

Postmodern Pain and Pleasure in *Weetzie Bat*'s Love Current

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Weetzie Bat, published in 1989 by Francesca Lia Block, was heralded in reviews as “a rare treat,” as “unlike any book you’ve ever read before” (Back cover). Patrick Jones called it strange and dream-like, and, as Jan Susina points out in his article on *Weetzie Bat* as postmodern *flâneur*, arguments almost immediately ensued over just what it was—fable? fairy-tale? prose? poetry? A problem novel pasted over with feathers and glitter? Or magical realism, with an emphasis on the realism as it enacts with almost documentary-style accuracy a particular time and place? In retrospect, one thing is almost certain: with *Weetzie Bat*, postmodernism had finally found its way into young adult literature.

Now of course, many people will want to argue with me on that one—whenever anyone makes a claim that a novel or a poem or a picture book is the first instance of a particular literary type or kind, people line up and wave their examples of predecessors and undiscovered or underappreciated treasures, and I can only respond that I am as willing to be argued down here as I am to stand by my contention. Critics, reviewers, and young adult readers sensed that there was something different and in fact remarkable about this little book, and whether they found this difference refreshing or disturbing, they were clearly responding to the fact this book did not follow the same rules that they had been used to in a literature that more often than not tended toward the darkly didactic. What I mean by darkly didactic is that YA literature of the late 60s through the late 80s and onward to today in many cases tends to teach its moral lessons through a haze of pain and suffering. Characters are put through the wringer, and if they come out alive and ultimately hopeful about the project of taking on adult life, they carry with them the scars left over from betrayal, violence, loss, and grief. Sexuality is a problem, relationships between friends are a problem, drugs are a problem, parental divorce is a problem, poverty is a problem, trying to buck the system is a problem, and the solutions to these problems are hard-won through introspective moralizing usually facilitated by a liminal experience, where the protagonist has to be physically or emotionally isolated in order to sort out priorities and what he or she needs to survive in an unyielding, antagonistic social world.

All of these usual things are present in *Weetzie Bat*, and yet none of them emerges as the centrally defining problem, that is, the thing the protagonist must confront and learn from in order to achieve some sort of maturity. This, I would argue, is the key feature that makes this book distinctly postmodern and possibly the first of its kind in YA literature. Postmodernism is, of course, variously defined, but it is generally agreed, at least when discussing postmodern art and literature, that it is characterized by the play of surfaces—collage, pastiche, and fragmented images juxtaposed to create new meanings, and forms overcome traditional and modernist impulses to imagine inner depths, organic, unified forms, and coherent thematic meaning. In this novel, surface and depth undergo a profound reversal. The things that usually form the central issues of a YA novel are relegated to undeveloped undercurrents here: Weetzie feels alone, alienated, and misunderstood. Her parents are divorced and unhappy. Her dad is on drugs, and her mother drinks too much. She is lonely. Her attempts to find a boyfriend are dismal failures. She is date-raped. Dirk’s beloved grandmother dies. Dirk and Duck are dating around

indiscriminately at a time and in a place where it is very dangerous to do so—not only is AIDS prevalent in their communities, but until they get together, they experience exploitive and violent relationships. Weetzie is unfaithful to her boyfriend because she wants a baby, and he doesn't. Max is unfaithful to her because he is angry at her infidelity to both their partnership and his wishes. There are two out-of-wedlock babies. None of the characters has a steady job. Weetzie's dad commits suicide. But instead of engaging in soul-searching introspection that confronts the demons caused by and causing these problems, the characters in *Weetzie Bat* are *happy*.

Professor Margaret Soltan, in her class on postmodern literature at George Washington University, claims that the difference between modernist novels and postmodern ones is largely one of attitude. Both types of novel share the same sets of problems—the quest for authenticity, the management of increasing complexity in everyday life, the necessity of change (and I would add for the YA protagonist, the necessity of growth toward maturity), the challenge or threat of mortality, the fear of anonymity, and the desire for recognition. Soltan says that the problems of modernism are not necessarily solved in postmodernism nor are they ignored or replaced by new problems, but instead these same issues are played for laughs. Certainly, Block doesn't play Weetzie's and Dirk's problems for laughs, but she does take a decidedly lighter approach to them than an inveterate reader of YA literature might expect. Weetzie and Dirk are not looking for ways to live authentically; they are looking for ways to live stylishly. Rather than lamenting the plastic illusion that is LA as Charlie Bat, Weetzie's father, does, they celebrate it. In fact, this contrast in their outlooks gets at the heart of the issue of valuing surface and illusion over depth and reality. Charlie says:

“Well, I love you more than everything. But I can't be in that city. Everything's an illusion; that's the whole thing about it—illusion, imitation, a mirage. Pagodas and palaces and skies, blondes and stars. It makes me too sad. It's like having a good dream. You know you are going to wake up.” (73)

But these are precisely the things that Weetzie loves about her home. The book begins:

The reason Weetzie hated high school was because no one understood. They didn't even realize where they were living. They didn't care that Marilyn's prints were practically in their backyard at Graumann's; that you could buy tomahawks and plastic palm tree wallets at Farmer's Market, and the wildest, cheapest cheese and bean and hot dog and pastrami burritos at Oki Dogs; that the waitresses wore skates at the Jetson-style Tiny Naylor's; that there was a fountain that turned soda-pop colors, and a canyon where Jim Morrison and Houdini used to live, and all-night potato knishes at Canter's and not too far away was Venice, with columns, and canals, even, like the real Venice but maybe cooler because of the surfers. (3-4)

Weetzie hunts cool, and blithely ignores the fact that Marilyn and Jim Morrison probably shared her father's attitudes about their city more than hers; she is happy with the simulacra, happy to believe that her adoption of pink Indian headdresses and feathered outfits and love for plastic tomahawks honors an exploited culture rather than dishonoring its religious traditions and exploiting it further, happy to believe that her mother's alcoholism can be cured with health

food, happy to believe that Max's demons can be forgotten with a good bath, happy to believe that temporarily forgetting traumatic things is all its takes to achieve a meaningful and fulfilled life.

Indeed, if any of the traumatic things swirling in the undercurrent of this novel were allowed to push their way full-bore through the aggressively maintained surface of Weetzie's love current, a surface decorated with funky clothes, dried rose petals, glitter, ornamental dogs, cool hair, sunglasses and cars, the characters would likely drown, but that's the point of a fully embraced postmodernism—surface is all. If one can aestheticize experience to produce a glitzy, always moving, at least partially reflective surface, one needn't ever wake up from the dream. Even when Weetzie cries, she does so into pink tissues that cover the floor like roses.

It probably sounds here like I find postmodernism ethically vacuous, that I am condemning Weetzie's embrace of the illusion as an inferior way of coping with real life. Honestly, however, I'm not sure I do, and it is this novel that makes me question my own received value that going deep when it comes to life's problems is the best way to work through them. If we shed nostalgia for that kind of thinking, and embrace another form of nostalgia that values simplicity and joy in everyday life, then Weetzie may be on to something. Charlie Bat is in real pain, but it is pain created from the failures of the very illusions he manufactured. In other words, he approaches the glittery surface of contemporary culture with an earnestness it doesn't merit and is thus crushed when it fails to live up to his desire for it to have a substantiality it never claimed for itself. Weetzie and her friends, on the other hand, live as happy ironists; they know the city they live in is an ephemeral paradise, where old things are torn down and new things appear in their place, where people and trends come and go, where the illusion matters more than the substance behind it, and they accept that transience and artificiality as the condition of its existence.

As true postmoderns, they also refuse an arboreal model of selfhood—they are not individual, isolated trees that remain fixed in one place, growing leafy crowns that are only as lush and stable as their roots are healthy. Instead, they construct a rhizomatic network of relationships that is as strong as its connections. They couple, but don't exclude each other, choosing instead to all live together. They work together on their movies, each member of their extended family network playing a crucial role in the various aspects of filmmaking. They make a baby that looks like all of them. When Max and Duck are drawn into their respective dark nights of the soul, Weetzie and Dirk pull them back into the light of their fairytale cottage. They don't encourage time alone or endless talk to work through their pain. Instead, they each offer the mute intimacy of sex as a ritual of healing because it reestablishes the connections that are ultimately responsible for who they are as individuals.

Weetzie Bat created a stir in the YA literature world because it offered us new, perhaps even inverted, ways of thinking about what it means to live a good life in a contemporary landscape that oscillates between Shangri-LA and Hell-A. Do we earnestly persist in seeking authenticity in a culture that seems not to support it, or do we embrace the position of ironists, living knowingly between pretense, aspiration, and reality? Do we continue to cultivate introspection as the path to self-knowledge and ethical behavior, or do we turn to the others in our lives to find ourselves and our paths? Because of our highly media-driven, image-based,

increasingly globalized culture, LA—more precisely Hollywood—forms a large part of the imaginary geographies of people all over the world, making our confrontation with the illusions of that geography an ethical challenge of profound importance. *Weetzie Bat* calls us to that challenge and offers us provocative possibilities for finding our way through.

References

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