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'Faith, Love, and Hope': reading the maturation process in Matthew Quick's *Sorta Like a Rock Star* through a Kristevan lens

Abstract:

This exegetical paper seeks to place the maturation process in US novelist Matthew Quick's *Sorta Like a Rock Star* (2010) in the context of a reflection on Bulgarian-French psychoanalyst and writer Julia Kristeva's work on love. By reading Quick's YA novel through a Kristevan lens, I illustrate how Kristeva's critical investigation of love, her concept of the subject-in-process, and her notion of adolescence as 'open structure' add to the complexity of analysing the protagonist's maturation process. Kristeva's work on love from a psychoanalytic, philosophical, theological, and sociocultural position forms the framework for my critical analysis of Quick's narrative. By contextualizing and supporting the creative component of my research, this paper responds to the view of several poststructuralist literary critics, such as Roberta Seelinger Trites, Karen Coats, and Martha Westwater, who argue for greater inclusion of adolescent literature in the critical study of literature. By reading the maturation process in Quick's YA novel through a Kristevan lens, I explore notions of growth and the depiction of maturation in YA literature, hoping to expand the representation of love and growth in adolescent literary texts as well as allowing Kristeva's theory to inform my own creative practice.

Biographical note:

Kerstin Kugler is the author of two children's books and is a PhD candidate at Curtin University of Technology. Her research focus is on poststructuralist studies of children's and adolescent literature with a particular focus on the representation of the maturation process.

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This exegetical reflection on Julia Kristeva's work on love in the context of the maturation process in adolescent literature complements the creative component of my research. It provides both context and focus for my creative practice in which I seek to explore conceptualisations of growth, maturation, and subjective renewal. I propose to move away from a linear understanding of coming-of-age in a traditional *bildungsroman* pattern, toward a cyclical view of maturation as continuous 'subjective rebirth' (Miller 2014: 5), which is evocative of Kristeva's approach to strangeness within and without and advocates a renewed coming-into-subjectivity (cf. Miller 2014). US writer Matthew Quick's *Sorta Like a Rock Star* (2010) is an example of the depth and complexity that can be achieved in adolescent literature with an altered understanding of change and maturation. In Kristeva's theory, a subject is always in process and identity never fixed or unified (cf. Kristeva 1990). As Kelly Oliver observes, the unity of the Kristevan subject 'is called into question by the other within, and other-in-process' (1993: 13). Uncovering the stranger in herself and opening up in a dialogic interaction with other subject positions mark the changes and growth of Quick's protagonist, Amber.

As Karen Coats observed in her 2001 review of Martha Westwater's Kristevan reading of adolescent fiction, "Since the dearth of genuinely theoretical reflection on Young Adult literature was noted by Caroline Hunt in 1996, several book-length studies have appeared on the subject" (2001:214). Most relevant for this paper are Martha Westwater's study of adolescent fiction in the context of Julia Kristeva, *Giant Despair Meets Hopeful* (2000). Also influential is Roberta Seelinger Trites' reading of adolescent literature in the context of Michel Foucault's theory on power in *Disturbing the Universe* (2000), followed up almost two decades later with her study of the depiction of maturation in adolescent literature, *Literary Conceptualizations of Growth* (2014). Robyn McCallum's study of Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of dialogic subject formation, *Ideologies of Identity in Adolescent Fiction* (1999), is important not only because it gives a thorough examination of identity in adolescent literature, but also because Bakhtin's concepts of dialogism and polyphony influenced Kristeva's own theory of the subject-in-process. Finally, Karen Coat's *Looking Glasses and Neverlands* (2004) is important despite the fact that her Lacanian approach is directed more towards children's literature than YA literature. Coats dedicates a chapter to Kristevan abjection in adolescent literature, which is useful for gaining a clearer picture of the depiction of growth and maturation in YA literature.

Kristeva, a Bulgarian-French psychoanalyst who lives and teaches in Paris and publishes her work in French, is also a novelist and a literary and art critic with a background in semiotics and Russian formalism. The scope of her work makes it difficult to put an exact label on her that adequately reflects her complex engagement across the various disciplines, including literary criticism, linguistics, and psychoanalysis. This is particularly so because different aspects of her oeuvre have had a varying influence in different countries. She has been called an influential thinker, a public intellectual, a philosopher, a feminist, and has been characterised in *Le Monde* as 'someone who offers psychoanalytic interpretations of current political events (cf. Blanchard 2005). As a psychoanalyst, literary critic, and public figure, she is interested in the crisis and reconstruction of identity and meaning, has written largely about the symbolic and the subject in crisis, and has devoted much of her work to an investigation of emotions such as love or hatred within a psychoanalytic framework. She has repeatedly investigated faith, strangeness, the uncanny, abjection, melancholia, and love from a psychoanalytical and historical perspective.

Kristeva's work is as heavily influenced by Sigmund Freud's and Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theories as it is by the theories of Mikhail Bakhtin, who she introduced to the French intellectuals in the 1960s and 1970s. Some of the most prominent concepts of her

work include her theory on the semiotic and the symbolic, which formed part of her doctoral thesis in the early 1970s, her notion of intertextuality, the subject-in-process, and split subject of separation. Increasingly, she has moved her focus toward a deeper engagement with art, as for example in her book *The Severed Head* (2012).

Martha Westwater's approach to a Kristevan reading of YA literature is informed by concepts that feature prominently in Kristeva's work, such as her theory of the semiotic and the symbolic, and also concepts that have been less widely discussed, such as Kristeva's monumental time (2000). In her book, Westwater reads the work of well-established YA authors in light of particular Kristevan notions. For example, she dedicates one chapter to abjection in Katherine Paterson's novels, and another to a discussion of Aidan Chambers' novels and Kristeva's work on melancholia.

Westwater's approach has been followed by various scholars of childhood studies. It seems that it is in particular Kristeva's work on abjection and melancholia that studies in YA literature draw on, such as Karen Coats in *Looking Glasses and Neverlands* (2004) or Michelle Preston in *Ghostly Children* (2009). This exegetical paper, however, seeks to reflect on Kristeva's work on love, such as her *Tales of Love* (1987). As in Kristeva's *Powers of Horror* (1982), on abjection, and her *Black Sun* (1989), on melancholia, *Tales of Love* explores human emotions supported by a psychoanalytic framework. As is Kristeva's usual procedure, the trajectory of the book follows first her personal experience of love, then moves to situate her examination of love in philosophy, theology, and literature from a psychoanalytic position. She concentrates her focus, for example, on theological writings, such as Paul's on agape. As she chronicles the development of the concept of love in the west, she increasingly presents 'psychoanalytic discourse as a discourse of love ... one that situates itself in the space previously filled by religion' (Moi 1986: 238). Kristeva views not just psychoanalysis but also literary and artistic discourses as filling the void that religion left behind. John Lechte explains Kristeva's approach to literary discourse as amatory discourse by noting that for Kristeva, 'art is an opening up of the psyche, similar to love' (Lechte 1990: 184). In *Hatred and Forgiveness* (2010), a collection of essays, articles, and interviews published 23 years after *Tales of Love*, Kristeva is even more explicit about her view: 'After "God is dead", Auschwitz, the gulags, the terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers, we know: a single religion remains: that of Love' (Kristeva 2010: 187)

While Kristeva's engagement with love is crucial to her overall oeuvre, so too is her continuous investigation of the processes by which a subject renews her psychic identity. Her understanding of adolescence as an open structure contrasts with the *bildungsroman*-inspired representation of the maturation process common in adolescent literature. In her recent *Literary Conceptualizations of Growth* (2014), Roberta Seelinger Trites offers valuable insight in the goal-oriented trend in YA coming-of-age novels.

Trites notes that 'our culture self-replicates ideas, such as the hegemony of growth in adolescent literature, with entailed conceptual metaphors and cultural narratives that have become scripted by repetition ... Ideas about growth then become an almost endless loop in adolescent literature' (2014: 147). This has serious ramifications, which Trites addresses by asking 'do those of us in childhood studies ever want to write about childhood and adolescence employing metaphors that effectively entail youth as negative, as something to be outgrown[?]' (2014: 145).

While Trites acknowledges 'that there is nothing inherently evil about growth because it is a fundamental factor in everyone's life', she argues for 'other epistemologies, that would help young readers understand literature – and life – in less goal-oriented ways. After all, in

literary depictions, coming of age does have a clear-cut trajectory that is defined by only one goal: maturity' (Trites 2014: 148).

Juxtaposing the hegemony of growth which Trites observes in adolescent literature with Kristeva's definition of adolescence, I argue that Kristeva's approach is not centred around concepts of maturation but instead based on what she terms 'the openness of the adolescent structure' (Kristeva 1995a: 136). Kristeva makes it clear in her essay on the adolescent novel in *New Maladies of the Soul*, that 'with "adolescent" I mean less a developmental stage than an open psychic structure' (Kristeva 1995a: 136). She repeats this view in her review of the psychoanalyst Helene Deutsch's autobiography when she writes that, "the Sturm und Drang of adolescence is less a matter of age than of a structure that I have called an "open structure" (Kristeva 1995b: 199). Kristeva borrows the term 'open structure' from biology, and describes it as 'a living organism whose sole purpose is to renew itself by opening itself up to its environment or other structures' (Kristeva 1995a: 136).

In her book on the dialogic construction of subjectivity in adolescent literature, Robyn McCallum observes that in a Bakhtinian context 'concepts of personal identity and selfhood are formed in dialogue with society, with language, and with other people' (1999: 3). Kristeva's notion of the open structure as interaction of subjects with one another, or with that which is repressed in oneself, is evocative of Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogism and his theory of subject relations as 'dialogic interplay between different concepts of subjectivity' (McCallum 1999: 90). According to Kristeva, it is this open structure which is essential in the renewal of one's identity.

A Kristevan approach, informed by her theory of the subject-in-process and the open structure, adds a complex dimension to a reading of maturation in adolescent literature. Kristeva remarks that her theory of the subject-in-process is 'my attempt to articulate as precise a logic as possible between identity or unity, the challenge to this identity and even its reduction to zero, the moment of crisis, of emptiness, and then the reconstitution of a new, plural identity' (quoted in Guberman 1996: 189-190). In Matthew Quick's *Rock Star*, the author depicts the psychic reorganisation of his protagonist's subjectivity rather than her coming-of-age in a traditional sense. Instead of examining her maturation as linear growth, Amber's maturation is explored as a renewal of her plural identity. Elaine Miller uses the notion of 'coming to subjectivity' in *Head Cases* (Miller 2014: 20), her book on Julia Kristeva and art. I propose to consider maturation in adolescent narratives as a renewed coming-into-subjectivity, rather than a coming-of-age.

Matthew Quick's YA portrayal of Amber, a Catholic teenager battling homelessness and depression, avoids propaganda statements as it goes straight to the heart of some of religion's big questions. What does it mean to have faith? Are love and hope essential qualities for a Christian? What is the place of love and hope in today's society? And, finally, 'why does God allow horrible things to happen to good people?' (Quick 2010: 199).

Amber, her mother, and her pet rescue dog are homeless after her mother's last boyfriend kicked them out, but Amber keeps it a secret from her friends and teachers. It is her senior year at high school and she spends most of her free time volunteering at different organisations. She teaches English at a Korean church, spends time at a nursing home with Joan of Old, the widow of a German philosopher, befriends Private Jackson, a traumatised war veteran, and fights for more social equality at her high school. During winter, Amber's mother becomes increasingly desperate to find a new home for herself and her daughter. As her salary as a bus driver is so small, she is convinced she needs to find a new partner to take them in. When she does not return from the town's bars one night, Amber raises the alarm. Her worst fears are confirmed when her mother is found murdered. Donna, the mother of one

of Amber's school friends, takes her in, but Amber grieves for her mother and battles a crisis of meaning. She is about to give in to pessimism and hopelessness when her rescue dog needs her help. To finance his life-saving operation, she organises a fundraiser and is overwhelmed by the town's response. Finally, when her mother's killer is caught, she confronts him with a message that reaffirms her positive outlook on life.

As the events of the novel raise philosophical questions about love and faith, and the trajectory of the plot takes the reader on a rollercoaster journey from youthful optimism to utter despair before it arrives at a conclusion founded on love, faith, and hope, a reflection on Kristeva's engagement with the crisis and renewal of identity and meaning allows us to delve deep into the adolescent subject as 'work-in-progress' (Coats 2001: 214). A reading of Quick's novel in the context of coming-of-age novels for adolescent readers will necessarily have to address disillusionment as part of the *bildungsroman* pattern (cf. Trites 2014), especially since Quick presents optimism as a fundamentally youthful quality. But Kristeva's approach to adolescence as 'open psychic structure' (Kristeva 1995a: 136), which Coats calls the 'adolescent's neverending creation and recreation of the self' (Coats 2001 :214), unearths other possible views of maturation, especially in terms of a renewal of the self, and an opening up to that which has been repressed (cf. Kristeva 1995a).

Quick's *Rock Star* is a battle between hope and despair, which is fought on various interlinked levels. On the level of language, Amber's hopeful exuberance is contrasted with Joan of Old's unaffectionate tone and a tendency to counteract her optimism with Nietzsche quotes that cut to the quick. The protagonist's exuberant tone becomes muted in the wake of her mother's murder, evocative of the emptiness she feels, which is stylistically characterised by the dominance of the blank page. The written word becomes sparse, and Quick's sentences assume a staccato-like pattern reverberating the short, explosive eruptions of Amber's grief and horror, while the physical turning of the page corresponds to her monotone melancholy with a loss of language. With a renewal of Amber's hopeful optimism, Quick's style picks up speed and the protagonist's exuberance is even more prominent than before.

Before I burst into tears, in my mind, I start pumping myself up with accolades to stop the waterworks, and I'm using a super-mega sports announcer voice:

The indomitably hopeful one!

The girl of unyielding optimism!

The teen of merriment!

The fan favorite!

Your undisputed champion!

'Amber – Rock Star of Hope – Apple-TOOOOOOOON!'

I yell across the Friendly's, and everyone in the joint turns and looks at me like my head is on fire. (Quick 2010: 354-355)

The battle between hope and despair is also fought on a thematic level in the nature of events presented in Quick's narrative. *Rock Star* is marked by tragedy both familiar (homelessness in an unaffected city, abandonment, poverty) and extraordinary (the brutal murder of Amber's mother). Yet, as noted above, Amber's optimism, though cruelly put to the test, prevails. Repeatedly, in the course of events, hope wins over despair, and Quick's *Rock Star* presents this realisation of hope through love.

Quick's narrative is infused with the concepts of love, faith, and hope, which are elaborated along two interlinked dynamics. Love and hope play a fundamental role in driving the plot structure. They form the core of Amber's identity, as she and others think of herself. Yet,

love and hope are also placed within a Christian context and structured within this framework.

The contextualisation of love within a Christian dynamic in *Rock Star* allows a reflection on Kristeva's examination of agape, in particular in the context of Paul's doctrine. Kristeva writes that while the term agape had been used in 'Greek eroticism' as well as 'Hellenic Judaism', it was 'Paul who was the first to give the term its Christian value, its only religious value' (Kristeva 1987: 393). She explains that agape is 'definitely a *disinterested gift*. Far from needing to deserve it or to fear its withdrawal by God, the Christian is assured of being loved, independently of his merits' (Kristeva 1987: 139, emphasis in the original). Kristeva stresses that agape is also 'a love for those who are unworthy' and contrasts it as 'concept of theocentric love' with both 'human deserved love' and 'an eros aiming at happiness' (Kristeva 1987: 139). She also emphasises agape's indelibility and writes that 'there is a fundamental, indestructible biblical love that is the true pedestal of Christian agape' (Kristeva 1987: 393). As Lechte explains, whereas 'Eros rises to the object ... agape descends on its object' (1990:172). Lechte describes that Paul calls on 'active enlightenment' to realise that 'God loves everyone', which will lead 'to a full encounter' with 'God as the Ideal' (1990: 173). Lechte stresses the realisation that in 'opening myself up to the symbolic (Other), I will love the other as myself' (1990: 173). Moi explains that Kristeva defines agape as 'metaphorical identification' (1986: 239), and uses the term agape 'as synonymous with primary identification' (Moi 1986: 264).

Love in Quick's *Rock Star* is not a search for something that is lacking, but a realisation of something that is already within us. Both the unmerited and indestructible nature of agape, together with the required opening up of oneself to the other, become important building blocks in *Rock Star*. The plot in Quick's narrative is driven by Amber's actions, which spread hope in her hometown. Thus, the reader realises that in Quick's novel, it is not only Jesus who is 'Sorta like a Rock Star', but also Amber, who comes to symbolise the indestructible nature of Christian love. In the absence of Christian agape, Quick's narrative has a tendency to present love as either manic (Amber's mother, whose search for the ideal boyfriend becomes the driver of her own destruction) or solitary (the traumatised war veteran who suffers in solitude, unable to share his pain with the people around him).

The disinterested and indestructible nature of agape lies at the heart of Amber's passion for Jesus, while the trajectory of the plot reveals the whole gamut of her changing belief in the church's doctrine. Amber's interest in Christianity stems from a series of religious children's books titled 'Jesus was a Rock Star', which are 'the only thing my father, Bob, left behind for me when he took off' (Quick 2010: 53). After being baptised as a teenager in a more orthodox church, Amber quickly becomes disaffected with the traditional conservatism of the Catholic Church and finds what she is looking for in Father Chee's derelict Korean Church. From the outset, she chooses misfits and outcasts who – like she and her mother – live on the margins of society. Her active engagement with the people around her is informed by her openness toward, and her curiosity about, the specificity of these people's situations.

The nature of agape is also echoed in her weekly *Battle between Hope and Pessimism*, Amber's unique way of engaging with the residents at a local nursing home. Amber, as the Princess of Hope, battles with the widow of a German philosopher, who quotes Nietzsche to challenge Amber's optimism. The following battle scene crystallises the novel's main message.

'What do you know, child?' Joan of Old says. "Life always gets harder toward the summit – the cold increases, responsibility increases." Also Nietzsche. You haven't even begun to feel

pain, young woman, but you will. You will feel pain. Life is hell, and your life has only just begun.'

Joan sorta stares at me through her pink wrinkly eyelids, and suddenly, this old, Nietzsche-quoting woman chills my bones. Maybe she's right. Maybe there is nothing but pain in my future. Endless pain and then you die. Can this be what's true? (Quick 2010: 118)

Amber experiences a moment of doubt after the widow's challenge, to which she responds by praying to God. The solution comes to her in the form of love: 'I walk over to Joan, say, "That's okay. Be as pessimistic as you want, JOO. I'll still love you anyway"' (Quick 2010: 118).

In the course of the novel, the trajectory of Amber's relationship with Jesus and her forceful optimism moves from a relatively firm foundation based on shining a light of hope into the lives around her, to utter despair in the wake of her mother's death. Although the people in her life rally around her, Amber struggles to reconcile her faith with the meaninglessness of her mother's murder. The novel poses questions it cannot truly answer, such as 'why do bad things happen to good people' (Quick 2010: 199). Again, a variation of the novel's underlying message is voiced, this time by Amber's priest, the Korean Father Chee:

'I use my life to tell other people the good idea.'

'What's the good idea?'

'That no matter how much evidence we have to prove that life is meaningless, we should believe that life makes some sort of sense – and that the story of Jesus is a good story, simply because it teaches us that we should be kind to others. That we should do whatever it takes, that we should sing soul music if it makes the lives of others better. That we should try to be good people, and love everyone.' (Quick 2010: 237)

Amber experiences her mother's murder also as an attack on the core of her identity. Suffering from grief and depression, Amber realises that her mother's murder presents her with a choice. She can decide to 'never recover from the blow' (Quick 2010: 216) or 'return to her hopeful self' (Quick 2010: 268). For a time, and despite the support of her friends, it seems that Amber will give up. When she decides 'to quit being Amber Appleton' (Quick 2010: 178) and observes that, "I'm not a kid anymore" (Quick 2010: 179), she allows the tragic circumstances of her mother's murder to reduce her hopeful identity to someone who has lost all hope.

The reconstitution of Amber's identity begins with Amber learning that her pet dog is seriously ill and will need expensive surgery. Before she even fully realises it, hope and love once again dominate her life. As she prays for her dog's recovery, she observes that, 'I sorta need to pray, and all. Praying keeps me sane. Maybe it's my true favorite' (Quick 2010: 268). As Amber works through her grief and depression towards a renewed sense of hope, this is not portrayed as a denial of tragedy but as a reconstitution of her hopeful identity. The tragic events of her life have failed to disillusion her, but they have uncovered a truth which Amber had chosen to hide from others and herself. Recalling her previous homelessness and her desperate struggle against marginalisation, Amber questions the source of her optimism:

At best, I'm just an interesting blip in people's lives – an amusing footnote. Which is probably why my dad split and my mom can't stay sober and all of her boyfriends ditch us after only a few months or so. Sometimes I wonder why I try at all. What's the point? (Quick 2010: 124)

Her mother's murder uncovered Amber's hidden fear that spreading hope is a futile undertaking which makes no difference. When she begins the slow reconstitution of her identity, she is aware of this fear, but chooses hope regardless. Thus, Amber's maturation is

not characterised by disillusionment but rather by the realisation that she can choose to remain hopeful in the face of tragedy. Amber realises that in the absence of hope, life becomes meaningless, and she makes the conscious decision that a meaningless life is not what she wants. It is telling that Amber's nemesis, Joan of Old, reiterates this decision close to the end of the novel.

'I understand the town is having some sort of pep rally for you because of what happened to your mother and because you were so constantly on your guard that you are no longer able to defend yourself, like Nietzsche said. I hear you've lost hope, and – regardless of my philosophical views – you're far too young for that. What will you have to look forward to in old age, if you become a nihilist before you hit eighteen?' (Quick 2010: 328)

As the above quote illustrates, Amber and Joan of Old seem to agree that Amber has to make a conscious decision how to respond to tragedy. At a fundraising event to collect money for her pet's surgery, her community overwhelms Amber with their generosity and reaffirms her decision to continue to spread hope. The event turns into a moment that celebrates neighbourly love, hope, and kindness in the spirit of Christian agape. Amber's return to her hopeful self is depicted as a triumphant moment, with the townspeople welcoming her like a rock star. For her community and friends, Amber has become a symbol for love and hope.

Calling to mind the dialogic nature of Kristeva's view of an open psychic structure, Amber's maturation is depicted not in a simple linear progression from youthful idealism to mature disillusionment, but as a cyclical reconstitution and a deeper renewal of a plural identity. Quick's novel presents Amber's interaction with society, but also her interaction with that which she had repressed.

In the closing pages, Amber remarks that "'I'm only eighteen. These are the days. I'm still a kid if I want to be. And I do'" (Quick 2010: 349). Rather than placing Amber's growth and emotional journey into a stereotypical conceptualisation of coming-of-age, the above words illustrate her renewed sense of self. Her identity's renewal is also articulated in the form of a haiku when Amber confronts her mother's killer:

How I am responding to his murdering my mother.

You may exist in

This world – but I exist too

And I will not yield. (Quick 2010:348)

Amber has arrived at a deeper knowledge of herself and understands what being hopeful means to her. Kristeva's postulation that a speaking subject is a loving subject is developed by Quick in his narrative to postulate that a loving subject is also a hopeful subject. This forms a crucial aspect of how Amber chooses to see herself, and how she allows others to see her. Realising how much her idealism has affected the people around her, she makes a renewed plea for youthful optimism:

I spread hope.

I'm a hope spreader.

I guess what's what I do ... and that's why I'm still circling the big flaming ball in the sky.
(Quick 2010:355)

With the realisation that instilling hope in the people around her is what gives her life meaning, Amber's emotional journey has come full circle, but is in no way finite or fixed. Her journey through grief and crisis has culminated in a moment of 'subjective rebirth' (Miller 2014: 5) that allows Amber to see what she had repressed. Amber realises how much hope and love nourish her, and how much she missed being a 'Rock Star of Hope' (Quick

2010: 354). Although the events in her life will continue to challenge her optimism, Amber has come to realise that in opening up to the others around her and her own dark fears, she is truly a subject-in-process.

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