

The Manic Pixie Dream Girl in US YA Fiction: Introducing a Narrative Model

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ABSTRACT

Coined in 2007 by film critic Nathan Rabin, the Manic Pixie Dream Girl (MPDG) is a quirky, ethereal figure who exists merely as a tool for self-actualisation and has no narrative purpose beyond that of enriching the life of an apathetic, White, male, cisgender, heterosexual, middle-class protagonist. Despite her pervasiveness across film and television, popular culture, and literature – particularly contemporary YA fiction such as John Green's *Looking for Alaska* (2005) – the Pixie remains a wholly understudied figure. To address this gap in the field, this article offers a narrative model for a novel type I call 'MPDGYA', a pattern I have identified across YA texts, all either published or set in the US, in which the Pixie features. I argue that this five-stage model can not only be used to understand and analyse typical Pixie texts, but can also function, for example, as a means of assessing attempts to challenge or intervene in MPDG discourse. To demonstrate this, the article contains two case studies: Robyn Schneider's *The Beginning of Everything* (2013), exemplary of a typical Pixie novel, and Gretchen McNeil's *I'm Not Your Manic Pixie Dream Girl* (2016), an interventionist text. In engaging with two novels at either end of the Pixie discourse spectrum, my work here

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argues that the MPDGYA model lays important groundwork not only for research opportunities in the field of YA studies, but for the emergence of collaborative and intersectional approaches to the Pixie – and the texts in which she appears – across multiple disciplines.

INTRODUCTION

At the time of writing, the search term “Manic Pixie Dream Girl” (MPDG) yields over 1.2 million results on Google, ranging from think pieces for sites such as *Glamour* and *Jezebel*, to fan-made compilation images of classic Manic Pixies such as *Elizabethtown*’s Claire Colburn and *Garden State*’s Sam, to bright and bubbly *Buzzfeed* quizzes earnestly asking, “Which Manic Pixie Dream Girl Are You?”. Typing the same search term into audio streaming service Spotify reveals over 200 songs, 45 albums, and five podcasts featuring or discussing the Pixie. In the world of YA fiction, novels in which MPDGs appear have been published steadily for nearly two decades, six of which were published in the last five years.¹ In 2020, the Pixie crossed over into New Adult fiction via British YA author Holly Bourne’s *Pretending*, in which the protagonist pretends to be a Pixie in order to push a blossoming romance beyond the fifth date – a hurdle she can never quite jump.² Several MPDG novels have also been adapted for screen. A film version of John Green’s novel *Paper Towns* was released by Fox 2000 Pictures in 2015 and, in 2020, Hulu converted his first novel, *Looking for Alaska*, into an eight-part miniseries. Cinematic renderings of Krystal Sutherland’s *Our Chemical Hearts* and Jerry Spinelli’s *Stargirl* (2000) also premiered on Amazon Video and Disney+, respectively, in the same year.

Though the term was first coined in 2007 by film critic Nathan Rabin, the MPDG clearly continues to occupy a significant position in the cultural zeitgeist, as well as YA fiction. And yet, despite her continuing prevalence, the Pixie is wholly understudied in the field of YA studies. This article begins efforts to remedy this oversight by introducing a narrative model for what I term ‘MPDGYA fiction’. A particularly American phenomenon, typical Pixie stories are formulaic, containing five key plot markers: Beginnings; Setting up the Mystique;

1 Emery Lord’s *When We Collided* (2016), Krystal Sutherland’s *Our Chemical Hearts* (2016), Gretchen McNeil’s *I’m Not Your Manic Pixie Dream Girl* (2016), Michael Belanger’s *The History of Jane Doe* (2018), and Lenore Appelhans’ reimagining of the trope in *The Manic Pixie Dream Boy Improvement Project* (2019).

2 First used in 2009, the term ‘New Adult’ was coined by St Martin’s Press (a subsidiary of MacMillan) as part of a submissions contest in which they were “seeking fiction similar to YA that can be published and marketed as adult – a sort of ‘older’ YA” (McAlister 4). I mention Bourne’s novel here due to her status as a bestselling YA author in the UK, demonstrating the Pixie’s journey across the Atlantic. For more on NA, see McAlister’s “Defining and Redefining Popular Genres: The Evolution of New Adult’ Fiction”.

Becoming Friends, Adventuring Together; A Bump in the Road; and Reunions, Goodbyes and The Final Monologue. Although the order of events may be shuffled or the lines between two blurred, these markers are almost invariably present in some form across MPDGYA. Most obviously, the model can be used as a tool for identifying, comparing, and analysing MPDGYA texts. However, I argue here that it can also be used to move away from such core texts to instead assess the effectiveness of novels that attempt to intervene, play with, or challenge the discourse surrounding the MPDG trope – a breed of MPDGYA that has become particularly prevalent in recent years and which I call ‘interventionist novels’. To demonstrate this, after situating the Pixie in context and presenting my model in more detail, I offer an exploration of Robyn Schneider’s *The Beginning of Everything* (2013), a typical Pixie novel, and Gretchen McNeil’s *I’m Not Your Manic Pixie Dream Girl* (2016), an interventionist text, as case studies. It is my contention that an understanding of this model facilitates the acknowledgement of the MPDG trope as a dominant cultural force within YA (and vice versa), subsequently creating a core framework for considering her as such and revealing new, cross-disciplinary possibilities for research.

DEFINING AND CONTEXTUALISING THE PIXIE

In a scathing review of Cameron Crowe’s 2005 film, *Elizabethtown*, Rabin compares Kirsten Dunst’s character, Claire Colburn, to “a character type [he calls] The Manic Pixie Dream Girl”, citing Natalie Portman’s role as Sam in *Garden State* (2004) as “another prime example” of the trope (“Bataan Death March” n.p.). For Rabin, the MPDG can be defined as a figure who “exists solely in the fevered imaginations of sensitive writer-directors to teach broodingly soulful young men to embrace life and its infinite mysteries and adventures” (“Bataan Death March” n.p.). This review, written for *AV Club* in January 2007, was the first appearance of the term ‘Manic Pixie Dream Girl’ in print. In the seven years between the article’s publication and Rabin’s follow-up piece for *Salon* in 2014, the term became over-used, over-saturated, and re-worked in ways that Rabin claimed distanced the Pixie from his intended critical parameters. Though the MPDG’s traits were quickly mapped beyond film, also appearing in literature and popular culture, Rabin insisted that he “never could have imagined how that phrase would explode”, going on to note that his original definition was one intended to highlight that the trope “taps into a particular male fantasy: of being saved from depression and ennui by a fantasy woman who sweeps in like a glittery breeze to save you from yourself, then disappears once her work is done” (“I’m sorry” n.p.). The apparently exasperated critic also attempted to distance himself from his coinage, claiming that “the rise of the MPDG was in large part a creation of the Internet” and that he “didn’t recognize the manic pixie anymore” (“I’m sorry” n.p.).

Though Rabin may have coined the term and his definition is often a first port of call for those interested in it, I want to make clear that the MPDG did not magically appear from the stock character ether in the early-to-mid-2000s. Rather, she is a descendant of reductive imaginings of femininity that have plagued popular thinking for hundreds of years. Put another way, as Laurie Penny pithily notes, “[l]ike scabies and syphilis, Manic Pixie Dream Girls were with us long before they were accurately named” (n.p.). For example, in their 2008 ‘listicle’, “Wild Things: 16 films featuring Manic Pixie Dream Girls”, Noel Murray, Donna Bowman, et. al. cite Howard Hawks’ 1938 screwball comedy *Bringing Up Baby* as a Pixie film, making reference also to Audrey Hepburn’s performance in *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* (1961) and Diane Keaton’s in *Annie Hall* (1977) – all three of which were released well before Rabin’s trope-defining article. Thus, while the MPDG can undoubtedly be connected to a particular cultural moment, her earlier appearances make it clear that she is not only of that moment.

Today, the MPDG exists in three different, though connected, guises: film and television, popular culture, and (YA) literature. Across all three, the Pixie is White,³ cisgender, heterosexual, and middle-class. As Tami Winfrey-Harris notes, “wide-eyed, girlish, take-care-of-me [MPDG] characters [...] are not open to many women of colour, particularly black women” (n.p.). She continues: “The affectations of the manic pixie are read differently on black women. A streak of pink in the hair goes from quirky and youthful to ‘ghetto’ on a black body. Thrift store clothing leads to a host of class assumptions” (n.p.). In this way, although she is hailed as being ‘quirky’ and ‘not like other girls’, the MPDG is in fact a cultural steam valve, masquerading as difference while reinforcing the norm. Indeed, the dominance of Whiteness in the MPDG narrative is indicative of a wider cultural issue both within children’s and YA literature and in pop-culture more broadly. David Huyck et al.’s well-known and important research on diversity in children’s publishing in the United States found that, as of 2018, 50% of characters in these kinds of books are White and 27% are depicted as animals; meanwhile, only 10% are African American, 7% are Asian Pacific, 5% are Latinx, and 1% are American Indians or First Nations (n.p.). Similarly, in her work on girlhood and popular culture, Sarah Projansky highlights that “the majority of girls in media culture simply are white. The celebrities who crash and burn are white. The central characters in most films and television shows about girls are white” (*Spectacular Girls* 7). The overwhelming Whiteness of Western culture seeps into the narrative spaces in which the MPDG appears, from TV and film to books to pop-culture skits. When characters of colour feature in MPDGYA, such as Black teen Radar in Green’s *Paper Towns* or Asian-American Lola in Sutherland’s *Our Chemical Hearts*, they perform a secondary role in the narrative; they are never the lead, instead “functioning as a narrative support, as sidekick, as discursive backdrop” (Projansky, *Spectacular Girls* 54). In MPDG stories, then, Whiteness is not only

3 In capitalising ‘White’ throughout this article, I intend not only to draw attention to the racialisation of the MPDG trope and, later, the male protagonist, but also to emphasise how they both enact and embody an explicit and particular form of privileged, cultural Whiteness.

dominant but oppressively normative – a privilege-infused, cultural racialisation that actively marginalises those who fall outside it.

In each of her manifestations, the Pixie exists solely to enrich the life of the White, cisgender, heterosexual, middle-class male protagonist, who is often in a state of ennui before the MPDG's arrival or, at the very least, lives an almost overwhelmingly unremarkable life. This enrichment usually comes in the form of interactions filled with whimsy and adventure, leading to a gradual opening of the protagonist's eyes so he can see the extraordinary in the ordinary and undergo personal growth. The Pixie is built on that which is visible and visual and, because of this focus on surface rather than depth, she is “never a point-of-view character, and she isn't understood from the inside” (Penny n.p.). A character designed to function as an object of patriarchal fantasy who simply disappears once her work is done, the Pixie is a manifestation of what I term ‘disposable girlhood’; she is designed to be discarded once the male protagonist has used her for her singular purpose. Once discarded – by both the protagonist and the narrative as a whole – the Pixie becomes frozen in time, forever a teenaged fantasy. In short, as Emily Tannenbaum so wonderfully puts it, the Pixie “teaches a boring man how to have fun and then fucks off” (n.p.).

MPDGYA: A NARRATIVE MODEL

Having offered some context for, and ways of defining, the Pixie, I turn now to introduce my narrative model for MPDGYA. Comprised of five stages or markers, the model can be outlined as follows:

- 1 **Beginnings:** The reader is introduced to a sad, White, heterosexual, cisgender, male, middle-class protagonist, typically living in American suburbia.
- 2 **Setting up the Mystique:** The MPDG character comes into the protagonist's life, seemingly appearing from nowhere. She is both intriguing and beautiful, marked by the protagonist as ‘not like other girls’. This intrigue is reinforced by a secret she keeps from both the protagonist and the rest of her peers.
- 3 **Becoming Friends, Adventuring Together:** The MPDG and the protagonist become friends and spend lots of time together, often resulting in spontaneous adventure. At this point, the ‘Manic’ in MPDG can, but does not always, become apparent.
- 4 **A Bump in the Road:** The MPDG and the protagonist have a heated argument, during or shortly after which her secret is revealed. In some novels, it is the protagonist's discovery of the secret behind the Pixie's back that begins the argument. If the Pixie is to be given a tragic backstory, this usually happens here. The MPDG temporarily disappears from the narrative.
- 5 **Reunions, Goodbyes, and The Final Monologue:** The Pixie and the protagonist are reunited and there is some sort of resolution between them, usually under

melodramatic circumstances. The MPDG then disappears from the narrative for a second and final time. The novel ends shortly after, its closing pages dedicated to a philosophical and/or reflective monologue from the male protagonist.

In the following case studies, I demonstrate the formulaic nature of the Pixie model and the (un)intentional impact deviation from this pattern can have on Pixie discourse, as well as the problematic cultural work this discourse performs in service of White masculinity. Notably, both novels are written by writers who identify as female, demonstrating that while the Pixie narrative is undoubtedly a product and maintenance of patriarchal fantasy, it is not only reproduced by male authors.

CASE STUDY 1: *THE BEGINNING OF EVERYTHING* AS TYPICAL MPDGYA NOVEL

As I highlighted above, the protagonist of the MPDGYA novel is exclusively White. He is also male, straight, cisgender, and middle-class, belonging to a normative, nuclear family. A senior in high school, or close to becoming one, the protagonist's thoughts are consumed by college applications and graduation. While not unpopular per se, he occupies, or has come to occupy, a social position close to the bottom and, in line with his aspirations to attend a 'good' college, is usually considered by his peers to be nerdy. In other words, the protagonist is entirely unremarkable – almost painfully average. This seeming ordinariness is doubled down upon by the novel's suburban setting – a space which, as Angel Daniel Matos notes, “historically, imaginatively, and ideologically, ha[s] been associated with notions of white supremacy, homogenization and heteronormativity” (n.p.). By situating the plot in American suburbia, the world of the MPDGYA novel is presented as an everywhere, a normative, well-known and comfortable space into which the reader can easily slip. And yet, within these communities, the characters live in large houses nestled in immaculately landscaped gated communities or subdivisions, separated from the ‘real world’ – or, more accurately, the non-White world. Ezra Faulkner of *The Beginning of Everything*, for example, lives in an area “full of six-bedroom ‘Spanish-style’ homes while, half a mile down the road, illegal migrant workers break their backs in the strawberry fields, and you have to drive past them every morning on the way to school” (Schneider 14). For the MPDGYA novel, then, ordinariness is problematically equated to a brand of particularly privileged, almost ostentatious, Whiteness. This White ordinariness, this privileged uneventfulness – which can also manifest in the protagonist's ennui – lays the narrative groundwork for the Manic Pixie to arrive and make waves in a “nothing-ever-happens town” (Schneider 61) as she begins to transform the protagonist's worldview from the second stage of the model onwards.

While I posit *The Beginning of Everything* as a typical MPDGYA text, I am also aware that Ezra can be read as an atypical MPDGYA protagonist. While the protagonist normally has little social capital, is considered nerdy, and is at least somewhat focused on, or anxious

about, college, Ezra ends his junior year with the opposite of this in hand; a typical jock, class president Ezra tells us: “Eastwood High used to be mine, the one place where everyone knew who I was and it felt as though I could do no wrong” (Schneider 16). Handsome, popular, and incredibly privileged, he confesses: “I’d never really thought I’d have to deal with [college applications]. It was a given that I’d be recruited to play somewhere, probably one of the nearby state colleges” (61). After being involved in a car crash which saw both his sleek, shiny BMW Z4 roadster and his knee damaged beyond repair, Ezra walks with a cane and, no longer able to captain the tennis team, loses both his sports career and his social status as he begins his senior year. Because of this, Ezra’s deep-rooted ennui is not a result of what he never had, but rather what he lost, his ontological crisis stemming from a deep fear that he is “destined to forever be someone whose defining characteristic was lost forever at seventeen, rather than found” (142). Thus, although Ezra initially functions as a kind of inversion of the typical MPDGYA protagonist, he is in fact illustrative of what is at the core of this character: it is only if and when the protagonist lacks in social capital that space can be created for the Pixie to enter the narrative.

In the eyes of the protagonist, the MPDG enters the narrative in Stage Two suddenly and unexpectedly. She is usually a new student, transferring from a town or school the protagonist knows little to nothing about. She is quickly marked by the protagonist as different and not like other girls, her mysterious background usually intertwined with the secret revealed in the fourth stage. In Schneider’s novel, Ezra is made aware of Cassidy’s presence by “a perceptible shift in the room”, after which he glances over to the classroom bookshelves and sees “a sleeve of green sweater and a cascade of red hair” (Schneider 25). Cassidy’s green sweater invokes the light on Daisy’s dock in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* – a reference which begins with the novel’s title, taken from a letter Fitzgerald wrote to a friend in the wake of criticism of his intent to marry his then-girlfriend, Zelda (“I love her and that’s the beginning and end of everything” [qtd. in Lanahan 8]), and is continued by the novel’s setting of Eastwood, a clear echoing of East Egg. While a fuller exploration of this intertextuality is beyond the scope of this article, I do think it is worth noting that Daisy can be read as a prototypical MPDG. In positioning Cassidy as a contemporary manifestation of Daisy, *The Beginning of Everything* consequently aligns Ezra with a core tenet of Fitzgerald’s novel: Gatsby’s entirely unwavering commitment to Daisy – or, rather, his idea of her.

Crucially, when Ezra sees Cassidy properly for the first time, he immediately marks her as different:

I thought about how most of the girls at Eastwood, or at least the ones worth noticing, all looked the same: blonde hair, lots of makeup, stupidly expensive handbags. The new girl was nothing like that, and I didn’t know what to make of the shabby boys’ button-down tucked into her jean shorts, or the worn leather satchel slung over her

shoulder, like something out of an old-fashioned movie. She was pretty, though, and I wondered where she'd come from and why she hadn't bothered trying to fit in. (29)

Here the homogenisation associated with suburbia is reinforced, coalescing with Ezra's insidiously patriarchal view that girls are not worth noticing unless they are beautiful; all the girls, like all the neighbourhoods in Eastwood, look the same. Notably, Ezra's points of comparison linger on the superficial: hair, makeup, clothing – all of which Cassidy enacts in a way that is not like other girls, her choice of a boys' shirt pushing her dangerously close to transgressive femininity and prompting her classmates to call her "Butch Cassidy" (37). This move is quickly undone, however, when she arrives to school the next day in a fitted dress that Ezra describes as "tight in all of the right places, and Butch Cassidy she was not" (46). The above passage, then, is illustrative of the Pixie's status as a cultural steam valve to which I gestured earlier. Cassidy is permitted to masquerade difference, but ultimately is reduced to a tool through which the norm of the patriarchal, misogynistic gaze is reinforced alongside the Pixie's status as a visual object or, to use Laura Mulvey's term, her "*to-be-looked-at-ness*" (62).

Beyond this, Cassidy is also exemplary of the mystery connected to the MPDG. The stories surrounding her are far-fetched, awe-inspiring, or both. For example, when they are partnered in Spanish class, Ezra learns that Cassidy "had just completed a high-school summer program at Oxford, studying Shakespeare; that one weekend she'd nearly got stranded in Transylvania; that she'd been teaching herself how to play guitar on the roof of her dormitory because of the acoustics of gothic architecture" (36). By contrast, Ezra has "never been out of the country" or "to the Globe Theatre or had [his] passport stolen by gypsies at Dracula's castle, or climbed out of [his] bedroom window with a guitar strapped to [his] back" (36). This point in the novel also invokes *Paper Towns*, an early example of a MPDGYA novel⁴ in which Q, the protagonist, regales similar tales of his own Pixie figure, Margo Roth Spiegelman, "whose stories of epic adventures would blow through school like a summer storm" and include spending three days travelling with the circus and drinking herbal tea backstage with the Mallionaires at one of their concerts (Green 15). Thus, this stage in the narrative establishes the MPDG as a myth and a kind of exoticised, yet unthreatening, Other. Her extraordinariness, her otherworldliness, is set in direct opposition to the protagonist and his town's ordinariness. While he is of average attractiveness, she is like nothing he has ever seen before; he lives an unremarkable life with little experience beyond the boundary line of his subdivision, while she arrives with the whispers of her previous, well-travelled life blowing in the wind behind her.

4 While Green has said he believes *Paper Towns* to be doing the work of an interventionist text, I contend, as I discuss at length elsewhere, that he has instead written a typical MPDGYA novel with an interventionist coda. It is because of this hybridity that I refer to *Paper Towns* as both an example of and an intervention in MPDGYA in this article.

Cassidy and Ezra are invited to sit at the same lunch table and soon become friends. This friendship, typical of Stage Three, progresses quickly, and it is not long before she invites him to spend extended time alone with her. Having both joined the debate team, Cassidy, a known ‘picket fencer’ (that is, someone who places first in every round at a debate competition), offers to take Ezra under her wing and prepare him for their tournament in San Diego. She asks him to pick her up on the school’s teacher training day, and when he asks where they are going, she simply replies: “Where we have no business being, other than the business of mischief and deception” (Schneider 104). This mystery destination is revealed as the University of California Eastwood, where the two sneak into lectures to get Ezra “good and educated in the liberal arts” for his first competition (105). As they relax on the lawn after their classes, Cassidy picks daisies and fashions a flower crown, quoting Mary Oliver, Walt Whitman, William Shakespeare, Mark Twain, and Dylan Thomas – all references that Ezra does not understand. Cassidy’s obvious intelligence is thus reframed as an endearing quirk, with Ezra focusing largely on her face and “the freckles that dusted her nose and the gold flecks in the disquieting blue of her eyes” (111) as he fantasises about “tilt[ing] her face up toward [his] and kiss[ing] her” (113). Later in the novel, she takes him on a treasure hunt in which the treasure is “*geocache*, or tiny capsule[s...] hidden all over the United States, and you ha[ve] to solve puzzles to find them” (Schneider 173). Cassidy tells Ezra that she and her brother used to leave false names when they found each puzzle in an effort to “mess with the universe”, explaining that they did so because the “world tends toward chaos” (175). Here Cassidy is truly child-like, her framing of the often empty – or, indeed, tat-filled – geocaches as “treasure” positioning her as a connoisseur of quotidian magic. Notably, these Stage Three adventures often do little to advance the overall plot, instead acting as a showcase for the Pixie’s apparent whimsy and as the first step in the protagonist’s journey of personal growth.

After this narrative *rallentando*, the plot quickly picks up pace as it hurtles toward its conclusion. In Stage Four of the model, the Pixie and the protagonist have a heated argument, often related to her secret. On the night of prom, Cassidy stands Ezra up. Thinking she is missing, Ezra drives around Eastwood looking for her. Eventually he finds her – or, rather, “the unmistakable green of Cassidy’s favourite sweater” (242) – and their confrontation begins. Cassidy claims she already has a boyfriend, that he has driven from San Francisco to surprise her, and tells Ezra she won’t be going to prom. They break up, their falling out resulting in Cassidy’s first disappearance from the novel. Driving to school the next morning, Ezra’s inner monologue is a heady mix of melodrama and privilege, claiming his teenage heartbreak to be more painful than that faced by “the migrant workers in the strawberry fields, breaking their backs to harvest off-season fruit” (247). However, at this point, Cassidy’s true secret has not been revealed. It is only when Ezra bumps into Cassidy in his therapist’s reception, and “something in her shoulders suggesting this visit was routine” (292), that the crest in curiosity associated with the beginning of this stage takes place. In a gross violation of Cassidy’s privacy, Ezra asks his friend, Toby, to mine Cassidy’s ex-

schoolmates for more information on her background. Upon his return, Toby reveals Cassidy's transfer to Eastwood High was prompted by the death of her brother, Owen, who died from a sudden cardiac arrest caused by thromboembolism. The reasons for Cassidy's visit to the therapist, along with the sudden arrival of her 'boyfriend', crystallise for Ezra. For *The Beginning of Everything*, then, the boundaries of Stage Four are somewhat blurred, combining from plot elements usually found across Stages Three and Four: the uncovering of the 'Manic' in Manic Pixie Dream Girl and the addition of her tragic backstory.⁵

While the 'Manic' in MPDG often manifests as a more severe form of trauma or mental illness the protagonist usually romanticises or ignores – for example, the death of Alaska's mother in *Looking for Alaska* when she was just eight or the death of Grace's boyfriend in *Our Chemical Hearts* – Cassidy's regular therapy sessions in the wake of her brother's untimely passing function as more of a means to a melodramatic end, which I will explore in more depth shortly. For now, though, I am interested in the role the tragic backstory plays in MPDGYA narratives. In theory, the addition of such trauma should lend depth to the otherwise flimsy, two-dimensional Pixie character, allowing for her to be, in Penny's words, "understood from the inside" (n.p.). In practice, however, this is not the case. Instead, the Pixie's trauma is positioned in relation to the protagonist and the potential it unlocks in him. The Pixie's battles with her mental health, usually directly related to her tragic backstory, are romanticised by the male protagonist in ways that reinforce masculine ideals of the hero, of saving the damsel in distress; Pudge believes he could have prevented Alaska's suicide, while Henry sees Grace as an embodiment of Kintsukuroi, an ancient Japanese art form in which broken pottery is mended with seams of pure gold. For Ezra, Cassidy's ills – and his own loneliness – can be cured by "an adventure" (Schneider 312). Even in crisis, the Pixie remains two-dimensional, a blank canvas onto which the protagonist can project his deepest fantasies.

As the MPDGYA novel nears its conclusion, the Pixie and the protagonist reunite in Stage Five, usually under melodramatic circumstances.⁶ Cut from similarly formulaic cloth as MPDGYA, "melodrama's circular patterns evoke heightened emotions", resulting in what Katie Kapurch terms "melodramatic excess" (4). As Kapurch also notes, "the melodramatic experience is about exposing, grasping, and reaching for objects of desire" (16); it is "not concerned with what is possible or actual but with what is desirable" (Vicinus qtd. in Kapurch 16). In this way, the excess or 'heightenedness' of MPDGYA fiction's closing chapters serves as a narrative mirror of the Pixie herself. Put another way, it makes sense for the novel's final pages to be filled with what Gabriel Duckels terms as "over-the-topness" (n.p.) given that the Pixie is a heightened figure: hyperfeminine, hyperbeautiful, and not like other girls.

5 *Glamour* columnist Emily Tannenbaum also discusses the significance of the Pixie's tragic backstory in her article "The 'Manic Pixie Dream Girl' Isn't Dead – She Has Just Evolved."

6 I would like to thank Gabriel Duckels for the conversations and reading suggestions that helped shape this paragraph and the one following.

Having learned of Cassidy's brother's death, Ezra decides to build her a 'snowman' in a town where it never snows, spray-painting sculpted tumbleweeds white. Though she laughs at his creation, she immediately asks him to take it down and, while the two argue, a coyote attempts to attack Ezra. His beloved dog, Cooper, defends him and is badly injured. Once the coyote disappears, Cassidy and Ezra rush Cooper to the vet. As they anxiously wait for news on his condition, the two have a heart-to-heart during which it is revealed that Owen's death from thromboembolism was a direct result of injuries sustained as the other driver in the crash that cost Ezra his tennis career. "I'm glad that car accident was mine", Ezra responds, "[o]therwise I wouldn't be applying to East Coast colleges, or on the debate team, or any of those things because I wouldn't have met you" (Schneider 329). Yet, in spite of the recognition Ezra gives her, Cassidy refuses to take credit for Ezra's new life:

"But I didn't *do* any of that," Cassidy insisted. "Ezra, the girl you're chasing after doesn't exist. I'm not some bohemian adventurer who takes you on treasure hunts and sends you secret messages. I'm this sad, lonely mess who studies too much and pushes people away and hides in her haunted house. You keep wanting to give *me* credit because *you* finally decided you weren't content with squeezing yourself into the narrow corridor of everyone's expectations, but you made that decision before we'd even met." (329)

This chapter, and the chapter following, serve two purposes. Firstly, they pick up the threads that were dropped when Cassidy and Ezra's argument over the 'snowman' was interrupted by the 'over-the-topness' of the coyote attack, marking a return to Peter Brooks' concept of the moment of astonishment, a scene typical of melodrama fuelled by "the desire to express all [...]. Nothing is spared because nothing is left unsaid" (4). Secondly, these chapters create what I call the 'Pixie Paradox'.⁷ Soon after this conversation, Cooper dies and Cassidy, following MPDGYA protocol, disappears from the narrative for a final time and the reader does not learn what becomes of her. In keeping with other MPDGYA texts, the final chapter of the novel is instead dedicated to Ezra's monologue. Written in his college dorm room, this monologue is a space for contemplation and reflection on Cassidy's role in his life, its "grandiose phraseology" eking the novel's partnership with melodrama out to its very last pages (Brooks 25):

The truth of it was, I'd been running the wrong experiment my whole life, and while Cassidy was the first person to realise, she didn't add the elements that allowed me to

7 While the Pixie Paradox is usually found in interventionist novels, I contend its presence here does not affect *The Beginning of Everything's* status as a typical MPDGYA novel; interventionist novels, as I will discuss in the second case study, must make a significant and/or sustained intervention in Pixie discourse, or be claimed as doing such by the author. This is not the case here.

proceed down a different path. She lent a spark, perhaps, or tendered the flame, but the arson was mine. (Schneider 335)

By the novel's end, Ezra has stripped Cassidy of her Pixieness, considering his maturation and growth to be the result of something from within rather than without. However, when read together, Cassidy's final speech and Ezra's monologue work in tandem to both establish and destabilise Cassidy's status as an MPDG. As I mentioned earlier in the article, the Pixie's purpose is to sweep into the protagonist's life, help him discover the joy of life through whimsy and adventure, then vanish once his self-actualisation is complete. Though Cassidy claims that Ezra's coming-of-age took place of his own volition, and that the vision he has of her is nothing more than a fantasy, he learns this from her before she leaves. This is the Pixie Paradox. In teaching Ezra that she does not merely exist to be his fantasy, that she is not a Manic Pixie Dream Girl, Cassidy becomes one. To put this another way, in facilitating Ezra's realisation that he is responsible for his own personal growth, Cassidy is rendered simultaneously Pixie and Not-Pixie, fulfilling the criteria for the trope in an attempt to distance herself from it.

CASE STUDY 2: I'M NOT YOUR MANIC PIXIE DREAM GIRL AS INTERVENTIONIST TEXT

In this second case study, I want to demonstrate how the MPDGYA model offers a useful framework for examining how and when interventionist texts attempt to talk back to Manic Pixie discourse and, additionally, how it can be used as a means of measuring the impact, or lack thereof, of what I term 'interventionist texts'. The publication of such novels is an important development for the Pixie, who no longer features solely in MPDGYA texts which offer little (if any) interrogation of the trope; instead, we begin to see the trope appear in a more thoughtful, albeit largely unsuccessful, breed of novels, which are aware of her problematic nature. Indeed, while the existence of MPDGYA indicates a pop-cultural fascination with the Pixie that extends beyond her cinematic roots, the recent turn in YA towards novels that challenge the trope points to a readership ready to critically examine it. I define an MPDGYA interventionist text as one in which the attempt to intervene in, or challenge, the discourse surrounding the Pixie is significant and/or sustained. Alternatively, a novel can be considered as an interventionist text if it has been claimed as such by the author, even if the effectiveness of its intervention is limited. For example, in a post on his now-deleted Tumblr, John Green claimed that *Paper Towns* "is devoted IN ITS ENTIRETY to destroying the lie of the manic pixie dream girl" ("Hey John" n.p.).

Published in 2016, Gretchen McNeil's *I'm Not Your Manic Pixie Dream Girl (INYMPDG)* tells the story of half-Filipino teen Beatrice 'Bea' Giovannini, a self-proclaimed "math nerd" beginning her senior year at Fullerton Hills High (64). As part of an application for a

scholarship to the prestigious MIT, Bea uses her maths skills to design a formula for happiness in high school. However, when Bea is dumped by her boyfriend Jesse in favour of new student Toile, an MPDG, the formula's purpose shifts to 'becoming Pixie', winning Jesse back, and 'beating' Toile. McNeil situates her conceptualisation of the Pixie not only within existing Pixie discourse, but also within wider discourses of girlhood. In particular, much of the novel positions the Pixie within the intersecting arenas of postfeminism and the makeover paradigm. Unlike my work with *The Beginning of Everything*, in which my discussion moved in chronological order through both the novel and the model, here I will focus my attention on key moments in which McNeil's novel engages with Pixie discourse, using Stages One and Five of the model in combination with close reading strategies to assess *INYMPDG*'s status as an interventionist text. I am particularly interested in the ways in which McNeil's novel speaks to the Whiteness associated with Pixie stories, as well as how the novel's ending functions as an exchange of one problematic narrative for another, ultimately reinforcing, as MPDGYA narratives do, the status quo.

INYMPDG opens with Bea and her mother driving to school. On their commute, Bea describes her mother's outfit "with a mix of horror (65 percent) and awe (35 percent)", unimpressed by the "red dress, sleeveless with a draped neckline and a thigh slit that effectively negated the knee-length hem" Flordeliza has chosen to wear to the office that day (McNeil 2). When Bea arrives, irritated by her mother's driving and much later than she'd planned, she tells her friends that she was "at the mercy of Flordeliza, who spent an hour in the bathroom getting tarted up for work" (6). In a mere six pages, the novel thus establishes Flordeliza as a symbol of postfeminism; her outfit and makeup, or rather the affective language Bea uses to describe them (for example "tarted up"), are reflective of the "marked sexualisation of culture" Rosalind Gill identifies as one of the core features of postfeminist discourse (149). Notably, Flordeliza's sexualised, überfeminine appearance stands in stark contrast to Bea's who, though only a senior in high school, wears a navy blazer with white piping accessorised with a wheelie bag. This outfit, more suited to a middle-aged businessman than a teenage girl, codes her as masculine. Importantly, though, Bea is not merely situated within masculinity at large, but rather within a particular kind of masculinity that I identified as embodied by the typical MPDGYA protagonist: nerdy, unremarkable, and occupying a social position close to the bottom of the pack. Though it may appear that Bea's mathematical genius and Ivy League aspirations give her an edge over a protagonist such as *Our Chemical Hearts*' Henry Page, who "was happy to focus on school and getting the grades [...] to get into a semi-decent college" (Sutherland 5), in the novel's world it has the opposite effect, contributing instead to Bea's lack of social capital and rendering her so unremarkable that her peers do not know her name, calling her "Math Girl" on the rare occasions they notice her at all (McNeil 9). Thus, when the masculinised Bea later seeks to 'become Pixie', she instead becomes a peculiar hybrid of both Pixie and protagonist, the usually crisp, clear lines between these character types decidedly blurred.

This process of blurring begins on the book's dust jacket. In titling the novel *I'm Not Your Manic Pixie Dream Girl*, McNeil foregrounds Bea's voice. This centring of Bea's experience continues into the text itself, which is not only written from Bea's perspective, but in the first person. At first glance, this move seems radical; after all, as discussed earlier, the Pixie is never a point-of-view character nor is she granted any interiority (Penny n.p.). Yet, as I noted above, Bea is coded as masculine within the novel's opening pages and, as the story develops, McNeil makes clear the split between the inner and outer, between male-leaning Bea and her hyperfeminine Pixie persona, Trixie. Bea does not truly 'become' Pixie, but rather consciously plays at and imitates the trope; like the MPDGYA protagonist, it is through this pursuit of the Pixie (albeit to possess her characteristics rather than to possess her) that Bea, in Rabinian terms, learns "to embrace life and its infinite mysteries and adventures" (Rabin, "Bataan March" n.p.). In the final pages of *INYMPDG*, Bea distances herself from the cold, hard facts and figures that have informed her life choices thus far, deciding instead to tap into her 'female intuition' and "trust [her] feelings," resulting in a new-found romantic relationship with her best friend, Spencer (McNeil 319). In this way, McNeil essentially reinforces the status quo; the novel's voice is given to a gender-swapped version of the male protagonist. What may initially be read as an intervention in the trope is instead an intensification and internalisation of it – a literary cul-de-sac that simply finds McNeil back where she began.

As I noted above, *INYMPDG* can be situated within postfeminist ideologies. Bea's relationship with postfeminism, however, is linked with her relationship to her mother and complicated by their Filipinoness – a characterisation that, for Bea, should be a significant deviation from the Whiteness of the Pixie. As Jess Butler – and, indeed, several others⁸ – have noted, "the idealised postfeminist subject is a white, Western, heterosexual woman" (47). Yet, as Butler also notes, "the argument that postfeminism *excludes* women of colour [...] seems both overly simplistic and empirically unfounded" (48). However, although postfeminism is not necessarily exclusionary, it nonetheless functions as "an *affirmation* of the white heterosexual subject" (49). This affirmation is one in which the novel, in two, interconnected ways, takes part: first, through Flordeliza's position at the margins of both the narrative and postfeminism, and second through Bea's renunciation of her Filipinoness and foregrounding of her Whiteness.

Flordeliza's positioning within postfeminism is the result of the intersection of this discourse with a fetishising of the exotic Other, of her "sexy *pinay* charm", in other words, of her Asianness (McNeil 2). If "the central figure of postfeminist discourses is a white, heterosexual, middle-class woman" (Projanksy, *Watching Rape* 12), then it follows that those who fall outside this categorisation may only occupy the remaining peripheral space – if they are permitted entry to it. Though on this periphery, Flordeliza nonetheless has enough

8 See also, for example, Alison Winch, Sarah Projanksy, Angela McRobbie, and Rosalind Gill.

access to postfeminism to act as a facilitator for Bea's makeover, the first step in her journey to becoming not only Pixie, but an ideal postfeminist subject.⁹

That Bea is half-White and that her mother's looks have "been completely lost in the genetic translation" when it comes to her is crucial to this transformation (McNeil 2). It is the Whiteness within Bea that allows her to later renounce her Filipino roots and, via Flordeliza's initial facilitation of her makeover, take up her position as the central, White figure of postfeminism. By ultimately pushing Bea's heritage aside during her makeover sequence, McNeil's reconceptualisation of the Pixie as mixed race – as opposed to the exclusively White trope I identify in this article – has little impact, instead serving as the affirmation of the White subject Butler identified above. That Bea is also heterosexual and middle-class confirms McNeil's apparent departure from the trope was not particularly radical to begin with. Rather, McNeil finds herself back at the literary cul-de-sac I mentioned earlier; the parts of Bea that can be viewed as a threat to the dominant discourse are suppressed or erased over the course of the novel. Bea may be mixed race, but the ambiguity of this, as I will explore shortly, is resolved through her makeover sequence's emphasis on her Whiteness – an emphasis which, as the novel progresses, slowly dissipates to avoid discussion of Bea's ethnic identity at all. Bea's hybridisation as both Pixie and masculinised protagonist also disappears in the novel's closing chapters in favour of a more 'authentic' feminised self; Bea's pursuit of the scholarship to MIT fades into the background, while her acquisition of a normative, heterosexual relationship blazes to the foreground in garish technicolour. Indeed, the eventual erasure of Flordeliza and the side-lining of Gabe Muñoz, Bea's queer Latinx friend, are the final nails in the interventionist coffin for the novel; it is the White Spencer and coded-as-White Bea who are the focus of *INYMPDG*'s conclusion, and thus are its enduring images.

As part of her Manic Pixie makeover, Bea decides that her given name is an inadequate signifier of her new Pixie identity:

While sufficiently old-fashioned in a hipster baby kind of way, Beatrice isn't quirky enough. I mean, these manic pixies all have hopelessly adorable names: Clementine, Polly, Claire, Sabrina. For God's sake, Toile's named after a fabric. How can I outdo that? (McNeil 131).

Notably, Bea is not only concerned with how quirky her Pixie name is, but also with choosing a name considered suitably adorable. In her seminal work *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting*, Sianne Ngai asserts that "cuteness is an aestheticization of powerlessness" and "an affective response to weakness" (3). Thus, Bea's preoccupation with the 'adorableness' of her name is indicative of the Pixie trope's status as a subordinate character

9 This facilitation comes in the form of Flordeliza making Bea a hair appointment with her stylist, Armand.

within a narrative dedicated to the growth of the straight, White, cisgender, male protagonist.

The concerns at the roots of Bea's onomastic quandary, however, are seemingly unfounded; 'Beatrice', derived from the Latin for 'she who brings happiness', seems entirely fitting for a trope associated with male wish fulfilment and fantasy. Despite this, Bea chooses 'Trixie', a "diminutive of the Spanish 'Beatriz'" for her Pixie name (McNeil 131). This decision is telling on multiple levels. As a nickname, 'Trixie' serves to underpin the novel's understanding of the trope as subordinate, cute, almost literally diminutive. When read more broadly however, this choice is indicative of the problematic relationship between the MPDG and Whiteness. As I noted earlier, Beatrice is half-Filipino – or, more specifically, "only half-Filipino" (emphasis added, 2). While Bea wistfully notes that her mother has an exotic charm about her and begins her description of rival Toile by focusing on her "porcelain skin" (21), Bea describes herself as "more mutt than purebred, the cute puppy at the shelter with an indefinable lineage and intelligent eyes" (95). In these passages, Bea's racial ambiguity is positioned problematically, with the implication that while her mother's Filipinoness is fetishised and Toile, as White, is "purebred", Bea, in her liminality and ambiguity, is unattractive and undesirable. Toile is consistently described in relation to her "porcelain" or "fair" skin while her blonde hair, as Richard Dyer notes, "is the ultimate sign of whiteness" (40). Crucially, this positions her in opposition to Bea as bloneness is "racially unambiguous" (Dyer 40). It is also the gateway to being the ideal (Dyer 40). In Bea's – and the novel's – view, to be an ideal Pixie is to be cute. However, non-White women "have less access to those varieties of cute aesthetics predicated on White, Western standards of beauty" (Leyda qtd. in Dale et. al. 167). The name 'Beatrice' (in the West, at least) conjures images of Princess Beatrice of York and the White middle-to-upper classes. Theoretically, then, Bea should not need to change her name as it aligns her with the "middle-class norms, wealth, privilege, beauty, and desirability" associated with the Pixie (Thomas 38). And yet, 'Beatrice' falls short for Bea because of its ties to her Filipina heritage. She cannot see the White-centred iteration of 'Beatrice' because, for her, it names her as she is rather than as who she wants to be. For Bea, 'Beatrice' is a linguistic marker of her half-Filipinoness.

'Trixie', of course, rhymes with 'Pixie', instantly aligning Bea aurally with the trope. According to Nikki Usher, first popularised in Chicago, 'Trixie' is also a slang term for a young, White, middle-class woman (n.p.). As both Spanish diminutive and Chicago slang, 'Trixie' can thus also be read as an echo of the Philippines' colonial history, in which the country became governed by the United States after the Spanish-American War of 1898. In literally halving her name, Bea symbolically halves her heritage, erasing her Filipinoness and bringing her Whiteness to the fore, sharpening the fuzzy edges of her apparent racial ambiguity in an act of self-colonisation. In so doing, she allows herself the access to the Pixie her non-Whiteness may previously have denied. This erasure of non-Whiteness is reflected

narratively as Bea's cultural roots are not mentioned again for the rest of the novel; in effect, from the moment Bea alters her name, she is coded White.

In the final part of this case study, I want to touch briefly on *INYMPDG*'s ending and the effect this has on McNeil's attempted intervention overall. In the last hundred or so pages of the novel, Bea, as Trixie, isolates herself from her friends as she competes against Toile to win the Student Body President election. Deciding her friendships are more important than beating Toile, Bea withdraws from the race and ditches her Pixie persona. Realising she is in love with her best friend, Spencer, Bea rushes to his house to confess her feelings. Here Spencer critiques Bea's transformation into Trixie, telling her that "[t]he right guy would never want you to change. He'd like you, flaws and all" (340-341). Although Bea believes Spencer is right, reflecting that he liked her even "when I was dorky and unpopular and spitting out percentages and equations like a camel" – in other words, when she was her more masculinised self – a closer reading of the plot tells a different story (341). Throughout the novel, there is a recurring motif in which Bea is too busy or is interrupted the moment she tries to check the contents of a USB drive given to her by Spencer earlier in the book. Crucially, it is only once Bea sheds her Trixie skin, revealing a more feminised version of Bea underneath, that she finds time to check the files and discovers a video from Spencer telling Bea he loves her, thus granting her access to the postfeminist "'prize' of (a new or rekindled) heterosexual romance" (Gilligan qtd. in Gwynne 61). Indeed, Spencer reinforces this newly feminised identity by encouraging Bea to "lay off the numbers" (343). Spencer's, Bea's, and ultimately the novel's dismissal of both Trixie and of Bea's masculine coding thus functions as an invocation of Stage Five of the MPDGYA model; the 'personal growth' of the male protagonist manifests as Bea discovering an appropriately feminine version of herself, paving the way for her romance with Spencer, while the disappearance of Trixie works to mirror the Pixie leaving the narrative for good once her work is done. In this way, although McNeil shows the Pixie to be problematic and unsustainable (Bea only acts as Trixie for two weeks), she merely exchanges one problematic trope for another. In the novel's final line, Bea tells Spencer that "the Formula worked" (343). That the formula was entitled "The Formula for Happiness in High School" (40) and that the MIT scholarship, which seemingly consumed Bea in *INYMPDG*'s opening chapters, is not Bea's eventual reward results in a fatal capitulation; the final chapter is not dedicated to the results of Bea's scholarship application (the masculine), but instead focuses on Bea securing her relationship with Spencer (the feminine). The novel's enduring message, then, is not one of resistance against the Manic Pixie, but instead a reinforcement of the normative idea that true happiness can only be found through a heterosexual relationship, serving only, as the Pixie ultimately does, as a reification of the status quo.

In reading *INYMPDG* through the lens of Stages One and Five of the MPDGYA narrative model, this case study makes clear that McNeil merely gestures to intervention but does not fully enact it. While the novel seemingly plays with MPDGYA, McNeil instead intensifies and

internalises Pixie discourse via Bea. McNeil's intervention is further curbed in the exchange of one problematic rendering of femininity for another and, as I discussed above, it is an image steeped in normativity which prevails. Arguably, this ending is fitting of the MPDG herself. While the Pixie trope masquerades as a manifestation of quirkiness, like McNeil's novel she merely offers the appearance of difference while ultimately existing within parameters created by straight, White masculinity which serve to reinforce the norm. In short, McNeil's strategies of contestation are proved weak, only able to chip at the trope's walls but never quite breaking through them.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I have demonstrated two potential uses for the MPDGYA model. First, as a means of identifying, examining, and comparing typical MPDGYA texts. And second, in combination with my definitions of the Pixie, as a method for assessing a text's intervention in MPDG discourse. It is my contention that the model lays important groundwork not only for research opportunities in the field of YA studies, but for the emergence of collaborative and intersectional approaches to the Pixie – and the texts in which she appears – across multiple disciplines. As I noted in my introduction, a number of MPDGYA novels have been adapted for both the big and small screens. The model could be used, therefore, as a tool for navigating this transition from page to screen, to explore what elements of the plot, and therefore the model, are changed in this shift, and whether the adaptation is any more or less 'Pixie' than its textual counterpart. Running parallel to its use in evaluating the effectiveness of interventionist texts, the model can also be used in tandem with areas of study such as boyhood studies and studies of gender and sexuality, to name just a few, to understand the impact of what I term 'Alt-Pixies'; that is, Pixies which are not straight, White, heterosexual, and cisgender females but rather may be male, homosexual, transgender, of colour, or of any other identity that deviates from the trope as it typically appears. Indeed, it may become apparent that these kinds of Pixies do not exist, in which case the model, in combination with other fields of study, can be used to ask why. Thus, an acknowledgement of both the MPDG and the model's potential within YA allows for rich, timely, exciting avenues of research to emerge. Although the Pixie figure is afforded no future within her own novel, it is clear her life in the field of YA studies – and beyond – is only just beginning.

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