

University of Alberta

A Beautiful Inquiry: Stories in the Reflections of Beauty

by

Denise Hélène Lemieux

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Dedication

For three special people:

... my Mum who told me that if I promised not to go away to pursue my Masters she would help me accomplish my dream of graduate studies. I literally could not have done this without you. Your support, encouragement and belief in me never wavers.

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Abstract

This study explored the implicit messages in narrative fiction relating to the construction of female beauty ideas and ideals. Conversations with three young adult female participants focused on how our media-saturated culture perpetuates beauty myths specifically within fictional narratives and how these stories affect identification with the concept of beauty.

Through one selected counterstory, *Uglies* by Scott Westerfeld, participants and researcher reflected on the potential for narrative fiction to question symbolic representations of culturally encoded beauty ideology.

Furthermore, the study highlighted the importance for young adults to develop active and critical reading competencies when encountering the implied messages in narrative fiction.

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Once Upon A Time



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Introduction

At an early stage in my graduate program I was asked to describe something I was passionate about. It was an easy question. My driving passion has always been my love affair with literature. Books are more than a passion or obsession, however; they are my sustenance. I may dine on delicious fantasy, or

feast on science fiction. Most recently I find my fill in theory of many kinds from the critical pedagogy of Paulo Freire to the three psychoanalytical registers of Jacques Lacan. And to be perfectly honest, when it is time to indulge, I will turn to romance. No matter what it is, it is always satisfying.

When I was writing my statement of intent for admission to the University of Alberta, I thought endlessly about what I wanted to do. I wrote, re-wrote, thought, re-thought and finally my friend told me it did not really matter what I said I was going to do and that the focus of my research and my reason would eventually come. She was right. I started out wanting to look into the darker side of young adult fiction and how it is working to shape the culture and identity of youth – fictional texts which are widely read but not permissible on the library shelves of junior high schools. I still want to look at culture and identity but my selection of fiction has shifted.

With each new course, I kept finding myself back at the same place. It took different forms but it always focused on adolescent females and the issues they encounter within their social worlds and the unrealistic expectations played out in popular culture narratives. My more specific inspiration came from the junior high students I teach. We were in the middle of a literature circle study and one of the books they could choose was Scott Westerfeld's (2005) science fiction tale, *Uglies*. During one of the discussion days, I happened upon a group while the student responsible for the Cool Connector role was presenting. A Cool Connector can bring any item or text that they believe relates to the selected reading for the week. This student had brought in a fashion magazine and she

said that it represented what was unraveling in the narrative because the concept of beauty was so unclear. At the beginning of Westerfeld's novel, when we are introduced to the world of the Ugliers and the Pretties, we use our own cultural prejudices to create images for the characters. Later in the novel, the concept of beauty is problematized.

The Problem

It was at this point that I realized the potential of narrative fiction to perpetuate culturally encoded ideas and ideals. In today's society, we are often reminded of the influence of the media, especially in relation to young adolescents, but all these cautions are directed at advertising and visual media like film and television. Rarely did I hear or read about the dangers of current and popular fiction unless it was in reference to religious concerns (*The Golden Compass*, *Harry Potter* series) or issues of violence (Darren Shan's *Cirque du Freak Saga* and *Demonata* series) and sexuality (*Rainbow Boys*, *The Droughtlanders*). The covert and subtle implications of beauty ideas and ideals positioned within popular culture narrative texts intrigued me.

From an educational perspective relating to English Language Arts teachers, implicit messages in narrative fiction need more consideration. As English teachers, we often select texts for students. While some may refer to approved lists, or restrict themselves to the options in the aging 'book room', others select from popular and current titles. I would place myself in the third category but all three need to be concerned with what they are presenting to

students. In selecting fiction, English teachers need to consider the ideas and ideologies that are reinforced or (possibly) challenged in these novels.

The Purpose

In my study, I wanted to look at the construction of beauty in Western society, how it is perceived and how our media-saturated culture perpetuates beauty myths specifically within fictional narratives. I hoped that student participants in my study would have opportunities to explore the implicit beauty messages in narrative fiction within popular culture and how these stories affect identification with the concept of beauty. Through one selected counterstory, I desired to question the symbolic representations of beauty that have been culturally encoded through fictional texts aimed particularly at Caucasian, young adult, North American, females.

The Questions

Three specific inquiries underpinned my study: (1) How are stories of beauty created for young adult females in contemporary narrative fiction? (2) How do females create their own stories of beauty within a popular culture framework? and (3) How does interaction with popular cultural texts affect the relationship between notions of a feminine self and beauty?

My first question looked at the experiences of young girls as they reflect on fictional pieces they have already read and how that has affected or is affecting their sense of beauty. With this question, I intended to explore the female protagonists of young adult fictional pieces and how beauty plays an overt or subtle role in the narrative.

The second question asked for a closer examination of how notions of beauty influence the lives of young girls as they navigate through adolescence in a media dominated world. While we did not look specifically at advertising and visual media, these were inevitably part of our conversations about beauty as we discussed the fabrications that we, as females, create in our own realities.

It was through the third question that I wished to introduce the idea of the counterstory and the transformative potential of such stories. From the texts discussed in relation to the first question to *Uglies* as a beauty counternarrative, participants and researcher alike investigated how narratives can influence and form our sense of identity and relationship with femininity and beauty.

Through these three questions, my research goal was to inquire into the established symbol of beauty as an ideal and encourage critical, reflective thought as a way to interact with and inform experiences with narrative fiction.

Review of the Literature

Literature written about the relationship between beauty and media and popular culture is much like finding patterns in a kaleidoscope. The connections exist but with each slight turn, a new image, and different connections, appear. It is neither groundbreaking nor is it novel to assert that media and popular texts influence cultural perceptions. Research on such topics is abundant in scholarly journals such as *Journal of Advertising* and *Journal of Popular Culture*. What is less reflected, however, is a more specific focus on the multifaceted relationship that exists between the ideas and ideals of beauty and how the media and popular culture portray beauty. Before a discussion of the research on this topic is

possible, it is first important to establish what is meant by popular culture as well as how the concept of beauty will be defined in this context.

What is Popular Culture?

In a chapter aptly entitled “So: Pop Culture. Let’s Define It.”, Zeisler (2008) explains that the contemporary idea of pop culture “grew out of low culture, the uncouth counterpart to so-called high culture” (p. 1). Where high culture texts would include the likes of Shakespeare and Dickens, low culture was reserved for the penny tomes available to a much larger audience – both economically and intellectually. As pop culture became synonymous with “‘low culture,’ it was defined more by what it wasn’t – elegant, refined, erudite – than what it was” (p. 1). In some ways, contemporary culture has seen a shift in how popular culture is viewed. It is no longer ‘bottom-shelf’ or ‘low-culture’. Steven Johnson (2005) writes about the benefits of popular media in his book, *Everything Bad is Good for You*. As a reaction to negative views on popular cultural texts, he maintains that:

For decades, we’ve worked under the assumption that mass culture follows a steadily declining path toward lowest-common-denominator standards, presumably because the “masses” want dumb, simple pleasures and big media companies want to give the masses what they want. But in fact, the exact opposite is happening: the culture is getting more intellectually demanding, not less (p. 9).

Whether ‘good for you’ or not, understanding what popular culture is depends “on who’s defining it and what his or her agenda is. In a purely literal

sense, popular culture is any cultural product that has a mass audience” (Zeisler, 2008, p. 1). Popular culture, then, is any text (including visual media) experienced by many. Whether the text is popular in the classic sense of the word is not necessarily as important as how broad the scope of influence can be – accessibility is key.

Popular culture texts range from magazines to music videos and from blockbuster films to graphic novels and video games. The proliferation of these different types of media and our exposure to them create a situation where critical viewing is imperative but also where it is inevitable that the viewer is affected (Gauntlett, 2008). Even a close reading does not always negate the power of the medium. For instance, reading a magazine armed with the knowledge that you are, in fact, being influenced does not stop the message – whether it be that you do not fit into the categories of the ideals set forth or that you could fit the requirements if you only use certain products or resort to extreme measures designed to get you there – from sinking in somehow (Gauntlett, 2008). I know the powerful influence of the advertising world and yet will often find myself purchasing items suggested by the glossy pages. Gauntlett (2008) furthers the idea of popular cultural media as influential as he explains that “images of ‘attractive people’ abound. This may have absolutely no influence on how we rate our own appearance, and that of others – but that’s improbable” (p. 2). Undoubtedly, popular culture is a very coercive medium.

The strength of popular culture is that it continuously changes and grows. Since it is always current, its power rarely wanes. The presence of popular

culture is neither good nor bad, it just exists, and today it exists on a much larger scale than any other time in history. The strength and possible danger of popular culture is the potential it has to define us – a lens we peer through in an attempt to understand our surroundings and ourselves as well (Zeisler, 2008). Zeisler is speaking specifically about American history, but I believe the same assertion can be more encompassing. If this is true and popular culture not only becomes a way to define us but also a framing device through which we view the world, then it would follow that pop culture is no longer relegated to the pulp ghetto of ‘low culture’. It may be frivolous at times; it could just be out to extort money; and it has definitely been exploited as a weapon to incite unfounded fears but, according to Zeisler, “that’s all the more reason to keep an eye on [it]” (p. 148). For Zeisler, pop culture is a ‘marketplace of ideas’ and “people who don’t engage with it risk having no voice in how it represents them” (p. 148). Popular culture has become a window through which we can view a particular time frame, an agent for accessing information, and a possible tool for reform. This window, however, is not transparent and cannot be peered through clearly without the intervention of the medium we are viewing. To Buckingham (2003), media “provide(s) channels through which representations and images of the world can be communicated *indirectly*. The media *intervene*: they provide us with selective versions of the world, rather than direct access to it” (p. 3). While our window may be murky with possibly nefarious intents, the power of the media we are gazing upon and its potential to transform remain clear. Popular cultural media can be used but we need to figure out how to use it wisely.

As popular cultural texts change, so do their readers. By texts, I am not referring to print pieces only but to clothing, music, film, and even body art. Reading popular culture is reading the images that dominate the landscape of our time. Accessibility is key to defining the term, popular culture, which also contributes to its power. Pop culture texts are not restricted to the elite but can reach beyond the boundaries of socioeconomic influences as well as location. In our current media savvy world, it becomes imperative that we explore what the message *is* in the medium.

Beauty is in the Eye of what?

There are numerous clichés for beauty: ‘beauty is only skin deep’, ‘beauty is in the eye of the beholder’, and my new least favourite – as seen on a t-shirt – ‘beauty is only a light switch away’. Beauty is emphasized, ridiculed, and desired, but yet very difficult to define. Weiss (2000) relies on Plato as a starting point for a discussion about beauty myths. While Plato proposed that beauty was ‘eternal’ and ‘permanent’, Weiss asserts that:

Our culture promises just the opposite. Beauty is imagined to be fleeting, something that we must cling to with all our might because at any moment it can be stolen from us (p. 16).

Whether the thieves of beauty are time or changing ideals, this statement tells us that beauty is elusive but it does not define it. Etcoff, Orbach, Scott, and D’Agostino (2004) looked to the 1913 Webster’s dictionary for their definition – beauty is defined as “properties pleasing the eye, the ear, the intellect, aesthetic faculty or the moral sense” (p. 4). While there are a few more specifics in this

definition, it still seems to lack parameters. A more current definition, though somewhat problematic from the standpoint of this research puzzle, can be found in the Encarta World English Dictionary as used in Microsoft Word. When the word ‘beauty’ is entered into the reference tools, the following are the first two descriptors:

- 1.the combination of qualities that make something pleasing and impressive to listen to or touch, or especially to look at,
- 2.personal physical attractiveness, especially with regard to the use of cosmetics and other methods of enhancing it (1999)

It appears that these definitions play into the stereotypical representation of beauty perpetuated by contemporary media. To Ectoff (2004), “the diversity of human beauty has been strained through the sieve of culture, status, power and money and what has emerged is a narrow sliver of the full panorama of human visual splendor” (p. 4). It is not surprising that the word ‘beauty’ does not just refer to a physical aesthetic but can also imply an element of advantage.

Plato’s interpretation of beauty is difficult enough to decipher but contemporary cultural definitions are even more complicated and multidimensional (Englis, Solomon, & Ashmore, 1994). When looking at the ideals of beauty, iconic examples vary through history – “one need only contrast the plumpness of the nudes painted by Titian, Raphael, and Rubens to the stick figure exemplified by the eponymous Twiggy” (Englis et al., 1994, p. 52). Even though “the increased globalization and diversification of the society in which we live, and the popular culture in which we are immersed, are creating more [or

possibly fewer] ways to be beautiful” (Englis et al., p. 52), beauty ideals do exist and are reinforced in popular culture.

These beliefs and myths about an ideal of beauty permeate our culture right down to the fairy tales told to young children (Blair & Shalmon, 2005). In most contemporary children’s narratives there is a correlation established between beauty and happiness and this relationship is further emphasized in media targeted at the young adult audience. For the purpose of this present discussion, I will defer to the aesthetic definitions of beauty explored so far and equate beauty with a level of physical attractiveness. Later, however, I will complicate this definition once again.

How do we measure up?

It sounds trite to say that media is everywhere but it is the truth. The sheer magnitude of advertising one is exposed to on a daily basis is astounding. I often find myself wondering where an idea came from and then realizing that I had read or seen it somewhere and internalized it subconsciously. One such time involved a billboard for a well-known local spa. The main copy, in large impressive letters, declared, “I’m becoming me”. I like the idea of becoming. I embrace the unfinishedness of my own life. But I don’t think laser hair removal or botox injections are going to help me to become. The unwritten message behind this advertisement seems to be that I could ‘become’ better and that better would mean more beautiful. Gauntlett (2008) agrees and comments that we are surrounded by images of ‘attractive people’ and that “this may have absolutely no influence on how we rate our own appearance or that of others – but that’s

improbable” (p. 2). We are impacted by our surroundings and what we see around us, with popular culture dominating most of the view.

The dominant message women (and men) are being sent is that they are unacceptable as they are and the pop culture representations of beauty become something to which we aspire and create a standard of comparison we will never be able to achieve but will, none the less, relentlessly strive toward (Currie, 1999). While the media is a powerful influencing agent on men as well as women, my study focused on young adult females and, therefore, the literature reviewed focused specifically on one gender. According to Goodman, Morris, and Sutherland (2008), “the media are major socializing agents, they emphasize beauty as the route to social acceptability, and they positively reward the beautiful” (p. 148). What is not stated but implied is that those who do not fit inside the beauty box are punished for it. This beauty box is not only narrow but tends to exclude diverse representations of beauty and privileges white complexioned women (Osuri, 2008). Writing about the beauty standard in India, Osuri discusses the popularity of lightening skin creams and the emphasis on lighter skin as a beauty standard. The popular culture depiction of perfection is limited by both desired physical attributes and ethnicity. Because this message can be so damaging, it is imperative that we explore the relationship between these ideas and ideals of beauty and those depictions in popular narratives.

Even though plot lines related to the desire for physical perfection and efforts to become beautiful are not new, reality television has taken the ‘makeover’ story to a dangerous level (Zeisler, 2008). Zeisler asserts that reality

TV attempts to sell empowerment and actualization in the guise of makeovers but that they are actually re-establishing and cementing unrealistic ideals. *The Swan*, a reality program which claimed they could turn ugly ducklings into beautiful swans involved large amounts of plastic surgery – “on each episode, the beauty ideal that was reinforced was one that was literally constructed, and the women told that the very fakeness they bought into was what would liberate them” (Zeisler, p. 130). Beauty would apparently set them free. The essential message, to the participants and viewing audience, was simple; if you are not beautiful you either become so or lose.

The obvious question surrounding the beauty ideal issue is: who decides? Whether life imitates art or the other way around, standards are set somehow. Solomon, Ahsmore, and Longo (1992) suggest that fashion and beauty editors act as cultural gatekeepers “who create media messages and indirectly teach members of the general public how to think about physical attractiveness” (p. 23). They become symbolic encoders and “play a pivotal role in defining and sanctioning ideals of beauty” (p. 24). It seems like a great deal of power rests in the hands of a few to make these decisions. There are, however, some ‘gatekeepers’ who are using their status as such to promote a more varied standard of beauty. Shows like *America’s Next Top Model* have included plus size and petite models in the competitions and recently, in 2008, a full-figured ‘beauty’ finally claimed the prize. On a rival network, ABC aired a reality show entitled *True Beauty* in which contestants believed they were being judged on their physical attractiveness but were secretly being evaluated on their ability to show compassion and

empathy. It would appear that a positive message is being sent but all participants were still beautiful by media standards.

The apparent issue with beauty is that it is a paradox – it is both possible and impossible at the same time and an element of the impossibility can be attributed to the unfinishedness of the quest and never-fulfilled longing for beauty (Mallan, 2009). Where can young women situate themselves within the conflicting ideals of media and popular culture?

Beautiful Research

As I began my research on popular cultural portrayals of the ideas and ideals of beauty, I noticed that the majority of the studies focused on one dimension of body image – body dissatisfaction. While I do believe that the influence of the media on body satisfaction to be a significant issue, my research puzzle took me in a different direction. I intended to explore the narratives of beauty and how those stories affect feminine identity and identification with what is beautiful. In order to establish where I wanted to go with this journey, I first mapped out where others had been. After wading through the numerous studies on eating disorders, cosmetic surgery, and basic body dissatisfaction influenced by media portrayals of unrealistic physical expectations, I found myself where I had never bothered to tread before. In fact, until then, I had purposely avoided this path.

As a teacher of a course called ‘Girls Empowered’ – a women’s studies option for grade 9 girls – I have had many people regale me with the positive messages in Dove®’s Campaign for Real Beauty. What I knew, that perhaps they

did not, was that Dove®'s partner/sister company, Unilever, is the maker and promoter of Axe body spray and that another division of Dove® happens to own Slimfast – both of which reinforce sexist and unrealistic standards respectively. Even though I found the Dove® Self-Esteem fund and website to have some valuable resources, I did not give a lot of credit to their Campaign for Real Beauty – it appeared hypocritical. Now, after analyzing the findings of two quantitative studies completed by Dove®, I am intrigued, encouraged, and hopefully enlightened but still just a little bit skeptical.

In 2004, Dove® surveyed 3200 women aged 18 – 64 in ten countries to empirically explore “what beauty means to women today and why that is” (Etcoff, Orbach, Scott, & D’Agostino, p. 2). Their work was considered groundbreaking because a comprehensive study of this sort had not been undertaken before. Through a telephone survey, the female participants were asked to respond to a series of questions on a graduated scale of strongly disagree to strongly agree. While the findings were not surprising, they are quite informative and provide a foundation for further study in the area.

An initial finding of importance revealed “that ‘beautiful’ is not a word women willingly associate with themselves” (Etcoff et al., 2004, p. 9) and only 2% of women chose ‘beautiful’ as a personal descriptor. Despite not associating with the idea of beautiful to describe themselves, the women surveyed agreed that both beauty and attractiveness “are seen as highly valued by society, but, at the same time, rendered almost impossible to attain” (Etcoff et al., p. 25). Over half of the participants felt that “attributes of female beauty have become very

narrowly defined in today's world", 47% agreed that "the media and advertising set an unrealistic standard of beauty that most women can't ever achieve" and over two-thirds affirmed that "only the most physically attractive women are portrayed in popular culture" (Etcoff et al., p. 27). With these findings, it is apparent that women are not satisfied with how they are being represented in popular culture and media and are, at the same time, affected by the unrealistic standards being set for them.

In their conclusions, Etcoff et al. (2004) reinforce their initial hypothesis that so-called authentic beauty, while an intimate desire of women, is rarely portrayed or acknowledged by media and popular culture. In order to establish this claim, the researchers needed to determine what would constitute authentic beauty. This is where I see a potential problem with this study. Real beauty, according to Dove's study, is not about physical attractiveness but encompasses much more of who a person truly is. My issue is not that I disagree with the actual statement but with the method of amassing data about such a subjective topic. If 63% of those surveyed strongly agreed that beauty was not related to physical attractiveness then how does it follow that the majority did not consider 'beautiful' to be an accurate descriptor of self? The study concluded that "women clearly have the ability and desire to think of beauty in broader terms than physical attractiveness" (Etcoff et al., p. 35) and yet they choose not to? While women wanted to be represented differently, the researchers found that:

The definition of beauty as physical attractiveness is powerfully communicated through the mass media and has been assimilated through

popular culture. It is this ideal that many women measure themselves against and aspire to attain (Etcoff et al., p. 47).

Dove®'s 2004 study successfully explores how women view themselves in relation to media, establishes that media is a powerful tool with the potential to be transformative, and through the Dove® Self-Esteem fund created programs with the intent of using education to improve body image and self-esteem in young women (Zeisler, 2008). Unfortunately, the Dove® *Real Truth About Beauty* study did not appear to fulfill its own purpose of setting a new standard for Real Beauty.

In addition to *The Real Truth About Beauty* global report, a second document was released by Dove® in 2004 entitled *The Dove Report: Challenging Beauty*. Unlike the exclusively quantitative approach of the previous study, Dove® embarked on a multidimensional research study involving both quantitative and qualitative methods. To begin with, Dove® and a research consulting group, The Downing Street Group, reviewed previous studies about beauty to establish what had not yet been explored and discovered that “there was an emergent and novel opportunity to research the solutions and strategies that many women already are using to combat the negative feelings that beauty often can elicit” (Trotman Reid & Antonucci, 2004, p. 3). Once they had established a direction, the study involved a mixed methods approach incorporating both quantitative telephone interviews and qualitative in-depth individual interviews, ethnographic interviews and affinity groups. Also, an advisory board was selected from authors, educators, and social critics to bring expertise and insight to the study. Each member of the all female advisory board – including Naomi Wolf, author of

The Beauty Myth, - was asked to provide “an exclusive perspective on the study and what the results suggest for the future of women and the beauty industry” (Trotman Reid & Antonucci, 2004, p. 15). General findings confirm that women acknowledge the challenge of living within a society of narrow ideals and wish that the advertising industry would incorporate a wider range of beauty ‘types’. Also, women “are ready for a new definition of beauty that celebrates real types of women rather than stereotypes” (Trotman Reid & Antonucci, 2004, p. 9). One of the results of *The Dove Report: Challenging Beauty*, was the creation of *The Dove Self-Esteem Fund*, an organization which creates resources and runs workshops for women of all ages in efforts to improve self-esteem and redefine beauty.

Shortly after their initial studies, Dove® initiated a second wave with the intent to “uncover and understand the many ways that beauty, whether self-defined or imposed, impacts women’s identity, self-worth and well being” (Etcoff, 2006, p. 6). While the first study focused on how women perceive beauty as portrayed in the media, this second study delved deeper into the actual influences of these established beauty ideals and where they come from. The researchers’ review of the pertinent literature revealed similar findings to my own review. They observed that:

Overall beauty socialization among girls and women has received limited coverage, with greater focus on specific issues associated with beauty – such as weight, body image, dieting or self-esteem (Etcoff, Orbach, Scott, & D’Agostino, 2006, p. 10).

Instead of addressing the issues of body dissatisfaction, the researchers wanted to explore “beauty socialization, the harmfulness of current beauty stereotypes, and the desire for change” (Etcoff et al., 2006, p. 14) with a goal of problematizing current beauty stereotypes.

Conclusions were similar, in most areas, to Dove®’s 2004 study but there was more of a focus on the origin of these ideas and ideals of beauty and a decided emphasis on popular culture. The researchers found that the most powerful and earliest “influence for all women (15 – 64) on feelings about beauty and body image are girlfriends (peers) and mothers, followed by the media” (Etcoff et al., 2006, p. 47). It may be second to friends and family but it is still significant. In her introduction, Etcoff reveals the essential issue – “girls and women feel they must wear permanent masks approximating a current narrow ideal of beauty rather than face the world as they are, in their uniqueness and diversity” (2006, p. 6). It is this mask that I wish to remove from its place of privilege in dominant popular culture to scrutinize it in my own research.

Masks Revealed

In order to take a closer look at the ‘beauty mask’, I decided that I needed to approach it from a different angle. Media and popular culture still, unquestionably, played a pivotal role in my research but I wished to look at the more subtle influences. The studies I reviewed included advertisements and magazines as their primary focus. These texts send overt messages. I wondered about the more covert and possibly nefarious implications of subtext in pop culture narratives. Just because a novel is not selling a beauty product does not

mean it is not promoting a beauty ideal. The research in this field, from my reading, has not delved into the subtle intricacies of beauty as a culturally encoded ideal. Englis, Solomon, and Ashmore (1994) encourage further research to understand how beauty ideals are “ingrained in children and adolescents by different mass media formats” (p. 49). As consumers of popular culture, our relationship with media is complex. Douglas (1995) explains that our exposure to media is far from simple and “if we are honest, we have to admit that we love the media as much as we have hated them – and often at exactly the same time” (p. 12). In addition to the absence of an emphasis on beauty as a culturally encoded and established ideal related to identity, there is a lack of exploration into the transformative potential of counternarratives.

One such counternarrative can be found in a young adult science fiction series. *Uglies*, by Scott Westerfeld, that “offers a counternarrative that works against the consumerist aesthetics of our times which celebrate a particular kind of beauty based on notions of ideality” (Mallan, 2009, p. 85). In this first installment of a four book series, Westerfeld introduces the reader to a futuristic, apparently utopian society where you are ugly until you are made pretty.

Your sixteenth birthday brings an operation that turns you from a repellent ugly into a stunningly attractive pretty and catapults you into a high-tech paradise where your only job is to have a really great time. In just a few weeks Tally will be there. (Westerfeld, 2005, book jacket)

Tally, one of the central protagonists, encounters a snag just before her sixteenth birthday. Her best friend, Shay, has run off and she has been instructed by Special Circumstances to help them find her or stay ugly forever.

Prior to my study, I offered this novel as one of four in a Grade 9 Literature Circle unit. I had read the series a few times before and discovered the potential for this text to play a role in my research during one discussion day. As previously stated, the Cool Connector, one student whose task is to find connections between the novel and other texts, brought a fashion magazine because it represented what was unraveling in the narrative; that the concept of beauty was in question. She went on to explain that in the beginning of the book we all had an idea of what the Pretties would look like. We used our own cultural prejudices (my interpretation) and envisioned the top models of our time as Pretties. During the chapters for this particular week, however, this assumption is challenged. Tally has traveled to a place called the Smoke, in her quest for her friend Shay, and she comes across a library of sorts housing historical artifacts from what is implied to be our times. While looking through the books, she finds a fashion magazine:

“Not books. They’re called ‘magazines,’” Shay said. She opened one and pointed. Its strangely glossy pages were covered with pictures. Of people.

Uglies. (Westerfeld, 2005, p. 198)

In this passage, Westerfeld takes us to a wilderness of uncertainty. If our supermodels are considered by Tally to be ugly, then what do the Pretties look like? What has happened to the construction of beauty?

Mallan (2009) sees *Uglies* as a cautionary tale taking “readers to the extreme edge of a world that responds to the ‘what if?’ question” and that question is “What if we all became pretty? What then would the world be like? In *Uglies*, it’s not a pretty sight” (p. 87). Popular culture does contribute to establishing the unrealistic ideals of beauty but, with novels like *Uglies*, it can also contribute to a conversation that I initiated in my research.

A Beautiful Conversation

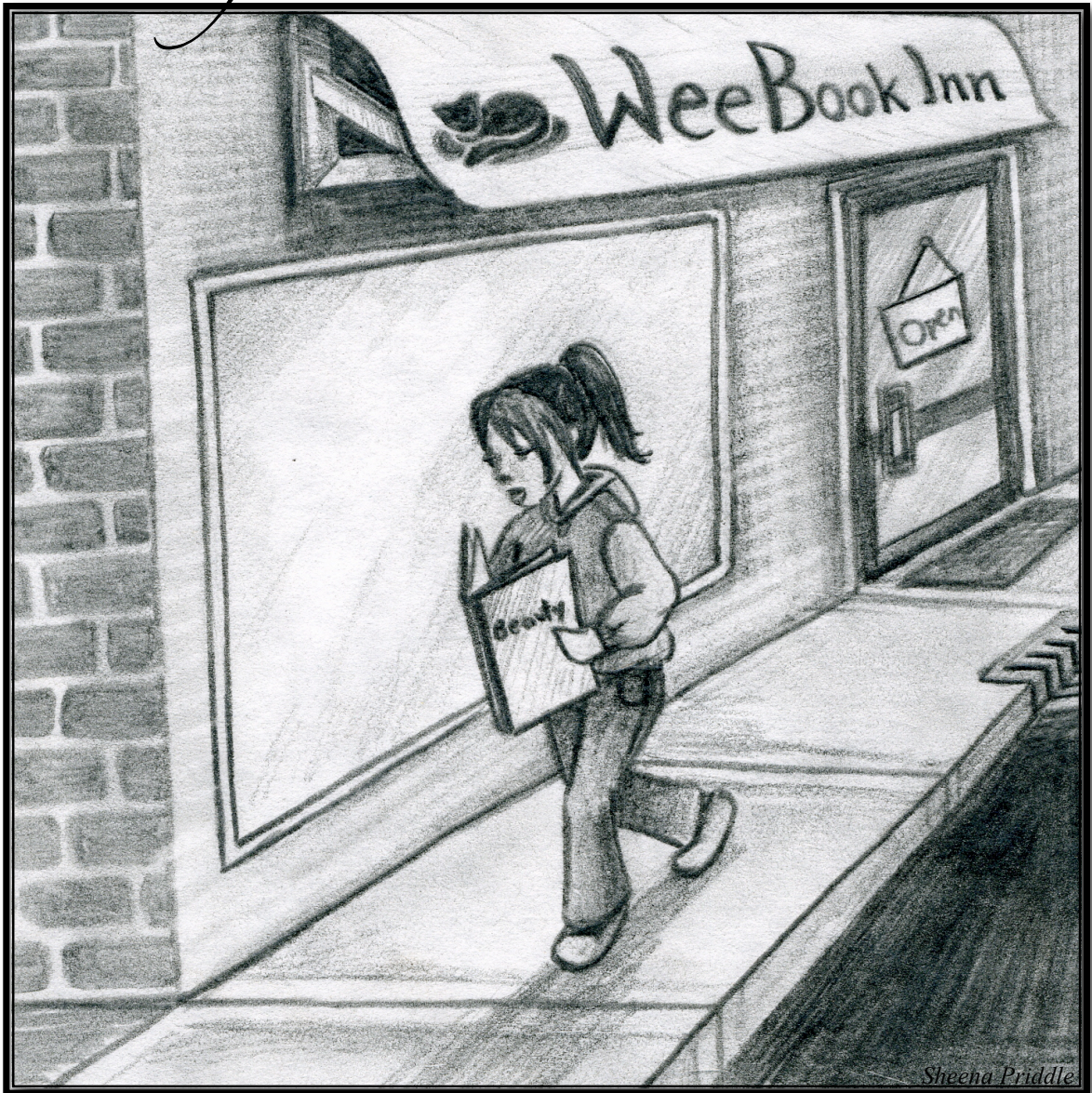
As I was going through the literature on beauty I noticed two very significant things. It is nearly impossible to define beauty and ironically most studies of beauty were quantitative. If it is so difficult to define the ideal, then how can it be quantified? While I did agree with many of the findings of the foundational work completed by Dove®, I questioned the methodology. A phone interview about such an intimate issue did not suit my desire to begin deep conversations about beauty as I find the phone to be quite impersonal. I understand the strength of the phone interview being a tool for reaching a larger population which would amass a large amount of data but I felt it was necessary for my research to take a more qualitative, personal, and exploratory approach.

Culture can be created through stories and stories have the potential to re-create culture. Thomas King (2005) said, “Want a different ethic? Tell a different story” (p. 164). The potentiality of a narrative to affect change intrigues

me. Rather than compiling numerical data about how beauty is perceived, I wished to chronicle the relationship young women have with the more subtle beauty standards implicit in the popular narratives of their own time and place. In order for the ideas and ideals of popular beauty culture to be transformed, old stories of beauty need to be reviewed, contemporary paradigms need to be discussed, and new ones need to be told.

When you pick up a novel, you enter a different world. It could be a world of fantasy, drama, romance or possibly science fiction but what sets it apart from reality is that it is not real. It is a fabrication. What is real, however, is the potential the novel has to establish or re-establish cultural ideals. Within that fictional world, the reader may or may not find him or herself. The reader could relate to the characters or aspire to become them. In fictional worlds, almost anything is possible. Fiction has the power to both create and question culture. These fabrications hold some very powerful keys to the ideals of our world – one of which is *beauty*. It was my desire for my study to unlock those doors, throw them open, and problematize whatever lay inside.

Beautiful Books



A Love Affair With Books

I used to believe that if I weighed less, or grew more, or looked better, that I would find happiness and feel beautiful. I used to sit and watch T.V. and wonder what it would be like to sit and watch T.V. without sucking in my tummy.

What would it feel like to curl up on the couch and be comfortable in my own skin?

I can't remember a time when I was not concerned about appearance. From a very young age, I was taught to value looks. I was encouraged to exercise, to diet, to dress and present myself in certain ways. Some might mistakenly think that these influences came from my mom, but the reality is that they didn't. I was, after all, daddy's little princess. I'm not entirely sure where that image comes from because if you look to fairy tales, there were no daddy's princesses. The 'daddies' are all gone in those stories. Then again, they become princesses when they meet their male counterpart, but I'm getting ahead of myself here.

Not only was I encouraged to conform to the culturally constructed ideal of beauty which meant that I needed to be thin to be beautiful, there was also a bit of an incentive program. I love to read and always have. Books are not just bound words for me but true chances to experience different things. They've always been my refuge. When I was young, my favourites were Nancy Drew, The Sweet Valley High Series, and Sweet Dreams books. Thinking back now, those books reinforced most of the ideals I was working so hard to attain. All I knew at the time, though, was that I wanted more books. And the incentive program designed for me allowed me to get them. For every 2 pounds I lost, I was given money for one book. I worked so hard to lose for what I thought was gain. What I didn't realize was that I was playing with a circle that continues to exert control over me. No one had ever said that I had to give the book back if I

gained. So, I played the game. I would lose large amounts, get the books, and gain it back. I still struggle with maintaining a healthy weight, not to mention body image.

While my story is uniquely me, it is not unique to me. Many young girls and boys alike aspire to standards set for them by others. Standards that are, at best, impossible and, at worst, dangerous for more the majority of the population. The stories played out in books and movies and on television reinforce this pressure ‘to be’ a certain way instead of just encouraging people ‘to be’.

Incentive means different things to different people. I remember in my first year of teaching sitting down with one of my French students. He had been misbehaving in class and I asked him to stay behind to chat. I asked him what was going on. He said, “I don’t like you.” I thought *Well, I don’t like you very much right now either* but said, “Why is that?”

“I don’t like your methods,” he continued, “you bribe us.”

I had taken over the class part way through the year and will be the first one to admit that I had very little idea what I was doing. I wanted them to answer questions. So I offered candy for correct responses. I saw it as incentive. He saw it as coercion.

My dad did not set out to hurt me or make me feel badly about myself. He saw it as incentive. I saw it then as pressure. But it did get me those coveted books.

Methodology

Assumptions and Rationale for Qualitative Design

When I began graduate school, I could not have imagined that in addition to pursuing personal knowledge of interest, I would also be adding an entirely new lexicon to my vocabulary. Some terms I had known before but they became foreign in their new context. Words like pragmatist and purist, qualitative and quantitative – even the word narrative (a term I thought I knew so well) took on new meaning when paired with inquiry. Ercikan and Roth (2006) assert that the fundamental reason for research is to generate knowledge. It may seem obvious but with the labyrinthine nature of educational research, the goal may become lost in the forest of terminology.

What I have discovered along the paths in this forest is that there is a battle waging under the surface (and sometimes on top of it) in educational research. I used to assume that quantitative approaches were best suited to the Maths and Sciences and that qualitative approaches fit the Humanities best. What I did not know, however, was that they could complement each other. They do not have to be separated and deciding on one approach over the other does not entail tackling the same problem from a different angle (Firestone, 1987). While the purists see the two method types as incompatible, the pragmatists envision a complementary nature between them. I would have once ascribed to a dichotomous relationship between quantitative and qualitative, considering myself a purist, but now I lean more toward the pragmatists. There are still the essential differences between quantitative and qualitative studies as Firestone attributes to

the assumptions about the world, purpose of the study, approach and the role of the researcher but, ultimately, both approaches are a way to answer questions. The important consideration becomes which question you wish to ask and what answers you endeavour to find.

It would be possible to approach the problem in my study from the two different methodologies, but doing so would alter the questions. If I wanted to measure the effect to which media representations of beauty ideas and ideals influence female identity and identification with beauty, then a quantitative approach would likely suit the purpose. Instead, I wished to understand a social phenomenon within a locational context – namely the cultural encoding of ideas through the subtle influence of narrative fiction. To me, at this stage, a qualitative design would be most effective. Also, I found myself intimately connected to my research and since I believe that you are never truly separated from what you study, qualitative methods allowed for me to not just be involved but also to be fully immersed – a participant myself.

After a year of attempting to reason out my specific methodology in all the hermeneutic circles and action research spirals, I ended up accidentally stumbling upon one approach that resonated greatly for me. It was summertime and I took advantage of the teaching break to enroll in a course. There was only one offered that sounded interesting and, in all honesty, the reason I picked it was because it had the word ‘narrative’ in the title. I assumed that since I was an English Language Arts teacher, this course would definitely pertain to my study. I was wrong. And right. The first day, when I discovered the class was, in fact, a

research methodology course for something called narrative inquiry, I panicked. I barely knew what my research questions were nor had I really identified the problem. I did not feel prepared enough to work through a specific methodology without having taken the appropriate survey course. What I discovered with this narrative inquiry experience, though, was that any study is a 'work in progress'. I did not need to have everything decided and structured. After that revelation, I made a concerted effort to bring this new perspective into all my course work and through that process, discovered an approach that fit my study, my questions, and me.

Narrative Inquiry – The Importance of Stories

For once a story is told, it cannot be called back. Once told, it is loose in the world. So you have to be careful with the stories that you tell. And you have to watch out for the stories that you are told. (King, 2003, p. 10)

Growing up, I lived in and through stories: not the stories of those around me but the ones I found in novels. I often preferred to immerse myself in fictional worlds than the one in which I lived. It almost seems natural that I found my study within a narrative realm. That is not to say that I have confused storytelling with narrative inquiry because the relationship is much more complex than that. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) propose that narrative approach is both phenomenon and method. It is not only a narrative inquiry that is carried out but also an inquiry into narrative. The stories of experience become the texts by which we can begin to understand the phenomenon in question but also provide for a rhetorical device to tell a new story. To Bell (2002), narrative inquiry goes

beyond simply telling stories “to an analytical examination of the underlying insights and assumptions that the story illustrates” (p. 208). Important to this process is “recognizing that these [stories] rest on deeper stories of which people are often unaware” and that all stories “rest on and illustrate the story structures a person holds” (Bell, 2002, p. 209). By exploring the personal narratives of experience, I hope to shift the structures that are formed in relation to the ideality of a beauty master narrative.

One of the reasons I am drawn to narrative inquiry is the fact that it begins with the researcher. While it may seem that this would de-emphasize the research problem, it does the exact opposite. Because narrative inquiry “begins with the researcher’s autobiographically oriented narrative associated with the *research puzzle*” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 41), the puzzle becomes something with which the researcher is intimately connected, thereby lending a power to the study. I do not envision the narrative inquiry puzzle as a typical jigsaw with predetermined pieces waiting to be fit together. I believe these pieces have to first be fashioned through the process and eventually an image or form may materialize. Instead of using the word ‘problem’ which implies a definite solution, narrative inquiry proposes puzzles to be discovered before they can begin to be pieced together. The entire picture or solution may not emerge as intended, if at all, but that is not necessarily the purpose of inquiring narratively. As a qualitative method, it is ultimately exploratory and exploration implies many potentialities rather than a single one answer.

Locating myself within the Narrative Inquiry Landscape

When considering narrative inquiry, it is important to be cognizant of the three dimensional space consisting of temporality, the personal and social, and place (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Neither stories nor experience exist in isolation. In addition, they cannot be distanced from their own location. Stories have a past, present and future which impacts the messages they send.

Experience links both the researcher and the participant through personal interactions and the social implications of those conversations. I believe that place refers not only to the physical surroundings of the inquiry but also to the places we find ourselves in while interacting with others. I have been told that research conversations or interviews are, ultimately, acts of intervention (G. Thomas, personal communication, January 13, 2010) and all three commonplaces of narrative inquiry have the potential to contribute to the strength of such an intervention.

A Framework for this Beautiful Inquiry

In Clandinin, Pushor and Orr (2007) a framework for narrative inquiry is developed. The seven point design requires that the researcher first justify the study. This justification encourages the researcher to reflect on the purpose of the study and his or her own narratives of experience that have led to the formation of the current puzzle. This includes looking at the personal, practical and social aspects of the study's focus (Clandinin et al., 2007). For me, the personal justification is simple – I have always struggled with the idea of beauty in my own life and seeing myself as beautiful by societal or media influenced standards

is troublesome. Perhaps it is because of my past conflicting experiences with beauty that I wish to take the opportunity to problematize the portrayals of beauty in narrative fiction. The practical aspect of justification requires a look at how the study could change things. This one is a little more difficult. The change I am hoping for is more of a social change than a societal one. I see social as interactions between people and within human social structures whereas society is the actual system in which we live. To change the system itself would be a great undertaking. Instead, I want to begin with the construction of beauty within the female social structure and provide an opportunity for young girls to engage in critical literacy activities with narrative fiction to begin conversations about the cultural encoding of beauty. From a scholarly perspective, I hope to encourage English Language Arts teachers to consider text selection as more complex than referring to a prescribed and approved list. The social element of justification asks the questions ‘So what?’ and ‘Who cares’. I would love to believe that everyone cares but am not naïve enough to think this is true. Most important, at this stage of the inquiry, is the fact that *I* care.

The second part of the framework focuses on the naming of the phenomenon. It would seem that naming the research focus or phenomenon would be an easy task but is complicated when you consider Clandinin’s (2000) experience.

Being able to say what phenomenon a narrative inquiry is about is not an easily answered question. It is not one that is answered with finality at the beginning of an inquiry or in the research proposal. As inquirers, we tend

to define our phenomenon as if life stood still and did not get in our way.

But life does not stand still; it is always getting in the way, always making what may appear static and not changing into a shifting, moving, interacting complexity. (Clandinin & Connelly, p. 125)

While I hesitate to confine my phenomenon by naming it, it is still important to have a focus. To that end, I decided my study would explore how ideas and ideals of beauty are created for young girls and established or re-affirmed through popular cultural narrative texts.

The remaining aspects of the narrative inquiry framework require the researcher to consider and describe particular methods, theoretical considerations, analysis and interpretation approaches as well as exploration of literature pertaining to research in the area, ethical concerns and what the study can contribute. Since all of these will be discussed in the following sections of this chapter, I will elaborate on each in turn.

I have referred to a considerable amount of literature by Clandinin and Connelly for multiple reasons. First, research into narrative inquiry inevitably takes you back to these two names. Secondly, I find that what they write, the way they illustrate, and the approach they take to narrative resonates with me. I found I did not have to wander too far from home before I also discovered Carl Leggo. It would appear that Canadian educational research is rich in narrative. The three principal dynamics of narrative inquiry for Leggo (2008) involve story (what happened), interpretation (so what or the significance), and discourse (how the story is told or the rhetoric of story telling). Leggo reaffirms the concept of

narrative inquiry being a process of thinking about experience and further explains that “we are epistemologically and ontologically engaged in using stories as an integral way to sort who we are as people in relation to other people. We are all creatively engaged in processes of identity formation and transformation by attending to stories” (2008, p. 3). It is exactly this ‘attending to stories’ with an endeavor toward transformation that drives my study.

Since I began this section with my accidental encounter with Clandinin’s narrative inquiry course, it seems fitting to return to and close the section with her work and her co-composer, Connelly (2000). The third commonplace of narrative inquiry involves place, which always implies a landscape to me. It is not a two dimensional horizon that I envision but a three dimensional image with me in the centre surrounded by my study. The stories I share and am privileged to hear in this place “are also set within the institutions within which we work, the social narratives of which we are a part, the landscape on which we live” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 64). My landscape is my classroom and it is this place in which my research began and unfolded.

The Role of the Researcher

In this study, as is typical for narrative inquiry, the researcher is not a sideline observer or simply an interpreter of data but an integral part of the process as a participant. It was imperative that I immersed myself in the study and experienced the progression alongside my participants. It is important to note that I have read the texts a few times before, so my experience was affected by the multiple exposures and act of deconstructing my own reading before working

with the girls in the study. I would have welcomed the opportunity to engage with texts for the first time alongside the participants; but, as a researcher, it was my responsibility to be prepared and have an idea of where I would like to take the conversation. A first reading would not provide for this type of facilitation; therefore, I took the time to work through the texts in order to frame the conversations and questions posed throughout the inquiry.

In addition to contributing to conversations with participants, as a narrative inquiry researcher, I kept a personal reading log, composing and compiling my own stories of beauty to share with participants and provide a framing for the final research piece.

Any method of research involves an act of interpretation – which will be explored in more detail presently. While member checking was a priority in my study, I do have to acknowledge my own role as an interpretive researcher and respect the fact that the stories I tell and retell here have been filtered through my own personal lens. A participant myself, I acted as facilitator, researcher, conversationalist, and interpreter.

Research Site and Participants

As a practicing teacher of both English Language Arts and an elective for grade 9 girls entitled Girls Empowered, the logical site for my inquiry was my own school and classroom. Ethical concerns caution against researching with students one currently teaches because of perceived power relationships and the issue of assessment and how the research could affect the relationship between teacher and student outside of the study. At the same time, relationships need to

build in narrative inquiry and the current time frame of my graduate program did not provide for such development.

With these considerations in mind, I approached two former students who had been in both my Language Arts class as well as Girls Empowered during the 2008/2009 school year. At the time of the study, the two girls were attending local high schools in my community and responded positively to the invitation to research. One concern I had with approaching my own former students was whether or not they would have read the central text for the study during their time in my L.A. class. Fortunately, both girls had chosen other texts during the Literature Circle Novel Study. The other participant was a student in the school where I teach. A power relationship was not an issue as I did not teach this student and had established that she had not previously read the text.

All of the girls chosen for this study were extensive readers, powerful writers, and expressed great interest in this particular research focus. In my relationships with them, I found them to be perceptive and thoughtful as well as individual and independent thinkers.

Data Sources

The collection of data for this study involved three methods: individual conversations, personal artifacts and an online discussion forum.

Narrative inquiry distinguishes between research interviews as field texts and conversations as field texts. In a conversation, both participants are active and contributing to the progression of the ideas being discussed and a dialectical relationship is formed. Researchers using individual conversations as a method of

data collection must be prepared with questions they wish to use as a guide for the conversation, but are not restricted to a set list. It is also important to note that conversations require active listening whereas there is the potential danger in an interview to refer only to the prescribed questions as a checklist without any interaction. To Clandinin and Connelly (2000), “the listener’s response may constitute a probe that takes the representation of the experience far beyond what is possible in an interview” (p. 109). This in-depth probing must be conducted in a place of trust with care for the experience described by the other always in mind. The strength of conversations can also be a limitation. With a semi-structured approach there is the potential to wander from the focus. In such cases, it is the responsibility of the researcher to make sure that time is utilized effectively and that the conversation remains centered. With both the advantages of conversations and the limitations in mind, it is still my opinion that the most valuable approach to the subjective topic of beauty is through face-to-face interaction. I felt this genuine and personal communication enhanced the exploration of my research puzzle through these individual conversations.

Every puzzle needs more than a few pieces and this is where the artifacts fit. From photographs to memory books and boxes, “many of us collect a variety of materials as we compose our lives” and “these artifacts provide a rich source of memories” with the potential to create “something that might be called an archaeology of memory and meaning” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 114). I requested that participants bring and create artifacts related to their individual understanding and interpretation of beauty as a social construction, in order to

provide an opportunity for deeper conversations about the symbolic representations of beauty in popular culture. To question the symbol, it must first be discovered. A limitation of artifacts as a data collection method is its inherent subjectivity. What is valuable to one person may seem insignificant to another. Once again, though, the limitation is also an advantage because without subjectivity, the subject cannot be revealed and without the subject or participant, I would have no stories. The telling of the artifact's story is privileged, not the relative importance of the item itself.

As my research is couched in the world of popular culture, it seemed only natural to incorporate one of the most prevalent popular cultural mediums – the internet. Online networking sites dominate the cyber landscape and many young adults are quite comfortable within this artificial space. By providing a venue through which participants could have timely communication with me and each other, more pieces of my research puzzle could be formed. There was the potential for misrepresentation in the artificial world of the internet where avatars and profiles are plentiful and malleable but I hoped that the participants would use the social network as another communicative tool.

Individual Conversations and Artifacts

Specific dates were not predetermined for individual conversations as it was possible that participants would move through the narrative at different paces. As such, dates were determined between the participant and researcher through emails. I had intended to conclude the conversations by the end of June 2010 but the participant's schedules changed the timeline. Two of the girls, in their first

year of high school, had exams and I did not want to interfere with their study time considering both are very diligent students. I did complete conversations with one participant but with the end of the school year and summer activities, the final conversations with the other two were not finished until the end of August.

While I knew that some questions would develop during and between conversations, each collaboration had a definite predetermined focus. The first conversations, which took place before the text, *Uglies*, was read, explored the participants' previous experiences with representations of beauty in narratives. Participants were asked to bring a 'beauty' artifact to this first meeting. The focus of the first conversation was to establish what beauty was and has been to the participants, as well as where and how these idealities were constructed.

The second interview would take place at the midpoint of reading. Together the participant and researcher conversed about reactions to the text, changes in impressions, a deconstruction of reading as process and the narrative in relation to the messages it is sending. A second artifact, reflecting stories of beauty, was shared. The focus of this conversation revolved around the potential of fiction to form and transform culture.

During the third conversation, which was held after all reading was completed, final reactions to the texts and implications of *Uglies* as a counternarrative were explored. A final artifact, of the participant's making, was a central discussion point. This last conversation looked to the future of beauty as an idea and ideal.

Online Discussion Forum - NING

The individual conversations revolved around the primary text whereas the proposed focus for the NING discussions was to consider the social implications of beauty narratives and the ideas and ideals of beauty. NING.com is a social networking site that allows individuals to compose web logs (blogs) and provides a forum where groups of people can collaborate and discuss ideas. The NING that has been created for this study (<http://beautifulinquiry.ning.com>) has the most strict privacy settings and only those invited through email will have access to the site. I created email addresses, using pseudonyms, for my participants so that their own personal information was not associated with the NING.

My intent was to post different texts in a variety of forms – i.e. videos and images – pertaining to the concept of beauty and ask participants to respond to these texts. NING participation was encouraged but not strictly required. My desire was to put the questions out to the group, in a venue pertinent to their own culture, and unpack what unfolded.

Unfortunately, the NING forum conversations did not go as I had hoped and because of very little interaction between participants and with myself, I chose to focus primarily on the individual conversations. Whether because the sample was so small that interaction appeared forced, or because summer holidays are not conducive to online scholastic endeavours, it seemed best to shift my attention to the one-on-one conversations.

Collection of Data Sources

Individual conversations were audio recorded and the transcripts composed by a third party within a short period of time to allow for immediate impressions to resonate. By transcribing without delay, I was able to reflect with the subsequent conversations in mind. Transcripts of conversations were shared with participants for member checking. Participants were given the opportunity to add to, restrict, or clarify data to be used.

Data Analysis and Reporting

Once the data was collected, it became my task to analyze. I do not, however, feel comfortable with the term analysis for what I envisioned. To me, analysis implies a dissection of sorts – a breaking up of individual parts to be closely inspected. While close readings will feature prominently as I immersed myself in the stories I had collected and shared, I did not wish to isolate or remove parts of the narrative irrevocably from the whole. Instead, my desire was to work with and within the stories to unpack meaning and inform interpretation. The meanings I am searching for are not finite. I was not looking for specific answers but potentialities. Answers or definable meaning are difficult in narrative inquiry; instead it can recognize “some of the possibilities of meaning that lie always in the seemingly tangled messiness of lived experience” (Leggo, 2008, p. 8). As I sifted through the lived experience of all my participants and myself, I needed to remember my role as an interpretive researcher. Clarification and member checking allowed the participants to contribute to the placing of the pieces within the puzzle but, ultimately, I was responsible for selecting these

pieces. It is difficult to state explicitly what I was looking for and while it may seem like a clichéd response, I truly believed that I would know the pieces when I saw them. The story I wished to tell may not have been present in all the pieces that formed and while they were important in the overall tapestry of my study, specific pieces did not resonate with me. I did recognize the picture forming when I saw it and became quite excited as the image unfolded before me.

The discourse or the rhetoric of writing narrative inquiry is a primary concern and reporting narrative inquiry should not be viewed in the form of a linear plot. It is much more like a rhizome branching in many directions without a specific centre (Leggo, 2008). Does my eventual story have a beginning, a middle and an end? No. But it is narrative. It tells a story and it begins somewhere and travels in different directions. It does not have a traditional ending because it is only the beginning. The conversation I initiated does not have a perceived end point. Answers to the research problem are not explicitly clarified but left up to the audience and determined by the reader who is the ultimate creator of meaning for any text. Leggo (2008) encourages researchers using a narrative inquiry methodology to “let readers contribute to making meaning out of the stories, as they inevitably will anyway. Instead of trying to close down understanding, we should be opening up possibilities for wide-ranging connections, questions, and insights” (p. 6). This approach and the privileging of the reader is supported by Peshkin (2000) who asserts that “interpretation is an act of imagination” and that “it is the work of others to reject, modify, and reconstrue the researcher’s selection of ‘fact’” (p. 9). I believe that Peshkin’s use of

quotations around the word ‘fact’ imply that the fact referred to is not without interpretation. Typically facts imply truths but within my study, truth is not constant but ever changing. There is no one truth of beauty and as such the primacy of reader interpretation remains key to the findings. If I hope to tell a different story, I need to include my audience as part of the process because only through experiencing a text can individual meaning be created and varying truths explored.

A Post-Structural Lacanian Semiotic Reflection

In order to set my reader up for interpretation, there are particular streams of thought to which they need to be introduced. I have reflected on my findings with a post-structural approach with reference to Lacan's three registers and considerations of how semiotics has influenced my thinking.

When I first began my research, I was intent on sticking solely to psychoanalysis, but with time, participant conversations, and reflecting on the conversations, it became apparent that while symbolic ideas were definitely present, they contained the fluidity of meaning ascribed to post-structural thought and while I do want to disrupt symbolic ideals of beauty, it is also imperative to look closely at how the ideas and ideals of beauty have shifted for my participants not only in their personal experiences but also within their experiences as they encountered the text, *Uglies*. These “ideas are the effect of meanings we learn and reproduce” (Belsey, 2002, p. 7) where primacy is given to the experience and interpretation of the reader and not the author of the text. In Posner’s (2011) words, “the purpose [of reading] is no longer the search for a prefabricated

message, but the creation of sense” (p. 21). It is this sense and the formation of it that I intended to explore in the conversations about beauty and the artifacts and stories shared.

I had decided to abandon Lacan and turn my attention completely to post-structuralism, but after immersing myself in even more reading, I discovered that the two are quite complimentary. Jacques Lacan proposes that we exist within and experience three registers: the Real, the imaginary and the symbolic are intertwined within a non-static structure and “constantly act on each other, defining each other and themselves in contradistinction to one another” (Ross, 2002, p. 1). We are born in the Real and once we connect images with language we can move through the imaginary and into the symbolic. The Real is complete experience without imagination or interpretation which is why we very rarely encounter the Real in our adult lives. Instances of trauma that defy explanation and understanding can cause us to briefly re-encounter the Real register. The imaginary is where identification begins to unfold and leads to the realization of symbols. The signified or concept works with the actual sign to form the meaning inherent in the symbolic. This symbolic order is where the ideality of beauty rests. It has become the sign or ideal defined by the signifier (name or word) of ‘beautiful’ and the signified or actual representation itself – whether it be a supermodel in a magazine or a perfectly sculpted profile. The symbolic is defined through language as once named we can attempt to understand, but it is this very use of the language of beauty that I have endeavoured to problematize in this thesis. Further, it is in the malleability of language as the signified slides under

the signifier that modifies meaning and interpretation. Beauty is not a constant symbol but a changing idea.

Ethical Concerns

Narrative inquiry provides a vast amount of potential directions from exploration to interpretation but its very nature of dealing with stories and experience can be an ethical concern. Stories are personal and stories about beauty are intimately personal. Adams (2008) says that when “we lift a piece of a life on the page from its larger story, we separate it from its written, constitutive conditions” and that “we must use a different sensitivity when working with life texts” (p. 183). It is imperative that I treat the stories of my participants with the same level of respect that I would give to each of them personally. “To engage in ethical thought and action at all, one has to accept certain baseline commitments, such as respecting the dignity of human persons” (Hostetler, 2005, p. 19). My participants’ stories reflect who they are within my inquiry and I need to be vigilant about representing them authentically.

Magolda and Weems (2002) ask that as qualitative researchers we consider 6 points in issues of potential harm. To begin with, we must incorporate ethical concerns as part of the planning process and not a separate piece reserved for ‘official’ approval. Participants should be aware of the potential harm and it is the responsibility of the researcher to make them aware. During the process, we must consistently revisit and reflect on our ethical obligation to do no harm while familiarizing ourselves with our own research context. Finally, they remind us that writing of any sort is a political act and that in reporting or representing the

participants, we need to be sensitive to the integrity of the data. Ultimately, it is the researcher's responsibility to be cognizant of his or her own position within the process while at the same time appreciating the immense task of interpretation and construction of knowledge (Magolda & Weems, 2002). In essence, ethical concerns do not begin and end with official clearance for a research study but play a significant role in any study involving persons throughout the entire process. Clandinin (2006) proposes that "we need to imagine ethics as being about negotiation, respect, mutuality and openness to multiple voices" (p. 52). Each of the voices in my study deserves to be treated with a delicacy required within the sensitive realm of beauty.

Not only did I need to be aware of how my participants are treated and represented, I also needed to consider myself. Self censorship is a danger in any form of writing and even more so in personal storytelling. I am concerned about misrepresenting myself and being judged by my stories but I am also tentative about how others in my own life and in my own stories are perceived. Adams (2008) posed the question – "Will I silence myself worrying about harming *them*?" (p. 184). This is a dilemma I struggled with in writing the thesis.

Research Contributions

Anyone who writes is hoping someone will read what they have written and that they will be affected by what they read; perhaps even inspired to act. The hope that I had in conducting my research is twofold. I would like for young adult females to be cognizant of the subtle messages about beauty they are

internalizing as they read narrative fiction and for English Language Arts teachers to take a critical look at the texts they choose for youth.

Paulo Freire (1987) said that reading the world precedes reading the word and while I agree, I also believe that in reading the word we begin to create worlds. I mentioned previously that I lived my life in books; to take it a step further, I lived books in my life as well. As I think about the effect narrative fiction has had on shaping my own experiences, I am reminded of a scene from the movie *You've Got Mail*. Kathleen Kelly, the central character is talking about her mother and the impact her mother's store, The Shop Around the Corner, and the books within it had on its patrons. She says:

I used to watch her, and it wasn't that she was selling books, it was that she was helping people become whoever they were going to turn out to be. When you read a book as a child it becomes part of your identity in a way that no other reading in your life does. (1998)

The fictional worlds in young adult literature invite the reader to reside within them for a short while; however, the experience does not end with the final page. After the cover is closed, that world filters through the pages and becomes a part of the reader. When viewed critically, the messages in fiction can be discarded but sometimes the influence is so subtle it is almost imperceptible. These are the messages, especially pertaining to beauty ideas and ideals, that I hoped to unfold in my research. To be aware of what we are reading and how it affects us is different from being critical; it entails more of a critical sensitivity and discerning approach. It is not my intent to interfere with the pleasure of reading but to give

the reader a pause – a chance to review the subtle influences of narrative fiction and decide independently which messages they wish to read in (and into) the world.

As an English Language Arts (ELA) teacher it has been my privilege to choose texts for our library and for the ELA classes. While I do sometimes refer to the ‘approved lists’ compiled by Alberta Education, more often than not I seek the advice of students. After all, they are the audience for these texts. What I have not consciously considered before is precisely what I hope my research will inform. ELA teachers have a responsibility to encourage students to read critically and “identify and discuss how timeless themes are developed in a variety of oral, print and other media text” (ELA Program of Studies, 2000, p. 33). As we select, and to some extent exclude, texts, we need to respect the power of the fictional medium. The idea is not to censor but to inform and encourage readers to reflect on the messages they may be internalizing.

We still want to visit these fictional worlds but we must be wary of blind acceptance. Whether it is an ELA teacher selecting a novel or a young female pulling a book from the shelf, the culture bound within the pages of narrative fiction has power. In the pages of *Inkheart*, by Cornelia Funke (2003), narration literally comes alive and Mo cautions the reader that stories do not end on the last page any more than they begin on the first. Stories continue on and evolve even after the book is closed. They are never truly finished and this is where the potential for change resides. With counterstories like Westerfeld’s *Uglies*, concepts like beauty as an ideal can be challenged and new fictions and worlds

created. To disrupt beauty within the social world of young adult females, different stories need to be shared – not to replace the old ideal with a new sign or symbol but to create a beautiful story in experience.

Beauty Unmasked & Revealed



A Shattered Slipper

I remember sending my first email. I was 21. At 23 I found myself in love – with the internet. I was only working half days and would rush home, log in, and surf. I spent most of my time in a film trivia chat room and came to know

most of the ‘regulars’. We even had our ‘preferred’ spots in the room. Mine was the bottom right hand corner. I even remember entering the room sometimes to see someone in my spot and, if they were a regular, they’d move; if they were new, someone would tell them to move. It was my own mini family.

I could be whoever I wanted to be when I entered the online world. Everyone sported avatars or small pictures representing themselves but very few people actually had ‘real’ pictures. On rare occasions we would pull out the true pics but never for very long. It was as if people didn’t want to tamper with the illusory world we had created. Simple avatars expanded into extravagant depictions of our personality. Not only would I sit and chat about movies, but when the ‘tagging’ or painting rooms became popular, I frequented them and eventually became a sought after painter. From my early dabbling with Paint Shop Pro and tacky beyond tacky sparkles to Adobe Photoshop and the classic blending of what I believed to be true art, I could transform a simple avatar into something new, something unique, something beautiful. It was all make believe though. I even named my paintshop Faux Façade; I liked the redundancy, though most chatters didn’t get it.

It was in the film trivia chat room that I met someone with whom I would spend the next 7 years. He was top left. I’d like to say we met in the middle but our relationship was never that equal.

When I was growing up, I’d planned to be married by 25 and have at least 2 children by 30; after all, that is what seemed to happen in all the books I read and definitely in all the movies I watched – fiction had a timeline and I wanted to

follow it. The ‘prince’ I found seemed to fit with at least part of my idea of happily ever after. He proposed when I was 26 and I had a wedding at 29.

It was beautiful. I had planned everything pretty much on my own. My dress was reminiscent of Juliet, it was Christmas time, I had a horse drawn carriage, a white cape complete with fur muff, a castle – the Hotel MacDonald, and as close to glass slippers as I could find. The fairytale was complete. Except for one small thing. None of it was real. It was beautiful beyond my own dreams but it was staged beauty with no substance.

My ‘prince’ didn’t have the paperwork from his previous divorce so we could not get a marriage license. I found this out a month prior and could not bring myself to shatter the image I had carefully created so I went through with the façade. Cinderella did not have to worry about legalities; everything just worked out. I had lived so long in a fantasy world that I kept the fiction going. Sometimes we have to take off the glass slippers and really look at them to see if they are authentic or fabrications.

Reading is like that for me. I can become so immersed in the narrative that time can pass by and I don’t even notice. I remember my Nana getting very frustrated with me when I was little and she had apparently been calling my name for over 10 minutes. I hadn’t responded. I was reading. I was the daughter who would willingly go to bed and turn out the lights at the assigned time but hours later could be found tucked under the covers with a flashlight and whatever book held me captive.

As a child, I did not like to analyze books. I thought it took away from the magic of them. Now, as a teacher, I love to scrutinize every little bit. It no longer detracts from the fantasy. It allows me to enter the pages like never before.

It is sometimes difficult to get students to take themselves outside of the narrative and ask them to look at it critically. Is it not a mark of a good writer if they are able to captivate their audience? The danger comes not when we delve into the fiction but when negative messages are internalized without the reader even acknowledging them. Works of fiction are façades but the realities they can sometimes create and reinforce are very real.

Reading *Uglies*

I recently finished reading *Uglies*. I turned the final page while flying somewhere over the ocean between North America and Europe (I truly am geographically challenged). I am not quite sure how many times I have thumbed through the pages of the first book in this series by Scott Westerfeld. From my initial read quite a while ago to the re-reads that inevitably follow a book I love and from offering *Uglies* as a Literature Circle novel option for grade 9 (which requires an annual refresher) to deciding that Tally Youngblood and the Bubblehead Pretties would become the focus of my Masters work, I would definitely be in the double digits by now.

Was this most recent read different from the others before it? Absolutely. Every time I read a book, it is different. Nothing has changed in the text but everything has changed in the meaning because I have changed.

As I began the process of looking at how I read, I did what I always do

with something new – I turned to research. I read examples of the deconstruction of reading in other thesis writing, I looked at those writers’ reference lists and sifted briefly through the piles of books, articles, websites etc. exploring the process of reading. I wrote down some different ways of reading and began organizing my thoughts into these respective sections. I pondered the varying approaches to understanding and interpreting text. And then I put down the article I was reading and looked around.

I happened to be in my classroom and it was the beginning of class. Typically, my Language Arts classes start with 10 minutes of reading. This allows for a few things: students are able to settle into the class (especially if it is just after lunch), I have time to collect assignments or talk to individual students if required, and, most importantly, I also get an opportunity to read. My students were all in their seats with various texts in front of them. One student was reading a graphic novel, another had the latest Cassandra Clare propped up on the desk and directly in front of me, a young girl was finger scrolling on the screen of a Kindle eReader. As different as their chosen text and medium were, their experiences were just as varied. No two of them would see the same thing in a book and no two of them would approach a book in the same way.

While I appreciate the research I did uncover about the reading process and approach to reading, it was in this moment that I realized I would be unable to specifically use any of it for my own journey through *Uglyville* and into New Pretty Town. I would have to approach *Uglies* in my own way. That is not to say that I have not been influenced by the research both recently and during my career

as a classroom teacher but that I will be drawing more upon my experience as a reader; which began a long time ago.

I do not remember the first book I ever read, nor can I recall actually learning to read but what I can vividly recollect is the fact that I have lived my life in books. At the beginning of the movie, *You've Got Mail*, Meg Ryan's character, Kathleen, writes to an online interest and in one of the conversations, the bookstore owner comments on life and books. She says, "So much of what I see reminds me of something I read in a book, when shouldn't it be the other way around?" (1998). I feel the same way.

I have a Garfield book bag that reads "Some of my best friends are books" and even though I giggle when I see it, I know it to be true. Fictional worlds are where I go to retreat from this one. A couple of years ago, I was talking with a grade 8 class about differences and how students often treat each other unfairly. The discussion led to one student mentioning how there was a boy in gym class who would, when given free time, immediately go to the stage area, pick up a book and read. My student could not understand why this individual would forgo free gym time. Another student in my class, who rarely voiced his opinion, raised his hand and said, "Maybe he prefers the world in the book to the one he's living." Pretty profound words for a 13 year old but I completely understood what he meant. That was me. That is me. Books were then and still are my refuge.

Now, however, I must endeavour to remove myself from the escape of books and look back at both the narratives and my experiences with them to see

and be able to discuss how I am affected by fiction. What ideas and ideals have been seeded in my mind and how can I appreciate the power of narrative and its transformative potential while at the same time ensuring enjoyment.

This brings me to my process as a reader. What is it that I do as I read? How does my relationship with the text, coupled with my own life experiences, form meaning? For me, it comes down to three things: I read, I question, and I write. The one thing I try not to do while reading is answer. I might make a few predictions but I attempt to avoid deciding where the author is going to take me. That is their job. Mine is to follow the narrative path, leaving myself breadcrumbs in order to return later.

Before I continue, I have a confession to make – I write in books. Some would say that is a form of vandalism but for me it is a method of recording my own thoughts and experiences while I read. Sometimes I use stickynotes or (eek) dogear the page but usually I underline, circle, or write in the margin. This is also a process I encourage in my students – with a definite emphasis on the stickynote method if it is a library book they are reading.

Before picking up my margin breadcrumbs and turning them over to see what they may contain, I'd like us to make our way to Uglyville and meet Tally Youngblood.

Scott Westerfeld's novel, *Uglies*, begins with a typical teen looking out of her window wishing for something she doesn't have. However, when you turn the first page and Tally Youngblood's room starts talking to her, readers discover they are not in our world. Nothing is typical. And while normal does exist,

anything 'normal' is considered ugly.

Tally's world is divided. There is a river that separates Uglyville from New Pretty Town and your ticket across the bridge is the operation you get when you turn 16. You turn Pretty. Tally has been waiting not so patiently for her 16th birthday. All her friends are older, have turned Pretty already and moved across the river where ugly doesn't exist, and Uglies like Tally are not welcome, not even to her best friend, Peris. After sneaking across to see him and almost getting caught, Tally promises to behave, wait out her time and finally become Pretty. But then she meets Shay.

Shay, like a lot of the uglies Tally knew, likes to play tricks. It is almost expected that uglies will push the boundaries and see how much they can get away with. It is all a part of growing up. On one of their forbidden treks outside of the city, Shay takes Tally to the Rusty Ruins and tells her about a different way of living. Shay talks about the Smoke – a place where you don't have to turn Pretty. And she talks of David – the guy who could take them there.

As much as her new friendship with Shay means to her, Tally refuses to run away with Shay to the Smoke and remains in Uglyville ready for her operation. Her 16th birthday arrives and she anxiously boards the hovercraft eager to move to New Pretty Town. Unfortunately, plans have changed and Dr. Cable, a scary woman from Special Circumstances who oversees pretty much everything in Tally's world, threatens the future Tally has always dreamed of. Special Circumstances is interested in the disappearances of many Uglies, including Shay,

and would like Tally's help in finding them. Tally doesn't want to betray Shay but the alternative is to never turn pretty at all. She eventually agrees.

After a lengthy journey to the Smoke, Tally finds herself living a completely different life. One she begins to like. Her original design to reach the Smoke, contact Dr. Cable and return for her operation takes a turn once she gets to know David – who was born in the wild. His parents, who had been doctors performing the Pretty operation for years, discovered that part of the operation involved modifying brain patterns and more specifically individual thought. Not only was their patients' physical appearance controlled but so was their behaviour.

Learning this piece of information horrified Tally and solidified her resolve to stay in the Smoke. Unfortunately, by destroying the tracking device Dr. Cable had sent with her, Tally activated it and awoke the next day to a complete attack by Special Circumstances. Both Tally and David are able to escape but Shay and the others do not, and the next time they all meet, Shay is Pretty and David's father is dead.

This first book of what eventually became a 4 book series, ends with Tally deciding she wants to make amends for everything that has happened. David's mother, Maddy, had developed a cure for the brain lesions caused by the Pretty operation. However, she refused to use it on anyone who had already undergone the operation considering they would not longer be able to make such decisions for themselves. Although Tally no longer wants to become a Pretty, she volunteers herself as a test subject for the 'cure'. Giving written consent prior to

returning to the city, Tally ensures that Maddy will give her the ‘cure’ after she’s had the operation. The novel ends with her approaching the authorities and saying, “I’m Tally Youngblood, make me Pretty.”

Westerfeld’s novel, *Uglies*, is the primary text for my research and provides a jumping off place for many of the conversational points I wanted to explore with my participants in relation to the concept of beauty. It gives readers a glimpse into a world where a specific type of perfection can exist. People do not strive, as some do in our society, to ‘become’ aesthetically beautiful because they all know that once they turn 16, it will just happen. As young girls read this novel, will they see such a possibility as preferable or repulsive? In my read of *Uglies*, the Pretty world is as vacant as the minds of all the Pretties in it. But that’s my read. Let’s see what my participants thought.

A Few Princesses

As I mentioned during the previous methodology section, selecting my participants required an existing familiarity. The time constrictions and my desire to continue teaching a full course load while working on my program did not provide the necessary time to build the sort of relationship I would need with the participants in order to discuss fiction and beauty. To that end, my participants included three female students with whom I have had and continue to have relationships. I was not teaching any of the three of them while conducting the research but I did have all of them in at least one of my classes while they were in junior high. I believe Language Arts provides the opportunity for teachers to get to know students quite well. Writing can be very personal and students must have

trust in their teachers for them to willingly share stories. The three girls in this study were in my Language Arts classes and I also had two of them in the option Girls Empowered 9. Not only did I have the pleasure of teaching all three, but they also continue to visit and update me on how they are doing in high school. This trust that was formed during their time as students in my class allowed us to bypass the introductions at the beginning of the research required to become familiar – we already were.

During our conversations, pseudonyms for each of the three girls emerged. One of the questions, which I will elaborate upon further in this section, asked that the girls share a ‘first story of beauty’. After the first two girls selected Disney narratives fitting the traditional Princess genre, I was interested to see if the third would follow and she did. For this reason, I have decided to use their chosen princesses – their first experiences with beauty – as their respective pseudonyms. The links between the girls and the princesses they chose is strengthened by the fact that they do have commonalities with their choices. Ariel (Participant 1) is musically inclined and very talented; Belle (Participant 2) is a young girl who devours books; and Pocahontas (Participant 3) is committed to an appreciation of the natural world which she explores through her photography. All three choices support the assertion that we best recall those fictional characters in which we see ourselves reflected.

Where to start the Story... Puzzle Pieces and their Placement

As I waded through the many pages of conversation transcripts, I thought about how to bring it all together. Should I deal with each participant in isolation and then tie it all together at the end or would it be best to weave their stories and our conversations as they unfolded. Eventually, I just stopped thinking about it and that is when the answer came to me. I could not deal with each participant on their own nor could I remove my own responses from their contributions. The conversations became a framing device in which I was able to see pieces of the puzzle take shape.

I know from my work with Narrative Inquiry that this is how it is ‘supposed’ to happen but I found it very difficult to let the process work itself out. I am a planner. I like to have everything set and organized before I begin anything. Being able to back away from something so personal was almost impossible but it did work. Instead of fitting each conversation into a predetermined box to be interpreted, I let the conversations create the form and the pieces that emerged paint a beautiful image.

Conversation #1 – Looking at Beauty The Beauty of Reading

One of my goals as an English Language Arts teacher is to create readers. I know that I have to focus on structure and style of writing; make sure to include grammar; and ensure that my students know the definition for and can identify everything from a satire to an oxymoron; but, behind it all and driving it all is my desire to encourage them to connect with fiction or whatever it is that they are reading. For me reading is an escape but for others it can be torture.

When I was considering the selection of participants for this study, as outlined in the previous section, it was only natural that I would gravitate toward those students who loved to read as much as I do. What I did not anticipate was how similar our relationships would all be with works of fiction.

I began our first conversations by asking the girls, “Why do you read fiction?” to which they responded:

Ariel: Never really thought about it before. I guess it’s just very intriguing and interesting and I like how you can lose yourself in a different world and be that character or be in that situation and, it’s just very relaxing, too.

Researcher: How is it relaxing?

Ariel: Like when, I don’t know, when you just wanna curl up, you know, curl up with a book or whatever, you can just lose yourself in the book.

Belle: Well, it gets you away from reality and it’s more enjoyable, I guess, because non-fiction is about real stuff. Like, my mom likes to read non-fiction, but it’s mostly stories to do with people who were in war or people who climb Mount Everest and died or have survived and all this, which really annoys me, but because it’s so depressing I couldn’t read it.

Pocahontas: I see it like an escape kind of thing, so you gotta day of school, and that’s the real world, and then you can go into your fantasy world, that’s my favourite, I like sci-fi.

All three girls implied that fiction has an element of escape to it. Belle even went so far as to say that she found the non-fiction her mom read to be almost depressing because it was so real. The question then becomes whether or not fiction can portray reality even if it is a fantasy. The worlds that myself and these young girls escape into are fabrications but as we walk through these fictional landscapes, what do we pick up and hold onto?

After looking at choices of fiction and how we can be enticed by covers or simply choose works from favourite authors and genres, the conversation turned to how these fictions affect a reader. Simply put, can a book change you?

Ariel had a particularly interesting response to this question because she is in the midst of writing a novel. She has completed 22 chapters and having read them myself, I look forward to attending her book signing one day. She is a very talented writer and creative individual. When asked how she is affected by what she reads, she responded with:

Ariel: I don't know if this really answers the question, but it inspires me more to write a lot of times... Like, I'll be reading a book and, I don't know, I just get in that writing mood from it.

When I directed the question a little more and asked if there had ever been a book that she felt had changed her somehow or changed the way she perceived and thought about something, she responded:

Ariel: Well, *Uglies*, actually... Just how the whole idea of beauty can be so altered, and how each person perceives it differently... Just how being perfect isn't always being beautiful.

Researcher: What do you mean by that? What is perfection?

Ariel: Well, how that image in society, like a perfect girl, you know, it's not always the best image. Like it's what's inside that counts more.

Researcher: Does it?

Ariel: I think so. (laughs)

Researcher: Do you think that you're in the majority?

Ariel: Within my group of friends I'd say so. But within the world I don't know. (laughs)

I am not sure if another book would have entered her mind had she been reading something other than *Uglies* at the time but what is more important is that she is aware of the messages she is being sent as she reads. She does not read blindly

but thinks about what is being set up through the narrative outside of the basic progression of plot.

Belle took the idea of being affected by what you read a little differently:

Belle: Well, sometimes it comes up in every day life, so if there's something that I've read I know contributes to a conversation that we were having. I'll say, oh, I kinda read that in a book and I'll say what happened or we [friends] talk about books that we like. We talk about fictional books... Like Harry Potter, we talk about that all the time. (laughs)

While she does not go into detail about the conversations her and her friends have about books, the implication is that the ideas do not stay on the pages between the covers, but instead permeate into their everyday lives. It may be through simple discussions of which characters they like but regardless of the topic, fiction has entered reality. How we choose to deal with fiction entering our real world is exactly the direction I wanted to take our conversations and I wanted to begin that process with the girls' experiences of beauty in both reality and fiction.

The Beauty of Beauty

Writing about beauty is like looking into a kaleidoscope – every time I think I am close to understanding, a new angle emerges. Each twist of the kaleidoscope reveals something beautiful and uniquely different. I decided to ask my participants the same difficult questions I had been grappling with thus allowing them to turn the kaleidoscope. I started with the question, “What is Beauty?”:

Ariel: Oh, goodness. I think beauty, in a lot of ways, is confidence and looking at yourself and feeling like you're beautiful, and not caring what anybody else thinks, um, and just believing in yourself, I guess.

Researcher: What about within nature? What is beauty?

Ariel: Everything.

Researcher: Okay (laughs). That was a really quick response.

Ariel: Yeah. I guess because none of it's man-made.

Belle: Well, I think it should be yourself. You should think of yourself as a beautiful person. Like, the one thing that comes up into my head is the Dove commercials and how they promote beauty in everybody and how they have older women and younger women and they're all showing themselves and saying that everybody's beautiful and that, but the advertisers say that you have to be thin and you have to eat this way and have this makeup and you have to cover all your imperfections and that could get you into a lot of trouble.

Pocahontas: I don't know. I see it as more of an idea 'cause it's changed so much. Well, at least for people-wise, like, back in the twenties, it's lots of red lipstick and kind of edgier, I guess, in my opinion. And then you get to the hippy times and long, flowy hair and it comes to today when everything, I don't know. It's more or less, like, set.

Researcher: And in your life? How do you interpret beauty personally?

Pocahontas: Personally, I like environmental beauty. I'm an art student, I like photography and when I take pictures and stuff, I go more for scenery than I do for people. Just because I feel like scenery is something that can be beautiful to masses. I like things that just don't quite fit but they still somehow look right together.

Each of the girls had her own view of beauty. From the confidence within a person to being yourself and the beauty of nature, the abstract concept of beauty takes many forms. I complicated the definition even further when I followed up by asking them, "What is Beautiful?":

Ariel: Everyone has a different definition of beauty, but, yeah, I don't know if you can really pin it down.

Researcher: What do you mean?

Ariel: Just like in different, well, different societies and different cultures, the media portrays it different everywhere, so it's kind of hard to really define it, I guess.

Belle: Well, I think it's, like, the exact same thing, but, yeah, that's what I kind of think of it. It's like beauty and just another word for it.

Researcher: So beautiful is a synonym for beauty?

Belle: Yeah

Researcher: From a photographer's perspective. What is beautiful?

Pocahontas: I feel like it's what can appeal to your senses, sort of, so what lots of people could see and, what would catch your eye.

Researcher: What about in people? What is beautiful?

Pocahontas: I feel like there's two sides to that for me. Like, part of me is thinking there's so much stereotyping, beautiful is what's to date. So in the modern world, what is so familiar to everybody is beautiful.

The concept of beauty is definitely not simple. It is very hard to define and I was expecting that the girls would have as difficult a time as I did when I first began exploring the idea. I did find Pocahontas's response to be quite intriguing and profound. She mentions that there is a lot of stereotyping relating to beauty.

What I believe she means is that in each individual culture we are inundated with images of what is perceived as 'beautiful' in our society and those images become associated with beauty itself. When she says, "what is familiar to everybody is beautiful", it implies that beauty is mass distribution of an image. Once we are accustomed to it, we view it as appealing. I wonder how long that process takes?

Beautiful Artifacts

For this first conversation, I asked the girls to bring with them a beautiful artifact. That was all the direction I gave. I did not give details as to what the artifact could be and this was prior to our ensuing conversations about beauty itself.

Even though I believe the conversations flow together to create the larger image, with this particular piece, I would like to discuss each girl's artifact individually.

Ariel brought a rose.

Ariel: I brought a rose. I think it's beautiful because it's part of nature and it's very natural and pretty just the way it is. It hasn't been altered in any way, it's just a rose. (laughs) And even when it's dying or whatever, people still dry the petals and it's still very pretty.

Researcher: What would you say is beautiful about a dying rose?

Ariel: It's just, it still has, well, it doesn't really, I guess, have life in it, but it's still part of nature and it's still something God made.

Researcher: There are many things in nature. Why a rose?

Ariel: Well, flowers, it's kind of cliché, flowers and beauty and love and all that stuff.

Researcher: What does this symbol of beauty (rose) mean to you?

Ariel: It represents nature, for sure, and beauty in its natural form. And just a pure, sort of, beauty.

Researcher: What do you mean by pure form of beauty?

Ariel: I don't know how to phrase it. It's in its natural form and that's the way it's grown and that's the way it's been, well, it hasn't been made, it's from nature so that's just its natural state. So it's very, almost, innocent.

Researcher: Okay. What about if that flower were dyed? Would it still be natural and unaltered?

Ariel: Hmm, if it were dyed. Not as much.

Researcher: Would it still be beautiful?

Ariel: I think so. But not in the same way because it's not as natural.

When I had initially asked Ariel what she believed beauty and beautiful meant, she struggled a little. She mentioned that confidence reflected beauty but when questioned further about a natural beauty she asserted that everything in nature was beautiful so it was no surprise when she chose a rose as her beautiful artifact. What I found most interesting about our conversation was how it pinpointed two very distinct ideas: the power of symbols and the difference between natural and fabricated.

I will save the discussion of symbology, meaning, and the troubling of the Lacanian symbolic register for the following section but for now I do want to comment on the power of alteration. While Ariel found the flower to be a symbol of beauty, she claimed that it would lose some of its allure if it were altered or dyed. The natural element would be lost and with it some of its beauty. What is most intriguing to me about this idea is that in the aesthetics fields of

contemporary society, alteration supposedly creates beauty. Which is more beautiful? The untouched or the enhanced? I am not sure I know.

Belle brought a mirror.

Belle: It's a hand-held mirror. And I brought it because it gives a reflection of yourself and you should always think of yourself as beautiful no matter what.

Researcher: How is a mirror a symbol of beauty?

Belle: It reflects what you are.

Researcher: Would you say that a mirror is a universal symbol of beauty? Is it typically associated with beauty?

Belle: Probably.

Researcher: Would you say that everyone sees it as a positive symbol of beauty?

Belle: No. Because there's, I'm just going to use this example, but anorexic people, they look into the mirror and they see themselves still as fat...

Researcher: So, can a mirror reflect true beauty?

Belle: No, because it's on the inside.

Researcher: What does the idea of a mirror mean to you? What is your relationship like with mirrors?

Belle: Well, I just like seeing myself in clothes, that's why. I look at mirrors and I just think they help you know what to wear because you see what fits you better and what doesn't and what shows your style and what doesn't.

Researcher: And how is this mirror beautiful?

Belle: Because it shows the images of beautiful people and it reflects.

I was actually expecting that one of the girls would choose a mirror as a symbol of beauty. I myself equate mirrors not only with the idea of beauty but also with the concept of self-worth. I spent a summer during my mid 20s tree planting. I had planned on making a lot of money – which did not happen since we spent every weekend in town enjoying our earnings. What I had not expected during that summer was to feel as great as I did. Some people would attribute that to the vigorous amount of physical activity – tree planting is definitely hard work. But I disagree. I did work hard and my body felt it. Where I felt the greatest change,

however, was within me and how I viewed myself. Basically, I could not. We did not have any mirrors in camp. The bathroom was an outhouse and the shower area was a tent-like shack with plastic partitions. Until we went into town each weekend, I had no access to reflections. I am sure I was dirtier than I had ever been in my life but I felt incredible. I had no chance to assess myself as I would have, given access to a mirror. Much like the anorexics Belle refers to, mirrors do not necessarily reflect reality.

Pocahontas brought a picture of her sister.

Pocahontas: I brought a picture of my sister. Well, when you asked me to bring something that is beautiful... It just was the first thing that popped into my head, I guess.

Researcher: So how is she beautiful?

Pocahontas: I don't know. I think she's very strongly opinionated. Like, if she wants to say something, she's gonna say it.

Researcher: And how is that beautiful? Or how is that beauty?

Pocahontas: Well, I think courage is a lot about beauty.

I am drawn to the idea of courage being about beauty but I am also confused by it.

Is it beautiful to be courageous? What exactly about courage is beautiful? Is it a faith in self that we find beautiful when we see someone who is confident?

Pocahontas said that her sister is very opinionated and that when asked to bring an artifact of beauty, a picture of her sister was the first thing she thought of. Maybe being self assured enough to speak your own mind mixed with the strengths of relationships with those we love is where we find beauty.

This first conversation I had with the girls centered around how they view reading and beauty itself. All three participants had no difficulty discussing why they read or how they feel about reading. They enjoy books, mostly fiction, and typically immerse themselves in narratives as a measure of escape. Their

responses when asked about beauty, however, were more conceptual. They struggled to find words to convey a specific definition but through the artifacts they chose, it was apparent that beauty is uniquely individual and not a fixed ideal. Now it was time to bring beauty and fiction together.

Conversation #2 – Looking at Stories
It's a Pretty Ugly Normal World

*In a world of extreme beauty,
Anyone normal is Ugly.*

This tagline from the cover of *Uglies* is quite provocative. Before we even turn the first page, we have questions. What is extreme beauty? What is normal? What does it mean to be ugly? I began my second conversation with all three participants by asking how they interpreted this cover line. At this point, the girls had read approximately the first third of the novel so they had been introduced to the diverse sections of Uglyville and New Pretty Town in Tally Youngblood's world. When asked what the cover line meant to them, they responded with:

Ariel: I guess in the book how all of the Pretties are, they see them as being all perfect and everything, and so everyone who hasn't had the operation is viewed as being ugly and they kind of put that image on them right from when they start growing up, I guess. Because I guess being a Pretty would be something different to everyone who reads the book. Cause people have different ideas of what they consider, I don't want to say beautiful, but... Beautiful. And in the book, they said, like, big eyes, full lips, perfect skin, that kind of thing. But I don't really have a picture in my head.

Researcher: But you did say that, as people read it, they have a different vision in their own heads of what beautiful is. Where do those images come from, in your opinion?

Ariel: Probably a lot of the media, how you grow up, who you're around... Like, partly maybe who you hang out with, too, because if you feel appreciated yourself then you might feel more beautiful yourself. You know what I mean?

I do know what Ariel means. Our surroundings and influences do play a significant role in how we view ourselves and our own sense of beauty. While she references media as an indicator of beauty, she does not dwell on it. Ariel did take Girls Empowered 9 with me when she was in junior high and she might be influenced by the media unit we studied but what is more interesting in her response is how she acknowledges that beauty is different for whoever reads the book. I did go on to ask her another question before we moved on:

Researcher: You said that you didn't have an idea in your head of what a Pretty looked like but did you have an ethnic type? As you were reading?

Ariel: I probably just assumed that they were, like, white.

Seeing as Ariel is Caucasian, it is not surprising that she envisioned the characters to look as she does. What is of note is the fact that without the North American cover which includes a Caucasian female face, there are few descriptors in the text that would indicate whiteness. When they are in the Smoke, Tally mentions the tanned skin of some Smokies and Tally and Shay have a conversation about how people used to have wars over skin color but other than that, ethnicity is not specifically indicated. Yet, Pretties are assumed to be white. This could be influenced by the fact that the majority of most library bookshelves tend to be filled with novels featuring Caucasian protagonists. White is the default race when not specified. And, thus, beauty ideals lean toward this proliferation of white.

Belle took this question in a different direction and was very specific in her responses:

Researcher: The tagline on the book cover is, "In a world of extreme beauty, anyone normal is ugly." What do you make of that?

Belle: I don't really think it's true. Because there could be two kinds of beauty because there could be a world of extreme beauty and then there could be beauty after.

I am not entirely sure what she meant by "beauty after" but my interpretation is that there would be an end or limit to beauty if an 'extreme' beauty existed to start with and if that were the case, what is the limit and who sets it?

Researcher: It says, "anyone normal is ugly." What is normal? What would it mean to you if someone were normal?

Belle: If they were themselves all the time and didn't change for anybody.

In an earlier conversation, when Belle was asked who she believed the most beautiful fictional character was, she said Hermione Granger from *Harry Potter*. I asked her why Hermione was beautiful and she attributed it to the fact that she refused to change for anyone. She was herself all the time. It is interesting that when asked what normal means, Belle responds with the same idea. In her opinion, it would seem, normal is beautiful.

After a look at normal, we moved the conversation toward the idea of Pretty. We are never clearly and specifically given a physical description of a Pretty which lends itself to the potential of *Uglies* as a beauty counter-narrative. What the average reader sees as Pretty is quite compelling:

Researcher: What do you think a Pretty looks like?

Belle: Some kind of robot. That's what I kind of think. Because, um, I was reading this book... I kinda stopped it 'cause I wasn't interested in reading it again, it's called *Skinned*, I think... it's about this girl who gets in a car crash and she almost dies but then they take her in for surgery and she's not normal. She's part robot and part human... But the picture on it [*Skinned*] kinda reminds me of what [Pretties] would be like. (laughs) Because she has pale skin, she's blond and she has blue eyes and she's perfect.

Researcher: Would you say then that even the concept of ultimate beauty or the ultimate Pretty is almost alien to the point that it's like a robot?

Belle: Yeah.

The connection between the Pretties and the character from *Skinned* which Belle believes to be ‘perfect’ implies to me that Scott Westerfeld has created a world where beauty is beyond reach without alteration and ultimate fabrication. As a counter narrative for beauty, *Uglies* satirically represents our contemporary society where beauty is seemingly unattainable for the masses and only possible for a select few. The Uglies in Tally’s world are the general population in our own. While Westerfeld’s satire is thought provoking and intentional, how many young adult narratives available only show the pretty side of being pretty?

When I asked Pocahontas about the tagline on the cover of *Uglies* she discussed where the first Pretty could have come from:

Pocahontas: If the Uglies are like average teens, some must be pretty, but I don’t know how to imagine these breathtaking Pretties and if they have ideals for Pretties, they must have gotten them from natural-born people at one point or another.

Researcher: What do you think they used as the template for ideal beauty?

Pocahontas: Well, like, people or their parts... that kind of thing.

At first she indicates that the ideal Pretty must have existed at some point in time but then she goes on to say that the beauty template could have been derived from parts. Once again, we have beauty that is fabricated and pieced together, something far from natural.

Uglies offers a narrative that questions the definitions of words we use quite frequently – ugly and pretty. How many times have we said or read those words without thinking of the connotations? What do ugly and pretty really mean? I believe that what we read does have the power to influence how we see the world as well as how we view ourselves and I wanted to further explore this

theory by asking my participants to link early and remembered stories to the concept of beauty.

Some Beautiful Stories

With each conversation, I asked the girls to bring an item or two. For the second conversation, I asked them to bring ‘A Beautiful Story’ as well as ‘A first Story of Beauty’. I did not give direction or indicate in any way what I was expecting. I wanted to see what stories or pieces of fiction they would associate with the concept of beauty.

Ariel’s Beautiful Story

The Miraculous Journey of Edward Tulane by Kate DiCamillo

Ariel: It’s about a china rabbit... and he starts off in the care of this little girl named Abilene, and she loves him, like she puts him to bed every night, tells him she loves him, she has all of his clothes and everything, but he doesn’t love her back. And he’s very distant and he’s very self-centered and is very proud of himself and how he looks and everything and through a series of events he gets thrown overboard off the ship and Abilene is very, very upset. And it goes through his journey. He goes through a whole bunch of things, he gets thrown away, he meets all these people, um, like a dog he spends time with, and all these things and he learns how to love. And he learns that, even though, like, there’s this one part where he is with a little girl and she’s very, very sick and she ends up dying, and he’s surprised that he’s upset by that because he never would have been before. And he learns that even though love can sometimes be painful, it’s still better than not loving at all. So, I don’t know why, I just think it’s very, it’s a very cute, touching story and I liked it.

Researcher: What would you say is beautiful about it?

Ariel: Well, the fact that it’s more than just about a china rabbit, I guess. It can be applied to anybody who, just the whole idea of loving and how he went from being this self-centered ignorant, proud rabbit and he went on this journey and he was, well, at the end he’s reunited with Abilene and he’s like a whole ‘nother person, a whole ‘nother rabbit.

I agree with Ariel that love is a very beautiful idea and learning to love has a measure of beauty in it. I wonder which comes first, though? Is something or someone beautiful because we love it or do we love it because it is beautiful? In

the case of the china rabbit the former appears true and I would hope this is the case in many instances but I am not so sure. Ariel has introduced me to what she believes to be a beautiful story that is not about beauty itself at all. Which leads me to think that beauty is not in the ‘eye’ of the beholder but in the ‘gaze’ of the beholder. What I see is not the same as what Ariel sees. Beauty is individual and up for interpretation.

Ariel’s First Story of Beauty

Ariel: Okay, the first time is actually more of a personal story. When I was, the first time I went to Hawaii, I was in kindergarten. And we went with my cousins and my grandparents and stuff, and I remember being at this luau and I don’t know why, but there was this hula dancer and we got to go up on stage with her and stuff, me and my cousin, and, I don’t know, I just thought she was really pretty to me, and that was one of the first times I think that I was probably, I don’t know. ‘Cause I love dance and stuff, too, that kind of drew me. I’m not sure why.

Ariel: And the other one is Disney. I know my thing when I was little was always *The Little Mermaid*. I was obsessed with *The Little Mermaid*. (laughs) So, I guess that’s the other one, is just Disney princesses in general. I guess it’s kind of an unhealthy image (laughs) ‘cause you look at them and they’re really skinny and young and, yeah, but, I don’t know, that was when I was little.

I can definitely relate to Ariel’s first and very personal story of beauty.

While I have never been to Hawaii nor have I seen a hula dancer, I distinctly remember being about the same age as Ariel when I had my first encounter with a bride. My cousin, Dan, was getting married and, to me, his fiancé was the epitome of beauty. I spent as much time with her as I could during that weekend in Winnipeg and while I can barely remember the actual ceremony, I do recall her dress. I also recall how much it meant to me that she took the time to smile at me, dance with me during the reception, and basically made me feel important. This summer, I had a similar experience – except this time *I* was the bride. Unlike my

previous bridal experience, this one was real and wonderful. There were a few little girls milling around who I did not know but I did recognize the look in their eyes. It was the same look I had had so long ago. I smiled and they smiled back. I am not sure what it is about the hula dancer or brides that seems so alluring. Maybe they have an exotic element that young girls are drawn to. They are almost princesses.

Ariel's pseudonym, as well as the other participants, was inspired (as previously mentioned) by their first stories of beauty – they all involved Disney princesses. I have been and continue to struggle with Disney and the picture perfect princesses who dominate children's books, television and feature films. My niece is 4 years old and obsessed with the princesses. As a 30 something woman who understands the unrealistic expectations being set, I do not want to encourage this obsession and yet I think back to my own experiences with Disney and I loved wishing and hoping that my prince would one day come. Is it dangerous to allow young girls to wish for such things? Is it worse to shield them from the 'happily ever after' in favour of a 'realistic' view of the world? Is innocence lost if we take away Sleeping Beauty's castle? Whether a hula dancer, a bride, or an actual princess, we are surrounded by grand narratives of beauty from a very young age.

Belle's Beautiful Story

Wintergirls by Laurie Halse Anderson

Belle: It's kind of like the opposite of a beautiful story, though. It's what's unbeautiful, but the story's about Lia and Cassie and they're both anorexic.

Researcher: So why is it a beautiful story, or why is it an unbeautiful story?

Belle: Well, it shows you that if... I know there's a lot of people who are anorexic, in the United States and everywhere, but it shows them, if they read it, that when you're like that, you're not necessarily beautiful. You're just ruining your life and you're ruining your chances of doing something exceptional with your life and going on and doing something that you would want to and maybe actually becoming more beautiful than you actually are 'cause you're actually making yourself skinny to the point where you're not human anymore. You're not alive. It's like you're almost dead.

Researcher: Would you say that *Wintergirls* is a novel that contributes ideas and ideals of beauty or counters ideals and ideas of beauty? Does it reinforce society's view right now of what ideal is in beauty? Or does it counter it and say, ooh, that's wrong, that's kinda scary, let's take a look at this from another side?

Belle: Well for normal people who aren't in it, then yeah, it would counteract, but girls who are models they could be anorexic and think that it's exceptional and it's what they should be doing.

At first glance, it seems as though Belle chose a story about the struggle to achieve beauty but after reflecting on the novel and her comments, it goes further than the desire to conform to an ideal. *Wintergirls* is a disturbingly familiar tale and anorexia not only a disorder that resides in my past but a looming figure in my present. One of the options I teach, Girls Empowered, a course focused on issues for grade 9 girls will inevitably find itself in the murky pools of self-esteem, self-worth and body image. I have a lot of personal and professional knowledge about eating disorders and low self-esteem but I hesitate when the time for this unit rolls around. I hope that the information I share with them affects them but I am also afraid that for one of those girls the details of what an anorexic or bulimic is and does will give them an idea. The reason for this fear is personal experience. I cannot recall which daytime talk show I was watching but I do remember being in high school when I learned that an anorexic consumes fewer than 600 calories a day. I thought I had hit on the one diet that would

finally work for me. And it did. I lost weight, rapidly. I pretended to eat and would discard wrappers in the kitchen garbage to prove to my mum that I had had dinner while she was still at work. I also found myself chewing nothing in my mouth as I watched my friends around me at lunch devour their plates of French fries all the while wondering why I could not be like them. Why could I not feel comfortable in my own skin. Even more distinct is the memory of watching my graduation slide show in which the only picture of me featured me asleep on the couch in the library of our school. I had no energy, no life – I was a wintergirl.

Where is the beauty in such a story? The beauty is in survival, the beauty is in recognizing that you are worth it, you are enough. The beauty is in the experience.

Belle's First Story of Beauty

Belle: I was thinking *Beauty and the Beast* because she thinks that the Beast is beautiful even though he's this big, scary creature that everybody hates and wants to get rid of but at the end, she sees through all that and he becomes human again.

Researcher: What I find really interesting in what you just said is, you said a first story of beauty was Disney Princesses and then you picked the Beast as the image of beauty. So what did you mean with Disney Princesses?

Belle: It's your first experience to beauty as a little child if you're a girl... And they are without any imperfections, like, they don't have any, they're not fat, they don't have acne, they don't have anything else. They're just perfect. And so you want to be like them. That's why all little girls wanna be little princesses.

Researcher: Good or bad thing? And why?

Belle: Well, it's just a dream so I guess it's a good thing. But the bad thing is some of them will never be that way...

Researcher: As a first story of beauty, does it set achievable expectations?

Belle: Yes, because even though they are beautiful, they all do have a really good personality and they're all very helpful and they all do chores, like Snow White does all the chores for the Seven Dwarfs and they all have evil people who come and get them. But (laughs)... And then they fall for it, but that's a bad thing to like. But they all get out of it and they

show perseverance and they always have a little happy ending even though that's not true... In real life. But just, personality-wise, I guess girls could be like, personality-wise in the future.

There is undeniably an attraction for young (and older) girls to the Disney Princesses. Some people could argue that they are weak and require a male figure to save them, and others (myself included at times) emphasize the unachievable expectations set by these tales and yet one still sees in Belle, a critically aware young lady, the innocence of loving the 'happily ever after' tale. She acknowledges that not all young girls can be like the princesses and yet she still sees the positives in the personalities of dedication and perseverance. Anything I have ever read or watched that was critical of Disney was written or made by adults. I wonder if we become jaded and then look back and judge? Or, maybe, it is simple jealousy. Have we lost the ability to believe in happily ever after and, therefore, it cannot exist? Fiction does not always reflect reality but it does portray an ideal to which we may strive. Whether consciously or not, fiction has the potential to establish a life pattern we try to achieve in reality.

Pocahontas's Beautiful Story

"Nightingale and the Rose" by Oscar Wilde

Pocahontas: Well, I'm not sure that it's a beautiful story but I love the symbolism. To just trying to, like, read between the lines, I guess. But it's more of a story about beauty.

Wilde's "Nightingale and the Rose" is a fictional piece I teach in a grade 9 short story unit. The unit is a workshop and students are allowed to choose from 3 stories within each of the 6 genres studied. An option in the folklore genre, "Nightingale and the Rose" is rarely chosen. This could be because it is the longest or possibly because it is offered opposite gruesome tales like

“Blackbeard”. Whatever the reason, the conversations with students who have chosen Wilde’s tragic tale are always interesting. They tend to find the student in the story repelling and feel sorry for the nightingale who seemingly sacrifices her life for nothing. The love the student feels is not true but there is true beauty in the nightingale’s sacrifice for love.

Pocahontas’s First Story of Beauty

Pocahontas: Pocahontas. Because, well, for me, when I was little, I’m darker, I’ve got dark hair... You always see the princesses who are, they’re blond or they’re lighter and they’re just more cute little perky girls. And then Pocahontas is the independent, she’s native, she’s dark, and so I was always, like, whoa, I don’t look like any of the others. (laughs)

Researcher: The beauty that you see in the characters that you find to be beautiful from those stories is their diversity and their independence?

Pocahontas: Yeah.

I have discovered recently that I have a proclivity toward fictional pieces with female protagonists. I did a little mental checklist of my favourite novels and the majority of them do feature strong-willed females. There are the exceptions like *Harry Potter* and *Lord of the Rings* but even within those tales, I find myself drawn to the female characters. I do not believe there is some highly complex reason for this preference. It is simple – I am a girl. I understand being a girl and I understand the conflicts girls face more than I ever could for males. I think this is what Pocahontas saw in her first story of beauty – herself. In her case it was not just that the protagonist was female but that there was finally a female princess she could see herself reflected in both personally and physically.

The stories we read at a young age influence our perceptions of the world around us. Beauty is established in this way through childhood stories. I do not believe it is a coincidence that all three girls chose Disney Princess stories as their

first stories of beauty. These stories dominate the media for young viewers and readers; consumers who have not yet developed the critical media literacy skills required to read these narratives objectively.

Conversation #3 – Looking Back at Beauty Beautiful *Uglies*

During my third and final meeting with my participants we looked at the novel in its entirety as well as discussed our emerging interpretations of beauty. To prepare for this last conversation I asked the girls to do two things: free write on beauty in *Uglies* and to create an original beautiful piece.

As we began our final conversations, we turned directly to how beauty was discussed in the novel. There was, of course, the obvious reference to becoming pretty but I wanted to focus more on discussions between Tally, who has grown up feeling ugly, and David, who has never known the Pretty world. David did not understand how Tally could view herself as anything other than beautiful while Tally could not disregard the teachings of the Pretty world.

Researcher: On page 278, Tally and David are having another discussion about beauty, obviously, and she's saying that she's not beautiful. "Listen, Tally, that's not what's important to me, what's inside you matters a lot more" and she says, "but first you see my face, you react to symmetry, skin tone, the shape of my eyes and you decide what's inside me based on all your reactions, you're programmed to." And he says, "I'm not programmed. I didn't grow up in a city." And she says, "it's not just culture, it's evolution." Do you think that we are programmed by culture or are have we evolved a certain way and that affects how we view beauty?

Ariel: Well, I know, hmmm. Like, you always have a first impression, even though you don't want to sometimes. You know, there's always gonna be something that you think of that person, um, not necessarily bad, not necessarily good, but maybe first impression, and I don't know if it's evolution or culture. I think a lot of it's the media, too, 'cause... You associate beauty with a certain thing...

What Ariel may not have realized is that while she is saying she does not see it as evolution or culture, she then brings in media which ultimately is affected by and does affect culture. Westerfeld has Tally take culture completely out of the equation as she believes that people have evolved to view beauty a certain way. If viewed as Tally sees it, beauty is a fixed piece of evolution and cannot be disrupted. Beauty, then, is static and would not change nor would the way we view it. I disagree. Beauty is definitely a product of culture and heavily influenced by it.

During the corresponding conversation with Belle, the direction of thought took a turn toward how the book as a whole addresses beauty as well as how Scott Westerfeld, himself, views the concept.

Researcher: And how does the book view beauty?

Belle: No imperfections and everybody thinks the same, does the same, so, kind of, like assimilation.

Researcher: Okay. So, in Tally's world, that's beauty. Do you think that Scott Westerfeld views beauty that way?

Belle: Well, he could, or it could be like the guy in the *Chrysalids*, who wrote that he takes stuff to the extreme but it's not actually what he's trying to say. He's trying to say the opposite. So Scott Westerfeld might be taking it to the extreme saying this, and he might think that that's not what he thinks beauty is. Like, he thinks beauty is natural or something.

I wonder if Belle is right and if Westerfeld's intent is to shock us with the extreme in order to make us take a look at how our own cultural views of beauty have and continue to change. There is evidence in the book that while Westerfeld troubles the ideals of beauty, he recognizes the inherent beauty that is in nature.

Researcher: Then on page 230, "Nature, at least, didn't need an operation to be beautiful. It just was." So, my question is, if nature doesn't need to be altered to be beautiful, then why do people?

Belle: Well, nature doesn't have emotions, so, unlike humans, we have emotions and we have feelings and the media influences those feelings and nature is just nature and doesn't change.

Researcher: So, nature doesn't need to be perfected?

Belle: I don't think so. (laughs)

Belle appears to see nature as innocent and immune to influences. Unlike people, nature does not have emotions. Perhaps the strength of media rests in its ability to toy with our emotions. Pocahontas continues the same discussion about natural beauty and reflects on why nature does not need to be altered to be considered beautiful.

Researcher: If nature does not need an operation to be beautiful, then what is the difference between nature and people?

Pocahontas: I think it's mostly people have always had different thoughts about each other, like there's jealousy and everybody's different opinions about other people and wildlife doesn't have that about different things. Like, trees don't think that grass is ugly. But people, and, it's, it's weird though, because all the different natural things are so different, like a mountain and a flower. But with people, we're all humans. But we have so much hate going around with each other in that sense.

Is it, as she says, our ability to reason and compare that has led to disparity in beauty? Pocahontas is probably right – trees more than likely do not see grass as ugly. But would they if given the opportunity to compare? Is it the 'differing' that leads to inequity? Would we all be better off if we had access to the operation as Tally's world does? Or, is it our ability to reason that not only restricts us but also gives us tools for emancipation? As a counternarrative, *Uglies* offers us that option.

In a book, which by its very title, questions ideals of beauty, it is interesting that Pocahontas could see what she refers to as no personal perspective about beauty.

Researcher: You said that no personal perspective about beauty exists in this novel?

Pocahontas: Yeah. Um, I think what I meant by that is just that they're, as an Ugly, they're waiting to become pretty. They know these are the guidelines of pretty. And then once they're pretty, they are pretty. Like, they don't see anybody else as pretty, they are pretty.

Researcher: So once they're a pretty, it's no longer a division but more a state of being?

Pocahontas: Like, who is and who isn't.

Researcher: Okay. Yeah. So it's not a becoming?

Pocahontas: No, it's are.

Researcher: Or are not. And even every symbol in *our* society that, I mean, popular culture, that deals with beauty is about transformation.

Pocahontas: Yeah. Changing to make yourself pretty.

With such a dichotomy of either Ugly or Pretty, it should follow that ill feelings exist between the different groups and yet other than the longing that Tally feels to move across the river to New Pretty Town and finally become Pretty, there is no animosity. Perhaps the lack of conflict arises because of the fact that becoming Pretty is not exactly an act of 'becoming' it is just another stage of life to be reached. It is a non-negotiable. That is until it becomes one.

Choking Beauty

When I had set up the NING online forum, I chose as my avatar a picture of a white orchid. I was hoping that the girls would recognize the significance of my choice as they read the novel. Since the NING did not work out as I had planned, the orchid became a topic for discussion during the final conversations. I chose the white orchid as an avatar not only because of the associations between beauty and flowers within my own culture but also because the orchid is a very important symbol in *Uglies*. When Tally is on her way to the Smoke she finds herself in a beautiful field of white flowers. Unfortunately, her admiration of the surroundings does not last very long as a helicopter flies overhead and sets the

fields on fire. The flowers had been cultivated for their beauty and encouraged to grow which they did, choking everything around them. Now that the orchids are seen as weeds, Tally's society attempts to control them. At one point, Tally compares herself to the orchid.

Researcher: Tally kind of compares herself to the orchid and on page 244 she says, "Tally Youngblood was a weed and, unlike the orchids, she wasn't even a pretty one." How is she like the orchid?

Ariel: How is she like the orchid? Well, I guess, with the smoke, she came and she was all, like, everybody loved her and she was all, I don't know, I don't want to say deceiving, but, and then she had the best intentions but she ended up betraying them. And, I guess with the orchid, too it appears beautiful and perfect and everything and then you realize that it's not everything it seems.

I asked Ariel what she meant by this and decided to talk a little about common weeds.

Researcher: How do you view dandelions?

Ariel: Hmmm. Uh, well, they're pretty, but they're weeds.

Researcher: Okay. When you were little, how did you view dandelions? Do you remember what you thought of dandelions?

Ariel: I liked them. And I know my grandma she'd take us for walks and she'd show us how to make little necklaces with them and stuff.

Researcher: So at what point did you start to view them differently?

Ariel: I don't know. Well, my dad always is, like, if you see them in the lawn, pick them. (laughs) 'Cause they spread.

Ariel viewed dandelions as pretty until she was asked to get rid of them and stop them from spreading. A dandelion is a weed to me but when my nephew first moved here from Colombia, he could not understand why we were trying to get rid of them from my brother's lawn. He thought they looked nice and my sister-in-law wanted a whole yard full of them. Who gets to decide what is a flower and what is a weed? Viewing beauty, like viewing a flower or a weed, is a learned process that comes from somewhere.

I asked Belle the same question and we started to discuss the idea of control and why they were trying to control the white flower.

Researcher: Okay. So, they're trying to control them?

Belle: Yeah, but that's just because they want to control and put it in one area so people can still enjoy their beauty but it's not consuming everything.

When I read this over, it reminded me of New Pretty Town. There are all these Pretties in one area, confined and controlled. They are pretty to look at but they pose no threat because they are vacant – controlled by the lesions that take away independent thought. Is that what beauty should be? Should we be able to control it to the point that it loses its very essence? As much as I want to trouble the symbolic ideals of beauty, I do not want it to become a field of flaming orchids.

Creating Beauty

I chose to end my conversations with the girls in much the same way we had started them but with one significant difference. Instead of simply bringing me an artifact of beauty, I asked them to create one. Once again, I did not give any specifications other than that it needed to be an original creation of beauty. Their interpretation of what I meant was entirely their own.

Ariel made an origami flower (Appendix A) and a picture frame.

Ariel: Okay. It's origami and it's a vase with a flower tulip in it.

Researcher: How is it a creation of beauty?

Ariel: I knew you were gonna ask me that. (laughs) Um, I don't know. I think when you make something it always, it feels more special or beautiful because you put the energy into it.

Researcher: This flat piece of paper on the desk, it really has no potential. Or does it? Because this can become that.

Researcher: All right. So, the picture frame, why is that a creation of beauty?

Ariel: Well, I don't know. It was really fun to make and even though everybody had the same décor elements, every one turned out so different.

Researcher: So, what does that say about beauty?

Ariel: Well, beauty is different. Like, everybody has a different, um, I don't know how to say this, beauty comes in different shapes and sizes and colours and everything. It doesn't have to be the same.

Ariel loves scrapbooking. I have been to her house when her mom has hosted Stampin' Up workshops and she is always there, helping us out, and sometimes she has created the project of the day herself. Every card for whichever occasion we are focusing on each session is unique. I have never made the same card twice in the 3 years I have been attending the workshops. The fact that Ariel chose to create a flower from paper and bring a picture frame from a Stampin' Up workshop contributes to the idea that there is always the potential for beauty and that beauty ultimately has an individual element to it.

As discussed in the above transcript, I mentioned to Ariel that a flat piece of paper may lack beauty because it seems to lack potential but, if altered, it can become something else. Am I feeding into the ideas of New Pretty Town? Does the paper have to become something else before it can be considered beautiful or is the beauty in the potential of the paper to become anything?

Ariel's picture frame makes me think of Facebook. More specifically, it reminds me of the profile pictures of my family and friends. Most of my own profile pictures are carefully selected and I have to admit that some of them are slightly enhanced or altered. The Facebook profile picture is a representation of myself that I'm willing to share with others. Ariel's picture frame, however, symbolizes a potential and individual beauty. She said that everyone at the

workshop made their frame a little differently. They each made their own. And they can fill it whichever way they wish as well. Most likely Ariel will place within the frame a picture of herself and people she cares about. That picture is not just a presentation or representation of self but more a portrayal of the beauty of relationship. She did not create the frame in isolation and she will fill it with others.

Belle created a collage of beauty elements using words and images (Appendix B).

Belle: Um, well, it took me a while to figure it out. (laughs) Because I couldn't think of anything. Um, but I did what is beauty and I put the definition of beauty and what my definition of beauty was. And then the collage is kind of what the media thinks beauty is and what I think beauty is. Like, their (media – i.e. magazines like ELLE) definition of beauty is kinda I like to call weird just because it's more towards this (pointing at collage).

Researcher: Okay, so it's extreme?

Belle: And where they look unnatural. And then looking younger and being perfect are stuff that makes you beautiful.

Researcher: Looking perfect makes you beautiful by which standards?

Belle: By media standards. ... And then natural is what I think is beautiful and there's natural. And then that is, I just kind of like this because, um, there's lots of people who are, obese and things in the United States and stuff so that's really big and so they aren't necessarily called beautiful. And, like, just the Biggest Loser show and I watch that all the time, they always think that they're not beautiful and that everybody says that they have a beautiful face but not necessarily a beautiful body. They say, oh, she has pretty eyes and all that, but they don't say, oh, you have a perfect shape or anything like that because they're so big, they don't think of themselves as beautiful.

Researcher: So, when someone doesn't fit, fit the, I'm going to call it a frame, so when someone doesn't fit the frame of beauty, which is that perfect body, right? Then their beauty is chopped up, so their eyes can be pretty or they could have a beautiful smile, but they can't be beautiful?

Belle's collage of beauty vividly portrays how I see beauty. She created the kaleidoscope that reveals new images with each turn. I have always taught my students that a collage is not just a selection of pictures and words pasted onto a

page but that it needs to say something itself. Each individual piece has its own meaning but ultimately contributes to the overall message. She, obviously, listened. When I look at the collage, my eye is not automatically drawn to any one image or word. Instead, my gaze travels through the page from top left to bottom right and then I'm encouraged to turn the page sideways to reveal more of the message. The overall meaning to me is one of conflict. There seems to be an issue between accepting and attempting to better oneself. Belle's definition, however, reveals her underlying opinion. She may see the conflict in the appearances of beauty but to her beauty is "the quality in a person or thing that makes them unique and alive".

Pocahontas painted a canvas of a masquerade profile for her creation of beauty (Appendix C). The irony of her creation is that I happened to buy it at our art auction about a week before we had the final conversation. So when I asked her what she had brought, she pointed at my wall where it was already hanging.

Pocahontas: And so I found a picture of an actual girl wearing a mask... And I just kind of wanted to change it. 'Cause that's, really, the big reason I did it kind of like that, is it's so much easier to paint. Everything around her is black and her mouth still seems so subtle and it almost looks like, the word that comes to mind is defiant. And then, the blue kind of just adds the youthfulness to it, I guess. 'Cause I did try to make her look younger. And it's a masquerade, so she can wear a mask, she can hide.

Researcher: What do make of the fact that your creation of beauty includes a mask?

Pocahontas: I don't know. I feel like that, that I was thinking about with the book, too, like, that was unintentional. (laughs) But then afterward, I was thinking about, with the mask and with the book, um, in the book their beauty is so, I don't want to say unrealistic... But it's so distorted. And she's kind of like, hiding...beneath the mask that I tried to, well, it didn't really work as well as I was hoping. (laughs) But I wanted it to look really stand out-ish. But then, when I painted the side of her face, like, the silhouette of it, I tried to make it imperfect. A little bit. Like, her nose is a little bit bigger than it was in the picture and her lips are smaller.

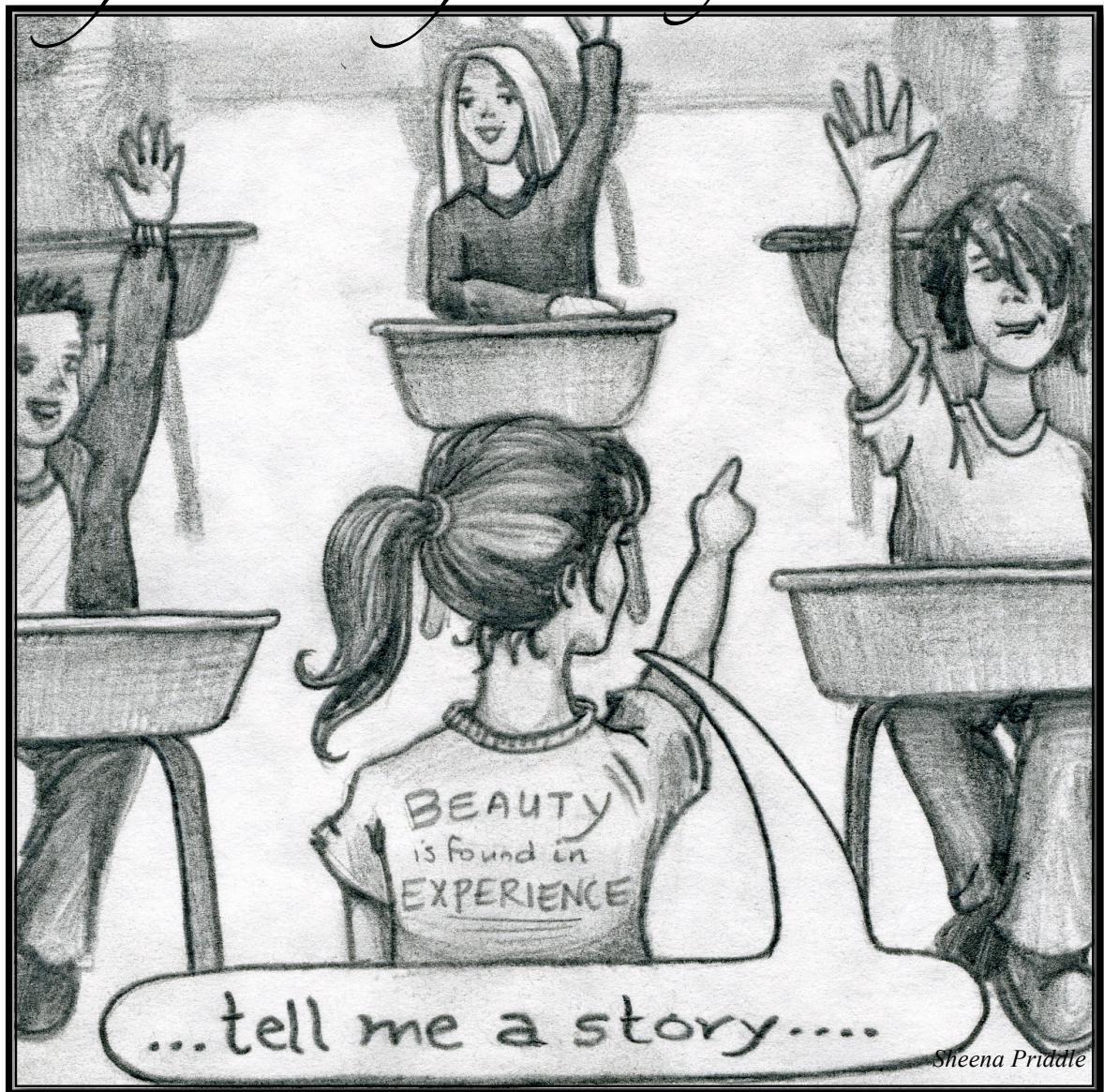
And it's just, the mask is like, like in the *Uglies* series it's like being a Pretty. It's hiding who you, your beauty is. And then, but underneath, she's not air quotes perfect. (laughs)

The idea of hiding behind a mask intrigues me and what catches my attention even more is Pocahontas' assertion that the mask hides a beauty which she refers to as 'not-perfect'. She purposely changed the physical attributes of the image she had selected from a magazine in order to make it unique and less symmetrical yet that image was probably chosen for the magazine because of its symmetry, or, at the very least it was altered to reflect such perceived perfection

All three creations of beauty have one commonality. All three have been influenced by the creator's own experiences. Ariel loves flowers and scrapbooking so it makes sense that she would use paper to create an original piece as well as bring a frame made during a scrapbooking workshop. Belle is a very analytical individual and enjoys scrutinizing elements of what could create a whole image. The pieces of a collage woven together to project one idea works for her. And Pocahontas, who loves art, would not have chosen anything other than her passion to express the idea of beauty – a piece of which I am a very proud owner.

We cannot separate ourselves from our own pasts and experiences, nor should we. What we have been exposed to, in many forms, works to shape how we view the world and ourselves. This is why it is imperative that we look closely at the typically subtle ideas and ideals that permeate young adult fictional literature. Books do have the potential to become a part of us and shape our lives.

Reflections of Beauty



Beautiful Life

I have worn a ring on my right hand for the past 15 or more years. It has a diamond but it's not a diamond ring. It's a love ring. It's wonderfully delicate and old fashioned and while it was once yellow gold, it's now been dipped in

white gold for me. It was once a 25th wedding anniversary gift from my grampa to my nana, then it was passed to my mum, and now it's in my life. It can tell all sorts of stories - stories of love and stories of loss but the story it tells today is one of strength and discovery.

Whenever I picture my nana, I think of a tall woman with amazing strength but it was not until after her death that I discovered just how strong she was. I found out quite recently that during WWII while my grampa was stationed in London, he had an affair. When I heard this, my first thought was not about his infidelity and I didn't feel anger toward him. Instead, I wondered how it affected my nana. My Auntie Pat filled in this blank for me. She told me that when Grampa came back from the war, he was honest with Nana. He told her what had happened and that there was a baby girl across the ocean and he was the dad. He gave Nana a choice. If she no longer trusted him and wanted him gone, he would leave. And if she thought she could forgive him, he would stay and be forever hers. He stayed and a few years later my mom was born. A few more years later, they celebrated their 25th anniversary. Twenty five years after that, they celebrated their 50th.

I vividly remember the day that my nana's ring came to me. When she died, her treasured possessions were given to my mum. Mum wore all of Nana's rings. I didn't notice the day that the 25th anniversary ring disappeared from her finger and I'm glad I didn't because on Christmas morning it had a new home. My mom didn't wrap the ring or put it under the tree or in my stocking. Instead, after all the fanfare of Christmas morning, she pulled me aside. It was just Mum

and I in the hallway. She took the ring and put it on my finger. I'm not entirely sure what she said but I'll never forget the feeling. It was a moment of coming together.

After my faux wedding, I still had faith. My ex told me that he would get the paperwork together and just as soon as everything was in order, we'd go to a JP and make it legal. Wouldn't it be great to have Valentine's day as our 'real' day? Wouldn't it be great to go somewhere in the summer to do it? How about our birthdays in September? And, finally, wouldn't it be wonderful to have December 21st as 'the' day since everyone else already thought it was? By December 19th, 2004, I lost my faith. Or maybe I gained some sense. I walked away. Would I have caved if he had tried to convince me? Possibly. This wasn't an issue to deal with because when I walked away, no one followed. The prince always goes after the princess but my reality was not reflecting the fantasies I had so longed to be a part of.

Reflections of Beauty

I sit here and reflect on my past, and it's difficult. It's difficult to look back and remember and it's sometimes difficult to look forward and imagine. But that's how we learn and that's how we are able to tell stories.

My initial research intent was to look at how stories of beauty are created for young adult females within a popular culture framework. I used *Uglies* by Scott Westerfeld as the primary text for exploration and my own experiences with reading and with beauty in which to situate my research. What I had not anticipated, was the many directions my research would take me. Beauty is not a

static concept, nor can it be studied objectively. Beauty, itself, as well as the angles of beauty we see, change much like in the kaleidoscope I mentioned earlier.

The symbols we each have for beauty are as individual as we are and continually shift with personal experiences and time. In *Uglies*, the template for a Pretty was the averaging of what was considered beautiful. The idea of averaging would imply that the Pretties were normal but that is not the construct that formed in my mind as I read. And looking back at the responses from my participants, they felt the same way. All four of us imagined the supermodels of today. Much like the student who brought the fashion magazine to the Literature Circle discussion day, we were confused when Tally refers to the models in the magazines as Uglies. If our modern day beauty icons are considered ugly in Tally's time, then what is beautiful? Scott Westerfeld makes us stop and think about the symbolic ideals we have created for beauty. The United Kingdom version of *Uglies* has distinctly different cover art than the original North American version with no actual image of a female face (Appendix D). The UK cover features Barbie parts resting in a bed pan. Interestingly, as I was searching for the images to include in my appendix, I discovered that in May, 2011, a new North American cover for *Uglies* was released. This new cover is what I would have preferred originally – the face is covered. The strength of the UK edition and redesigned North American version is that, by not identifying a type, the beauty ideal is ambiguous and allows the reader to become more involved in the construction of a beauty image.

Popular culture refers to something current and as such consistently changes to reflect contemporary times. Looking at how females create their own stories of beauty within a popular culture framework involves looking at how their own worlds have shifted through time.

I was practically addicted to *Sweet Valley High* books in my early teens. The Wakefield twins, Elizabeth and Jess, represented everything I had ever wanted to be. They had what I viewed as glamorous lives in California complete with beaches and a red sports car. But mostly, they were gorgeous. Francine Pascal would spend at least three paragraphs in each novel describing their perfect, blond, thin California bodies and I would suck in my stomach as I read and wish. I rarely felt this kind of envy with fashion magazines and only marginally with visual media. But when I would read a young adult novel with a female protagonist, I would want to become her. Maybe it is because the nature of fiction allows the reader to be drawn into the world of the narrative and in that way it seems natural to me to want to live the life I'm reading about. My concern is that when I think back over the many young adult novels I read, I cannot remember one with a female protagonist who was not aesthetically beautiful unless the narrative revolved around her becoming so. There were some in which the heroine did not believe herself to be beautiful but that was more of a personal perception and as a reader, I imagined her as pretty.

When Ariel and I discussed the protagonist in the novel she is writing, the conversation found itself in the area of character traits – both physical and personality. Here is what she said about Emma:

Ariel: Yeah. So, she's very, well, normal. She's not, you know, very exceptionally beautiful but she is on the inside.

Researcher: Do you think that when people read Emma... They will visualize her as prettier than you did?

Ariel: Probably.

Researcher: Why?

Ariel: Um, because she's the good guy, I guess. (laughs)

Researcher: Okay. (laughs)

Ariel: People always have that image in their head, and she's not really described, so, besides a couple traits, it's not really something I say. This is kind of up to the reader to picture in their head and I think everyone will have a different image...

I agree that every reader will have a slightly different image of what Emma looks like but the fact that she is the protagonist, as Ariel states, lends itself to a more aesthetically pleasing physical description.

As an English Language Arts teacher, I have the privilege and responsibility of text selection. Whether it is the latest piece for the school library or which novel study our department would like to add to the shelves, the task to choose is ours. It is a very serious task when I consider what I have explored in my research. Novels can influence and establish ideals and expectations. As we look at the choices before us, my hope is that we do not simply defer to whatever is most popular at the time. It is important for students to be engaged but it is also imperative for them to be challenged. By choosing books like *Uglies* which have the potential to raise questions and stimulate conversations contrary to the status quo, we can encourage our students to look closely at what they are reading and, in some ways, absorbing. My wish is not to lose the enjoyment of reading but to read actively and question what popular culture notions are being fed to us through fiction.

Many avid readers hate it when their favourite novel is made into a feature film. Most of the time I am excited to see what a film maker and director will do with the narrative as I have imagined it. There is one novel, however, that I hope they never make into a movie. My apologies to Scott Westerfeld but I really do not want the options that have been placed on the *Uglies* series to come to fruition. One of the biggest strengths, in my opinion, of *Uglies* and its potential as a counternarrative is the fact that we are never really told what a Pretty looks like. There are pieces of physical traits that are mentioned as well as the idea that template involved an averaging of beauty but other than the front cover that might feature Tally as a Pretty but could also be her before the operation, no exact image is created. My fear with a film is that Pretty will lose its subjectivity and become an image. Once an individual is cast for a role as a Bubblehead Pretty, an ideal will be set. The symbol will be registered. Pretty will have a specific image and *Uglies* will lose its potential to question beauty ideals. In addition, reading the text, as film, would not allow for creation of meaning associated with beauty. Beauty would be a fixed concept.

Beauty symbols are quite powerful in popular culture and as my participant, Pocahontas, stated, “What is familiar to everybody is beautiful”. That familiarity is linked to mass production of a symbol or an image. Lacan’s symbolic register is where all of these images rest and we use our symbolic register to make sense of the world around us. It allows us to name and understand things. The problem arises when we want to trouble the symbolic. How can I change the signifier or meaning when the symbolic image is so

entrenched within? While I would love to completely eradicate beauty ideology symbols, that is impossible. What I am striving to achieve with my research is to begin conversations about the more subtle and yet powerful messages about beauty within popular culture fictional narratives. Once the conversations begin, our signifier can start to slide under that signified.

I would like to encourage my students to be careful with words. The actual word itself and the connotative message behind a word have the potential to affect how we view ourselves and those around us. The word ‘pretty’, for example, is a cultural construct and the symbolic meaning or image created when this word is used is not fixed. However, despite the malleability of the symbol, it still refers to an ideal. What if you don’t fit the ‘pretty’ construct of the narrative fiction you read? Maybe it is impossible to change the actual word or symbol but as readers who create meaning with each flip of the page, we have the privilege of altering how we individually view the symbol.

Scott Westerfeld does a formidable job of playing with signs and semiotics in *Uglies* through simple capitalization. In Pocahontas’ free-write about *Uglies*, she discussed the varied use of capitalization for the words ‘ugly/ulgies’ and ‘pretty/pretties’.

Pocahontas: That’s one thing that I just kept thinking about through the whole book because Scott Westerfeld constantly, he uses pretty with a lowercase... And with an uppercase and same with ugly. And it just, it changes for both because it, like, you have all the words that are, they’re written the same and sound the same, but they don’t mean the same thing.

Researcher: So what is the difference between capital Pretty and lowercase pretty?

Pocahontas: Well, for the capital, it’s more like they’re making it a class system, almost... They change the meaning for it. It makes it more important or something.

Researcher: Yeah. If you think, going grammar on you for a second here. If you think of a proper noun versus a common noun... A proper noun is a specific label. So Pretty with a capital p...

Pocahontas: Yeah, it's like a name. More than a word.

When we capitalize a word we not only draw attention to it but we do what Pocahontas says – we make it more than a word. It becomes a specific label for something. The words ugly and pretty take on different meaning when they become Ugly and Pretty. We have specified the concept by capitalizing the word. There is an 'ideal' of sorts created because the very definition of a proper noun is that it refers to a specific type rather than a general one. When the capital letter is used, Pretty or Ugly becomes something you *are* instead of a trait you possess. Does the ideal lose its strength when there are so many Pretties? I believe this was Westerfeld's intent and his piece, as a satirical narrative, encourages us to think more about how we use the terms. Which ties beautifully into my own research goals.

The last of my research questions focused on how interaction with popular cultural texts affects the relationship between feminine self and beauty. Looking back at my own experiences with the popular texts of my adolescence, the effect was not positive. I not only longed to be like the young girls I read about but I also established for myself a timeline of sorts that I saw reflected in the narratives I read as I got older. The shift was from high school relationships and friend problems to engagements and children. I saw life progress in the books I was reading and could not understand why my own life was not following the supposed script.

If, however, I were to lay my own personal timeline over contemporary pieces of fiction, the differences would not be as pronounced. Popular culture today has changed, as it should. The cultural texts change as culture changes and I am reminded of the rose Ariel brought for our first conversation and the discussion we had about the difference between natural and fabricated. I had asked Ariel about the beauty of a rose and whether or not it would still retain that beauty if it were less natural or had been altered – if it were dyed. She said that it wouldn't be as natural and that it would still have an element of beauty but not in the same way because it was no longer natural.

I think my life is the natural world Ariel mentions and the fictional pieces I read are the altered lives or the fabrications. They can and do hold beauty but not in the same way, because they are not natural. My life as it is lived is far more beautiful than any fabricated reality.

As I near the end of my research and writing, I bring myself back to one of the first questions I was asked to consider with my work – 'So what?' What is the significance of this particular study? To begin with, it has encouraged me to reflect more on my own personal reading selections and how I interact with these texts, as well as how I let them become a part of my life. This awareness does not only affect my own reading but will filter into my classroom in various ways. Discussions of novels studied will hopefully take different directions as my students and I bring our unique readings to the group and look closely at how interpretation and meaning is informed by personal experiences. In addition, I hope to make meaningful connections between the pieces we encounter in the

classroom and ways in which they possibly reflect the changing cultural world we live in. The young adult section of most bookstores and school libraries look different today than they did when I was a teenager. Timeless themes exist but times themselves change. Fiction selections can speak to the cultural ideologies of certain ages but narrative also has the potential to alter some of those ideals. It is this potentiality of narrative fiction, specifically related to the construction of beauty, that answers my 'so what' question. The significance of my study is found in the bound pages of novels, in the imaginations of young adults as they read, in the selection process of English teachers in the classrooms, and in the talented minds of young adult writers who literally hold the transformative power of narration in their fingertips.

While it seems inevitable that a standard for beauty will continue to exist and it is possible that years from now young girls will still select Disney Princesses as their first experiences with beauty, my hope is that young readers will become more aware of the messages they are absorbing through the popular narratives they read. Fiction does reflect changing culture and can influence those changes as well but readers need to decide which changes they want to adopt for themselves. I previously compared looking at beauty to looking through a kaleidoscope and while I still see the images shifting with each turn, I also see beauty as a reflection. Beauty is a reflection of an ideal that was once considered truth but as with any reflection, it can shift and change according to your perspective.

Beautiful New Stories

That ring I wear on my right hand is new again. I have had it remade. The vintage look of it still remains but now it is nested in a band of platinum. Times change and lives change and my life has changed dramatically over the past few years and in the time it has taken me to complete my masters program. I decided to have my nana's ring re-set because it is no longer the only ring I wear. It now has a partner on my left hand as I have a partner to hold that hand. This summer I got married. It was not your traditional 'picture-perfect' wedding but it was the most beautiful day of my life. I rode my quad down the aisle as the wind literally tore my veil off my head. The dock wavered with the combined weight of the wedding party and at any moment we could have been pitched into Moose Lake. Part way through the vows I realized that the Pastor was repeating my wedding vows rather than having me say the ring ceremony ones. I stopped him, whispered a quiet, "I think we did this already," and we all laughed. During our first dance, my iPhone, which was hooked up to the sound system stopped but instead of letting it bother us, my husband turned to our guests and said, "You know the words, sing along!" And we all did. By the standards set in narratives, the wedding was not perfect but for us it was perfectly beautiful because it was perfectly real. We rode away, not into the sunset, but down the gravel road with our *Just Married* sign on the back of the quad and the Root Beer and Cream Soda cans jingling all the way. Behind us lay our families and friends – people who could tell many stories about each of us. And ahead of us rests the stories we have yet to author. But they are ours to write.

Students come to us with stories of love and stories of loss. Stories of friendship and stories of loneliness. Stories of childhood and stories of adolescence. Stories of beauty and stories of ugliness. The beauty we see in these stories is the beauty we see in the experience of life lived.

Novels can be about beauty; the strive for it, the lack of it. Some novels can make us feel inferior and wish we could be more like the heroes and heroines in the tales we love. Sometimes we want to act like them and sometimes we want to look like them. The main difference between us, though, is that they are fabrications and we are the real thing. Perfection may exist in a narrative but experience has taught me that perfection does not exist in life. Life is wonderfully imperfect and that's what makes it beautiful.



Sheena Priddle

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Appendix A

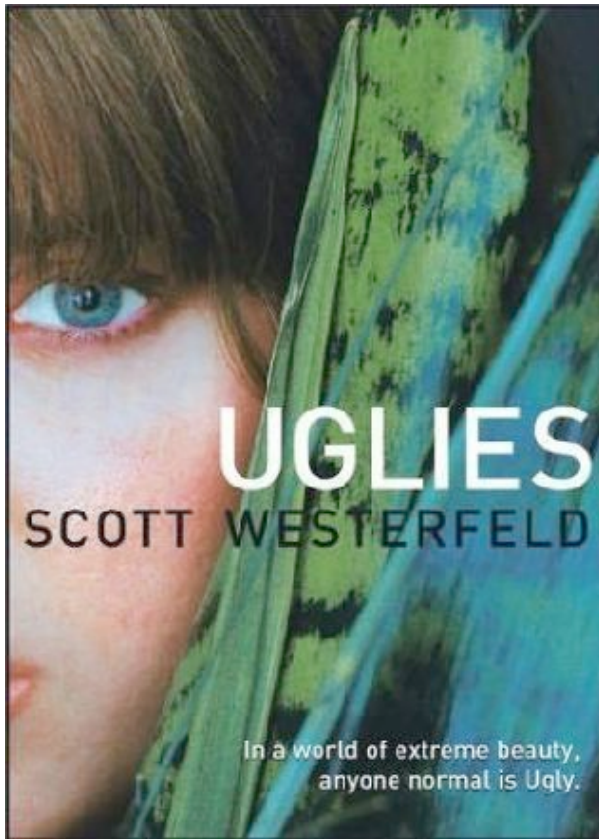




Appendix C



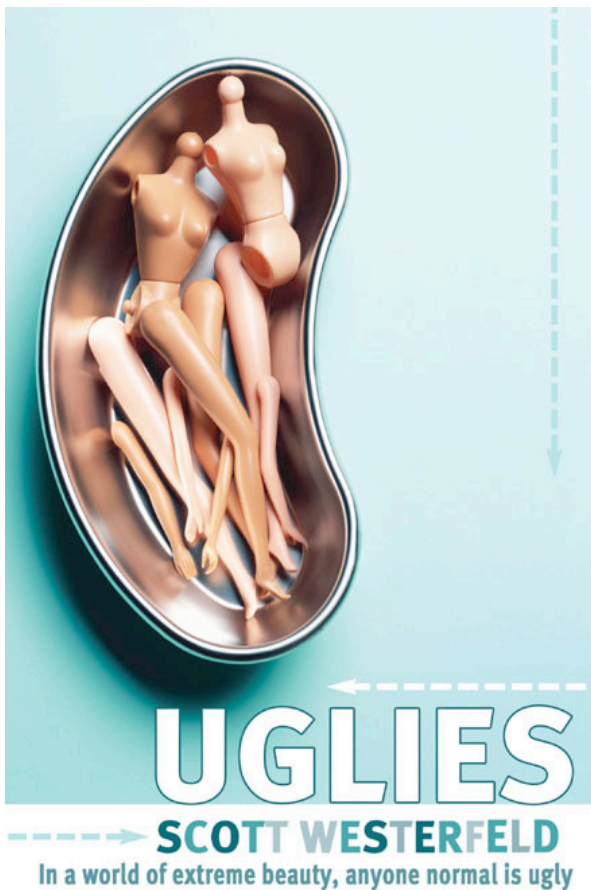
Appendix D



North American Cover - Original



North American Cover – New



United Kingdom Cover

A Beautiful Inquiry: Stories in the Reflections of Beauty

Denise Lemieux

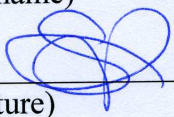
Consent to use Artist Created Work

I understand that Denise Lemieux, from the University of Alberta, is requesting to use images I created in consultation with her. Original work has been given to her with full copyright permission. This includes both the original drawings and the photography taken at her wedding. I understand that images of this work may be used in the researcher's thesis / dissertation / research reports / scholarly publications or in presentations at scholarly conferences.

☒ I understand that my original artwork and photography will be used in Denise Lemieux's thesis and that she will credit me for each piece within the thesis.

By signing below, I consent for my work to be used as stipulated above.

Sheena Priddie
(print name)


(signature)

August 30, 2011
(date)

The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines and approved by the Faculties of Education, Extension, Augustana and Campus Saint Jean Research Ethics Board (EEASJ REB) at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Chair of the EEASJ REB c/o (780) 492-2614.

A Beautiful Inquiry: Stories in the Reflections of Beauty

Denise Lemieux

Consent to use Participant Created Work

I understand that a researcher from the University of Alberta is requesting to use my child's art/school work for the purpose of research. Original samples will be photographed/photocopied and returned to the participant in a timely manner if requested. I understand that images of this work may be used in the researcher's thesis / dissertation / research reports / scholarly publications or in presentations at scholarly conferences.

☒ I understand that in discussions about the work, a pseudonym will be used.

OR

☐ I understand that at my child's request her/his name will be included in the caption.

FURTHER,

☒ I request return of original artifact(s) to the address provided below

4 Odessa Place
St. Albert, AB
T8N-6C6

By signing below, I consent* for my child's work to be used as stipulated above.

CHRISTINE LUDWIG
(print name)

Christine Ludwig
(signature)

May 11/2010
(date)

*I understand that I may withdraw this consent up until a month after the collection of the work by contacting the researcher, Denise Lemieux, verbally or via email at dh11@ualberta.ca.

You are provided with 2 copies of the Permission to Use Work Consent form. Please complete, return one, and keep the other for your records.

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A Beautiful Inquiry: Stories in the Reflections of Beauty

Denise Lemieux

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OR

☐ I understand that at my request my name will be included in the caption.

FURTHER,

☒ I request return of original artifact(s) to the address provided below

4 Odessa Place
ST. ALBERT, AB
T8N-6C6

By signing below, I consent* for my work to be used as stipulated above.

Caralyn Ludwig
(print name)

(Ludwig)
(signature)

May 11, 2010
(date)

*I understand that I may withdraw this consent up until a month after the collection of the work by contacting the researcher, Denise Lemieux, verbally or via email at dhl1@ualberta.ca.

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A Beautiful Inquiry: Stories in the Reflections of Beauty

Denise Lemieux

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☐ I understand that in discussions about the work, a pseudonym will be used.

OR

☒ I understand that at my child's request her/his name will be included in the caption.

FURTHER,

☐ I request return of original artifact(s) to the address provided below

By signing below, I consent* for my child's work to be used as stipulated above.

Sandy Johnson
(print name)

Sandy Johnson
(signature)

May 11 / 2010
(date)

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A Beautiful Inquiry: Stories in the Reflections of Beauty

Denise Lemieux

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☐ I understand that in discussions about the work, a pseudonym will be used.

OR

☒ I understand that at my request my name will be included in the caption.

FURTHER,

☐ I request return of original artifact(s) to the address provided below

By signing below, I consent* for my work to be used as stipulated above.

Shelby Johnson
(print name)

Shelby Johnson
(signature)

May 11, 2010
(date)

*I understand that I may withdraw this consent up until a month after the collection of the work by contacting the researcher, Denise Lemieux, verbally or via email at dhl1@ualberta.ca.

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A Beautiful Inquiry: Stories in the Reflections of Beauty

Denise Lemieux

Consent to use Participant Created Work

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☒ I understand that in discussions about the work, a pseudonym will be used.

OR

☒ I understand that at my child's request her/his name will be included in the caption.

FURTHER,

☒ I request return of original artifact(s) to the address provided below

By signing below, I consent* for my child's work to be used as stipulated above.

Shelley Wilson
(print name)
[Signature]
(signature)

May 5/10
(date)

*I understand that I may withdraw this consent up until a month after the collection of the work by contacting the researcher, Denise Lemieux, verbally or via email at dhl1@ualberta.ca.

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A Beautiful Inquiry: Stories in the Reflections of Beauty

Denise Lemieux

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☐ I understand that in discussions about the work, a pseudonym will be used.

OR

☒ I understand that at my request my name will be included in the caption.

FURTHER,

☒ I request return of original artifact(s) to the address provided below

By signing below, I consent* for my work to be used as stipulated above.

Kimberley Wilson
(print name)

Kimberley Wilson
(signature)

Wed. May 5th 10
(date)

*I understand that I may withdraw this consent up until a month after the collection of the work by contacting the researcher, Denise Lemieux, verbally or via email at dhl1@ualberta.ca.

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