



There is no me without you

The implications of self as mutable and multiple for the writer

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ABSTRACT

The image of the self as singular, immutable, and “true” is a compelling one, and one that pervades fiction in the Global North. But given that neuroscience has now confirmed what some sociologists and philosophers have long argued – that self is mutable and multiple – what does that mean for writers of commercial psychological realism, and how might we better reflect the complex nature of self in our work? This article investigates selected attempts to render the mutable, multiple self in fiction, and explores other methods in the writer’s toolkit that may help portray or convey a dialogic, rather than monologic and essential sense of self.

THE PEARL THEORY

The image of the self as a pearl – a hard, tangible, impermeable thing – is a compelling one. We sense it, after all, don't we? That there is an inherent, unbreachable "me"ness to us, even if we do sometimes "fake" behaviour in order to fit in? And this idea – of a singular "true" self behind the mask – pervades fiction in the Global North. As writers, we're encouraged to finagle events that will force our protagonists to confront their "true" nature and reveal exactly "what sort of person are they?" (Yorke 2014: 15) at the novel's climax. Many narratives go further, with that question "who am I?" their driving force. The bildungsroman, for example, and its late twentieth-century offspring Young Adult fiction, often explicitly deal in the choosing of a singular self before, in Holden Caulfield's terms, protagonists leave behind the liminal "fields of rye" (Salinger 1958) of childhood and jump over the cliff-face into the unknown but implicitly miserable landscape of adulthood.

This is, perhaps, unsurprising, given that the former genre, as noted by academic Roberta Seelinger Trites, "emerged in an atmosphere nurtured by the romantic belief in the individual." (Seelinger Trites 2000: 11) Robyn McCallum's 1999 monograph *Ideologies of Identity in Adolescent Fiction* backs this theory, arguing that mainstream "adolescent fiction has been dominated by premodern conceptions of the individual, the self, and the child associated with liberal humanism and romanticism" (McCallum 1999: 3-4). McCallum goes on to associate this dominant liberal humanist ethic with the privileging of "concepts such as the uniqueness of the individual and the essentiality of self, as opposed to the self as fragmented or plural." (1999: 67)

That is not to say that adolescence, and thus YA fiction, does not enjoy what German-American psychologist Erik Erikson termed a "moratorium" on what might be seen as out of character behaviour, such as "horse-stealing and vision-quests" before meeting the "obligation" of adulthood (Erikson 1968: 156-157). We expect our children, and thus our teenaged characters, to try out new lives for size in the same way they may try out myriad dresses before prom night, then leave the rejects scattered on the bedroom floor. But the belief that this should a brief period of no more than a few years persists in life, and thus in fiction. We still root for the real self who will triumph. We still hold on to the concept of the pearl. Yet, for some decades now, neuroscience has

been patiently explaining that, compelling as it is, not only is adolescence a state that runs well into our twenties and beyond, but also that pretty pearl (at the end of the rainbow that is adolescence or narrative arc) simply does not exist.

THE SELF AS MUTABLE AND MULTIPLE

Bruce Hood, a specialist in cognitive neuroscience at Bristol University, and Julian Baggini, a Bristol-based writer and philosopher, set this concept out in their books *The Self Illusion* and *The Ego Trick*, originally published just months apart in 2011. Self, they explain, is not an object, but a construct or process; a story we tell ourselves about ourselves. And that process is not solipsistic, but dialogic, constructed in concert with those around us. We are as much the product of our family, friends, even fictional characters we admire and absorb, as we are our own experiences, desires and dislikes.

The argument goes like this: each of us has some feeling of "me-ness": of both existence as a separate being, and of the nature of that being. And that me-ness is remarkably enduring, despite our ever-changing circumstances, tastes and relationships. As such we tend to conceive of identity as a single, stable, and somehow solid thing, and yet no-one can say where exactly this pearl called "self" resides, to the point that neuroscience, as Baggini puts it, "has given up on the search" (2011: 28). The reason for this abandonment? Because self is not something the brain possesses, it is something the brain does; a "symphony" played by the "orchestra of different brain processes" (Hood 2011: xi).

Baggini calls this the "ego trick"; for Hood it is the "self illusion", but both suggest the same idea that wholeness is effect rather than cause, as the mind draws on memory and manages to convince us that we are unified. And it does that because we are all masters of fiction. As Hood puts it, "Who we are is the story of our self – a constructed narrative that our brain creates." (2011: xi). For Baggini, we write ourselves into being by constructing an "autobiographical narrative that links experiences over time" (2011: 40). It is this narrative that creates the feeling of unity, a feeling so compelling that "it becomes natural to think of ourselves as beings with clear boundaries [...] This is false. We are fluid, ever-changing, amorphous selves." (Baggini 2011: 140) Key to Baggini's thinking is that this narrative itself isn't an unchangeable text, but can be revised and rewritten to absorb inconsistencies and

maintain coherence. No less important is that this narrative of self isn't a monologue, constructed by the mind in isolation, but the product of an ongoing conversation; it is dialogic.

The idea that we are partly what others perceive us to be might strike one as the stuff of adolescent nightmare; a damning confirmation that looks matter, that labels stick, that we are what we wear, say, listen to. The evidence is, however, overwhelming. Hood and Baggini are just two among many who cast those with whom we interact – our family, friends, idols, even fictional characters – in the role of meaning-givers. This does not erase us as “authors” of our selves; instead, these people are co-creators with whom we engage in a constant process of negotiation between the way we perceive ourselves and the way we perceive others to perceive ourselves. We are, Hood argues, “a product of those around us, or at least what we believe they expect from us” (2011: 51). In simple terms, other people – and by extension, their opinions – matter.

So, we think of our self, at least in part, according to what others think, and even according to what we think they think. This offers an explanation as to why we – especially in adolescent years – may mould our selves to fit better with the shape of the crowd: we copy their outfits, their Instagram pouts, their Spotify playlists; we (whether consciously not) often adopt their modes of speech, their morals. Is this weakness? The sign of an atrophied self, able to do no more than follow the herd? Or might it, actually, be favourable? Necessary, even? Hood thinks so, giving the concept a neurological explanation in “mirror neurons”. These synapses “appear to fire in sympathy” (Hood 2011: 42) when watching other people, eliciting a mirroring action. For Hood this process is akin to resonance: “It's like when you are in a guitar salesroom and strike the ‘G’ string loudly enough on one guitar, all the other ‘G’ strings on all the other guitars will eventually vibrate.” (2011: 151) But, according to him, this unconscious mimicry, this attempt to “fit in”, is not a fault, nor default, but design; a survival method, mirroring “binds us to others” (2011: 151). Self is socially constructed in order for society to thrive.

It is also important to say this theory does not render us mere puppets, or chameleons. Rather, it reveals that, far from being driven exclusively from the inside out, the being we project onto the world and that we use to negotiate the world, is as much

a product of that world as it is producer. Whether it is unconscious mirroring, or the conscious drive to be one of the crowd (or, indeed, stand out from it), self is a two-way street. This is key in the subtle distinction between a self that emerges in reaction to external influence, which implies authenticity, versus one that is assumed, which implies it is pure masquerade – stolen or handed to one and worn as no more than a suit of clothes.

So self is not an immutable essence, but dialogic. But even the word “dialogic” is misleading, because it is not one negotiation we have with the world but many, and in ever-increasing number, which led me to what Baggini describes as the “obvious” question: “Once the idea of the unitary self is fractured, should we not take this one stage further and accept that in the absence of a strongly singular ‘I’, there must be a weakly multiple ‘we’?” (2011: 83)

So, what does this idea of dialogic, or multilogic, self mean for the characters we create, and the way we structure our stories? Are we to abandon the sense of self entirely for a nebulous, entirely unreliable cast? And, if not, how else can we suggest the neuroscientific truth about self in our narratives, especially when working in the psychological realist tradition? For writer and storytelling coach Will Storr, characters in “well-told stories” (2019: 117) already reflect this multiplicity simply by being “three-dimensional”. The crisis and climax can be said to reveal, rather than “true self”, just which model of self won the battle for dominion at that time. Storr's view is compelling – it requires no real change of process after all, just ongoing work to ensure all characters are rounded. But in practice it does little to suggest to readers that the concept of “true self” is in itself fatally flawed. How can we know that they're not just seeing that temporarily dominant self as the “real” one?

Below, I will open the writer's toolbox and root around for some alternatives to Storr that work towards helping writers abandon their protagonist's pursuit of “true” self, as well foregrounding the dialogic construction of self. These are: a mutable protagonist, second person address, polyphonic text and first-person plural narrative.

A MUTABLE PROTAGONIST

While neuroscience has only caught up relatively recently, the idea of the self as mutable or multiple isn't new, and certainly isn't absent from fiction.

We see it in the trope of doubling in Robert Louis Stevenson's 1886 novella *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1993) and Oscar Wilde's *The Portrait of Dorian Gray* (1993); we see it pathologised as Dissociative Identity Disorder (previously known as Multiple Personality Disorder) in works like Chuck Paluhniak's *Fight Club* (1997). These depictions, though, (including my own, in *Eden* (Nadin 2014) and *Wonderland* (Nadin 2009)) tend towards the troublesome, with double or multiple selves depicted as, at best, problematic, at worst, fractured and, ultimately, self-destructive. Even Woolf, whose work explores the concept in theme and structure in several works, and who approaches positive depictions at times, complained "I come to feel more and more how difficult it is to collect myself into one Virginia." (Woolf 2011: xxvi)

I made my own first attempt at rendering a positive fully mutable self in the YA novel *Queen Bea* (Nadin 2019), a metamorphosis coming-of-age narrative, submitted as part of my doctoral thesis. A latter-day *Gatsby*, the narrator Bea undergoes a Cinderella transformation to become more like her best friend Stella – much as my narrator Jude did in *Wonderland*. This time, though, Bea refuses to return to her "true" awkward self, boldly proclaiming:

Yes I am the seven year old dressed in a yellow poloneck and scowl and sat on her mother's knee. But I'm also the drunk, dancing girl on the table-top at Happy Holliday's, and the sober one sat here writing to you now. I am all the "me"s that people see. Yesterday I downed a half bottle of vodka in my room after dinner because some days the hole you left is so fucking huge and raw and gaping I can't find enough things to fill it, and that was me. And it was me when less than an hour later I stuck my fingers down my throat and threw it all up. In five minutes I'm going to go downstairs and smile and eat salted almonds and play a strained game of Trivial Pursuit, and that's me. And tomorrow night I think I'm going to I sleep with that new kid from Cambridge, and maybe he'll tell me I'm like no girl he's ever met before, and I'll laugh and tell him he never met you, and yeah, that's me too. (Nadin 2009: 191-192)

And this is where I hit a brick wall, otherwise known as the rejection pile. My YA editor at Walker Books worried about the lack of "come-uppance" and declared Bea "irredeemable" for her refusal to "revert to type" at the end of the novel after trying out her new style / persona. In other words – she

wasn't being "the real Bea"; she was still wearing what my editor saw and, she suspected, many readers would see, as a mask. And we don't like masks – they confuse us; they prevent us from seeing the "real" person and thus being able to categorize them neatly.

Sartre put it like this: "A grocer who dreams is offensive to the buyer, because such a grocer is not wholly a grocer. Society demands that he limit himself..." (Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, quoted in Goffman, 1969: 66) It is this principle – the drive for reality, or for supposed authenticity – that is behind the common desire to reveal Pygmalions as the flower girls they are. And here lies the problem. Too many readers (and writers) still mitigate against what they see as "fakery" – unable, yet, to accept either that people can change (class, appearance, gender), or simply be more than one thing. We may admire makeover shows, and applaud "glow ups", but only within relatively narrow parameters; in fact, it's often the reverse we gawp at more – the pre-surgery celebrity photos. We are still the Tom Buchanans, scouring the text for evidence of past lives, awaiting the yanking back of the curtain and the revelation of true selves.

In addition, the conclusion from my editor played into one of the very notions I'd been trying to disprove – the statement by former director of the Royal Institution, Baroness Susan Greenfield, that exposure to technology, entertainment and social media was "softening" the identity of adolescents, rendering it "transparent, fragile and questionable", resulting in a generation of atrophied selves or "nobodies" (Greenfield 2009: 15) rather than the joyous, multiple "somebodies" I was aiming for. I was, effectively, sent back to the drawing board.

I'm not abandoning this technique – both my forthcoming novel *The Double Life of Daisy Hemmings* (Nadin 2022) and my current work in progress *Sabrina Says* (2021b) contain characters who undergo metamorphoses from which they don't "revert" (though their changes aren't without contest or consequences, and, crucially, both of these novels are aimed at adults, not adolescents). And we can see that a minor character can be portrayed in such a way in David Levithan's drag queen quarterback *Infinite Darlene*, from his 2006 YA novel *Boy Meets Boy*, whose dialogism is a matter of record:

She seems very full of herself. Which she is. It's only after you get to know her better that you realize that somehow she's managed to encompass

all her friends within her own self-image, so that when she's acting full of herself, she's actually full of her close friends, too.

(Levithan, 2006: 54-55)

This said, a joyously mutable protagonist, whose revelation in Act 3 is that the “kind of person they are” is actually several different people, remains somewhat problematic, so how else might we suggest a less than pearlised sense of self?

SECOND PERSON ADDRESS (YOU)

Like novelist Mohsin Hamid, who confessed his “enduring” love affair with the form in the Guardian (2013b), I have always been drawn to second-person address. That includes the universalising version employed, for example, by Peter Ho Davies in his 2000 short story “How to Be an Expatriate” and Julian Barnes in his novel *The Only Story*: “Would you rather love the more, and suffer the more; or love the less, and suffer the less? That is, I think, finally, the only real question.” (Barnes 2018: 3) – a voice that subtly implicates the reader as “being like” the narrator. This is perhaps the more common, and more easily digested, occurrence. It certainly abounds now. Carmen Maria Machado’s ‘you’ in *In The Dream House* is explicitly narrator (and thus potentially reader): ‘You listen to her read an old essay about how her parents never let her eat sugary cereal. You tell her, often, how hysterically funny funny she is.’ (Machado 2020: 25) Caleb Azumah Nelson uses the technique in the Costa Prize-winning *Open Water*, but here muddies identity slightly by implicating both narrator and subject: ‘The first night you met, a night you both negate as too brief an encounter, you pull your friend Samuel to the side.’ (Nelson 2022: 3).

It also encompasses the buttonholing direct address to the “you” of the reader or another character, used by Hamid in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2008) and *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*: “This book is a self-help book. Its objective, as it says on the cover, is to show you how to get filthy rich in rising Asia. And to do that it has to find you, huddled, shivering, on the packed earth under your mother’s cot one cold, dewy morning.” (Hamid 2013: 1) We witness this version again as a narrator addresses their stalker in Claire Kendall’s *The Book of You*: “It is you. Of course it is you. It is always you.” (Kendall 2014: 1) or their kidnapper in Lucy Christopher’s *Stolen*: “I saw you before you saw me.” (Christopher 2013: 1).

While a decidedly Marmite point-of-view (a brief poll on Twitter brought out violent detractors and supporters alike), it is a form that can well conjure close or obsessive relationships on the page. In the creative writing classroom, it can help students better understand and get closer to narrators as they work on second-person pieces in which protagonists address other characters in their works in progress. In addition, as Magdalena Rembowska-Pluciennik argues in her 2018 paper on the rise in popularity of second-person address, and its link to increasing interest in social co-operation (Rembowska-Pluciennik 2018: 159), the use of “you” implicates the reader in the story (whether in Barnes’ universalising version or Christopher’s specific one), and thus in meaning creation – itself suggesting dialogue or co-creation. Might, then, it also work for suggesting the dialogic (if not exactly multiplicit) nature of self?

I have certainly tried to employ it thus, using the form initially in the commercially rejected *Queen Bea*, but with both critical and commercial success in *The Queen of Bloody Everything* (Nadin 2018). Here, the narrator, Dido, addresses her mother Edie who is dying on a hospital ward, recounting excerpts of their life story. Initially employed to better reflect the antagonism of a daughter towards her mother, whom she has spent a lifetime trying not to become: “I used to rail against my inheritance, the pieces of genetic jigsaw puzzle that make up half of me.” (2018: 1), the eventual aim of the technique is to suggest that one cannot pretend not to be partially formed by that other person, that “you”, a fact that Dido suggests in the conclusion:

All those days spent lying on a single bed rereading *Othello* wishing I was black, or star-crossed, or just anyone but me. Scared that somehow, without trying, without even knowing it, I would manage to squeeze myself into your ragtag coat – the one that you wear to all your fuck-ups and faux pas.
(ibid: 404)

I believe the technique can be effective, but here perhaps mostly because Dido is explicit about the nature of how she herself has been formed in concert with Edie. The wider effect of the use of monologic dialogue – i.e. the one-sided conversation – that Dido has with her mother (and cannot escape) is subtler, and thus, perhaps, misses its mark slightly. There is also the risk, as Cowan points out in *The Art of Fiction*, that the “queasy” intimacy that

second person address enforces on the reader may not be welcome if the “you” is a person with whom the reader really doesn’t identify, or doesn’t want to admit that they do (Cowan, 2013: 133). Finally, there is the obvious point that, in a world in which we encounter multiple others on a daily basis, whether that is in real life, on the page or on the screen (big, small, or telephonic), suggesting that formation of self is limited to two people is, while more accurate than the individually formed “pearl”, still far from the truth.

POLYPHONIC TEXT

Emily Mackie’s *In Search of Solace* opens with an epigraph – Walt Whitman’s “Song of Myself”: “Do I contradict myself? / Very well then I contradict myself, / (I am large, I contain multitudes.)” (Mackie, 2014: v) The final line of this stanza is later repeated by Mackie’s confused and chameleon protagonist “Jacob”, who has also been Keith the archaeologist, Otto, the purple-bearded pagan and Isaac the gardener, amongst many others: “There is no one in me at all,” he says. “Can’t you see? I am large. I contain multitudes.” (Mackie 2014: 117)

Mackie’s novel is, both explicitly as here, and implicitly in structure and style (it uses multiple viewpoints to try (and fail) to locate the “real” Jacob), one of the closest attempts I have seen to render the multiplicit nature of self. It echoes (deliberately, I suspect), both Woolf’s *Jacob’s Room* (2008) and her *The Waves* (2001), the latter of which follows six friends from childhood to adulthood and fictionalises the author’s own previously cited conviction that she had many selves: “The six characters were all supposed to be one,” she wrote to G.L. Dickinson. (Woolf 2011: xxvi). As such it is packed with language that alludes to this belief: “How curiously one is changed by the addition [...] of a friend,” remarks Neville. “As he approaches I become not myself but Neville mixed with somebody.” (2011: 61-62) “I am not one and simple but complex and many,” says Bernard. “I have to effect different transitions; have to cover the entrances and exits of several different men who alternately act their parts as Bernard.” (2011: 56)

What interests me most here about both Woolf’s and Mackie’s works is not the characters” openly expressed conviction that identity is multiple, which risks feeling forced, but the use of multiple viewpoints. Multiperspectivity can be employed in fiction as a method of showing different versions of

an event, but here seems to provide a more subtle way of suggesting that the nature not merely of events, but of self itself, is contingent on who, exactly, is doing the viewing. This is a technique used well in Virginia Walter and Katrina Roeckelein’s YA graphic novel *Making Up Megaboy* (1998), which investigates why a quiet, thirteen-year-old loner would take his father’s gun and shoot a Korean liquor store owner. Taking a trope similar to the one used by Woolf in *Jacob’s Room* we see *Megaboy* purely through the eyes and descriptions of those with whom he has come into contact. As a result, we meet a host of different Megaboys, all potentially false, all potentially true.

This, to me, is a version of Bakhtin’s textual polyphony, giving validity to several points of view, all formed from the notion of a dialogic sense of truth. For Bakhtin, a single consciousness was a contradiction in terms. Consciousness was multiple, only emerging in contact with other people. “Two voices,” he said, “is the minimum for life, the minimum for existence.” (Bakhtin 1984: 252) For him, Dostoevsky’s work, with its plurality of voices, best expressed this. For me, in contemporary, commercial terms, Walter and Rockelein do this well, as does Bernadine Evaristo in *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019), with its twelve narrators and intersections of identity. In these novels there is no single truth, nor a universally agreed-on version of a character. There is only version. And, in Evaristo’s work at least, this is not problematic, but rather a celebration. This sense of celebration and interconnection is something I’m aiming for in *All About Eve* (2021a), which chronicles the life of one girl – Eve Delaney – as told by ten characters living in the same Wiltshire village, revealing, I hope, that there are many Eves, all contingent, all valid.

Another advantage of this collective narration is that, in a world in which we’re losing faith in leaders, and slowly realising that a single hero or heroine is unlikely to save society, it pushes, perhaps, towards offering a narrative blueprint for change of the kind we can only achieve if we ditch our individual heroes, accept our interconnectivity, and work together [2]. As may the use of the first-person plural pronoun: “we”, an address which also offers a potential narrative method for conveying the multiplicit nature of a narrator.

FIRST PERSON PLURAL NARRATIVE (WE)

Second-person as a textual address is becoming more widespread and culturally accepted, thanks in part, according to Rembowska-Płuciennik, to the proliferation of digital and social media, which prioritises “you”, placing us all in the role of “content producers” (Rembowska-Płuciennik 2018: 170). However, while some may be familiar with its usage from religious texts, or from “certain non-Western cultures [in which] the idea of a separate consciousness is perceived as a fatal error” (Marcus, 2008: 50), the first-person plural pronoun “we” is still limited in its appearance in popular Global North fiction. The *Virgin Suicides* by Jeffrey Eugenides (2002) springs to mind, but I struggled to come up with many others from recent years. Importantly, Eugenides’ work fits into the four “conceivable” cases of “we” offered by Uri Margolin:

1. All members of the reference class jointly speaking.
 2. A subset of the wider class offering a token “we” to speak on behalf of the whole class.
 3. Several members uttering “we” individually, alternately or in succession to refer to the whole class.
 4. A single member of the class speaking “we” on behalf of the whole class.
- (Margolin, 2001: 243)

For Margolin, and, surely, the vast majority of readers (unless we are witnessing the Queen speaking), “Whenever a reference to a “we” in a narrated domain is made in discourse, a group of some sort is immediately invoked.” (ibid: 246) But, remember Baggini and his question whether, in the absence of a singular “I”, “there must be a weakly multiple ‘we?’” (Baggini 2011: 83) Can we not apply this to narrative pronouns?

Virginia Woolf at least considered it. For her, “we” was, theoretically at least, a potential substitute for the misleading “I” to convey those many selves she was trying to gather together: “I rejected, ‘We’ substituted:... We composed of many different things... We all life, all art.” (Woolf 1959: 279) This “we” could, if she had dared, stood in for the six characters in *The Waves*. But she didn’t dare, and nor, yet, do I.

Outside the relatively freeing space of academia, I write fiction partly for financial gain. While the collective version of “we” employed by Eugenides is as quickly accepted by the reader as Barnes’ or

Christopher’s “you”, when denoting a single subject it risks either constant re-arrest on the part of the reader or a suggestion of Dissociative Identity Disorder (which is still, disappointingly, the go-to diagnosis whenever I mention “multiple self”). The former of these is largely undesirable by commercial publishing houses, the latter by me. There is also, more generally, something that feels, currently, a little “shouty” about the usage of “we” in these circumstances, excessive even. A sort of literary “Look at we!” However, things may yet change.

Building on, then ultimately rejecting Margolin, Amit Marcus questions whether, while first person plural may be “semantically unstable”, this justifies authors’ avoidance, “in an era that consecrates incoherence, inconsistency and equivocation”. (Marcus 2008: 48) And there are signs, elsewhere, of our willingness to accept the altered use of pronouns. While the need is far from pressing, I hope that, just as the use of “they” as a singular pronoun is rightly becoming more widely used and understood, both verbally and textually, that this singular version of “we” may yet have its day on the page.

CONCLUSION

The tools that I have suggested are, as I have demonstrated, not perfect, nor are they, I hope, exhaustive. I hope that writers will find other, perhaps far more effective ways of doing what I have been trying to for several years now. But the neuroscientific truth is that the search for an “essential” or “authentic” self is, as Rita Carter, author of *Multiplicity* puts it: “doomed to failure” (Carter 2008: xv), and so, it follows, should be phased out in fiction. This is undoubtedly a substantial challenge, but also an opportunity. For me the malleable nature of identity is simply an expansion of the concept of empathy, which we know fiction already encourages, as not only desirable but essential for inclusion. Carter, again: “If we are to swim in a disjointed and ever-changing world we need more than ever to pull on our ability to see things from different viewpoints and to adopt multiple behaviours in different situations.” (2008: 79).

Nearly eighty years ago, Virginia Woolf expressed the hope that her short stories like “The Mark on the Wall” would help novelists in future realise “there is not one reflection [of self] but an almost infinite number...” (Woolf 1943: 39). I don’t claim or aim to be Woolf, but my mission here is the same: I

hope that I can help a few readers at least come to that conclusion. So that the answer to the question “Who am I?” becomes, in Kenneth Gergen’s terms, “a teeming world of provisional possibilities” (Gergen 2000: 139), and this pliability and multiplicity is freeing, a way not of escaping but of transcending both some of our genetic inheritance and circumstances of birth. We can all be, finally, Sartre’s grocer who dares to dream.

Or, as the protagonist Julia in my next project (another second person adult narrative, will put it:

I am all the things I’ve done and the ones I’m yet to think of.

I am memories and hopes and other people’s dreams.

I am who I want to be. And who they make me. And who you made me, too.

And for that I will be forever grateful.
(Nadin, 2021b)

ENDNOTES

[2] On this issue, I recommend Toby Litt’s blog for Writers Rebel How to Tell a Story to Save the World (Litt, 2021), which dismantles Joseph Campbell’s “Hero’s Journey” and the very notion of individual heroism itself as essential to “a good story”.

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Dr Joanna Nadin was recently appointed Senior Lecturer in Creative Writing at the University of Bristol. Prior to that she taught for many years on the MA in Writing for Young People at Bath Spa University, where she also gained her creative writing doctorate looking at mutable and multiple identity in adolescence and adolescent literature. A former broadcast journalist and Special Adviser to the Prime Minister, she is now the author of more than eighty novels for children, teenagers and adults, including the acclaimed *Worst Class in the World* series (Bloomsbury, 2020), and the Carnegie-nominated YA novels *Everything Hurts* (Atom, 2018, co-authored with Anthony McGowan) and *Joe All Alone* (Little, Brown, 2014), which is now a BAFTA-winning BBC drama.