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Losing Sight of Literature: The Commodity of Book Packaging

In every young writer's heart there is a dream, a dream that one day all of their hard work will lead to a successful, published novel. And not just any novel, but the next Great American novel that will be taught in classes for decades to come. Unfortunately, much of the publishing industry has another goal in mind when weeding through submissions and story ideas: making money and duplicating the success of *Harry Potter* or *Twilight*. In this paper, I plan to examine the workings of companies like Alloy Entertainment and James Frey's Full Fathom Five Factory, each of which provide outlines and hire writers to put together novels for the Young Adult (YA hereafter) genre. By using a "novel by committee" format, these companies are weakening the publishing industry and making it that much more difficult for an up and coming writer to get their original work seen, much less published. They are doing away with what is considered to be the author and replacing it with brand names and product placement, changing the ideals of what it is to be a writer. In this essay, I will question whether or not these precooked ideas can still be considered art with any literary value, or if they're simply commodities to companies consumed with the desire for money rather than the desire to share good books.

First, though, it is important to determine what it is that allows something to be considered literature or to have literary value. In *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, Terry Eagleton goes through several possible definitions of what literature is and how definitions vary according to who's doing the defining. First he says that "Literature, by forcing us into dramatic awareness of language, refreshes these habitual responses and renders objects more 'perceptible.'

By having to grapple with language in a more strenuous, self-conscious way than usual, the world which that language contains is vividly renewed” (3). This “grappling with language” is close to my own way of defining literature. Some things just sound like literature. There’s a tone, a phrasing, a style that seems to just lend itself to some kind of higher form of writing. It’s the way a casual reader or non-expert on the topic might define it. For example, the kinds of books read in an English course are not always the same as the kinds of books read in teenage bedrooms. The novels that will be discussed in this paper are the latter kind of book, ones that don’t work to create vivid worlds or do anything to make the reading process strenuous. As I’ll get into, they’re primary goal is simply to entertain.

And yet, though Eagleton mentions several possible definitions of literature, at one point he says that “there is no ‘essence’ of literature whatsoever...Perhaps literature means...any kind of writing which for some reason or another somebody values highly” (8). To a certain extent, I agree with this. Anything I read that means a lot to me, I consider literary, worthy to be read and cherished. Yet, this same book may be read by someone else and considered poor quality, with little meaning or creative style worthy of praising. In this sense literature is subjective, allowing any written text to be capable of having literary value. But there’s a danger to having such a loose definition of literature. If anything can qualify, the novels that are truly special, the ones with particularly creative styles or unique voices will not get the recognition they deserve. There has to be a selection process, some kind of competitive aspect that separates the ordinary in fiction and nonfiction from the Pulitzer winners. Of course, series like *Gossip Girl* don’t have that particular literary style, yet they’ve still managed to reach the New York Times Bestsellers List several times. Eagleton says “Value-judgments would certainly seem to have a lot to do with what is judged literature and what isn’t – not necessarily in the sense that writing has to be ‘fine’

to be literary, but that it has to be *of the kind* that is judged fine: it may be an inferior example of a generally valued mode” (9). He’s saying that it’s not really required to be a particular kind of writer, but that you’re able to pass off as one. It doesn’t really define literature, though Eagleton ends up saying literature of “unalterable value” doesn’t exist” (9). Instead, it serves as a benchmark. This idea is what I will consider in this paper as passing off as literature is what these book packaging industries seem to be attempting, and somehow, no one really cares.

The idea of book packaging all started with Edward Stratemeyer. At the turn of the century he began a children’s series called *The Rover Boys*, about three brothers sent to military school for misbehaving. The series, written by Stratemeyer under a pseudonym, paved the way for several series in what would become the first book packager for children’s fiction, Stratemeyer Syndicate. Stratemeyer hired several ghostwriters to write series such as *Hardy Boys* and *Nancy Drew*, all of which were to follow certain guidelines like having jackets similar to those of adult novels or ending chapters mid-situation so kids would keep reading (Billman). The company was wildly successful, and in 1922, a study showed that “the reading habits of 5th, 6th, and 7th graders were dominated by Stratemeyer books” (Romalov 118). Their methods carried into the 1980s until Stratemeyer’s daughter passed away, leading Simon and Schuster to buy the company and create their own mass production company. Another book packager named Dan Weiss started the company Sweet Dreams and created a “Harlequin romance for kids” series called *Sweet Valley High* (Mead 69). This series was extremely popular as well, all written under the name Francine Pascal, a real woman who wrote very few of them, instead writing only the outlines that she’d then hand off to ghostwriters.

Given these series, it’s no wonder that several companies would be working to achieve the same success. Today, Alloy Entertainment is a successful book packager for the YA genre,

scoring some big hits with the *Gossip Girl* series and *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* series. Each of these ideas, along with every other that passes through their offices into the publisher's hands, were thought up during a brainstorming session by two male bosses, Leslie Morgenstein and Josh Banks, and then several young, female editors. It is these young women, or young women like them, who are then contracted to carry out a story idea once it has been completely outlined and plotted in a brainstorming meeting (Mead 62). Some people in the industry may be okay with this idea of collaborative effort, feeling that more people are capable of coming up with more clever and unique ideas. Or that the more people involved, the faster the actual work can be finished. But this is not at all what one envisions when imagining the creation of their own work, or even the work of a favorite author. I think of authors struggling in a cramped closet of an office, cursing, pulling hair, slamming their fist on the desk with, inexplicably, a trashcan overflowing with papers at their side. All so that they can eventually find the right voice for their characters, the ending that ties everything together in such a way that it means something. The author doesn't sit at a laptop as five or six people feed him or her ideas. They don't call up someone like Morgenstein at 2:30 in the morning to clarify a plot point. They stay up until 2:30 in the morning to try and create a plot point. The idea of "the author" seems basic enough; a person who brings something to life that didn't previously exist. It's difficult to find that kind of strength in a work where the name on the cover is only made up, the real work done by any number of people. Sometimes, as is the case with *Sweet Valley High* and *Gossip Girl*, the name on the cover is real, but the person who wrote it is very different.

In *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Wayne Booth goes into a lot more detail regarding this idea of "the author." Though Booth makes several points about the author's role, I'm focusing here on the presence of the author aspect of his argument. Booth details opposing opinions on whether or

not the presence of the author within a novel takes away the possibility of it being art. This is tricky because as Booth says early on “The author’s judgment is always present...though the author can to some extent choose his disguises, he can never choose to disappear” (20). If there is no way for the author to escape, then it is impossible to say his presence prevents a novel or drama from being art. If it did, then no literature could be considered art, creating a mess of an attempt to define novels as something else. Some critics, such as Jean-Paul Sartre, believe that the author should not even exist in literary works, that if a reader becomes aware that the author is controlling characters, “they will not seem to be free” (50). At that point, the reader may be taken out of the story and it will lose any chance it ever had of being appreciated by the literary world (slight exaggeration of course, but Sartre does seem to feel strongly here that the author should not demonstrate how he’s playing God with characters). Jean-Louis Curtis, responded saying that readers have “a tacit contract with the novelist, a contract granting him the right to know what he is writing about...To deny it would not only destroy all fiction, but all literature, since all art presupposes the artist’s choice. ‘If you destroy the notion of choice it is art that is annihilated” (53). Such a contract exists regardless of the genre or form of publication of a work. With that in mind, readers of these packaged novels, like *The A-List*, are choosing to enjoy them, to purchase them and embrace them, regardless of whether any of the rules for who the author is or what literature is are being followed. It doesn’t concern them if there are too many signs of the author’s presence, pushing the characters along, basically playing God. Readers are choosing to accept these works as art, and agreeing with the author that that is what these novels are. This is disregarding the fact that Zoey Dean, the pseudonym for *The A-List* series, is actually several people, several different authors all making what little choices they can within an outline, an agreement they’re barely capable of making. Really in this case, the contract is between Alloy

Entertainment and the reader; Alloy is making choices as artists, not any authors, and the readers have no idea (because it actually takes searching to learn which names on the covers are real and which aren't).

With an understanding that the author must be present, Booth goes on to discuss what he terms the implied author, saying “However impersonal he (the author) may try to be, his reader will inevitably construct a picture of the official scribe who writes in this manner – and of course that official scribe will never be neutral toward all values” (71). Beneath the narration of a novel, a reader can deduce certain values and perceptions from the author that may not match the author's views in real life. By reading a particular novel, not only does a reader get an idea of the characters and/or narrator within the pages, but he can also pick up one what seems to be the personality of the author. It's much like any writing. By reading an email from someone, you can pick up on certain cues of that person's personality, and, to an extent, their views on certain aspects of life. This idea only reinforces how important the role of the author is, and how these book packagers are cutting out an integral piece to the puzzle. Who are the readers getting to know as they read about these have-it-all teenagers? Perhaps it is this lack of background noise, of information between the lines that causes these series to have less substance (or in some cases, to at least appear that way). This could also be a reason why some of these novels seem to lack distinctive personalities. For example, in the *Gossip Girl* series, the author(s) use the construct where an anonymous blogger shares the goings on of all of the main characters of the novel. This does progress the plot, but mostly it is used to center on the scandals the characters are knee deep in. And this is done in a typical fashion, with lines like “It's going to be a wild and wicket year. I can smell it” (4). Not to mention how the book immediately begins with the reason why kids are reading the book, asking “Ever wondered what the lives of the chosen ones are like?” (3). Well,

if this novel is any indication, they're all the same. All of the characters are high-schoolers getting drunk and having sex. It's difficult to tell them apart, and as the series goes on, they date each other in so many different combinations that it's almost uncomfortable. The only reason why the blogger is able to remain anonymous, aside from the fact that it's necessary to keep the premise going, is because there's no substance to the dirt that "Gossip Girl" is dishing. Her identity is a mystery because she sounds like everyone else, with nothing distinctive except for the font that's used to separate the blog posts from the regular chapters. I'm not sure if this shallowness would exist even if one author wrote the series on her own, as it could simply be the ploy to attract teenagers. But these series seem to be excluding the author and the artist necessary for deeper fiction.

This idea of artistry leads to my next area of concern in Booth's book. It is actually simply the title of a section, called "True Artists Write Only For Themselves" that gives me pause (89). Booth says that the author is not only creating an image of himself in a work, but also trying to "mold the reader" into someone who can properly appreciate the book (89). This idea of artists/writers writing solely for themselves is intriguing because writers of these book packagers aren't really writing for themselves. They've signed a "write-for-hire" contract. They're following guidelines that are usually imposed by the company rather than creatively thought up by themselves. Therefore they aren't really writing for themselves, from their own creative devices, and thus it could be said that they are not true artists. Though I mentioned previously that the connection between author and reader, if agreed upon by both parties, may allow the work to be considered art, this idea seems to negate that possibility. How can something be true, as art or as an artist, if the connection between them is not real but manufactured by a corporation that creates the ideas for you? The young reader may find no qualms here, but a

work of art should belong to the artist in every way, from conception to fruition, with no major assistance from anyone else. Booth points to such pride in a novelists work when quoting author Mark Harris saying “I write. Let the reader learn to read” (90). Perhaps it is an idealistic notion, but the novel is not written for the reader but for the novelist himself. The author shouldn’t have to make certain allowances so that the reader might better enjoy or understand a work. It should be a work of art that, as Harris says, the reader adapts to, rather than the other way around. These novels are produced with the explicit purpose of consumption. Given that they’re meant for the YA genre, it is almost a sure bet that the authors and packagers craft the plots to create a fast, easy read that serves simply to entertain rather than enlighten. Harris also says that “There is easy reading. And there is literature....There are easy writers and there are writers” (90). Novel series like the aforementioned *The A-List* or others not mentioned like *The Clique* are written quickly, several published a year in each series. They’re easy reading done by writers who, based on the contract that they’ve signed with the packager, are easy writers. It stands to reason then that easy reading and literature are two separate entities, and because these books are packaged with the purpose of being light, entertaining reads, that they can’t also be considered literature. And here we are again, noting that while these packagers might produce the big bucks, and that may be all anyone at Alloy Entertainment cares about, they do not possess what it is to be considered literature.

Of course, authorship alone isn’t enough of a determinant in figuring out if something is literary or not. It’s possible that a more corporate authorship could still intend to create something that engages readers minds rather than simply their wallets. Yet Morgenstein, the President of the company says “The company’s main goals, however, is to produce blockbusters” (63). And they’ve done that quite well. According to Mead, 18 of 29 of their new

titles hit the *Times* Children's best sellers list (from 2009). Because of their book packaging scheme, they are able to "retain the intellectual property rights to all of the work, with the view to generating a movie or TV show with the same title" (64). This results in more money and more opportunity than if they were a typical publisher and the author had all of the rights. To their advantage, they work on giving kids what they want to read, rather than what might be good for them to read.

This "giving the people what they want" also has a few drawbacks. One of their popular series, *Gossip Girl*, as mentioned earlier, is all about wealthy teens who show little to no moral qualms as they deal with sex, drugs, and alcohol. Young teens were so enthralled by the image of gorgeous teens wearing designer clothing that several other series have been spun from it, like *The It Girl* and *The Clique*. To them, it didn't matter how deep the characters were, or how reasonable the plot was; what mattered was what dress they were wearing when they hooked up with some random guy. Of course, in general it's hard to add a high amount of literary value to the YA genre, simply because young teens aren't looking for something like that yet. They may want books that look like what their parents read, as Mead suggests, but they aren't quite prepared to read them, particularly since it seems rather common for every adult novel to include some sort of sex scene that would be too mature for their age (at least the younger end of the YA age group, 12-15 or so). Teens want something they can relate to, characters that they wish they could be or that represent them in some way. There is some good YA fiction that does this, like anything that Sarah Dessen has ever written. Even as an adult, I can still find value in her books, as she never stoops to having only beautiful characters, a narrator that every boy falls in love with, or one that can buy anything they could ever hope for. She may not be in line to win a Pulitzer, but she's managed to create entirely believable characters all on her own, no packaging

necessary, with no need to over-commercialize her work for better results. Work by Alloy Entertainment, on the other hand, is always going after the commercial, sometimes at the expense of literary quality.

These kinds of complaints dogged Alloy's predecessors as well. Stratemeyer had to deal with librarians attempting to ban his books from their libraries, because they led to "mental laziness" and that they, the libraries, had to "stand for better, purer literature and art for children" rather than "gratifying a low and lowering taste (Romalov 115). Back then, most books written for children were written with the intention of providing some kind of lesson that kids could learn from in their own lives. Such a problem is hardly an issue now, or we wouldn't even be discussing the existence of *Gossip Girl*. *Sweet Valley High* faced the same kind of disdain that their adult contemporary, romance novels, face. Many thought they were trashy, poorly written, too perfect and too often white.

Do these issues matter, though? If this commercial method of popping out novels is leading to success, and as noted above many have gone on to become bestsellers, then maybe the underlying quality doesn't matter. If kids don't mind that Bella Swan from *Twilight* was the most boring character alive, than maybe there's no need to complain, no need to question whether there's any real value to these novels or if they're simply a commodity that young teens fall all over. Banks, executive vice president of Alloy Entertainment, points out "'We don't have literary aims. It would be nice...you can't group plot Harry Potter. Well, you could, but it wouldn't be Harry Potter'" (70). This seems to be an open admission that their goal is not to create the next *Catcher in the Rye*. He also seems to be admitting that it's not possible for a group of people to create an idea and world as real and expansive as what J.K. Rowling did. A group of people can all have different ideas that one person alone may not have been able to come up with, but one

person can have an idea and go much deeper with it than a whole group can. And that's the difference between book packagers and a sole author slaving away at a computer. One is done as art and one is done to make money.

Alloy Entertainment is taking their novel-as-product approach even further with their series *Private*. *Private* is about a young teenage girl, Reed Brennan, who becomes fixated on joining an elite dorm at her private school, filled with popular girls called the Billings Girls. As she fights to become one, she solves mysteries and falls in love and all sorts of things that typically happen to young heroines. The series has been a popular one, with the 14th addition expected to publish this September. If that's not enough, there is also a prequel series that focuses on a supporting character, Ariana Osgood, and events that occurred before *Private* started. Ariana Osgood is also the focus of the spin off series, which occurs after the events of *Private*. Including the novels set to publish this year, there are 22 books in the series, all written by Kate Brian, or at least the woman behind the name. The interesting thing regarding Brian and this series is that she is able to create a relationship with the readers, but it's completely under her pseudonym. Her entries on her MySpace regarding the series always end in "Kate" though I did notice that her real name, Kieran Scott, appears as a MySpace friend. The real intrigue with this series, however, is Alloy Entertainment's new method of getting a brand across: webisodes.

In 2009, after many fans were clamoring for a television adaptation, like *Gossip Girl* (Karpel 1), the company got a better idea. They decided to turn the series into a web series on Alloy's teen site, teen.com. The company Alloy caters to teens in every platform imaginable, from a teen website, to Channel One that airs on television in middle and high schools across the country, to a clothing shop called Delia's. If there's a way to reach teens as consumers, Alloy is doing it. By turning *Private* into a web series, they are making it their next big product, the next

big ticket to cash in on what has become more and more popular with teens: online television. Leslie Morgenstein, the president of Alloy Entertainment, says that “It’s an opportunity to be closer to the audience and the advertiser” (1). Really, what he’s saying is that by integrating advertisements and product placement into the show, the audience may not even realize that what they’re watching is actually just a longwinded commercial for Neutrogena or O.B. Karpel quotes him as also saying that “I think we’ve come up with very creative ways to provide big bang for the buck for the brands” (2). He’s likely talking about the brands that are sponsoring the series (all Johnson and Johnson products like the aforementioned Neutrogena and O.B.). But he may as well also be talking about the *Private* web series. Every move the company is making for this series has nothing at all to do with the actual content of the novels. There is no desire to make the characters come to life, no focus on making sure that the series is everything that the readers and fans were hoping for. Alloy Entertainment has completely stripped away any aspect of literature or creativity in the hopes that viewers will see an actor use some face cream and afterwards go out and buy it themselves.

To make matters even worse, before the series aired, there was a short reality series where readers could submit audition videos to a website, privatetheseries.com (2). Three girls would be chosen from these auditions and flown to Los Angeles with the chance of winning a supporting role on the series (this was the reality series part). The main qualification for the chosen girl, was “that [the] actress needs to be gorgeous” (2). This is because the character that they’ll be playing is a model at the school, of course. Karpel even includes a quote of one of the casting directors discussing how difficult it can be to find a gorgeous girl who can also act. Now, Alloy Entertainment is not alone in only desiring beautiful people to portray characters in their shows. That is practically a law in Hollywood, as television would be much less enjoyable if

everyone was simply average. And given that the characters of the series were written as being unbelievably gorgeous, it only stands to reason that the actresses hired to play them also be gorgeous. But there is something wrong with the idea of searching through everyday teenagers, fans who greatly loved the books, and picking and choosing who is worthy to be on a show based on their appearance. Once again, what will market well is considered more important than anything that has to do with the actual series or those who have embraced it since its inception.

What is really interesting though is the fact that each “webisode,” of which there are only 20, are only four to six minutes long. Morgenstein is quoted saying that “We think that is the optimum length to both tell a story and retain attention” (2). This line suggests that Morgenstein doesn’t really consider viewers/fans as anything beyond a demographic, a market that can be exploited for its natural inclination to have everything. It also implies that young teens are incapable of focusing on anything for longer than five minutes. Given that teens these days spend so much time sitting in front of their computers or television, the idea that they’d be unable to stomach even a half hour show is a stretch. It’s not as if 13-year-olds have to get up and walk around in the middle of a movie because their attention span is shot. The article gives no other reason for such a short length, and from looking at more recent web shows on their website, it appears that keeping things short is still a priority, though now it’s more like eight minutes. But from everything else the article states, where they mention the many ways that having a web series is cheaper and potentially more profitable than an actual television show, I would guess that they have decided on such short episodes simply because less production is less expensive, and kids will tune in if it’s something they think they want to see.

How well the series did is hard to say. There are very little reviews of it available, and searching under things like Wikipedia only offers the very basic of information, such as when

episodes originally aired and who was in the cast. There was one review I found of an adult who admitted that it was never meant for him, and subsequently hated it. That's not really fair to include. Likely, those who loved the novel series likely really enjoyed watching the web series, regardless of the product placement or short episodes. So in the end, even without meaning to and without even really considering it, Alloy Entertainment likely pleased *Private* fans to a certain degree. They received their show, even if each episode was barely longer than a commercial break for a regular television show.

Amy Pattee discusses the idea of selling books as products, saying "In this case, literature for young people, conceived initially as a conceptual commodity and not with charitable intent, becomes the serendipitous product of a capital venture, the goal of which is to sell products-any product" (155). Perhaps it was unexpected that YA novels could be so popular, but since that realization, publishers and book packagers have been bent on producing and selling as many as possible, choosing quantity over quality. But if a business needs a market where it can easily convince people something is good, teenage girls are the group to go after. They have relentless power in the market, capable of catapulting a no one from Youtube to a big name performer on the Grammys. Young teens have not yet had to deal with the prospect of saving money, as their bank is simply going up to their parents and asking for more money. If the success of these novel series are any indication, parents have been more than willing to comply. In the case of *Gossip Girl*, it was no longer about the fact it was a book series. It had become a brand, a recognizable product that one knows about without ever having read them (case in point, myself, who never dared touch them).

Alloy Entertainment, or more specifically in this case, 17th Street Productions, a subsidiary of Alloy Inc., began to market the series that way. Soon the supposed author of the

series, Cecily von Ziegesar, who actually only wrote the first few before handing them off to an unknown ghostwriter, was modeled as someone that readers could identify with. Pattee describes how Von Ziegesar actually lived the life that the characters of *Gossip Girl* are portrayed as having. She went to a private school, was wealthy, had parents who remarried several times. The fact that she was these characters “lends new resonance and credence to the series among teen readers as well. Ultimately, the authenticity of the author-as she becomes a "real-life" symbol or embodiment of the novels-can be considered a component of the literary production of the series” (162). It’s interesting because 17th Street Production is creating this connection between reader and author, yet in reality, she is not the true author of the series, at least not in totality. The reader’s beloved series was put together by a corporation, the author herself a character that was drawn together to further earn their adoration, long after she left the series to work on something else.

Pattee goes further, saying “It is distinctly more romantic (and perhaps more comforting) to view reading in terms of a private communication between author and reader and not as the inevitable product of market research and canny advertising” (172). It’s possible that devoted readers of this series and others don’t learn of the corporate authorship until they’ve outgrown the books, but it is still a betrayal to the reader to fake the kind of relationship that many readers seek from favorite authors. It’s much the same way we feel about celebrities. We would like to think that Jake Gyllenhaal is just as charming and kind in real life as he is in movies and in interviews. To think that that is all a façade constructed to garner more acclaim and better paying movies would be disappointing. Especially with the advent of Twitter, connections to authors are made easier and stronger than ever before. Now you can know what they eat for breakfast, the cute things their kids do, or even how they’re remodeling their home. Leslie Morgenstein from

Alloy Entertainment has used this very notion to explain why they're beginning to shy away from using pseudonyms at their company. This is because "it is difficult to get a nonexistent author to blog or tweet, let alone make an appearance" (Mead 69). To readers who love to read, who love literature, making a connection with an author is important. Book packaging, creating a brand rather than a believable world, gets in the way of that connection.

Brands show up inside the pages of these novels as well. In *Pretty Little Liars*, author Sara Shepard name drops the most popular brands of every accessory and article of clothing imaginable. A character doesn't put on a pair of sweatpants, she puts on a pair of Juicy sweatpants (1). They're not blasting music out of their cars, they're blasting it out of "their Cherokees" (2). Nearly every page draws attention to a company name. And these aren't just any brands; these are the brands worn and bought by the rich and famous, the privileged and proud. Coach purses, Tiffany jewelry, Michael Kors perfume, Kate Spade clothing and hand bags. Some of these things I only recognize by name and couldn't even point them out by sight, yet the novel is littered with them, reading like a shopping list of all of the things required to own if one wants to be considered cool. In fact, of the first 25 pages of the novel, some kind of name drop of a brand or pop culture was present on 20 of them. And the majority of these pages were simply the prologue to the novel...when the characters were only in seventh grade. Later, some characters go to the mall, where the name dropping occurs every other paragraph.

I'm sure there are 12 and 13-year-olds out there that are obsessed with fashion and what's made popular by the media, and a part of that is undoubtedly due to novels such as this. Like the relationship made with the author, readers also create a relationship with the characters, discussing their lives as if they were truly living them in some other town. Characters become the standard to which a reader might hold other, real, people to. For example, for a long time

after reading *This Lullaby* by Sarah Dessen, I wanted a guy just like Dexter, a quirky, funny musician that could also be depended upon in times of crisis. There are characters that a reader might wish they could be friends with, or even become. That's one of the great qualities of fiction, relating to the people within the pages. When young readers read *Pretty Little Liars*, they might create an investment in the characters and have some of those same notions (desire to be friends with characters etc). So it makes sense that they may become interested in the same things that the characters are interested in, including what they're wearing. But with this novel, the name dropping and product placement almost spoils any kind of relationship that I could even attempt to have with the characters. It is clear that the author, Shepard, is trying to glamorize the characters, putting them on a pedestal and daring readers to imitate them. Soon enough, kids want to become these characters not because of their well roundedness or how well they relate to them, but because they wish they could be so incredibly wealthy and buy things for their fancy labels, rather than how they actually look (and there are some very expensive, ugly things people buy just because they think it impresses people). It can be seen with *Gossip Girl* and with the societal obsession of Hollywood starlets like Kim Kardashian and Selena Gomez.

The obsession with wealth and having things just to have them is a problem in this case because it seems that these packaged novels have an ulterior purpose to their production: to sell as many of the mentioned products as possible. It's another moneymaking scheme targeted at the one market that can be counted on to come through. What takes place in the novel, what's beneath the surface of the characters, seems secondary in *Pretty Little Liars*. Instead, the plot is connected to brands in whatever way necessary. For example, "It was one of those ridiculous fights that could have been about who saw the new Lacoste polo dress at Neiman Marcus first..." (13). Or when one of the characters, Emily, has to go to the house of her missing friend

to greet the new family that lives there, she reminisces on a memento that she still has from that friend. Though it's plausible, there's something off-putting about the fact that she keeps "a pair of Citizens corduroys" that this friend, Ali, had let her borrow (20). It's not the fact that she still has her friend's pants, but rather that there's a need to mention the brand rather than the importance of the pants themselves. It's almost like there's a quota that needs to be filled for some kind of contract agreement.

In fact, a lot of the memories that the main characters have regarding their old friendship (since Ali disappeared, the rest of the girls are no longer friends) have to do with fashion. Hanna thinks of things that Ali has missed, like "Chanel's leather iPod Nano holders... iPod Nanos in general" (45-46). Though it's not farfetched to wish that a lost loved one could see all of the crazy advancements in technology that are going on, in this case it seems a little odd. Is missing out on an iPod Nano holder really missing out? Does it actually provide some kind of quality of living that makes its absence impossible? To me, it is simply a chance to throw Chanel a bone in the name dropping race (though be sure that Chanel No. 5 is later mentioned; it must be one of the most name dropped perfumes in history). When I think of lost family members, I wish that they could be around to see me graduate college, or have a successful career as a writer. I don't mind that they'll never see the new top I bought from Old Navy a month ago, or experience the wonder of wearing a Snuggie. Not only are the priorities of the characters mixed up in *Pretty Little Liars*, but they also become shallow caricatures, waiting for the next moment to show off their Gucci bag or Aviator sunglasses, instead of truly caring their friend has been kidnapped. Though the novel frequently mentions Ali and her absence, it glazes over the actual trauma that such an event would incur. There is no searching for their friend, no worry of what has happened, no real mourning as days turn to weeks. Instead, the novel skips ahead three years,

presumably to skip all of the heartrending business and instead to focus on what seems to really matter: what they wore once when Ali was around, or what they wish she could still be around to wear. Basically, what they're wearing.

Perhaps being so bothered by the fashion dropping is pretentious of me. But the truth is, it's not common to see this kind of brand name dropping in novels. Unless, of course, you're reading *The Shopaholic Series*, but at least in that case you know what you're getting yourself into. Most novels, however, don't care to describe the name on the tag of a shirt. Instead there will be descriptions of how worn out it is, or how a character has to keep everything about their outfit neat and orderly. Insight into who is wearing the shirt is given, the shirt a tool in laying out a personality of a character. Anyone can wear Ralph Lauren, but not everyone pops their collar, or wears it every Monday because they schedule their clothing. If Shepard were to mention some kind of detail like these with her outfit descriptions, the reader might have some idea of who the characters really are. Instead, she is not creating any personality behind the labels she is so often introducing. Rather, she's creating an idea that one must go out and buy these things. Buy Ralph Lauren, wear Chanel, and buy this book. She turns the book into a product itself, something else to add to the shopping list. *Pretty Little Liars* is like a catalog to shop out of, rather than what it was really intended to be: a novel.

In many creative writing classes, it is made clear that it is important to show, not tell what is occurring in a plot. This novel falls in between, lazily showing readers what is happening with the characters. Instead, there's a reliance on stereotype, on what living the rich life is presumed to be like. The constant naming of things in *Pretty Little Liars*, the constant telling of what's being worn and adorned is tiring. It's like reading advertisements instead of reading literature. So much time is being spent describing articles of clothing that there's no real feeling of "life"

within the novel. The characters are more like dolls who are put in different clothing for different days and certain situations. I've read most of the novel and still couldn't describe the personality of each character or tell them apart. They're personalities blend together, and though their physical appearances are described thoroughly, I have no recollection of what any of them look like. Shepard has the ideal girl in mind, and all of the characters in the novel are written to follow that criteria as closely as possible. Even just looking at the back cover of the novel, the four main girls look a lot alike. Two are brunette, two are blond. All are thin, perfect skin, fashionable, three are wearing skirts. They've got nice hair. The cover, ironically, is a Barbie doll version of one of the of the girls on the back cover. The doll seems to almost exclaim that nothing is real on the pages. She's just another tool, pushing a product.

Alloy Entertainment is not the only big name book packager for the YA genre. Infamous James Frey has in the last couple of years begun his own company, Full Fathom Five. He solicited writers from creative writing MFA programs to begin churning out ideas that could be marketed and hopefully fill in the gaps left by *Harry Potter* and *Twilight*. Of course, with Frey involved, the picture is not quite so simple. After all, he's had his share of controversy when it became clear that his memoir, *A Million Little Pieces* was more fiction than previously admitted. He was ripped apart on Oprah and dropped by his literary manager. Somehow, he has been able to make himself relevant again, although the controversy continues to surround him. Frey and his Full Fathom Five Factory have face a lot of ridicule for the pitiful contracts that he offers to potential writers. He seems to bask in this kind of attention though, telling Suzanne Moses, one of the potential writers he meets with, that he "wants to be the most controversial and widely read (writers) of his time" (1). Moses offers an inside look at what his own attempts are in the

market and how he is trying to turn YA novels into art, while still maintaining their commodity status.

Frey is quick to mention that “he won’t write anything that doesn’t change the world,” (1) a lofty goal for someone who later admits that he’s only looking for high concept ideas that “can be pitched in one sentence” because “we know we can sell” it (2). Right away, Frey is presenting the fact that he’s looking to create his own spot in the YA circle, and by hiring several writers, all desperate to be published, he increases a chance to become that next big thing. It’s not about literature for him either, as he actually sold the first of his works, *I Am Number Four* as a film first and only later was it written as a novel. Frey, of course, did not write the novel but hired a writer named Jobie Hughes to follow his outline. He also encouraged strong product placement with both Hughes and Moses, just to provide something else that he can sell to consumers (5). Instead of literature, Frey was looking to create art, or rather, an art factory, a literary Andy Warhol. Moses says that “He reintroduced the idea that he was modeling his company on Damien Hirst’s art factory, a warehouse in which a reported 120 employees work to create fine art signed by Hirst” (4). There are several things disturbing about the notion that one can hire people to do all of the work and give them little to no credit for it when the work itself is praised. It happens every day in the real world, but no one shrugs it off as art. No one is impressed by the ability to contractually bind people into such awful contracts that one of the lawyers Moses contacted said was the worst that he had ever seen, “a collaboration agreement without there being any collaboration” (5). In short, if the book sold really well, it would be Frey’s face on the cover of every magazine. If it didn’t, then the writer would just cease to matter completely. Finally, though it is not quite plagiarizing, the idea of Frey “signing his name” onto someone

else's work seems unlawful, a man getting everything for nothing but disguising it as a good idea (to the writer).

Even taking out the moral implication of unfair treatment to vulnerable young writers, the idea that what his "factory" produces is art is a little ridiculous. First, the actual book *I Am Number Four* received mixed reviews. Patrick Ness called it "a competent and entertaining thriller, but it has no deeper resonance, a resonance which was key to the success of both the Harry Potter and Twilight series" (*The Guardian*). He also mentions how he feels like it's being made up on the fly rather than researched and thought out. I include this simply to point out that what Frey is trying to create doesn't really have anything to do with the stories themselves, but simply a desire for fame and fortune. It's not even about the product itself, but the production and the names attached (for example, Spielberg directed the movie). Just like it's difficult for me to consider the books published by Alloy as literature, I also couldn't consider what he's doing art. Even in the cases where the writer brings in the idea instead of Frey, it still has to be outlined and approved by Frey before the writing process begins. Though it appears from this one article that there is a bit more freedom in the writing than at Alloy Entertainment, there are still limits to creativity, still attempts to reach some kind of quota or standard imposed by the factory. Most of all, however, Full Fathom Five cannot produce art because it's not looking to produce art. Frey isn't Andy Warhol trying to make some kind of statement by creating factory prints. Frey is trying to create success quickly. He's trying to do it in a way that people will notice, which the contract controversy has certainly granted him. As stated above, He wants to be controversial so that his work will be around long after he's gone. That's not what art or literature was meant to be. It's not supposed to be about the man with all of the money, doing whatever it takes to get recognized. It's about the work itself, the attempt to share something, and the person who really

wrote it. That's what Frey is missing. So stuck in all things commercial, he is overlooking the very thing he claims to be doing: art.

Though perhaps I am being unfair to Frey. In his article "The Ecstasy of Influence: a Plagiarism," Jonathan Lethem talks about the ways in which our society has become so populated with ideas and opinions that inevitably we are always borrowing from each other, regurgitating ideas as our own that we really only picked up from someone else. Given that idea, he says that "it's not a surprise that some of today's most ambitious art is going about trying to *make the familiar strange*." This may be what Frey is trying to do, or at least a part of what he is trying to do (though this is never something he openly says he's trying to do). After all, in *I Am Number Four*, the aliens look like normal teenagers, even though they are anything from it. A lot of these YA packagers, even ones I haven't mentioned, indicate that they're no longer looking for simple ideas of what could be seen in normal life, but for outside the box stuff, ideas people may latch onto because they've never seen it before. Or at the very least, supernatural things that always cause readers to wonder what it would be like if these things were real. Alloy Entertainment recently released a novel called *Wishful Thinking*, in which a young girl receives a dress, tailored by a magical seamstress, that allows her the opportunity to make wishes that will come true. She wishes to get to know her mother that she never met, and with the help of a little magic, just like that she is flown into the past and befriending her mother as a fellow teenager. Though I don't know that the YA genre is really the one that will properly showcase strange circumstances that will blow readers away, I do feel like the attempt to do so is as close to art or literature that these packagers will get. They're trying to create something that hasn't yet been created, a new way of looking at the world. And as long as it's not about vampires, it's a step in the right direction.

What's even more intriguing than Lethem's idea about making familiarity strange is what he says about gifts and commodity. He says in the "You Can't Steal a Gift" section that "The cardinal difference between gift and commodity exchange is that a gift establishes a feeling-bond between two people, whereas the sale of a commodity leaves no necessary connection." This might give the impression that what packagers do really can be considered literature rather than simply a method of creating profit. Though series like *Pretty Little Liars* and *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* aren't actually given as gifts to readers, they could be considered by the readers to be true gifts, a welcome escape from the world. Furthermore, even if the work will never be up for any awards, there is certainly a feeling-bond created between the reader and the book, if not the author. But perhaps it doesn't matter what literature is in the theoretical sense, or in an expert's opinion. Perhaps whether or not something is literature is entirely dependent upon the reader and their own personal connection with a piece, as I also spoke about with Eagleton. For example, I unfortunately read the first book in the *Twilight* series. I would not consider that art in the least bit. I can admire the author's, Stephanie Meyer, ability to complete a novel but it is very lazily written. To illustrate, though the main character, Bella, seems to lack a true personality, every teen male that comes in contact with her is suddenly smitten. They all want to go to the dance with her, carry her books, anything that she needs. When she chooses Edward, the vampire, he becomes so controlling and protective of her it's alarming. It almost seems to indicate that teenage girls need boyfriends because they can't take care of themselves without them. I could never get past these things. Yet millions of girls, and surely some boys too, felt a deep connection with it, taking to the internet to post their own versions, joining Team Edward or Team Jacob, and buying tickets to the midnight showing of each movie premiere. To them, the book is a masterpiece.

Lethem goes further with this idea of a bond between art and commerce, saying that “Even if we've paid a fee at the door of the museum or concert hall, when we are touched by a work of art something comes to us that has nothing to do with the price...a gift conveys an uncommodifiable surplus of inspiration.” The fact that we have to pay for something is not enough to take away an object’s artistic or literary value. Lethem says that art is one of the few things that shouldn’t be commodified (a convenient made up word to mean “made into a commodity”), that art is a gift and that “The daily commerce of our lives proceeds at its own constant level, but a gift conveys an uncommodifiable surplus of inspiration.” So much of the society is made up of buying and selling, giving and taking to improve a life that not too many years ago would’ve been just fine without any of these things. A lot of things that were once considered remarkable, like cell phones, are now so commonplace that no one marvels at what they can do, but instead expects them to do more and more, practically allowing us to live our lives through them. Thus, many aspects of our lives have become a commodity. Yet gifts, in this case works of art, are one of the few things that cannot fall into this category. Each work of art is original, new to the recipient, special in some way. That aspect is what allows it to be considered a gift. Lethem next says “if it is true that in the essential commerce of art a gift is carried by the work from the artist to his audience, if I am right to say that where there is no gift there is no art, then it may be possible to destroy a work of art by converting it into a pure commodity.” Alloy Entertainment and Frey do exactly this, destroying works of art by concerning themselves with the market first and the books second. They have marketed their books with the purpose of selling, so that to them they are not pushing art on the hungry masses, but rather pushing a product to one of the few age groups left that can truly power a market. (After all, we don’t see middle aged folks lining outside Barnes & Noble at midnight to buy the next Grisham or Stephen

King). The commodification is the final nail in the coffin, a clear statement that there is no art to be found in what Alloy or Frey are doing. They've turned what has always been considered one of the truest ways to express yourself, the novel, into something else that just needs to be bought, like an iPod or even a hacksaw.

Of course, books have always been made to be sold. No one writes them with the intention of giving them away for free. But the ideal writer, the kind who values their work and does it for themselves and doesn't compromise their work just so they can meet a certain niche, they have other motives too. Their work is meant as a gift for those who read it, as an inspiration for those looking to follow their footsteps. Book packagers, on the other hand, focus on branding, creating something so commercial that it's recognizable to anyone, that it might be bought for the cover rather than what is written inside of it. These ideas are what prevent the packaged novels from being art or literature.

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