

# Reading for Normal: Young People and YA Fiction in the Time of Covid-19

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Volume 13, Number 2, Fall 2022

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1100570ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1100570ar>

[See table of contents](#)

## Publisher(s)

Groupe de recherches et d'études sur le livre au Québec

## ISSN

1920-602X (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

## Cite this article

Waller, A. & Dashwood, R. J. (2022). Reading for Normal: Young People and YA Fiction in the Time of Covid-19. *Mémoires du livre / Studies in Book Culture*, 13(2), 1–36. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1100570ar>

## Article abstract

The Reading for Normal project discussed in this article sought to interrogate some of the assumptions about “normality” that underpin everyday life, and to understand how reading fictional representations of ordinary life might help young readers better manage periods of uncertainty and instability. Using data from a small-scale UK-based reading group project that ran from December 2020 to May 2021, we explore the affordances of authenticity, belonging, and connection that emerged when teens were offered opportunities for a “common dwelling in fictional ordinariness with a generational cohort”. We consider the ways in which reading and talking about young adult (YA) fiction helps teenage readers address questions about the changing world around them.





## READING FOR NORMAL: Young People and YA Fiction in the Time of Covid-19

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### ABSTRACT

The Reading for Normal project discussed in this article sought to interrogate some of the assumptions about “normality” that underpin everyday life, and to understand how reading fictional representations of ordinary life might help young readers better manage periods of uncertainty and instability. Using data from a small-scale UK-based reading group project that ran from December 2020 to May 2021, we explore the affordances of authenticity, belonging, and connection that emerged when teens were offered opportunities for a “common dwelling in fictional ordinariness with a generational cohort”. We consider the ways in which reading and talking about young adult (YA) fiction helps teenage readers address questions about the changing world around them.

### RÉSUMÉ

Le projet « Reading for Normal » s’intéresse aux conceptions de la « normalité » qui sous-tendent la vie quotidienne, ainsi qu’à la manière dont des représentations fictives de cette banalité sont susceptibles d’aider les jeunes lectrices et lecteurs à mieux composer avec des périodes d’incertitude et d’instabilité. Les données, recueillies de décembre 2020 à mai 2021 auprès d’un club de lecture actif au Royaume-Uni, nous permettent de constater que, lorsque des adolescentes et des adolescents se voient offrir la possibilité de « fréquenter », avec d’autres jeunes de leur âge, des œuvres de fiction mettant en scène le quotidien dans ce qu’il a de plus banal, il émerge une impression d’authenticité, et un sentiment d’appartenance et d’être en relation avec les autres. Nous nous intéressons aux manières dont le fait de lire de la littérature pour adolescents, et d’en discuter, permet aux jeunes lectrices et lecteurs d’interroger le monde en mutation dans lequel elles et ils vivent.

## Keywords

Young adult fiction, reading groups, social norms, ordinariness, Britishness

## Mots-clés

Littérature pour adolescents, clubs de lecture, normes sociales, banalité, britannicité

I thought the way that they were so normal—I know this sounds really weird, but they so fit our everyday lives that it was shocking because the other young adult books that I’ve read have not necessarily been like that.

—Nabeela (Year 12, Gloucestershire)

National and regional periods of lockdown during the Covid-19 pandemic brought many challenges to young people, including disruptions to “normal life” and threats to mental health and wellbeing. The Reading for Normal project discussed in this article sought to interrogate some of the assumptions about “normality” that underpin everyday life, and to understand how reading fictional representations of ordinariness might help teenage readers manage periods of uncertainty and instability.<sup>1</sup> It aimed to help its participants develop critical awareness of the social norms that surround and shape them, while also providing ways of navigating these norms through a greater understanding of shared lived experiences. Our starting point in designing the project was the view that books aimed specifically at adolescents are meaningful because their contents can offer useful insights into common, everyday experience. Other scholars have previously outlined the benefits that fiction can offer for improving self-awareness, wellbeing, mental health, and a sense of community,<sup>2</sup> and have noted that reading has provided “refuge” for many young people during the pandemic;<sup>3</sup> but we offer a new approach in considering how reading and talking about young adult (YA) fiction helps teenage readers address questions about the changing world around them.

Reading researchers have begun to explore the new relationships that individuals and communities developed with books and reading throughout the Covid-19 crisis.<sup>4</sup> Initial reports focused mainly on young children, and suggested that on the whole reading improved their mental health during this period<sup>5</sup>—although the findings of one Ireland-Scotland study indicate

that the pandemic has had a damaging effect on “access to books and book culture ...especially ...for children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds.”<sup>6</sup> Polly Waite and her colleagues discovered that UK adolescents were generally successful in adapting to new ways of being in the world, noting that they were able to “maintain peer relationships through, for example, online chats, messaging and gaming.”<sup>7</sup> We found that teenagers could profit from reading as much as from engaging with social media and games during the pandemic, and that there was a good deal to be gained from adolescent readers reading contemporary, realist YA fiction and discussing it with peers from different backgrounds. Encountering fiction that reflected something of their own pre-Covid lives back to them was of value to young adult readers when everything else was disrupted. Paying close attention to aspects of ordinariness represented within these books in relation to their own everyday experiences offered them the chance to question what “normal” really means and to resist regulatory forces of normalization, especially when they could discuss their responses with other readers who had read the same texts. In this article we describe the matrix of affordances stemming from what we call “a common dwelling in fictional ordinariness with a generational cohort.”<sup>8</sup> Through the Reading for Normal project, we showed that a certain kind of reading helps adolescents develop a broader understanding of “normality,” one that emerges from authenticity and that encompasses a generous sense of belonging, and a sense of connection beyond usual peer groups.

Data is drawn from a small-scale reading group project that ran from December 2020 to May 2021, involving pupils between the ages of 13 and 17 from different parts of England. Groups of participants met online to discuss YA novels set in contemporary, pre-pandemic Britain. The aim of the project was to hear from young people as individuals and as a cohort of readers about how they understood their lived experiences before, during, and beyond Covid-19, particularly in relation to fictional characters and worlds. Throughout, the concept of normality was up for discussion, and our objective was to encourage readers to explore how fiction could help them interrogate their everyday lives, no matter how much their daily routines had changed due to lockdowns and other national and local restrictions.

## Context

In conceiving of and designing Reading for Normal we drew on reading studies and reading group research, particularly work that focuses on reading for pleasure as a way of making meaning or developing community<sup>9</sup> rather than for improving literacy.<sup>10</sup> We recognize that reading and discussing books has broad social and personal value when it allows readers to inhabit “a common domain afforded by literature.”<sup>11</sup> For teens, this dwelling in books has been explicitly linked to developmental stages and processes that help shape identity, such as “finding oneself in literature” and “venturing beyond the self”;<sup>12</sup> in other contexts, inhabiting a common literary domain can provide safe or stimulating ground for exploring shared experiences as wide-ranging as being a woman or an older person, living with a neurological condition, or being a prisoner.<sup>13</sup>

Our project investigated the ways in which young adults might inhabit the common domain of a literature aimed specifically at them (British YA), and we explored how they might recognize and profit from sharing that space together. We perceived the participants in Reading for Normal as forming a generational cohort connected by age and nationality,<sup>14</sup> as well as by the recent experience of living through the Covid pandemic. The organizing principle of “generation” is best described by Simon Biggs and Ariela Lowenstein:

Individuals may begin to realize that as they are striving to define themselves and their place in society, they are part of a stream of others who, having been born at the same time, in the same historical, cultural or social circumstances, are travelling the same paths.<sup>15</sup>

Reading for Normal is thus a study of readers whose common domain is YA fiction and who have travelled a shared path by living through Covid lockdowns during a period of secondary education in England.

Our project examined how young people understand the concepts of “normal” and “ordinary” in their own lives, particularly through the Covid-19 pandemic period and in relation to key transitional points in their personal and educational contexts. It built on findings from University College London’s “Adolescent Identities” project, another reading group

study, which questioned the perpetuation of cultural “norms” in mainstream YA literature.<sup>16</sup> As its name suggests, *Adolescent Identities* focused on the portrayal of identity in YA, explicitly seeking to expose the continuing predominance of “White, nondisabled, cisgender, and heterosexual main characters” in contemporary texts published for a young audience,<sup>17</sup> and to challenge this situation by introducing its reading participants to a more “inclusive, representational, and ‘diverse’ YA”.<sup>18</sup> *Reading for Normal* similarly worked with YA fiction that reflected “the plurality of contemporary Britain”<sup>19</sup> in this way, but moved beyond issues of identity to explore other aspects of the everyday represented in these novels in order to help young readers think about the routines and shapes of their own lives.

Melanie Ramdarshan Bold and Leah Philips outline the regulatory nature of cultural “norms” in literature for young people, arguing that race, gender, sexuality, ability, and other forms of homogeneity in YA fiction obstruct reading for pleasure and exclude many readers by stereotyping or ignoring their particular identities and lived experiences: “a power imbalance occurs that contributes to and reflects the marginalization of identities and selves not aligning with the ‘norm’”.<sup>20</sup> *Reading for Normal* was interested in probing such lived experience through a critical examination of other, broader, aspects of “normality,” not just those related to identity. In other words, its focus was on “ordinariness”: that is, the “ordinary actions or behaviours” and the “shared worlds of routine and sometimes boring lives.”<sup>21</sup> The project guided readers to analyze textual representations of objects, routines, ways of being, and common practices, and to compare these with their own real lives before and during lockdown. Cultural critic Joe Moran has called for a “necessary concreteness” in methods for examining the everyday.<sup>22</sup> Readers in the project were therefore given some direction in identifying and reflecting on things that seemed “normal or ordinary” to them. In many respects, however, they were likely to be adept at this practice already, as a form of what Yasmin Ibrahim calls “banal imaging”: “the human need to immortalize our presence in this world and convert everyday images into commodities,”<sup>23</sup> which is most frequently practiced by young adults through the use of mobile digital technologies. Although we understood the “Normal” of the project’s title as referring to the ordinary, the everyday, or the banal, we did not ignore the importance of engaging critically with entrenched cultural norms and normalized identity politics. Our discussion of the reading groups, below, shows that the idea of

the “normal” could be critiqued even as readers found ways of dwelling in fictional ordinariness together through its affordance of authenticity, belonging, and connection.

## Methodology

We recognize that individuals understand the world around them through their subjective experiences, and that aspects of everyday life that might be taken for granted can be brought to the surface by paying close attention to the rich reflections, patterns, and meanings in personal accounts. We also understand that group discussion can help expose new “cultural and narrative themes.”<sup>24</sup> Reading for Normal therefore took a qualitative case-study approach to its enquiry, informed by previous research that has used fiction as a stimulus for interrogating personal experience of everyday life.<sup>25</sup> We employed aspects of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), which collects data from individuals who share an experience of a particular phenomenon, with the aim of coming to an understanding of the “essence” of that experience.<sup>26</sup>

The case study involved 15 pupils: four from Year 9 (13–14 years old); six from Year 10 (14–15); and four from Year 12 (16–17). These participants were recruited with help from our “schools liaisons”<sup>27</sup> from three locations across England (London, Gloucestershire in the South West, and Northumberland in the North East),<sup>28</sup> and we attempted to select a cohort who reflected some diversity in terms of gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. However, the primary selection criterion was an enthusiasm for reading, a characteristic about which the schools liaisons could make a good judgment. All participants were first asked to create a Reflective Journal, describing their own lives before, during, and after the various periods of lockdown between March 2020 and December 2020. They were also involved in voting for three recent realist British YA novels, from a list provided by the researchers,<sup>29</sup> to read and discuss during the rest of the project. They selected Alice Oseman’s *I Was Born for This* (HarperCollins 2018) as the first text for exploration, Danielle Jawando’s *And the Stars were Burning Brightly* (Simon and Schuster 2020) as the second, and Non Pratt’s *Every Little Piece of my Heart* (Walker Books 2020) as the final text. (Pratt’s novel generated less discussion than the others, and is therefore not considered in detail in this article.) Participants were sent print copies of

the books over a period of four months. They were required to read each book privately and annotate or make notes about scenes of “ordinary life” featured, using guidance provided, before taking part in a group session focused on that text. The groups for the first two sessions exploring *I Was Born for This* and *And the Stars Were Burning Brightly* were made up of readers of a similar age<sup>30</sup> who met online via Zoom for discussion facilitated by the researchers. For *Every Little Piece of my Heart*, the full cohort was invited to a Zoom discussion and asked to bring specific questions to ask each other about the text and their experience of the project as a whole.

We thus gathered and analyzed both individual responses to the books and material from the Reflective Journals and any notes submitted on the novels, as well as group responses generated by participants in discussion together. The online discussions worked as a form of focus group, the aim of which is to provide “a comfortable, permissive environment” so that individuals who have something in common can say what they “really think and feel” about that common interest.<sup>31</sup> Focus group research is a popular method for understanding reading as a cultural activity that provides researchers with insights into how “ordinary” (as opposed to academic) readers interpret and evaluate literary texts, and how they participate in shared reading activities and events.<sup>32</sup> It allowed us to listen in on relatively naturalistic conversations between our young readers, although we also guided their discussions to some extent.

With the aim of encouraging rich and open reflection on both the YA novels and ideas about participants’ lives that were sparked from reading them, we used Aidan Chambers’s “Tell Me” framework for talking about books to shape the discussion meetings. This framework focuses on “conversational dialogue rather than interrogation”<sup>33</sup> and was useful in positioning Reading for Normal as an extra-curricular research project in which participants could feel free to say anything they wanted without fear of being corrected or judged.<sup>34</sup> Of particular use was Chambers’s category of “sharing connections.” This practice involves “comparing the events or characters or language of a story with events or people or language known personally to the reader.”<sup>35</sup> Our semi-structured group sessions therefore used a series of standard questions as prompts to help participants use the YA novels to make sense of themselves and their lives.<sup>36</sup> The result of this open structure was a dataset of recordings that reveal thoughtful and



meaningful responses to the texts and intimate reflections on everyday life before, during, and beyond the Covid-19 pandemic.

By bringing together reading journals, personal reflections, and group discussions, we adopted methods appropriate to the complexity of the transactions to be found between young people and the fictions they encounter.<sup>37</sup> Our analysis of the data that we collected highlighted significant statements, clusters of meaning, and themes.<sup>38</sup> In particular, we were alert to how elements of the ordinary generated reading reactions amongst participants, and how participants subsequently shared these reactions within their groups and across the cohort.

Throughout our data-gathering process, we recognized the particular challenges of working with young people in an online forum. We were very careful with our ethical and practical procedures, giving participants detailed guidelines about their safety and expectations for good behaviour, and offering them the choice of using their own name or a pseudonym and having their camera off or on during online meetings. We found that the young participants were already well versed in navigating our online methods. As members of Generation Z, this cohort are digital natives,<sup>39</sup> and since the first two discussion groups took place during the third period of national lockdown and home schooling, they had been widely exposed to web conferencing tools such as Zoom, and understood how to mute themselves and take turns speaking. In most cases participants chose to keep their cameras off. While we initially regretted that this trend shut down opportunities for visual cues, we soon realized that it allowed participants to feel secure in situations where they were meeting peers from different schools for the first time. In fact, by the end of the project, we considered the lack of video a benefit, as it reduced the potential for implicit bias and also ensured that participants were not worrying about their own appearance being beamed back at them: the focus of these meetings was very much on discussion.

The following section explores the ways in which lockdown regimes shaped the project and our participants' living conditions and states of mind as they began reading and talking together. It sets up the baseline expectations that informed our findings from the project. All names have been changed in the discussion below (some to pseudonyms chosen by participants themselves),

and an indication is given of each participant's year group (Y9, Y10, Y12) and region (London = L, Northumberland = N, and Gloucestershire = G). Most of the subsequent quotations come from discussion group transcriptions, but some are taken from the written Reflective Journals (marked as RF in brackets where this is the case).

## **Starting Points: Life During Lockdown**

The Reflective Journals that participants submitted in January 2021 gave us an initial understanding of their everyday lives and a baseline for what seemed important to them about the experience of lockdown. The guidelines that we provided asked them to explore and comment on any of the following topics: school; routines; friends and hobbies (including reading); technology; travel and holidays; music/tv/games; spaces in the home; shopping; food; and family.

Participants approached the task in a variety of ways, but there were some common themes. Many mentioned the strangeness of the year they had just lived through and the suddenness of change, some rather dramatically: Iris (Y9N RF) pithily writes that “[o]n the 16<sup>th</sup> March 2020 everything changed” while Mia (Y10N RF) asks a profound question: “Life. What even is it at the minute?” The Year 12 participants (now in their final years of education) reflected on the abrupt way that their time at school had come to an end, with none of the long-expected exams, proms, or leavers’ events, and not even any personal goodbyes allowed to take place. There was no consensus on whether the break from educational routines and established friendship groups was mostly positive or mostly negative for these young people. Some missed school, stressing its value in providing structure and meaning—it was Mia’s (Y10N RF) “stronghold,” for example—but others enjoyed home schooling for the opportunity to focus on the subjects and styles of learning that suited them. Several participants “broke up” with friends during lockdown (Amy Y12N RF), or found returning to school difficult because they had “lost all common interests with [their] friends” (Billie Y9N RF) or had discovered that “people are still immature and [they] can’t avoid them” (Thorns Y10N RF); but others were able to maintain existing friendships relatively easily using social media and video-calling tools. These mixed responses reflect Waite et al.’s argument that while the pandemic brought a number of challenges, “it is possible that aspects of lockdown brought some

benefits to ... adolescents, particularly due to a reduction in academic or social pressures.”<sup>40</sup>

Participants’ reflections converged more consistently on the general topic of mental health, which came up in different contexts even though we had not included it as a prompt for the journals. Participants wrote about the anxiety they felt about being away from school, or around going back; about improvements or declines in mental wellbeing; and about managing stress and pressure. The inventive and passionate language our participants used in the Reflective Journals to describe their feelings during the pandemic suggests a deep-seated personal concern with these topics: for Rose (Y12L), “[i]t all became very overwhelming”; for Iris (Y9N RF), “[a]nxiety [was] still clawing away at [her] head”; and for Otis (Y10G RF), the only way to describe his state of mind was to refer to the popular meme, “My Brain Has Too Many Tabs Open.” In the book group discussions (especially the first two sessions) the students spoke about how they appreciated the honest depictions of mental health struggles in the YA novels: those who had experienced similar conditions felt represented, while others found they developed empathy with the characters portrayed.

Other reading group studies have found that young adult readers appreciate “the frank explorations of mental health issues” in some YA fiction.<sup>41</sup> However, it is important to note that reading itself is not necessarily a panacea for mental illness. Billie’s (Y9N RF) comments provide a very useful counterpoint to a general notion of “bibliotherapy”:

I really got into reading for a while [during lockdown] and then I didn’t go so well with mental health and it kind of just spiralled, and people kept buying me books, and the book pile just went up, and I couldn’t really read because I just couldn’t concentrate.

In our conclusion, we explain how reading fiction that reflects one’s own life and discussing it with peers can bring benefits, but should not be considered a form of clinical therapy. Rather, the processes involved in Reading for Normal brought about certain affordances that allowed for meaningful personal engagement with ideas of what “normal” means. In the three sections that follow, we explore these affordances in detail: Authenticity; Belonging; and Connection.

## Authenticity

Our first focus text, Alice Oseman's *I Was Born for This*, was the favourite book amongst participants. It also raised rich topics for discussion in our first set of reading groups, notably mental health (especially anxiety), friendship, and life online, as well as regulatory notions of normality. The novel follows the interlinked stories of Angel, a young Muslim girl and superfan of the boyband The Ark, and Jimmy, one of the members of the band. The novel's main theme is friendship, whether it is forged through online fandom or in the pressured world of celebrity. Most of the action is set in London, as Angel travels to meet fellow fan Julie for the first time in real life ("IRL") and they prepare to attend an Ark concert. We also follow Jimmy through The Ark's city apartment, tour vehicles, and other claustrophobic settings as he becomes increasingly anxious about the repercussions of his fame, his identity as a young trans, gay man, and the vulnerability of his relationship with the other band members. In a central scene set at a fan "meet and greet," Jimmy is swarmed by the crowd and responds violently: "I try not to make any sound but I can't breathe and I'm scared. I'm going to die .... I can't stop the tears emerging from my eyes, I can't make my heart stop pounding, I can't do anything, I can't do anything—."42

The students' initial responses to *I Was Born for This* stressed the novel's "relatability," especially with respect to its treatment of mental health issues and identity. Iris (Y9N) suggested that the way the book "talked about mental health and ... anxiety" is "quite good for today's age," and Mia (Y10N) added that "many teenagers have anxiety and they don't get better. And now obviously it's going to be worse because they can't do things that used to make them feel better and happy." Iris and Mia, like other participants, made clear connections between these themes and their own lived realities. In Group A, both Iris (Y9N) and Billie (Y9N) found the portrayal of Jimmy's panic attacks interesting because they had experienced similar events themselves; notably, although these readers attend the same school, this is not a topic that had come up between them before, and Iris reflected that "it has really helped knowing I'm not the only one." Similarly, Antonia (Y10L) and Otis (Y10G) related to the ethnic and gender differences represented in Oseman's diverse cast of characters, while Billie

(Y9N) explained that the depiction of Angel and Juliet's obsessive fandom felt familiar because "it was basically me with some of my friends."

The second focus text was Danielle Jawando's *And the Stars Were Burning Brightly*, a thought-provoking novel that deals sensitively but brutally with the issue of teenage suicide. It is another dual narrative, following Nathan in his quest to understand the suicide of his older brother, Al, and Megan, a friend of Al's, who connects with Nathan over their shared interest in Al's artistic brilliance and who learns to acknowledge her own creative abilities in the process. The story features a number of Al's inspirational musings and describes his drawings, which provide clues about the bullying and catfishing<sup>43</sup> he was subject to at school. Eventually, Nathan and Megan recognize the racial abuse and sexual coercion that is rife amongst their peers and on social media, and they stage an exhibition of Al's artwork and an online campaign for hope.

As with *I Was Born for This*, many of our participants appreciated Jawando's skilful characterization, her depiction of young people with flaws and weaknesses who are nonetheless appealing to readers. Mercury (Y10G) explained:

Okay, I liked how it showed especially Nathan as a real person. Most people make their main characters out to be perfect but they didn't make Nathan like that. ... It showed that not everyone is innocent or this perfect person. It portrayed a lot of people realistically and I liked that.

Perhaps because the themes of Jawando's novel were more harrowing and extreme than Oseman's, the groups spoke about recognizing, understanding, and empathizing with characters, rather than about relating directly to them. For example, although participants were familiar with bullying and grieving, they had not necessarily experienced them personally, and so often discussed them in terms of risk and possibility. Reflecting on the disturbing scenes of victimization, Mia noted that "it could be your own family in that situation," and Otis pointed out that "this is in the world, this is happening, it could be happening to someone you know." Ella (Y9G) explained that she had not personally lost anyone close to her, but that

reading about Nathan’s bereavement “opened [her] eyes to see how other people feel when they are going through a different situation.”

Key to these discussions was the participants’ recognition of the profound authenticity of the stories being told. Even if they had not experienced all of the issues themselves, participants recognized that anxiety and depression, bullying, suicide, and grief are all part of the reality they live in. For some participants, this fictional authenticity resulted in a feeling of not being alone; for others, it meant developing empathy for people different from themselves. Most importantly, the groups were comfortable talking about the ways in which the novels portrayed these difficult topics, even if they would not usually chat about them with friends, parents, or teachers. As Antonia (Y10L) commented when reflecting on the content of *And the Stars Were Burning Brightly*, “it’s something that no one will sit down with us and talk about.”

These responses to *I Was Born for This* and *And the Stars Were Burning Brightly* also highlight the ways in which reading contemporary YA fiction and discussing it with a peer cohort can validate young people’s own feelings and experiences. The novels discussed here present precisely the kind of inclusive narratives that reflect the “plurality of contemporary Britain” called for by Ramdarshan Bold and Philips, and that offer windows, mirrors, and doors to young British readers, as Rudine Sims Bishop would describe it<sup>44</sup>—an idea we will return to in later sections. And sharing responses in safe discussion groups provides further validation, as participants recognized that other readers in their generational cohort—readers like them—also see their identities and experiences reflected back through fiction. The common domain created by realist texts and open talk in this project created space for readers to explore what might be considered “normal” and what felt “authentic” and “valid” and to help them understand their own circumstances and experiences. In the next section we tease out further implications of encountering realistic portrayals of everyday life in the selected YA novels; in particular, we are interested in the ways in which cultural and national identities are framed through the recognition of familiar places or objects to create a sense of belonging—a feeling that is particularly crucial during times of crisis.

## Belonging

Reading for Normal also highlighted the importance of place in feeling normal. Along with the importance of realistic characterization and the validation of difficult feelings and experiences, discussion of *And the Stars were Burning Brightly* revealed readers' interest in reading about settings they recognized. Partly guided by the project's concerns with ordinary spaces and routines, readers drew attention to the familiarity of Nathan and Megan's school, which provides a backdrop to much of the novel's action. As Evie (Y12G) put it, "It felt really authentic, the way they spoke, spoke to teachers, and things like that." Ramdarshan Bold and Philips found that "seeing recognisable characters and places in the books they consume can help readers feel more engaged" (5). Thus, Gabe (Y9G) explained, "I think the settings, the school—because it's such a normal thing for young adults, we've all experienced it, we all know what it's like, and it's a good setting for a book to be written in." Groups A and C explored this aspect of their shared reading experience and generally agreed that encountering scenes set in classrooms, art rooms, corridors and common rooms was valuable, not just because it offered an authentic representation of their regular lives, but because it reminded them of what they were missing during periods of lockdown and home schooling. Mandy (Y10L) listed the parts of school life she remembers: "[j]ust going away to a quiet spot in the school, just hanging out with a friend." She pointed to a passage in Jawando's novel that describes "all the kids standing outside, trying to put off going inside," and noted that "it's just what we do every day at school." Set against the dramatic plot points and themes of suicide and bullying, these images of everyday life stand out. In literary terms, these are examples of the "reality effects" that Roland Barthes identifies as giving the illusion of concrete reality in the fictional world created by a text;<sup>45</sup> in cultural terms, such descriptions illustrate the "connective tissue against which we see concrete experience."<sup>46</sup> For readers who form part of a generational cohort that has had to forego these mundane experiences, such descriptions act as more than just markers of ordinariness, however: they are reminders that familiar spaces and practices still exist out in the world, even if they are only accessible for the time being in terms of memory or in anticipation of the future.

These reminders seem to have been mostly pleasing for readers in the project. Billie (Y9N) admitted that reading some of the descriptions of everyday settings in *And the Stars Were Burning Brightly* made her miss “the whole fact that you could go to school like things used to be”; she remarked that it seemed “weird” to read about them—but that she liked it. Daisy (Y12N) went further, suggesting that the familiarity had a beneficial effect because it helped her place herself inside the storyline: “Because of the similarities between any British school, you can kind of imagine that happening as the storyline unfolded .... [T]he layout makes sense.” Similarly, Evie (Y12G) explained that “[w]henver they described the school [she] just instinctively thought of [her] own school.” Jawando is certainly skilled at capturing the atmosphere of a British secondary comprehensive: the functional building with a few bricks “painted green, or yellow, or red, to make it look better” (103); noisy corridors full of pupils “[s]crolling through their phones, taking selfies, watching videos, shoving into each other”; desks that emit a “chemical smell of bleach or polish”; art rooms featuring a “thin piece of wire running across the wall at the top, with paintings pegged to it, waiting to dry.”<sup>47</sup> These are ordinary but evocative details that can “[bind] individuals and communities to the world in which they live”<sup>48</sup>— or in the case of this cohort, to the world in which they used to live, and which used to be “normal.”

Familiarity as a catalyst for belonging also emerged in other ways during our discussions of the YA novels, ways that spoke to the lived experiences of readers who reside in different parts of the country or who come from different parts of the world. The shared experience of lockdown adds an extra dimension to these connections. For instance, Rose (Y10L) was one of only three participants based in London, and she reflected on portrayals of city life in *I Was Born for This* in much the same way that Daisy, Evie, and others responded to depictions of the school setting in *And the Stars Were Burning Brightly*: the city emerged as a familiar space that allowed her to insert herself into the story. She explained, “there were places in London mentioned that I go quite a lot ... and I could almost relate to [the characters] because they were doing things that I had done and going to places that I had been to.” Mandy (Y10L) agreed that the characters’ experiences of being in crowded spaces felt authentic: “I get that, because it’s happening all the time.” But it is crucial to note that the familiarity of the urban space was intimately tied to a particular time and context, and it was



completely transformed during the pandemic. For instance, Mandy also pointed out that while it was authentic for Oseman's characters to travel around the city on the train "because it's an important part of living in London," it puts her own lived experience into sharp contrast, since lockdown had "completely changed the way that anyone in London does anything." For the London readers, references to "the departure board, ...the crowds of travellers swarming around ..., walking from cafes to escalators to platforms"<sup>49</sup> were a "reminder of what everything used to be like" (Rose (Y10L)).

Although the novel does deal with the extraordinary exploits of Jimmy and his ultra-privileged boyband, it mainly follows a "ordinary" teenage girl, Angel, as she navigates London for the first time. Oseman portrays the city from Angel's point of view as both thrilling and mundane: her first impression stepping off the train is that "[i]t's pouring with rain. Tons of people ... There are people smoking outside the station and I breathe it in. I love the smell of cigarette smoke."<sup>50</sup> Billie (Y9N) identified with the kinds of feelings that Angel has about encountering a strange space:

It all kind of seemed really different to me because there's one big city where I live and I don't really go into it so much, so it was really, really different to me, how people go on the train all the time and I normally just walk or go by car, so it was kind of different to me.

These impressions are complemented by Jimmy's perspective, which is shaded by anxiety and agoraphobia: he would rather live in a remote part of the Lake District than in busy London. His panic attack takes place at the iconic O2 Arena in Greenwich, where The Ark put on a "meet and greet." The majority of readers from semi-rural Gloucestershire and Northumberland viewed the fictional version of London as Jimmy does, however, either due to a shared appreciation of the symptoms of anxiety, or through the lens of lockdown. Iris (Y9N) said that like Jimmy she gets "really overwhelmed when there's loads of people," and she did not really see "how people can live in the city all day with all that noise and bustle." Ella (Y9G) used the novel to reflect on different real-world conditions, considering how the pandemic may have brought different challenges to those living in the country and those in cities:

I feel like at the moment if you did live in a city you'd feel very much like Jimmy because, obviously, there are a lot more people in the city and where I live it's quiet countryside, and it's really easy to go out for a walk without seeing anybody, and in the city it's difficult.

Gabe (Y9G) went further, offering an empathetic response to Jimmy's panic attacks in a manner that collapsed the fictional (pre-Covid) world and current aspects of ordinary real life during the Covid pandemic:

I feel for Jimmy in a way because, especially at the minute, with this lot of Covid virus going around and things like that, people's anxieties are a lot higher, so living in a city at the moment—because I live in quite a rural place—living in a city at the moment I think would be quite overwhelming.

These moments of empathy, borne of insights into other types of lived experience (particularly in terms of an urban/rural divide) that originate from engagement with the text and from discussion with peers in other parts of the country, have a peculiar resonance in the context of lockdown and in relation to the focus on mental health that most of our participants highlighted in their Reflective Journals. The shared experience of feeling anxiety in busy spaces, brought to the fore by this generational cohort's pandemic experience, cut across some of the disparities in their situations and everyday lives in ways that we see as providing a particular affordance of belonging together.<sup>51</sup>

Additional insights about the ways in which depictions of familiar places created a sense of belonging emerged during our group discussions. For example, in a discussion about *I Was Born for This*, numerous members of Group B remarked on the 'Britishness' of the fictional landscape. Prompted to explore the world-building in this novel, Thorns (Y10N) pulled out the detailed notes she had made while reading Oseman's novel and drew our attention to a scene in which Angel and Juliet go to a Wetherspoons pub<sup>52</sup>: "Like, the word pub, because it's a very British word, in my opinion, it just feels like ...you have a pub nearby ...it just feels familiar." Otis (Y10G) and Mia (Y10N) joined in enthusiastically to affirm Thorns's observations, demonstrating their engagement with this aspect of the novel:

Otis: I agree. I feel like if you weren't British you would find it very difficult to—not necessarily understand—but definitely know what's going on. They don't know what a Wetherspoons is, that could be for them.

Mia: Yeah, because it says "Spoons." To us, we don't say Wetherspoons, we just say "Do you want to go to Spoons?" If you were in a different country you would be like "What is that?"

Otis: Yeah, are they going to go to an item of cutlery?

Ramdarshan Bold and Philips argue that when British readers encounter novels with British settings written by American authors, they sometimes feel a dissonance and do not feel properly addressed in authentic ways. Otis's and Mia's references to "them" and "us" and the comic possibilities for misunderstanding the vernacular use of "Spoons" for a Wetherspoons pub allowed the readers in this group to reflect on what they shared with young people from other regions of the country, in contrast to the different responses to scenes of urban bustle that had emerged based on whether participants live in the city or the countryside. Thorns (Y10N) noted it is like they have "a special connection with these things that nobody else has, which is pretty cool." This sense of belonging to a group of people with cultural knowledge and capital stems from the practice of reading attentively, recognizing descriptions of ordinariness in the text, and realizing that these shared reference points bind readers from across the country into a kind of privileged "club."

There are, of course, questions to be raised about the common domain of the pub and drinking in youth culture, and the potential for xenophobic attitudes to form when acknowledging the existence of insiders and outsiders. Antonia (Y10L), the only Londoner in Group B, had a slightly different perspective. Part of an immigrant family from Eastern Europe, she wrote in her Reflective Journal about the difficulties she faced "fitting into a foreign society," particularly during periods of lockdown, which had made it harder to improve her English through social interactions and made her feel like she was "still a stranger" even after two years of living in the UK. During Group B's discussion about British culture in *I Was Born for This*, she admitted that she had to Google the O2 Arena to find out what it was and although she was familiar with the idea of pubs, she did not frequent them

(like Angel, she does not drink alcohol). Nevertheless, Antonia stated that she “felt British” while reading the novel, encountering markers of ordinariness like the ones Thorns has listed. Later she expanded upon this point, explaining that Oseman’s portrayal of characters of different genders, ethnicities, and colours also reflected her own of experience of coming to London from a country she described as “very racist and homophobic”: “when we came here strangers were just smiling at me, even though I was not the same colour or I looked different or I was wearing completely different stuff.”<sup>53</sup> A general discussion of diversity and inclusion followed, with the rest of the group agreeing that England<sup>54</sup> is a very “welcoming” place. Against the backdrop of Covid inequalities, Black Lives Matter protests, and continuing Brexit debates, this wholly positive discourse was striking. Although it was a relatively brief interlude in just one of the group discussions, it implies that British YA fiction like *I Was Born for This* might play a part in foregrounding diversity as a key element of national identity. And discussion with peers from different backgrounds may also help to foster this valuable sense of cohesion, particularly where a shared reading experience offers a kind of touchstone to hang ideas on. Otis (Y10G) was most explicit in identifying this gain, noticing Antonia’s experience as a relative newcomer to London:

I found it interesting about [Antonia] and how she could obviously relate to what was happening in the book [more] than most of us. I felt like from a different point of view of England and I thought, I was like “Hmm,” I was listening to that.

As Otis remarks, talking to others about fictional accounts of ordinariness highlights the value of belonging to a group with both shared reference points (such as familiar landmarks or cultural practices) and markers of difference (such as distinct regional or national backgrounds): readers in these discussion groups began to grasp that they could forge interpersonal connections in the links between the two. In the next section, we consider the extent to which book discussions—particularly in an online environment—can also generate specific moments of connection that build a temporary community.

## Connection

All three novels selected for the Reading for Normal project engage with social media and other forms of mobile communication and digital content in the lives of young people today. As Oseman has stated, “Technology is everywhere and it’s not going away. I can’t imagine trying to write a realistic contemporary story without it.”<sup>55</sup> While Jawando’s novel most obviously foregrounds the potential dangers of such technologies through cyberbullying on Facebook and other platforms, *I Was Born for This* also explores the ways in which such technologies can get in the way of authentic and positive connection, showing how superfans assume that their social media posts give them intimate access to Jimmy and other members of The Ark in Oseman’s novel.<sup>56</sup> One surprising finding from this project, therefore, is the unequivocal positivity all participants felt towards their online and connected lives, especially during periods of lockdown. The Reflective Journals indicated the extent to which social media played a part in providing relief, distraction, and meaningful opportunities for friendship and community, even while online home schooling was rather more taxing and unsatisfactory. Otis (Y10G) considered his increased use of Zoom (for family quizzes), and YouTube and Twitch (for “comfort streamers”), and noted, “I can’t see me stopping using them,” while Amy (Y12N) explained that when her school friendships disintegrated she made new friends through messaging apps and Animal Crossing (a social simulation game), and that “these people have become very important to [her].” In discussion sessions, the benefits of living life online became even clearer: virtual spaces allow for the creation of meaningful, if temporary, connections, and also provide opportunities for young people to share their authentic selves and find a sense of belonging—just as reading YA fiction does, too.

In *I Was Born for This*, Angel’s passionate interest in The Ark leads to an online, fandom-based friendship with Juliet. Several of our participants related to this kind of bond, noting that some of their strongest friendships are not those that have emerged through conventional geophysical networks, such as being in the same class or living on the same street, but are built around a shared love of cultural phenomena that is usually expressed through and on social media. Antonia’s (Y10L) experience was common: “I’m in several fandoms like this, and sometimes I feel like these people I’ve never seen—like I’m closer to them than the physical being in

front of me.” Otis (Y10G) concurred: “Honestly, making online friends is probably one of the best things I’ve ever done.” The conditions of lockdown helped to foster these kinds of relationships, providing time and impetus for reaching out to others with shared interests and hobbies. Where, as Antonia put it, “maybe school-related things connected [friends]” in pre-Covid times, during the pandemic, connections were created through much more meaningful pastimes, such as hobbies or passionate fandoms. *I Was Born for This* offered our readers a chance to understand this process as a common one, in many respects. Billie (Y9N) explained that she could relate to the friendship between Angel and Juliet because seeing her own kind of online community of music fans represented in fiction made her feel less alone, “like [she] wasn’t the only person who was addicted to a band or something.” Gabe (Y9G) agreed:

Yeah, same here. I think me and my friends, we all have some very similar interests, but especially reading the book made me realize: “What if there are more people like this?” “What if there are more people like that?” And it made me think about things more.

These points of connection multiply for readers of a novel like *I Was Born for This*. Even though it was written before Covid-19, its focus on online friendships and fandoms reflects the experience of many teens during periods of lockdown. In thinking about their everyday lives, our participants nearly all noted the value of finding a sense of community and connection with others via social media and online platforms and through shared interests. And although Oseman’s novel extends Angel and Juliet’s relationship from solely online to an IRL one—when they first meet, Angel says to Juliet, “You’re a physical being .... Not just some pixels on a screen”<sup>57</sup>—purely virtual relationships provide the support and stimulus teenagers need, particularly when lockdown made socializing in person impossible. Finding people with similar interests and passions online helped our participants feel less alone, and seeing these kinds of friendships represented in fiction added an extra dimension, allowing them to understand the phenomenon as both normal and full of potential for the future.

The future loomed large in our project discussions, particularly in the sessions focused on *And the Stars Were Shining Brightly*. This novel stages

debates about future thinking in dramatic terms, by lamenting Al's premature death and exploring Nathan and Megan's efforts to find new aims and ambitions in life. Since participants in this study were all in transitional stages of their education and facing uncertainty due to the ongoing pandemic, these topics were important to them. The younger groups, A and B, were anxious about their prospects, and compared their own opportunities with those of the characters in the book who can make plans for a normal future. Ella (Y9G) explained: "I don't think life will be going back to normal for quite a while now, what we called normal before." Group C were most philosophical about the future, perhaps because their GCSE examinations<sup>58</sup> were behind them rather than ahead, with Evie (Y12G), Daisy (Y12N), and Nabeela (Y12G) all agreeing that even though lots of things were "scary and daunting" (Nabeela), lockdown had given them the time and space to really slow down and not worry as much about what is ahead.

These reactions to questions about the future, alongside the finding that our young participants had wholly positive experiences of an enhanced online community during lockdown, helped us as researchers pinpoint a further affordance of the Reading for Normal project. As enthusiastic readers already, our participants benefited from being given the time and motivation to read new fiction closely and carefully. But more than that, these realist novels featuring everyday British life helped them to feel connected during a period of anxiety and isolation. Billie (Y9N) explained:

I didn't really see a difference with [the novels] at first, I just thought that they were ordinary books, but the first one kind of made me feel less alone. [...] I just felt like I could relate to these characters, and I felt like I wasn't the only one in the world who felt like this or acted like this or had similar interests, and it just felt really comforting to me. Because I don't have a lot of friends who have the same interests as me, it felt really nice to know that I'm not alone.

It is not clear whether Billie's realization that these books could help her feel less alone came from the particular realist quality of Oseman and Jawando's writing, from paying closer attention to her reading than usual, or from sharing thoughts about the content with other project participants: it could

be that all three of these elements played a part in her sense of connection. Certainly, being able to discuss these points of connection with other readers in the project provided further reassurance, validation, and comfort for a number of participants. Katie (Y12N) noted that “just knowing that everybody shares that common interest of reading and books is enough to feel less judged in this space,” while Antonia (Y10L) reflected that the discussion groups “gave [her] company, both from people who are sitting in this meeting and also from the characters of the books.”

In this article, we have suggested that reading realist British YA novels, and sharing the experience of reading them with others, enables young readers to discover a common dwelling in fictional ordinariness with their generational cohort. In turn, this common dwelling provided three valuable affordances for readers: a sense of authenticity (leading to validation); a sense of belonging (through familiarity); and a sense of connection (and community). Each of these affordances relied in some part on the project design and a triangulation of the choice of texts, the mode of reading practice, and the quality of shared reading, discussion, and reflection amongst participants. In our Conclusion, we tease out the implications of these design features and offer some final commentary on the notion of “normal” that underpinned the project.

## Conclusion

Nabeela’s (Y12G) final assessment, quoted in our epigraph, that the books chosen for the Reading for Normal project were “so normal” might appear to be self-evident: after all, we selected Oseman’s, Jawando’s, and Pratt’s novels because they were good examples of contemporary realism that offered recognizable snapshots of British youth culture today. The three authors are not quite the same generational cohort as our participants, but they are certainly immersed in similar minutiae of life, a fact that was highlighted by the itinerary of “reality effects” that Billie (Y9L) created for *I Was Born for This*: “...hm ... what else? I think I had more. And Capri-Sun, Wetherspoon’s, the name of an actual place, Cards Against Humanity, Lake District, David Attenborough, Trip Advisor ... yeah, just ... it feels really familiar.” Yet it is significant that Nabeela had not previously experienced reading stories that “so fit our everyday lives” before. She was not alone: other participants in the final session discussed



the ways in which the novels they read for this project differed from their standard fare, whether those were non-YA fiction, or non-realist YA. Evie (Y12G) explained that she had got out of the habit of reading YA novels, and it surprised her “how realistic they’ve gotten.” Mandy (Y10L) also noted that the books she was used to encountering “don’t relate to someone my age so much anymore,” whereas during Reading for Normal she “knew the characters, ... knew where they were coming from.” Gabe (Y9G), Ella (Y9G), Billie (Y9L), and Thorns (Y10L) all agreed that before this project they were in the habit of reading fantasy books, and were interested to find that realist novels are “really relatable” (Billie) and highlight “social issues and key issues” (Gabe). Billie realized that she had “really missed” realistic YA and Gabe was relieved “because it just [felt] nice to go back to books [he] used to read and drifted away from,” while Ella and Evie (Y12G) both stated that they are going to pick up more British YA novels to read in the future.

Some general points about the value of reading realist British YA might be drawn from the enthusiastic responses of our participants. It is notable that two of the Year 12s (Evie (Y12G) and Daisy (Y12L) wrote in their journals about the pressure they felt to read “prestigious” literature during lockdown, particularly if they were studying English Literature at A-Level.<sup>59</sup> Elisabeth Rose Gruner argues that this kind of critical independence—“reading more than was assigned, using ...reading to shape ...opinions”—is a way of conforming to social and educational expectations.<sup>60</sup> While Gruner viewed this practice of reading classics and culturally-approved novels as a pleasure, we suggest that even for high-achieving students who enjoy books, some exposure to texts that reflect aspects of their own lives back to them (and that are not always recognized as “quality” literature) is beneficial. Moreover, as discussed above, the specific cultural settings and scenarios created by British authors writing about contemporary society offer an alternative and relatable fictional landscape for readers saturated in the popular American fantasy that dominates YA bestseller lists in Britain.<sup>61</sup> The Reading for Normal project highlighted the fact that even enthusiastic teen readers are not always aware of this body of writing, and can be surprised and delighted to discover novels like Oseman’s, Jawando’s and Pratt’s.

The value of the act of reading itself was also brought into sharp focus for many participants. For some, having a good reason to read outside of schoolwork had a mild therapeutic effect—although we would not go so far as calling Reading for Normal a form of therapy, not least because we as facilitators and researchers were not trained therapists.<sup>62</sup> Mia (Y10L) found she felt better reading while she was in lockdown and isolating, “like there’s something I can do, basically,” and others concurred that reading gave them a purposeful activity. Ella (Y9G) stressed that reading was particularly useful as a way of getting away from phones and screens and not having to “worry about what was going on outside and what was going on with the virus.” More specifically, Otis (Y10G) loved the familiarity of the pre-pandemic world represented in *I Was Born for This* so much that he planned to reread it, saying “it might become my comfort book.”

In addition, Reading for Normal structured the reading experience by asking participants to focus on scenes or features of “ordinariness.” As well as provoking conversations in the reading group meetings that allowed us to move beyond identification with characters to more expansive points of connection with portrayals of the everyday, this directive also influenced the actual reading practices of some of the young readers. Antonia (Y10S) explained in our final sessions that since taking part in the group she had adopted the practice of marking quotations she liked in new books with a “colourful sticker,” and Nabeela (Y12G) noted that she has also “been more attentive” in her reading. While it is uncertain whether these strategies for close reading will be taken up or maintained by all participants, paying attention to texts, especially to the reality effects scattered through them, has resulted in fuller engagement at the level of personal responses. Combined with the value of the corpus of texts, this is a gain in young people’s experience of reading—or it was for the duration of the project itself, at least.

As well as shaping personal reading practices, Reading for Normal highlighted the social aspects of reading and demonstrated how important these are for young people today, especially during the restricted conditions of lockdown. Reflecting on the project in our final session, several participants commented on the benefits they found in sharing their thoughts about the YA novels with other readers they would not have otherwise met, and described the experience as “joyful” (Gabe Y9G), “refreshing” (Evie

Y12G), and “cool” (Billie Y9L). When asked to sum up their feelings about taking part in the project, Mandy (Y10L) chose the word “intriguing,” because “you can see how other people view the books that you’ve just read even though they’re on the other side of the country,” while Daisy (Y12N) chose “reassuring,” because she was “able to talk to people who in no other situation [would she] be able to meet, about things that [she’s] interested in and they’re interested in.” As noted throughout our discussion, these young people were open to tackling difficult topics that featured in the novels and in their own worlds, as well as exploring the portrayal of more ordinary and frivolous aspects of everyday life, and they felt able to do so freely and safely. This sense of security came in part from the realization that they were all members of the same generational cohort without necessarily being bound by the conventions or structures of their more immediate peer cohorts at home or school. There was also, we argue, a shared feeling amongst these participants that reading realist British YA was a meaningful activity, which supported the general sense of community, albeit a temporary one—a point we will return to in our final comments.

Bringing together texts, reading practices, and readers in this way shaped Reading for Normal and has enabled a study of the affordances that emerged from the project. By encouraging young readers to interrogate their own sense of “normality” in the face of the “new normal” of the Covid-19 pandemic, we were working to counter some of the outcomes of other reading group endeavours, which have been found—consciously or not—to entrench certain social and cultural norms. For instance, Ramdarshan Bold and Philips argue that there are serious repercussions in “the effects of YA’s homogeneity on tweens, teens, and other YA readers” (2), particularly in creating power imbalances that further disadvantage marginalized groups; and Maxine Branagh-Miscampbell has found that followers of WH Smith’s Zoella Book Club (launched in collaboration with British YouTuber Zoe Sugg in 2016) engaged mostly as consumers rather than readers, and as a community “aspired to, and reiterated, the general aesthetics of the highly-feminised and domestic Zoella brand.”<sup>63</sup> In contrast, we discovered that our participants gained feelings of authenticity, belonging, and connection through reading and discussing realist British YA novels together, and that each of these affordances brought with it a critical perspective on normality. The project helped students understand that their own everyday worlds and experiences are valid, familiar, and common, both

because they saw them reflected in the fiction and because they could share stories about their lives with each other in response to the books. Their points of engagement with, and feelings about, the YA novels were also validated in this shared process of common dwelling. Crucially, experiences and responses alike emerge as always already “normal”. In other words, participants could understand themselves as responding to and shaping ideas of normality (including the “new normal” of their generational cohort’s lockdown life), rather than simply engaging in images or narratives that might provoke a desire to become “more normal,” that is, more normalized.

As we write, it seems as though the worst of the Covid-19 pandemic has retreated in the UK, but the future is uncertain. Reading for Normal offered enthusiastic readers a temporary community during the most severe period of lockdown so far in this journey. It is significant that this community may only be short-lived, since the teenage participants have already learned that even seemingly concrete relationships such as friendships or school cohorts are fragile constructs in the face of crises. Moreover, YA literature is shaped by contemporary notions of adolescence as a transitory stage of life, and as such is a literature of change. Antonia’s (Y10L) final reflection on the project is pertinent: “it also gave me company, both from people who are sitting in this meeting and also from the characters of the books.” Recognizing that such temporary communities may be just as valuable as more permanent social structures is important, and represents a final finding for this study.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The full title of the research project was “Reading for Normal: Young People and Fiction in the Time of Covid-19,” and it was funded by the British Academy’s Special Research Grants as a Covid-19 Award. This research has been approved under the procedures of the Research Integrity and Ethics Committee at the University of Roehampton.

<sup>2</sup> Danielle Fuller and DeNel Rehberg Sedo, *Reading Beyond the Book: The Social Practices of Contemporary Literary Culture* (New York and London: Routledge, 2013); Eleanor Longden et al., “Shared Reading: Assessing the Intrinsic Value of a Literature-Based Health Intervention,” *Medical Humanities* 41, no. 2 (2015): 113–20; Catherine Sheldrick Ross, Lynne McKechnie, and Paulette M. Rothbauer, *Reading Still Matters: What the Research Reveals about Reading, Libraries, and Community* (Santa Barbara, CA: Libraries Unlimited, 2018); Josie Billington, *Reading Between the Lines: The Benefits of Reading for Pleasure* (Quick Reads, University of Liverpool, 2019): <https://www.letterpressproject.co.uk/media/file/T>

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[he Benefits of Reading for Pleasure.pdf](#); Elizabeth A.L. Stine-Morrow, Erika K. Hussey, and Shukhan Ng, “The Potential for Literacy to Shape Lifelong Cognitive Health,” *Policy Insights from the Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 2, no. 1 (2015): 92–100; Liz Brewster and Sarah McNicol, eds., *Bibliotherapy* (London: Routledge, 2018).

<sup>3</sup> Christina Clark and Irene Picton, *Children and Young People’s Reading in 2020 Before and During Lockdown* (London: National Literacy Trust, July 2020), 12: [https://cdn.literacytrust.org.uk/media/documents/National\\_Literacy\\_Trust\\_-\\_Reading\\_practices\\_under\\_lockdown\\_report\\_-\\_FINAL.pdf](https://cdn.literacytrust.org.uk/media/documents/National_Literacy_Trust_-_Reading_practices_under_lockdown_report_-_FINAL.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, READ-IT’s Covid-19 events (<https://readit-project.eu/tag/covid-19-pandemic/>), the University of Portsmouth and University of Copenhagen’s comparative project “The Experience of Novel Reading During COVID-19 Lockdowns 2020” (<https://researchportal.port.ac.uk/en/projects/the-experience-of-novel-reading-during-covid-19-lockdowns-2020>), and Aston University’s “Lockdown Library” project (<https://lockdownlibraryproject.wordpress.com/>).

<sup>5</sup> Clark and Picton, *Children and Young People’s Reading in 2020*; Keith Topping and Christina Clark, *What and How Kids Are Reading: The Book-Reading Behaviours of Pupils in Pandemic Times: Pandemic Edition* (London: Renaissance Learning, 2021): <https://doc.renlearn.com/KMNet/R63390.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> Melanie Ramdarshan Bold, Patricia Kennon, and Siobhán Morrissey, *Impacts of Covid-19 on Children’s and Young Adult Literature Creative, Cultural, and Reading Communities in Scotland and Ireland* (Royal Society of Edinburgh and the Royal Society of Ireland, 2022), 8: <https://childrensbooksireland.ie/sites/default/files/2022-04/Impacts%20of%20COVID%20on%20Scot-Ire%20Youth%20Literature%20and%20Arts.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> Polly Waite et al., “How did the mental health symptoms of children and adolescents change over early lockdown during the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK?”, *JCPP Advances*, 1 (2021): 7.

<sup>8</sup> We understand “affordances” as what an environment or set of practices “provides or furnishes, either for good or ill”: James J. Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1979), 127.

<sup>9</sup> Jenny Hartley and Sarah Turvey, “Reading Together: The Role of the Reading Group inside Prison,” *Prison Service Journal* 183 (May 2009): 27–32; Christina Clark and Kate Rumbold, *Reading for Pleasure: A Research Overview* (London: National Literacy Trust, November 2006): <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED496343.pdf>; Fuller and Rehberg Sedo, *Reading Beyond the Book*.

<sup>10</sup> Teresa Cremin, et al., *Building Communities of Engaged Readers: Reading for Pleasure* (London: Routledge, 2014).

<sup>11</sup> Brigitte Ouvry-Vial, “Reading Seen as a Commons,” *Participations: Journal of Audience and Reception Studies* 16, no. 1 (2009): 163.

<sup>12</sup> Alleen Pace Nilsen and Kenneth L. Donelson, *Literature for Today’s Young Adults*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Boston: Pearson, 2005), 11.

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<sup>13</sup> Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1984); Louise Bazalgette, John Holden, Philip Tew, Nick Hubble, and Jago Morrison, *Coming of Age* (London: Demos, 2011): [https://de.mosuk.wpengine.com/files/Coming\\_of\\_Age\\_-\\_web.pdf?1302099024](https://de.mosuk.wpengine.com/files/Coming_of_Age_-_web.pdf?1302099024); Julie M. Latchem and Janette Greenhalgh, “The Role of Reading on the Health and Well-Being of People with Neurological Conditions: A Systematic Review,” *Aging & Mental Health* 18, no. 6 (2014): 731–44; Hartley and Turvey, “Reading Together.”

<sup>14</sup> The cohort was aged between 13 and 17 years old and was primarily British, although one participant had recently immigrated from Eastern Europe.

<sup>15</sup> Simon Biggs and Ariela Lowenstein, *Generational Intelligence: A Critical Approach to Age Relations* (London: Routledge, 2013), x.

<sup>16</sup> Melanie Ramdarshan Bold and Leah Phillips, “Adolescent Identities: The Untapped Power of YA,” *Research on Diversity in Youth Literature* 1, no. 2 (2019) 1-9.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>21</sup> Alison Waller, “The Art of Being Ordinary: Cups of Tea and Catching the Bus in Contemporary British YA,” *The International Journal of Young Adult Literature* 1, no. 1 (2020): 3.

<sup>22</sup> Joe Moran, *Reading the Everyday* (London: Routledge, 2005), ix.

<sup>23</sup> Yasmin Ibrahim, “Instagramming Life: Banal Imaging and the Poetics of the Everyday,” *Journal of Media Practice* 16, no. 1 (2015): 51.

<sup>24</sup> Jonathan Smith, Paul Flowers, and Michael Larkin, *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: Theory, Method and Research* (London: Sage, 2009), 9.

<sup>25</sup> Nick Hubble and Philip Tew, “The Fiction and the Cultural Mediation of Ageing Project (FCMAP),” in *Ageing, Narrative and Identity* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Alison Waller, Gemma Seltzer, and Wallis Eates, “‘Life Goes Through in a Book’: A Case Study of a Co-Creative Narrative Enquiry Involving Older Adults Living with Early-Stage Dementia,” *Participations: Journal of Audience and Reception Studies* 18, no. 1 (2021): 1–23.

<sup>26</sup> Clark Moustakas, *Phenomenological Research Methods* (London: Sage, 1994); Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis*.

<sup>27</sup> We worked with two teachers [one of whom was their school’s Mental Health Lead] and one school librarian.

<sup>28</sup> Participants came from state-funded secondary academies, run by non-profit academy trusts to educate pupils aged 11–16. The London and Northumberland schools included

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“sixth forms,” offering provision for post-16 education, while the Gloucestershire school did not. Schools Liaisons recruited students from their own schools, and in the case of Gloucestershire, from sixth forms at two other schools.

<sup>29</sup> The list was made up of 12 standalone novels that had been published within the previous three years by British or Irish authors and were set in a recognizable and contemporary part of the British Isles. The selection aimed to offer diversity in terms of the gender, ethnicity, ability, and sexuality of authors and protagonists, as well as to present a geographical spread and a range of urban and rural settings. The full list was:

Melvin Burgess, *The Lost Witch* (2018)  
Sophie Cameron, *Out of the Blue* (2018)  
Orlagh Collins, *All the Invisible Things* (2018)  
Moira Fowley-Doyle, *Spellbook of the Lost and Found* (2017)  
Danielle Jawando, *And the Stars Were Burning Brightly* (2020)  
Savita Kalhan, *That Asian Kid* (2019)  
Muhammad Khan, *Kick the Moon* (2019)  
Patrice Lawrence, *Eight Pieces of Silva* (2020)  
Alice Oseman, *I Was Born for This* (2018)  
Tom Pollock, *White Rabbit, Red Wolf* (2018)  
Non Pratt, *Every Little Piece of My Heart* (2020)  
Nikesh Shukla, *Run Riot* (2018)

<sup>30</sup> Group A = four Year 9s and one Year 10; Group B = six Year 10s; Group C = one Year 10 and four Year 12s.

<sup>31</sup> Richard A. Krueger and Mary Anne Casey, *Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research* (London: Sage, 2015), 5.

<sup>32</sup> See for example: Joan Swann and Daniel Allington, “Reading Groups and the Language of Literary Texts: A Case Study in Social Reading,” *Language and Literature* 18, no. 3 (2009): 247–64; Danielle Fuller and DeNel Rehberg Sedo, “Mixing It Up: Using Mixed Methods to Investigate Contemporary Cultures of Reading,” in *From Codex to Hypertext: Reading at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Anouk Lang (Cambridge, MA, University of Massachusetts Press, 2012), 234–51; Beth Driscoll and Claire Squires, “Experiments with Book Festival People (Real and Imaginary),” *Mémoires du livre / Studies in Book Culture* 11, no. 2 (2020): 1–40.

<sup>33</sup> Aidan Chambers, *Tell Me (Children, Reading & Talk) with The Reading Environment* (Stroud, UK: Thimble Press, 2011), 49.

<sup>34</sup> Our formulation in correspondence and at the beginning of each session was, “This is a reading group, not a classroom, so there will no ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ answers and all responses are equally valid. We are so interested in what you have to say.”

<sup>35</sup> Chambers, *Tell Me*, 19.

<sup>36</sup> The questions were: Was there anything you liked about this book? Can you relate to the characters in the story? Does anything in this story remind you of anything in your own life? Has anything that happens in this book ever happened to you? Which parts of the book seem to you to be most true-to-life? In what ways was it the same or different to



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you? Did the book make you think differently about your own similar experience? How are events in this story similar to things that happen in the real world? How are events in this story different from things that happen in the real world?

<sup>37</sup> Evelyn Arizpe and Gabrielle Cliff Hodges, *Young People Reading: Empirical Research Across International Contexts* (London: Routledge, 2018).

<sup>38</sup> Moustakas, *Phenomenological Research Methods*.

<sup>39</sup> Marc Prensky, “Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants,” *On the Horizon* 9, no. 5 (2001).

<sup>40</sup> Waite et al., “How did the mental health symptoms,” 7.

<sup>41</sup> Maxine Branagh-Miscampbell, “‘Eating, sleeping, breathing, reading’: The Zoella Book Club and the Young Woman Reader in the 21st Century,” *Participations: Journal of Audience and Reception Studies* 16, no. 1 (2019): 420.

<sup>42</sup> Oseman, *I Was Born for This*, 210.

<sup>43</sup> “Catfishing” is the act of creating a false online identity with the purpose of pursuing deceptive romances.

<sup>44</sup> Rudine Sims Bishop, “Mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors,” *Perspectives* 6, no. 3 (1990), ix–xi.

<sup>45</sup> Roland Barthes, “The Reality Effect” (1969), in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard, ed. François Walch (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 141–48.

<sup>46</sup> Susie Scott, *Making Sense of Everyday Life* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), 10.

<sup>47</sup> Jawando, *And the Stars Were Burning Brightly*, 111, 122, 123.

<sup>48</sup> Waller, “The Art of Being Ordinary,” 21.

<sup>49</sup> Oseman, *I Was Born for This*, 257.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>51</sup> It is worth noting that the anxieties expressed about busy city life did not crop up so much amongst the older students in Group C, so it is possible that age and experience play a part in shaping this form of belonging.

<sup>52</sup> Wetherspoons is a pub chain operating in the UK and Ireland, known for its mass-market appeal and cheap food and drinks.

<sup>53</sup> The group did not discuss the character Angel’s Muslim identity, but this may well have provided further reason for Antonia’s pleasure in the diversity of this particular text—although Antonia herself comes from a Catholic background and we do not suggest that.

<sup>54</sup> As Mia (Y10N) noted, she can only speak to England—she doesn’t know “about Scotland and Wales and stuff.”

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<sup>55</sup> Cited in Sarah Gibson Yates, “Writing Digital Culture into Contemporary Realist Young Adult Literature: A Novel and Exegesis” (PhD dissertation, Anglia Ruskin University, 2020).

<sup>56</sup> Pratt’s *Every Little Piece of My Heart* also tackles this topic through the character of Freya, who ghosts her best friend Sophie on all her communication streams.

<sup>57</sup> Oseman, *I Was Born For This*, 5.

<sup>58</sup> GCSEs (General Certificates of Secondary Education) are the qualifications taken by most pupils in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland at the end of Year 11.

<sup>59</sup> A-Levels, or Advanced Level General Certificates of Education, are the standard sixth-form leaving qualifications offered in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland.

<sup>60</sup> Elisabeth Rose Gruner, *Constructing the Adolescent Reader in Contemporary Young Adult Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 25.

<sup>61</sup> See Melanie Ramdarshan Bold, “Authors of Colour in the British YA Market: 2017-2019 Edition,” *International Journal of Young Adult Literature* 2, no. 1 (2021): 1-35.

<sup>62</sup> As Eleanor Longden et al. note, therapy may be “too ‘medicalised’ a term for reading’s intrinsic value” (“Shared Reading,” 118). Rather than making a case for specific therapeutic qualities inherent in books, they argue instead for the value of shared and facilitated experiences of reading, suggesting that their version of shared reading can be viewed as “‘implicit psychotherapy’ precisely by remaining literary” (118).

<sup>63</sup> Branagh-Miscampbell, “Eating, sleeping, breathing, reading,” 434.

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