

(12) Growing-Up Novel

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Growing-Up Novel

History
& Patterns

- a popular American genre at least since Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876) and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885), which established the archetypes of the obedient and the rebellious boy respectively¹
- the genre was variously developed by different ethnic groups and in different regions, as Henry Roth's Jewish novel *Call It Sleep* (1934) or William Faulkner's Southern *The Unvanquished* (1938) and *The Reivers* (1962)
- many growing-up novels share the pattern of **journey** as a means of maturation, mostly from a town to a city, discernible for instance in Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957) and in Cormac McCarthy's growing-up novels
- another pattern is writing the story for **therapeutic** reasons, as J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951)
- the pioneering 1950s and 1960s growing-up novels focused on the child in the vein of **psychological** realism
- the later 1980s and 1990s novels written at the time of political correctness use a naïve child narrator who can afford to be politically incorrect or use a fictional child modelled on the author for reasons of inner censorship
- the later novels often have a political focus, experiment with **satire** and with absurd and grotesque elements

Jerome David Salinger (1919–2010)

- started his literary career by writing short stories published in magazines already before the Second World War
- after his first novel produced several collections of short stories but retired in the 1960s and stopped publishing

The Catcher in the Rye (1951)

Style &
Themes

- presents an unhappy teenager, lonely, quixotic, compassionate, plagued by the 'phoniness' of his environment
- describes his running away from boarding school, his spell in New York and his eventual nervous breakdown
- the title, taken from a poem by Robert Burns, refers to the boy's desire to **preserve innocence** of those still to grow up, having lost his own, to stop their fall from innocence into experience, from childhood into adulthood
- written in a confessional mode, draws readers into the narrator's resistance to the surrounding stiffening world
- written in a persuasive vernacular idiom, an invented language which came to be adopted by ordinary speakers
- the protagonist, Holden Caulfield, is an **universal** middle-class character with no particular ethnic background
- recalls Huckleberry Finn in presenting an outsider who dislikes system and distrusts authority, makes his way through a world of hypocrisy and describes the stupidity of the people he meets with engagingly quirky humour
- differs from Huck in making Holden more knowing, more judgemental and more implicated in his 'phony' circumstances, replaces Huck's clarity, candour and truth-telling by Holden's unease, uncertainty and **confusion**
- the narrator is both confessional and defensive, longing to reveal himself but also fearful of dropping the mask

Holden
v. Huck

Nine Stories (1953)

Short
Stories

- a collection of stories, including 'A Perfect Day for Bananafish', on the suicide of the veteran Seymour Glass

Franny and Zooey (1961)

- a collection of the two title stories, featuring Franny and Zooey Glass, a sister and a brother in their twenties

Novellas

Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters and Seymour: An Introduction (1963)

- a collection of the two title novellas, on the lonely, brilliant, eccentric individualists Seymour and Buddy Glass

Warren Miller (1921–1966)

- a novelist and scriptwriter, author of several novels on **racial** and political themes, adherent of left-wing views

*The Cool World*² (1959)

Maturing
in Harlem

- a growing-up novel narrated by a fourteen-year-old black boy who rises to the leader of a Harlem **street gang**
- introduces a sensitive adolescent whose marginal society breeds anger, confusion and a poignant tenderness
- presents the black perspective of bare apartments and shabby hallways where the knife-carrying gangs meet
- relieves the seedy urban ghetto setting and the struggle for one's position by moments of appealing humour
- exposes the emotional and intellectual attitudes of the characters through a masterly rendered **Harlem idiom**

Political
Novels

Flush Times (1962)

- a decadent novel featuring a New Yorker accompanying his estranged wife to Cuba where she is to have an abortion and where he gets involved with a group of U.S. refugees dealing in gambling, drugs and prostitution
- the protagonist falls in love with a Chinese Cuban girl, who is kidnapped and killed, and ends up killing himself

¹ Also *Tom Sawyer Abroad* (1894), *Tom Sawyer Detective* (1896) and the unfinished *Huck Finn* and *Tom Sawyer among the Indians*.

² Brilliantly translated by Jan Zábřana as *Prezident Krokodylů* [sic] (1963), which succeeds in re-creating the original vernacular.

***The Siege of Harlem* (1964)**

- a political satire and literary parody, pokes fun at the satire in the Swiftian tradition and the Uncle Remus tales, records the tale of an old grandfather who describes how Harlem seceded and became an independent country

***Looking for the General* (1964)**

- a novel narrated by a physicist who becomes convinced of the existence of intelligent beings beyond Earth and follows the general of the title, who holds the same views, in his attempts to escape from the terrestrial confines

John Irving (b. 1942)Writing
Features

- author of novels reflecting the concerns of the 1960s and showing the clash of libertarian and traditional views
- noted for engaging story lines, colourful characterizations, macabre humour and examination of **topical issues**
- characteristic for his **Dickensian** sprawling plots, chains of improbable incidents and a large cast of characters
- his recurring themes are his native New England, wrestling, prostitutes, deadly accidents and missing parents

Maturing
Writer***The World According to Garp* (1978)**

- a fanciful story of a wonderfully talented young novelist who is murdered at thirty-three by a disgruntled reader
- its oblique self-referentiality and intellectual subversiveness qualify as an instance of fictional postmodernism
- the protagonist is T. S. Garp, the initials standing for the occupation of his father, the Technical Sergeant Garp
- his mother conceived Garp when she essentially raped the Technical Sergeant, then dying of a shrapnel wound
- Garp grows up to be interested in sex, wrestling and writing, unlike his mother he marries and fathers children
- throughout the novel Garp and his family experience dark and violent events through which they learn to grow

Maturing
Five Kids***The Hotel New Hampshire* (1981)**

- a coming-of-age novel following the experiences of a married couple and their five very idiosyncratic children

Maturing
Doctor***The Cider House Rules* (1985)**

- employs a young doctor protagonist to demonstrate the attitudes and perils attending the question of abortion

Maturing
Prophet***A Prayer for Owen Meany* (1989)**

- the title character is a gnomelike figure with the gift of prophecy and a deep belief that he is God's instrument
- his friend, obsessed with the nature of faith, tells Meany's tale against the background of the Vietnam War

Picaresque
Novel***A Son of the Circus* (1994)**

- a tale of a film star, a missionary, twins separated at birth, a dwarf chauffeur and a serial killer meeting in India

Fred Chappell (b. 1936)Writing
Features

- began his career writing sci-fi stories and historical fantasies exploring the inspirations of artists and scientists
- moved to preoccupation with the relationship between the literary work and the actual life where it originates
- his characters are preoccupied with **stories** which they seek to use to know their past and possibly to change it
- dissolves the line between fact and fiction, often uses autobiographical facts and imaginatively re-creates them
- his semi-autobiographical growing-up tetralogy portrays some universal themes as well as specific aspects of growing up with the traditions and habits of the **Appalachian region**, where the author himself was brought up

Back to
Childhood***It Is Time, Lord* (1963)**

- his first novel, a modernist piece influenced by Faulkner, follows the successful editor of a university press who explores his childhood to explain his nightmares but only adds more when he causes the death of his friend

Changing
One's Past***The Inkling* (1965)**

- may be seen as a balladic story about the decay of a family, isolation and madness inspired by the nineteenth-century British Gothic novel or as an allegory of the struggle of will and lust inspired by French decadent poets
- describes dark aspects of the human mind, following a protagonist who moves in time to warn his younger self

Horror
Fantasy***Dagon* (1968)**

- inspired by the horror fantasies of Howard Phillips Lovecraft (1890–1937), features a protagonist who deliberately chooses a violent death and reflects on it from the netherworld while waiting for his last judgement

Fighting
the Absurd***The Gaudy Place* (1973)**

- portrays several characters from different social classes coming to terms with their absurd world, including a young intellectual attempting to perform a useless action, like in Albert Camus's *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942)

Kirkman
Tetralogy**The Kirkman Tetralogy: *I Am One of You Forever* (1985), *Brighten the Corner Where You Are* (1989), *Farewell, I'm Bound to Leave You* (1996), *Look Back All the Green Valley* (1999)**

- named for the boy protagonist Jess Kirkman, set in the town of Tipton, modelled on Canton, North Carolina

- the first book features the storyteller **Uncle Zeno**, the namesake of the ancient Greek stoic philosopher Zeno of Elea, whose many stories have the power of vaporizing the people with whom they deal from the actual world
- includes a chapter called ‘The Storytellers’, a part of which was earlier published as a short story, and in which the boy protagonist tells anew Zeno’s story about him and his father, fearing that otherwise they would vanish
- suggests that some mysteries had better remain unsolved and that attempts to rationalize may prove disastrous
- the second part is Jess’s comic dream of his father, a teacher who dared to challenge the Bible with Darwinism
- the third book is told by the voices of Jess’s mother and grandmother, whose death serves as the book’s frame
- the last volume traces Jess’s search in the past of his late father, which fails to bring any surprising revelations

Lewis Nordan (b. 1939)

Writing
Inspiration

- grew up in the small town of Itta Bena, Mississippi, and the Mississippi Delta³ features in much of his writing
- brought up by a step-father for whom he felt a mixture of affection and hatred and who inspired his character of Gilbert Mecklin, the father of Sugar Mecklin, a house painter, a heavy drinker and the chronically losing type
- turns his native town into the fictional Arrow Catcher, the prototypical **Southern** small town populated by men who enjoy drinking and hunting and women who suffer depressions and hope for a better fate for their children
- the town of Arrow Catcher is headed by a sheriff who has troubles coming to terms with the large number of dwarfs, idiots and cripples in the town’s population, including his son Hydro who suffers from hydrocephalus⁴
- deaths in the town are always rendered in the **grotesque** manner and are never the definite end of the character because the same stories are often attributes to different characters and there is no telling what is fact or fiction

Motifs
& Themes

- his frequent motifs are the idea that we are all alone, which is uttered even by his child protagonists, the idea that getting what you want too early may ruin your life and the parallel of maturing and overcoming **loneliness**
- his writing is based on telling and retelling stories, often presenting the same story in several different versions
- his stories are pervaded with a sense of mystery and secret, with emotions springing from recalling the stories
- the emotions derive from memories only, the present provides but for useless search and emotional emptiness
- his characters view their lives as movies, as directors they choose bombastic but finally self-destructive stunts

Short
Stories

Welcome to the Arrow Catcher Fair (1983)

- a short story collection, the title story introduces the arrow catching sport, practised originally by two friends, one white and one Indian, one firing sharp arrows at his partner and the other always managing to catch them

The All-Girl Football Team (1986)

- a short story collection, including the story ‘Sugar, the Eunuchs and Big G. B.’ which deals with a supposedly autobiographical incident when Sugar attempts to shoot his father through a kitchen window, but his pistol fails

Growing-Up
Masterpiece

Music of the Swamp (1991)

- a novel-like series of interconnected stories, the culmination of stories featuring **Sugar Mecklin** and his father

Black Boy
Murdered

Wolf Whistle (1993)

- the title refers to the incident which happened in the town called Money, located near the author’s hometown, when a fourteen-year-old African American boy was murdered for daring to wolf whistle a white woman (1955)
- a novel presenting Sugar this time as a minor character who happens to discover the dead body of a black boy
- focuses on those responsible for the boy’s death, deals with the serious issue of racial violence in a comic way

Hydro
the Hero

The Sharpshooter Blues (1995)

- the novel is a grotesque exploration of various forms of violence in a Southern small town, portrays the clash of innocence and cruelty in reintroducing the idiot character of **Hydro** who eliminates two dangerous criminals
- the town takes invented stories of violence and murder for fact but disbelieves the true story of Hydro’s deed

Single Event
Change

The Lightning Song (1997)

- a novel set in the Mississippi hills where the father of the child protagonist runs a farm breeding exotic llamas
- examines the theme of family relationships and the question how a single event can utterly change one’s life

Autobio-
graphy

Boy with Loaded Gun (2000)

- initially conceived as an autobiography, turned out to resemble rather the style of literary fiction, all the events included are based on fact, but some dialogues are invented, some names changed and some situations adapted

³ The Mississippi Delta is technically not a delta but a fertile flat plain located in the the state of Mississippi. Not to be confused with the Mississippi River Delta, the actual delta through which the Mississippi river empties in the Gulf of Mexico in Louisiana.

⁴ Hydrocephalus, or ‘Water on the Brain’, is an inborn medical condition characterized by abnormal accumulation of fluid in the brain. This causes pressure inside the skull, a progressive enlargement of the head, mental disability and sometimes leads to death.