

# How Young Adult Crime Fiction Influences and Reflects Modern Adolescents: An Examination of Karen M. McManus's *One of Us Is Lying* and *One of Us Is Next*

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When we read crime fiction, we often expect a cast dominated by adult characters. This is likely a result of decades' worth of popular crime fiction narratives almost exclusively containing adult characters. The earliest literature in the mystery and crime genre that was targeted towards younger audiences contained teenage detectives and adult criminals because it allowed the younger audiences to read about powerful teenagers overthrowing adult authority while still only engaging in acceptable moral activities in an attempt to decrease or discourage juvenile delinquency. A newer trend among young adult crime fiction novels is the adolescent playing the part of the criminal in addition to the detective. Applying social cognitive theory explored in the study conducted by Black and Barnes to the roles of adolescents in Karen M.

McManus's young adult mystery novel *One of Us Is Lying* and its sequel *One of Us Is Next*, this essay will analyze the novels' adolescent characters to show how adolescent characters in young adult crime fiction reflect their young audiences' desires to subvert adult hierarchies while still displaying acceptable morals and how they possibly influence their sense of morality.

Crime fiction as a genre has notably been geared towards adult audiences, most likely a result of the violent subject matter including but not limited to murder, rape, torture, and gore. However, the crime fiction genre isn't exclusive to adult audiences. Young adult (YA) crime fiction, emerging in the 1920s and gaining popularity around the 1950s, is targeted towards younger audiences between the ages of twelve and eighteen. Despite catering towards a younger audience, young adult fiction—including young adult crime fiction—is a genre that deserves recognition and serious discussion. Focusing on the roles of adolescents in Karen M. McManus's young adult mystery novel *One of Us Is Lying* and its sequel *One of Us Is Next*, as well as research on the effects of YA fiction, this essay will analyze the adolescent characters to show that adolescent characters in young adult crime fiction reflect and possibly influence young audiences' sense of morality, especially in a society in which technology plays an integral role in adolescents' everyday lives.

To understand the genre of YA crime fiction and its audience, it is important to note its origins. In "Teenage Detectives and Teenage Delinquents," Ilana Nash analyzes the society which created YA crime fiction and traces its roots back to 1880s writer Edward Stratemeyer, who wrote many teenage heroism stories for boys in the ten–fifteen age range. It wasn't until the 1920s when Stratemeyer's publishing company, called Stratemeyer Syndicate, published the Hardy Boys series, which became one of the first, if not the first, children's detective series featuring recurring teenage characters as detectives (Nash 73–74). The *Nancy Drew* series was quick to follow in the 1930s, and around twenty years later, both series' popularity rocketed. This was after World War II, which brought an onslaught of teenage independence and social influence. Nash explains, "The literatures of teens and crime used the image of the teenager to address anxieties about social control and the future of American society" (Nash 73). Many believed that these stories and other similar stories would encourage behavior that was deemed acceptable and would discourage teenage delinquency as well as, ultimately, the erosion of American morals in the younger generation. To accomplish this, the role of adolescents in YA crime fiction was that of detectives upholding traditional values that reinforced conservative hierarchies of class, race, and gender. For example, those who came from lower-class households were depicted as more susceptible to delinquency and violence. Girls faced sexual activity as a factor to determine their delinquency whereas the boys' sexual activity was under less scrutiny, their delinquency being primarily focused on violence and vandalism (Nash 76). The desired result would be to encourage readers to adhere to the boundaries and values portrayed.

While it is still true today that adolescent characters in this genre are given the

role of the detective to bring the criminal to justice, the morally sound detective is not the only role adolescents occupy anymore. John G. Cawelti identifies four essential character roles in mystery fiction: The victim, the criminal, the detective, and those threatened by the crime but incapable of solving it (91). The original YA crime fiction writers from the 1930s up until recently have ensured their teenage characters filled the roles of the detective in an attempt to decrease juvenile delinquency, as Nash explained, but modern YA crime fiction seems to have changed this convention. Now more than ever, audiences of this genre are seeing teenagers in the roles of all of those presented by Cawelti, and some even redefine these roles.

A modern example of YA crime fiction redefining some of these roles is McManus's *One of Us Is Lying*. For some background, in this novel, high school student Simon runs a notorious gossip app called "About That" that regularly exposes Bayview High's students' secrets. During an after-school detention where the supervising teacher exits the room for a short amount of time, leaving students Bronwyn, Nate, Cooper, Addy, and Simon alone, Simon mysteriously dies. The four other students in detention, later dubbed the Bayview Four, are all potential suspects in his death because the gossip app Simon ran had queued up their secrets next, providing them all with a motive for murder. In the end, it is revealed that Simon suffered a fatal allergic reaction that he caused as a form of suicide because he wanted to die in infamy while bringing down the four other students with him. In his manifesto, which gets revealed towards the end of the book, Simon wrote down that he thought about conducting a school shooting but "that's been done to death. It doesn't have the same impact anymore. I want to be more creative. More unique. I want my suicide to be talked about for years" (McManus 322). In this book, it is clear that Simon is simultaneously playing the role of the victim and also of the criminal, with the other criminals being his two friends who helped him execute the phases of his plan after his death. Like Simon, the four students who are blamed for Simon's death—Bronwyn, Addy, Nate, and Cooper—fill two roles in the narrative, the detective and those threatened by the crime. Unlike Cawelti's original formula, which stated that those who were threatened by the crime were unable to solve it, the characters in *One of Us Is Lying* are the ones who solve it. In fact, it seems as though it is up to them because the adult authority falls short of discovering the truth themselves.

More unique to *One of Us Is Lying* compared to early YA crime fiction is modern technology's consistent, and almost intrusive, role in adolescents' lives. Technology has become an integral part of modern teens' lives, and the novels reflect that and use those technologies—more specifically, social media—to create a plot that generates relatability among young readers. Simon finds a community online that fuels his hatred towards his classmates of a higher social ranking. According to Janae, Simon

“started spending all his time online with a bunch of creepers, fantasizing about getting revenge on everyone who made him miserable” (McManus 322). In this context, “creepers” refers to individuals who shared Simon’s twisted and masochistic fantasies of causing harm to others with a sense of higher self-worth. Furthermore, Simon’s “About That” app spreads secrets among Bayview High and exposes its students for the sake of drama and gossip. Simon later uses it to expose the four students at the top of the social ladder—the Bayview Four—because he is jealous of their social status and wants to be the catalyst of their downfall. In the early stages of the investigation following Simon’s mysterious death, Detective Wheeler told Addy in a conversation that read as a soft interrogation, “Kids your age are under a lot of pressure today...The social media alone—it’s like you can’t make a mistake anymore, can you? It follows you everywhere” (McManus 83). The intent of this quote in context was to persuade Addy into admitting guilt, but in the greater context of the novel, and even in reality, it shows how prevalent the impact of social media and technology is on adolescents. Young readers who have grown up in the age of social media have most likely faced some form of cyberbullying, so when they read of Simon facing the consequences of his actions, they must feel some sort of satisfaction. It enables them to read a situation in which a bully loses and the victims win. Although it was in Simon’s plan to die, his ultimate plan was to ruin the lives of the Bayview Four and frame Nate as his murderer. The Bayview Four, along with the help of Maeve, ruin Simon’s plans and end up exposing his detestable and manipulative actions. The genre of young adult literature (YAL) provides a sense of wish fulfillment, though Connors claims it is not fulfillment as “the life we wish we could live, but as the power and influence we wish we could have” (3). This is what grants readers satisfaction: The bully facing justice and the consequences of their actions, something that victims of cyberbullying or other types of bullying undoubtedly want to experience.

With this context of modern adolescents and their roles in mind, one can begin to analyze modern YA crime fiction as it pertains to its effects on audiences today. A study done by Jessica Black and Jennifer Barnes assessed how fiction—with a focus on YA fiction—impacts readers’ empathy, moral identity, and moral agency. Their findings concluded that exposure to adult fiction and YA fiction were both connected to integrity, or “the desire for consistency between moral principles and actions,” but perceived moral agency was exclusively linked to YA fiction (Black and Barnes 157). Furthermore, across studies, YA fiction was found to be consistently associated with empathic concern, integrity, and moral agency. These findings align with social cognitive theory, which states that “learning occurs in a social context with a dynamic and reciprocal interaction of the person, environment, and behavior” (Black and Barnes 149). Or, when applied to the context of this paper, consumers of literature can absorb

the moral behavior displayed by fictional characters. This would support the efforts made by publishers in the 1950s when they were pushing for the representation of traditional values in the form of teenage detectives in YA crime fiction, though those traditional values were imposed by white conservative middle-class Americans and are no longer the exclusive standard by which Western society at large judges morality. As a result of Black and Barnes' study, which shows how influential the genre of YA fiction is to its audience, it is paramount to critically analyze its content because the adolescent audience will soon assimilate into and assume active roles in society.

These research findings provided by Black and Barnes apply to *One of Us Is Lying* because morally ambiguous, morally sound, and morally unsound actions are all performed by adolescent characters in the major roles identified by Cawelti. As previously mentioned, in *One of Us Is Lying*, the criminals are high school students. Simon runs a gossip app that was designed to expose his peers for his own entertainment, something that many would agree is not particularly morally sound across multiple standards. Furthermore, Simon's two friends that agree to help him in his plan to kill himself and then pass the blame to his classmates—whom he hates because they were ranked high on the social hierarchy whereas he, despite his best efforts, was always on the bottom—also make questionable choices, including the instance where one of them, Jake, attacks Addy and nearly kills her because she messed up the plan near the end. Janae, Simon's other friend who initially agreed to help execute his plan, decides near the end that she would no longer go along with his plan to plant evidence on Addy because she realized Addy was not as awful as Simon led her to believe. When Addy asks Janae why she didn't stick to the plan to plant the evidence on her, Janae says, "You were nice to me...I know we're probably not really friends and you probably hate me now, but...I couldn't do that to you" (McManus 327). When Jake attacks Addy after she discovers the full truth, Janae also helps her then. This blurring of lines between roles redefines Cawelti's roles for mystery narratives.

The four main characters who play the part of detective also blur the lines of roles because they were actively hiding something viewed as morally wrong. Bronwyn, for instance, was hiding the fact that she stole the answers for a chemistry exam to uphold her perfect GPA to be accepted into an Ivy League university. Nate's secret is that he had been selling drugs. For Addy, it's how she cheated on her boyfriend. Cooper's secret was that he is gay, and although his secret is not nearly on the same level as his peers', it was still something that wouldn't have been widely accepted. He is also rumored to have been using steroids to enhance his athletic performance in sports, though this would be revealed as a lie. With each of these characters not upholding the traditional values, one might argue that despite their ability to bring the truth to light, they are not the role models Nash wrote about in her discussion of

adolescents in YA crime fiction.

However, as a result of Black and Barnes' study which found strong associations between the consumption of YA fiction and empathy, it can be said that reading books such as *One of Us Is Lying* is not inherently detrimental to their audiences simply because their adolescent characters occasionally misbehave. The main characters in the Bayview Four adhere to more progressive standards of morals. The teen delinquents, Simon and Jake, are written in a negative light and are met with justice. For Simon, this means his malicious plans are ruined and are brought to life. For Jake, this means being arrested. Consequently, this novel still encourages youth to be more aligned with the adolescents who fill the detective role and those threatened by the crime than the teen criminals.

As previously mentioned, these adolescents adhere to a more progressive and modern moral code that does not, for example, villainize promiscuity or homosexuality. These depictions could be an attempt to change the YA crime genre's penchant for supporting the white middle class values that were being pushed by the *Nancy Drew* and *Hardy Boys* series. As well as attempting to change these genre conventions, they reflect the shift in morals present in younger generations, who are the target audiences for these novels. For example, a poll conducted by Gallup, a global analytics firm, found that the percentage of U.S. adults who identified as a part of the LGBTQIA+ community has "increased to a new high of 7.1%, which is double the percentage from 2012," which is largely due to the influx of LGBTQIA+ identifiers in Generation Z (Jones). The representation of non-heterosexual characters in *One of Us Is Lying*, though minimal, reflects this trend. While this representation is small in comparison to the representation of heterosexuality in McManus's novels, it does not villainize or demoralize the characters who identify as such. In fact, Cooper, one of the main characters, is gay and helps the other three of the Bayview Four solve Simon's death. His boyfriend also aids in the uncovering of the truth of the crime. Audiences also want to see more representation of POC characters in YAL, which also diverts from the focus of the first YA crime fiction narratives since they aimed to represent and prioritize the white middle and upper class. *One of Us Is Lying* takes a step to cater to this with the character of Bronwyn. She diverts from the stereotypes maintained by the era of *The Hardy Boys* and *Nancy Drew* by representing a POC adolescent woman who is intelligent and has attainable aspirations of attending an ivy league university. YAL is seeing an influx of diversity, but the YA crime fiction genre still has plenty of room to become more diverse and inclusive. *One of Us Is Lying* is a step towards this representation. Having the more diverse teen detectives—those who are meant to display the behaviors which young audiences are meant to draw influence from—demonstrates how McManus's YA crime novels have begun to push the genre forward

as well as reflect the progressive values of their audience.

While the YA crime genre has shifted since the *Nancy Drew* series and the *Hardy Boys* series to reflect changes in audiences' values, one aspect that has prevailed is the adolescent desire to overthrow adult hierarchies. The first notable signs of fear of teenage rebellion sprouted from post-war America when adults' anxieties of atomic warfare during the Cold War shifted "to the image of the nation's youth" (Nash 76). The fear of teenage rebellion was met with the desire to subdue and control teenage behavior, which has continued to the present. Today, similar acts of teenage rebellion from the past are still apparent. Also increasingly present is the number of youth involved in organized protests and rallies, such as March for Our Lives and climate change demonstrations. Psychologist Carl Pickhardt identifies two common types of teenage rebellion: Rebellion of non-conformity and rebellion of noncompliance, otherwise stated as rebellion against adult authority (Pickhardt). This rebellion against adult authority comes from adolescents' "desire for power and control," according to Sean P. Connors, researcher of YAL (Connors 3). The adult authority falls short in *One of Us Is Lying* in multiple instances, such as failing to discover the true person who is at fault for Simon's death, and even wrongly arresting Nate, causing the rest of the Bayview Four to have to prove his innocence in their process of uncovering the real murderer. When Bronwyn first learns of Nate's unfounded arrest, she says, "You've seen how screwed up this investigation is. They thought I did it for a while. They're wrong. I'm positive they're wrong" (McManus 276). The reason the authorities believe Nate to be the murderer is because it was in Simon's plan for Janae to plant evidence and frame one of the Bayview Four. Janae is meant to plant the evidence on Addy, but after Addy is friendly to her, she changes the plan. The rest of the Bayview Four rebel against adult authorities' ruling and investigate the murder case themselves because the adult authorities fell for the lie. Reading about these adults' shortcomings and the adolescents' ability to subvert their authority by solving the mysteries themselves reflects and satiates young adult readers' desires to overthrow adult hierarchies in reality.

The sequel to *One of Us Is Lying*, *One of Us Is Next*, contains the same aspects of the first novel that reflects and influences its modern adolescent audience. As a basis for context, the novel follows the younger sister of Bronwyn, named Maeve, and two other students named Phoebe and Knox. These three are the targets of a dangerous, and even fatal, game of "truth or dare" that sprung up as a copycat of Simon's infamous gossip app to continue Simon's legacy. While none of the main three characters are suspected of being behind the anonymously run game of "truth or dare," they are each impacted by it as they all have secrets that could get out if they choose truth instead of the perilous dare. In *One of Us Is Next*, Cawelti's identified roles are also mainly filled by

adolescent characters. Maeve, Phoebe, and Knox fill the role of the detective and are also somewhat threatened by the crime, though in a different way compared to how the four students in the previous book were threatened. The victims are all high school students, and the main criminal is an adult named Jared, who is brought to justice in the end. It could be argued that Phoebe's younger siblings Emma and Owen could also be classified as criminals since they teamed up with Jared for a short amount of time, but when assessing their intentions, it is clear Jared took advantage of their young age and emotions. A deeper analysis of these characters' situations will be conducted later in this essay to support the claim that the adolescent characters who have contributed in some way to the crime are not used as positive models for the young audience to imitate in their formation of morals and behaviors. While Jared, an adult, is the main criminal in this novel who exemplifies a corrupt and violent standard of morals, it still stands that adolescents fill the major roles.

Like the first novel in the series, technology plays a major role in *One of Us Is Next* as well. However, the gossip app "About That" is gone and is instead replaced with a "truth or dare" game conducted over text that results in the death of a student named Brandon. The digital footprint left by the one controlling the game and picking its victims leads Knox, Maeve, and Phoebe to discover a Reddit thread that gives them enough clues to reveal their identities and motive. In the first book, technology's role was the root cause of the issues that arose; in the sequel, it helped track down the one responsible and bring him to justice. In both, technology—specifically social media—is a method of exposing students and enacting revenge. In real life, the same can be true. Cyberbullying—such as the "truth or dare" game in the novel—is increasingly prevalent among modern adolescents as they become more reliant on social media and technology because individuals feel a sense of protection from their words and behavior when they are conducted online. Ganesini and Brighi explain that this is because when individuals communicate online, "they feel that they are a part of an anonymous mass and therefore tend not to take responsibility for their actions or do not perceive their actions as particularly harmful because 'virtual' is not 'real'" (8–9). The perceived disconnect between "virtual" and "real" enables cyberbullies to victimize their targets easier. However, the pain and torment victims face as a result of cyberbullying is not easier to manage just because it is facilitated online. After Knox's secret is revealed during "truth or dare", he narrates, "How the hell am I supposed to show up at school tomorrow? Or ever?" (McManus 151). When adolescents read these lines, many of them are likely to relate to how Knox is feeling because of how prevalent cyberbullying has become in recent decades. These instances in *One of Us Is Next* reflect not only the constant use of technology in modern adolescents, but they also reflect the unique struggles they face as a result.



Similarly to how each of the Bayview Four characters all have flaws (or perceived flaws) in *One of Us Is Lying*, the main protagonists in the sequel are also written with more moral ambiguity than the earliest YA crime fiction adolescent protagonists discussed by Nash. For example, Phoebe sleeps with her sister Emma's boyfriend behind her back and Maeve tells an embarrassing secret about Knox to her sister Bronwyn which gets leaked to the whole school. Again, although the findings of Barnes and Black's research that assessed how YAL impacts audiences in terms of empathy, morality, and integrity, reading about these characters' flaws are not inherently causing their audiences to misbehave. There are not as many teen criminals present in *One of Us Is Next* as there were in *One of Us Is Lying*, but there are a few examples of adolescents who, intentionally or not, contribute to the main crime. These examples would include Emma and Owen, Phoebe's siblings. Emma wanted revenge on a student named Brandon, who accidentally killed her father and cheated on her with her sister Phoebe, and started chatting with Jared—the main criminal—on Reddit, but she backed out as soon as she realized how violent and cruel Jared's plans were since she only wanted to expose unflattering secrets. When revealing the truth at the very end, Emma says, "As soon as the Truth or Dare game started, I hated it. I regretted everything. I told Jared to shut it down, and he said he would... But the game kept going. I didn't understand why, but I was afraid to get in touch with Jared again." She begins to cry and adds, "Brandon wasn't supposed to die" (McManus 336–337). Owen took his sister's place in the chat room without Emma's knowledge because he saw how devastated she was as a result of her ex-boyfriend cheating on her and tried to continue speaking with Jared, but once he realized how far Jared was taking the game, he also backed out. After Brandon died fulfilling a dare from "truth or dare," Owen messages Jared still under the guise of his sister and says, "That wasn't supposed to happen" and then promptly "ghosts" him (McManus 371). It is evident that their intentions—publicly humiliating the one who caused their father's death with teen gossip—were not criminal or malevolent, though the consequences were. As such, these books still encourage youth to be more aligned with the adolescents who fill the roles of detective and those threatened by the crime than those who contribute to the crime.

Like *One of Us Is Lying*, *One of Us Is Next* also reflects its audience's more progressive values compared to the traditional values identified by Nash. The three main protagonists—Maeve, Knox, and Phoebe—as well as some tertiary characters, demonstrate these shifts. Younger audiences have an increased desire to see representation of diverse characters in narratives. It is important to note that *One of Us Is Next* is undoubtedly not the most diverse YA crime novel, but it is worth noting the difference in representation compared to the earliest YA crime fiction narrative

to recognize the progression of the genre. Representation of illness has increased in YAL—a notable example would be John Green's *The Fault in Our Stars*—but its representation in YA crime fiction is still low. Maeve's character represents a character who struggled with leukemia in her past and grapples with a potential relapse throughout the novel. Representation of race is also present in the novel with Maeve's Columbian heritage and Luis and his family's Mexican heritage. Another aspect of the novel that reflects the desire for more diverse characters and the audiences' more progressive values is the—somewhat limited—representation of sexual orientations. Cooper, who was in the closet in *One of Us Is Lying*, appears in this novel as openly gay and in a happy relationship with his boyfriend. Having more diverse teen detectives—those who are meant to display the behaviors which young audiences are meant to draw influence from—demonstrates how McManus's YA crime novels have begun to push the genre forward as well as reflect the progressive values of their audience.

As well as catering towards its audiences' desire for more representation and progressive values, *One of Us Is Next* provides readers with teen detectives who overpower adult authority. Like the first novel in the series, the adult authorities are unable to solve the crime of Brandon's death; in fact, they do not recognize that the death of Brandon is even a crime until the three teen detectives—Maeve, Knox, and Phoebe—solve it for them. The adults are written as primarily uninvolved, resulting in the responsibility of solving the crime to fall onto the kids. Their connections and unique perspectives grant them the ability to uncover things the adult authorities were unable to. In one scene where Maeve and Knox are attempting to hack into Knox's mother's work computer, Maeve succeeds without any struggle. She does not even have to hack into it because she guesses common passwords until she gets it right on the third try. She tells Knox, "Parents are the single worst threat to any type of cyber security" (287). It is by the adults' incompetencies that they are able to succeed. Seeing these adult authorities failing and the teens succeeding feeds into the wish fulfillment many readers of this genre seek. Connors explains that reading about adolescents pushing back against authority "challenges readers to look critically at the power structures that envelop and seek to construct them" (3). He asserts that it is important for adolescents to read these types of novels, even in school settings, because allowing students to read YAL that includes characters who resist oppressive power systems "invite[s] students to acknowledge their own potential to act" (Connors 20). Although Connors is discussing YA dystopia, the same can be said about YA crime fiction. This is especially true concerning McManus's *One of Us Is Lying* and *One of Us Is Next* because they are both set in the mostly relatable setting of a public school and reflect the struggles adolescents from their technology-infused generation face.

Although YA crime fiction is for a younger audience, it would be unreasonable

to be skeptical of the merit of the literature that falls under this genre. In fact, because this genre contains subjects that are geared more towards mature audiences—such as crime and violence—and is targeted towards a demographic who are in one of the most critical moments for their development, it requires our attention. The findings of Black and Barnes’s study as well as the research by Nash prove the importance of YAL, and when applied to YA crime fiction—especially more modern YA crime fiction—these implications are even more critical for this reason. Not only does the analysis of YA crime literature reveal the desires and practices of its audience, but it also influences its audience in ways that may contribute to their formation of morals.

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