



Authoring Online

Fangirl, Eliza and her Monsters *and the Complexities of the Young Adult Künstlerroman in the Digital Age*

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Abstract

This article explores how young adult artist novels respond to the current proliferation of digital media technologies. Examining two recent publications—*Fangirl* by Rainbow Rowell (2013) and *Eliza and her Monsters* by Francesca Zappia (2017), this paper analyses how these novels interrogate the shifting author function against the backdrop of digitalisation, and how that shift in turn affects the representation of young people's artistic maturation. Informed by a keen awareness of the profound ways in which technological advancements reshape traditional experiences and expectations of authorship and artistic growth, these contemporary novels offer a unique prism through which to complicate the evolving genre of the *Künstlerroman* in adolescent literature.

Keywords

Digital technology, *Künstlerroman*, Bildungsroman, YA literature, artistic maturation, fanfiction

Introduction

Meg Cabot, a well-known American YA author, confessed in a *New York Times* article that if she had written her *Princess Diaries* books now instead of in the early 2000s, she would have had her heroine tweet or blog about her life rather than having her keep a diary (The New York Times, 2013). Cabot's claims reflect an increasing awareness of internet technology's formative power over young people's lives, an awareness that has led to a renewed interest in how adolescent novels represent the complex transition from childhood to adulthood against the backdrop of rapid digitalisation and social media participation. As part of the emerging conversation probing the implications of youth coming of age in the digital era, this essay focuses on how two YA novels explore

the figure of the artist protagonist and the process of her development (or the *Künstler* process) within a context informed by the latest online technologies. The article starts with an examination of the *Künstlerroman* concept and the previous critical conversation surrounding the representation of artists in youth novels, pointing out the significance of examining how contemporary YA artist narratives respond to—and are shaped by—the changing digital environment. The texts I use for my analysis are two American YA titles published within the last decade—*Fangirl* by Rainbow Rowell (2013) and *Eliza and her Monsters* (hereafter referred to as *Eliza*) by Francesca Zappia (2017).

Fangirl charts the development of Cath, a popular fanfiction author, as she navigates her first two terms in college; *Eliza* tells

the story of teenager slash online serial web-comics creator Eliza juggling her high school life and her journey as an artist. Each text can be understood as a *Künstlerroman* for the presentation of the self-identifying artist protagonist and her path to maturation as an author. At the same time, the novels are heavily informed by digital technology because the protagonists (predominantly) perform their authorship online. Rather than comparing and contrasting the two novels, I discuss them in terms of their similarities so as to show how YA novels collectively grapple with Web 2.0 as an emerging phenomenon that has profoundly challenged previous values of creativity, authorship and the author/artist¹ function (Van der Weel, 2019). In the latter part of the article, I demonstrate how each novel reformulates the trajectories for contemporary artistic development in their respective ways. In so doing, this paper aims to offer new critical perspectives on what it means to grow up as a young artist in the twenty-first century, and, by extension, what we may expect of future *Künstler* narratives for adolescents.

The *Künstlerroman*: Concept and Criticism

The *Künstlerroman* usually focuses on the artistic person, thus the protagonists need not only achieve the type of individual and social growth demanded of regular *Bildung* plots, but also arrive at a complete understanding of themselves as artists (Santos, 2017, p. 22). Indeed, crucial to any discussion of the *Künstlerroman* is the figure of the artist. In 'The Philosophy of the Novel of the Artist', Ernst Bloch declares that the artist figure is characterised by a pursuit for 'that which has never yet been heard' (1988, p. 274). Maurice Beebe (1964) and Roberta Seret (1992) likewise indicate how the artist's individuality and generative ability set him apart from secular environments. The aforementioned perceptions of the artist reveal a Romantic view of the privileged artist role, whose creative genius marks him as a trail-

blazer and a misfit. As the *Künstlerroman* evolves into the twentieth century, the artist figure continues to be valued for such traits as self-reliance, originality and professional esteem, as feminist critics began interrogating the eruptive potential of female creativity and the obstacles women must overcome in order to establish a career (Davees, 1999).

Another indispensable question in the *Künstlerroman* is the artist's education and growth. In classic *Künstler* narratives, the protagonist's education often implies his/her transition from an amateur to a professional² thereby achieving the recognised 'author' status, which is 'opposed to the idea of the writer, the scribbler, the journalist or literary drudge' (Bennett, 2005, p. 60). Furthermore, the notion of growth is often tied to identity formation, which requires the protagonist to accept his/her identity as an artist (Trites, 1997).

In adolescent literature, studies on the (female) artist character (see, for example, Clark 1989; Trites 1997) reflect some of the central concerns that have characterised *Künstlerroman* criticism in the past century, including the emphasis on the author role, the apprenticeship process that often leads up to a career, and the affirmation of one's creative identity. However, previous research has not paid adequate attention to the growing significance of digital technologies in shaping cultural perceptions of the artist/author and her maturation process. Two recent studies on contemporary female *Künstler* narratives, namely those by Jocelyn Van Tuyl (2016) and Megan Lynn Isaac (2018), reveal interesting aspects of post-millennial models of apprenticeship in YA novels, touching upon the new realities young people face under the changing landscape of writing and publishing. Nonetheless, neither Tuyl nor Isaac has elaborated upon how these new realities relate to the problematic notions of twenty-first-century authorship, which is bound up with the impact of digital technologies. Nor have they expounded upon how digitalisation affects

how we might perceive the YA artist novel genre.

As many scholars note, Young Adult Literature as a category ‘has undergone many transitions and transformations’ (Fitzsimmons & Wilson, 2020, p. xiii) which mirror the emerging conditions in the media landscape that affect how YA fiction is produced and consumed (Garcia, 2013). These conditions have crucial implications for the youth *Künstlerroman*, which must also tackle with a series of new concerns, especially the increasing ambiguities regarding the author figure and the challenges that inform her maturation. Therefore, the central questions I ask in this article are: to what extent have digital media technologies in the era of Web 2.0 reshaped the representation of the female author figure and her development process in the two YA novels? What do these changing representations mean for the YA *Künstler* narrative as a genre? In order to capture the interplay between the larger contextual shifts and the books I analyse, and to examine my research questions more effectively, I read my primary texts against the relevant transformations that internet technology has brought to the literary sphere. Although my study mainly features girl protagonists, I dwell more specifically on their identity as online authors rather than on their gender, which is why I choose not to contextualise my analysis against the parameters of gender, feminist and girlhood research. Instead, I draw from authorship studies, fan studies and research in digital writing to paint a clearer picture of how technology plays a part in reframing the *Künstlerroman* genre for young adults.

Interrogating the Author Function

Authorship studies have always been interested in exploring the relationship between technology and the author image. According to Andrew Bennett (2005), the prominence of the author in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is a result of a transition from manuscript culture to print culture.

According to Bennett, print culture ‘confirm[s] individuality in its formal qualities of closure and distinction’ and ‘entails a new relationship between text and author’ (Bennett, 2005, p. 46)). Consequently, authors attained legal status and acquired independence, which in turn influenced modern conceptions of authorship (Bennett, 2005).

In the twentieth century, critics have begun questioning the author’s privilege in textual interpretation and manipulation (Bennett, 2005, pp. 68–9). Yet it is the rise of digital technology since the millennium that presents a real challenge to the traditional text-author-reader dynamic. Scholarly debates have also acknowledged the ways in which the expansion of the internet ushers in new landscapes under which authorship functions. In literacy studies, for instance, scholars have pointed out the expansion of digital literacy leading to an understanding of creativity as a common phenomenon, rather than an exclusive trait of Romantic authors (Pennington, 2017). Researchers of digital writing also underline how the internet has turned a reading-dominant culture into a writing-dominant one, lowering the threshold of becoming a published author. R. L. Skains, for instance, puts forward the idea of ‘the demotic author’, a creator who ‘eschews the top-down communication flow of author → text → reader, in favor of publishing platforms that permit and encourage feedbacks and conversations’ (Skains, 2019, pp. 2–3). Furthermore, writing scholar Heather Urbanski (2010) postulates that a unique rhetorical situation of the digital media is fanfiction, which is rapidly moving from the margins to the mainstream, from subculture to culture (Coppa, 2017, p. 1). Operating across disciplinary boundaries, fan studies underline the crucial role fan works and fan authors play in digital culture. An important argument made by fan scholars is how fanfiction embodies the democratisation of creative activity and artist identities, creating spaces for participatory entertainment that open common

readers/fans to the kind of authorship status described by Skains. It would seem that the rise of fandom and digital dissemination platforms have begun to complicate conceptions of authorship in young adult fiction.

In many *Künstler* narratives featuring adolescent girls, the young person's writer identity derives from an internal drive for self-expression (Trites, 1997, p. 66). Yet in *Fangirl* as in *Eliza*, both girls start out as participants in online communities: before setting out on writing fanfiction, Cath belongs to the fandom of the famous fantasy series *Simon Snow*, while Eliza begins as a fan-artist for her favourite book series, *Children of Hypnos*. In an era where information is made readily accessible and sharable, and where digital media encourages channels for participation, readers like Cath and Eliza can easily 'assert a gesture of authorship' (Healey, 2013, p. 69) by posting and disseminating content. Their transition into authorship enables us to imagine the author figure, at least partially, apart from its Romantic genealogy. Becoming an author has now become closely associated with online textual engagements, and with the consumption and appropriation of culture.

In both novels, the act of (often collaborative) appropriation is presented as an integral component of authorship—Cath co-writes *Carry On, Simon* with her sister Wren, while Wallace, a top fan of Eliza's comic, creates a written narrative to accompany her visual art. While collaborative writing or appropriation are by no means uncommon in the history of authorship (Bennett, 2005), they are nevertheless key components of the interactive rhetoric mode in a digitally saturated writing environment, not least through the prominence of 'the fantext'. Collaborative in nature, fantext is characterised by intertextuality and creative indebtedness to one another (Gray, Sandvoss & Harrington, 2017), complicating 'the regal isolation, the solitary individualism, of the Romantic author' (Bennett, 2005, p. 94). It celebrates the 'death of the author' and urges us to ask

the very question Barthes himself put forward in his seminal work—'who is speaking thus?' (1995, p. 125)

In *Fangirl*, Cath's earlier fanfictions are signed off as 'Magicath and Wrenegade', making it difficult to differentiate the voices of Cath and her sister. Cath's own fanfiction, which appropriates the content of the famous *Simon Snow* series, makes her a second author operating alongside Gemma T. Leslie's original voice. A similar pattern can be observed in Wallace's retelling of Eliza's webcomic: as a fan of Eliza's work, Wallace sets out to transcribe Eliza's visual images into chapters. Significantly, both novels adopt a format that displays the interwoven and embedded relationship between fantext and original text—Cath's fanfiction and Gemma T. Leslie's writing appear alternately at the end of each chapter, while Eliza's drawings are presented alongside a written narrative to accompany her artwork, which the text suggests is penned by Wallace. Like classic artist narratives, which are typically centered around the completion of the protagonist's fictitious creation (Bloch, 1988, p. 269), the novels are driven by the girls' desire to finish a certain work—for Cath it's her creative writing assignment, and for Eliza, her webcomic. Nevertheless, the format of these novels provides rich textual spaces for the intertextual and palimpsestic mixture of fantext, co-written text and single-authored text, presenting not one, but multiple speakers. Rather than featuring writings exclusively produced by the heroine, thereby documenting the formation of a single artist-consciousness and the journey leading up to the completion of her artwork, *Fangirl* and *Eliza* employ a format that reflects the impact of digital technology on how writing is produced—when one authors something, another could provide an alternative and share that authorship instantly, to the point where it may be impossible to claim an artwork as entirely one's own.

However, just as both novels nuance the independent Romantic authorship status in

many classic *Künstler* narratives via form and content, they also point to how digital media extends the attention towards authors beyond the book, increasing the projection of authorial personae and enforcing ‘the cult of the author’ (Rombes, 2005). Simone Murray (2018), for instance, discusses contemporary authorship practices within what she calls ‘the digital literary sphere’, an umbrella term that describes the relationship between digital media and literary culture. In the digital literary sphere, Murray argues, authorial identity performance is restructured, as the proliferation of publicising channels and the increased interactivity with readers enable the construction of influential author profiles. Asserting that social media, blogs, personal sites and fansites allow authors to manage themselves as ‘a brand’, Murray concludes that internet technologies have boosted rather than diminished the author’s authority, harking back to the Romantic genius figure in the popular cultural imagination.

Murray’s observations demonstrate the internal paradox of digital literary communication: it both questions and enforces the importance of the author. This paradox is present in *Fangirl* and *Eliza*. In both books, the young writers’ anonymity seemingly represents a departure from the Romantic authorship concept, but interestingly, the girls have great influence ascribed to their pseudonyms. Known as ‘the inimitable Magicath’ (Rowell, 2013, p. 268) by her fans, Cath’s appearance on Fanfixx.net often reminds readers of the popularity accompanying that name. When she googles ‘Magicath’, Cath finds it at the very top of the search results (p. 944). Similarly, at the opening of the story, Eliza’s online author profile already has millions of comments, hits and followers (Zappia, 2017, p. 16). Her fame allows her to sell webcomic-related products such as T-shirts and earn money that greatly surpasses the amount owned by a regular teenager (p. 682). Despite their youth, Cath’s and Eliza’s achievements testify to their ce-

lebrity author status in which their names alone hold huge public attention and media currency, in a way that protagonists of traditional *Künstlerroman* often do not experience.

Revealing the tenuous boundary between authorship and appropriation while flagging out how the internet magnifies the influence of the girls’ author-roles, *Fangirl* and *Eliza* illuminate the increasing ambiguity attached to the author function within a digitally saturated mode of communication. In fact, the novels are haunted by a description of authorship that is participatory on the one hand and exclusive on the other, a tension that directly ties in with current technological transformations. Unlike the relatively singular Romantic author image presented in previous *Künstler* narratives, Cath’s and Eliza’s stories expose a tendency in which the contemporary YA *Künstlerroman* becomes a vehicle for interrogating the contradictory and complex nature of authorship in the digital era.

Reframing the Artist’s Development

In the above section, I have argued that recent technological shifts magnify the dual nature of twenty-first century authorship, which stresses and at the same time demystifies the role of the author. But how do current expectations of authorship affect how the developmental trajectories of artist-protagonists are described? While a considerable number of YA novels continue to discuss the characters’ artistic maturation in terms of their transition to professionalism or their success in achieving complete artist identities, I use *Fangirl* and *Eliza* as examples in the following section to explore how digitalisation has nevertheless allowed us to conceive the fictional apprenticeship process in slightly different, more nuanced ways.

Reframing the Path to Professionalism

As Isaac notes, twenty-first-century teens are offered a much broader range of pathways to literary success (2018, p. 135). The easier

access to authorship can have critical impact on how young people steer their artist careers. In *Fangirl*, Cath's fanfiction writing enables her to capture the previously distinctive author role, but it also goes against the principles of originality lauded by traditional authorship practices. While scholars tend to read fanfiction as an obstacle for the young writer's literary achievements (Isaac, 2018; Tuyl, 2016), I argue that Cath's fanfiction writing *embodies* the real struggle she is experiencing, namely, choosing the kind of 'author' she wants to become when the criterion for literary success is no longer fixed. Fan writers, as Adriaan Van der Weel and Aarthi Vadde reason, are practitioners of amateur creativity in an age where amateur and professional literary endeavours are entangled. Web 2.0 has brought forth 'the cult of the amateur' and 'hollowed out' many writing professions or questioned the authority of literary institutions (Van der Weel, 2019, p. 228). At the same time, though, conventional publication channels continue to represent one of the most important hallmarks of literary prestige. The rise of the amateur and the co-existence of digital and print authorship practices mean that those who start off as amateur writers online are faced with more choices than ever before: they may insist on publishing in amateur communities; they may end up pursuing conventional literary careers; or they may even morph into best-selling authors using the very materials they've produced as amateurs (Vadde, 2017, p. 34). As Vadde affirms, amateur writing communities 'are mixtures of hobbyist pleasure, professional aspiration, political conviction, and erotic attachment' (p. 33).

It is possible, then, to say that fanfiction authorship is a fluid territory where possibilities of authorship branch out and a singular path to literary success is subverted. Cath's conflicted feelings about continuing fanfiction writing or completing the original story

suggest that she is caught in the dilemma of performing authorship as an amateur or entering the conventional literary system as her writing professor advocates. Throughout Cath's journey, her role as a demotic author and her attempt at fulfilling her professor's notions of authorship are heavily intertwined, reflecting the co-existing if not contesting tensions that the digital age has placed upon the author concept. As fixed definitions of the author figure are dissolved and ways of being an author are diversified, crucial to Cath's maturation is finding her place within such tensions and choosing the kind of author she wants to become. When the professor accuses her of plagiarism because she submits one of her *Simon Snow* fanfictions, Cath realises for the first time that producing the kind of writing she is so good at bars her path towards traditional published success (Rowell, 2013, p. 264). Her later conversation with the professor shows her grappling the slippery boundaries of 'amateur' or 'professional' commitments. When the professor complains that fanfiction is 'stillborn' and doesn't lead to a career, Cath snaps back, 'I'll write because I love it, the way other people knit or ... or scrapbook' (p. 668). Towards the end of the novel, Cath finally decides to postpone fanfiction writing and work on her original fiction, a decision critics identify as a key milestone in Cath's maturation. But rather than ascribing the significance of Cath's success to her finding the 'right' genre to write in, one might also say that her triumph rests in making an independent choice about the path she should take as an author. More importantly, the fact that Cath is offered opportunities to choose testifies to the profound ways in which technology diversifies the scribbler-to-author trajectory that earlier *Künstler* protagonists typically go through. Choice, it now seems, has become as important as talent and effort within an artist's development.

Reframing the Journey Towards a Complete Artist Self

If Cath's journey presents adolescent artists navigating the changing expectations of authorship against the hybrid realities of today's digital literary landscape, Eliza's experience indicates that contemporary shifts in how the author-role is maintained has made it more difficult for youngsters to achieve a stable artist identity, not least because the internet has blurred the boundaries between public (online) and private (offline) artist personas. As the digital literary sphere endows authors like Eliza huge popularity without the support of industries, it heightens, on the one hand, authors' reliance on readers and, on the other, readers' curiosity towards authors. This reformed author-reader dynamic means that today's authors must build an attractive online persona and garner attention from readers or even offer them some form of 'equalizing and voyeuristic spectatorship' (Murray, 2018, p. 51). Such changes have critical implications for teenagers, who are often portrayed as inexperienced when it comes to their investment in online identities. Shannon Hervey contends that 'contemporary YA texts that use information technology as central plot devices depict worlds where boundaries are indeed confused and entangled' (2018, p. 37). Hervey cites YA texts that depict young people whose 'networked projections of the self' overlap with—or even efface—their material selves (p. 38). In a similar vein, *Eliza* recounts the heroine's cultivation of online authorial identity and what happens when that identity infringes upon her self-perception as an artist.

When she begins publishing the webcomic, Eliza feels comfortable with the online authorial persona she has constructed. Through her intriguing work, her regular updates, and her weekly appearances in chatrooms to mingle with the readers, Eliza quickly receives attention with her username—'LadyConstellation'. A key principle she relies on for her online self-building is anonymity. She reports, not without pride,

that while people are curious about her personal identity, they have never gotten past her username, an upside that keeps her from 'getting too nauseated to work' (Zappia, 2017, p. 36). Anonymity helps her keep her agency as an artist by allowing her to focus on her work without bearing the burden of the celebrity authorship status accorded to her online presence. With anonymity, Eliza could choose to ignore reader comments and focus on her creative urges; she could even pass off as a fan when she interacts with her readers in real life. However, when her anonymity is compromised after her parents accidentally leak her true identity in the school newspaper, the weight of Eliza's online celebrity status starts to erode upon her faith in her own artistry. Previously, she clearly identified with her artist self: 'This is what I was put on Earth to create, for me and for my fans. This story. This is mine, and it is my duty to bring it into the world' (p. 37). But after losing her anonymity, Eliza encounters a serious writer's block. Whenever she thinks of drawing, she gets overwhelmed by the idea of not producing quality work and suffering from the harassment of internet masses, who could now 'find her' (p. 641). As her writer's block worsens, Eliza conflates her failure to live up to her online fame with her failure as a person, resulting in the denial of both her online and offline artist identities.

As Murray (2018) observes, social media sites such as Twitter, Tumblr and YouTube are key sites for the construction of author identity today, especially YouTube, which encourages disclosures of personal information or experiences (Rebellino, 2020, p. 22). Amateur communities, however, offer authors high online visibility without them having to disclose personal information. Eliza's story, though, reveals the fragility of anonymity against the mechanisms of the internet. Just as Web 2.0 provides artistic freedom by allowing artists to hide behind a powerful online persona, it simultaneously opens up possibilities for compromising that freedom. Anonymity, it seems, doesn't make

it any easier for today's youths—real or fictional—to maintain a public authorial image and to deal with the fame and influence attached with that image. Nor does it prove to be the ultimate protection against the age-old tension, one which digital media inevitably intensifies—the tension between popularity and personal agency, between satisfying readers and fulfilling one's own creative desires. The solution, according to Zappia, lies in the ability to embrace one's online persona without losing sight of one's intrinsic artistic selves. When her true identity goes viral online, Eliza writes to her favourite author, Olivia Kane, who disappeared from public view at the height of her fame because she feared that her fans would no longer like her stories. Instead of advising Eliza to give up her online fame, as she herself did all those years ago, Kane encourages Eliza to rediscover her creativity from within rather than framing her self-perception as an author against reader expectations. At last, Eliza publishes her finished webcomic and updates her online author-profile, with her real name, location and drawing hobby included. Though the success of Eliza's apprenticeship directly results from the completion of her work, it is the union of her online fame and her independent artist self that signals Eliza's triumph in her *Künstler* process.

Conclusion

Fangirl and *Eliza* are examples of YA novels that indicate a new pathway through which to understand how the *Künstlerroman* responds to—and is shaped by—digital technologies. By reflecting how Web 2.0 reframes fictional perceptions of the author image, the novels underscore the effect of appropriation, collaboration and the democratisation of publishing on the authority of the author (Van der Weel, 2019, p. 228) while also emphasising the power of digital dissemination in increasing the influence afforded to digital performances of authorship.

The changing conceptions of 'author' and

'authorship' means that the *Künstler* path to literary success and to achieving one's artist identity is also complicated. Cath's growth is not only defined by publication but by her ability to assert her position between the liminal boundaries of amateurism and professionalism; Eliza's maturation is achieved when she learns to juggle her online artist persona and her personal values and desires as an artist. Admittedly, both novels continue to exhibit the conventional themes of the *Künstlerroman* by valuing the importance of the artist's search for voice and identity, and by highlighting the process of constructing of one's relationship with the world through art: in finishing her original story, Cath finds her own voice and achieves deeper understanding of family and romantic relationships; Eliza recuperates her creative urges after getting in touch with her inner artist self and mending her misunderstanding with Wallace and her parents. However, my analysis in this article suggests that despite continuing to embody the concerns of classic *Künstler* narratives, *Fangirl* and *Eliza* demonstrate how the *Künstlerroman* genre responds to the increasingly potent role technology plays in shaping young people's authorship practices and producing new implications for their artistic growth. Eight years and four years have passed, respectively, since their publication. What might the future hold? One might ask, for example, that if internet publishing channels continue to democratise the parameters of 'authorship' (or even that of 'the artist'), will the *Künstlerroman* lose its relative distinctiveness in relation to the regular YA Bildungsroman? Or, if the increasing prevalence of digital media outlets intensify the potency of the online authorial persona, how will artist narratives respond to the widening gap between public online success and personal artist ideal? Will they begin to prioritise a search for popularity over the need to cultivate one's inner artist self? These questions may remain some of the most pressing ones for the future YA artist novel.

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Notes

- 1 In this article, I use the term ‘author’ and ‘artist’ interchangeably because they often share overlapping features in the *Künstler* narrative. However, when I adopt the term ‘author’ in my later discussions I am referring more specifically to the owner of a published work, while the term ‘artist’ carries a broader definition.
- 2 Researchers who examine the figure of the woman artist in the female *Künstlerromane* often discuss how these narratives, especially those published in the nineteenth century, associate artistic ambition with the desire for a vocation, which entails the artist’s getting published and entering into public discourse (see Duplessis, 1995, pp. 243-70).

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