recovery can follow. Even better, discussion, whether with parents or educators, on recognizing depression's signs, considering additional negative effects from today's social media, retracing Melinda's party actions for a different

outcome, and understanding her fears of disclosure can lead to meaningful activism and lessen future assaults. Exploring Melinda's unidentified depression by recognizing its many signs and seeking adult assistance is a valuable beginning. Another topic to consider is school culture; social media was not prominent in 1999, but what might Melinda have faced today? Considering individual safety regarding parties by tracing Melinda's experience seems vital; what actions could be taken for a different outcome or contributed to fearing disclosure? Interwoven throughout should be the necessity of students' activism regarding reducing sexual assaults and the assistance and support of those in crisis.

## ***THE BABY-SITTERS' CLUB* – REVIEW OF THE NETFLIX ADAPTATION**

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Almost forty years after Ann. M. Martin's (1986) *Kristy's Big Idea*, Netflix (2020) has introduced a new audience to Kristy, Mary Anne, Claudia, and Stacey, thrusting *The Baby-sitters Club* - with its female entrepreneurial spirit and myriad family dynamics that were quite progressive even in 1986 (Spencer, 2020) - into current conversations about gender and identities within families.

The plot is the same across the franchise, which includes graphic novels, films, a TV series, and the Netflix (2020) series. Kristy's mom has trouble finding a sitter, and Kristy comes up with an idea for a baby-sitting club run by her and her friends. While the basic premise remains the same, the Netflix series has made changes to the supporting details to situate the series firmly in the present day.

Fifty-one seconds into the Netflix (2020) series, Kristy criticizes her teacher's lesson about Thomas Jefferson's thoughts that all *men* are created equal (a scene not in the original book). After Kristy gets in trouble (which happens in both texts but for different reasons), she is assigned an essay on decorum. The Netflix (2020) show reveals Kristy and her mom discussing how an essay on decorum would never be asked of a boy, a scene absent from the print text. It is not that discussions of gender are absent from the original novella. Claudia does tell one of her charges that

“sometimes girls *do* play with trucks” (Martin, 1986, p. 78). It is just that Netflix (2020) show seems focused intently on raising issues of gender in ways that are more explicit than the original.

The book (Martin, 1986) portrayed myriad family structures: Shy Mary Anne is raised by her single father after her mom’s passing; assertive (some might label her bossy) Kristy’s dad left her family, and her mom is currently dating a man with kids of his own; and artistic Claudia’s Japanese grandmother lives with her family. Claudia’s character is a contrast to her white friends, and Martin underscores this by having Kristy mention that Kristy and Mary Anne “even look a little alike.” (Martin, 1986, p. 4). The Netflix (2020) depiction keeps the different family dynamics while also including more diversity. Mary Anne is now biracial and Dawn, who is added a bit later in both the book series in the Netflix (2020) show, is now Latinx. The series is even part of Netflix’s Representation Matters Collection, which highlights work by and featuring people of color.

Teachers might invite students to analyze presentations of gender and identities within families across different versions of *The Baby-sitters Club*. Looking at data to see the ways in which the original print text broke boundaries (or not) and the ways in which the show’s portrayals of gender roles and family dynamics affirms (or does not) contemporary society could be meaningful.

Whether Netflix will be able to keep up pace with the hundreds of *The Baby-Sitters Club* books (Swain, 2019) or the fourteen graphic novels (Anmol, 2020) in terms of volume remains to be seen. That its second season will continue to reflect a particular modernization as it brings these baby-sitters to a contemporary audience seems certain.

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