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“Louis Sachar’s Holes: Palimpsestic Use of the Fairy Tale to Privilege the Reader”

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Laura Nicosia

Louis Sachar's *Holes*:

Palimpsestic Use of the Fairy Tale to Privilege the Reader

Since its publication in 1998, Louis Sachar's award-winning novel, *Holes*, has received critical attention and popular praise. While marketed as a Young Adult text, it has been alternately categorized as: realistic, a tall tale, a folk tale, a fairy tale, a children's story, a postmodern novel, a detective fiction and an historical legend. Over the years, several critics have commented upon its patterns of archetypal characterizations, and Annette Wannamaker has scrutinized its portrayal of masculinity using literary theory and gender studies analysis. Despite this flurry of attention, little critical consideration has been focused upon the text's layered narrative poetics—the synchronous overlapping of the atemporal familial curse and the folk legend of Kissin' Kate Barlow—throughout, beneath and within Stanley Yelnats' contemporary story.

Sachar crafts this frame tale novel by conflating time periods and weaving oral narratives within the story of Stanley's unjust incarceration and ultimate victory—a fairy tale in its own right. Sachar's use of these oral tales does more than pay homage to a traditional genre. They are neither a cushion to "aler[t] the reader that Stanley's travails should not be taken too seriously" as Elizabeth Mascia says in *The ALAN Review*; nor are they deployed as "an effective means of tackling twenty-first-century issues" as Pat Pinsent suggests of the contemporary use of fairy tales (203). These embedded, intertextual, palimpsestic prequels serve as strategic counterpoints to the immediate story about Stanley's imprisonment at Camp Green Lake. Additionally, they act as narrative vehicles which serve to privilege Sachar's reader *beyond* the knowl-

edge of the characters. These narrative ironies are what I intend to plumb through this essay.

My main intent, therefore, is not to prove that *Holes* is, itself, a fairy tale. Several critics including Mascia and Pinsent have admirably accomplished that task. If the reader, however, wishes further clarification, please refer to these authors.

In short, there are several key characteristics that *Holes* shares with the fairy tale. In the storyline proper, there are magic animals (the poisonous, yellow-spotted lizards). Along with the presence of these magical beings, all three story-times include some form of magical potion or spell (the preserved peaches, dad's anti-foot odor solution, Sam's onions, the songs of Madame Zeroni and Stanley's father). Perhaps the most important fairy tale element is the presence of the two curses (the one levied against Elya and his descendants, the other against Trout Walker and his descendants).

Most of the characters fulfill archetypal roles. Specifically, Madame Zeroni acts as the fairy godmother. The Warden serves as the "wicked" witch who acts as antagonist to the hero figure, Stanley. Kissin' Kate Barlow fulfills the role of the outlaw or wronged woman who seeks to revenge the unjust death of her beloved Sam, the scapegoat victim.

Clearly, Sachar has done his homework in providing a postmodern version of a fairy tale. He is thorough in his construction and true in his adaptation of this classic genre. This is a novel that exemplifies a writer at the top of his craft. Acknowledging these characteristics and accepting that *Holes* is itself a fairy tale that embeds fairy and folk tales within its narra-



tive framing, let us now examine how Sachar deftly intersperses these discrete tales as narrative counterpoints and as asides spoken to a privileged reader and *not* to the naïve characters.

Palimpsestic, Strategic Counterpoints

Holes has been credited as having a complicated and engrossing plot; Sachar's treatment of narrative time and story is ultimately linear—insofar as the book ends at a future point from where it starts—but the narrative is essentially multidirectional, multispatial and multitemporal. Maria Nikolajeva explains that today's young adult and children's literature "transgress[es] its own boundaries, coming closer to mainstream literature, and exhibiting the most prominent features of postmodernism, such as genre eclecticism, disintegration of traditional narrative structures, polyphony, intersubjectivity, and metafiction" (221). From its onset, *Holes* shows evidence of Nikolajeva's portrait of a text that blurs the genre lines. It brings past into present by conflating and overlapping three time periods—telling a triad of stories, using three separate (but related and inter-related character sets).

For those who are unfamiliar with the novel, I will now provide an abbreviated *chronologic* summary of the three counterpointed story lines. In the *distant* past, Stanley's great-great grandfather, Elya, seeks the help of Madame Zeroni to whip up a love spell so he can marry a girl above his station and despite the fact that he cannot pay the bride price. In a variation of the motif of the lover's test, he violates a code of the fairy tale and neglects to fulfill his obligation to the gypsy (never mind the fact that her love spell was flawed). Because of this, he draws a curse against himself and his progeny. This curse has a domino effect for all of his offspring and for those who come in contact with them.

In what constitutes the *near* past, the second story line, Elya's son, the first Stanley Yelnats, loses his fortune to a folkloric hero (who all characters know as Kissin' Kate Barlow). The reader comes to learn her story and how she became the notorious outlaw as the result of a tragic interracial love story. Her deviant career as an outlaw and her ultimate defeat lead to a curse that *she* places upon the family of Trout Walker—the ancestor of the present day warden of Camp Green Lake.¹

In the *present* storyline, the primary story, the progeny of the past character sets of Elya Yelnats, Madame Zeroni, and Trout Walker (i.e., Stanley, Zero and the warden) play out incidents and events that are the direct but distant result of past actions. Curses are lifted, fortunes are reversed, crises from both the far and near past are mollified, and the requisite "happily ever after" ending is provided. In sum, Stanley's wrongful imprisonment becomes what Tolkein calls the "eucatastrophe," or the "good catastrophe" facilitated by the overlapping temporal shifts and the ability for present day characters to correct their ancestors' failings (Tolkein 68).

Sachar deploys these temporal shifts using varying strategies. Sometimes the turning of a page or a chapter change will signify a shift in time or story. Other times, a peritextual blank space on the page will signal a temporal *volta*. And yet other times, Sachar will simply enjamb shifting times from one paragraph to another, juxtaposed in postmodern fashion.

Despite the embedding of multiple times and plots, each character set remains discrete from the other two sets—living separate lives, enacting separate storylines and never directly interacting with each other. Sachar emphasizes the separateness of the character sets when he humorously says of Elya Yelnats, "He didn't know that he was Stanley's great-great-grandfather" (28).

The contemporary story—that is, Stanley's story—however, is *influenced* by both the distant and near past storylines. Nikolajeva identifies that, "A further development toward more complex narrative is multiple plots, as well as multiple temporality and spatiality" (226). Clearly, with its three layers of storylines and three sets of characters, *Holes* is a modern, complex narrative. Within the first three sentences of the novel, a fusion of times is evidenced. The reader hears about the verdant history of Camp Green Lake—from over 100 years ago—reminiscent of

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the "Once upon a time" beginning to most fairy tales. The mention of an historic past introduces the reader to the tone and counterpointed construction of the text. The narrator says, "There is no lake at Camp Green Lake. There once was a very large lake here, the largest lake in Texas. That was over a hundred years ago. Now it is just a dry, flat wasteland" (3). The reader grows sensitized to the past-in-the-present. Stanley may be looking at a dried lakebed and an arid topography. But the reader knows about Green Lake's recent *geographic* past of lushness.

Sachar manipulates this theme of things, people and events that once *were* but *are no longer* as a recurring motif of the text. Both reader and characters

are always aware that a very large lake once was present in Texas every time mention is made of the dry wasteland it has become. This past is palpably present and coexists with "the now" not despite, but because of, the absences.

Soon after, by page 7, when the reader hears about Stanley's "no-good-dirty-rotten-pig-stealing-great-great-grandfather," she has already encountered several "what-if"

scenarios and several leaps in narrative time. Sachar lures the reader back and forth through the present, near and far past in a process of nonlinear narrative accretion. The reader learns how to engage with this text, as if it were a "jig-saw puzzle of a novel," as a reviewer from *The New York Times Book Review* claims, and to make meaning by narrative multi-tasking—adding details to three stories concurrently. In Chapter 3, for instance, the reader encounters at least eight temporal shifts over the course of five pages:

- First, she hears about Stanley's transport to the detention camp;
- Second, the reader makes a short leap backward in time to Stanley's send-off by his parents;
- Third, the reader jumps yet again backward in time and learns about Stanley's embarrassment at school just *before* the supposed crime occurs;

- Fourth, in forward chronologic order, Stanley is arrested;
- Fifth, the reader leaps to the distant past learning about the curse placed upon Elya Yelnats;
- Sixth, the reader leaps to the present time to learn of Stanley's father's quest to find a way to recycle old sneakers;
- Seventh, the reader leaps backward to the near past and the first reference to Kissin' Kate Barlow;
- Finally, the reader leaps ahead 100+ years to Stanley's transport to the camp to fulfill his (albeit) unearned social obligation. (Sachar 6–10)

For the duration of the novel, Sachar presents these time shifts in scatter-shot fashion, with interrelated story lines and creates a palimpsest of narratives. Each incident from both pasts remains in the reader's mind as she experiences Stanley's present. The reader juggles the counterpointed events and reconstructs the asynchronous stories in synchronous fashion. She understands how Stanley's present is not only a response to the past, it also re-enacts key events, acts as a corrective and offers narrative closure to the unsatisfied pasts. Ultimately, Stanley fulfills his great-great-grandfather's obligation to Madame Zeroni and sets the universe correct. He does this, however, unaware of his karmic implications and clueless as to the events he is setting aright.

Narrative Vehicles to Privilege the Reader

Through Sachar's use of the third person limited omniscient narrative voice, the reader learns all that the protagonist and focal lens, Stanley, knows. *Beyond* that, the reader gleans through the narrator's offerings, the history of the Yelnats curse and an awareness of fate's and coincidence's roles in Stanley's life—elements to which even Stanley never becomes fully aware. Specifically, *Holes* practices a type of authorial privileging of the reader through the embedded and layered use of fairy and folk tales (such as the Yelnats curse and the Kissin' Kate Barlow tall tales). As a result of these counterpoint narratives, *Holes* fleshes out an ironic narrative topography beyond which the present-day characters acquire. Simply put, as a result of encountering these embedded oral stories, the reader grows to know more than the characters—and she is aware of her privileged status.

An example of this narrative privilege is when the

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reader learns that despite his appellation as a “no-good-dirty-rotten-pig-stealing-great-great-grandfather,” Elya Yelnats is not a pig thief. His descendants may refer to him as such, but he was *given* the pig by Madame Zeroni as part of his challenge and as part of the plan to help him win the love of Myra. Madame explains, “It just so happens, my sow gave birth to a litter of piglets yesterday. There is one little runt whom she won’t suckle. You may have him. He would die anyway” (30). Clearly, Elya did not steal the pig; it was a gift. The reader is made aware of this fact. The family, however, never comes to realize such a truth. They think, rather, that the curse placed upon their family is the result of some ancient economic crime committed by their progenitor. They have no idea that he defaulted on a *promise* made to a gypsy conjure woman and that *that* was his offense.

This narrative irony is the result of the privileged status of the reader who knows that Elya’s curse is the result of his failure to carry Madame Zeroni up the hill and serenade her with the pig lullaby. This irony also begs the question regarding the function of fairy tales as purveyors of truth: had the family known the whole tale of Elya’s failings as revealed to the reader, could the curse have been lifted sooner?

Besides Sachar’s creation of an ironic narrative topography, he familiarizes his reader with the use of direct address as early as page 5 when the self-aware narrator begins, “The reader is probably asking: Why would anyone go to Camp Green Lake?” Sachar constructs a narrative that speaks through a conscious storyteller to the reader—thereby facilitating the sense of privilege that comes with being in the narrator’s confidence. The reader grows comfortable with direct disclosures from the narrator and benefits from the epiphanies such revelations offer.

In another simple yet profound example of ironic privilege, the reader finds out on page 9 that

Stanley’s great grandfather, the first Stanley Yelnats, was robbed by Kissin’ Kate Barlow. This central mystery to the text is revealed early on to the reader—even before the need-to-know such a fact is made clear. Sure, it is an intriguing and fascinating brush with fame. But, what such an historically fascinating event *means* in the novel is unclear at this time, both to the reader *and* to the characters. Frankly, Stanley’s knowledge of the Kate Barlow encounter comes *after* the reader has been clued-in. The narrator offers, “At such times she [Stanley’s mother] neglected to mention the bad luck that befell the first Stanley Yelnats” (9). Stanley doesn’t find out about his ancestor’s brush with fame until page 10.

The longest sustained example of privileged narrative irony occurs in Chapters 25 and 26, which are entirely devoted to the recent past story of Kate Barlow, Sam the onion man and their forbidden interracial love. The reader learns that Sam was killed for his transgression of kissing a white woman and

that Kate was spared execution and was “rescued against her will” (115). After peritextual ellipses indicate a narrative shift, the storyteller directly addresses the reader with additional information to which no present-day character is made aware. It is learned that after Trout Walker rammed into Sam’s boat out on Green Lake, “Sam was shot and killed in the water. . . . [His] donkey had been shot in the head” (115).

No character in the present tense story learns the details of Sam’s death and Kate’s conversion to outlaw. Neither do they discuss (and it is quite possible that no one knows of) the curse Kate levied against Walker and his descendants: “‘Go ahead and kill me, Trout,’ said Kate. ‘But I sure hope you like to dig. ‘Cause you’re going to be digging for a long time. It’s a big vast wasteland out there. You, and your children, and their children, can dig for the next hundred years and you’ll never find

The two storylines alternate in narrative counterpoint throughout the chapter with no segues, no transitions. Rather than constructing connections between the story lines to ease the reader from the present to the distant past, Sachar fosters a sense of rushing urgency that propels the reader from the present, to the past, and back again.

it” (122). While the Walker clan has searched and dug for the treasure Kate buried, no mention is made of this as a curse. The warden and others are simply looking for buried treasure. And, while she “was one of the most feared outlaws in all the West,” no one speaks about the facts of their story (115). How could they? The Yelnats family would not be aware of the details; the original Stanley Yelnats entered the storyline *after* Kate’s transformation. Only Trout Walker and his posse know the story and Walker’s progeny, the present day warden, is not about to talk about her ancestor’s racism, jealousy and murderous rage—if she even knows about such traits. This folkloric legend is revealed over the course of these two chapters, and its raw truths are revealed to only the reader—not to the characters.

Besides his use of limited omniscient voice and the employment of direct address, the author introduces the reader to the secondary/tertiary stories and the concomitant conflation of times. In chapter 7, Stanley has his first day of digging holes under the hot Texas sun. With each visual extra space of white on the page, the narrative shifts from present day Camp Green Lake to the old country and compresses the passage of time. Each leap to the *distant* past develops the story of Elya—his agreement with Madame Zeroni and his subsequent flight to America—and the origin of the curse. Each *present* day narrative discloses Stanley’s first day of digging holes.

The two storylines alternate in narrative counterpoint throughout the chapter with no segues, no transitions. Rather than constructing connections between the story lines to ease the reader from the present to the distant past, Sachar fosters a sense of rushing urgency that propels the reader from the present, to the past, and back again. He does this by incrementally shortening the duration of each vignette over the course of the chapter. The initial tale, that of Stanley’s first hole, runs for nearly three pages. Elya’s story breaks in and lasts for just over three pages,

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itself. Each subsequent telling—jumping from present to past and back again—lasts for only one page each, creating a sense of rapid counterpoint which trains the ear of the reader to expect a shift in time after brief but decreasing intervals (Sachar 26-40).

What this does, in effect, is blur the line of what is real or now, and what is past or the magical. When a reader enters, exits, enters, and exits the fictive, primary and secondary realms of Elya’s and Stanley’s stories in rapid succession, she becomes comfortable with both narratives and has no real need to distinguish where or when she is at any given moment. Asking the question, “Am I in the present with Stanley now, or am I in a flashback fairy tale from long ago?” is unnecessary since both are

encountered in an active “now.” Such a blurring of temporalities and slippage between genres permits Elya’s past to be *in* and layered *atop* Stanley’s present and allows the magic of the past to permeate the harshness of this present time. To the reader, both stories and times are revealed and enacted concurrently.

Concluding Thoughts

Holes is a complex *present day* fairy tale that frames a *distant past* fairy tale and a *near past* folk legend. Cindy Lou Daniels writes, “Sachar’s plotting strategy within this work is exemplary; there are stories within stories that ultimately fit together like a set of stacking boxes. . . . Critics could not find a better novel to explore structurally and thematically” (80). What I find even more interesting than *Holes*’ themes and structure is that as Sachar layers these stories, characters and temporal periods, he affords the reader a broader, ironic sense of truth and a greater understanding of fate, destiny, and coincidence than Sachar’s characters acquire. Max Lüthi writes, “the fairy tale and similar genres—remove us from the time continuum and make us feel that there is another way



of viewing and experiencing life. . . . the fairy tale, however, reveals [this theme] through its *form*" (45). Sachar's narrative construct establishes an irony that privileges the reader as it entertains. I assert that this intricate craftsmanship merits serious theoretic candling.

If Young Adult and Children's Literatures are to continue making headway against the "theory barrier" that marginalizes both genres within the academy, scholarly critics must be willing to examine these texts with the same literary scrutiny we critique adult canonical texts (Daniels 78). Sachar's *Holes* is one of many notable YA novels that rises to the challenge of critical inquiry and theoretical exploration. This ground is fertile for such investigations. Literary scholars from within the academy will learn that there is an ever-growing corpus of YA and children's texts that not only withstand rigorous analysis, but flourish and grow in their significance as we examine their craftsmanship and explore their intricacies. We must simply get beyond the hierarchical biases of genre classifications.

¹ In what *may* be a further, unsubstantiated but possible entanglement between character sets, Elya Yelnats married an American girl named Sarah Miller (Sachar 38). Trout Walker marries a young girl named Linda Miller (121). Is it possible that Stanley and the warden are related (albeit distantly) through a marriage in the near past?

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