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### Critical Response to Journal Article

Laurie Langbauer, author of “The Ethics and Practice of Lemony Snicket: Adolescence and Generation X,” offers a critical literary analysis of Snicket’s work and implies within this analysis broader implications on the roles, merits, and expectations of both adolescent and children’s literature.

This essay, published in the March 2007 issue of PMLA, the peer-reviewed journal of the Modern Language Association of America, is an excerpt of Langbauer’s greater study entitled “Learning to Read: Ethics and Children’s Literature” (“PMLA”; Langbauer 502). Langbauer’s expertise is clearly seen throughout her analysis, however, her authority is also reinforced through her career: She is a professor of English at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, while also claiming authorship of two books, and participating in research focusing specifically on the relationship between child development and its relationship to literature (Langbauer 502). The author’s wide background knowledge is also seen in the Works Cited section of her article. She utilizes sources from a wide variety of subject areas to provide a foundation on which to make her own arguments concerning the works of Snicket and their place in the wider study of adolescent and children’s literature. Of course, Langbauer draws examples from every book within Snicket’s series, *A Series of Unfortunate Events*; additionally, she provides interviews

with Daniel Handler (the man behind the pseudonym Lemony Snicket). Langbauer uses psychological studies and articles to fuel her perspectives on child development (such as Coupland Douglas' *Generation X: Tales from an Accelerated Culture*), studies that access theoretical and critical viewpoints of literature (such as Linda Hutcheon's *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*), and various sources that specifically address the genres under study (such as Ann Grieve's "Metafictional Play in Children's Fiction" and Katherine Dalsimer's *Female Adolescence: Psychoanalytic Reflections on Works of Literature*) (Langbauer 517-521). To put it simply, Langbauer denies no voice in shaping her own, boasting a works cited page that stretches 5 pages of her 20 page article.

Despite the hefty list of sources that add to her argument, Langbauer's own argument is clear and consistent throughout the text, manifesting itself on the first page of the piece. She writes, "instead of simply exemplifying one's generational values, *A Series* also offers a critique, debunking what it considers the pieties of its predecessors and imparting its own vision of ethics" (502). She goes on to argue that, while authors of children's literature have worked to complicate the prescriptive visions of "right and wrong" for generations, "Snicket's series also recasts ethics—from fixed code to something more fluid, knowable ultimately only in action" (503). In this perspective, Langbauer argues that Snicket's work is an exemplary piece of literature that adds new dimension to the idea of children's and adolescent literature: "Generation X" is one which has the opportunity, through texts such as this, to construct meaning themselves, rather than being prescribed meaning. Before Langbauer can go on to imply this new trend to the genre of adolescent literature, she clearly describes the framework for which she views practical purpose of the genre: "Adolescent fiction is by definition metafictional" (503). Additionally, the author defines her subjects, the individuals affected by this metafictional perspective. She quotes

Douglas Copland who writes that “X...defines not a chronological age but a way of looking at the world” (504). Claiming that “the reading and writing practices for Generation X merge children’s and adult books,” Langbauer’s argument is thus centralized on the metfictional properties of adolescent literature within the schema of Generation X, both forces working to construct and influence one another.

One of the main points underlying this argument is that Snicket’s *Series* works in a way that mirrors adolescence itself, including Snicket’s construction and deconstruction of language and ethics. Langbauer writes, “A *Series* reveals adolescence as a category through which... simple notions of the human come to grief...In this respect, his books provide a model for a literary criticism ambivalent about its interest in a category as treacherous as the human” (505). Adolescents exist within a difficult, formative period of transition that hinges on the idea of discovering one’s own humanity. In childhood, one is accustomed to being told what is right and wrong, how to best go about solving a problem, and what values they should appropriate; however, in adulthood, one recognizes the world as a place of contradictions, hardships, and unanswerable questions. Adolescents, therefore, exist within this anomalous place in between prescription and self-description. Langbauer effectively argues that Snicket’s work is metafictional in the way he constructs and deconstructs language and ethics throughout the series to mirror this transitory period. Langbauer writes, “Handler invokes metafiction as moral compass because he equates ethics not with didacticism but with aesthetics” (507). To reinforce such a claim, the author hearkens to the assertions made by Handler himself: “Handler repeatedly claims that he started writing children’s fiction to correct the ‘overwhelmingly moralistic tone in all my least favorite [children’s] books’” (506). Langbauer’s analysis of *A Series of Unfortunate Events* opens the door to a critical literary analysis of the text, while also

focusing on the text in its context—as a piece of adolescent literature, a genre which (for Generation X) works to mirror ambiguity.

It is through this open door established in Langbauer's article from which I was able to ascertain the focused direction in my own analysis of Snicket's literature: Langbauer's article acts, for me, as an exemplary text that blends critical analysis with a field of research relating specifically to young adults. While Langbauer's argument surrounds the development of ethics in children's and adolescent literature, her essay will aid my own argument by providing me with an example of structure and source material in building my own.

Langbauer's use and presentation of sources is particularly important for the development of my study. My own argument is quite vast: I will attempt to argue the importance of studying adolescent/young adult literature because of its flexibility as a genre; and in doing so, I will be making this assertion by a critical literary analysis of Snicket's *A Series of Unfortunate Events*. To a writer such as myself, a novice compared to Langbauer, this task seems daunting; however, Langbauer's essay provides me with an excellent framework on how I can most effectively weave together a variety of sources to make my argument. Additionally, because we are critically analyzing the same primary texts, her secondary source materials are often helpful in my own research. For example, Langbauer makes reference to Derrida, a postmodern theorist: She writes that adolescent literature for Generation X “marks a return to ethics when it comes to children's literature, one that rethinks ethics as Handler does...through a deconstruction of categories such as justice, which it nevertheless upholds (Derrida)” (505). It was this reference which led me to construct my own argument through the critical lens established by Derrida and other postmodernist thinkers.

While providing my research with an exemplary structure and list of potential secondary resources, Langbauer's article also helps establish the credibility of my argument. Because my argument is so broad, encompassing a critical reading of an entire series while incorporating this reading into a larger argument, "The Ethics and Practice of Lemony Snicket: Adolescence and Generation X" provides a foundation for credibility. To a skeptical reader, my references to this source will lead them to understand that I am not alone in my argument, in terms of scope, structure, and underlying assertion of adolescent literature as a genre worthy of critical study and consideration. Langbauer's focus on critical elements like negative capability and the arbitrary construction of meaning will help me reinforce my claims made about the literature itself. Her focus on the merits of the series will provide legitimacy in my claim that young adult literature matters both inside and outside the classroom, that young adult literature is, in fact, literature worth studying. Langbauer, in her conclusion, writes "This series is tricky—deeply compelling and deeply off-putting; it seems to polarize readers, as if they must either love or hate it...beyond those responses it offers something more" (515). Because Langbauer comes from such a reputable position as an educator, professional writer, and researcher, her legitimacy can be transferred to me in such instances.

Langbauer's article is, and will continue to be, a valuable resource in my own writing; however it cannot be said that her article is the pinnacle example of academic writing which I must mirror in my own argument. While her essay is very well researched and effectively argues her meaningful interpretations of the literature and its place in a broader context, it is inherently quite different from my own argument. As such, I will be employing different structural techniques while I frame my own argument. Langbauer's argument, like mine, is quite broad and relies on weaving of many academic subjects and disciplines to effectively communicate. While

reading Langbauer, I often found myself writing countless notes in the margins, circling and highlighting passages on every page. While this points to the richness of her work, it also alerted me to the fact that her underlying arguments, which concerned the relationship between Generation X and the genres of children's and adolescent literature, were often lost in a sea of critical literary analysis. I was on the edge of my seat, hungry as she dissected Snicket's literature, hung on her every word when she discussed the significance of each literary allusion introduced by the author of *A Series*, yet I frequently lost focus on her overall point. It is my hope to structure my argument in a different manner: I hope to provide a substantial foundation of background knowledge concerning the genre of adolescent literature itself and briefly explain its development over the last few decades, as well as establishing the context of its controversy within academia and the k-12 educational system; furthermore, I will separate this discussion and background by clearly merging into the critical analysis before broadening back out into a discussion on the analysis working to establish my earlier claims on the merits of the overall genre in which this text fits. While Langbauer's study was effective and intriguing, the structural modes in which she made her arguments seem ineffective as a basis for my own.

Overall, Laurie Lanbauer's "The Ethics and Practice of Lemony Snicket: Adolescence and Generation X" is an excellent source. For my own purposes, it is a text which offers a network of usable, valuable elements.

Works Cited

Langbauer, Laurie. "The Ethics of Lemony Snicket: Adolescence and Generation X." *PMLA*.

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