

Instructive Pandemics? Meaning-Making and the Influenza Pandemic of 1918 in Contemporary Historical Fiction for Young Adults

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Abstract

This article investigates how contemporary young adult historical fiction about the 1918 influenza pandemic creates meaning from the contingent event. Analyzing Cat Winters's *In the Shadow of Blackbirds* (2014), Makiia Lucier's *A Death-Struck Year* (2016), and Mary Downing Hahn's *One for Sorrow* (2018) reveals three frames of meaning-making. First, the collective frame uses quantifiable historical data and external sources.

Second, the individual frame filters the pandemic through the protagonists' coming-of-age journeys and gain of agency. Third, the supernatural frame employs ghosts and reframes objects tied to the pandemic (like flu masks) to the uncanny. The article concludes that these intersecting frames validate the complex uncertainty of the pandemic experience for adolescents.

Introduction: COVID-19, the Influenza Pandemic of 1918, and Historical Fiction for Adolescents

Once an overlooked part of American history, the 1918 influenza pandemic—dubbed “America’s Forgotten Pandemic” (Crosby) and treated with a “conspicuous literary and critical silence” (Outka 2)—has recently triggered both scholarly and artistic engagement, particularly in light of COVID-19 (Agrawal et al. 128). As Farrin A. Manian notes, “[t]he COVID-19 pandemic was not a repeat of the 1918 influenza pandemic a century earlier, but it seemed to rhyme with it in many ways” (93). In a time of pandemic disruption, the past lends itself as a point of reference, specifically for younger generations. Regarding COVID, children and young adults were severely affected by social distancing (Green), even though they tended to suffer from only mild cases of illness. The influenza pandemic of 1918, by contrast, posed a specific threat to young adults, with increased mortality rates in the younger generation (Gagnon et al. 1). Today, the younger generation connects the influenza pandemic of 1918 to the experience of COVID, with Reddit mega threads discussing the 1918 influenza (r/AskHistorians), and users sharing memes linking both pandemics (“Fifteen Spanish Flu Memes”). This article aims to investigate one specific way the past is revisited to create meaning: through the pages of historical fiction for adolescents. Comparable to consulting the past for medical knowledge, historical fiction can serve as a means of learning from history by aiming to “contribute to mainstream historical knowledge” (de Groot, *Remaking History* 3). This notion holds particularly true for younger readers (Freeman and Levstik 330), and historical fiction about pandemics often introduces readers to characters struggling to find meaning in uncertain times (Sarkar 4).

In this article, I examine how contemporary US American historical fiction for young adults represents the influenza pandemic of 1918 and how it constructs meaning from the disruptive event. For this reason, the article draws from the well-established connection between

illness and narrative in the field of medical humanities. While Susan Sontag famously concluded that “illness is *not* a metaphor” (3) and thus highlighted the significance of the body for lived experience, narrative framing shapes how illness and disease are conceptualized. As Priscilla Wald explains, the contingent event of spreading disease is given specific form in the “outbreak narrative,” which offers “a contradictory but compelling story of the perils of human interdependence and the triumph of human connection and cooperation, scientific authority and the evolutionary advantages of the microbe, ecological balance and impending disaster” (2). The outbreak narrative relies on a series of human and non-human actors, positioning them in a specific socio-cultural context. As a blueprint, the metanarrative underscores the impact of narratively framing an event that otherwise risks evading human frames of meaning-making. As Catherine Belling notes about historical pandemic fiction in regards to the influenza of 1918: “A million deaths, let alone the fifty or a hundred million caused by the 1918–1919 influenza pandemic, cannot be recounted as a meaningful story” (56). Yet, conversely, fiction that attempts to create a story from pandemic contingency offers frames of meaning-making to people currently undergoing the disruption of their lives. In other words, as Sucharita Sarkar explains, these narratives “offer readers a range and depth of coping and learning resources that make them both instantly and enduringly popular and fascinating” (3).

In further investigating these ties between meaning-making, historical fiction, and the pandemic experience, young adult fiction aptly lends itself to the discussion.¹ Meaning-making and finding a place for oneself in adult power structures lies at the heart of YA fiction (Trites x), a field that commonly engages with younger protagonists’ processes of identity formation (Stephens 40), and gain of agency (Morton and Lounsbury 53). Research suggests that younger people refer to fiction to process individual experiences (Nairn and Panelli 97), and, as T. Hunter Strickland notes, pandemic and zombie tales let adolescents “deal with their own fears” (13). These processes are specifically significant because meaning-making has been established as an important

1 Young adult will be abbreviated to YA from hereon.

contribution to coping with the disruptive event of COVID (Yang et al. 2). I relate to the assessment of meaning-making in the framework of Psychology and Behavioral Science by Ziyang Yang et al., where “[m]eaning making refers to how individuals construe, understand, and make sense of life events” (2).

Building on this understanding, this article analyzes three examples of YA fiction, examines how they frame the flu, and discusses the interpretative frameworks they offer younger readers to make sense of the pandemic event. The novels were chosen based on topic (they all feature influenza as an immediate impact on the plot’s development), setting (they are all set in 1918 USA), and time of publication (they were all written in the 2010s). Nevertheless, they differ greatly in tone, aim, and scope. Cat Winters’s *In the Shadow of Blackbirds* (2014) focuses on Mary Shelley Black, who is haunted by the ghost of her first love, whose murder case she needs to solve. Makiia Lucier’s *A Death-Struck Year* (2016) is narrated by Cleo Berry and traces her weeks as a nurse caring for patients in Portland. *One for Sorrow* (2018) by Mary Downing Hahn is a self-proclaimed ghost story, as Annie is haunted by Elsie, who died of the flu. While two of the works in this study (*In the Shadow of Blackbirds* and *One for Sorrow*) include supernatural entities as part of their imagined pasts, they are still read as examples of historical fiction. Even though Jerome de Groot argues for historical fiction as working within “a factual-led framework” (*The Historical Novel* 19), this article follows Bryony Stocker’s understanding that “the incorporation of some fantastical elements does not necessarily conflict with this [notion]” (78).

The aim of this article relates to a central question about historical fiction offered by de Groot: “What do the strategies of fictionalizing—from addresses to emotion to shifts in narrative technique—suggest about modes of knowing?” (*Remaking History* 3). Following his consideration, this paper establishes three frames of meaning-making: first, the novels introduce their young readers to quantifiable historical data and offer a collective perspective on the pandemic. Secondly, the protagonists’ individual efforts toward gaining agency are framed by each of their personal encounters with the flu. Lastly, the correlation

between the influenza pandemic and the supernatural indicates that the influenza can only be understood in terms of the otherworldly, as it transcends previous strategies of meaning-making. By offering different forms of conceptualization, these texts establish that the flu cannot be understood within a single frame of reference, but by intersects the personal with the global and defying previously existing frameworks via the supernatural. Hereby, the article investigates historical fiction as a means to learn from the past in relation to YA fiction's "pedagogical dimension" (Ciesielski and Jurczynszyn 19). This discussion thus contributes to the structural understanding of how pandemics are conceptualized for younger readers and provides a framework for future discussions on COVID.

Historical Fiction, Historical Sources? The Employment of Extradiegetic References

Even though each of the discussed novels is a work of fiction, their authors factually ground them in historical resources. This emphasis is already established in the authors' comments included in each work, which refer to quantifiable data. In her "Historical Note" Makiia Lucier explains that "[a]lthough the characters in this story are fictional, the events that took place are not" (277) and offers data related to the pandemic (278). In a similar vein, Cat Winters includes estimates of people killed by the influenza in her "Author's Note." Mary Downing Hahn, on the other hand, primarily speaks about her mother's anecdote that inspired her work, but also mentions the number of people killed in the pandemic (291). These examples indicate a need to offer quantifiable data: numbers that young readers can take away from their engagement with fictional accounts.

The inclusion of data not only roots the fictional text in historical scholarship, it also aims to motivate readers to engage in further research. Lucier's *A Death-Struck Year* includes a list "For Further Reading" primarily consisting of introductory works on historical developments (280). Interestingly, the listed titles in the YA novel are aimed at a mature audience and do not include a single item intended for younger readers. The same holds true for Cat Winters's

suggestions. This gap signals an absence of titles for a younger audience at the time of the novels' publication.² However, it also raises the question of the intended audience for these suggested readings: the young readers, their parents or their teachers? Here, these lists also resonate with what has been understood as YA fiction's "pedagogical dimension," as the texts actively encourage further research (Ciesielski and Jurczynszyn 19). Moreover, the emphasis on research for adult audiences resonates with de Groot's understanding of the author's note as a defining feature of the historical novel (*The Historical Novel* 6–7), and grants meaning to the YA historical novel by relating it to extradiegetic sources.

While in these instances, references to historical evidence and scholarship are relegated to the novels' comment sections, the authors also deliberately incorporate historical sources into their fictionalized past, thus turning them into a part of the characters' intradiegetic world. Lucier's *A Death-Struck Year*, for instance, repeatedly employs newspaper clippings. Most prominently, Cleo, the seventeen-year-old narrator, decides to help the Red Cross after reading a plea in the newspaper: "NURSES ASKED TO RESPOND: RED CROSS APPEALS TO WOMEN TO ENLIST" (54). As Cleo flips through the fictionalized paper, Lucier's protagonist reacts to official records and becomes part of the documented past of Portland. As Gérard Genette explains, "we shall not confound extradiegetic with real historical existence, nor diegetic (or even metadiegetic) status with fiction" (230). In other words, as the clippings become part of Cleo's diegetic world, they still retain their relation to historical sources, which are used to emphasize their impact and personal significance.

Similar to Lucier, Winters includes references to external sources by collaging Mary Shelley's story with contemporary photographs. These images range in tone and topic: they depict Uncle Sam calling his troops (26), spirit photography (50), and influenza wards (291). Such extratextual references position the fictional characters

2 Two non-fictional works for younger audiences were published only several years after Lucier's and Winters's novels, namely Albert Marrin's *Very, Very, Very Dreadful: The Influenza Pandemic of 1918* (2018) and *Purple Death: The Mysterious Spanish Flu of 1918* by David Getz (2017).

in historical contexts and provide visual representations that complement the narrative. Hereby, they contribute to the novel's imagery of historical setting, and a *Kirkus* review explains that the "vintage photographs contribute to the authenticity of the atmospheric and nicely paced storytelling" ("In the Shadow of Blackbirds"). Kate Quealy-Gainer also emphasizes the photographs' impact in her review and notes that, rather than the "ghosts," it is the images of flu victims that will impact the reader. However, in contrast to *A Death-Struck Year*, in which the included clippings are navigated by Cleo (an example of how the collective frame of meaning-making also impacts the individual), *In the Shadow of Blackbirds* introduces photographs vis-à-vis Mary Shelley's account. Read in the frameworks of pandemic writing, Joakim Wrethed's engagement with Jacques Derrida's spectral figure from a narratological perspective elaborates that "[o]ne cannot kill a ghost and attempts to do so rather conjure than eliminate" (10). In this sense, the inclusion of spirit photography and the overall inclusion of ghosts in the YA texts in question create spectral images that coalesce with the historical specifics of the flu pandemic. Here, the collective record of a pandemic—its documented deaths and historical imagery—is inextricably linked to the supernatural.

Ultimately, these external references establish the first frame of meaning-making: the collective. By embedding historical data, scholarship, and newspaper articles into their intradiegetic world, and their author's notes, the narratives are rooted in an authorized version of the U.S. American past. Yet, these materials are not merely background details; they shape the protagonists' decision processes. In the case of Winters's use of photographs in particular, historical snippets are intertwined with a ghost story. This collage contributes to the fictionalization of history, conceptualizing the pandemic through official records that are intricately related to the protagonists' personal experiences.

The Subjective Experience of a Deindividualizing World

Belling emphasizes that in epidemics, “[t]he collective replaces the individual as protagonist” (55). Narrative can counter this shift by introducing subjectivity through characters who offer a connection to what could be reduced to “abstract numerical data” (Belling 56). Similarly, Georg Lukács speaks of the “derivation of the individuality of characters from the historical peculiarity of their age” (19). This relationship between individual characters and their socio-political context is particularly vital for a discussion of historical YA fiction, as the field often intersects social expectations and individual development. Joanne Brown and Nancy St. Clair explain: “In confronting their respective circumstances and challenging the dominant structures of their society, each [protagonist] assumes more control of his or her life, gaining unanticipated strength” (4). These “dominant structures” are rendered particularly salient by a surrounding pandemic, in which the individual scope for action is limited. The works in this study mirror this tension between the collective and the individual: while presenting the author’s knowledge of historical facts, they opt for the limited first-person narration of their young protagonists.

The personal experience of the epidemic is prominently presented in the protagonists’ non- or misunderstanding of the information they receive. Annie’s (*One for Sorrow*) reaction to the rising death toll of the pandemic illustrates this notion:

I stared in horror at Father. Dead bodies in piles? Were they outside where everyone could see them? No, they couldn’t be. They must keep them in hospital basements or somewhere private. Morgues maybe. The very word made me shiver. How would I sleep tonight? (57)

Annie’s internal monologue intersects with the mounting fatalities, as well as her growing sense of confusion and inability to understand the situation. As the girl looks at an authority figure, namely her father, in disbelief and attempts to deny what she has just heard (“No, they

couldn't be"), she introduces the turn her world has just taken: she desires the bodies to be hidden, to not know about them, yet cannot seem to forget them. Her wondering how the news might impact her sleep further contributes to her childlike and sheltered character. In effect, the child narrator becomes the mediator that transforms numbers into haunting images.

Similarly, in *In the Shadow of Blackbirds*, Mary Shelley is older than Annie, yet also exhibits a deep desire to not know about the rising death toll. When she hears that four thousand have died in Boston, she explains:

The use of cold statistics to describe the loss of precious lives made me ill. I crossed my fingers and hoped that Portland wasn't a big enough city to mention. Hearing the death toll up there—worrying about my father in that crowded jail—would have probably killed me. (194)

Rather than wishing that no deaths had occurred in Portland, Mary Shelley hopes that they will simply not be mentioned: she embraces deliberate unawareness. Even though this desire appears similar to Annie's, Mary Shelley does not express her disbelief; apparently, she is deemed old enough to know about the pandemic's impact. At the same time, her musings appear as a teachable moment: arguing for the disparity between "cold statistics" and "precious lives" can be read as a plea for the validation of historical fiction and its emphasis on individual characters.

Similar to Mary Shelley, Cleo in *A Death-Struck Year* also hears about rising numbers after she has started to help out at the Red Cross:

I stopped in the center of the aisle. Two hundred yesterday, at least four hundred today. What did that mean for tomorrow? Or next week? And what about me? How long would it be before I ended up on one of those cots?

Surrounded by the smell of antiseptic and a coppery sweet scent I recognized as blood, I realized that I could not do this. (78)

Here, Cleo links her personal safety directly to the collective data. Her limited knowledge shapes the narrator's reflections and grants individual meaning to the impersonal numbers. While Mary Shelley predominantly desires not to know to avoid worrying about her father, Cleo suddenly understands that she herself is in danger and opts to stop volunteering. This hesitation—which she will unsurprisingly overcome—not only presents her struggle between keeping herself safe and communal responsibility but also offers a spontaneous, possibly selfish reaction. In this instance, rather than appearing as a poster child for volunteer work, the narrator is deliberately portrayed as a struggling individual.

The parallel framing of these three instances—the reception of numerical data, the moment of disbelief, and the impulse to ‘unknow’ or detach—establishes the relevance of the young narrators in the processes of meaning-making: as mediators of the received information, they appear as the emotional sounding board for the presented data. An implicit alignment between reader and narrator emerges: following the young protagonists, the reader is invited to associate numbers with the fictionally rendered suffering. This personal dimension of the influenza is further developed in *In the Shadow of Blackbirds* and *A Death-Struck Year*, both of which reconceptualize the pandemic as a personal obstacle to the protagonist.

In the Shadow of Blackbirds prominently employs the pandemic as part of Mary Shelley's path to individual agency. While, as just elaborated, Mary Shelley opts not to engage with specific facts of the pandemic, her development is also accompanied by her thirst for knowledge, specifically concerning the death of her love interest, Stephen. As Safah explains in a review, “[t]he pages drip with the voice of a mind yearning for knowledge in a time where it was deemed improper” (n.p.). Given this opposition between Mary Shelley's search for truth, her female identity, and her historical surroundings, her

behavior can be understood as rebellious in nature. This rebellion against the limits of her societal role resonates with historical YA fiction's interest in focusing on marginalized protagonists who change their situation (Brown and St. Clair 4). This struggle is mirrored in Mary Shelley's decision to defy her aunt's wishes and care for her when she falls ill, a decisive step towards maturation. When her aunt asks her niece to leave, Mary Shelley muses:

I backed out of the room, unsure what to do. At any second I might drop to the floor with the same convulsions. My life could end in a matter of hours. . . .
But I couldn't leave my aunt. I couldn't—not when I could possibly save her. (324)

Mary Shelley's uncertainty gives way to a firm conviction that care is essential and non-negotiable—an idea emphasized through the repeated phrase “I couldn't.” Then, Mary Shelley exhibits a growing awareness of her responsibility and skill (“when I could possibly save her”). Her decision appears as a decisive step towards maturation, a notion that is further emphasized by the transformation brought forth by her task: “A snail of a girl was what I'd become. An old woman shuffling about in the stooped body of a sixteen-year-old” (331). The correlation between her new role as a caregiver and normative readings of age becomes obvious: taking care of her aunt literally matures—even ages—Mary Shelley beyond her years. *In the Shadow of Blackbirds* thus positions the flu as a decisive factor in the narrator's coming-of-age.

This framing of the influenza as a transformative power in the protagonist's life is also presented in *A Death-Struck Year*. Lucier's novel features the narrator Cleo's struggle to find a place in society, and the novel opens with her wondering what her purpose in life might be. This purpose, the novel supposes, is her work for the Red Cross, a task she pursues against her brother's orders and which she soon begins to perceive as a personal obligation. Through this shift, the narrator gains agency and self-assertion. In the novel's beginning, she muses: “I was in enough trouble as it was. Others would help, surely.

Wouldn't they?" (55). Here, Cleo refrains from breaking the rules and opts to rely on other, probably more mature members of society, to reply. This passive, more childlike position is abandoned in the novel's end, when Cleo, after facing serious loss, considers abandoning her task but reacts differently: "And tempted as I was to throw the list [of households to visit] into the fire and be done with it, I couldn't. If not me, then who?" (247). Similar to her musings in the novel's beginning, Cleo offers a rhetorical question, yet finds a divergent answer: while earlier, she relied on someone else to help, she has come to understand that she herself is responsible. Her position has shifted towards agency, from childlike passivity to the developing self-sufficiency of adulthood. To Cleo, then, the influenza and her work as a volunteer also present a purpose. Read within the frame of YA fiction, her task triggers a growing sense of maturity and identity formation.

The employment of influenza as part of the heroines' journey is thus expressed in their shifting depiction of and engagement with the pandemic. The young protagonists act as mediators between the reader and historical data, offering a limited adolescent perspective on their surroundings. However, the nature of this perspective is also tied to the narrator's age. Of the three texts, only *One for Sorrow* features a younger, pre-adolescent protagonist, and, notably, does not employ influenza as a personal obstacle that needs to be overcome. While the younger Annie thus remains in a more passive role that is commonly linked to childhood, Cleo and Mary Shelley's growth in agency resonates with YA fiction's overall emphasis on identity formation. Lindsay Morton and Lynnette Lounsbury argue that YA dystopian fiction "function[s] as a roadmap to agency" (53), a notion that holds appeal beyond the dystopian genre. The narrators' struggle to overcome inertia is tied to their emerging adult priorities—finding a purpose, seeking justice for a loved one—and thus provides a frame of meaning-making centered on individual agency and coming-of-age.

Uncanny Masks and the Haunting Pandemic

As the narrators encounter a rising death toll and try to create meaning from the influenza for their own lives, the discussed texts interlace

the seemingly objective nature of numerical data with the protagonists' personal experiences. Beyond these perspectives, I want to suggest that the supernatural appears as a third frame of meaning-making which tends to overlap with the other two, providing a space for both personal expression and a cultural response to the collective trauma.

In these instances, both the flu and its remedies are linked to the uncanny. *In the Shadow of Blackbirds*, Mary Shelley remembers a classmate who died from the flu and “convulsed on the hard wooden floor like the victim of a witch’s curse” (159). While the protagonist is interested in science and only reluctantly accepts the presence of her deceased love interest, the comment indicates that the experience of the illness has shifted what can be approached and understood within a scientific frame. Jean Webb further explains: “For Mary this period of the pandemic and the heightened sense of urgency takes away the unreality of Stephen appearing as a spirit for nothing seems to be normal and the abnormal becomes accepted.” As Webb notes, the pandemic shifts notions of normalcy and presents the supernatural as another frame of meaning-making. Like the illness itself, its remedies, too, are linked to the otherworldly. When Mary Shelley attends Stephen’s funeral, she narrates: “We entered a white foyer, and I stiffened at a disturbing sight: a glowing purplish-blue haze that drifted across the floorboards and rose to the ceiling like a restless band of travelling phantoms” (116). The believed remedy for the flu, the sprinkling of sulfur on hot coals, is reframed as an otherworldly appearance: to Mary Shelley the sight appears “disturbing” as the personified fog ascends like “phantoms.” The role of the opaque sulfur fog as Gothic imagery is further underlined when Stephen’s “dark eyes in the photograph wat[ch] [her] through the incandescent blue fog” immediately before making contact with her from beyond the grave (119). Clearly, the fog as a remedy against the flu is reconceptualized in terms of the uncanny: hereby, the influenza—and the measures taken to prevent it—are tied to death’s presence in the protagonists’ life. These references to the supernatural offer shortcuts to conceptualize the overwhelming and traumatic experience of the pandemic,

and the young falling ill and dying by the thousands is expressed in metaphorical terms.

The most prominent symbol of the correlation between remedies for the flu and otherworldly appearances, however, is the titular “blackbirds” themselves. When Mary Shelley communicates with the deceased Stephen, he repeatedly expresses his horror of blackbirds, first as animals (161), then as “birdmen” with “hands and beaks” (231). Initially, Mary Shelley attempts to make meaning from the birds by engaging with war poetry (189) and by tying Stephen’s fears to birds eating corpses in the war (230). Yet as she solves the mystery of Stephen’s death, she uncovers that the birdmen are, in fact, humans transformed by the wearing of flu masks:

One of the figures turned toward me, and his mask mutated into an enormous white beak. I sucked in my breath and blinked my eyes, but he wouldn’t change – the creature looked like an ungodly bird with the body of a man. (356)

The flu masks literally “mutate” the two men who have violated Stephen into “creatures” and “ungodly birds.” Their birdlike appearance resonates with the beak-like structure of the pest mask and evokes a previous pandemic. Mary Shelley’s apparent disbelief, her attempt to blink and chase the dreamlike image away, further emphasizes the merging of the otherworldly with her present. The wearing of masks, which conceals and alters the face, reconceptualizes Stephen’s comments; what was dismissed as delirium is manifested as Mary Shelley’s reality. The mask-wearing men—or birdmen, depending on perspective—tormenting Stephen with poison until he accidentally kills himself, further substantiates their link to death. The shift in perspective in which flu masks transform the wearer reveals the limits of a purely medical framework for understanding the individual experience of the pandemic. Instead, this mode of meaning-making is intersected with the supernatural to articulate a sense of uncertainty and contingency that informs both the pandemic experience and its medical interventions.

The flu mask itself, then, is linked to the uncanny, a notion further developed in *One for Sorrow*, when Annie's friend steals Elsie's mask and wears it herself. Yet after Elsie dies, the mask itself epitomizes the girl's death, and contact with the infectious object becomes impossible. As the narrator explains: "We were afraid of it. We didn't even touch it" (97). She not only expresses knowledge of possible infection, Annie also shows guilt for mocking Elsie. This interlayering of fear and guilt is rendered palpable in the ensuing haunting by Elsie's ghost. In a dream, Annie first sees "a girl white as snow stood where the angel had been, and she was wearing a flu mask" (121). Similar to the previous instance of "blackbirds," a winged creature wears a flu mask, and again, the mask defines the figure's identity: in Annie's dream, an angel is turned into the vengeful Elsie by wearing a mask.

Yet *One for Sorrow* not only links the flu mask to the uncanny, it also assigns a personified form to the unseeable influenza by referencing the skipping rhyme "In flew Enza," which is also mentioned in *In the Shadow of Blackbirds*. The rhyme was well-known at the time; Crosby even reports on President Wilson referring to it (125). In *One for Sorrow*, Annie and her friends chant:

I had a little bird,
 And its name was Enza.
 I opened up the window,
 And in flew Enza. (60)

In the Shadow of Blackbirds opts for a different spelling of the final line: "And in-flu-enza" (85), thus further emphasizing the wordplay. The song itself gives clear, metaphorical form to an abstract concept: the airborne flu becomes a bird called Enza. The song emphasizes the children's need to translate the unknowable force of the pandemic into a physical entity, which haunts the group (and is soon mirrored by Elise haunting Annie). Yet the song also reflects on social distancing and teaches a clear lesson: by opening the window, "Enza" enters. Valid information is thus translated into rhyme and is made accessible, chantable and repeatable even to smaller children. In the novel,

the song and “Enza” serve as a shorthand for the deadly disease, but also relate to Annie’s guilt: after Annie and her friends mock Elsie with the song, the latter dies of influenza only to return to haunt the narrator. While the renaming of “Enza” thus appears as the group’s insider code for the pandemic and as part of childlike play, it is clearly entangled with the brutality of their social exclusion and linked to Elsie’s impending death.

Both Winters’s and Lucier’s novels introduce ghosts to a story set amidst the influenza pandemic of 1918 and thus interrelate elements of the supernatural with the pandemic. The shifts in everyday life and deviations from normalcy—the burning of sulfur, the wearing of masks—are narratively reimagined as pertaining to the supernatural realm. Hereby, the novels offer a third frame of meaning-making in which the influenza cannot be explained by historical fact or mediated by the protagonists’ emotional reactions; instead, it is presented as an uncontrollable and ultimately incomprehensible force in the characters’ lives.

Conclusion: Frames of Meaning-Making in Historical Fiction for Young Adults

In this article, I have attempted to outline the prevalence of three frames of meaning-making—collective, individual, supernatural—in three texts of historical fiction for young adults about the influenza pandemic of 1918. By embedding historical data, the novels ground their fictional characters in a documented past. Yet, they also emphasize the narrators’ limited perspective and invite identification with the protagonists’ fallible nature. As the young protagonists struggle with the impact of the pandemic on their personal lives, their coming-of-age and gain in agency are linked to the experience of the pandemic. Finally, by invoking the supernatural, they capture the pandemic’s unexpected, incomprehensible, and seemingly uncontrollable force. These frames offer different modes of explanation and ways to try to make meaning of the pandemic. Yet, they also intersect and overlap. For instance, an object like the flu mask functions simultaneously as a

collective public health tool, a source of individual trauma and guilt, and a catalyst for the supernatural, transforming wearers into uncanny “birdmen.” They thus highlight that the pandemic, as an event of rupture, also destroys existing frames of meaning-making. Rather, it calls for ever-changing, overlapping approaches that allow for the complex interaction of internal and external developments, as well as local and global effects.

This focus on making sense of a past pandemic is particularly timely. For adolescents who have lived through the spread of COVID-19, the experiences of these fictionalized protagonists offer ample grounds for identification. Following Louise Rosenblatt’s transactional theory of reading, a text becomes a poem because its symbols are deciphered by a specific reader with specific experiences, and said reader “selects from the various referents that occur to him in response to the verbal symbols. He finds some context within which these referents can be related” (34). These “referents” may allow readers to understand the past pandemic in terms of the more recent one—and vice versa.

At first sight, it may thus appear that YA novels about pandemics follow “the outbreak narrative” (Wald 2), creating coherence from the contingency presented by the disease and countering a banal problem: pandemics do not follow story arches. It might therefore seem like texts for young adults find simple answers to complex questions. When wondering how life can go on during or after a pandemic, they suggest that the personal struggles encountered in a pandemic are simply part of an adolescent’s path to greater agency. Yet beyond containing the pandemic within the well-known tropes of YA fiction, these texts also establish uncertainty as an integral part of the pandemic experience. In approaching and teaching their young readers through different frames, they ultimately suggest that no single solution can ever be presented; in the end, the pandemic defies any single frame of meaning-making. Hereby, they also normalize the experience of uncertainty, of loss of reference, as inherent to their young characters’ narratives. The texts’ most educative function, then, is accepting

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Biography

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