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Working-Through Traumatic Memory in Young Adult Fiction

Amanda Charles

A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Brigham Young University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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## ABSTRACT

### Working-Through Traumatic Memory in Young Adult Fiction

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Despite the growing presence of trauma and abuse narratives in young adult literature (YAL), adolescent traumatic memory has largely been left out of the conversation. To better understand how contemporary memory scholarship is manifested in YAL, the following essay will offer a close reading of *Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes* (1993) by Chris Crutcher and *Speak* (1999) by Laurie Halse Anderson in conjunction with adolescent memory research. The accuracy of traumatic memory representation in these novels confirms the value of YAL as a means for youth to interact with and learn about traumatic memory, its processes, and its effects.

Keywords: young adult literature, trauma, memory

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## Introduction

Young adult literature (YAL) has gained traction over the last decade as a means to discuss heavy topics like abuse, sexual assault, bullying, and more. As a category, YAL has become a space where the concerns of young adults can be addressed in a nonthreatening setting. The label “fiction” provides a kind of emotional buffer between young adult readers and the difficult topics portrayed in these books, allowing a comfortable distance between reader and narrative. In a *New York Times* article discussing how YAL can help youth navigate the #metoo movement, one YAL author commented, “Novels can provide a safe place to explore ideas about consent and speaking out after abuse because young readers can inhabit the experience of a fictional character rather than face their own trauma head-on” (Jacobs). Through these vicarious interactions with trauma, young adult novels act as entry points into important conversations. Alongside Reed, authors like Stephen Chbosky and Courtney Summers have also become vocal advocates for the exploration of trauma through YAL.

The collection of scholarship about the depiction of trauma in YAL has been slowly building for years, with texts discussing sexual assault receiving particular attention. “No Accident, No Mistake’: Acquaintance Rape in Recent YA Novels” uses YAL to break apart common misconceptions surrounding topics like rape. As sexual assault narratives prove to be useful guideposts for young adults and aid in the dispelling of rape myths, scholarship is sure to increase (Cleveland and Durand). Despite the growing presence of trauma and abuse narratives in YAL, adolescent traumatic memory has largely been left out of the conversation. Labeled as a psychological wound lodged inside one’s memory, trauma, and the act of

remembering trauma, can greatly affect the formation of identity in young adults (Gilmore 33). Because YAL frequently interacts with questions of identity, understanding how trauma and memory function in YAL allows readers to better understand the nuances of the genre. In this essay, I argue that trauma narratives in young adult literature highlight the process of “working-through” trauma and provide a roadmap for what healing might look like in the life of a young adult who has suffered abuse (LaCapra, “History in Transit” 119). As defined by LaCapra, “Working-through means working on posttraumatic symptoms in order to mitigate the effects of trauma” (“History in Transit” 119). These effects of trauma are prevalent in pivotal YA texts like *Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes* (1993) by Chris Crutcher and *Speak* (1999) by Laurie Halse Anderson. Both novels follow the narratives of adolescent females attempting to cope with the aftermath of their abuse. As moments of memory recall are described within each text, readers move through various stages of trauma alongside the protagonist. Because the reader is familiarizing themselves with sensitive material, the reliability of the narrative, as it pertains to real-life memory and trauma, is particularly important. Fortunately, contemporary research surrounding trauma and young adult memory supports their fictional depictions in these two novels as authentic representations of trauma, confirming that both are factually legitimate and emotionally beneficial.

The novels themselves showcase two forms of recalling trauma: one from early childhood memory and the other from recent memory. Moving forward, I will evaluate the accuracy of traumatic memory representation in these young adult novels as they pertain to current research, ultimately leading to the conclusion that existing scholarship defends the portrayal of traumatic memory within high-quality YAL. This conclusion further validates the

value of YAL as a means for youth to interact with and learn about traumatic memory, its processes, and its effects.

### Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes

*Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes* depicts the remembering and retelling of early childhood trauma as Sarah Byrnes is only three and a half years old when her father forcibly holds her face against their wood-burning stove, permanently scarring her. In an attempt to combat the irony of her name and its pun with her severe burns, Sarah Byrnes demands that she always be referred to by her full name. (Out of respect for her character, the same rules will be maintained in this essay.)

There have been a variety of research studies conducted to learn more about abused or maltreated children like Sarah Byrnes. The driving motivation behind these experiments seems to be to understand to what extent the memory functions of abused children are affected by trauma and whether or not their memories, both old and new, can be trusted. In an article on child maltreatment and memory, McWilliams et. al compiled the research of several scientists who conducted experiments on the memory performances of maltreated children. One experiment “reported that children with sexual abuse histories were particularly accurate in reporting genital touch and venipuncture that had taken place during a forensic medical examination” (703). In contrast to other, non-sexually abused children, sexual abuse victims showed enhanced memory recall regarding the exam. Though the sexually-abused children were placed in a potentially triggering situation, a medical examination that required genital touch, their memory recall was “particularly accurate.” The accuracy of the report indicates that the child’s ability to remember stressful situations comparable to past trauma has not been



compromised. This heightened awareness and memory recall supports the likelihood of reliable traumatic memory and dispels some of the concerns about the memory processing of childhood-abuse victims. The compilation of experiments trended toward the following conclusion:

[T]he experience of maltreatment does not alter basic memory processes. They propose that individuals who experience maltreatment during youth still attend to/encode, store, and retrieve information in a typical fashion. Our results support this theory in that maltreatment history alone did not predict significant differences in participants' memory performance for positive or negative information. (McWilliams et. al 714)

The confirmation that childhood maltreatment does not impede or alter one's memory functions offers significant reassurances while assessing the reliability of childhood traumatic memory. It relieves some of the tension surrounding the retelling of childhood trauma and reinforces the notion that victims should be listened to and believed. These studies offer real-world support to fictional narratives, like Sarah Byrnes', confirming that the experiences of the protagonist are authentic and plausible, even when adults suspect otherwise.

The emotions surrounding traumatic events also play an important role in how well a child or adolescent can remember the experience.

Considerable research has shown that children's emotional reactions during an event are major contributors to how well it is later remembered. In a review of children's recall of autobiographical events, whether or not there was robust long-term recall of these events was highly related to emotionality, and highly negative events seem to be particularly well-remembered. (Quas and Fivush 60)

Considering what readers understand about Sarah Byrnes' emotional reaction to her trauma, their research provides a psychological framework that suggests her account is reliable and bolsters

the fictional narrative. The intense emotions surrounding the event are displayed as Sarah Byrnes relates the story to her best friend, Eric. Her anger and defensiveness while speaking, support her claims of vivid remembering. Researchers like Kongshoj and Bohn uphold Quas and Fivush's claim by arguing that "because traumas are per definition highly emotional and distinct... the trauma should be recalled as well as other types of memories, or even better" (177). Within this context, the presumed accuracy of Sarah Byrnes' memory is validated through a plethora of scholarship, all of which furthers the ethos of her narrative and encourages genuine reader engagement with discussions of trauma and memory.

In *Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes*, Crutcher encourages his audience to acknowledge the complexity and implications of discussing childhood traumatic memory. This is accomplished by deliberately exposing the reader to the experience of traumatic memory recall and by recognizing how attachment-based memories create more space for biased or revised accounts. As previously mentioned, Sarah Byrnes' father, Virgil, holds her face against a wood-burning stove when she's very young. The aftermath of that experience includes the fleeing of Sarah Byrnes' mother to Reno, leaving her daughter to grow up in Virgil's abusive household. Sarah Byrnes is permanently and emotionally scarred by the incident, and her trauma is compounded because her father refuses to allow reconstructive surgery. Her disclosure of the trauma to Eric functions as her first active step in working-through her trauma, as Sarah Byrnes recalls, in detail, the burning that happened almost fifteen years prior. Afraid that she would not be believed because of her age at the time of the incident, Sarah Byrnes had kept the truth of the experience private for most of her life. After over a decade of silence, she shares her secret with Eric while seeking refuge from her father in a psychiatric ward. Within his own reflection upon learning about the incident, Eric says, "I've been thinking about what a huge risk it was for Sarah Byrnes to tell me her story;

not about the story itself, which is certainly bad enough, but about how scary it must have been to let me see her like that. Scared. Vulnerable” (Crutcher 147). Eric's thoughts shed some light on the space between a traumatic event and sharing the details of that event with another. Even with so much distance from the incident, Sarah Byrnes has to allow herself to be vulnerable in order to accept Eric's help. Sarah Byrnes' hesitance in offering testimony regarding the burning can be linked to Dori Laub's theories on trauma. He states that victims “on some level prefer silence so as to protect themselves from the fear of being listened to — and of listening to themselves. That while silence is defeat, it serves them both as sanctuary and as a place of bondage... To *not* return from this silence is rule rather than exception” (58). In connection with Laub's commentary, the reader can assume that Sarah Byrnes has chosen silence as a means to seek refuge from the realities of her trauma. The act of sharing her pain with Eric is a dramatic leap from a kind of “sanctuary” and “bondage” toward an unknown future, but in order to move toward physical and emotional safety she must end her silence and confide in her friend.

A key facet of the burning is that Sarah Byrnes was only, “about three and a half, but I remember it like it happened this morning” (Crutcher 143). Though she remembers “the wood stove coming right at my face,” she does not remember the sensation of the burning, only the moments leading up to it and the events that followed. When Sarah Byrnes is in the hospital, she is told by a nurse that she pulled a pot of boiling spaghetti onto herself (144). In this moment, the memory of the burning is rewritten by outside forces. The hospital's documents will say that her injuries were an accident; as the lie is archived and labeled as truth, her version of the story immediately becomes less convincing. The reality of her abuse is hidden by faulty documentation and by her father's false account. She almost tells the nurse that her father's version is a lie, but instead, she stays silent. If Sarah Byrnes had contradicted her father's story, it

is unlikely she would have been believed, as the memories of adults often overshadow the claims and memories of children. The following day, her father threatens to burn the rest of her if she tells anyone the truth (144).

At the time of the incident, fear of her father and the vulnerability of youth prevented Sarah Byrnes from speaking out. However, as time progresses and her desire to tell the truth grows, she is restricted by a variety of factors. Not only does silence in some ways feel easier, as Laub suggests, but her early-childhood memory is unlikely to trump her father's testimony and the hospital's documents. When Eric encourages her to report the incident, Sarah Byrnes responds, "Why would I be telling it now? It's been fourteen years. They're sure gonna believe me" (Crutcher 146). Though her reluctance and sarcasm are understandable, research suggests that the authorities should believe Sarah Byrnes' memory.

Sarah Byrnes' authentic recall of the incident is heavily supported by the studies of Lenore Terr, a seminal figure in the study of traumatic memory in children. Terr's 1988 experiment pushes against the assumption that early childhood memories cannot be trusted. She evaluated "the verbal and behavioral remembrances of 20 children who suffered psychic trauma before age 5" and then compared those remembrances with the documentation of each event (96). Her findings concluded that many children above the age of 36 months at the time of their abuse incident could produce "full verbal recall or extensive spot memories" of their trauma (97), thereby supporting the legitimacy of Sarah Byrnes' memory recall regardless of her young age. Sarah Byrnes can clearly remember the events of her burning, and research conducted on similar subjects has yielded results that support her narrative. It is, however, noteworthy that Terr also found that "repeated and/or variable events are less fully remembered than are single episodes of trauma" (97). This becomes significant when Sarah Byrnes takes another step toward

healing by revealing a piece of her horrific past to Lemry, a trusted teacher and adult mentor in the novel. She was tied up, locked up, and denied food in various instances throughout her childhood (Crutcher 278). Because these events were repeated and/or variable, Sarah Byrnes may be less likely to accurately recall them. However, the novelty of the burning must be excluded from this as it was a singular occurrence.

In opposition to the intense, traumatic memories of her father, Sarah Byrnes has a small grouping of positive memories involving her mother. In the act of remembering her mother, Sarah Byrnes readily acknowledges the blurriness or unreliability of her memories. Nevertheless, these moments of remembering are an important step for Sarah Byrnes as she works through her trauma. She starts by explaining to Eric that while in the psychiatric care unit, she began having dreams about her mother. “They aren’t like real dreams, they’re like memories” she said (177). She continues, “I remember how my mother and I used to hide after my dad beat her up and we’d hold each other in the dark, but I also remember her laughing and playing with me when he was gone. She loved me in her way, Eric” (177). In this passage, the reader encounters a paraphrased relation of memory. It is not a specific event but rather a kind of vague recollection that encapsulates both the memories of her mother’s frequent abuse and their happier moments together. The only unambiguous memories of her mother in the novel are within the burning scene. Everything else remains obscured by time. In declaring to Eric that she was loved by her mother, Sarah Byrnes reveals the depth of her attachment to the mother that abandoned her.

Rooted in attachment-based theory, Dykas et. al hypothesized:

It is possible that a secure or an insecure individual could have an overly favorable or unfavorable initial memory of an event in comparison to observers that ultimately become more attuned to the observed quality of the event over some time period. On the

other hand, it is possible that an individual's view of an event could initially match observers' perspectives on the event, but later memory could diverge from the observers' perspective. (1447)

These speculations proved true as their team evaluated the memory recall of teenagers after incidents of conflict with their parents. If the adolescent had a secure attachment to the parent, they were more likely to favorably alter the memory as time passed. The same is true for insecure relationships. They resulted in negative alterations of memory (1456). Dykas et. al finished their experiment regarding attachment and reconstructive memory with "compelling evidence... that is consistent with the idea that one's own state of mind with respect to attachment may guide one's memory" (1456). When applied to Sarah Byrnes' situation, there are a few important distinctions before the text can be analyzed through an attachment-based lens. The first is that, unlike the adolescents in the experiment, Sarah Byrnes was a child in her revised memory but is recounting them as a seventeen-year-old. Secondly, the teens in Dykas' study were experiencing emotional conflict with a parent rather than extreme physical trauma. Their modified memories affected their parent-child relationship but little else. After acknowledging the differences in the situation, it becomes possible to appropriately analyze the application of attachment theory in Crutcher's novel. It's possible, and even likely, that Sarah Byrnes' reconstructed memories of her mother have been altered over time. Her attachment to her mother indicates that even if happy memories of the two of them were scarce, the positive emotions connected to thoughts of her mother would result in favorable memory revision. Regardless of her later abandonment, Sarah Byrnes is inclined to believe that her mother cared for her, in part because the hospital's group counselor has encouraged her to attach her new life (post-treatment) to positive memories and emotions (Crutcher 177). Sarah Byrnes needs to tether her identity to

something outside of her abuse and memories of her mother provide a somewhat safe space to do that. This kind of nostalgic memory becomes part of “working-through” trauma. Even though Sarah Byrnes’s hope for a happier future may be based on modified memories, they offer a path forward.

The attachment narrative in the novel is eventually challenged when Sarah Byrnes finds and confronts her mother, Julie. Initially, Julie denies her presence at the incident and claims that she had “split with her husband *before* Sarah Byrnes was injured” (Crutcher 260-61). Lemry speculates that Julie was “hoping Sarah Byrnes didn’t remember” (261). At this point, the attachment-based generosity of Sarah Byrnes’s memory is cast aside in favor of reality. Her mother will not help her. Even though Julie refuses to offer a corroborating testimony of the burning, the bits of memory about Sarah Byrnes’ mother serve an important purpose. The positive memories that exist alongside her traumatic past give her the courage to move from her guarded emotional state and allow herself to be vulnerable, first with Eric and then with Lemry. Sarah Byrnes’ memories chart her healing as she transitions from living in fearful silence to sharing her traumatic memory with close friends. She becomes an example of what it might look like to confide in and accept help from others as a trauma survivor.

### Speak

In contrast to *Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes*, which describes early-childhood traumatic memory, *Speak* offers insight into the formation of traumatic memory in real time as Melinda documents her struggle to deal with the emotional aftermath of being raped mere weeks before the start of her freshman year of high school. The story itself supports LaCapra’s claim that “The

experience of trauma is thus unlike the traumatizing event in that it is not punctual or datable. It is bound up with belated effects or symptoms, which render it elusive” (“History in Transit” 118). LaCapra’s definition of an experience of trauma is evident in Melinda’s struggle with depression, anxiety, isolation, and poor school performance following her traumatic event. These symptoms continue throughout the novel, frequently reinforcing the notion that her traumatic experience is ongoing. However, the account of Melinda’s rape has to be pieced together for the reader through traumatic memory recall. How and when her traumatic memories are divulged signals to the reader Melinda’s emotional progression toward trauma acceptance. Chaotic, fragmented chunks of memory transition into a cohesive narrative as Melinda begins to heal.

Anderson’s rhetorical decision to present the rape in disjointed pieces aligns with scholarship regarding the dissociation model. In her article on the recovery of memory, Janice Haaken explained that; “the dissociation model asserts that traumatic memory is preserved in split-off ego formations and emerges over time in a fragmentary reexperiencing of the trauma” (1076). Melinda’s rape is offered to the reader in dissatisfying snippets, as a “fragmentary reexperiencing of the trauma,” until she has coped with the pain enough to divulge the memory in its entirety (1076). In this regard, the protagonist’s fictional memory mimics real-life memory functions. Because fragmented memory also qualifies as a belated effect of the rape, Melinda’s disordered narrative further supports LaCapra’s claim regarding the extended experience of trauma.

The initial introduction to Melinda’s memory is the description of her wanting to escape it. “There is a beast in my gut, I can hear it scraping away at the inside of my ribs. Even if I dump the memory, it will stay with me, staining me” (Anderson 51). This “staining,” or



symptom of the trauma experience, takes shape as Melinda's PTSD within the text. Because her PTSD symptoms are often linked to or sparked by her traumatic memories, they play an important role in analyzing memory within the novel. Melinda's PTSD manifests as moments of intense panic. One of these moments occurs when she is required to dissect a frog in her science class. Her lab partner David "spread her froggy legs and pins her froggy feet." After which, Melinda has to "slice open her belly" (81). The predatory language used to describe the experiment functions as a signal to the reader that Melinda is about to be triggered. She is clearly drawing parallels between herself, her trauma, and the frog. "She doesn't say a word. She is already dead. A scream starts in my gut — I can feel the cut, smell the dirt, leaves in my hair. I don't remember passing out" (81). In this scene, the reader is given a glimpse into Melinda's rape, while experiencing how her traumatic memory invades her everyday life. She is interacting with what LaCapra refers to as a "reliving of trauma that collapses the past into the present, making it seem or feel as if it were more "real" and "present" than contemporary circumstances" ("Trauma, History" 377). The intensity of this moment is so extreme that Melinda faints in the classroom. As her senses are completely overcome, the reader begins to understand to what extent Melinda has been affected by the event. She is occupying the beginning stages of trauma, one in which "acting-out" — compulsive repetition that perpetuates negative trauma responses — occurs without counterforces (LaCapra, "History in Transit" 119). As traumatic memory stokes her PTSD, the experience and effects of trauma infiltrate all aspects of her life and become part of her life story.

In their chapter on PTSD in Youth, Kongshoj and Bohn claim:

One of the central aspects of the mnemonic model is that in PTSD, memories of traumatic events are integrated into the life story, and that this integration to some extent

is causing PTSD symptoms. Given the salience of traumatic memories due to their distinctiveness and emotional intensity, and given that youth is a period in which important events in life are pieced together into a coherent life story, it seems likely that young people might display a greater tendency to integrate traumatic events into their life stories. (178)

As Melinda is assaulted by PTSD symptoms throughout the novel, the power of these memories and her physical reactions to them, allow the reader to experience this process of integration. Diverging from LaCapra's concept of working-through, integration does not focus on alleviating the negative effects of trauma but rather acknowledges the inevitability of accepting trauma and its effects as part of one's identity. Within Melinda, the reader can identify both LaCapra and Kongshoj and Bohn's theories at work. Her trauma is embedding itself into her as a core piece of her life story. Yet Melinda is unwilling to yield to a future of acting-out. Though her trauma seems to have taken over her life, she continues to believe that her silence can somehow override the emotional and mental effects of her rape. "The whole point of not talking about, of silencing the memory, is to make it go away" (Anderson 82). This tactic proves ineffective as Melinda is triggered repeatedly throughout the text. The potential antidote to her silent agony is to share her burden with someone else; confide in her parents, report the incident to the police, or share it with a trusted teacher. Unfortunately, her fear of being disbelieved prevents her from speaking out.

Although the cause of her symptoms might seem obvious to the reader, Melinda's parents fail to recognize the evidence of trauma in their daughter and disregard it as teenage rebellion. While sitting in the guidance counselor's office discussing her grades with her parents, the following dialogue ensues:

“Mother: She’s jerking us around to get attention.”

“Me: [inside my head] Would you listen? Would you believe me? Fat chance” (114).

The reader is already aware that Melinda’s relationship with her parents is strained and their communication is minimal. Melinda rarely speaks to them. On the night of her rape, neither parent was home when she got in, and in the months that followed she felt incapable of expressing her emotions to them or verbalizing her trauma (72). As Melinda’s grades continue to drop, the reader is led to this scene. She is no longer earnestly searching for the words to tell her parents but rather questioning if they would even believe her. At this moment, Melinda falls in line with the 64% to 96% of rape victims that “do not report the crimes committed against them, and a major reason for this is victims’ belief that his or her report will be met with suspicion or outright disbelief” (Lisak 1331).

Again, fiction mirrors real life, as Melinda’s trauma and fear of skepticism isolate her from those who should be her support system. Without her parents as a safe space, the next natural option would be for Melinda to confide in her friends. However, Melinda’s former best friend, Rachel, no longer speaks to her. Their fractured friendship is a direct result of Rachel’s outrage toward Melinda for calling the police at a high school party. Unbeknownst to Rachel at the time, Melinda had just been raped. “I stood in the middle of a drunken crowd and I called 911 because I needed help” she recounts (Anderson 136). After a tear-filled, wordless conversation (on Melinda’s part) with 911, she leaves the party before the officers arrive. As she attempts to process her trauma and seek help from trusted adult figures, Melinda fails to verbalize the event. “I saw my face in the window over the kitchen sink and no words came out of my [Melinda’s] mouth” (136). She seems to be encountering the “essential

incomprehensibility” of trauma, in which the true essence of an event struggles to transform itself into “a narrative memory that allows the story to be verbalized and communicated” (qtd. in LaCapra, “History in Transit” 120). This moment offers a striking contrast to Sarah Byrnes and her story. Having had years to digest the reality of her trauma, Sarah Byrnes gained the language to express what happened to her. Though it does not and cannot convey all of the nuances of her traumatic memory, when Sarah Byrnes has the desire to speak and share her trauma with Eric, she is prepared to do so. Melinda, however, is at a loss for language. The newness of the trauma acts as a kind of barrier between her and her voice. It is not until later in the novel, when Melinda has had time to accept her abuse and mentally confront her trauma, that she finds the words to communicate it. Both novels seem to imply that survivors must begin working-through trauma in order to verbalize their experience. As readers compare the stories of Melinda and Sarah Byrnes against one another, they’re able to conceptualize some of the differences between navigating recent trauma versus distant trauma.

The actual account of Melinda’s rape in the novel showcases what the formation of traumatic memory might look like for an abuse victim. Rather than the clarity of Sarah Byrnes’ early childhood memory, the reader is presented with a frantic, disjointed narrative as Melinda expresses significant shock and confusion. The scene begins with excitement and giddiness. She is at a high school party and a cute boy is talking to her, *flirting* with her. The scene quickly shifts. “We were on the ground. When did that happen?... I’m trying to remember how we got on the ground and where the moon went and wham! Shirt up, shorts down, and the ground smells wet and dark and NO!” (Anderson 135) Though chaotic, the scene depicts a variety of specific details suggesting that the sense of previously-cited heightened memory seems to be in play. However, the memory is then fragmented. Similar to Sarah Byrnes’ narrative jump from the

burning to being in the hospital, Melinda's memory omits her getting up from the forest floor and moving toward the house, explaining to the reader that "The next thing I saw was the telephone" (136). In the retelling of Sarah Byrnes' trauma, there is distance from the situation. She had had time to think and ponder and remember the events. In some ways, it seems to sharpen her memory as she recalls it again and again throughout her upbringing. In direct opposition to this, Melinda is fumbling with present injury that will become traumatic memory. She does not have the luxury of time or space to clear her thoughts and sift through the event. Sarah Byrnes was able to imagine all of the possible outcomes of speaking out about her abuse before she actually did so. The benefits or drawbacks of this can be heavily debated, but what the reader is seeing in Melinda's attempt to contact the police is the real-time reaction to trauma in all of its messiness. It's unclear whether or not Melinda would have gone through with speaking to the police because someone takes the phone from her, realizes she has called 911, and alerts the rest of the party. In all of the commotion, Melinda is slapped and crawls out of the room to return "home to an empty house. Without a word" (136).

On a sick day home from school, Melinda reflects upon the experience and imagines she is a guest on Oprah. This reminiscence is of particular importance because it seems to offer clarity to both Melinda and the reader. "Was I raped?" Melinda poses to herself, and Oprah. "Oprah: "Let's explore that. You said no. He covered your mouth with his hand. You were thirteen years old. It doesn't matter that you were drunk. Honey, you were raped" (164). Melinda's fictional interview highlights her struggle to believe her own memory. She doubts herself and her experience, questioning the logistics of it. Melinda is in a very real sense analyzing her own memory, clarifying what happened to her, and defining the event. Up until this point in the novel, Melinda has kept silent and continues to endure the ongoing symptoms of

her traumatic experience. However, having now shared the entirety of her rape with the reader, Melinda is moving into a different stage of the healing process: acceptance. This moment of introspection is an important step in gathering the strength to speak out since Melinda needs to feel sure enough in her own memory to claim rape. Again the reader can see an important distinction between Sarah Byrnes and Melinda. Sarah Byrnes was, from what the reader is told, always confident in the accuracy of her memory. The question was whether or not anyone else would believe her. Because Melinda is in a different stage of the trauma experience, she must first convince herself of the truth of her narrative before she feels ready to share it with anyone else. As LaCapra might suggest, Melinda is working-through her trauma in order to mitigate its dominance in her life. By acknowledging the reality of her rape, she is striving to disrupt the compulsive repetition of memory (traumatic reliving) that fuels her PTSD and trauma symptoms (“History in Transit” 119).

This self-assurance proves critical when Melinda’s attacker, Andy Beast (Melinda’s nickname for him), attempts to assault her a second time. Shortly before their high school prom, Melinda confides in Rachel, her ex-best friend, that she was raped by Beast at the party they attended together before the start of the school year. Rachel is shocked and sympathetic upon hearing the news and then becomes skeptical and angry when told that the identity of Melinda’s rapist is Rachel’s boyfriend. However, a few scenes later, the audience learns from Beast that, “Rachel blew me off at the prom, giving me some bullshit story about how I raped you. You know that’s a lie. I never raped anybody. I don’t have to. You wanted it just as bad as I did. But your feelings got hurt, so you started spreading lies...” (Anderson 193). Here the reader encounters a combination of denial and revised memory. Research suggests that Andy Beast has likely altered his perception of the events to fit his personal narrative and beliefs about himself

(Quas 30). His mind refuses to acknowledge that he is the villain in Melinda's account and instead attempts to discredit her story. However, as his rant continues, Beast exclaims, “you really screwed things up for me” (Anderson 193). The prom confrontation and Beast’s subsequent anger imply that Rachel believes Melinda and that Melinda’s disclosure of trauma has been accepted as truth. Regardless of the repercussions, by sharing the event with Rachel, Melinda moves into a new stage of the healing process: testifying. LaCapra hypothesizes that “giving testimony may itself be crucial to working through trauma and its symptoms, and a reason for survival may be the desire (in an oft-repeated phrase) to tell one's story” (“Trauma, History” 381). Beginning with her conversation with Rachel and continuing through to the end of the text, the reader witnesses a transformation in Melinda. Having spent the vast majority of the novel in fearful silence, she begins to fight back with both her words and her body. As Beast tries to force himself onto Melinda, she screams as loud as she can, hitting him with anything she can get her hands on. After Melinda holds a shard of broken mirror to his throat, Beast finally withdraws, stunned into silence. This moment of empowerment carries over into Melinda’s final scene with her beloved art teacher as they discuss her semester-long project:

Mr. Freeman: “You’ve been through a lot, haven’t you?”

The tears dissolve the last block of ice in my throat. I feel the frozen stillness melt down through the inside of me, dripping shards of ice that vanish in a puddle of sunlight on the stained floor. Words float up.

Me: “Let me tell you about it.”

(Anderson 198)

In this scene, the audience is offered a visual representation of Melinda's healing. The ice in her throat is melting, and she is finally able to speak. The emotional turmoil and trauma symptoms that have plagued her throughout the novel have not disappeared, but she has worked through them enough to be able to offer testimony. Though she did share her witness with Rachel earlier in the novel, they communicated by passing notes in the library. This scene is the first time the reader sees Melinda attempting a verbal recall of her rape. Having survived the experience of trauma up until this point, Melinda's willingness to share her story with Mr. Freeman signals to the reader that she has somehow processed the trauma enough to put it into words. Within the storylines of both Melinda and Sarah Byrnes, the ability to give testimony is seen as a key feature of healing, whether that be months or years after the event.

### Conclusion

By reading these novels through a memory studies and trauma theory lens, readers are confronted with a surprising amount of nonfiction at play in fictional texts. The relationship between trauma and memory depicted in these novels is, in fact, corroborated by real-life research and theory, whether that be through the studies of Lenore Terr or the musings of Dominick LaCapra. Bringing memory studies into conversation with young adult literature provokes a collective reevaluation of the value of trauma narratives in YAL. Because it's likely that all young adults will experience trauma at some point in their lives, reading about trauma within YAL can function as a rehearsal for how the reader might respond to similar events. The act of evaluating how Sarah Byrnes and Melinda move through trauma creates a window for readers to theorize how they might react to those circumstances. By mentally negotiating these hypothetical situations, YAL readers gain some of the mental and emotional tools needed to



navigate trauma. The transfer of these tools into real-life circumstances is one of the more profound benefits of reading YAL.

As Courtney Summers commented, one of the many aims of YAL is to “offer a safe space for readers to process and discuss what is happening in the world around them, whether or not they ever directly experience what they’re reading about.” *Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes* and *Speak* are exceptional examples of this. Having vicariously experienced some of the protagonists’ suffering, readers are encouraged to utilize this safe space to reflect on the process of healing and finding hope after experiencing trauma. However, if the trauma narratives consumed by YA readers are *too* fictional, meaning they are misleading or deceptive in their depiction of remembering and processing trauma, then they have failed to provide a safe space.

Through the interdisciplinary application of memory and trauma studies within YAL, it becomes apparent that both memory and trauma are depicted responsibly in Crutcher and Anderson’s work. This authentic representation of traumatic memory sets the stage for young adults to meaningfully engage with the text and develop the mental and emotional tools needed to interact with the text’s content. Alongside these tools, I would argue that the most valuable facet of these two novels is their ability to provide accessible examples of traumatic healing to a young adult audience. For protagonists like Sarah Byrnes and Melinda, this means moving from the bondage of silence toward the freedom of testimony, and for young readers who have experienced abuse, these characters demonstrate a possible path forward. That is not to say that either Melinda or Sarah Byrnes is an ideal model for working-through trauma. However, their storylines serve an important purpose by functioning as both windows and mirrors. Chris Crutcher would likely agree. In an email to a student who read *Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes* as a class text, he commented, “Stories that depict... “an unsavory worldview” allow bruised kids to

talk about - and therefore better understand - their own situations, and relatively unbruised kids to become more enlightened and therefore, hopefully, more decent.” Crutcher’s words encapsulate the fundamental importance behind YA trauma narratives. These books should promote a deeper understanding of real life. By rooting their fiction in fact, Crutcher and Anderson better equip their novels to act as sources of hope and guidance for young adults working-through their personal traumas.

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