

# Writing 9/11 for teenagers: *Sidekick* and the *Meg's diary* blog

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## Abstract

This article examines memories of 9/11 in two superficially very different texts marketed to adolescent readers: a blog post on author Meg Cabot's website, and a small episode in a novel, Adeline Radloff's *Sidekick*. Cabot recounts her own memories; the memories of Radloff's heroine, Katie, are entirely fictional. Cabot was in New York on the day, able to see the first tower burning from her flat window; Katie was in Cape Town, where her superhero boss's attempt to help the victims failed because of his inability to get to New York. Cabot is an adult recounting adult memories; Katie is seventeen in the novel, and was a child in 2001. In examining these two different representations of 9/11 – "real" and fictional, geographically near and geographically distant, adult and child/adolescent – the article explores issues of agency, power and hope, and suggests that there are significant similarities between the texts because there are significant similarities between their treatments of these issues. It concludes that power is central in both narratives; that both narratives portray knowledge of power as concomitant with reminders of powerlessness; and that geography profoundly affects questions of power and questions of character in both narratives.

On the face of it, the subject of this article is inane: memories of 9/11 in one episode in a young adult, or YA, novel, Adeline Radloff's *Sidekick*, and in one post, called "Ten years", in the *Meg's diary* blog of Meg Cabot, the writer of the *Princess diaries* series. The two texts would seem to have little in common beyond their focus on memories of 9/11, and their common audience: teenagers. They have significant structural differences: while the blog post can stand alone, the 9/11 narrative in *Sidekick* is one small part of the novel as

a whole. Cabot's blogged memories are selected and shaped into story, significance and signification, but there may nevertheless be differences in approach between the blog's representation of memories that are based on Cabot's perception of reality, and the novel's representation of the purely fictional – in fact the fantastic – memories of a fictional narrator-heroine. This heroine, seventeen-year-old Capetonian Katie Holmes, who looks back on events that she experienced as a young child, inevitably offers a different focalization to that

of Meg Cabot, adult narrator of her experiences as an adult New Yorker.

Why then have I juxtaposed these two texts? Because what emerges in an examination, rather than a categorization, of the texts is that they are less different than might be expected. Particularly, they turn out to be remarkably similar in their representation of power and its limits. Both portray responses to trauma – Katie’s muted and indirect, an overt fiction with a focus away from 9/11 itself, and Cabot’s piercing, immediate, palpable, and experienced as real – and both suggest that these responses are at once aggravated and palliated by circumstances relating to power.

Power is worth examining in texts written for teenagers. Roberta Seelinger Trites (2000:x) argues that patterns in adolescent literature have one thing in common:

They can all be linked to issues of power. Although the primary purpose of the adolescent novel may appear to be a depiction of growth, growth in this genre is inevitably represented as being linked to what the adolescent has learned about power.

Even more uncompromisingly, she says: “Everything in adolescent literature is designed to teach adolescents their place in the power structure” (2001). With regard to what that place is, she argues that the ideological message of the adolescent novel “[w]ith incredible consistency” is: “You shall know your power and that power shall set you free – that is, until you begin to abrogate institutional power or parental power or sexual power or the very power of death itself, in which case, the narrative will remind you of your powerlessness” (2001).

Stephen Thomson (2004) criticizes Trites for what he calls her assumption that “characters just are, evidently and without question, models for readers, and that reading works through the wholesale absorption, by readers, of these

models”. I would agree that what literature is “designed to teach”, as Trites (2001) puts it, does not necessarily reflect what is taken away from it. Karen Coats’s (2008:525) image of a child reader who is “an active constructor of texts rather than a passive consumer” calls this idea into question, as does what Peter Hunt (1991:142–143) calls the “literalist fallacy”, which, he says “rests on a faith in the power of the surface of the text and a belief in the similarity of children’s and adults’ perceptions which goes against basic common sense”. And John Stephens (1992:68) argues convincingly that readers are especially susceptible to “unarticulated or implicit ideologies”, which, I think, texts most frequently communicate independently of their authors’ designs.

If we look at the 9/11 episodes of both Cabot’s blog and Radloff’s novel with a focus on what they represent (both by design and incidentally to the intentions of their authors) rather than on what the reader may or may not learn from these representations (again, by design as well as incidentally), then it is noticeable in both texts that characters, or people functioning as characters, are taught their place in the power structure, exercising power, having their power limited, being reminded of their powerlessness. Power, with the messages about power that Trites associates with writing for young adults, is fundamental in both texts.

Another thing that is fundamental in both is geography. Not only is a strong sense of place embedded in both narratives, but the characters of both texts are simultaneously empowered and profoundly disempowered by, in Cabot’s account, their geographical proximity to what is now known as Ground Zero, and, in Radloff’s novel, their geographical distance from it. Tony Watkins’s discussion (1995:169) of the role in the cultural and ideological project of the British National Heritage of “a ‘National Geography’ that lies ‘hidden away’ just beyond the reaches of an industrialized Britain” (167) is suggestive. While Trites (2000:x)

identifies four poles that are central to adolescents' place in the power structure – institutions, authority figures, sex and death – it is, I think, significant that almost all of the primary texts she refers to in her book on power in YA fiction are US American, and all but four of the remainder are British. It may be because of these limitations in her source material that she fails to recognize what I think is another pole: I would argue that a comparison of power in Cabot's and Radloff's 9/11 narratives suggests that geography is a fifth pole that both attracts and repels power in teenagers' lives.

### **Writing power and powerlessness in New York**

Cabot's blog post (2011) begins with Cabot being woken by a phone call, having slept late. She comments that she knows "several people who are still alive today because they were late to work that morning, or stopped to get coffee". From the start, agency is negated: people at risk are alive not through their own agency, but by lucky chance. Also from the start, place is emphasized: because of the geographical position of their places of work, these people might have died.

Cabot expresses the significance of the fall of the towers themselves, as distinct from the loss of the people within them, in simultaneously geographical and emotional terms when she describes them as her "own personal compass point for the direction 'South'". The emphasis on place continues as, with her housekeeper, Luz, she watches developments from her window, from her roof, and on New York 1, a local TV channel. The emotional weight of what they see is increased by its personal significance and its geography: Cabot's husband works across the road from the towers, and Luz's son is at college next to them. Cabot writes: "We sat ... hugging each other, and crying as we watched what was happening on TV ... which was what was happening a few

dozen blocks from where we sat, where both the people we loved were".

Their fear and vulnerability are another result of their geography: cell phone servers "on top of the World Trade Centre" stop working, and cellular networks are overloaded by all the calls in their part of the city. Their inability to contact their loved ones is a motif that recurs throughout the day, along with those of not knowing what is happening, or what to do. Together, the cumulative repetition of these motifs creates a devastating mood of powerlessness.

But the most potent narrative reminder in Cabot's account of the powerlessness that Trites sees as inescapable in YA writing is death. Death permeates everything in the narrative: it is general and belongs to strangers, and it is also local and personal. In a shocking reminder of powerlessness following attempts to abrogate (as Trites puts it) the power of death, Cabot reports that so much blood was donated on the day of the attacks that much of it was later destroyed because of insufficient storage space, but that "there turned out to be no use for it anyway. There were few survivors." Shai, the three-year-old daughter of friends who flee the area of the Trade Centre to Cabot's apartment, says, "All the police are dead. I saw them going into the building that just fell down." Her certainty – and the feeling of powerlessness that this certainty imparts, regardless of its inaccuracy – derives from presence: when Cabot tells her that "[n]ot all the police are dead", she cries, "Yes, they ARE. I SAW THEM."

There is a fire station across the road from Cabot's home; every fireman at the station dies. People who live in Cabot's building die. Because they work in the World Trade Center, the wife of a former colleague and the husband of a friend of Cabot's die. Returning to his office under guard a few days later, Cabot's husband finds a body, which is taken down to

a makeshift morgue in the Brooks Brothers shop in the foyer of the building, “from which he [has] bought so many of his business shirts and ties”. As often in YA writing, and particularly in Meg Cabot’s writing, clothing is metaphorical: here it figures the invasion of death into the sphere of the everyday, the local, the personal.

The first sign of a turn appears when Luz notices that people are walking away from the Trade Center down Cabot’s street. Outside her window, Cabot says she sees “wall to wall people. They [have] taken over the street .... [S]houlder to shoulder, ten deep in the middle of the road, like a parade or a rally. There [are] tens of thousands of them.” There is new sense of resistance in “rally”, in the military and victorious connotations of “shoulder to shoulder”, “parade” and “taken over”, in the strength in numbers of “tens of thousands” and “ten deep”.

This turn, with its diction of resistance, signals the beginning of a series of small but symbolically significant reclamations of agency, all made possible by location in, or sufficient proximity to travel to, Manhattan. A manicure shop across the street from Cabot gives pedicure flip-flops to women walking barefoot because their work shoes have high heels. A deli at the end of the block gives water to the marchers. Cabot’s friend Jen arranges shelter for students who cannot get home from New York University, where she works. Shai’s family report that as they ran from the falling towers “shop owners tossed water on their backs ... to keep their clothes from catching on fire”. From 12 September, rival companies lend office space to Cabot’s husband’s business. Cabot suggests the effect of these small symbolic resistances when she describes the acrid smoke that fills the streets of Manhattan for the next week, and writes:

It wasn’t until workers from a barbecue restaurant drove all the way to Manhattan from Memphis,

and stationed their tanker-sized smokers right next to Ground Zero, and then started giving away free barbecue to all the rescue workers there for weeks on end, that the smell changed to something other than death.

Everyone loved those guys. It was just barbecue. But it wasn’t just barbecue. It was life.

Proximity to Ground Zero also facilitates more direct agency. Cabot says that Fred, a volunteer paramedic who works for her friend Jen, still, years later, seems “to feel guilty” because he survives while his unit is crushed – in fact, Cabot calls him “Fred” because he refuses to let her use his real name, possibly at least partly because of his guilt. However, during 9/11 Fred travels over two miles to get to the towers and help, saving the lives of a busload of college students and, coincidentally, of Luz’s son, when he drives them to safety just before the towers fall; he has to force Luz’s son, who is himself trying to get to the towers to help, onto the bus against his will.

Like Fred, and Luz’s son, the wife of Cabot’s friend Jack also actively advances into danger. She works in the Trade Center, reaches the ground safely, but goes back into the building to tell her IT department, backing up data, to come down. She dies, but she first explains to Jack over the phone, “It seemed like the right thing to do.”

Cabot’s response is, “Of course it did ... Jack would have done the same thing”. Of Fred and Luz’s son, she says that it is “the thing that makes [her] cry most of all”. What makes Jack’s wife’s risk-taking seem right? Why does a successful rescue make Cabot cry more than anything? Why does Fred feel guilty about the lives that are lost despite the lives that he saves? As death is the most potent reminder of powerlessness in Cabot’s narrative, so the voluntary risking of life to defy the power of death is its most potent reminder of hope, the saving of life its most potent reminder of agen-

cy and power. As Jack's wife's death makes concrete the powerlessness that follows her attempt to defy the power of death, so the rightness of her risk and sacrifice, as well as Fred's guilt and Cabot's tears, reflects the emotional weight and force of hope, agency and power in Cabot's narrative.

### Writing power and powerlessness in Cape Town

Katie's 9/11 narrative in Radloff's novel, by contrast, allows for no hope, no agency or power.

Katie's mother's employer, Finn O'Reilly, is able to stop time; Katie is the only person besides him who is able to remain awake when time is frozen, or in what they call "untime" (Radloff 2010:7 and throughout). On 11 September 2001, Finn, Katie, Katie's mother, and Finn and Katie's mentor, Simon, are watching events on TV. Finn wants to stop time and intervene, but Simon stops him; Katie says:

Simon was trying to calm Finn down. He was telling Finn that there was nothing he could do, that *it was all happening too far away*, that it was over and done with in any case. It was too late. He said that thing, you know, about changing the things we can, and *accepting the things we cannot* .... (76, emphasis added)

When the second airplane appears, however, Finn cannot accept the limits of his power, or the things he cannot change, and he does stop time. But it is impossible for airplanes to fly in untime, and it is dangerous for Finn to stop time for long enough to travel to New York by other means, because he grows younger (108) in untime. Furthermore, Finn is tied to Table Mountain, an important planetary energy centre. Katie explains:

... it keeps Finn sane, for some reason, and gives him a level of control over his power that he wouldn't have otherwise. (Apparently the man

got up to all kinds of crazy things before he came to live in Cape Town.) Fact is, Finn can't stay away from the mountain for too long or he goes dangerously nuts .... (77-78)

As a result, Katie says of Finn's hope of saving the people in the second tower: "It was a ridiculous, doomed idea from the start" (81).

It is because of geography that Finn's idea is ridiculous and doomed; it is because of geography that Katie can say that Finn's ability "isn't exactly a *real* superpower. It's a wicked enough trick, sure, but it's also kind of limiting" (74-75). Maria Nikolajeva (2002:272) makes the somewhat bold claim that "[s]etting as such cannot be considered part of characterization", although she says it can "enhance" it. I think this is difficult to support in the face of the emotional weight Cabot (2011) gives to her "own personal compass point for the direction 'South'"; I would argue that it is impossible in relation to Finn, whose efficacy, sanity, and even age are directly dependent on his geography. In *Sidekick*, the Cape Town setting is embedded in the foundations of character.

When Finn eventually admits defeat and starts time again, something within him, according to Katie, is "broken" (Radloff 2010:81). This is the point of Katie's account of 9/11, which she explicitly states she offers as an example of how Finn's "kind of superpower can break your heart" (75). It ends the 9/11 account on a note of absolute hopelessness.

Katie's powerlessness is not etched into the 9/11 narrative metaphorically, in the way Finn's is, but it is just as unequivocal as his; she is not forcibly reminded of her powerlessness, as he is, because her powerlessness is so manifest that she never attempts to defy it. At the time of the narrative, she is seventeen. She does not specify her age in 2001, but she says: "At that time Finn wouldn't let me get involved in any of his projects because I was still too young (and Mom would've had

a screaming heart attack)” (78). Repeated reminders of – and apologies because of – how young she was during 9/11 further emphasise the lack of agency that she associates here with being a child.

Being a child, for Katie, also precludes involvement in what she sees on television:

It was awful to watch, of course, but also kind of fascinating, like a movie. Remember I was still very young, and I didn't get the fact that those buildings were full of real live people. I was mostly just excited to see something so major happening in front of my eyes, and I kind of went, you know .... Cool. An explosion. Wow. (76)

The luxury of uninvolvement is not shared by Shai and her brother in Cabot's account. Klein, Devoe, Miranda-Julian and Linas (2009:3) draw attention to the difference between watching the attacks on television and in person in their study of child witnesses' responses to 9/11:

While most of the world witnessed the attacks on the World Trade Centre (WTC) on television, families in New York City watched it unfold in person. Children living near the WTC witnessed the disaster firsthand: from watching and hearing airplanes hit the towers to running for their lives amidst crowds of panicked people. Families were displaced from homes, schools, and communities for weeks or months.

Shai and her family are among those who run for their lives and are displaced for months, and the contrasting, and happily exclusionary, effect of Katie's geography is emphasized not only by the fact that she watches the attacks on TV, but also, and more strongly, by the fact that the station she watches is CNN (Radloff 2010:75), a foreign station that implies both distance and a lack of involvement compared with Cabot's window, her roof, New York 1.

Cabot's direct, personal involvement (2011) is repeatedly inscribed in the very clumsiness of

the epithets of geography and relationship that situate her narrative within a real-world network of human interrelationship: “our friends David and Susan” and “their daughter Shai”; “all the firemen from the station across from my apartment building”; “her husband, who worked at the Trade Center”; “my husband's sister-in-law”. By contrast, Katie's 9/11 is characterized by a mood of overwhelming loneliness and isolation, imaged when she walks on the beach during the inordinately long stretch of untime in which Finn abandons her when he tries to go to New York, and it makes her, she says, “sad, the way it always does, seeing the sea all still and unmoving like that” (Radloff 2010:79). She begins to feel she is “the last person on earth” (79), and eventually, poignantly, she rearranges the frozen bodies of Simon and her mother so that she can sit between them (80).

Without day and night, it is impossible for her to tell how long she has spent alone in untime, but it is long enough for Finn to have grown “very thin” (80). His return only increases the sense of loneliness, as Katie realizes that he has spent so much time away from the mountain that he has “forgotten all about” (81) her.

Katie's lack of human involvement is paralleled by her lack of focused or directed action. After Finn leaves, she says, “I ... waited. / And waited. / And waited” (79). She gets “really bored” (79) and “the hours [drag] by” (79). In two pages, she mentions four times that time passes (see 78–80), and she describes how she passes time by playing, “making jewellery, scrapbooking, decorating T-shirts” (79), walking and reading. Cabot's motif of not knowing what to do is echoed and compounded in Katie's passivity and her pointless pastimes, with their distinct negation of agency.

This negation works with the foregrounding of isolation and lack of involvement, and with the metaphor of Table Mountain, actively to disallow both power and hope in relation to

9/11. For either of these things, the narrative insists, Katie and Finn must look away from 9/11, away from New York; they must recognize their geographical limits. When Finn tries to ignore these limits, the narrative – true to the ideological message of YA literature as identified by Trites – reminds him of his powerlessness. However, in the context of the novel as a whole, when geographical limits are recognised, not only power, but “superpower” (74), is possible; Simon believes that Katie “will, in time, develop powers as strong [as] or even stronger than Finn’s” (189), and that these powers will be so strong because she has spent most of her life “so close to the mountain” (189).

Reynolds (2004:139) says that YA writing is usually assumed to have “central characters and readers [who] are critical of the world created by adults, and struggle to resist and change that world”, but she identifies a trend towards suppressing and contorting this characteristic through YA writing that represents or promotes an “apathetic, unengaged turning away from issues” (141), which encourages teenagers, among other things, “to retreat into privatized and narcissistic preoccupations” (141). Despite its insistence on the geographical limitation of power, *Sidekick* is emphatically not part of this trend; its narrative of powerlessness surrounding 9/11 must be read as part of the greater exploration of power in the novel as a whole.

In the novel, Katie criticizes Finn heavily for responding to the fact that his power is limited by turning apathetically away from problems in the world that he is empowered to solve, as well as for retreating into private, narcissistic hedonism. Then, when Katie is drugged and attacked by three schoolboys at a party, and Katie’s best friend, a girl Finn knows and likes, is kidnapped, the narrative forces him to acknowledge the fact that he cannot disengage from the world, and that he must exercise

the limited power that he has to effect change where he can.

Katie has acknowledged the importance of exercising the limited power she has to effect change where she can since she was twelve years old. Working with Finn in untimed time, she has been saving lives and averting disasters since that time, when she decided for herself that she “wanted to help” (Radloff 2010:107). The main plot of *Sidekick* celebrates her agency in her undertaking to find and save a group of missing children; she decides on her own initiative to make these children a project, she finds the first victim working entirely on her own, and it is she who saves all but one of the victims. Far from retreating into narcissism, Katie saves the children from a villainous symbol of narcissism: the “Perfect Life Spa” (171), a “one-stop vanity shop where you can get Botoxed, nipped, tucked, massaged, blow-dried, boot-camped, liposucked and life coached until every smidgen of originality has been bullied out of you” (36), and where the narcissistic pursuit of a perfect life includes a “domestic surgery” (178) service through which children “preventing their parents from having perfect lives” (178) are removed.

Simon’s vision of Katie’s future superpower implies that her present power is limited because she is a teenager. However, unlike Finn, she responds to her limitations not with a narcissistic obsession with and reaction to these limitations, but with a focus on the problems she sees in the world outside herself, and on how, working within her limitations, she can solve these problems. Her power and agency are limited by her age, but they are nonetheless remarkable.

### Reading what is written

I began this article by suggesting that there are significant similarities in the representations of power and its limits, despite superficial differences of category, between the 9/11 accounts

of Adeline Radloff's novel *Sidekick*, and Meg Cabot's blog. My reading of the two texts locates these similarities in the importance of power and of geography in both accounts, and in an ideological message, taken from Trites, about the concomitant knowledge of power and reminder of powerlessness.

Cabot's blog post begins with a series of staggering reminders of powerlessness, the most potent of which is death. The people in it then reassert themselves but, while hope, agency and power are given tremendous emotional force in the narrative, they are also limited, and frequently resist the power of death only symbolically. Radloff's 9/11 narrative limits power even more decidedly, but cannot be read independently of the novel of which it is only a small part, and within which its function is to remind of powerlessness while elsewhere the agency that is possible with even limited power is celebrated. In both texts, geography is directly and essentially related to both power and character.

Because of the difficulty of distinguishing what texts set out to teach and what readers – particularly child and adolescent readers – take away from them, I have specified a focus in this article on what is represented in Cabot's and Radloff's texts. When what is represented is integrally bound up with specific geographies, however, it is difficult to separate representation from perceived experiences of these geographies. It is difficult, also, to read two such disparate texts, which nevertheless represent complementary ideas about the same phenomenon, without wanting to measure those ideas against perceived experiences of that phenomenon – in this case, power.

If power is as central to YA writing, and if geography – as related to, but distinct from, geopolitics – is as pertinent for power and character as my readings of Cabot's blog and Radloff's novel suggest, then this is perhaps no bad thing. The implied readers of YA writ-

ing are developing social beings and developing minds. Teenagers are in the process of defining their roles as characters in the narratives by which people make sense of perceived experiences, and in the process of situating themselves within social hegemonies and formal power structures. We cannot assume that texts teach and readers learn what authors transparently intend. But, however it is "taught", what readers take away from texts is something we cannot ignore, particularly when the readers are young, and particularly when what is being taken away relates materially to issues of power and character.

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