How to Be Yourself: Ideological Interpellation, Weight Control, and YA Novels

—Dorothy Karlin

Ginny is too fat. Lia is too skinny. You, dear teen reader, may also have issues with your weight, and we have books for you, particularly if you are female. Read them! With their guidance, you will learn to take control of your weight, wresting it from the machinations and manipulations of adult authority figures and the media. Not only will you be happier and healthier, but you will also blossom into a productive member of society.

If you have not encountered Ginny and Lia yet, they inhabit recent YA novels that seek to redress prevalent depictions of female teenagers. Virginia "Ginny" Shreves is the protagonist of Carolyn Mackler's 2003 novel *The Earth, My Butt, and Other Big Round Things*, and Lia is the protagonist of Laurie Halse Anderson's 2009 novel *Wintergirls*. Slightly overweight, Ginny obsesses over her body and the reactions it engenders in family, friends, and classmates. Anorexic Lia obsesses over her body as well, monitoring her food intake and exercising compulsively. With their messages of body acceptance, these two novels seem to offer alternatives to much YA fiction, which frequently reinforces prevalent cultural messages valorizing thinness and equating larger bodies with moral transgression. On closer examination, however, both novels further the same ideological *process* they ostensibly criticize, working only to author an alternative template for its expression. These adult-authored books guide readers through a policing of their bodies, intervening between a girl and her appetites.

Young adult literature often showcases ideological interpellation on a general scale, as adolescent characters become aware of social power structures

and learn how to operate within them. As Roberta Seelinger Trites writes, adolescent novels focus on protagonists who "learn to negotiate the levels of power that exist in the myriad social institutions within which they must function, including family; school; the church; social constructions of sexuality, gender, race, class; and cultural mores surrounding death" (3). While this negotiation requires intellectual compliance, ideology does not exist solely in ideas but in actions and practices as well. Ideological interpellation has a strong corporeal element, and with its ideological thrust, YA literature works to regulate how adolescents shape and then inhabit their bodies. Characters in young adult novels demonstrate how to affect—in a literal, bodily way—the "reproduction of submission to the ruling ideology" (Althusser 133). Typically written by adults, YA novels inevitably contain an adult viewpoint and agenda that Perry Nodelman has dubbed "the hidden adult." The messages transmitted have physical ramifications, given that a focus on the body serves to make teen readers aware of their own physical presence outside of the imagined space of reading. For better or for worse, the novels ask readers to identify with the protagonists and to recognize certain eating practices and behaviours as unhealthy and unproductive.

Considered as part of a broader ideological phenomenon, YA novels work alongside magazines and other media in targeting young girls and featuring pervasive, often explicit and decidedly gendered directives for makeup, clothing, exercise, and diet. Instead of including step-by-step instructions or glossy photographs of supposed ideals, YA novels provide models for behaviour by showing characters dealing with rules about self-presentation. In particular, such novels often regulate body size and appropriate eating; they reward characters who lose weight through dieting and, in doing so, work to circumscribe the corporeal experience of adolescence. In her 1998 article "The Portrayal of Obese Adolescents," Rachel Beineke describes her search for protagonists that reflected her obese, female adolescent self. She discovered novels that target middle-grade audiences primarily but included some YA titles, among them Paula Danziger's *The Cat Ate My Gym Suit*, Jan Greenberg's *The Pig-Out Blues*, and Robert Lipsyte's *One Fat Summer*. The plots of these novels resemble the narratives of recent YA texts such as Mackler's *The Earth, My Butt, and Other Big Round Things*, Sasha Paley's *Huge*, and Donna Cooner's *Skinny*:

> The novels look at the pressure families place on their children to lose weight and even those who neglect their children because they are overweight. The books also look at the verbal and emotional abuse from peers and adults who make fun of the obese. . . . Yet, by the end of each book, each child either loses the weight or starts to lose the weight.

> The child then gains popularity and friends and has loving families that are pleased that their child is finally becoming "normal" and fitting into their standards as a result of the weight loss.

The satisfying resolutions of the novels offer wish-fulfillment for readers, and the goals realized by the characters define what both characters and readers should desire, echoing and reinforcing media representations of bodily ideals.

Catherine S. Quick reiterates the pervasiveness of this YA narrative of normalcy: "The young adult loses weight not to be healthy and live a long life, but to fit in better with peers, to be considered attractive and desirable." The satisfying resolutions of the novels offer wish-fulfillment for readers, and the goals realized by the characters define what both characters and readers should desire, echoing and reinforcing media representations of bodily ideals.

Even novels that couch their anti-fat ideologies in discourses of health work to bring both their characters and their readers in line with cultural norms. The alternative motivation Quick offers, "to be healthy and live a long life," still positions the YA novel as intercessor between the teen reader and her body. Neither Beineke nor Quick tackles the gendered component of the lessons in self-presentation delivered by the novels, for, as they rightly indicate, both male and female characters in these YA novels respond to external and internalized pressure to lose weight. The rewards, however, fit nicely into Trites's argument that YA as a genre teaches its characters how to fit into social constructions of sexuality and gender. In broad strokes, girls become appropriate objects of desire and boys become strong, virile competitors with other boys. This recognition of the gendered pressure teenagers experience is not new in the genre. In fact, recent YA novels, influenced by feminism, have sought increasingly to redress past novelized prescriptions that bore marks of patriarchal repression. Novels like Mackler's *The Earth, My Butt,*

and Other Big Round Things, Susan Vaught's *Big Fat Manifesto*, and Suzanne Supplee's *Artichoke's Heart* purport to promote fat acceptance for overweight or obese protagonists. Focusing on characters suffering from bulimia and/or anorexia nervosa, novels like Anderson's *Wintergirls*, Natasha Friend's *Perfect*, and Leslie Lipton's *Unwell* advocate likewise for bodily self-acceptance. Although both forms of self-acceptance novel claim to give voice to historically "voiceless" YA bodies, they nonetheless continue to participate in the ideological interpellation in which Trites argues that all YA novels participate. As Quick notes, even in novels where the overweight protagonist does not lose weight, "[t]hinness still represents normalcy; the obese person simply decides that he/she will not be able to obtain normalcy and agrees to go about life as abnormal, to remain a freak." Novels such as the ones Quick examines may write against the weight-loss narrative arc, but they still act as agents of socialization by not only reaffirming a specific body type as normal but also by maintaining the same realm of authority. Texts may tell adolescent girls to reduce the size of their body and others may tell them to accept their bodies as they are. Despite these contradictory elements in the ever-growing media barrage that assaults teens, the texts promote explicit scrutiny of teen girls' bodies by their owners as directed by external, adult moderators.

As with other YA novels, *The Earth, My Butt, and Other Big Round Things* and *Wintergirls* assume a role of authority in enacting self-regulation; they belong to a historical trend concerning the discipline of women's bodies, particularly young women's bodies, which shows few signs of changing. With their explicit focus on issues of self-image, these two novels attempt to offer alternatives to dominant cultural messages that adolescent females likely receive about their bodies. These messages have two facets, one about socially acceptable body size and one about self-discipline. With regard to body size, theorists Sandra Bartky, Susan Bordo, and countless others, particularly recent fat activists, have explored images that promote what feminist Kim Chernin dubbed "the tyranny of slenderness." These theorists have examined fashion magazines, the dieting industry, advertisements, and entertainment across media. These cultural texts favour thin bodies, demean fat bodies, and offer remedies and suggestions for obtaining the favoured body. Self-discipline—particularly as it relates to eating habits—also concerns body size, but a more general self-regulation belongs to a long literary tradition in the United States. It has strong roots in early American literature read by adolescent females. Nineteenth-century novels such as Susan Warner's immensely popular *The Wide, Wide World* and, more pointedly, Martha Finley's *Elsie Dinsmore* and Louisa May Alcott's *Eight Cousins* encourage self-abnegation in their female protagonists. They present controlled eating as a means to win favour from earthly agents (that is to

say, father figures) who speak for heavenly guardians. The characters' relationships with food borrow the language of contemporaneous food beliefs and manias, in particular the vegetarian movement,[1] but the authors deploy ideas about nutrition to illustrate submission to a parental figure. As the young protagonists learn how to master their own appetites and follow social dicta, they become less threatening to adults. If they internalize behaviours espoused by adult members of their textual worlds, they will not disturb social values through wayward thoughts or actions. Those earlier texts do not connect nutritional discipline and weight explicitly, but instead, their protagonists practise self-control because they are good and, separately, they are attractive because they are good. Their appearance is not necessarily a direct manifestation of their eating habits. Dieting has changed since the publication of these nineteenth-century novels; in the intervening years, self-discipline and weight have become more intertwined. Recent novels bear strong traces of early American didactic literature, but they have made self-discipline and normal weight inextricable.

Mackler's and Anderson's novels examine female adolescent eating habits to demonstrate how social norms become internalized, but they still monitor the protagonists' relationships with food. Despite seemingly subversive motivations, they participate in the socialization of the characters, whom they in turn offer as models for their readers. Mackler's Ginny and Anderson's Lia view their bodies as always inhabiting a transgressive space, and they wriggle under the internalized external gaze. They peer over their own shoulders at encroaching state apparatuses, which they see in their doctors, their peers, their family members, and mirrors. Despite their attempts to quell any possible offences, Ginny and Lia transgress social expectations through their bodily presence. They have internalized messages that say they must control their bodies in order to inhabit social spaces. Descendants of oatmeal-eating heroines from the nineteenth century, these protagonists have learned lessons about self-abnegation. Although they enact self-discipline in different ways, both believe that they must revise their bodies. Both texts seem to position themselves between their protagonists and the dominant ideology, but that positioning reinforces the role of the YA novel in encouraging and monitoring adolescent self-management.

If YA novels have power in how they contribute to and reinforce cultural messages about body image, these two texts try to access that same power in order to write against those messages. As with the texts they criticize, they rely on and reinforce the need for a particular type of transaction between adult and adolescent. Rather than undo cultural norms, these novels reinforce the norms and how they should be transmitted, following older patterns in literature for young readers. In his discussion of *The Wide, Wide*

World, Richard H. Brodhead analyzes the scene in which Ellen Montgomery's mother gives her daughter a Bible, describing how Mrs. Montgomery "ceremonially delegates her presence to the Bible she gives Ellen, making the book an instrument to draw Ellen into the covenant of her values" (72). The Bible, a book designed to impart values, gains increased personal import through the transaction between a dying mother and her daughter. That depiction of the influence of a book becomes a model for the novel in which it occurs. Brodhead identifies an important moment within this particular text, which in turn illuminates how adults, either as writers or in other capacities as gatekeepers, share books and values with young readers.

The depiction of the adult passing the text to the child acts as a model for children's and YA literature as a whole. The accepting child does not necessarily become the tractable teen, however. Perry Nodelman theorizes the relationship between adult, text, and child in *The Hidden Adult: Defining Children's Literature*, in which he argues that children's literature, including YA literature, functions to transmit messages believed to be important by adults to children, who are presumed to be an "innocent" and needy audience (12). Children are depicted as willing to accept their own neediness, whereas teens frequently rebel against that idea. Citing Trites, Nodelman acknowledges differences between YA and children's literature, but he finds value in looking at the similarities: "underlying the differences in ideas about young people that produce different texts in different times and places and for different specific audiences, there might be a current of sameness, a consistent sense of how young human beings differ from older ones, that underlies even apparently quite different texts" (7). Adults, however, tend to differentiate between younger children and teens, and that difference challenges Nodelman's search for commonalities; the hidden adult in YA texts often seems unsure when addressing the teen reader. Even as YA novels invite characters and readers into a covenant of values, they betray an anxiety about the receptiveness of teenagers: what if they refuse to take the book?

The frequent depictions in YA novels of bonding between understanding adults and troubled teens can be read as a symptom of such a fear of teenagers. Both *The Earth, My Butt, and Other Big Round Things* and *Wintergirls* present themselves as instruments to bring readers into covenants of their values, and the authors inadvertently resurrect Mrs. Montgomery of *The Wide, Wide World*. In a striking parallel in *The Earth, My Butt, and Other Big Round Things*, Ginny's teacher, Ms. Crowley, gives her a collection of essays entitled *Body Outlaws*, perfectly emulating the moment that Mrs. Montgomery gives Ellen the Bible. The teacher gushes, "It's a fantastic book . . . all essays by young women who are rebelling against body norms"

(224). Ms. Crowley rounds out the values package by including as well an inscription from Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, which Ginny glosses as being about "throwing out old notions and reevaluating what you've always thought" (225). In responding to this gift, Ginny thinks, "As soon as I've read *Body Outlaws*, I think I'll give my namesake [Virginia Woolf] another chance" (225). In this formulation, the teen reads once the adult "ceremonially delegates her presence" to the book (Brodhead 72). In fact, when Ginny finds one adult mentor in her sympathetic teacher, she quickly accepts all adult guidance, from feminist authors to her parents, who, despite their misdirection throughout the novel, did name her after Virginia Woolf.

In contrast, *Wintergirls* has its protagonist reading without adult sanction, and Lia's unauthorized reading turns her narrative into a cautionary tale. Provided with no explicitly endorsed texts from which to find inspiration, Lia turns to reading material that promotes values that the novel does not support. She reads blogs and participates in chat rooms in which girls with eating disorders encourage each other in dieting, fasting, and exercise. Rather than promoting these sites as its bible, the novel brings an adult eye to them in order to identify and criticize them. They are "the home of the shrieking chorus, hungry girls singing endless anthems while [their] throats bleed and rust and fill up with loneliness" (175). The novel rejects this online community, suggesting that, instead of allowing for connection, it represents a conglomeration of lonely individuals. Comprised primarily of young women who are not overseen by adults, these online forums are depicted as suspect and dangerous. Through their depictions of reading materials, both novels demonstrate how young women should interact with the written word, calling for adult mediation. They reinforce Trites's argument that YA novels show protagonists learning "to negotiate the levels of power that exist in the myriad social institutions within which they must function" (3) by emphasizing the age-based hegemony that Nodelman describes. Within the novels, adults must endorse reading selections, and those relationships with texts become an endorsement for the books in which they occur.

Not only do YA novels depict how teens and adults can bond, but also, the authors claim authenticity in their authorial position based on their relationships with teen readers. In extra-textual writing and in interviews, Mackler and Anderson state, or suggest strongly, that the lessons that the protagonists learn could benefit other adolescent girls. With this mission, the authors position their novels as intercessors between the adolescent girl and her inappropriate appetites, asserting further the adult-centric hegemony established around reading practices within each novel. In an audio clip found on the "Behind the Book" section of her website, Mackler explains that she chose to write about an overweight character

after readers of her first novel, *Love and Other Four-Letter Words*, indicated that they had identified with the protagonist when she complained about stretch marks and stomach fat. In response, Mackler decided that she "wanted to write about a girl who doesn't lose weight and can still feel comfortable and confident in her own skin" ("Behind"). Similarly, Laurie Halse Anderson implies in her acknowledgements that she wrote her novel to help her readers deal with body issues: "I journeyed into the land of the Wintergirls because of the countless readers who wrote and talked to me about their struggles with eating disorders, cutting, and feeling lost. Their courage and honesty put me on the path to find Lia and helped me understand her brokenness. While Lia's story is not based on any living person, it was inspired by those readers and I thank them" (n. pag.) Both authors reveal a desire to help readers deal with some form of "brokenness" and acknowledge an agenda beyond storytelling in their supplementary writings. In the text that accompanies the audio clip, Mackler writes to her readers:

Both authors reveal a desire to help readers deal with some form of "brokenness" and acknowledge an agenda beyond storytelling in their supplementary writings.

> most importantly, I get so many messages from readers telling me that *The Earth, My Butt, and Other Big Round Things* helped them feel better about themselves as they are, made them stop hurting their bodies, guided them through a difficult time in their lives, and made them feel less alone. And do you know what, readers? Your letters make me feel like we're all connected in a special and intimate way. They make me feel less alone, too.

With her emphasis on connection, Mackler encourages her readers to identify with her protagonist and to use her book as a means to

discover and assert their own subjectivities, much as Ms. Crowley encourages Ginny to do with her gift of *Body Outlaws*. Mackler clearly sees her characters as stand-ins for her readers. Similarly, Anderson wants to help readers who feel "lost." Although she speaks only of her own path toward understanding, her acknowledgements suggest that her novel is a project that will help teen readers make appropriate connections. Both Anderson and Mackler present their novels as tools for assuming agency in a social sphere.

As projects about body image, the two texts mediate the issue for their adolescent readership, suggesting the role that the novel can play in their search for authentic subjectivity. Although the texts criticize unexamined assumptions, they become equally prescriptive. They add their own discourse about appropriate eating to the glut of messages young girls receive. Instead of advocating severe self-control, they caution against it, but they still say *how* to eat. Ginny should make her own decisions, but the text diagnoses her eating habits as a product of emotional repression that must be overcome. With Lia, Anderson portrays anorexia nervosa as extreme, unhealthy self-discipline. In her narration, Lia describes food as repulsive if desirable simultaneously, but the novel depicts her discipline as a disease that makes her body repulsive. Both novels show how their protagonists must change how they eat. The texts reinforce their own ideological roles as they offer alternative attitudes to consumption.

Reproducing critical discourses around dieting, *The Earth, My Butt, and Other Big Round Things* demonstrates the battery of messages regarding body image that assault young women. Early in the novel, Ginny is eating pastries with her father while watching television, and her father whistles at a model in a beer commercial. Ginny responds mentally:

> Typical Dad. He's constantly praising thin women's bodies. It used to drive Anaïs crazy. Whenever Dad complimented her figure, she would yell at him and spout feminist theory about how men shouldn't judge women by their body type. Even though I've heard the skinny-women-are-more-attractive spiel a million times in my life, it strikes a sore nerve tonight.
>
> I feel my stomach tightening up.
>
> Nine hours ago, Brie Newhart said that if she were as fat as me, she'd kill herself.
>
> Five hours ago, Byron called me extra-large.
>
> Four hours ago, Mom announced that I have to see a special doctor about my "nutrition."
>
> And here I am, wolfing down Popsicles and pasta and pastries like they're going out of style. (35–36)

Ginny's thoughts outline the omnipresence of fat prejudice in her life, transmitted to her by way of media, family, peers, and self. The novel undermines these

messages by putting the authority of each into question. It takes common tropes—the blandly chauvinist father, the queen bee, the golden son, the therapist mother—and challenges their power. The novel casts the men as victimizers, villains resting atop gender, race, and class hierarchies. Accepting this arrangement, her father passively perpetuates hegemony in his relationship with women in his family. Ginny's brother Byron abuses his privilege actively. Expelled from Columbia University for committing date rape, he still expects his family's empathy instead of censure; he has no sense of wrongdoing. In contrast, the women are victimizers only because they are victimized. Brie quickly topples from the apex of the social hierarchy of the school as bulimia takes its toll. Ginny's mother, a successful adolescent psychologist and exercise fiend, revisits her own weight issues on her daughter. Ginny self-flagellates because she feels that she has not met their expectations. As it pulls apart the workings of gender power structures, the novel acts as a primer in feminist theory, and Ginny's tutelage becomes the means by which the novel seeks to bring readers into its covenant of values.

Despite its attempt to characterize consumption in a new way, *The Earth, My Butt, and Other Big Round Things*, ironically, does not offer different rewards for its disciplinary project: over the course of the novel, Ginny loses weight. Mackler may set out to show a "girl who doesn't lose weight," but she writes against her own agenda, thereby demonstrating the pervasiveness of cultural prejudices related to body size. After Ginny takes up kick-boxing, her father comments, "you really look like you're slimming down," to which Ginny responds, "I'd rather you don't talk about my body. It's just not yours to discuss" (235). With that exchange, the novel attempts to replace messages about body with messages about self-empowerment, but it does not unwrite the former messages or divorce self-empowerment from weight loss. Instead, it expands rather than undoes the signification of the thinner body.

The Earth, My Butt, and Other Big Round Things borrows the language of self-empowerment common to recent dieting discourse. It advocates for moderation and a focus on self-esteem and other psychological concerns; it implies that weight loss, although supposedly not necessary, will follow. Ginny transforms her outlook on self over the course of the novel. In early chapters, she abides by the "Fat Girl Code of Conduct" (14) she has written, a personal manifesto of self-effacement in romantic relationships. Based on rules that she encodes, she hides her relationship with Froggy Welsh the Fourth from public knowledge. After all, Fat Girls should know that "any sexual activity is a secret. No public displays of affection" (14). In response to the same assumptions that Beth Younger describes in her essay "Pleasure, Pain, and the Power of Being Thin: Female Sexuality in Young Adult Literature," Ginny turns them into rules. For example, the out-of-control sexuality that Younger notes becomes the dictum "Go

further than skinny girls" (14). By the end, Ginny rejects her conduct book. In the final scene, she kisses Froggy, "Right on the lips. Right in front of everyone" (244). She ends the novel deciding that she will be the kind of person who believes in "taking care of [her]self and not letting people walk all over [her]" (243). By changing how she interacts with other characters, Ginny changes how they see her. They accede quickly, and the series of capitulations may lead the reader to believe that Ginny either allowed or encouraged their earlier mistreatment. Ironically, the novel suggests that Ginny's issues with body image arise out of her own psychological deficiencies, particularly low self-esteem and repressed emotions.

Ginny becomes her own agent of change, but that responsibility also means, logically, that she was her own oppressor.

Ginny becomes her own agent of change, but that responsibility also means, logically, that she was her own oppressor. As Quick proposes, "[o]besity is universally considered the fault of the obese, even when it can legitimately be attributed to glands, genetics, or medications." By providing possible scientific explanations, Quick, like the YA novels she examines, suggests that emotional or psychological explanations are not legitimate. Ironically, Quick's attempt to deconstruct the link between obesity and moral flaws misfires; she suggests that the obese individual without a glandular disorder is, in fact, at fault and worthy of blame. With this conflation, the individual is understood to be responsible for her own weight and any psychological ramifications that follow from it: her weight is a visible and irrefutable marker of her physical and emotional shortcomings. When dieting discourse focuses more on psychological explanations for consumption, it not only maintains but also bolsters the need for a continued surveillance of individuals' food intake and body size. In "Foucault Goes to Weight Watchers," Cressida Heyes uses the corporate program Weight Watchers as a case study, analyzing how its

literature deploys the discourse of self-care to encourage self-discipline: "[W]ith weight loss as the synecdoche for multiple forms of working on oneself, recidivism is likely to be particularly crushing, with regained weight standing in for ethical weakness, a return to old habits, and failure to care adequately for the self (as well as to be responsible to others)" (145). The thin body takes on even greater psychological meaning when it is viewed no longer as the result of patriarchal oppression. Borrowing from the language of feminism, the dieting industry couples the internalized male gaze with a feminist gaze. A woman's overweight and therefore imperfect body now is inscribed not only with her lack of femininity but also with her failure to self-actualize. Although Ginny does lose some weight, the novel sublimates that into a focus on the self-actualization component of her journey, thereby allowing a resolution that posits Ginny as subverting cultural expectations by standing up for herself and defying her mother. The end has her becoming a productive member of society, her weight loss a pleasurable side effect of the "self work" she has completed.

If *The Earth, My Butt, and Other Big Round Things* diagnoses Ginny with emotional repression and prescribes self-work, *Wintergirls*, in contrast, presents Lia as overdosing on self-work. She suffers from anorexia, and the text details the extreme damage of excessive self-discipline. Although it chooses a different subject—a severely underweight female adolescent instead of an overweight one—the novel communicates similar values. Initially, Lia understands her eating disorder as personal, a preadolescent pact between her and her best friend, but she comes to recognize its larger social context. In its examination of eating disorders, the text uses the term *wintergirls* to identify women suffering from either anorexia or bulimia. They are caught permanently in the newly pubescent body that Bartky describes as the supposed aim of dieting (167), but the novel does not support this particular goal in its extreme form. Even as Lia continues to exercise and to fast, she predicts two potential futures for herself: death or a continuing borderland existence. When hearing about other girls' experiences in psych wards, she wonders: "Would [being locked up] be worse than the grown women who lived on our hall but didn't talk to us much? Wintergirls who were twenty-five, thirty, fifty-seven years old, walking around in their eleven-year-old bone cages, empty caves with bleeding eyes dragging from one treatment to the next, always being weighed, never being enough" (252). Lia spends much of the novel with an intensely inward focus, so this expanded view, which occurs near the end of the text, points to the ideological project of the novel. While anorexia is not the same as dieting, this literary presentation of it calls attention to the same cultural messages that label women insufficient if they have the wrong body weight, be it too little or too much. In its prolonged scrutiny of the anorexic brain, however, the

novel is a detailed depiction of the faults of the society that creates this mindset and of the faults of such a brain and the subsequent faults of such a body. Tellingly, the novel depicts those faults through the metaphor of a protracted girlhood; such women cannot become adults.

Products of the written word themselves, Ginny and Lia have several texts associated with them. They have their YA novels, their personal writings, and the bodies that each novel creates as representative of actual bodies. Lia becomes the representative of the eating disordered body, Ginny of the overweight body. The novels work to diagnose the cultural causes of actual manifestations of adolescent female bodies in the United States at the historic moments of the creation of the novels, since each author claims to draw on their readers as examples. This use of the body as text has a history in psychological diagnoses. In *Unbearable Weight*, Susan Bordo examines a group of gender-related and historically localized disorders, including anorexia (167). Indebted to Foucault, she presents the eating disorder as an inscription of the construction of contemporary femininity on the female psyche and body, articulating the useful concept of the body as a text written by historic notions of gender. She resists a complete dematerialization of the body, for "[i]f the body is treated as pure text, subversive, destabilizing elements can be emphasized and freedom and self-determination celebrated; but one is left wondering, is there a body in this text?" (38). Nonetheless, she examines the moment when the body enters discourse, noting that the language used in diagnosis reflects historical understandings of appropriate feminine behaviours. The diseases she examines are constructed as exaggerated versions of historic socio-cultural ideals, and the women who suffer from them transgress through being overly compliant with a broader disciplinary project. Transmitted through these diagnoses, the dominant ideology encourages a prolonged gaze at afflicted female bodies and a well-articulated discussion of solutions.

Interestingly, each novel provides examples of both body types—the underweight, eating-disordered body and the overweight body—presenting them as counterparts and linking the two bodily texts as different inscriptions of the same societal expectations. As Ginny comes to terms with her own body issues, she sees her classmate Brie suffering from bulimia. To her surprise, she finds herself feeling sorry for Brie, whom earlier she had seen as an oppressor, thinking, "I mean, we're on opposite ends of the weight spectrum, but I know what it's like to hate your body so much that you want to hurt it" (151–52). Lia, who hurts herself through starving and cutting, stands to hurt her nine-year-old stepsister as well through her example. Whereas Ginny and Brie, two teens, suffer from the same cultural prejudices, Lia and her family see her illness as threatening to her preadolescent sister. This formulation denies a similar

subject position for the two stepsisters, yet both girls are subjected to the same prejudices. However much Lia's self-mutilation can damage the younger girl psychologically, the novel shows how, regardless of Lia's actions, Emma is poised to enter the social space that has created Lia's body. Mimicking her elders, who parrot body acceptance, Lia narrates: "Emma is plump. Plump, not husky, not heavy, not fat. She is big-boned—like her dad, she says—and her plump is perfect" (47). Lia recognizes the contested site that is Emma's body, however, when she adds that Jennifer, Emma's mother, "thinks that Emma is ~~fat~~ plump, but she doesn't have the guts to say it" (47). Lia's body threatens Emma, but that insidious judgment that Lia ascribes to Jennifer, an example and symptom of cultural expectations, pushes Emma to become another adolescent subject who will require intercession between the girl and her bodily appetites. Both novels connect the overweight and the eating-disordered bodies, but by including examples of the other bodily text, they provide their protagonists with mirrors of their actions, thereby helping the protagonists evaluate their own behaviours more clearly.

Wintergirls mimics a palimpsest, with words crossed out and replaced, overwritten but not fully erased, a material figure for the revisions Lia makes to her body. As focalizer, Lia authors both texts, so the novel can show her initial thoughts and reactions as well as the alterations she makes. Although designed to present her emotional and bodily discipline, her edits take various forms. Lia represses her hunger, denying her desire for food by crossing out lines like "I am so hungry that I could gnaw off my right hand" (27). She also deletes anything that betrays her emotional attachments, replacing "Mom" with "Dr. Marrigan" frequently. While she uses the professional title to hurt her mother, that emotional distancing works often as in the above example when she replaces the term "fat" with "plump." She implements the language of therapy and self-acceptance with sarcasm: in her edited description of her visit to psychologist Dr. N. Parker, "prison" becomes "clinic stay," "scam artist" becomes "specialist," and "crazy teenagers" become "troubled adolescents" (114). She modulates her judgments in order to disengage emotionally. Explaining this need for distance, she expresses her regret for speaking openly with the therapist initially, observing that the doctor "laid land mines in my skull that detonated weeks later" (114). Lia refuses to stay emotionally open, and she matches and mirrors her bodily revisions with these revisions in her self-narrative. As she moves toward healing in the final pages, she stops crossing words out, which the novel presents as her starting to live more fully and honestly in her story and in her body. This transformation, however, also shows her acquiescence to adult-sanctioned scripts.

Ginny and Lia's bodies, their texts, require revisions to bring them to a more socially productive space. Both novels suggest that the protagonists can accomplish that transition through written discourse, specifically

an open, adult-mediated expression. In "Why Won't Melinda Just Talk About What Happened? *Speak* and the Confessional Voice," Chris McGee uses Laurie Halse Anderson's earlier novel to explore the need in YA novels for protagonists to tell adults their problems: "Anderson's book is preoccupied with what Melinda hides from others, no matter how long Anderson is willing to wait to have her speak. It is a book that consistently incites Melinda to discourse, suggesting ultimately that speaking to adults is ultimately in her best interest" (186). Significantly, Melinda writes her first confession about being raped in notes to her friend Rachel, and that articulation transitions into a confession to adults. By linking speaking to friends and speaking to adults, the novel moderates how, when, and in what ways teens can speak to each other.

Like Melinda, Ginny and Lia write from within their novels to integrate their bodies into socially productive spaces. When Ginny abandons her former subversive habits, she becomes a high-school go-getter, creating an online forum for all teens. Her webzine, Earthquack, may be a space "where people can bitch, rant, and rave about whatever is on their minds" (228), but, unlike the contributors to illicit pro-anorexia sites in *Wintergirls*, she has adult support in creating her website. Through Ginny, the book provides a possible road map to achieve what it deems appropriate, productive self-expression: "Over the past week, I've filled out all the necessary paperwork to make it an official school club. I've even received a modest budget, enough to buy a domain name and get it hosted on the Web. The only things I need now are writers, editors, and people who can do graphic design" (228). By creating "an official school club," Ginny becomes an arm of the state apparatus. With its resolution, the novel promotes an openness that contrasts with the private lists, such as the Fat Girl Code of Conduct that Ginny wrote at the beginning of the novel. At the time, she admitted: "I don't candy-coat my lists, so they tend toward the brutally honest. That's why I've never shown them to anyone, not even my best friend, Shannon" (15). The novel prohibits this need for secrecy, suggesting that private thoughts necessarily denote and perpetuate shame. Instead, self-writing must happen in a public space so that personal reflection can achieve the approval of ideological state apparatuses. By publishing the secret lists in the novel, the form of the novel itself reinforces this message.

Similarly, Lia must tell her story in order to heal. Although not explicitly a diary, Lia's narration bears the marks of her thought processes, with crossed-out words and shifts in narrative mode. In the final pages, when she has returned to the rehabilitation centre with a new attitude, she claims an active role in the construction of the novel: "I am spinning the silk threads of my story, weaving the fabric of my world. . . . I spin and weave and knit my words and visions until a life starts to take shape" (277). Like Ginny, she requires adult mediation.

She explains how this trip to New Seasons may have a different result from former trips because she is finally interacting with the staff openly: "I don't lie to the nurses this time. I don't argue with them or throw anything or scream. I argue with the doctors because I don't believe in their brand of magic, not a hundred percent, and it's something I need to talk about. They listen. Take notes. Suggest that I write down what it looks like to me" (276). Throughout, the novel uses imagery of frozen bodies to describe Lia's non-productivity. Without body fat, she is constantly cold; she has made her body sterile, figuratively and literally, while existing in "a snowdrift of confusion" (275). Listening to adults and writing her story in this new context, Lia transforms her body. The novel ends in a metaphorically loaded spring, with her doctor telling her, "you're blooming" (276). The final line, "I am thawing" (278), describes Lia's bodily transition into fertility, reiterating her move toward social productivity.

Both Mackler and Anderson want their protagonists and their readers to discuss their bodies, but they appear not to trust them to do so appropriately. When avoiding adult intervention, Lia finds inspiration from fellow anorexics and Ginny writes disempowering lists. The authors cite their readers as inspirations, claiming to respond to letters they have received. With their novels, they repackage and return the ideas expressed in those letters to the readers and their peers, thereby fortifying age-based hierarchies. Through their described interactions with their readers, the authors promote hegemony. Both novels attempt to do something radical by giving disenfranchised characters (the "fat girl," the "anorexic") a voice, but these voices, as they exist at the beginnings of each novel, are unsafely subversive and, in order for the novels to be situated within YA discourse, must be disciplined. The authors portray young girls explaining what messages they want to receive from adults to those adults. In turn, those adults create stories that relay those messages back to teen readers. The novels and surrounding material (such as author websites and author's notes included in the book) present the authors as intimately connected with teen concerns; through that relationship, the adult authors declare authenticity, but, simultaneously, they use the novel as a means to assert authority.

As the novels work to undo destructive socialization, they provide new lessons in appropriate consumption. Lia and Ginny must tame their monstrous selves, in part through a moderation of their appetites. They gain maturity through their compliance with what the texts present as adult wisdom, which in turn eases adult fears of unknowable and uncontrolled teenagers. The characters must enter an adult-mediated discourse fully and honestly. The novels purport to address body image in a radical way, but, in doing so, they obscure the nice fit of their socialization projects with generic conventions. The two texts may seem to offer solutions and describe better practices, but they rely on and

thereby reinforce an unequal relationship between the teen reader and the adult writer. If YA as a genre works to situate adolescent characters within power structures, it also sets limits to the empowerment it espouses. Lessons in self-discovery act as lessons in self-control because they require an affectionate obedience to authorities: if the characters do not discipline their bodies appropriately, they disappoint their families, their friends, YA authors, teen readers, and themselves.

Note

[1] Claudia Nelson explores this socio-cultural phenomenon in her essay "Care in Feeding: Vegetarianism and Social Reform in Alcott's America," in which she describes Bronson Alcott's implementation of his theories of nutrition. Of the three protagonists, Alcott's Rose has the most direct link between her physical appearance and her eating habits: dietary changes make her look healthier. Influenced by personal experience with experimental food intake, Alcott writes at the cusp of scientific nutrition.

Works Cited

Alcott, Louisa May. *Eight Cousins*. 1875. Cleveland: World, 1948. Print.

Althusser, Louis. *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. Trans. Ben Brewster. New York: Monthly, 1971. Print.

Anderson, Laurie Halse. *Speak*. 1999. New York: Penguin, 2006. Print.

---. *Wintergirls*. New York: Viking, 2009. Print.

Bartky, Sandra. *Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression*. New York: Routledge, 1990. Print.

Beineke, Rachel. "The Portrayal of Obese Adolescents." *ALAN Review* 25.3 (1998): n. pag. Web. 22 Apr. 2012.

Bordo, Susan. *Unbearable Weight: Femininity, Western Culture, and the Body*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1993. Print.

Brodhead, Richard H. *Cultures of Letters: Scenes of Reading and Writing in Nineteenth-Century America*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1993. Print.

Chernin, Kim. *The Obsession: Reflections on the Tyranny of Slenderness*. New York: HarperCollins, 2009. Print.

Cooner, Donna. *Skinny*. New York: Point, 2012. Print.

Danziger, Paula. *The Cat Ate My Gym Suit: A Novel*. New York: Delacorte, 1974. Print.

Edut, Ophira, ed. *Body Outlaws: Rewriting the Rules of Beauty and Body Image*. Emeryville: Seal, 1998. Print.

Finley, Martha. *Elsie Dinsmore*. 1867. New York: Arno, 1974. Print.
Friend, Natasha. *Perfect*. Minneapolis: Milkweed, 2004. Print.
Greenberg, Jan. *The Pig-Out Blues*. New York: Farrar, 1982. Print.
Heyes, Cressida. "Foucault Goes to Weight Watchers." *Hypatia* 21.2 (2006): 126–49. *Project Muse*. Web. 22 Apr. 2012.
Lipsyte, Robert. *One Fat Summer*. New York: Harper, 1977. Print.
Lipton, Leslie. *Unwell*. Bloomington: iUniverse, 2006. Print.
Mackler, Carolyn. "Behind the Book." *Carolyn Mackler*. N.p., 2009. Web. 22 Apr. 2012.
---. *The Earth, My Butt, and Other Big Round Things*. Somerville: Candlewick, 2003. Print.
---. *Love and Other Four-Letter Words*. New York: Delacorte, 2000. Print.
McGee, Chris. "Why Won't Melinda Just Talk about What Happened? *Speak* and the Confessional Voice." *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 34.2 (2009): 172–87. *Project Muse*. Web. 17 Apr. 2012.
Nelson, Claudia. "Care in Feeding: Vegetarianism and Social Reform in Alcott's America." *The Girl's Own: Cultural Histories of the Anglo-American Girl, 1830–1915*. Ed. Claudia Nelson and Lynne Vallone. Athens: U of Georgia P, 1994. Print.
Nodelman, Perry. *The Hidden Adult: Defining Children's Literature*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2008. Print.
Paley, Sasha. *Huge*. New York: Simon, 2007. Print.
Quick, Catherine S. "'*Meant* to Be Huge': Obesity and Body Image in Young Adult Novels." *ALAN Review* 35.2 (2008): n. pag. Web. 22 Apr. 2012.
Supplee, Suzanne. *Artichoke's Heart*. New York: Dutton, 2008. Print.
Trites, Roberta Seelinger. *Disturbing the Universe: Power and Repression in Adolescent Literature*. Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 2000. Print.
Vaught, Susan. *Big Fat Manifesto*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2007. Print.
Warner, Susan. *The Wide, Wide World*. 1850. New York: Feminist P, 1987. Print.
Younger, Beth. "Pleasure, Pain, and the Power of Being Thin: Female Sexuality in Young Adult Literature." *Feminist Formations* 15.2 (2003): 45–56. *Project Muse*. Web. 16 Apr. 2012.

Dorothy Karlin completed her B.A. in Comparative Literature at Dartmouth College, and she has a dual degree in Children's Literature and Library Sciences from Simmons College. As a children's librarian, she tells families that all reading is good reading, but she is particularly interested in how literature fits within broader ideological projects, whether related to colonialism, eating, gender, childhood and adolescence, or all of the above.