A Perfect Escape: Fantasy, Place and Narrative in Adolescence

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A Perfect Escape:

Fantasy, Place and Narrative in Adolescence

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This essay explores the realms of special places, the literary genre of fantasy, narrative, and comics. These topics are traversed alongside subjects of adolescence and the creation of stories for middle-grade readers. Framed with personal stories, as well as peaks into my process, I investigate these subjects through the lens of my own life and work, specifically my thesis project, a comic for middle-grade readers titled Beyond the Castle Walls. Beginning with adolescence in association with special places, I consider the work of developmental psychologists David Sobel and Edith Cobb as they pin-point the role of secret forts, nature, and imagination in middle childhood development. Moving into storytelling, narrative is defined through the perspective of Greek philosopher Aristotle alongside American cartoonist and comics theorist Scott McCloud, examining how comics and cartooning formally function as pathways for narrative content. Looking to fantasy as narrative tool, I explore essays on the subject by English writer and philologist J.R.R. Tolkien and American Poet W.H. Auden, defining fantasy and its role within storytelling. The essay concludes in defining a method of storytelling that aims to aid in the personal development of its audience by using real life experiences and places, along with narrative, to build a secondary world. This method brings together the topics of place, fantasy, narrative, comics, and developmental psychology in creating stories for young readers, allowing the story to become a technology for simulating a transitional experience in life.
As a child, I often made-up magical adventures for my friends and myself in far-off lands, built secret forts in bushes and special spots in trees, and dreamed of growing up to become a mermaid deep in the ocean. I was excited by the possibility of living far away from home and exploring the world on my own. When I was around 10 years old, there were two crabapple trees in my front yard. The tree closer to my house had a large branch that forked into two sturdy branches. It was a perfect little hammock for a small kid. Naturally, it wasn’t really perfect. There was a knob in the branch that poked at my back, so I never stayed up in the tree too long, but I loved the idea of a space fit just for me. In that tree, I could read or draw and look out at the cul-de-sac from up high, on my own. As an adult, I feel in some ways the same and in some ways different. Of course, it would be very cool to be a mermaid, and I love living on a second-floor apartment to see the neighborhood from up high, but I don’t yearn for faraway places like I used to.

The Necessity of Special Places
The places I’ve lived have become important to me almost in the same way people do. They become magical in their own way. In *A Sense of Place: The Artist and the American Land*, Alan Gussow defines place as “a piece of environment that has been claimed by feelings. We are homesick for places... And the catalyst that converts a physical location into a place is the process of experiencing deeply.” Gussow describes this bonding with place that I have often felt but haven’t quite been able to put to words before. He describes how depth of experience and emotional connections are what add meaning to a place. I remember being emotional the day that my family helped me move into my first college dorm room. I knew I was supposed to be excited, but I was overwhelmed to leave my hometown, a place that encompassed so much of what I knew about the world. It felt like I was leaving so much of myself — my parents, the warm dock in the summer, first dates, muddy soccer fields, my favorite custard shop. Places have the ability to capture so many experiences, memories, and people all in one space.

This kind of space, a place claimed by feelings and experiences, is what I have constructed within the setting of my thesis project. It is a place that the reader can feel themselves becoming immersed in, as the specificity and ambiguity meld to form a space that is tangible and reminiscent of home. The story, set in modern time, begins in a Midwest, suburban town loosely based off my hometown, a suburb just east of Kansas City, MO. My hometown is the place that I most associate with adolescence and growing up, which is why I chose it as inspiration in creating a story with a middle-grade audience in mind. We moved there when I was ten, leaving the crabapple trees for a residential lake. Many of my memories there include schoolwork at the kitchen table, barefoot walks through cut grass, awkward bike rides with my neighborhood crush, arguments with my (obviously wrong) younger brother, and warm summer nights that felt endless. Like with the crabapple tree, many of my favorite moments within adolescence took place outside.

Adolescence is defined as the period of development from the onset of puberty to the attainment of adulthood, usually between 11 and 13 years of age, and continuing through the teenage years. In a cultural sense, The Oxford Companion to Women’s Writing in the United States describes how the idea of adolescence has a strong hold on the Western imagination as it embodies values of exploration, growth, becoming, and the pursuit to overcome both the physical, mental, and societal struggles of growing up. It’s often addressed within narratives as a “coming-of-age” story that illustrates the hurdles of one’s teenage years.

Within my project, a 48-page middle-grade graphic novel chapter titled Beyond the Castle Walls, adolescence plays a key role. Each character is overcoming their own obstacles associated with growing up. Evelyn is an only child whose family is about to move across the country. She fears that she will lose her childhood friends and struggle in a new city without them. Her friend Flynn lives next door with his annoying younger brother Forrest. Flynn and Forrest’s father suffers from depression. Flynn bottles up and conceals his feelings and concerns for their father, closing himself off to Forrest who wants to feel accepted and grow closer to his cool, older brother and his friends. Matt moved in down the street a couple of years prior and takes every chance he can get to escape the reins of his strict parents and their high expectations. He’s unsure of himself in most situations but feels at home with his friends Evelyn and Flynn. The adolescent characters in my story reflect what the audience, middle-grade readers aged 8-11, might be facing in their own lives as they are about to enter adolescence.

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In creating a world for a middle-grade audience, it was important for me to learn more about the spaces the middle-grade children gravitate towards and why. David Sobel’s book *Children’s Special Places* looks at the role of "huts, dens, and bush houses from a developmental psychology perspective on middle childhood. In exercises and interviews with multiple children, Sobel discovers that children in middle childhood gravitate towards spaces within nature that they can call their own. Reinforced by childhood development theories within the field, Sobel insists that middle childhood is a critical period in the development of the sense of self. He emphasizes that, in creating secret forts within nature, children can retreat to a safe space that is entirely their own to mature and begin to perceive and unfold their individuality within the big world outside."

A great example of this within middle-grade literature is Katherine Paterson’s *Bridge to Terabithia*. The novel tells the story of two children that create a magical, imaginary kingdom in the forest near their town. Fifth grader Jesse Aarons and his new neighbor Leslie Burke become friends after Leslie beats Jesse in a footrace at school. Before meeting Leslie, Jesse was habitually fearful, angry, and depressed due to his family’s struggles and the hardships of his homelife. As Jesse and Leslie retreat to their secret kingdom in the woods, they grow and learn more about themselves and the world around them. Even after Leslie tragically passes away, Jesse becomes more courageous, lets go of his frustration and anger, and even shares their secret kingdom with his younger sister, giving her the opportunity to mature and escape in their imaginary world, just as he did.


Middle-grade children look to the natural world as a space to call their own and learn about themselves. In my story, they can relate to characters doing the same thing. As my thesis narrative moves forward, the four main characters choose to escape their problems at home and run away into the freedom of the nearby forest. They turn to a space within nature that’s wild and uncontrolled, a space no longer dictated by adults or society, that they can claim as their own, just as I did with my crabapple tree, and many other children do with secret forts and dens in the wild, weed-filled corners of their backyards. The suburban landscape, made up from a mix of rural and urban features mirrors the liminal, in-between nature of middle-grade and adolescence, leading the characters to scout out moments of freedom and independence in the wilderness that is uncontrolled by society and adults. As they journey to seek shelter in some abandoned cabins at an old campsite, they lose their way and encounter a world beyond what they had ever seen before. They soon notice the environment around them changing. The familiar flora of the forest shifts into plants and trees they don’t recognize, and instead of the cabins they had been searching for, they cross the threshold of castle ruins from another time.

In Edith Cobb’s “The Ecology of Imagination in Childhood”, she points to middle childhood as a unique stage in development for fostering the relationship between person and the natural world. The study of the child in nature, culture and society reveals that there is a special period, the little understood, prepubertal, halcyon, middle age of childhood, approximately from five or six to eleven or twelve, between the strivings of animal infancy and the storms of adolescence—when the natural world is experienced in some highly evocative way, producing in the child a sense of some profound continuity with natural processes.

In the setting of my story, a forest where the natural world is experienced in an exaggerated, magical way, I elicit the highly evocative experience with nature that Cobb describes in middle-grade children. The secret, nature-inspired fantasy world, is the perfect place to talk about adolescence and the issues that come with it. I take advantage of this imaginative moment in childhood development that Cobb describes, speaking to children at a time in their lives when their imaginations are still reeling with wonder and awe for the playground that the natural world lends them. At this same moment they are also beginning to understand and deal with the challenges that the real world presents. The setting illustrates the world through a child’s lens of imagination, in the way they might see a secret fort in the bushes through their mind’s eye. The enchanted forest takes our world and exaggerates it, making it weird and different and beautiful, so that it becomes something new, just as children do when playing pretend. Like the characters in my story, children might also be looking to forts and hideaways in the woods to distill their problems, take time for introspection, and think about what they want from their future as teens and adults. Within my thesis story, a middle-grade audience will be able to relate and learn more about their own situations within an inviting fantasy world designed just for them.
Narrative Strategies: Social Realism and Simplification

Comics and narrative share a similar encompassing quality to places. Fictional comics and stories encompass their own place and time that only exists within the contents of their pages. They are, in themselves, their own little worlds as they capture experiences, lives, places, and people between two covers. This gives comics the unique ability to isolate a moment in time. For example, the characters within my thesis project will never exist outside of their narrative and the world I create for them, but within the story they encounter a range of experiences, feelings, and characters along their trek. The narrative becomes its own special place.

One definition of narrative in The New Oxford American Dictionary defines the term as “a spoken or written account of connected events: a story.” Although broad, this is a good place to start when defining such a big term. We can then whittle it down by thinking more about the different parts that make up a story. Aristotle defines story in terms of structural unity, as something that has a beginning, middle, and end, and has the capacity to be held in the head and understood all at once. He insists that the unity of the plot is essential to a good narrative, and that the plot must move from beginning to end according to a tightly organized sequence of necessary or probable events.

Similarly, Scott McCloud defines comics as “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence.” Narratives take form in comics through a combination of images and text in a sequence of panels. The audience is observing the parts of the story, the panels, but perceiving them as a complete, whole narrative. The artist and author provide the elements to create the story: the setting, the characters, and the dialogue, but the imagination of the viewer is key in bringing it all together form the narrative. This makes comics the perfect form for narrative content, especially for children already filling up their own world with imagination. Comics allow the viewer to participate actively through imagination as they fill in the gaps of what happens between two panels, in the open space called the gutter. Great spans of space, time, and movement can happen in the gutter, allowing the viewer an amount of imaginative authority within the narrative that is only surpassed by the written word.

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9 McCloud, Understanding Comics, 64-69.
An example of social realism in comics can be seen in this section of panels from Ryan Andrew’s graphic novel *This Was Our Pact* (Fig. 20). The two main characters, Ben and Nathaniel, have been forced to do chores in a witch’s enchanted cellar. Ben is angry that Nathaniel got them trapped in the cellar, while Nathaniel is making the best of the situation and trying to have fun. We as the audience don’t know the two boys’ feelings because of a narrator or because their internal monologues have told us how they feel. Instead, we see and hear how they are feeling in what they say, their actions, and the expressions on their faces.

Comics like this apply Auden’s social realism in how they are creating emotional arcs and moving the story forward through dialogue and actions. Even though the boys are fighting about chores and a talking bear in an enchanted cellar, the argument between these two characters feels real because we can relate it to how we’ve seen two boys argue out in the real world. In my thesis comic, I’ve used social realism in the same way – the characters may be inhabiting a fantasy world, but the dialogue, actions, and panel transitions are driving the story. Figure 21 shows the three main boys bickering, similarly to Andrews’ characters, while a mysterious knight character is silently watching and listening before confronting the boys.

The tension between social realism and cartooning in comics shows through in the development of the story characters. I began by drawing undefined shapes all over a spread of my sketchbook for each character. These shapes were future heads and bodies for each character. The silhouettes helped me to ideate different distinct shapes for each character, starting from very simplified blobs drawn in paint marker. The silhouettes, devoid of contour lines or interior detail, allowed me to make each character different from one another at their most simplified state. This would keep me from using too many minute details to differentiate the characters in the later drawing stages. Leaning towards simplification versus naturalistic depiction in the cartooning of the characters was key in developing them to be distinct, yet relatable for the audience. I then filled the silhouettes with lines to define the facial characteristics, clothing, and hair for the different character ideations in the end choosing options that felt like they lived in the same world, in that they had similar drawing approaches to the eyes, hair, or other characteristics. Specificity and social realism became important in developing the personalities and final touches of each character to make them feel real within the narrative. I based the disposition and struggles of each character on people and experiences from my own life to build on that authenticity and help their voices sound genuine in the dialogue.

By using a more simplified, graphic style of drawing to depict the characters and setting within my comics, I set the viewer’s focus on the narrative and underlying themes of the story. The simplified way of drawing also allows for an amount of universality in the setting and characters. The more simplified a drawing is on a spectrum of simple versus photorealistic, the more possibilities it holds in what it is depicting. There is a slight tension between the specificity of social realism and the simplification of cartooning, but the ambiguity of the drawings allows the reader to interpret the story from their own perspective, making it more real to their own experiences. McCloud defines cartooning as “a form of amplification through simplification. When we abstract an image through cartooning, we’re not so much eliminating details as we are focusing on specific details. By stripping down an image to its essential ‘meaning’, an artist can amplify that meaning in a way that realistic art can’t.” The tension between social realism and the simplification of cartooning is a constant balancing act. I’m continually thinking about how the form of the narrative and the drawings can best fit my intended audience and deliver the content that I am exploring in an accessible, engaging, and illuminating fashion. I want the audience to relate to my narrative, see themselves in the characters, and envision the enchanted forest as the woods near their own home.

12 McCloud, Understanding Comics, 30-31.

Fig. 22 (left) McCloud, Scott, Understanding Comics. 1993. Panel from Page 31.
Fig. 23 (right) Character Explorations, Matt.
One Foot in Reality, One Foot in a Fantasy World

In J. R. R. Tolkien’s essay “On Fairy-Stories,” he discusses the fairy-story as a literary form in which storytellers can talk about our own world from the perspective of a fantasy world beyond our own, calling this invented world a “Secondary World.” Secondary Worlds are narratives that your mind can enter with their own set of laws, different from our own reality. The fantasy elements of a Secondary World are things that aren’t found in our world at all or are generally believed not to be found there. They could take the form of talking animals, enchanting spells, magical portals, and any other impossibilities an author can conjure up within their imagination. Along this vein of thinking, fantasy can be defined as a general literary term for any kind of fictional work that is not primarily devoted to realistic representation of the known world. The Oxford Encyclopedia of Children’s Literatures elaborates that the presence of magic within fantasy “may be unfolded into a whole universe or reduced to just one tiny magical bit.” For example, Marvel’s Cinematic Universe, is, as you can guess from the name, an entire fictional universe touched with magic. There are distant fictional planets, magical creatures and beings, portals through space and time, and advanced technology far beyond the bounds of reality. On the other end of the spectrum, Guillermo del Toro’s 2017 film The Shape of Water could be a normal, realistic Cold War drama if you took away the one fantasy element (an amphibian man). My work often falls somewhere in between this spectrum, placing one foot in reality and one foot in a fantasy world. This takes form in narratives rooted in the real world and personal narrative that make use of fantasy as a setting and device to enhance and simplify our world, relating to the amplification through simplification that occurs in cartooning. It’s also an opportunity to make my favorite parts of our world even more exaggerated and exciting to draw, such as plants, animals, and trees. These elements of place help build depth in the narrative.

The two supporting characters, the knight and the bear, along with the setting, were designed to mirror Flynn and Evelyn and their struggles. Evelyn runs away from home because she fears losing her friends as her family moves away. In the enchanted forest, she finds herself separated from her friends, lost to face her fears alone, until she meets the lonely bear who shares her fears. Animal characters give a voice to the character of place as animals bridge the gap between humanity and the environment. The bear speaks on behalf of the lonely, abandoned castle and wildness of the forest. Flynn runs away to escape his sadness and pain about his father, but soon finds himself faced with the reality of how he would feel if he were to lose his father. He encounters the knight, who left her own father in a fit of anger, returning now to the castle after he has passed. Flynn helps the knight through her loss and learns that he cannot avoid his own sadness. He must instead face it, so that it doesn't take over and keep him from appreciating and helping his own father through his struggles. Themes of identity, independence, friendship, courage, and growing up — universal subjects we all deal with as humans — are highlighted in this fantasy setting that allows viewers the opportunity to face difficult subjects through the imaginative eyes of a child.

Tolkien argues that the best fantasy stories deal largely with simple or fundamental things, untouched by Fantasy, but these simplicities are made all the more luminous by their setting. Fantasy helps us to understand and face our own world through the lives and characters of another. In Secondary Worlds like those in fantasy, difficult subjects can be presented in a more simplified, comprehensible form. This is at the heart of why I chose fantasy for a middle grade audience. I have been carving a path to talk about childhood and adolescence through the illuminating lens of fantasy. The inviting nature of fantasy is enhanced by the amplification and simplification used in cartooning and comics. These elements lead the audience to the underlying, real-world messages within the story.
“Transitional Storytelling” refers to storytelling that aims to aid in the personal development of its audience. These stories use real life experiences and places, along with narrative, to build a secondary world that allows the audience to explore a transitional phase of their life, such as adolescence. This relates to pedagogy in that it essentially what educators do with students in the classroom: create a particular scenario and set of constraints for learning a particular idea or skill. Secondary world-building in transitional storytelling provides an escape for readers to live vicariously through the characters in a different world, let their guard down, and learn more about themselves, making this kind of storytelling a great, approachable tool for unpacking the difficult transition from childhood to adolescence. The story becomes a technology for simulating a transitional experience.

The story parts, including characters, setting, and events, allow readers to “reality-test” experiences, feelings, and struggles that they may encounter in the outside world. Creating a Secondary World that utilizes aspects of social realism is key in making the narrative and story events, allow readers to “reality-test” experiences, feel interests and learn that they are exactly what one another needs in a friend. The author has created a place through fantasy, world-building and narrative to teach readers about friendship, confrontation, second chances, and honesty during a transitional time in their lives when friendship is confusing and difficult to navigate: middle school. Readers can see the path that this friendship takes, learn from it, and apply it in their own lives.

Transitional storytelling within my thesis narrative, Beyond the Castle Walls, specifically explores the relationship between childhood, adolescence, and place. The characters long to experience a world different from their own and escape the troubles that they face at home, much like many middle-grade children that feel a lack of control in their own homes as they grow in their independence throughout adolescence. In their frustration and fear, the characters run away to discover an enchanted forest that seems like the perfect escape. They soon find that this new place presents its own challenges. Evelyn runs away to be closer with her friends, but she soon finds that the unfamiliar forest is not as friendly as the streets of her neighborhood. She gets lost and separated from her friends in a moment of curiosity, leading to the discovery of an unexpected friend. Flynn and his brother Forest are faced with a new friend that mirrors their sadness at home. Matt must overcome his insecurities to be the last two boys to continue the search for the lanterns. The others have all turned back, breaking the pact. Together, Nathaniel and Ben end up traveling further than anyone had ever gone before, and during this journey, they face challenges that stir up frustrations and allow unsaid emotions to bubble to the surface. Ben’s insecurity kept him from getting to know Nathaniel because he worried that the other boys would bully him similarly to how they treat Nathaniel, and in the wake of Ben’s fears and frustrations along the journey, Nathaniel’s constant optimism eventually leads to a confrontation where both boys let out everything they’ve been feeling: Ben’s annoyance and insecurity, and Nathaniel’s hope to be accepted. In a fantasy environment shed of societal pressure, the two boys can see that they are not so different after all. They share interests and learn that they are exactly what one another needs in a friend.

The story becomes a technology for simulating a transitional experience. In this graphic novel, a group of boys make a pact to follow the floating lanterns that are released into the river by the town each year at the Autumn Equinox Festival. Legend has it that after drifting out of sight, the lanterns will soar off to the Milky Way and become brilliant stars. This year the boys are determined to find out if that is true. Nathaniel remains steadfast and self-assured despite enduring verbal bullying from the other boys, in contrast to timid, insecure Ben. Much to Ben’s disappointment, he and Nathaniel, the kid who doesn’t fit in, quickly become the last two boys to continue the search for the lanterns. The others have all turned back, breaking the pact. Together, Nathaniel and Ben end up traveling further than anyone had ever gone before, and during this journey, they face challenges that stir up frustrations and allow unsaid emotions to bubble to the surface. Ben’s insecurity kept him from getting to know Nathaniel because he worried that the other boys would bully him similarly to how they treat Nathaniel, and in the wake of Ben’s fears and frustrations along the journey, Nathaniel’s constant optimism eventually leads to a confrontation where both boys let out everything they’ve been feeling: Ben’s annoyance and insecurity, and Nathaniel’s hope to be accepted. In a fantasy environment shed of societal pressure, the two boys can see that they are not so different after all. They share interests and learn that they are exactly what one another needs in a friend.

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