

BLOCK MAGIC:
CATEGORIZATION, CREATION, AND INFLUENCE OF
FRANCESCA LIA BLOCK'S ENCHANTED AMERICA

by

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Abstract: Block Magic

This study addresses three questions concerning the young adult literature of Francesca Lia Block: (1) How does Block's writing fit into the tradition of fantasy literature for children? (2) How does she interpret and create her brand of magic realism? (3) What is the relevance of Block's writing to young adults? A review of the limited literary commentary on the subject of Block's works reveals that Block's place and impact in the field of children's literature is largely ignored. Critical literature relates a confusion surrounding Block's categorization in the areas of genre and audience. Block's influence on her young adult readers is scarcely addressed in critical works.

Text-based research examines the characteristics of genres relating to Block's literature, including "magic realism," *lo real maravilloso americano*, "baroque," and "American fairy tale." Content analysis of the stylistic elements at work in Block's literature supports a new classification of Block's works as enchanted American realism. Reviewer comments and the author's personal comments direct Block's literature to a mature audience. The relevance of Block's literature to young adults is established through content and cultural analysis of her fans' online postings.

This study reveals that Francesca Lia Block occupies a wholly unique place in children's literature. The findings indicate that Block's works resist classification in standard, pre-conceived categories of genre and audience. Findings also relate the significant influence Block's writing has on young adult readers' psyches.

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CHAPTER I

Introduction to the Research Problem:

Welcome to Block Magic

Background and Personal Interest:

Never before had I read anything like Francesca Lia Block's *Weetzie Bat*, and at first I did not know what to make of it. Never before had the juxtaposition of magic and reality been so striking. I was torn between a superficial and a deeper interpretation. I was struggling with the *mélange* of fairy tale motifs and modern day issues of homosexuality, multiculturalism, environmental concerns, substance abuse, and casual sex. I was confused by literal metaphors and the beauty of darkness. I presented *Weetzie Bat* to my Young Adult Literature class and had trouble explaining the blend of magic and real, and even more trouble explaining how and why it worked. "It's so great," I bumbled, "because it's so weird!" I made a mental note to revisit Francesca Lia Block—but self-discipline was unnecessary. I couldn't stop thinking about her.

"She's rather like marzipan," said Judith Saltman, my advisor, as we discussed my idea to write a thesis on Block. Indeed, Block's stories are bite-sized, sweet, and intense. Block writes novellas and short stories in a style densely poetic and imagistic, so that one is often enough—unless you're a Block junkie, of course. Rich with sensory indulgence, hyperbole, and excess, Block taps into baroque's "ornate and sumptuous style" (Benet 74). Alive with magical elements, hope, Hollywood imagery, and a sense of humour, Block enlists the modern American fairytale. Faithful to the fantastic, grounded in realism, packed with contradictory images and ideals, and devoted to modern political and cultural concerns, Block reads like magic realism. Block has been called "one of the most original writers in the last ten years" (Cart, "Carte" 1688), an L.A. poet

(Clover), and inventor of the pop-fairytale (Campbell, “Rose”). Herein lies the first research problem.

Research Problems:

1) How does Francesca Lia Block’s writing fit into the tradition of fantasy literature for children?

With so many genre labels working together to describe Block’s original writing, Block’s works evade classification. My initial reaction to *Weetzie Bat* was that it was “weird.” From reading criticisms of Block and from lending *Weetzie Bat* to adult friends, I know that “weird” is a comment that comes up time and again in relation Block’s works. I fear that there are a lot of teachers and librarians out there that do not recommend Block’s books because they do not understand them. The term “magic realism,” itself, is not widely understood. When Block refers to her writing style as “a kind of magic realism” (Gallo 17), *Alan Review* contributor, Lois L. Warner, comments, “Although it may appear that ‘magic realism’ is a phrase she made up on the spur of the moment, magic realism is a legitimate literary phenomenon that has been around more than fifty years” (26). Thus, a second research problem arises:

2) How does Francesca Lia Block interpret and create her brand of magic realism?

An understanding of the methods Block uses to infuse reality with magic contributes to an understanding of Block’s place in children’s literature. Those in the field of children’s literature must know how Block fits in with the children’s literature tradition and with today’s young adult audience. While Block’s writing is confident and distinctive, it is unlike anything else published for children or young adults. We need a

way to categorize and understand Block's writing so that we can confidently recommend her books to young adults who are likely to adore and benefit from them. This brings us to a final research problem:

3) What is the relevance of Francesca Lia Block's writing to young adults?

Those young adults who adore Block often do express gratitude to the author for influencing the way they live. Underneath Block's many labels and stylistic conventions lies a constant theme of the healing power of love and art in the face of pain and fear. The nourishing effect of Block's work is therefore more like mother's milk than marzipan. All at once, Block is able to tickle new readers in a heretofore unconscious part of the brain and satisfy a hunger for cosmic words of wisdom--now in seven languages, to boot.

Researching Block's influence on young adult readers, I went online. Not until 2003 has Block had an official Web page. Nevertheless, she has had a strong presence on the World Wide Web. Fan pages post the latest gossip. Is it true that *Weetzie Bat* is going to be a movie? Vote for which actor would make the best Weetzie or Witch Baby or My Secret Agent Loverman. Take a quiz: If you were a Block book, which one would you be? Which Block girl would you be? Join a Block fan club--or all fifteen of them. Exchange your own artwork, poems, short stories, zines with other Block fans.

Michael Cart, in *From Romance to Realism*, is perhaps the only critical author to provide an example of the direct impact Block has had on her readers. "She may [...] be the only young adult author whose work is celebrated by a teen 'zine' (*Weetzie Bat*, the *Zine*, published by two fans in Stamford, Connecticut)," writes Cart (*Romance* 260)¹.

¹ A zine (derived from "magazine") is a personally produced paper or online magazine that allows creators to express themselves through essays, poems, short stories, artwork, etcetera, without censorship. Creators usually charge the cost of postage or paper or another zine in exchange. Casual, email-style expression is common to zines, where abbreviations are used and capital letters and punctuation is optional.

Since Cart made this statement in 1996 there have been more zines written *about* Block and certainly many written *because* of Block. Fans act creatively at Block's suggestion. They absorb her message about the healing power of creative expression. Block's *Zine Scene*, a do-it-yourself guide to zine production, co-authored by Hillary Carlip, most literally advocates self-expression. Readers may also be inspired to create their own zines from reading Block's short story collection *Girl Goddess #9*, which includes the story "Girl Goddess #9," told in the form of a zine article.

If teenagers do not come across Block in their libraries or by word of mouth (and they may not, since there is a swarm of controversy around her books), they may be turned on to Block through self-help guides for teenage girls or for parents of teens, including *Deal with It! A Whole New Approach to Your Body, Brain, and Life as a Gurl* (Drill et al.) and *Real Rules for Girls* (Morgenstern), which suggest picking up a copy of *Girl Goddess #9* and *Zine Scene*².

My advisor suggested I compare Block's fan influence to the impact J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* has had on fans, since Harry is about as popular as you can get these days. It is an understatement to say that there are many more Potter or Rowling online fan-clubs than all Block sites combined. The major difference is that Potter fans are not claiming that Rowling has changed their lives. A common claim among dedicated Block readers is that the author has influenced the way they think and dream and act.

"With the publication, in 1989, of *Weetzie Bat*, [Francesca Lia Block] set the agenda for a new direction in young adult novels for the nineties" (Peacock 22). Through the nineties and into this next decade, Block remains a unique and distinct pillar of superior writing for young adults. I am not the only one who can't get enough of her.

² *Deal with It* recommends both *Girl Goddess #9* and *Zine Scene*; *Real Rules for Girls* recommends the latter.

Methodology:

I employ several approaches to literary criticism in addressing the aforementioned research problems. I apply text-based research in my examination of Block's categorical placement in children's literature. In particular, I identify the influence of "magic realism," *lo real maravilloso americano*, "baroque," and "American fairy tale" on Block's writing. I apply content analysis to Block's works and perform a close reading of her texts to explore how Block interprets and creates her unique magical reality. As Block's publications are so original, I also take a biocritical approach to her works. Block's painful experiences and her upbringing in a creative household have influenced her manipulation of reality and the thematic content of her works. Finally, I apply content and cultural analysis of fans' online postings to understand the popularity of Block's works with her cult following.

Explanation of Format and Voice:

So unique is Block's style and effect on her fans that I have chosen to reflect her creativity and intimate relationship with her readers in the structure and personal voice of my thesis. I was inspired by Francesca Lia Block's unconventional writing to experiment with a thesis format that is unconventional. I wanted the mode to reflect the content.

Block says she learned from a young age not to censor her creative voice (Peacock 25). I have taken her advice and been true to my own. Upon reading my first Block novel, *Weetzie Bat*, I felt I had found a kindred spirit in Block. I have always been attracted to writing about and writing with the senses. Block's imagery is the most indulgent I have read. I have allowed myself to follow her example, to write in the poetic and imagistic style I admire in Block.

The magic realism genre itself is conducive to experimental writing. Magical realism is neither fantasy nor reality; it is both. The magic realist writer thinks out of the

box. Thus, I felt free to discuss the genre in a form also out of the box. When it came to discussing the influence Block has on so many of her young adult fans, I felt I must show readers the passionate world I had stumbled upon. I felt Block's fans and their devotion to the creative and spiritual advice they glean from her stories would be best expressed through imitation. Therefore, I chose to write about the fans in their own voices, drawing on actual phrases they have posted in online groups and inventing my own young adult fan voice. The strong voice of the Block fan takes centre stage in Chapter 6, as I emulate the zine format. The zine format reflects the creative influence Block has had on fans. I have followed Block's zine style short story, "Girl Goddess #9" and her how-to manual *Zine-Scene* for formatting and content ideas.

Preview of Upcoming Chapters:

However, to begin to understand Block's place in young adult literature, her interpretation and development of a magic reality, and the relevance of her writing for young adults, I must first provide readers with an overview of Block's publications, which I will do in Chapter 2. Subsequently in Chapter 3, the literature review, I will summarize what those in the field of literary criticism find significant about the young adult writing of Francesca Lia Block. The literature review will make clearer the need to identify and understand Block's place in young adult literature. I will also provide some background information on terms that I feel apply to Block's writing, her own comments, and critics' comments about her writing, including "magic realism," *lo real maravilloso americano*, "baroque," and "American fairy tale." At the conclusion of Chapter 3, I will suggest a new way to categorize Block's books. Then, in Chapter 4 I will identify the elements that Block uses to infuse the real world with magic and to create her unique magical reality. Chapter 5 will relate how a lack of understanding of Block's books on the part of adults has created fear and controversy and a smaller readership than the

author deserves. I will also discuss why Francesca Lia Block, herself, feels uncomfortable with her placement in the category of books for young adults. Chapter 5 will also contrast Block criticism with her inspirational effect on young adults. Finally, in Chapter 6, I will describe the iconic young adult fan.

CHAPTER II

Summary of Works

Francesca Lia Block uses her writing to work through the pain in her own life. Writing for her is a cathartic healer. She takes her stories and sends them out into the world. Consequently, she is soothed and her readers are soothed. Block identifies story telling as a kind of magic. Her writing broadcasts the power of creativity and self-expression as a way to overcome pain; this concept is a constant theme in every one of Block's works.

The Weetzie Bat Books:

Compiled in the 1998 publication *Dangerous Angels* is Block's first book, *Weetzie Bat* (1989), and its sequels, *Witch Baby* (1991), *Cherokee Bat and the Goat Guys* (1992), *Missing Angel Juan* (1993), and *Baby Be-Bop* (1995). The collection examines the beauty and pain of love and personal growth.

Weetzie Bat introduces readers to the title character and her infectious love for life, despite its pains. Weetzie is a spunky and punky blond. She meets Dirk in their senior year in high school. He is gorgeous and shares Weetzie's passion for Los Angeles living. But there is no hope for romance. Dirk is gay. So, the two friends go "duck

hunting” together for sexy boys. One day, Dirk’s grandmother Fifi gives Weetzie a lamp, which, Weetzie soon discovers, houses a genie with three wishes. “I wish for a Duck for Dirk, and My Secret Agent Lover Man for me, and a beautiful little house for us to live in happily ever after” (Dangerous 19). Subsequently, Dirk meets his soul mate, Duck, and Weetzie meets her true love, My Secret Agent Lover Man. Grandma Fifi dies, leaving Dirk and Weetzie her house. Love is a dangerous angel, however, when Weetzie wants a baby and My Secret is too pessimistic about the state of the world to bring an innocent life into it. Weetzie sleeps with Dirk and Duck to get pregnant and My Secret leaves her. Shortly after the birth of Cherokee Bat, My Secret comes to his senses and returns to Weetzie. Ironically, upon leaving Weetzie, My Secret sires a child with a witch. The witch, Vixanne Wigg leaves her purple-eyed baby on Weetzie’s door step. They name the baby Lily, but it doesn’t stick; her wild spirit christens her Witch Baby. The almost-family lives happily in the little house in wonderland.

Weetzie Bat, while a fairy tale of granted wishes and true love is also about the dark experiences along the road. The theme of love as a dangerous angel develops: Weetzie has sex with boys who don’t love her and she is abused physically and emotionally. Weetzie’s father gives up his fight with depression and commits suicide; Weetzie’s mother drowns her pain in liquor. Dirk and Duck’s friend dies of AIDS. Nevertheless, Weetzie is able to find the beauty in any pitch of emotion and highlight for the reader the magical intensity of life and love.

Witch Baby is about the title character’s journey of self-discovery and self-acceptance. Witch Baby does not feel like she belongs in Weetzie’s household of glitter

and dried roses and feathers. Witch Baby's room is plastered with news clippings of death and disaster. She does not see herself reflected in Weetzie or Cherokee's blond beauty or bright spirits. Witch Baby's hair is black and tangled and she prefers to keep to the cobwebs. She does not have a boy to love either, the way Weetzie has My Secret, Dirk has Duck, and Cherokee has her boyfriend Raphael. Witch Baby has a reprieve from gloom when she meets Angel Juan, a black haired angel boy who she recognizes from her dreams. However, Angel Juan is deported and Witch Baby feels again out of place. She asks Weetzie and My Secret who she is, and they tell her honestly about the conception of Cherokee, their brief break-up, and about the witch Vixanne Wigg. Witch Baby leaves early the next morning to find her mother and, in turn, herself and her place in the sad world. Experiencing the dark world in which her mother lives, Witch Baby realizes she belongs at home. Reflecting Witch Baby's struggle with self-acceptance is the sub-plot of Duck's search for acceptance in his own family, who does not know he's gay.

Cherokee Bat and the Goat Guys is titled for the rock group Cherokee and Witch Baby and their respective boyfriends, Raphael and Angel Juan put together one summer when they are teenagers and their parents are away. The story is about sexual awakening. Cherokee and Witch Baby are children when they meet Raphael and Angel Juan. Performing as the Goat Guys electrifies their platonic love and yet also destroys what was innocent. Jealousies flare as the Goat Guys attract groupies; drugs and alcohol increase disconnect among group members and within themselves. Unable to endure this lifestyle, the members cleanse themselves of the fever of fame and vanity by dancing a sacred

Native American dance. Woven throughout the novel are themes and images from Native cultures; each chapter begins with a song indigenous to a particular tribe. The summer comes to an end, the adults return, and the Goat Guys are awakened to their sexual power and the power of their voices and their music.

Missing Angel Juan is a story about learning to live independently instead of relying on a loved one to light the darkness inside your soul. *Missing Angel Juan* is the only story of the series that is told from the first person point of view. In *Missing Angel Juan*, Witch Baby expresses the pain of a heart that is broken when Angel Juan leaves her to find himself in New York. Witch Baby cannot bear to be alone with her darkness, to be without the light of Angel Juan. So she sets out to find him and bring him home. Of course, in searching for Angel Juan, Witch Baby finds strength within herself. She travels around New York in the company of her almost-grandfather's ghost, Charlie Bat. Charlie is a gleam of light, but Witch Baby can converse with him and see his human shape clearly through the lens of her camera. As he guides her through New York, Witch Baby takes photographs that reflect the magic of people and the world. She sees herself reflected in these people; she sees herself as part of this world. Witch Baby's photos are fragments of herself that come together to make her whole.

As though truly guided by a knowing spirit, Witch Baby finds Angel Juan in the meat-packing district. He has been turned into a mannequin, a hollow shell. Witch Baby understands that she has done this to him by keeping him imprisoned in her desperate heart. She sets him free. She believes in herself enough to let go. Charlie Bat learns from watching Witch Baby to let go too, and he leaves the world at last. Witch Baby will

go home and live confidently with love for herself until the time when she and Angel Juan can meet again.

The final story in the *Dangerous Angels* series is a prequel to *Weetzie Bat*. *Baby Be-Bop* details the pain Dirk experiences growing up gay. Dirk has always know that he was gay and has always sensed that being gay is not acceptable. His grandmother Fifi raises him and with her he feels unconditionally loved. He does not, however, love himself.

As a teenager, Dirk falls in love with his best friend Pup. Pup, too, is gay, but cannot face the fact. Pup's feelings for Dirk frighten him and the two part. With Pup's rejection, Dirk's self-loathing escalates. He hides his self-hatred and his fear of being outed by shaving and sculpting his hair into a blue Mohawk. He drinks and slam dances angrily at clubs, trying to sweat the pain out.

One night, he is severely beaten by a gang of skinheads and feels strangely relieved: now his pain would show on the outside. He is relieved too that it all might be over now. But Dirk does not die. He drives himself home, falls into bed, and sinks into a coma. Dirk is visited then by the ghosts of his great-grandmother, his father, and his mother, who tell him their stories of pain and love. They tell him they love him, show him the magic and beauty of love, and ask him to fight for life. He also hears the story of a boy named Duck who will one day be his soul-mate. Finding again the will to live, Dirk awakens, ready to be his authentic self. Block's *Baby-Be-Bop* is about the ability of story telling to heal the story teller and receiver. This healing is what Block accomplishes in the *Dangerous Angels* series as a whole.

Friendship and Romance Novels:

I Was a Teenage Fairy (1998) walks the fine line between appearance and reality, tragedy and humour. Barbie Marks is a teenager whose mother has forced her into modeling from a young age. Barbie's desire is to be the one taking the pictures. However, she feels helpless to thwart her mother's ambitions for her modeling career. Barbie feels suffocated, until she meets Mab, a feisty fairy who visits her for the first time the day Barbie's father says, "She looks like a child prostitute" (13). Mab teaches Barbie, often with wit and always with attitude, to stand up for herself and release the secret that gnaws away at her soul. Mab's coaching empowers Barbie to confront the photographer who molested her as a child. Subsequently, Mab disappears. Barbie has absorbed Mab's spirit into herself.

Readers undoubtedly question the true existence of the fairy queen. Other sexually abused characters in the novel see Mab too--have even had a Mab of their own to whom they whispered what had been done to them. Barbie publishes a book of photographs of Mab, which becomes wildly popular with teenagers. Block tells us that fairies live because we believe in them; children like Barbie live because Mabs help them to believe in themselves. "It's all about belief," says Mab (176). "The belief is sometimes the biggest part of it all" (178). Barbie believes at last in herself. At the conclusion of the novel, she has a creative career and a boyfriend whose name is Forever.

Violet and Claire (1999) is about the healing power of friendship. Violet and Claire are both seniors at the same high school. Neither have friends until the unlikely

pair befriends each other. Violet frightens her classmates with her witchy clothes, sharp tongue, and dark history of slicing her arms up with razor blades. She is blackness and rebellion and fury and *film noir*. Claire, on the other hand, is the picture of innocence and naiveté. She wears fairy wings to school and quietly internalizes the taunting she receives. She is pink and glitter and petals and poetry. Both Violet and Claire, though, are bruised and lonely and fit together like pieces in a puzzle. Claire tempers Violet's attitude while Violet emboldens Claire's resolve. They support one another in their personal endeavours--Violet in film production and Claire in poetry. When the success of Violet's film draws her into a world of drugs and sex and emotional sacrifice, the two lose touch. Claire fills the emptiness by developing a crush on her poetry teacher, who seduces her and breaks her heart. Violet and Claire are miserable without one another. They reunite with the knowledge that life is not a fairy tale or a movie of happy endings; it is working hard to climb and grow. They need not, however, climb alone.

Tales from the Dark Side:

The Hanged Man (1994) takes place in the hazy, dream-dazed mind of Laurel, a seventeen-year-old girl trying to cope with the recent death of a father who molested her. Laurel's spirit is imprisoned by a mind fog-thick with nightmarish images of demons, skulls, poison, murder, and death, shattering, crushing, bruising, swallowing, pulling, choking, drowning, bleeding the life from her. Her sexuality sickens her; she allows anorexia to decompose the flesh of her belly, thighs, buttocks, and breasts so she can be as pure as a sexless fairy "floating out of the throat of a calla lily, white as calla lily flesh,

wet from the throat of the flower” (53). Of course, the only way she can be cleansed is to face the darkness of her abuse. Laurel confronts her pain in a collage of symbolic dreams and a maternal relationship with an abandoned little girl, who symbolizes the child Laurel aborted and her own lost innocence. Healing also occurs when Laurel paints and when she cathartically makes love with a young man who may be a physical demon, an emotional demon, or the canyon rapist. Throughout the novel, Block employs Tarot cards as metaphors for Laurel’s journey from denial to acceptance. Ultimately, Laurel identifies herself with “The Hanged Man,” a symbol for “Renunciation. Self-deprivation. Suspended in illusion [...] condemned to hang in hell eating his own waste. Self-poisoning. Also, resurrection” (102). At the conclusion, Laurel is able to release the hatred she has kept like a caged animal, forgive her mother, and accept herself.

Echo (2001) is another story of death, sacrifice, and healing through love and art. A collage of voices echo one another as Block relates the tale of self-searching Echo, a young adult jealous of her mother’s magical beauty and her dying father’s affection for her mother. Unfortunately, the novel also strongly echoes *The Hanged Man* in its themes and description of the protagonist. Laurel starves herself of food in her attempt to starve herself of memory and emotion. Likewise, Echo suppresses the pain she feels over her father’s disease by suppressing her hunger. Since her abuse, Laurel is a lost soul. Echo is a lost soul too, feeling unaccepted and ignored by parents who seem only to have eyes for each other. As her father nears death, Echo’s sense of belonging in the world fades ever more: “All I could manage to do,” she says, “was to go to clubs, get drunk, smoke cigarettes and sleep” (19). She attempts to drown herself and is rescued by a boy angel

who will be her true love. Before the happy ending, however, Echo's insecurity attracts her to the vanity of bodybuilding and the immediate bliss of drugs and sex. She envies everyone she becomes close to. She wants to be her angelic mother, the beautiful child adored by her rock star father. She wants to be the rock star with his smoky voice and adoring fans. She wants to be the boy performing magic tricks on campus. She wants to be the doll-perfect red-headed woman she meets at the club and the perfection of the aerobics instructor turning pain into "perfectly formed, taut body tissue" (133). Painting, as in *The Hanged Man*, becomes a great healing power for Echo, as it helps her to accept herself despite physical imperfections: "*Maybe Echo is not meant to be seen. She is meant to see*" (115). Echo's will to live and grow and learn is rewarded; she is reunited with her true love angel boy and thus arrives at peace within herself.

Block's latest publication, *Wasteland* (2003), is another novel narrated principally from a foggy, dream-like place within the protagonist's mind. As in *The Hanged Man* and *Echo*, the plot of the story comes in pieces as teenaged Marina tries to come to terms with her twin brother Lex's suicide and forgive herself for the role she played in his demise. Drifting between first person and omniscient narratives, Block creates a feeling of tension. The omniscient point of view explains calmly and is a foil for the confused, emotional, deeply personal, here and there stream-of-conscious voice of Marina. Now and again, the ghostly voice of Lex punctuates the novel with sparse imagery and poetic sentiment that detailed his thoughts in the days leading up to his suicide. The reader feels somewhat uncomfortable, like an eavesdropper, learning treasured secrets and intimate experiences shared between brother and sister. Marina ultimately accepts the support and

growing love of a boy who knew her brother; in his trust she confesses that she and Lex made love. The healing begins. In a twist, the already tragic tale becomes sadder: Lex and Marina are not biological siblings after all. With all the skeletons out of the closet, Marina can look to the future.

Short Story Compilations:

Girl Goddess #9 (1996) is a collection of nine short stories about girls in search of their inner strength after a loss of a loved one, a loss of innocence, or a loss of self. There are light tales, in which girls appreciate the power of creativity and love to overcome painful experiences, and there are darker tales, in which girls overcome the effects of a traumatic experience through drastic means or some magical intervention. In *Girl Goddess #9*, Block explores the difficult journey from innocence to experience and the shady boundaries between the two in the lives of girls.

“Tweetie Sweet Pea” is appropriately the first story in the collection. Tweetie and Sweet Pea are children who remind the reader of the joys of the world. Tweetie and Sweet Pea are two young sisters who delight in one another’s company, laughing as their father squirts them with the hose, having picnics in elf homes at the park, dancing their dolls to the music of the music box, eating frozen grapes in chairs too big for them, and curling up with their father while he watches the news. Tweetie and Sweet Pea enjoy all the pleasures childhood has to offer, but they are not as innocent as their parents believe. One day they know they will grow out of their bathing suits, no longer squeeze in where elves can go, get boobs like their dolls, touch their feet to the ground in those

kitchen chairs, and gasp at the shootings in the news like their parents do. Children are proof that happiness and experience can coexist; it's about living in the moment.

In "Blue," the joys of La's childhood are eclipsed by her mother's depression, insanity, and suicide. La has discovered her mother in a pool of blood and has lived with the fear that she would do that again. The day her mother succeeds, her father shuts himself off from La, and La retreats to her room in silent shock. Almost immediately, a blue creature emerges from her closet. Blue, as La calls him, helps her sleep, honestly answers her questions about her mother, and encourages La to write about all that was beautiful in her mother. Writing helps La to reconnect with her mother's love and find closure. Blue disappears.

The true, unconditional nature of love is the theme of "Dragons in Manhattan." Readers follow Tuck on her journey to find her biological father. Tuck is teased at school for having two moms; one is her real mother and the other is her lover. Though she is only a child, Tuck travels alone from New York to San Francisco, where she believes her father to be living. She does not find her father there, but she does uncover the history of her biological parents' romance; it is not what Tuck expects. Her father is actually her second mother. Tuck could not ask for a more loving home, though she could, as she teases, ask for a more "normal" one (92).

The thrill of expressing oneself creatively to an audience is the theme of the title story "Girl Goddess #9." The book as a whole is Block's way to voice her thoughts creatively. In the short story, she reminds readers that everyone has a voice and the opportunity to express themselves to a public, particularly in the form of a zine. Lady ivory and alabaster duchess had an opportunity to interview one of their favourite rock

stars, and they relate the excitement of the experience in this, the 9th issue of their zine, *Girl Goddess*. Just as exciting to them as meeting and interviewing a rock star is getting to tell their audience about it.

The next story, “Rave” sharply contrasts “Girl Goddess #9.” Rave is a girl who suppresses her voice, and the consequence is fatal. Rave is a groupie who has no ambitions apart from sleeping with lead singers and collecting the expensive gifts they buy for her. She has great physical beauty and an inner spirit that she must keep locked away in order to sell herself the way she does. Rave drops out of high school and dies of a heroin overdose at 17. Rave loses herself and cannot find the strength to reach for happiness.

“The Canyon” describes the desire of a young adult to cling to the carefree days of childhood and avoid the difficult realities of adulthood. Désirée spends her summer fooling around with her friends, testing the waters of adult experience. She drinks, gets high, rides around on the back of her new boyfriend’s motorbike, and has sex with him in her bed, saying, “My mom will kill me” (129). In fact, her mom might kill her the next time she flies into a rage. Désirée thinks a lot about a friend who got AIDS, the serial killer loose in the area, the way humans have destroyed the desert. Then a close friend dies in an accident and Désirée understands that there is no escape; experience must come.

“Pixie and Pony” is also about the nostalgia for childhood and the difficulty dealing with change as one grows up. Pixie and Pony have always done everything together. In the last years of high school, Pixie feels like she is competing with other girls for Pixie’s time and friendship. Soon, after graduation, they will be going to

separate schools, too. Pixie's dad has been diagnosed with cancer and is feeling emotional about so many changes all at once. After much reverie of memorable times gone by, Pixie asks Pony if they are best friends. Pony replies, "Best friends? [...] We're sisters" (154). Again, friendship is the power that will keep Pony from losing hope and losing herself.

"Winnie and Cubby" is also about change in friendship. Winnie and Cubby have been dating for a year, and it feels to Winnie that they are soul mates. When it becomes obvious that Cubby is avoiding making love to her, Cubby confesses that he is gay. At first, Winnie feels the loss, the fear of being alone. But she does not have to be alone. Their love for one another is still pure and true. They "hugged each other, wrapped in each other's arms like little children, until they fell asleep" (172).

"Orpheus" concludes the collection and leaves the reader standing again on the cusp of childhood and maturity. The collection began with a tale of childhood, in which children are positioned at a juncture of ignorance and awareness. They are beginning their journey into experience. In "Orpheus," Block leaves us on the brink of the journey into adulthood, and the journey begins with loss. The protagonist's best friend was recently killed. The boy the protagonist secretly loves is walking away from her with another girl. In just one week, she will be moving away to college, where she will know no one. She is alone, thrust suddenly into independence. She has a plan to "write a book of stories. Of girls becoming goddesses, and goddesses becoming girls" (180). It remains to be seen if she will "disappear or sing." (181). Orpheus, the "father of song and as such the carrier of a special kind of healing" (Newham and Cox) metaphorically summarizes Block's purpose in *Girl Goddess #9*: to highlight the healing powers of

expressing oneself for both signifier and significant.

The Rose and the Beast: Fairy Tales Retold (2000) is also a collection of nine short stories, this time based upon plots, characters, and themes of traditional fairy tales. Block's retellings are set in modern times and are, of course, recounted in her brand of magic realism. As all fairy tales do, Block's tales juxtapose innocence and experience. The "rose" in the title represents innocence and pure love; the "beast" represents experience and the pain of vulnerability that comes with loving.

"Snow," about a girl abandoned by a drug-addicted mother, learns the meaning of love not from a prince but from the caring dwarves who raise her. Block defines love in her stories--love good and evil, intoxicating and dangerous. Poisoned by the apple, Snow in her sleep sees love. It is the love for the gardener whose image provoked her fingers to explore "the palpitations of her body under the nightdress" (18). In her dream love "was poisoning. It was possessing. Devouring. Or it was seven pairs of boots climbing up the stairs to find her" (31).

"Tiny," a girl the size of a thumb, has never left her mother's property, having heard from her mother of all the dangers in the world. One day, Tiny falls in love-at-first sight with the gardener boy and breaks free of her sheltering confines to seek him out and adore and be adored by him. Romantic love is freedom.

In "Glass," a reinvention of Cinderella, the female protagonist is innocent in her love for her sisters. When she meets the man at the dance, she is sexually awakened. Her sisters begin to despise her for attracting the love of the man and criticize her until she turns the critical eye on herself and sinks into darkness. She is only able to recover

from her sisters' jealousy by telling stories. When she tells her tales, her voice is like a "torch forming the thinnest, most translucent sheets of light out of what was once sand" (61). Her fairy godmother tells Cinderella that with her magic words of truth, she can transform. "You are the one who transforms, who creates. You can go out into the world and show others. They will feel less alone because of you, they will feel understood, unburdened by you, awakened by you, freed of guilt and shame and sorrow" (61). As in *Baby Be-Bop* and *Girl Goddess #9*, the storyteller and the story receiver are healed in the creative process.

In "Charm," a story based on *Sleeping Beauty*, Rev's innocence is lost to the evils of heroin and pornography. Her spirit has been all but destroyed by greed and lust of men and only begins to recover through the friendship of a woman who has been through similar experiences.

Darkness in the modern world takes the form of sexual molestation again in "Wolf," which sprouts from *Little Red Riding Hood*. The wolf is a metaphoric term for an evil, physically and sexually abusive stepfather.

"Rose" is a story similar to "Pixie and Pony," "Winnie and Cubby," and "Orpheus" from *Girl Goddess #9*. Like these other stories, "Rose" is about how relationships change over time. Rose Red and her sister Rose White promise one another as children that they will always be together and never need anyone else. When they mature, Rose White falls in love. Rose Red is graciously happy for her sister and moves on, alone.

"Bones," based on *Bluebeard*, is the dark tale of a serial killer. Derrick Blue's victims are young, lonely, and hungry for someone to think they are special. The

protagonist of “Bones,” however, has had practice running away and lives to tell the story whispered to her by the bones beneath the house.

“Beast” is again about change. Beauty falls in love with a beast. When the beast is transformed into a man, their love changes. Some of the beast’s most endearing qualities disappear in the transformation. While Beauty still loves him, she wishes he had stayed a beast.

In the final story, “Ice,” the protagonist feels love as a threat. She has loved so deeply “that it felt as if it had to be taken away from [her] at any moment” (203). Cinderella’s fairy godmother warns that, of all worldly experiences, “love [...] can hurt most of all because of what can then be taken away” (61). A perfectly beautiful and sexual ice queen steals her lover. When the protagonist and her boyfriend reconnect at the conclusion, their relationship is changed; they are no longer innocent lovers. Love proves as painful as it is beautiful. “Once he and I were children, before this happened” (229)... so concludes “Ice” and so concludes *The Rose and the Beast*.

Non Fiction:

Zine Scene (1998) teaches readers how to produce a zine (a term derived from “magazine”) by offering helpful tips and providing a wide range of examples. The objective in creating a zine is to express oneself through poetry, essays, short, stories, lists, comics, photography, collage, or any other form of art and self-expression. Zine producers then sell their zines to subscribers for the cost of print and paper or in exchange for another’s zine.

Guarding the Moon: A Mother's First Year (2003) is, as the title suggests, about Block's first year as a mother. The work is striking in its honesty. Block expresses the pain she has been through as an adolescent and throughout her twenties. She has struggled with anorexia, acne, self-loathing, and her father's death. Block's insecurities rise to the surface again as she cares for a newborn. She expresses fears for her daughter's physical health and for her daughter's emotional health as a growing girl in a society that has been so brutal to Block's spirit. Block is also honest about the sacrifice that is motherhood—the beating her body has taken since giving birth, the fatigue, and the emotional separation she feels from her husband with the addition of the baby. Threaded throughout are beautiful examples of the joy and love that makes birth and motherhood a precious and sacred experience.

CHAPTER III

Literature Review

Categorizing the Original Writing of Francesca Lia Block—Genre and Audience

Note: The terms magic realism and magical realism are used interchangeably in source literature. I will use the former term, as this is the original phrase and that adopted most frequently by Francesca Lia Block.

In this chapter I will examine critical reviews, chapters, and theses on the subject of Francesca Lia Block. I will also describe the categories into which Block's writing falls: "magic realism," *lo real maravilloso americano*, "baroque," and "American fairy tale." Finally, I will propose a new way to categorize Block's books.

Genre Categorization:

As one researches the work of Francesca Lia Block, something that is typically a rather effortless consideration in a discussion of literature stands out as curious in Block's work: genre. Just how does one classify Block's young adult books? Everyone seems to have an idea, but not even the author herself is sure how to *label* the genre in which she writes.

Interviewing Francesca Lia Block in 1993, Michael Cart, one of Block's most ardent critical fans, asked Block why she has referred to her work as "pop magic realism."³ Block explains,

³ Block, Francesca Lia, "Punk Pixies in the Canyon," *The Los Angeles Times Book Review*, July 26, 1992, p.11

I'm drawn to two elements: the magical and the very--almost grittily--realistic. They appear together in almost everything I do. But it's hard for me to say that I'm a magical realistic writer and put myself in the company of my favorite writer, Gabriel García Márquez, especially since I'm coming from such a different culture. (Block, qtd. in Cart, Romance 262)

Block is humbled by the great work of Márquez, whose 1982 Nobel Prize winning *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (first published in 1970) saturates some 450 pages with what has become the icon of magic realist writing. The "pop" she says, "softens" the comparison between her magic realism and the magic realism of García Márquez (Block, qtd. in Cart, Romance 262). The "pop" describes the magical influence of Hollywood pop-culture on Block's reality.

Susan Stamberg of National Public Radio's *Morning Edition* interviewed Francesca Lia Block on the subject of her favourite book, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Block says that she "aspires to" and "would dream of" writing like García Márquez. Magic realism, she says, is to her "when there's magic in everyday life and the magic is very real so that these two things blend together seamlessly and you really can't distinguish them in some ways." Block recognizes that the magic of magic realism comes from a personal place.

García Márquez draws his magic from his Columbian upbringing and from the tales his grandmother used to tell him as a child. Magic realism, he says, has its roots in the folklore of a region.

Reality is also the myths of the common people, it is the beliefs, their legends; they are their everyday life and they affect their triumphs and failures. I realized that reality isn't just the police that kill people, but also everything that forms part of the life of the common people. All this must be incorporated. (Márquez qtd. in Williams 79)

The magic of Block's magic realism may be more readily accepted in the real world of Los Angeles because the magic is recognizable, ingrained from childhood, understood as a culture. Block's magic is unique because her upbringing was unique; she "grew up with fairy tales, Greek mythology, and some of the Hollywood ghosts," she tells Stamberg. As teens, Block says she and her friends, like her famous character Weetzie Bat, were "a little enchanted" with Hollywood (Block, qtd. in Campbell, "Francesca" 114). Los Angeles has become her muse for magic realism; her stories are almost exclusively set in L.A.

Also unique to Block's upbringing was the encouragement her parents gave her to express her emotions through poetry. In fact, Block published two volumes of poetry, illustrated by her father, when she was a teenager: *Moon Harvest* in 1978 and *Season of Green* the following year. Block feels she was further influenced by the poetry she studied at University of California Berkley. "I read H.D. and Emily Dickinson pretty intensely, and those really spare, concrete modernist, imagistic poems were a big influence. And then that all got mixed in with the myths and the fairy tales and the punk subculture that I was interested in and the music I was listening to" ("Block Party").

Block's writing draws on her experiences as a teenager, but also reflects the experiences of today's teen culture. Block knows from reading her fan mail from young adults that there is an enormous "amount of pain out there" (Roston). Genies, closet creatures, fairies, or ice queens become tangible fears, or alter egos, or angels of a very real world of sexual abuse, identity crises, AIDS, suicide, eating disorders, self-mutilation, murder, drug addiction, you name it. Block is inspired to acknowledge this

dark reality and temper it with a magical one. The same way Gabriel García Márquez “combined the magic and the real--in almost every sentence ... you get both” (“Block Party”)--Block wants to show that “you have the dark and the light in life” (“Block Party”).

In *Speaking for Ourselves Too*, Block again shies away from calling her work out-and-out magic realism, saying she writes “a kind of magic realism” (Block, qtd. in Gallo 17). As will be discussed in the following chapter, Block certainly does draw on elements of conventional or Márquez-style magic realism. Michael Cart notes, there is the “spirit” of Márquez in her works, even particular references to *One Hundred Years*, as in *The Hanged Man* and *Baby Be Bop*, when moths (in the former) and butterflies (in the latter), represent the spirit of a deceased loved one.⁴

But there is more to Block’s tales than Márquez magic realism and it cannot be attributed to pop culture. Besides, as much as she admires the magic realism of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, she does not wish to imitate. She takes pride in her originality, saying “I was encouraged to find my own voice by my parents, not to blindly follow something or somebody else” (“Block Party”).

Almost as often as Block’s works are referred to as magic realism, they are referred to as fairy tales. The fairy tale is a strong presence in Block’s writing. *Something About the Author* says “Block’s novels create postmodernist fairy tales” (Peacock 22) and Block herself comments in the same article, “I want my books to be contemporary fairy tales with an edge” (Block, qtd. in Peacock 25). However, in the same breath, she adds, “And I love the magical realism in my work” (Block, qtd. in

⁴ In *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Meme’s love for Mauricio Babilonia takes the physical form of yellow butterflies (Márquez 308-313).

Peacock 25). Michael Cart wrote a "Reading Group Guide" for Block's *I Was a Teenage Fairy*. Question 11 reads: "*I Was a Teenage Fairy* is a work of magic realism. What does that phrase mean to you as a reader? [...] Could this book be described as a modern fairy tale?" The correlation of magic realism and modern fairy tale is confusing. Where and why are they interconnected?

Cart offers one reason for the confusion. "When Francesca Lia Block's first young adult novel, *Weetzie Bat*, was published, [...] readers discovered one of the most original books of the last 10 years. The best we critics could do was to describe it as a punk fairy tale." (Cart, "Carte" 1688). Her original writing has caught critics by surprise. Upon interviewing Block, Cart recognizes further influences stemming from Block's unique upbringing: "a more than nodding acquaintance with imagist poetry [...] and a passion for contemporary music, punk fashion, and club culture." (Cart, "Carte" 1688). There's also the magic of the real city of Los Angeles, which Cart calls one of Block's "evergreen charms" ("Carte" 1688), "movie magic" ("Carte" 1688), and "love magic" ("Carte" 1688). "But thanks to the author's amazingly creative imagination," he continues, "all of these elements were brought together in ways that were breathtakingly and authentically original" (Cart, "Carte" 1688).

Block's original writing has inspired an abundance of original classification descriptions from reviewers.⁵ Richard Gehr refers to her writing at once as "a sassy brand of magical-realism" and as "lyrical and resonant fables." In her *Horn Book* review of *I Was a Teenage Fairy*, Jennifer Brabander also recognizes the "mix of realism and fantasy" (726), but refers to the book as "a modern-day YA fairy tale" (725). Chris Lynch

⁵ I am especially tickled by critics' comments that mimic some of that originality. Cart says, "Reading this author's lyrical prose and engaging her refreshingly innocent and romantic sensibility is like being brushed by wings and kissed by angels" (*Romance* 264).

says, "Block writes an unreal reality" (37), whereas Shirley Fetherolf sees perhaps the least fairytale-esque of the *Weetzie Books*, *Missing Angel Juan*, as "a surrealistic fairy tale" (42). Maeve Visser Knoth, reviewing *Witch Baby*, recognizes the genre as "reminiscent of a music video" (78) and labels the novel frankly, "untraditional" (78). Suzanne Reid and Brad Hutchinson also associate Block's writing with a music video: "The style mirrors MTV—technically impressive; superficially glitzy, sensual and attractive; portraying the exciting side of sex and experimentation."

Joshua Clover wins the award for most peculiar attempt at classifying Block's works. He sees Block's *Dangerous Angels* as "driving the bridge between Dr. Seuss and García Márquez with the top down" (122), and concludes his review by stating simply, "She's a poet of Los Angeles" (123). In essence, Block's works are indeed original, untraditional, and "[echo] no other voice on the junior shelves" (Clover 122).

In *Missing Angel Juan*, Cart sees "strong evocations of Orpheus's own descent into the underworld in search of his lover Eurydice" (*Romance* 264) and "Alice's Wonderland" (*Romance* 264). Her works are at times rich with myth and pure fantasy. Actually, the Greek myths of Orpheus and Persephone dominate in Block's *Ecstasia* and *Primavera*, respectively. Set in the future, *Ecstasia* and *Primavera* could be classified as science fiction if they are not seen as modern retellings of the myths. *Ecstasia* and *Primavera* were originally published for adults and are now out of print collectors' items. In spring of 2004, they will be re-released as novels for young adults.⁶ The initial publication of *Ecstasia* and *Primavera* as adult fiction illustrates Block's desire to be accepted in the adult market. She has gone so far as to publish erotica to accomplish this

⁶ Despite their adult categorization, John Stephens in his essay "Is This the Promised End...?" looks at *Ecstasia* as an example of the "Fin de Siecle mentality" in children's literature.

goal.⁷

Audience Categorization:

Thus, a second question that is, again, often uncomplicated in regards to children's literature publications is a debate when it comes to Block books: Who should read them?

As I will discuss in detail in Chapter 5, despite the critical excellence of her writing for young adults, the placement of Block's books on the junior shelves is often questioned—by outraged parents, nervous teachers and librarians, and even Block herself. Rebecca Platzner praises Block's brilliant use of collage in the *Weetzie Bat* books and considers them "a find," but a find for whom? "For now," she says she will "share them with [...] friends" (Platzner) rather than the young patrons of her library. Block's *Baby Be Bop* makes the frequently challenged books list for the 2002 publication of *Hit List 2*.

Yet, among others, Michael Cart, Chris Lynch, and Roberta Seelinger Trites have singled Block out as an example of the kind of young adult novel that is perfect for the true young adult—not a pre-teen or a middle reader, but a mature almost-adult of 16 to 24.

Cart, in *From Romance to Realism* discusses at length Block's *Hanged Man* and *Missing Angel Juan*--the latter he touts "her best since *Weetzie Bat*" (262). For Cart, *Hanged Man* and *Missing Angel Juan* are prime examples of Young Adult books that do

⁷ In 2000, Block published *Nymph*, a collection of erotic short stories that stay true to Block's blend of folkloric magic and reality.

anything but condescend to the young adult reader. In fact, Block is grouped with Bruce Brooks and Robert Cormier as young adult writing “at its best” (Cart, Romance 265). Cart believes the writing of Brooks, Cormier and Block “offers the reader rewards as rich as adult literature can, and why not, since in these salutary cases, at least, [young adult literature] is a seamless part of the whole large world of literature” (Cart, Romance 265). What makes Block’s works exemplary, he finds, is her original style and her honesty; art and subject. Cart believes “we sometimes get so concerned with the nutritional value of literature [for young adults] that we forget it should taste good, too” (Romance 251).

He can hardly believe Margaret A. Edwards in 1969 wrote, “Style that distinguishes a book as literature is very rare. Though it is to be cherished when found, it is not essential” (Edwards, qtd. in Cart, Romance 252). “Without style,” thinks Cart, “what is left for the critic to address?” (Romance 252)—and for the young adult to enjoy, and for that matter, what is left to sustain the existence of the young adult category of literature? Block is one who does not sacrifice “reader empathy” (Cart, Romance 252) for literary style. She does not censor her voice or her topics. In fact, Cart notes, Block has tackled the subject author Virginia Hamilton told Cart “could not be addressed in literature for young adults” (Cart, Romance 203): incest.

Block’s *The Hanged Man* is one of “three excellent novels treating this issue” (Cart Romance 203).⁸ Block revisits the issue in *Wasteland*, with even darker sensibilities, as one of the victims of incest commits suicide. *Kirkus Reviews* sees *Wasteland* in contrast to Block’s other YA publications: “This one [...] is instead darkly opalescent” (1172). *Wasteland* also differs from her previous publications since the story

⁸ The other two novels on the topic of incest, which Cart considers excellent and discusses in *Romance to Realism* are Cynthia Voigt’s *When She Hollers* and Jacqueline Woodson’s *I Hadn’t Meant to Tell You This*.

is very grounded in reality, in darkness. References to folklore or myth are almost non-existent. Block relies solely on the dreamy--or rather nightmarish in this case--effect of free verse poetry to cast a surrealistic aura upon reality. The magical aspect of *Wasteland* is the blurry senselessness of shame and grief through which the protagonist sees the world after her brother/lover's suicide. Coinciding with Block's "brilliant originality [...]" in her literary style and tone, which are perfect matches for that material in poetic imagery, unselfconscious wit, and offbeat whimsicality" (Cart *Romance* 259) is the "brilliant originality in [...] her choice and treatment of material"(Cart *Romance* 259).

Roberta Seelinger Trites in her book, *Disturbing the Universe: Power and Repression in Adolescent Literature*, also uses Block's *The Hanged Man* and *Missing Angel Juan* as examples of quality novels that an older young adult can appreciate. In addition, she discusses the importance of Block's *Baby Be-Bop* for its homosexual characters and themes. Trites' analyses are more theoretically based than Cart's,⁹ and she is not nearly as passionate in her praise.

Trites appreciates *The Hanged Man* for its original literary treatment of incest. It "does not follow the predictable made-for-TV patterns" of other YA publications, which "assume that the reader has a sexual naiveté in need of correction" (Trites 85). *Weetzie Bat* is an example to Trites of the freedom Block takes with a character's sexuality. Weetzie has sex with boys she meets at clubs and sleeps with two gay men for the sole purpose of conceiving a child. Nevertheless, Trites notices "the unavoidable ideological overtones of the dominant culture [...]. Writing within a post-AIDS culture, she only sanctions sex that occurs between committed, loving couples in permanent relationships" (Trites 93). Trites' tone suggests that safe sex is a flaw in Block's *Weetzie Bat*. Trites

⁹ Trites is particularly interested in the theory of photography as metaphor in *Witch Baby*.

goes on to say, “Block’s books carry no more approval for promiscuous sex than do [Judy] Blume’s. Weetzie, in fact, gets beat up and date-raped when she does not carefully guard her sexuality in a blaming-the-victim scene early in the novel” (93). I believe, in fact, that it is hardly Block’s intention to warn readers to abstain. Far from being didactic, Block writes honestly about emotional pain and self-loathing. I believe it is Block’s desire to confront the darkness of sex and to be true to her own experiences as a teenager full, as she says, of the “pain that led me to drink myself into reeling blackness, get into careening cars, sleep with men who didn’t love me” (*Guarding* 87).

Before Trites considers the possibility that “perhaps Block is simply being realistic” (Trites 109), Trites entertains the possibility that the YA author is like a dominatrix—one who enjoys “lecturing to adolescents about sexuality because it gives the adult power and a certain sexual pleasure, the scintillation present in the act of forbidding” (Trites 95). “No matter how good their intentions,” (Trites 95) YA authors cannot help but reinforce the “patriarchal status quo” and “define sexuality in terms of [...] repression” (Trites 95) instead of pleasure.

Likewise, Trites is quick to conclude that “Block sends a clear message that gay sex is not acceptable unless it is accompanied by love” (109). Later Trites considers the possibility that Block is perhaps being faithful to the true gay young adult experience. Trites does not consider that it may be true that the average gay teenager *does* feel shamed into silence, like Dirk, not even speaking “to the men he touched in bathrooms and parks and cars” (*Baby* qtd. in Trites 109).

In contrast, Cart adores Block for her honest portrayal of a homosexual character flirting with suicide, the same way he adores her honest discussion of youths suffering

from sexual abuse and youths confronting fear of AIDS (Cart, Romance 276). In his article, "Honoring Their Stories, Too: Literature for Gay and Lesbian Teens," Cart notes that "30 percent of the teenagers who commit suicide do so because of fear, confusion, anxiety or even persecution resulting from their being—or suspecting that they might be—homosexual." Cart believes Block is one who can actually save lives through "integrating" gay and lesbian characters seamlessly into her novels, the same way that they appear in every day life (Cart, "Honoring").

Cart and Trites come together in their appreciation for the effort of young adult authors like Block to empower readers by bringing awareness to issues like incest, AIDS, and homosexuality. Trites rightfully gleans from Block's *Baby Be-Bop* the theme that "silence equals death. Words equal empowerment" (Trites 115). Cart sees Block as one who does "risk taking the gloves off to tackle dangerous subjects and to deal with them unflinchingly and honestly. Not to shock and scandalize and sensationalize but to tell the simple, plain, and unvarnished truth." (Cart, Romance 277). Bringing the truth to "the most-at-risk-ever young adults" (Cart, Romance 278), he goes so far to say, is how young adult literature can "change lives" (Cart, Romance 278). Both Cart and Trites vow that censorship, whether author, publisher, teacher, librarian, parent, or "good Samaritan" based, is the death of the young adult novel and a detriment to young adults.

Chris Lynch in his article, "Today's YA Writers: Pulling No Punches," also names Block as an example of an author who writes fine literature for "largely ignored" (38) readers living the "high-end young adult life" (38). Like Cart, Lynch greatly admires Block's style and would agree with Cart and Trites that the content of her stories is valuable to readers. Lynch praises Block's writing for its honest representation of

reality: the “totally familiar [...] expression of the teenage individuality rat race [blends with] the ‘alternative’ elements [...] the spirituality spilling over into the occult, the multilevel cohabitation” (38). He admires “the teasing out of fairy-tale themes, the pure, refreshingly unforced multiculturalism [...] the ironic emotional realism, the lyrical playfulness” and her treatment of “real love” (38). Block is an example for Lynch that “there is nothing I can’t do in YA” (Patricia MacLachlan, qtd. in Lynch 37).

The YA category itself is an issue for Cart and Lynch and others, including Block herself. Cart has said, “The borders of the land of young adult have always been ill-defined and subject to negotiation” (Cart, qtd. in Campbell “Rescuing”). As I will detail in chapter 5, the “young adult” category of readers often implies pre-teen and middle school readers. Older young adults of 16 to 24 are moving on to adult literature before they have a chance to enjoy literature that respects, as Lynch says, “the teen experience [which is] unlike any other” (38).

Patricia Campbell of *Horn Book Magazine* writes passionately and repeatedly on this issue. Perhaps inspired by a panel titled “How Adult Is Young Adult?” at the 1996 American Library Association’s annual conference¹⁰, Campbell writes her article, “Rescuing Young Adult Literature,” in which she addresses the problem:

Today most YA librarians feel that the age span for their clientele is about ten to fourteen, essentially middle school students, and booksellers see YA’s as even younger, perhaps beginning as early as age nine. Publishers add to the confusion with overlapping age designations for “intermediate” and “YA” titles--“8-12,” “10-14,” “12 and up”--all more or less addressed to young teens and preteens. Meanwhile, high school students eschew anything labeled young adult and head for the Danielle Steels and the Stephen Kings in the adult department.

¹⁰ Michael Cart was moderator of the “How Adult Is Young Adult?” panel and at the time president-elect of the Young Adult Library Services Association.

Campbell uses phrases like “real disaster” and “what a pity” and laments, “We have lost the upper half of YA—those fourteen to nineteen-year-olds who were the original readership for the genre, at just the time when better and better books are being written for them. [...] The extraordinary has become the rule, as new writers of great originality and power appear.”

Campbell identifies Francesca Lia Block as one of those writers of originality and power. In a later article on the same topic, “Don’t Ask Alex,” Campbell asks librarians to do more to introduce high school readers to sophisticated YA writers like Block. She quotes Henry Holt editor, Marc Aronson, who says young adult literature has “the literary depth and thematic richness of better adult books, in a form and with a subject that could speak directly to teenagers” (Aronson, qtd. in Campbell “Alex”).

Francesca Lia Block herself spoke on that 1996 panel, “How Adult is Young Adult?” asking for “one category in which all barriers are crossed” (Block, qtd. in Campbell “Rescuing”), a category for Gen X readers that is not afraid of dark, mature, sophisticated themes and images. Chapter 5 of this paper will address Block’s unsteady feelings toward her placement on the YA shelf. Chapter 6 expresses how lucky young adult fans feel that Block writes what she does the way she does.

Lois L. Warner believes she knows why Block is popular with young adults: teenagers need magic in the real world. Even though her article is only three pages long, Warner, more than any other critical writer on Block, deals with the importance of magic to young readers of Block. In her article, “Francesca Lia Block’s Use of Enchantment: Teenagers’ Need for Magic in the Real World,” Warner argues that Block’s “melding of the magic and the ordinary” (26) and her “fanciful [prose] and plots [that] often draw on

fairy tales and folklore” (26) fulfill the same developmental requirements that psychologist Bruno Bettelheim attributes to fairy tales. Block’s books, writes Warner, “fill the void in literature that Bettelheim believes is crucial because they reveal truth through magical means that young teenagers can understand” (27).

According to Bettelheim, those who do not get the chance to enter the world of fairy tales as children will find some way of getting magic into their lives in late adolescence, almost as if they realize that they cannot meet the expectations of adult life without the chance to see the world magically. To get access to the magic they were denied in childhood, these young adults will use any means necessary” (Warner 27).

Warner says, “Block seems instinctively to realize that those on the verge of adulthood need one final contact with the world of fairy tales to make that [...] transition” (27). She believes that Block’s fairy tales act as safe practice runs through experiences the young adult will have to face in reality. Then the young adult can move on into adulthood and leave fairy magic behind.

But, is Block even writing to a young adult audience? Chapter 5 explains further that Block is uncomfortable with her place on young adult shelves. Block writes, as many of the finest authors do, for herself. I believe Block’s message to readers is that magic is not ever to be left behind. Block has repeatedly voiced that magic is an everyday part of life and inherent to the earth. (Peacock; Block, Morning; Hotaling; Templeton; Gallo; Block, “Francesca;” Roston). Block’s characters often comment on the subject: “Magic is in everything. Our culture just doesn’t value it” (Block, “Safe Love”). Block’s stories are not a “final chance” (Warner 27) to experience magic, but a state of mind, an alternate way to perceive the real world and a lesson in appreciation of

all experiences, dark and light. Warner expresses the value of the fairy tale aspect of Block's writing, but she does not, as her title suggests, express the value of seeing "magic in the real world;" (26) Warner does not explore the value of a *magical reality*. I will discuss the value of perceiving the magic of reality in Chapter 5.

Thus, the critics of children's literature acknowledge the originality, honesty, and value of Block's writing in the young adult field of literature. Chris Crowe, editor of *The English Journal*, identifies Block as a "boundary breaker and maker" in young adult literature. He recognizes *Weetzie Bat* as a novel that has been "instrumental in creating and shaping what we today know as young adult literature" (116). "*Weetzie Bat*," he writes, "introduced a compressed lyric quality to YA prose," (118) and, along with other fine first novels, "showed readers and other writers the positive effects that careful, polished, sophisticated writing have on a good story" (118). Yet to be articulated, much less resolved, is the confusion surrounding Block's many labels. A discussion of the magical forces at work in Block's literature will hopefully bring a better understanding of her magical reality. I hope the voices of Block's fans will encourage children's literature advocates to recommend Block's works to their intended mature young adult audience.

Francesca Lia Block in Theses:

The question of audience comes up in Nichole M. Saylor's Bachelor of Arts thesis, "The Weetzie Bat Books: the Young Adult Literature of Francesca Lia Block." Saylor briefly discusses some recurring "themes" (although by 'theme' she also means plot and style devices) across the *Weetzie Bat* books. "All the recurring themes in

Block's stories," she says, "tie into [a] quest [for self and for acceptance]: landscape, characters, relationships, journeys, symbols, and light versus dark" (14). Saylor looks at the *Weetzie Bat* books through a pedagogical lens, as she provides some suggestions for each novel's application in the classroom. Unfortunately, Saylor does not suggest to what age group she believes the novels or her activities should be targeted—apart from the wavering "young adult" age bracket. From the simplicity of the majority of her suggested activities, I assume Saylor aims to implement the *Weetzie Bat* novels into grade 6-8 curricula. She would have students imagine the unknown background of characters like My Secret Agent Love Man¹¹, choose three wishes *they* would ask the genie, or compare and contrast the characters of Weetzie Bat and Witch Baby. Since Block incorporates so much imagery into her writing, Saylor would ask students to write about a place or event using the five senses. She also suggests students make a place *they* know "sound as fantastical as Block's settings without making up things about it" (31). She does not, however, provide guidance as to how students, or how Block, for that matter, can make the real environment a place of magic. In the following chapter I discuss some ways I believe Block makes the world magic. Saylor's more sophisticated activities include researching Native American songs (which Block incorporates into *Cherokee Bat and the Goat Guys*) to come to a better understanding of the culture and contemplation of Dirk's fear of his own sexuality in *Baby-Be-Bop*.

Saylor comments that Block is not widely known or available in Midwest bookstores or school libraries and assumes this is because Block deals with "controversial elements" (3). I commend Saylor's effort to encourage teachers to read *Weetzie Bat*

¹¹ Patty Campbell jokes, "Perhaps we can hope for a book about the childhood of My Secret Agent Lover Man in which we meet the eccentric parents who would burden a child with such a preposterous name" (Campbell, "Francesca" 116).

and/or the sequels with students in the classroom.

Denver G. Olmstead, who has written a Bachelor of Arts thesis on Block entitled “Fairy Tale Meets the Punk Princess: The Use of Tough Magic in the Works of Francesca Lia Block,” also questions “why [...] Block’s novels are not used in the classroom or sold by the millions?” (Olmstead 28) and thinks,

The answer is easy. Block’s writing is disturbing. Block’s books are criticized as being too blunt or raw for young adults; however, she is writing stories which connect with a segment of today’s youth which have already encountered the blunt truth: Life is disturbing. (Olmstead 28)

Block’s confrontation of the disturbing, of the darkness in the world, is Olmstead’s focus. In the introductory “Acknowledgements” page of the thesis, Olmstead thanks Francesca Lia Block. “I need to thank the author [...] for taking me through darkness which made me find my passion for writing again.” Olmstead does not analyse the poetic writing of Block or claim to take inspiration from her stylistic example. Yet, Olmstead does appreciate Block’s persistent theme of acknowledging darkness in order to see the light. Olmstead sees Block’s protagonists as characters who “face ... a mental journey that represents a ‘coming of age’ or a rebirth of the self” (20). Olmstead has identified with these characters, suggesting that she or he has journeyed through the dark times of thesis-writing to emerge with a renewed passion for the writing process. Olmstead assumes that Block’s adolescent fans also identify with the emotional journeys of Block’s characters. From reading comments about Block’s books and writing posted online by young readers, I can say that Olmstead is correct. In Chapter 6 of my thesis, I look at the role Block’s style and themes have played in the lives of young readers.

Olmstead is also concerned with the influence Block has on her readers.

Specifically, Olmstead presents the relevance of darkness in Block's *Weetzie Bat*, *I Was a Teenage Fairy*, and *The Rose and the Beast* by comparing the benefits of reading these stories to the psychological benefits of reading fairy tales, as described by Bruno Bettelheim. Readers will recall that Warner has applied Bettelheim's theories to Block's magic as well.

The "tough magic" to which Olmstead refers is a phrase adopted from Jane Yolen's essay, "Tough Magic" in *Touch Magic: Fantasy, Faerie, and Folklore in the Literature of Childhood*. "Tough magic," writes Yolen, "is the old [concept that] one cannot receive without first giving. Every miracle requires an initial disaster" (Yolen, qtd. in Olmstead 2). Olmstead understands 'tough magic' to be the darkness, "our fears or the evil that lurks in the human mind" (Olmstead 2). Olmstead has noticed that Block shares Yolen's view that "without evil and the knowledge of its possible continuance, there can be no hope for redemption. That is what every memorable story, every tale of dimension is about: the working through evil in order to come at last to the light" (Yolen, qtd. in Olmstead 2).

Olmstead's thesis treats the works of Block as true fairy tales. Olmstead argues that Block's fantasies help adolescents cope with reality in the same way Bettelheim says fairy tales do, by giving young readers the tools to "meet the adversities of life" (Bettelheim, qtd. in Olmstead 121). Of course, Block's tales are not true fairy tales. Olmstead, herself, has not been able to avoid the ambiguity of genre in her discussion of Block's writing. Olmstead calls Block's works "novels that contain underlying fairy tales" (Olmstead 1). Yet she ignores the term 'magic realism,' which so many critics (and Block, herself) use to characterize her writings. Warner, while she does not focus

on the magic realism of Block's writing, does provide readers with background information on magic realism, since, Warner notes, Block "describes [her style as] 'a kind of magic realism'" (Warner 26).

Where Olmstead focuses on the fairy tale elements of Block's writing, using support only from fantasy and fairy tale sources, I will focus on the layers of magic that Block blends to create a new genre. Where Olmstead credits Block with bringing traditional folk-writing back to teenagers, I credit Block with creating a genre unique to children's literature. Olmstead says, "Block's writing style returns to the traditional writing of fairy tales containing 'brevity, [...] severe restraints on description, [...] flexible traditionalism, [...] inflexible hostility to all analysis, digression, reflections and 'gas'" (C.S. Lewis, qtd. in Olmstead 1). However, while Block does incorporate archetype and poetic restraint, she is a most descriptive, most untraditional, most obsessively self-reflective writer. Block's is a voice unlike any other in children's or young adult literature. To say that Block is "adapting classic fairy tales to fit present society" (Olmstead 1) or that her works are in the face of "the sugar-coated Disney fairy tales that many children of today are familiar with" (Olmstead 3) does not do Block's works justice. The comparison between Block's writing and Disney's fairy tales is especially flawed because of the discrepancy in the intended audiences of Disney and Block. Block's works are aimed at a mature young adult audience.

Finally, Olmstead and I perceive the effect of Block's imagery differently. Olmstead briefly mentions that Block has a "unique" style involving "short chapters, [...] simplistic sentence structure, [...] vivid imagery." (Olmstead 9). This imagery, Olmstead writes, "makes what is fictional and fantastical become real for the reader" (Olmstead 9).

She does not provide an example for how this is so. In the next chapter I express how I feel Block's imagery achieves the opposite end. Block's imagery makes what is real fantastic.

Laurie L. Walczak is the author of a third thesis, completed towards a Master of Arts degree, entitled: "Antigay Violence in 1990's Gay Adolescent Literature."¹² Walczak identifies Block's *Baby Be Bop* as one young adult novel that disempowers readers. Walczak writes, "this novel suggests that antigay violence is a roadblock along the path" (Walczak ii) to happiness in a gay relationship. Walczak says that the gay and lesbian friends in her life have "made me understand that antigay violence is a horrible problem for gay teens" (Walczak 2). Thus, when Dirk becomes a victim of anti-gay violence, Block is reflecting reality. Walczak regrets, however, that by depicting instances of anti-gay violence, Block is perpetuating "the extremely damaging homophobic notion that homosexuals cause or deserve anti-gay violence" (Walczak 6).

Walczak's thesis is the only Master of Arts thesis I was able to find on Block; I was not able to find any doctoral theses on the subject of Block. Missing from studies to date is a deeper analysis of the magical elements functioning in Block's works and classification of the resulting product of her original genre of young adult literature. In the first sentence of her thesis, Saylor comments that before Block, she had "never before [encountered magic realism] through young adult literature" (Saylor 1). Olmstead, in her second sentence says, "Block writes novels that contain underlying fairy tales." (Olmstead 1). There is evidently a need to better classify the writings of Francesca Lia Block. I wish to go to the roots of Block's writing to determine for myself how Block

¹² Walczak's thesis was approved by Roberta Seelinger Trites, author of *Disturbing the Universe*, which was discussed earlier in this chapter.

fits into the tradition of young adult literature and into the young adult category at all, for that matter. I use fan comments as support for her placement in the YA category and to illustrate the positive influence she has on young people who, as Chris Lynch reminds us, are the most at risk and in desperate need of an author like Block who respects the dark and light of young adulthood.

Shortage of Secondary Sources:

Aside from an absence of MA or PhD scholarship, there is a limited amount of critical writing in general on the subject of Block or her works. The majority of the critical sources I use to defend my thesis are reviews of Block's publications and small articles about the author and her works. Perhaps the shortage of secondary sources is due to Block's relatively new entrance onto the scene. She has published a total of 12 books for young adults since 1989.

Or, perhaps Block's originality makes her works less conducive to mention in larger thematic or stylistic studies. Magic realism in children's literature, for example, has not been explored in any depth. If it were, Block's texts would necessarily take center stage. As it stands, the western world is largely ignorant of the genre. Lois Warner is surprised that "magic realism" is not just a "phrase [Block] made up," (26) but a legitimate literary phenomenon that has been around more than fifty years" (26). No doubt, a poor understanding of the genre has limited Block's readership. However, it is no wonder that magic realism is largely unheard of. The term 'magic realism' was first coined in 1925, yet there are currently only nine books in print on the term as it is applied

to adult literature as of January 2004, two of which were published within the past two months. An analysis of the magic elements infusing Block's magical reality may help to make Block books less 'weird' and more extraordinary.

Perhaps there is a lack of secondary sources because her originality is not appreciated. As I will discuss in Chapter 5, there are critics who dismiss Block's writing as "pretentious" (Cooper 412), "over the top" ("*Violet*"), "syrupy" ("*Nymph*" 49), "irritating" (Shulman). More significantly, I believe that a great many of her adult readers dismiss Block because they simply do not know what to make of her. Ken Donelson says, "Our first taste of Francesca Lia Block may have shocked some of us, but kids recognized a kindred soul even if we couldn't immediately" (Ken Donelson, qtd. in Blasingame and McGlinn).

Patricia Campbell writes, "When *Weetzie Bat* (1989) burst over young-adult readers like a rainbow bubble showering clouds of roses, feathers, tiny shells, and a rubber chicken, some of the critics backed off in shock" ("Francesca" 111). But, Campbell continues, "the furor died down as timid librarians and teachers got used to Block's 'strangeness'" ("Francesca" 111). Based on the number of negative comments relating to Block's unique style, and based on the number of reviews and articles that express discomfort with Block's originality, I am not at all convinced that those in the field of children's literature *have* gotten used to Block. Perhaps a lack of Block scholarship reflects an academia that has not yet accepted what is 'strange' in the writings of Francesca Lia Block. Teachers and children's librarians are less likely to recommend a book whose oddity stands out more than its merits.

Or perhaps Block's originality is intimidating. Most intimidating, I find, is

discussing Block's writing without context. There is no other author, that I am aware of, to whom I can compare Block. Her position among the variety of literary genres has yet to be determined. Therefore, I feel it is necessary to discuss some categorical terms that could express the essence of Block's "strangeness."

When Magic is Real:

Understanding Magic Realism, *lo real maravilloso americano*, the Baroque, and the American Fairy Tale

In my attempt to classify the young adult works of Francesca Lia Block, I researched other genres that incorporate magic into the real world, specifically, magic realism, the marvellous real, the baroque, and the American fairy tale. I will now compare and contrast Block's writing to these genres. At the conclusion of this chapter I will offer a new way to categorize Block's works.

Magic Realism in relation to the works of Francesca Lia Block:

Speaking about what makes the fairy tale, George MacDonald wrote that he "should as soon think of describing the abstract human face, or stating what must go to constitute a human being" (14). From my research of the elements of magic realism, I feel I should rather attempt to define the fairy tale. The great consensus among those who debate the qualities of magic realism, I think, is that there is no consensus.

The term "magic realism" was first used by German art critic Franz Roh in 1925

to describe post-expressionist art depicting a dreamlike reality (Roh), or “the mysterious elements hidden in everyday reality” (Williams 77). In 1955, Angel Flores first applied the term to literature; Flores uses the term *magical realism* to describe Latin-American authors’ preoccupation with “mingling [...] drab reality with the phantasmal world” (112). In Latin-American literature, Flores notes, most fundamentally, a “transformation of the common and the every-day into the awesome and the unreal” (114), but he also mentions a sense of timelessness (115) and an absence of “lyrical effusions” (115) and “needlessly baroque descriptions” (115). Flores’ fundamental explanation of magic realism is still used today. However, other definitive qualities of magic realism are hazy.

Stephen Slemon swears that “in none of its applications to literature has the concept of magic realism ever successfully differentiated between itself and neighboring genres such as fabulation, metafiction, the baroque, the fantastic, the uncanny, or the marvelous, and consequently it is not surprising that some critics have chosen to abandon the term altogether” (407). Indeed, it would seem the more one reads about magic realism, the more one becomes convinced of the emptiness of the term. On a superficial level, the term itself conveys its meaning: an amalgamation of magic and real. Raymond Williams believes “Magic realism has been applied to a diverse group of writers and often in reference to any type of writing that portrayed both the real and the fantastic” (77).

Of course, it goes without saying that any complex work of fiction requires deeper analysis and contemplation. Critics of magic realism often find they must create their own definitions, focusing either on the stylistic source of the magic or of the real in specific works. Adding to the confusion, some critics even invent their own terms to

label the groupings and regroupings of the various conventions of magic realist writing, including *lo real maravilloso americano*, *carnavalesque*, *grotesque realism*, *super realism*, *mythic realism*, and *psychic realism*. Sheila Egoff, one of the few children's literature critics to acknowledge and discuss the magic realist branch of fantasy in literature for children, invents the term *enchanted realism*. Just what qualities do and do not define magic realism is an ongoing debate.

In general, writers of magic realism "interweave, in an ever-shifting pattern, a sharply etched realism in representing ordinary events and descriptive details together with fantastic and dreamlike elements, as well as with materials derived from myth and fairy tales" (Fletcher qtd. in Ruch and Sellman). Magic realism has been called "a literary mode rather than a distinguishable genre," (Bahri) though it is most frequently referred to as a genre or sub-genre of fantasy. Magic realism and fantasy overlap to such an extent that Gene Wolfe defines magic realism as "fantasy written by people who speak Spanish." If it were only that simple.

Where *does* one draw the line dividing magic realism from fantasy?

One frequent delineation of magic realism is its capacity to de-familiarize the familiar (Roh 24-5; Simpkins 151; Faris 177; Volek). Simple objects take on renewed significance in magic realism, and the effect is enchanting. Of course, fantasy commentators, too, have been known to tout fantasy's power to transform an old image into one sparkingly new. In fact, critics of both fantasy and magic realism perceive the genres as restoring to readers a child's perspective of the world (Faris 177; Eagar 213; Hunter 229), in which everyday objects may be seen through fresh eyes. The overlap of this refreshed, child's perspective in fantasy and magic realism may be understood if one

remembers that magic realism has roots in fantasy.

Francesca Lia Block adores this quality of magic realism—this de-familiarization of the familiar. In the first sentence of Gabriel García Márquez’s celebrated magic realist novel, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, a man faces a firing squad and thinks of a childhood moment, of “the distant afternoon when his father took him to discover ice” (1). Block most appreciates the word ‘ice’ in this famous first line: “it makes the very real, the very mundane word ‘ice’ become completely enthralling, enchanted, and magical.” (Block, *Morning*). Indeed, Raymond Williams believes this amazement over ice is why magic realism is an appropriate term for the writing of Gabriel García Márquez. Magic realism expresses “man’s astonishment before the wonders of the real world” (Williams 77). This magicalization of a simple image or word is what Block aspires to in her own writing. This, for Block, is a fundamental ingredient of her brand of magic realism.

Others share William’s and Block’s view. Wendy B. Faris notes that in magic realism “the reader may experience a particular kind of verbal magic—a closing of the gap between words and the world” (176). Hence, a metaphor may be real, such as Block’s character who goes by the name My Secret Agent Lover Man. “Objects may take on lives of their own and become magical. This materiality extends to word-objects as metaphors” (Faris 170).

Sheila Egoff comments that magic realism’s, or rather, *enchanted realism*’s “slight intrusion of something unreal [...] allows us to see more realistic detail than we would in real life” (7). In magic realism, fantastic elements highlight the magic or the unexplained aspects of reality (Simpkins; Zamora; Faris; Delbaere-Garant; Bahri). Of

course, other fantasy forms are known to refresh our vision of the world; fantasy “restores our own world to us” (Waggoner 27). G. K. Chesterton, Jane Yolen, Mollie Hunter, E. Nesbit, Lloyd Alexander, and Susan Cooper are among the many commentators who glean a renewed appreciation for real-world phenomena from reading the works of fantasy.

Fantasy writer J. R. R. Tolkien describes the home of Fantasy as a magical place with strong elements of the real. He refers to this place as a “Perilous Realm,” (14) of indescribable atmosphere called Faerie.

Faerie contains many things besides elves and fays, and besides dwarfs, witches, trolls, giants, or dragons; it holds the seas, the sun, the moon, the sky; and the earth, and all the things that are in it: tree and bird, water and stone, wine and bread, and ourselves, mortal men, when we are enchanted.” (Tolkien 14)

If this is a description of the indescribable setting of fantasy, then the setting of magic realism might best find description in a reversed reading: The world of magic realism contains many things besides the seas, the sun, the moon, the sky; and the earth, and all the things that are in it...; it holds elves and fays, dwarfs, witches, trolls, giants, or dragons... unicorns and changelings, aliens, ghosts, demons, vampires, and angels. At least, the setting of Francesca Lia Block’s magic realism does. As in other forms of fantasy, simple images of place in magic realism set dreams stirring. Sun, moon, water, stone, forest... these are images that stimulate the mind’s philosophical or spiritual centre (Bachelard; Thomas; Waggoner; Coles; Cooper). Gaston Bachelard believes the human psyche responds to images of place. Bachelard asks, “Does there exist a single dreamer... who does not respond to the word wardrobe?” (78).

My thought is that magic realism functions as surveyor of psychic images of place. The simple image ceases to be simple, as it formulates in the consciousness a sense of vast space, of timelessness, and of wonder. These are the feelings of enchantment-- "shoreless seas and stars uncouth" (Tolkien 9). Wondrous images of Earth send the mind on an "imaginative search" (Coles xxii) for the soul's very humanity as the creature who looks at the world and wonders those utterly existentialist questions" (Coles xxiii). No matter what a person's cultural upbringing, the earth's mysteries remain a constant source of magic.

Setting is the root of Gabriel García Márquez's magic realism, in which the "antithetical elements" (McMurray 70) of his Latin America reflect the "contrasting realities" (McMurray 70) of the genre. Williams also notes that "the coastal region where García Márquez spent his youth is a setting par excellence for this magical reality" (7).

Francesca Lia Block feels strongly about the power of place to illicit dreamy images of the enchanted. In fact, she considers her first novel, *Weetzie Bat*, "a love letter to Los Angeles" (Hotaling 26). Block thinks of Los Angeles as another character in her writing, and as such, the city takes on a complex personality of flawed beauty (Block, All Things). Los Angeles is personified time and again in Block's works. "Magic realism does indeed often display a deep connectedness between character and place" (Delbaere-Garant 252).

So connected are character and place, that Block employs nature's imagery in characterization. Nichole M. Saylor notes, too, that there is no Weetzie Bat without Los Angeles; there is no Francesca Lia Block without her L.A. muse, without a yearning for

home, for the place she knew first. The setting and source of magic in magic realism seem to be home.

Ursula Le Guin warns that fantasy is “a real wilderness, and those who go there should not feel too safe” (196). This wilderness has been called Elfland, Middle Earth, Prydain, the Forest of Boceliande, she reminds us... “But the point about Elfland is that you are not at home there” (Le Guin 196). The fantasies of Francesca Lia Block take place, for the most part, in her familiar L.A. surroundings, though these surroundings are saturated in “an ‘irreducible element’ of magic” (Faris 168). Perhaps, then, the fundamental difference between general fantasy and magic realism is that the latter tempers the threat of the wild, unknown, “perilous” (Tolkein) fantasy world with the familiar. Whereas other fantasy genres may take place in foreign worlds, magic realism is always set in this one (Faris, Bahri). Readers will sense the presence or mingling of two worlds (Simpkins; Faris; Wilson; Thiem; Delbaere-Garant; Slemon; Erickson), the magic and the real, without being transported to another. This world mingles with elements of the faerie realm that entice readers with what is usually an abundance of “entrancing-magic-details” (Faris 169) to tempt the senses.

The senses can be a strong source of the magic of magic realism. McMurray cannot “overlook the seductive powers of [García Márquez’s] language that stimulates the imagination with symbolic and captivating sensorial imagery” (106). One particular quality of magic realism may be that the magic is innate within the earth and its people. Magic intrinsic to human beings and the earth may be considered *carnavalesque*. “The concept of carnival celebrates the body, the senses, and the relations between humans” (Bahri). Perhaps inspired by her favourite author, Gabriel García Márquez, Block’s

magic realism adopts a carnivalisue spirit. "Latin American magic realists [...] explore the bright life-affirming side of the carnivalesque" (Bahri) and so does Block. In fact, Block believes "magic comes from fully experiencing the sensory world"¹³ (Block, "Francesca").

Opposite worlds mingling under the title magic realism testify to another convention common to the genre: paradox. Magic realism "aims to seize the paradox of the union of opposites" (Bahri). The titles of several works by Francesca Lia Block comply: *Dangerous Angels*, *Witch Baby*, *The Rose and the Beast*, *I was a Teenage Fairy*. "Contradictions stand face to face, oxymorons march in locked step" (Zamora and Faris 1). In this light, the Los Angeles setting of Block's stories is appropriate. The "paradoxical conception of the city as the site of controllable and uncontrollable energies" (Stewart 477) is a logical meeting place for two irreconcilable worlds. Beaudelaire has "attributed his fascination with the city to the 'beauty of the horrible' and Theodore Dreiser to... 'its extremes'" (Stewart 478). Melissa Stewart explains, "human beings create the city, yet they cannot completely control their creation. This paradox is also inherent in magic realism" (479). Just where the two opposing worlds of magic realism meet, or do not meet, is open to interpretation.

Edith Nesbit, whom Sheila Egoff calls an enchanted realist writer for children, uses an analogy of a dividing curtain to try to explain the boundary between what is real and what is magical: "There is a curtain, thin as a gossamer, clear as glass, strong as iron, that hangs forever between the world of magic and the world that seems to us to be real" (qtd. in Langton 166). Similarly, Francesca Lia Block says she "can see the fairies and

¹³ Block's setting for *Ecstasia*, Elysia, is a literal carnival with tents, performers, and carnie-folk that are part-man, part-beast. Elysia is a futuristic Los Angeles whose inhabitants are in constant pursuit of sensual indulgence. It is a city of cake, sex, champagne, song, and glitter and superficial beauty.

the stories through a glass, a window pane or something” (Block, “A Cool Bit”).

Ultimately, there is “something that separates [the real world and the writer] from that [magical] world” (Block, “A Cool Bit”). There seems to be a sense in magic realism that magic or “mystery does not descend to the represented world, but rather hides and palpitates behind it” (Roh 16). Jane Yolen identifies the magic of fairyland as “the soul beneath the skin” (50) of the real world. Does magic realism whisper an invitation to readers to “slip, as it were, behind reality” (Philip 151)? Or, does the curtain need to be tailored still to fit the magical realist text--particularly the text of Francesca Lia Block?

There can be no doubt that in the works of Francesca Lia Block, magic and reality fuse and coexist. What is real is what is magic and the reverse. When asked by National Public Radio’s Susan Stamberg, “How do you define magic realism...?” Francesca Lia Block responds, “I think for me it’s when there’s magic in everyday life and the magic is very real so that these two things blend together seamlessly and you really can’t distinguish them in some ways.” Block captures in her writing the feeling we have all had, “that around any corner one might catch a sudden glimpse of something strange and wonderful” (Hunter 214). G.K. Chesterton says ordinary man “has always had one foot in earth and the other in fairyland” (28). Block makes readers feel that we walk both worlds at once and choose the direction in which we keep our gaze. If we choose, we may see “two different pictures at once and yet [see] all the better for that” (Chesterton 28).

Critics perceive that within magic realist text, “the supernatural is not a simple or obvious matter, but it is an ordinary matter, an everyday occurrence—admitted, accepted, and integrated into the rationality and materiality of literary realism” (Zamora and Faris

3). Such is the case with García Márquez according to Williams and McMurray. Tolkien describes fantasy as a Secondary World with an internal logic, so that “the green sun will be credible” (46) when readers travel there. In magic realism, there is no Secondary World, and perhaps for this reason there is no logic to marvellous events. One participant of an online chat on this subject explains, “Dream logic is sufficient” (Jo Walton, qtd. in Leeper).

The faith characters of magic realism hold in the fantastic may have readers hesitating between an interpretation of these magical events as imaginary or miraculous (Faris 171). Indeed, readers of Block’s *I Was a Teenage Fairy* wonder if the fairy Mab is a figment of Barbie’s imagination. In *The Hanged Man*, readers question the reality of Laurel’s lover, Jack. Is the ghost of Charlie Bat really guiding Witch Baby through New York City in *Missing Angel Juan*? Weetzie’s genie, however, is a miracle. Perhaps Block is saying something about love, since love is a wish the genie grants. Ultimately, magic realism—especially the magic realism of Block—blurs one’s conception of a reality separate from fantasy, within and without the book.

Another strong source of the magic in magic realism is nature. Zamora and Faris claim magic realism takes place “where magic is a branch of naturalism” (6) and Alejo Carpentier sees the marvellous in Latin-American literature as a product of the American landscape. As indicated above, the source of the magic in magic realism is innate to human beings and to the environment. Block has a Celtic-like power to “magicalize nature, to render vivid not only the beauty, but also the weird power and the fairy charm of nature.” (Meigs 229). Tolkien and C. S. Lewis believe nature is a primary source of enchantment. Each personifies fantasy and describes enchantment as the face of the

genre. Tolkien says the “essential face of Faerie” is “the Magical towards Nature” (28). C. S. Lewis believes enchantment has “the face of nature” (172) with “its changing moods and seasons whether seen in windswept wastes or in a small mossy glade where hawthorn is in bloom” (172).

Ursula K. Le Guin also recognizes enchantment as a natural environment. She goes so far as to refer to Elfland as “a real wilderness” (196) and “a great national park, a vast and beautiful place” (195). Chesterton swears that “all the fire of the fairy tales is derived from this” (53)—from nature. He explains, “The only words that ever satisfied me as describing Nature are the terms used in the fairy books, ‘charm,’ ‘spell,’ ‘enchantment.’ [...] A tree grows fruit because it is a *magic* tree. Water runs downhill because it is bewitched. The sun shines because it is bewitched” (53). Whether nature is tapped by the fantasist or the realist, its effects are enchanting.

Magic and the natural environment are so closely united that it can be no coincidence that magic realism and fantasy works are popular venues for writers to voice environmental concerns. Egoff has also realized that in fantasy works for children and young adults, there is a common “theme of conservation” (Egoff 306). The genre seems to many writers, including Francesca Lia Block, to offer an appropriate medium to convey “warnings [...] about the destruction of the environment” (Egoff 306). Block’s *Ecsasia* and *Primavera*, in particular, predict the disaster ahead for humans in the future. For Block, the environment and animal rights, in addition to AIDS, are political motivations for her form of magic realism.

Setting continues to play a crucial role in defining magic realism, as magic realism seems to be related to marginal sub-cultures where the magic elements of the real

social culture facilitate an examination of that culture's pain. The electronic journal devoted to magic realism, *Margin*, actually takes its name from this quality of the work. The idea of a marginalized culture may not only include ethnically marginalized nations or groups, but also members of society who may feel marginalized, such as women and homosexuals (Delicka). In the works of Francesca Lia Block, sub-cultures of women, homosexuals, punks, groupies, witches, addicts, Native Americans, and interracial children have a voice. Magic realism tends to reflect a "cross-cultural intersection" (Delicka) that blends magical folklore--or insider detail, perhaps--with the greater social reality. George McMurray notes "the wide variety of cultures coexisting in Latin America, from the most primitive Indian tribes still living in the stone age to sophisticated, ultramodern metropolises. It might be expected, then, that a continent of such sharply contrasting realities would produce an art form of antithetical elements like magical realism" (165-6). Likewise, it might be expected that such a culturally diverse city as Los Angeles would produce a magic realist author. In Chapter 6 I examine whether Block's young adult audience feels like a marginalized group.

The magical elements of magic realism are thought to be so ingrained in a marginalized sub-culture that the magic is accepted as natural and real. Therefore, characters within magic realism may not react to the magic as miraculous or astonishing. In such an event, neither will the reader. The characters in some of Block's works do, however, react with initial alarm or surprise when they confront otherworldly magic. This astonishment is uncharacteristic of magic realism, but more true to characters living in twentieth-century L.A.

The magic of the natural and contrived landscapes of Los Angeles and of the

city's history, culture, and way of life is ignored or taken for granted by the majority of Americans, but not by Block or her characters. The first line of *Weetzie Bat* draws attention to the undervalued magic of Los Angeles: "The reason Weetzie Bat hated high school was because no one understood" (Dangerous 3). It drove Weetzie crazy that no one appreciated the magic of the city in which they lived. The magic of L.A. is celebrated by Weetzie and hence by readers. Perhaps the realism of life in Los Angeles, so unlike the realities of the majority of North Americans, creates a form of cultural margin group whose pop, Hollywood, and multi-ethnic magical elements are natural and real to native Angelenos, but amazing and otherworldly to outsiders.

Further conventions of magic realism may distinguish the genre from its fantasy forefather, including a narrative force based in myth and a love of excess or hyperbole (Zamora and Faris)—though Flores' original definition explicitly excludes the elaborate baroque style. In the following chapter I discuss the magical effect of a narrative rooted in folklore and the magic of excess, of "a wild world [...] of extravagance" (Jones).

We have seen that, along with a de-familiarization of the familiar, fantastic characters and events, seductive imagery, paradox, hyperbole, natural beauty, and political motivation, characteristics of myth and fairy tale are a part of magic realism. Block has said that she hesitates to call her writing magic realism, because *her* myths and fairy tales are not part of Márquez's Latin culture. Her New Age Californian culture is nevertheless the breeding place for her "kind of magic realism" (Gallo 17). Overall, I think it is best to understand magic realism as a product of a culture's "triumphs and failures" (Márquez, qtd. in Wilson 79), "beliefs [...] and] legends" (Márquez, qtd. in Wilson 79), and "myths of the common people" (Márquez, qtd. in Wilson 79), which are

as much a reality and influence as are the real threats to that culture. Magic realism embodies all that is glorious and ugly, miraculous and frightening, intoxicating and painful about the human condition and experience. Magic realism expresses all that is possible and impossible within the human heart, mind, body and community.

Lo real maravilloso americano in relation to the works of Francesca Lia Block:

Closely related to magic realism is a Spanish term first used in 1949 by the Cuban Alejo Carpentier in the preface to his novel *El reino de este mundo* (*The Kingdom of this World*): *lo real maravilloso americano*, or “the marvellous American reality.” The term was coined to describe a “uniquely American form of magic realism” (Zamora and Faris 75).

After visiting Haiti, Carpentier was “struck by the contrast between the ‘marvelous reality’ of the Caribbean and the artificial way of ‘provoking the marvelous’ in the Old World.” (Delbaere-Garant 252). *Lo real maravilloso americano* describes “a ‘magic’ reality not created by the imagination or projected from the subconscious but inherent in the myths and superstitions of non-European populations and in the very topography of the Americas.” (Delbaere-Garant 252). The magic of American reality is compared to “poetic epiphany” (Williams 77).

Francesca Lia Block, of course, is a poet at heart, and her magical reality relies heavily on the wonders of American pop culture and on the natural deserts and canyons of the Los Angeles landscape. Additionally, Francesca Lia Block blends the mythical magic inherent to her culture and upbringing with the magic of the Los Angeles

landscape. However, the fairy tale she relies upon in so much of her writing *is* of European origin.

Further readings on “the marvellous real” suggest that the source of the marvellous can be found in its expressive language, elements of folktale, legend, music, dance, religion, and in the “cosmic dream of abundance and fraternity of those people who still suffer from hunger and want” (Jacques Stephen Alexis, qtd. in Webb 1). This definition of *lo real maravilloso americano* closely matches Francesca Lia Block’s interpretation of magic realism. The source of Block’s magic, too, is found in poetically expressive language and an abundance of allusions to European folktales, Greek mythology, Indian legend, pop-music, art, and expressive dance. Her themes of self-indulgence, sacrifice, friendship, family, and healing through artistic expression and love fit *lo maravilloso*’s ‘cosmic dream’ to appease ‘suffering, hunger and want.’ Hence, I feel that “the marvellous real” could be a genre applied to Block’s works.

However, magic realism has eclipsed this Spanish term, no doubt because it is an awkward phrase to apply to English literature. There is a sense, as well, that Carpentier’s marvellous America was a celebration of a new world that had left European fantasies behind. Block, however, celebrates the European fairy tale. Furthermore, America as we know it today is not the America to which Carpentier referred. I will therefore abandon the idea of employing *lo real maravilloso americano* to Block’s unique magic reality.

The Baroque in relation to the works of Francesca Lia Block:

The term *baroque*, as applied to literature, is another “imprecise” (Beckson and

Ganz 23) term difficult to define. Alejo Carpentier begins to tackle the term in his essay "The Baroque and the Marvelous Real" (1975) by rejecting multiple dictionary definitions. These definitions conclude that baroque is a style of extravagance, ornamentation, excess, decadence, and even bad taste. Today, *A Handbook to Literature* explains, "The baroque is a blending of *picturesque* elements (the unexpected, the wild, the fantastic, the eccentric) with the more ordered, formal style of the "high *renaissance*" (Holman and Harmon 46). *Benet's Reader's Encyclopaedia* says the baroque "may be used judiciously to describe a particularly ornate or sumptuous style" (74).

Carpentier adopts Eugenio D'Ors' understanding of baroque, which D'Ors expresses in his book *Lo barroco* (1935). D'Ors observes "a baroque spirit" (Carpentier 90) that is a "constant of the human spirit" (Carpentier 93). This spirit, as opposed to style, is "characterized by a horror of the vacuum, the naked surface" (Carpentier 93) and by "motifs that contain their own expansive energy, that launch or project forms centrifugally. It is art in motion, a pulsating art" (Carpentier 93). The baroque spirit reappears time and again to this day because "it is a *spirit* and not a *historical style*" (Carpentier 95). Carpentier describes "a profoundly baroque writer" (91) as one who is "an inventor of words, an enricher of [...] language" (91), and one who may "require *seventy-two* consecutive verbs" (96) to describe a scene. Also, the baroque writer will "exteriorize his passions" (97), create "an atmosphere of 'storm and desire'" (97) and utopia.

The writing of Francesca Lia Block must, by D'Ors' and Carpentier's opinion, be judged baroque for its intensely imagistic and poetic prose, lavish strings of nouns and adjectives, and passionate, expansive energy. So dense are Block's images that one does,

indeed, have the sense that Block and her characters have an abhorrence for empty space. After all, Weetzie houses her extended almost family in a “room full of musical instruments, watercolor paints, candles, sparkles, beads, books, basketballs, roses, incense, surfboards, china pixie heads, lanky toy lizards and a rubber chicken” (*Dangerous* 73). Block, too, is an inventor of words, slang, in particular: *clutch pig* is a curse, *lanky lizards* is an exclamation of surprise, *slinkster* is synonymous with ‘cool,’ and a *duck* is an attractive man. There can be no question that she enriches the English language with her poetic imagery.

When Judith Saltman compared Block’s writing to marzipan, she must have been referring to Block’s excessive outpourings of rich imagery and poetic language. They have an intoxicating effect. *Horn Book* reviewer Patrick Jones has faulted Block for her ornately imagistic style. Her “slam-slang-bang, punk-inspired, pup-culture-driven, fable-laden, sentimental-tone prose poetry...distracts...with rampant cleverness overload.” Polly Shulman of *Salon* magazine finds “Block’s relentless lyricism as irritating as a neighbor’s wind chimes.” Thus, baroque may be a useful term to apply to Block’s writing, as baroque can carry a negative connotation. Further criticisms of Block’s writing will come in Chapter 5.

Baroque literature is further described as containing “extravagant conceits,” (Benet’s 74) that strive to “resolve the tensions between spiritual aspiration and fleshly impulse and to dramatize and transcend the paradoxes inherent in man’s relationship to time and eternity” (Beckson and Ganz 23). The writing of Block includes many paradoxes that illuminate the “disharmonies and radically divergent polarities of existence” (Beckson and Ganz 23), but no extraordinary conceits. Furthermore, baroque

style is said to be “elaborately formal” (Holman and Harmon 13). Block’s style, however, is carefree—even experimental.

Carpentier’s definition of the baroque spirit offers more room for individual style and vision. Carpentier perceives the baroque as stemming from a multicultural environment. “All symbiosis, all *mestizaje*, engenders the baroque” (Carpentier 100). America itself is baroque for “the unruly complexities of its nature and its vegetation, the many colors that surround us, the telluric pulse of the phenomena that we still feel” (105). A writer such as Francesca Lia Block, whose inspiration comes from her environment, must necessarily adopt the baroque spirit: “the description of a baroque world is necessarily baroque” (Carpentier 106). Thus, “with such variety, each contributing its version of the baroque, we intersect with [...] ‘the marvelous real’” (Carpentier 101). “The marvellous real” is anything both real and extraordinary, such as those marvelous, realistic visions of Blue Beard and Tom Thumb, created by Charles Perrault. Stephen Slemon has noted that one may have difficulty differentiating between magic realism and baroque. Carpentier suggests this is so because one is at the intersection of the other. Block’s magic reality certainly incorporates a baroque spirit.

The American Fairy Tale in relation to the works of Francesca Lia Block:

Block’s magical reality has been described by many as modern or post-modern fairy tales. Block incorporates characteristics of European tales including references to characters, settings and themes of “love and terror that... are so primal” (Block, “Francesca”). In fact, I think Block’s magical reality most resembles what Selma G. Lanes calls an American fairy tale. In the tradition of an American fairy tale, Block asks

readers to consider magic in the context of a modern American environment. She explores the role of magic where man is in charge of his own fate, where people expect the American dream. Weetzie Bat is granted her three wishes, but happily ever after is hard work. Living happily is respecting the miracle of love and working to make dreams come true, which in Weetzie's case is to turn her story into a low-budget film.

Selma G. Lanes defines what she calls an American fairy tale: "The designation 'fairy tale' is here applied to all tales that take for granted the existence of magical elements or beings in this world" (93). By this definition, Block's magical tales resemble American fairy tales, since, in Block's tales magic naturally exists in the real world of America. Lanes reserves the term 'fantasy' for "those tales in which magical realms may exist, but the tale's characters must somehow find a means to transport them. The two genres [fairy tale and fantasy], of course frequently overlap," (Lanes 94) as do magic realism and fantasy. According to Lanes, "the fairytale's ultimate message is that there is a magic to existence that defies charting" (94). The same is true for Block's magic realism. In American fairy tales, "no one lives happily ever after except by...[learning] a new and deeper appreciation of the magic of his own day-to-day existence" (Lanes 96). Again, the same is true for Block's characters. "I don't know about happily ever after," thinks Weetzie Bat, "but I know about happily" (Dangerous 70).

In the American fairy tale, there is a "curious confusion [...] between the world of fantasy and the wondrous realities of American existence" (Lanes 100). Indeed, how else would one explain the magic Block sees in the artistic graffiti, skating hamburgers, and hard-candy coloured traffic jams of Shangri-L.A.? Is there a difference between an American fairy tale and Block's magic realism? Or, is Lane's term yet another variant of

magic realism?

Magic in American fairy tales is “no more than good, plain American common sense” (Lanes 99). The message within American fairy tales is that, “with a little optimism, know-how and an understanding heart, wishes can be satisfied” (Lanes 102). The message in Block’s books is the same: happiness is accessible if only one chooses to “plug into the love current” (Dangerous 70).

Lanes describes a further key qualifier of the American fairy tale: there is “none of that unalterable wickedness so common in European tales, a wickedness which requires real and powerful magic to vanquish. In few American fairy tales is evil ever squarely faced” (103). Block, however, sees real, unalterable evil in this world: evil is a rapist, a child molester, a murderer, heroin. But no magic can vanquish evil; characters fight against it with common sense, intuition, optimism, and love. Lanes attributes the absence of true evil in American fairy tales to an American reluctance to acknowledge evil. “The American experience, until recent times, has not encouraged a bleak view of human nature. Since the close of World War II, however, there has crept into both American fairy tales and fantasies for children clear signs of waning of New World optimism and innocence” (Lanes 104). Some of the controversy around Block’s young adult fiction is undoubtedly due to her vision of a reality as dark as it is light. Block gives expression to the evil side of human nature and America. Since the events of September 11th, that unalterable evil of European fairy tales may begin to challenge good more frequently in American fairy tales.

Lanes describes an America at the birth of L. Frank Baum’s *Wizard of Oz*:
“Americans were thirsting for utopias in books, sensing perhaps that these were not so

readily attainable in life as once believed” (100) Does Block reinvent an urban utopia? Lanes also mentions “The Singing Lady” of the depression, Irene Wicker, who “gained national fame bringing the old-time fairytales nightly into every American home with both a child and a radio” (102). Are such times upon us again? Do the times dictate an inevitable popularity for the baroque, American magic realist fairy tales of Block for young adults? “What time are we upon and where do I belong?” (Dangerous 73) rings the opening to *Weetzie Bat*’s sequel, *Witch Baby*. This must be a phrase running through the minds of American young adults as they enter the frightening world of independence and responsibility.

While Block's tales closely compare to American fairy tales, I cannot ignore that the fairy tale is an influence and a presence in magic realist works as well. I believe the term magic realism can absorb Block’s fairy tale quality.

Classification of the Works of Francesca Lia Block

There are three reasons for reading that Michael Cart adopts from T. S. Eliot: “1. the acquisition of wisdom, 2. the enjoyment of art, 3. the pleasure of entertainment” (Cart, Romance 251). By “enjoyment of art,” Cart understands, in the words of John Rowe Townsend,

enjoyment of the shaping by art of the raw material of life and enjoyment, too, of the skill with which that shaping is performed; enjoyment in the stretching of one’s imagination, the deepening of one’s experience, and the heightening of one’s awareness; an enjoyment which may be intense even if the material of the literary work is sad or painful (Townsend, qtd in Cart, Romance 251).

Francesca Lia Block is a great master of this “art.” She tells Patricia Campbell that when

she was a teenager, she “wished [she] could write stories that made people react the way they do to music—sweating, dancing, crying” (Block, qtd. in Campbell, “Francesca” 114). Her art is musical, a lyrical incantation.

Almost any commentary on Block’s writing tells us that her style has been influenced by the paintings her father, Irving Block, produced as Block was growing up. Cart has seen Irving Block’s still lifes and sees a direct correlation between them and Block’s “fascination with *objets* and their omnipresence in the settings of her characters’ lives” (Cart, Romance 267). Block’s art is visual, a collage of images.

Art comes up again in the context of Block’s writing when Cart resorts to the word “art” to try to explain how great he finds Block’s *The Hanged Man*. “Francesca Lia Block’s *The Hanged Man* is [...] angry but beautiful, as well, in its language, its imagery, and its arresting ambiguities—in its *art*, in short” (Cart, Romance 206).

I personally find that Block’s writing is so close to “art” that her style can distract from plot—the way a painter’s style can occupy the mind more than the subject of the painting. Like a tune from lyrics, or sound from sense. Block’s method of composing her stories suggests that the art of her composition is a priority. “I usually begin with the poetry of the language and by trying to create vivid characters. Later, certain truths are revealed to me and I often go back and work on bringing them out more fully in the story” (Block, “Francesca”). The parts or detail in Block’s writing can distract from the whole. I find it curious that the more I read Block’s stories, the less I remember plot detail, and the more I understand and appreciate the techniques that create the magical experience. Teenaged fans, too, comment more on her faerie art, imagery, poetic prose, than plot.

What does one call a book whose plot seems secondary to its stylistic parts, but art? Now, what to call this art? I think the closest analogy of Block's style in relation to plot is sound in relation to spell. I will further discuss, in the following chapter, Block's use of sound to create magic in the world. Block's intensely poetic prose affects the mind as poetry does. Sound is the poem's pulse. Sound is also the life source of a magic spell (Parker 48). In each, poetry and spell, sound functions as enchanter. Thus, poetry is a spell of sorts, and Block makes full use of its powers. Writes Jane Yolen, "The gift of words is magic. It can turn a beast into a human as surely as the moon forces the werewolf's change" (Yolen 79). If one thinks of Block's writing as a magic spell, what matters is the experience of the language and the effect on the body of the whole. Readers spin in a swirling, colourful mist of words and are freed at the end, transformed, adorned with eyes that finally see.

To categorize Block's 'kind of magic realism' I must go back to the term coined by Sheila Egoff: *Enchanted Realism* and qualify the realism as an *American* one. Sheila Egoff uses the term *enchanted realism* to express the "slight intrusion of something unreal" (7) in children's literature that she says "allows us to see more realistic detail than we would in real life" (7). Egoff wishes to use the term enchanted realism to describe the "strange, the uncanny, the eerie, or the dreamlike aspects of reality rather than the completely fantastic" (7). I am drawn to Egoff's term because it does express how Block is able to show us the sparkling details of the real world. However, Egoff's enchanted realism cannot explain the impossibly fantastic occurrences in many of Block's stories. I am not in favour of enchanted realism because it is a "softer phrase" (Egoff 8) to be reserved for children's literature or because Block's magical reality does "not have [a]

coldness or [...] static quality” (7) of many adult magic realist novels. I am not sure, in fact, what Egoff means by calling adult magic realism “cold” and “static.”

I think the term *enchanted American realism* is appropriately applied to the works of Francesca Lia Block because Block consciously *enchants* the modern American world, and she does so through means commonly associated with enchantment: folklore, sound, and vivid, glimmering imagery.

I would like to offer a new definition of the term *enchanted realism*, one that is based on the definition of the term “enchantment.” “Enchantment” is defined as (1) “A feeling of great liking for something wonderful and unusual,” (2) “A psychological state induced by (or as if induced by) a magical incantation,” and (3) “A magical spell” (WordWeb). Indeed, Francesca Lia Block’s writing highlights what is wonderful and unusual about the real modern world and casts a magical spell over the world and the reader with her poetic voice and imagery. The reader’s psychological state is changed upon experiencing a magic reality.

In the tradition of magic realism, Block draws on the magical aspects of her Californian culture—European fairy tales, Native American myths, pop and punk cultures, and Hollywood dreams—and the magical aspects of her upbringing—art, poetry, and Greek mythology. Rebecca Platzner refers to Block’s writing style as collage, since Block incorporates so many of these magical influences into the “short little gems” she calls the *Weetzie Bat* books. The opulent and expansive layering of influences and imagery in such close proximity is what gives Block’s works the baroque spirit.

In fact, by definition, magic realism must be a collage of magical elements

infusing the real world. Gabriel García Márquez reminds us that magic realism is an amalgamation of the mysticism of a nation and the unique qualities of a writer's upbringing—the magical tales one hears as a child from a grandmother, the “myths of the common people, [...] the beliefs, their legends” (Márquez, qtd. in Williams 79). Consequently, magic realist authors from different regions will produce unique variants of magic realism. Consequently, the magical American reality of Francesca Lia Block is distinct.

Block's uniquely American magic, the legends and dreams of the common people raised on fairy tales and Hollywood dreams, becomes as much a part of her reality as the darkness of rape and overdose and AIDS. As Márquez says, “reality isn't just the police that kill people” (Márquez, qtd. in Williams 79). What makes Block's writing *enchanted realism*, however, is the lush, consuming addition of poetic sound and imagery. Block also exhibits a refreshing sense of humour.

Block chooses to believe in magic; her definition of real-world magic dictates a new interpretation of magic realism—enchanted American realism—whose spiritual heart seizes young adults confronting pain and existential questions. Young adults may even translate Block's brand of magic realism as a new spirituality: a prescription for happiness, self-respect, and love. Block's American reality is enchanted and the effect on the reader is enchanting.

However, as those who have written of Block before me have predominantly used the terms “fairy tale” and “magic realism” to categorize Block's works, I must, for the sake of clarity, draw support from secondary sources that refer to her novels as such.

Summary:

A review of Block-related literature presents two issues relevant to this thesis. First, we have seen that critics of young adult literature have struggled to describe the original writing of Francesca Lia Block, referring to her books as either fairy tales or magic realism. Block, herself, has had difficulty categorizing her literature. Second, we have seen that there is debate surrounding her presence in the category of young adult literature, in part due to Block's mature treatment of reality and in part due to the poor understanding of and respect given to the young adult category. Theses written to date have only added to the discrepancy in genre and have focused on the pedagogical implications of Block's *Weetzie Bat* books, the relevance of fairy tale evil to young adults, and the negative influence of anti-gay violence in adolescent literature. The impact of Block's magic reality on young adults has yet to be acknowledged. Further discussion of Block's unique magic, her place in young adult literature, and her relevance to young adult fans is therefore warranted.

A review of literature on the topics of magic realism, *lo real maravilloso americano*, the baroque, and the American fairy tale have provided the foundation for a discussion of Block's specific genre and lead to the conception of a new phrase that can be used to describe her unique brand of magic realism, as it incorporates a baroque spirit and elements of the European and the American fairy tale: *enchanted American realism*.

In the following chapter, I will explore in detail the ways in which Block enchants the American reality. The literature review of magic realism will continue to be relevant as I interweave theory into the making of Block's enchanted reality.

CHAPTER IV

Creating an Enchanted American Reality: Add one part Magic to one part Reality and Spin

In chapter 3, readers learn that Block has developed her own brand of magical reality that can be viewed as enchanted American realism. In this chapter I examine the mechanisms Block uses to cast an aura of magic upon the modern American city.

Swirling together in Block's magical reality is that traditional faerie magic, Los Angeles pop-culture, and poetry, each a mysterious bewitcher unto itself. Combined, the effect is enchanting in every sense of the word. American reality is enchanted. Readers' perspectives and resolves are transformed. Block's words are a charm to read.

The Fairy Tale Meets Los Angeles:

So much has been written by adults about the power and relevance of the fairy tale to children that its mysterious effects have become something of an obsession to librarians, educators, publishers, and writers. I wonder whether adults are not consequently betraying some inner longing for a restoration of that feeling the fairy tale so easily bestowed upon them when they were young. In any case, the appeal of the fairy tale surpasses childhood. Block hopes that readers do not dismiss fairy tales as "old-fashioned" or "childish." (Block, "Francesca"): "I don't feel it necessary to defend stories that have haunted our collective imagination with their passion from childhood through adulthood for centuries" (Block, "Francesca").

I recall that as a young adult of twelve or thirteen, the only books I read more than once were fairy tales, and those I read with an insatiable hunger. Tales about being in disfavoured, about being lost in the forest, about stumbling blindly into evil and mustering the wits to struggle out--these spoke to me with heavy importance, as though my body's cells remembered the significance from the first tellings in the time that we were once upon. The fairy tale spoke to me at this difficult transitional time of teen-hood, "once in the ear, and again and again and again in the echo chamber that is the heart" (Yolen, 67).

Block believes people have the conception that

when you're a child [...] the world is magic. [...] Then you grow up [...] and your heart breaks in two. [...] But I really feel that it works both ways. The division's not so clear.... I don't divide the world up the way some people do. Children do perceive the world as a very magical place. [...] But so do many adults. I know *I* do. (Block, qtd. in Templeton).

Reading Block's magic realism, magic is not a thing of nostalgia for young adults, but a reawakening to the magic of the here and now. The third book in the *Weetzie Bat* series, *Cherokee Bat and the Goat Guys*, was inspired by the Greek mythology she was steeped in as a child. "'I've always had a thing about fauns and satyrs,' says Block. 'That Human/animal split really fascinates me. My Dad would draw a lot of them, and talk about them. He told me Greek myths for bedtime stories'" (Campbell, "People"). The magic of *The Goat Guys* is predominantly mythological, also incorporating Native American legends. *Goat Guys* is about the coming of age of Cherokee and Witch Baby. Block relies on the mythical power of animals in Greek and Native cultures to express "the idea of them coming into their sexuality and the wildness of it" (Block, qtd. in Campbell, "People"). The imagery in this third book is some of Block's best. Yet,

Block's fans do not mention *Goat Guys* in their online postings to Block groups. On the other hand, the elements of fairy tale in her stories is a major source of her popularity. Is it a lack of familiarity with the mythology on the part of young adults? Or is an interest in mythological magic eclipsed by young adults greater attraction to the magic power of the fairy tale?

Clearly there is a power inherent in the fairy tale. Ursula LeGuin explains, "They speak *from* the unconscious *to* the unconscious, in the *language* of the unconscious--symbol and archetype..." (qtd. in Yolen, 67). C. S. Lewis believes that "fairyland arouses a longing [in a child] for he knows not what. It stirs and troubles him (to his lifelong enrichment) with the dim sense of something beyond his reach" (215). There is an enigmatic appeal to the fairy tale that alights many philosophical ideas in those who search to qualify it. For whatever reason, the fairy tale has a hold on us, young and old. When readers encounter the fairy tale outside of childhood, as do readers of Block, the longing described by Lewis is revived anew. Although her *Weetzie Bat* novels "read like contemporary fairy tales [...] laced with traditional folk motifs and images," (Hearne, "Sleeping" 53), Block's magic realism does not recreate the utterly simple, archetypal fairy tale form. Speaking of Block's *The Rose and the Beast: Fairy Tales Retold*, Betsy Hearne notes that "in translating [the fairy tales] to contemporary life, [Block] has written not fairy tales but short stories. There's a vast difference" (Hearne, "Sleeping" 53). However, the entrancing power of the traditional fairy tale magic springs forth at the mere mention of a Sleeping Beauty or witch or good and evil. The real world takes on an aura of timelessness and of faerie magic. Los Angeles's shallow, polluted, crime-infested image becomes the "Hell-A" (Dangerous 53) evil of a witch's curse. The pop-glory of

L.A. becomes a Shangri-L.A. (Dangerous 52).

“I’ve always loved fairy tales,” (Block, “Block Party”) says Block. “That dark, intense, emotional aspect is just as important to me as the more delicate parts. Sometimes I’ll take something directly, a myth or a fairy tale--and use it as a structure. But I’ll do both--either consciously work on a fairy tale theme or let it filter in from my subconscious.” (Block, “Block Party”). Block makes frequent allusions to fairy tales and mythology throughout her works with the intention of enchanting the modern world with timeless mysticism. “Flowers threaten to grow over [the] doors and windows [of L.A.’s homes] like what happened to Sleeping Beauty’s castle” (Violet 3). Tweetie “held her summer day in her arms like a beast prince, warm, enchanted, and real as any sadness, as she fell asleep” (Girl 13). A fairy “whispered [...] about how it had once been--orchards of fruit trees instead of freeways, skies so clear you could hear the stars singing, [...] the ocean visible from every hilltop, swirling with mermaids and sea dragons of foam.” (Teenage 55) Thus, the real world takes on an aura of the enchanted world of the fairy tale.

In particular, *Dangerous Angels: The Weetzie Bat Books* employs a fairy tale magic. The series is even advertised as a collection of “post-modern fairy tales.” Francesca Lia Block, herself, thinks of her first book, *Weetzie Bat*, as “kind of a punk fairy tale” (Block, “gURL”). Weetzie is granted three wishes from a lamp genie: a hot Duck for her gay best friend Dirk, My Secret Agent Lover Man for Weetzie and “a beautiful little house for us to live in happily ever after” (Dangerous 19). Subsequently, Weetzie and her almost family live in a “Hollywood cottage with one of those fairy-tale roofs” (Dangerous 20). But, “those love wishes are such a risk” (Dangerous 83).

Vixanne Wigg, the head of “a coven of witches who pose under the guise of a Jayne Mansfield fan club” (Dangerous 44) has sex with Weetzie’s wish-come-true Lover Man and gives birth to a wild and snarly Witch Baby, who she abandons at Weetzie’s cottage. Weetzie’s father commits suicide, and a close friend gets AIDS. As magic as love can be, this fairy tale is about how “love is a dangerous angel” (Dangerous 67).

Love in Block’s fairy tales is as romantic and passionate as the original Sleeping Beauty meets Prince in Shining Armour. But Block’s fairy tale romance is typically intertwined with the author’s romance with Los Angeles.

“Weetzie,” [My Secret Agent Lover Man] said, kissing her mouth. “You are my Marilyn [...]. You are my sky set, my ‘Hollywood in Miniature,’ my pink Cadillac, my highway, my martini, the stage for my heart to rock and roll on, the screen where my movies light up” (Dangerous 59).

Heaven itself is described as a Hollywood haven. As Weetzie’s dad dies, he dreams of

a city where everyone was always young and lit up like a movie, palm trees turned into tropical birds, Marilyn-blond angels flew through the spotlight rays, the cars were the color of candied mints and filled with lovers making love as they drove down the streets paved with stars that had fallen from the sky (Dangerous 58).

Every one of Block’s stories contains a theme of love, and love’s bliss is always tempered with its darker side. In the words of Cinderella’s fairy godmother, of all worldly experiences, “love [...] can hurt most of all because of what can then be taken away” (Rose 61).

The sequel, *Witch Baby*, is a fan favourite. From the very beginning of *Witch Baby*, readers are prepared for some dark fairy tale mysticism. The story opens with Witch Baby “curling her toes, tapping her drumsticks [...] pulling on the snarl balls in her

hair” (Dangerous 73) and asking, “What time are we upon and where do I belong?” (Dangerous 73). And yet, readers recognize just as quickly that this fairy world is one ruled by teen attitude-- “Once upon a time. What is that supposed to mean?” (Dangerous 73)-- and coloured by Los Angeles’ multicultural, bohemian, health conscious characters and accessories. Witch Baby’s almost-mother Weezie Bat is dressed in “a short pink evening gown, pink Harlequin sunglasses and a white feathered headdress” (Dangerous 74), dancing with her true love, My Secret Agent Lover Man. Weetzie’s friends Coyote, Valentine Jah-Love and his wife, Ping Chong and their “Hershey’s-powdered-chocolate-mix-colored son, Raphael Chong Jah-Love” (Dangerous 74) are dancing with Weetzie’s real daughter, Cherokee Bat. The protagonists in this fairy tale-type story belong to a modern Los Angeles “almost-family”(Dangerous 73). They are eating “Vegetable Love-Rice... guacamole,... homemade pizza, fig and berry salad..., Surfer Surprise Protein Punch,... pink macaroni... cornmeal cakes... mushu plum crepes... and Jamaican plantain pie” (Dangerous 75) and the table is set with “Guatemalan fabric, roses in juice jars, [and] wax rose candles from Tijuana” (Dangerous 75).

The magic of this easy-going mix of people and places is a magic from an L.A. fairyland. L.A. is a land of magic, but of magic good and evil, dark and light. “What time are we upon and where do I belong?” Witch Baby asks a second time (Dangerous 83). Witch Baby goes on a quest through the dark, enchanted forest of Los Angeles: the street. Past “the Charlie Chaplin Theatre that had been shut down a long time ago and was covered with graffiti now” (Dangerous 81), past “the man with dirt-blackened feet and a cloak of rags on the sidewalk sniffing pancakes in the air” (Dangerous 81), “past the rows of markets that sold fruits and vegetables, almonds and raisins, olive oil and

honey” (Dangerous 81), she meets a psychic sage who tells her, “This is the time we’re upon” (Dangerous 83). He blinks three times, and hands Witch Baby a magic “lamp shaped like a globe of the world” (Dangerous 82). “At home in the globe,” (Dangerous 83) he says, is where Witch Baby belongs. When he touches the lamp, it changes.

Where there had been a painted sea, Witch Baby saw real water rippling. Where there had been painted continents, there were now forests, deserts and tiny, flickering cities. Witch Baby thought she heard a whisper of tears and moans, of gunshots and music. (Dangerous 83)

The magic and the poverty and the violence and the sadness and the beauty of the world still readers with a power equal to “once upon a time.” Los Angeles’ eclectic magic, its age-old pull of dark and light and its movie glamour magic are magnified through the lens of the fairy tale motif. The fairy tale helps to make Los Angeles a magical reality. The fairy magic of *Weetzie Bat* is wishes-come-true and happily-ever-after. The fairy magic of *Witch Baby*, however, is much darker. This ominous witch magic is like a blanket over the novel, the same way that darkness is ever-present in a fairy tale.

In the classic fairy tale, there is a constant sense of encroaching darkness. I have felt that I am part of that darkness, a knowing eye focused upon a lost Gretel or Beauty as she picks her way through an enchanted and dangerous forest. I feel a part of this enchanted forest, perhaps because I sense throughout me the enchantment of the tale. As a reader of *Witch Baby*, I am a magical omniscient eye, watching as Witch Baby imagines the way her widowed grandmother’s tears “would feel on her own face” (Dangerous 77), as she scowls at the missing children on her wall who “stared back...smiling, not knowing what was going to happen to them later” (Dangerous 79), as

her heart swells “like a giant bee sting” (Dangerous 90), as she fails to see “her eerie, fairy, genie, moon-witch beauty, the beauty of twilight and rainstorms” (Dangerous 93). The reader watches Witch Baby fill up like the globe with dark images of poison and murder and poverty and disease and grief as she persists upon her quest for love. We watch the way Witch Baby stores up the painful visions in her mind and on the walls in her room, the way her witch mother chooses to suffocate hers in smoke and sugar and forgetting, and Weetzie Bat focuses instead on “being good and sweet” (Dangerous 149), seeing the world “through pink lenses” (Dangerous 154). As in any fairy tale, darkness is an ever-looming shadow upon Witch Baby’s world.

In particular, Block’s *The Rose and the Beast: Fairy Tales Retold* shows us that the real world is not so very distant from the magical one in the fairy tales we read about as children. Block chooses to use “a universal story structure as a way to express deeply personal experiences” (Block, “Francesca”). Again, the darkness of the fairy tale has a grip on the real world as it did once upon a time. Block was looking to incorporate “the elements of love and terror that fill fairy tales [that] are so primal” (Block, “Francesca”). The majority of the protagonists in *The Rose and the Beast* are nameless; they are Everygirl. Actually, while characters in her other works have names, Block uses the archetypal, “He says,” or “She says,” to begin sentences in the fairy tale stories. In “Glass,” a reinvention of Cinderella, the female protagonist is every young girl; she is innocence. She is happy to stay home while her sisters enjoy a social life, because this way Cinderella is “free, still, like a child, the way it is before you are seen and then after that you can never remember who you are unless someone else shows it to you” (Rose 56). Cinderella’s innocent love is familial; it is doting on her sisters. “Always she would

tell them stories; they returned at night and sat before their mirrors, let her rub their feet with almond oil, soothe them with her words and in this way she felt loved” (Rose 59)... Until she meets that boy at the dance with “soft full lips...eyes like a woodland beast and a body of lithe muscle” (Rose 73). She “felt his hard chest and stomach and hipbones” (Rose 63) and the darkness of experience sets in. Cinderella’s sisters, who represent the sisterhood among all women, observe Cinderella dancing with the handsome guy at the ball, and they criticize.

They could see what was wrong with her. She wasn’t perfect, she wasn’t so beautiful. Her skin was blemished and her body was too thin, or not thin enough, and she wasn’t perfectly symmetrical and her hair was thin and brittle and why was he looking at her like that? (Rose 65).

The sisters gorge like ogres on Cinderella’s flaws. The jealousy, the hatred, breaks Cinderella’s spirit and ignites self-loathing. She is psychologically haunted by their wickedness.

she wasn’t any good shut up you bad bad girl ugly and you don’t deserve any of this and so the spell was broken and she ran home through a tangle of words where the letters jumbled and made no sense and meant nothing, and the words were ugly and she was not to be heard or seen, she was blemished and too fat, too thin, not smart, too smart, not good, not a storyteller, not a creator, not beautiful, not a woman not not not. All the things that girls feel they are not when they fear that if they become, if they are, they will no longer be loved by the sisters whose hearts they have not meant to break (Rose 66).

The traditional tale of jealousy becomes the modern teenage girl’s experience of envy and self-loathing. Block voices every girl’s desire for beauty and love and fear of rejection.

The nameless protagonist of “Ice,” a modern story in the frame of Has Christian

Anderson's *The Snow Queen*, also learns to perceive love as a threat. She loved so deeply "that it felt as if it had to be taken away from [her] at any moment" (Rose 203). And when the "porn goddess, ice sex, glistening and shiny" (Rose 216) girl "went straight for him" (Rose 216), it is almost a relief: "What I dreaded most in the whole world was going to happen and I wouldn't have to live with it anymore--the fear" (Rose 202).

The darkness of jealousy and the darkness of fear are real in the traditional fairy tale stories and in the modern world of Block's tales. In her fairy tales, Block reflects the real world's "dark, intense, emotional aspect" (Block, "Block Party"), and thus provides "that bit of 'inner truth'" (Yolen, 25) that makes the fairy tale relevant to young adults. The darkness is pitch in "Wolf," a story that sprouts from Little Red Riding Hood. The wolf is a metaphor for an evil, physically and sexually abusive stepfather. "Bones," based on Bluebeard, is the dark tale of a serial killer. In "Charm," a story based on Sleeping Beauty, evil takes the form of heroin and pornography. The protagonist, Rev "felt like the girl in the fairy tale. Maybe there had been some kind of curse. Inevitable that she would prick her arm (not her finger) with the needle" (Rose 73). Pop "gave her what she needed in a needle in exchange for the photos he took of her. And sometimes she slept with him. Sleeping Beauty, he said. I like you this way" (Rose 77). Evil is as rampant, insidious and overpowering in Los Angeles as it is in the fairy tale.

Her fairy tales retold, like traditional fairy tales, are "the kinds of tales that force a confrontation with the deepest kind of reality" (Yolen 54). Readers of Block confront evil in all its ugly modern forms. Block's protagonists struggle "courageously against what seem like overwhelming odds" (Bettelheim 8), and they "emerge victorious"

(Bettelheim 8). In each of Block's stories, the protagonists learn what Cinderella in "Glass" learns: "The shoes are for dancing, not for running away" (Rose 61).

Block demands that readers acknowledge the fairy tale darkness in our world as much as we do the true-love magic the fairy tales promise us. By weaving elements of fairy tale into her books, Block asks us to confront our own inner darkness. "Block believes that wrestling with sadness is an important part of childhood [...]. Block believes that sadness is as important a part of growing up as joy and wonder" (Templeton). Speaking just days after the September 11th terrorist attacks, Block says, "that everyday sadness, if anything, is even more precious to me now" (Block, qtd. in Templeton).

Casting the Spell—The Magical Power of Poetry:

Block writes in a style that puts poetic emphasis on a single word or a significant image. She says her writing process begins "with the poetry of the language" (Block, "Francesca"). Such a consciously simple or minimalist style further helps transform Los Angeles into a timeless land of good and evil. The same way a fairy tale may "say little and imply much" (Hearne, "Sleeping" 53), readers sense that in Block's writing, every word, every image counts--like true poetry. Betsy Hearne regrets that readers of Block's fairy tales "will not appreciate true fairy tales again until they are much older and realize how complex simplicity can be" ("Sleeping" 53). Truly, Block's writing is an excellent example of the magic power of simplicity.

From an early age, Block has been attracted to the power of poetics. "My special interest was poetry," she says, "which I continue to look to for its rhythms, powerful

concrete images, and succinct expression of emotion” (Gallo 17). Block recognizes simple sounds or images as powerful sources of enchantment and manipulates the interaction between images to free the magic of contradiction and excess. Thus, Block’s prose, as many of her critics have commented, is “more like poetry than prose” (Young).

© *Sound:*

“Sound has a very important role to play in the creation of magic spells. In a spoken form, a spell is simply a series of sounds” (Parker 48). With the power of a drum beat, a single chord, or a symphony, the rhythm and sound of words toy with readers’ emotions. The spell works on the imagination with the efficacy of a drug. The real world acquires a powerful aura of magic--ever after, perhaps. Like the winter blankets the world with snow, the magic realism Francesca Lia Block blankets the world with sound-magic. Softly swirling sounds transform a mundane reality into one that gleams with wonder.

“What time are we upon and where do I belong?” (*Dangerous* 73). So begins the lyrical, magical tale of self-searching and identity that is *Witch Baby*. So begins the bewitching of the “rhythm and melody of her words” (Young). From the first line of *Witch Baby*, Block sets the theme and draws attention to two primary sources of her magic realism: the fairy tale, but also sound. The bouncing iambic meter seems to accentuate the assonance in the line; the short “o” and “a” sounds recall the woeful moan of the story’s haunted earth. “Upon” and “belong” add the pleasure of rhyme to the thematically important line, as well. Rhyme transports readers to a world of intrinsic beauty. Rhyme enhances the feeling of fate in *Violet and Claire*. Violet and Claire go

together like a “shower” and a “flower”: “They stood there like that in a meteor *shower*, in a silvery wind, in a spell of *flowers*” (Violet 167).

Block’s manipulation of sound is addictive and contagious. From reading her works time and again, I feel that pay more attention to the sound of what I write as much as the content of my thoughts. I imagine that Block becomes entranced with the flow of her own words that come in an ebb and tide of stressed and unstressed, vowel and consonant, alliteration and rhyme. Block’s choice of words and sound is this--a lulling flow--and yet altogether conscious. She has worked her prose as a practiced poet. Her reader is swept up in rhythm, as in the flawless iamb of the time we are upon; but then, at times, the readers is jarred, brought back to reality as it were, by sudden awkward words or blunt syllables.

Most often an awkward word comes in the form of slang or swearing. In one line, for example, Block blends the slangy phrase “This weasel guy comes up and puts his arms around me” (Hanged 20) with the rhythmic, alliterative phrasing of the hug, “his fingers just brushing under my breasts where I am soaked with sweat” (Hanged 20). The poetics are in contrast to the real world’s mundane speech. Describing L.A., Block says, “the canyon stretches out like an umbilical cord to the belly of the city [...] where the girl got raped last week, some man prowling outside” (Hanged 7). The cacophony of “girl got raped” and the mundane phrasing of “some man” seems to clash with the unique simile comparing the suburb to the city. A blunt change in meter disrupts the reader’s comfort, too. Block sets up an anapestic or dactylic-kind of trippy tra-la-la-la beat here: “At the party in the canyon I was named for, everyone is sweating in the heat in the rooms with low ceilings, masks on the walls.” (Hanged 19). Then, the next line is a crash

of spondee: "The air smells like burned meat" (Hanged 19). The effect is a blend of euphony and cacophony, which reflects the ever present motifs of light and dark in her stories.

Block likes to break the spell her poetry has on her readers. Most notably in "Charm," Block is able to control a reader's emotion with her poetic expression. Her poetic flow reproduces the tranquility of a heroin high so that the bluntness of the cacophony, the reality, is especially stark against the poetic spell serenity. Like Block's Sleeping heroin Beauty, readers are drugged. She is "wearing her kimono with embroidered red roses, her hair in her face. Hipbones haunting through silk and flesh. You have opium eyes," (Rose 77) says the one who robs her of life. Helpless we feel under the spell of the rhythmic repetition of sound. Like 'hipbones haunting' and 'opium eyes,' strings of euphonic alliteration and assonance wrap readers in the hush of Beauty's heroin hopelessness. Most horrifically, and yet most calmingly, Rev is led "upstairs, past the sleek smoky people drinking punch out of an aquarium and into a room that was painted to look like a shell." (Rose 80-81). We are lulled by Block's soft sounds. Rev takes off her dress when she's told and is limp when Pop "arranged her limbs on a big white bed, tied and slapped her arm, tucked the needle into the largest, least bruised vein." (Rose 81). Notice the needle is "tucked" into her arm, like Rev is being tucked soundly into sleep. Then she is mounted by three men and photographed. She and the reader's own heart are strangely still. But this stillness is the eye of a storm:

Pop hovered around them snapping shots. Rev did not cry out. She lay still. She let the opium be her soul. It was better than having a soul. It did not cry out, it did not writhe with pain. (Rose 81)

In stark contrast to the repetitive gentle shushing sounds of an 's' or an 'h', is the next line: "Get off her, you fucks!" (Rose 81).

The combination itself of prose and poetry agrees with a genre that is a mix of fantasy and realism. If the poetry is magically bewitching, then the prose is the reality of western teenage expression. The poetry is a light-filled fantasy world; the prose is a dark underground reality.

Like an incantation, the euphonic rhythm, rhyme, alliteration and assonance open the mind to a dream-like world that is magic realism. Wendy B. Faris notes that readers of magical realist fiction "may experience a particular kind of verbal magic--a closing of the gap between words and the world" (176). The strange power of words that sound right tranquilizes, anaesthetizes, lulls the imagination into a receptive dream state.

An element related to sound that Block's young readers often comment on, is her attention to names. One fan asks potential readers to "ignore the silly titles" (Andrea), but others are "awed by characters with offbeat names" ("Cool Block"). Francesca Lia Block believes "names are really powerful, like the whole 'primitive belief in the power of the name,' as in, once you know someone's name you have this power over them" (Block, "Block Party"), "you have some understanding of who they are" (Block, All Things). The names she chooses for her characters are often sound-names, names that are chosen simply for the way they sound, like La (which does not work well in the French translation), Rev, Weetzie Bat, Tweetie, Peachy Pie.... Others are symbolic: Barbie, Rave, Witch Baby, Echo, My Secret Agent Lover Man.... Many of her titles are single-syllable words, like "Blue," "Rave," and all those within the *The Rose and the Beast*: "Tiny," "Snow," "Ice," "Wolf," "Glass" She most likely chooses such simple

names in the tradition of a fairy tale, to add to the archetypal nature of her writing.

In general, Block chooses names to catch readers' attention. The sound, the awkwardness, the history of a name speak volumes, if not necessarily about the character, then always about Block's consciously poetic style. The name communicates her intention to capture readers with her sound spell.

I just try to look everywhere for a name--unexpected places. Like "Weetzie"--when I was 16 years old I was driving on the freeway and I saw this pink Pinto and the license plate said "Weetzie."... "My Secret Agent Lover Man" came from one time when I was in the ladies' restroom at the Berkeley library and between the grout and the tile someone had written, "My Secret Agent Lover Man, you will never read this." And I thought that was brilliant... Sometimes names will come completely subconsciously. I'll be writing and I'll need a name for a character and it will just appear and then later on I notice it has all these subconscious meanings. Sometimes it will almost be embarrassing--too revealing--and I have to change it! (Block, "BlockParty")

Block mentions that she loved to read Rumer Godden's novels growing up. With names of protagonists like Kizzy Lovell, Tottie Plantaganet, Holly and Ivy, Miss Happiness and Miss Flower in Godden's books, perhaps this is where Block's love of names took root.

In any case, Block is certainly a fool for the symbol and sound of a name. Her readers imitate, naming their pets or friends after characters in her books, or giving themselves an online identity of a character or image they've picked up from the books themselves. I imagine that fairygoddess, caughtinbeauty, mouthfullofstars, darkhaloedangel, PunkPrincess, pixie-punk, secretagent, violetwitchbaby, and AngelinDisguise smile knowingly as they read the cascading plethora of names Block showers upon her first born child in *Guarding the Moon*: Miss Pink, Bubela, Milk Maiden, Bambina, Bebe, Sugar Plum Fairy, Teenie Wee, Babela, Bunny, Fuzzy Wuzzy, Love Dove, Pinky Pie, Kewpie, Cozy Rose, Dolly Dumpling, Girly-Swirl, Miss Mango Tango, Milky-Silky,

Sweet Pea, Pea-Wee, Beauty, Perlita, Twinkerbelle, Moon Baby, Sugar Plumpkin, Miss Creepy Crawler, Tweety Bird, Giggle Bean, Hug Bug, Charm School, and finally Jasmine Angelina.

© *Contradiction:*

As the name for the genre suggests, magic realism is further characterized by striking paradox-- "contradictions stand face to face, oxymorons march in locked step" (Zamora and Faris 1). Magic realism "aims to seize the paradox of the union of opposites" (Bahri). Block enchants reality with paradox. Some of Block's book titles alone--*The Rose and the Beast*, *I was a Teenage Fairy*, *Witch Baby*, *Dangerous Angels*-- suggest the manipulation of contradiction. Within the works, contradiction has the effect of a sudden thrust of oddity, or a noticeable surge of strangeness that draws attention to the otherworldly atmosphere of the work. Block's stories are frequently punctuated by contrasting images. Paradox describes the earth, a strange, mystifying land, intrinsically dark and light. Los Angeles is "hot and cool, glam and slam, rich and trashy, devils and angels" (*Dangerous* 15)--a setting perfectly magic and real. The Los Angeles setting of Block's stories is appropriate for her enchanted reality. The "paradoxical conception of the city as the site of controllable and uncontrollable energies" (Stewart 477) is a logical meeting place for two irreconcilable worlds. Melissa Stewart explains, "human beings create the city, yet they cannot completely control their creation. This paradox is also inherent in magic realism" (479).

As Francesca Lia Block writes her love-letter novels to Los Angeles, she draws from a reality of symbiotic tastes, religions, colours, ideals, landscapes.... Her magic

arises from an environment of contrast. Block's modern world is a place of "eerie, fairy, genie, moon-witch beauty" (Dangerous 93) and cities "toxic and intoxicating" (Teenage 124), with "meat-eating roses in a demony garden" (Dangerous 273), "bone china" (Hanged 48), "flaming cakes" (Hanged 28), oleander flowers that are "beautiful but also poisonous" (Violet 74), tears that taste like salt (Dangerous 77), and children who "weep and sing" (Fairy 186). The earth speaks to us in "a whisper [...] of gunshots and music" (Dangerous 83).

When a morbid Laurel describes her reality, she casts darkness over all the beauty of the world; reality becomes a strange, foreign place. The sun comes "dusting in like some kind of drug we want to put in our noses and mouths and veins" (Hanged 7). "The moon looks too big, swollen like a belly full of blood" (Hanged 11). She puts "plums and a slice of buttered, home-baked bread" on "the tray with the real butterflies pressed under glass" (Hanged 9), dead because they are beautiful. She sees "big flowers that looked like organs, like dripping hearts and lungs" (Hanged 35). "All the madness we believe in becoming madness. Delirium" (Hanged 116). There is a confusion-- what is beautiful is made ugly. What is ugly is made beautiful. Bruises are "blood roses" (Hanged 24) blooming under the skin. The woman in the street "throws back her head [...]. I see her neck in the street lamplight, straining. She takes something-- a needle-- and she shoots it into her neck. Her head falls forward, as if in slow motion, some dance, her dark hair falling forward around her face" (Hanged 114).

Block is quite obsessed with the contrast of dark and light in the world. The contrast of good and evil is itself a form of magic that serves Block well. Block sees the world as magic and real, "the same way you have the dark and the light in life" (Block

Party). Block's child characters understand, although their mother tries to tell them otherwise, that evil is and always has been part of life as much as good. They know better than their parents that there is no good to come of wishing summer would last forever.

There were bad men. Just like there were princes, elves and magic horns. They created weapons that could destroy the earth, they tore down the healing elf forests, they didn't take care of people who were sick and hungry" (Girl 13).

These child characters love their magical imaginings all the more because they know the contrast. They know they will outgrow their favourite bathing suit and have to play inside when winter comes. So, they hold their summer days in their "arms like a Beast prince, warm, enchanted, and real as any sadness" (Girl 13).

Alfred Hitchcock once said, "Good and evil need each other." The great theme threading through Block's works is the greatness of pleasure in contrast to pain, the depth of satisfaction because of the length of deprivation, "the need to acknowledge life's darkness in order to fully experience love-magic" (Guarding 51). This message is most clearly conveyed in *Witch Baby*. Cherokee and Witch Baby share a room.

Cherokee's side of the room was filled with feathers, crystals, butterfly wings, rocks, shells and dried flowers.... The walls on Witch Baby's side of the room were covered with newspaper clippings--nuclear accidents, violence, poverty and disease... They made Cherokee cry. (Dangerous 77-8)

What is a feather next to the darkness of death? Cherokee does not want to see evil, though she knows it exists. Witch Baby, on the other hand, must collect these articles; otherwise, "she knew she would lie awake, watching the darkness break up into grainy dots around her head like an enlarged newspaper photo" (Dangerous 77). The whole

world becomes dark if we do not isolate the evil incidents from the good. Block's juxtaposition of Cherokee's collection of earthly beauty and Witch Baby's collection of pain helps readers see that the world can be magic *because* it can also be so painfully real. "It's about darkness as well as light. If you don't acknowledge the one, you are thoroughly fucked. You will never know the other" (Violet 54).

Witch Baby becomes a symbol for confronting a dark reality.¹⁴ Witch Baby is also in stark contrast to Weetzie, who chooses instead to see the world "through pink lenses" (Dangerous 154). Witch Baby is a "black lamb baby witch" (Dangerous 150) whose function it is to "express everyone else's anger and pain." (Dangerous 149). The darkness Witch Baby shows us "can help us face things" (Dangerous 149) and "learn not to be afraid" (Dangerous 150). Like magic, the darkness is the path to the light.

Because Block believes so strongly in the need to acknowledge darkness, elements of magic, particularly in *Witch Baby*, *Missing Angel Juan*, *The Rose and the Beast*, and *The Hanged Man*, do not serve to brighten a dark reality, but rather to deepen the darkness of the real world. Magic is dark as well as light. Contrast, in particular, casts an evil spell over the world, making reality especially threatening.

Los Angeles' vibrancy and pop-culture, used as sources of magic in lighter stories like *Weetzie Bat*, become sources of danger and violence.

She went out in the city with its lights like a radioactive phosphorescence, wandered through galleries where the high-priced art on the walls was the same as the graffiti scrawled outside by taggers who were arrested or killed for it, went to parties in hotel rooms where white-skinned, lingerie-clad rock stars had been staying the night their husbands shot themselves in the head, listened to music in nightclubs where stunning boyish actors had OD'd on the pavement (Rose 76).

¹⁴ It's no coincidence that Block's teen readers identify most with this character. Witch Baby is the teenage rage in Block.

Each phrase within this passage marries beauty and horror. The contrast bewitches the world.

Life's intrinsic paradox is what makes love a dangerous angel, and Block is famous for recognizing it. Paradox is loving "him the way it feels when you get hot wax on the inside of your wrist and while it's burning, just as sudden, it's a cool thick skin" (Rose 202). Paradox is loving "him so much that it felt as if it had to be taken away" (Rose 203)-- a "beautiful fear" (Rose 202). Paradox is making love and feeling "his crushing shoulders... his bruising thighs." (Hanged 24). Paradox is the "best-looking" (Hanged 28) man with AIDS: "You can tell everyone must have loved him, been helplessly in love with him. And you can tell he's dying from something in his blood" (Hanged 29). Paradox is being raped by the father you love. Paradox is losing the father who raped you and died and left you to make the phone calls: "People are crying and saying O My God O My God and I have to comfort them [...]. I'm happy when I get an answering machine. Beep. My father died" (Hanged 9-10). Love is feeling "for somebody else" (Rose 218) and "pain to make you stop feeling" (Rose 218). "How could something like that be allowed to exist on this earth?" (Beauty 203).

Paradox economically portrays mysterious characters, too. Paradox is the magic behind Block's fairy godmother: "She was young and old. She was blind and could see everything. She spoke softly, in whispers, but her voice carried across the mountain ranges like sleeping giants" (Rose 59). Paradox is the tarot card reader: "She has one blind, blue eye that rolls upward. She blinded herself, people say, to see" (Hanged 44). Magical is the figure who can be what they are not.

Block uses contrast to make magical a reality we take for granted--one that is

culturally diverse, wild and tamed, alluringly dangerous, and dangerously alluring. Through contrast, Block reminds readers of the magic that has always existed in the natural world. "This was life.... It was excruciating. It was excruciatingly beautiful" (Violet 168).

☉ *Imagery:*

Fans of Block adore the magic of Block's reality. Nostalgia for the magic of the senses may be one source of attraction for her fans. I believe our senses as children are physically indulged in a way that they are not in adulthood. "As children, we need time to wander, to be outside, to nibble on icicles" (Nabhan and Trimble 75)--and, as children, we seek this time out. The world *is* new and the wonder fresh. The icicle is mysterious, so we taste it. The dandelion is peculiarly fluffy, so we touch it. The mud looks marvellously gooey, so we stick bare feet in it. Children are more in touch with the magic waiting for the senses.

Block assumes that the reason many teenagers experiment with drugs is this gradual loss of real world sensory indulgence. Teenagers use drugs to enhance the senses, instead of naturally indulging their faculties. "The young Hollywood scenesters" (Fairy 69) in Block's *I Was a Teenage Fairy* were "seeking out titillating new drugs to crack the jade casings that had formed around their senses" (Fairy 69-70). Block's writing brings these unseen tastes, smells, sounds, and feelings back to the seeing heart. "If the writer of fantasy has served him well enough, there will always be some talisman--a sight, a scent, a sound, a touch--which can take him back to this world where imagination and experience were so closely integrated--this perfect one world of

fantasy.” (Hunter 229). The senses are a primary source of enchantment for Block.

The senses are the golden key to the mystical door, the enchanted path to the end of the rainbow. Sheila Egoff believes “the writer of fantasy goes beyond realism to disclose that we do not live entirely in a world of the perceived senses, that we also inhabit an inner world of the mind and spirit where the creative imagination is permanently struggling to expand vision and perception” (19). Undisputedly, the mind and spirit are mixed up with vision and perception. In fact, magic to Block is a state of mind. However, Francesca Lia Block does not ask the mind to struggle to experience a magical world. She believes, rather, that “magic comes out of fully experiencing the sensory world” (Block “Francesca”). Fantasy in all its forms, and magical realism most literally, “awakens within us a new vision [...] of ordinary reality. We do not need new colours or a sixth sense, but to be able to really see the old colors and really use the old senses” (Waggoner 27).

The senses are a powerful tool in presenting the world in a magical light. Philosopher Gaston Bachelard says, “a whiff of perfume, or even the slightest odour can create an entire environment in the world of the imagination” (Bachelard 174). Block has the power to make colours take on the vibrancy of a psychedelic dream. “Now, the fairy tale philosopher is glad that the leaf is green precisely because it might have been scarlet. [...] Every colour has in it a bold quality as of choice: the red of garden roses is not only decisive but dramatic, like suddenly spilt blood” (Chesterton 59). This is the magic stuff of Block’s imagery; colours, tastes, smells are emotionally dramatic. Tolkien says “we should look at green again, and be startled anew (but not blinded) by blue and yellow and red” (53). Block is that new look.

Block shows us how to look upon the world with a fresh eye. Magical realist critic Jeanne Delabaere-Garant describes the effect as a heightening of reality, rather than an elimination of it (Delabaere-Garant, 261). Magic realist critics Simpkins and Faris call it a “de-familiarization” of the familiar (Simpkins 151; Faris 177). Recall the first line of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* “makes the very real, the very mundane word ‘ice’ become completely enthralling, enchanted, and magical.” (Block, Morning). Block looks at the mundane with fascination. Vivid imagery reawakens sleepy senses and refreshes the spirit. The enchanted American realism of Francesca Lia Block “restores our own world to us” (Waggoner 27).

What stands out most in an analysis of the magic of Block’s form of magic realism is her imagery: the magic of the senses and, in particular, the magic of synaesthesia. Most magically, Block uses synaesthesia to enchant reality. Pronounced like an ancient spell, synaesthesia transforms the world as we know it into one of dizzy sensuality. As well as being a stylistic convention, synaesthesia is an actual neurological condition--a unique wiring of the brain that produces a confusion of the senses. The term comes from the Greek *syn* (union) and *aisthesis* (sensation) and refers to “the condition [...] in which a stimulus received in one sensory modality gives rise to an experience in another” (International Synaesthesia Association). Synaesthetes experience a connection between taste and sight or sound and smell. In literary terms, “synaesthesia is imagery that involves the use of one sense to evoke another,” (English Works) as in a loud colour or a sour note or an icy stare.

“As the daughter of a film-maker turned painter,” explains Block, “I learned to see the world through my senses; when I was growing up everything was about color and

feeling, emotion and creative expression” (“Cool Block”). For Block, the senses are synonymous with magic. “Magic comes out of fully experiencing the sensory world” (Block, “Francesca”). Block fully immerses herself in the sensory world; her writing drips with sensory and synaesthetic magic: “air... so sweet with jasmine and honeysuckle it could have been golden or silver” (Violet 33), “a spell of flowers” (Violet 167), the fountain at Griffith Park, where the spray on your face can feel “like a spray of moonlight as much as water,” (Violet 114), the “hot-dry-clean” taste of desert air (Violet, 97), feeling “peace... like the loose glitter from Mab’s wings” (Teenage 104), taking off your shoes and walking “down among the hibiscus and ivy where it is wet and dark” (Hanged 32), spiked punch that tastes “cold but it makes you sweat” (Hanged 58), moving “together to the music in the red, yellow, and green heat that smells of vanilla-banana incense (Hanged 90), “Dancing palm trees. Choruses of stargazers” (Girl 177), “air [that] smells the way it looks reflected in the bay” (Girl 179)....

Says Block: “There’s this division between the magic and the real in our culture. But to me, they’re very connected. Life is really full of that magic” (Roston). Block’s imagery shows us the intensity of sound, taste, smell, sight and feeling that is available to us at all times. Real world magic is a part of our daily lives, kissing our skin, perfuming the air, dazzling the mind’s eye, sweetening our tongues, harmonizing the works of art of man and nature.

Block’s imagery reveals that love, in particular, is magic. “I believe that love is the ultimate magic wand and love’s spirituality can be found in a flower, the sky, a work of art, a baby” (Block, “Francesca”). Even household chores can produce delight almost sensual.

She loved to plant the beds with lilies and wisteria, camellias and gardenias, until her hands were caked with earth. To arrange the flowers in the vase like dancing sisters. To make the salmon in pomegranate sauce; the salads of spinach, red onion, pine nuts, oranges, and avocados; the golden vanilla cream custards; the breads and piecrusts that powdered her with flour. She loved, even, to dust the things, to feel them in her hands, imagining their history... (Rose 55).

Block begins almost all of her novels--and each of the *Weetzie Bat* books-- with a collage of sensory imagery that shares the “super-hip aesthetic” (Roback and Devereaux 480) of her Los Angeles muse. She uses imagery to infuse her world with an aura of magic from the start. *Violet and Claire* opens with imagery of the city that intensifies the senses and establishes an atmosphere of magical indulgence:

The helicopter circles whirring in a sky the color of laundered-to-the-perfect-shade jeans. Clouds like the wigs of starlets--fluffy platinum spun floss.... Pools flash like jewels in backyards where Sleeping Beauties in sunglasses float topless, waking to sip from goblets of exotica decorated with pineapples, cherries and hibiscus blossoms. On the roads that run between the hills are shiny cars, hard-candy-colored and filled with music. (Violet 3).

Senses pop within us like fireworks, dripping light, intensity, and beauty over the brilliantly magical reality we may otherwise fail to see. Readers are immediately swallowed into a magical world that is a perfect reflection of this one. Readers indulge in a swirl of sensory experience--a whirring, fluffy flash of tropical exotica with music. The senses spill out in rapid succession to create a feeling of intoxication. Yet we also recognize the real world of jeans, wigs, pools, traffic... What is real the senses make magic, and the magic is real.

Witch Baby also begins with a collage of imagery evoking a range of senses. *Witch Baby* begins “in the room full of musical instruments, watercolor paints, candles, sparkles, beads, books, basketballs, roses, incense, surfboards, china pixie heads, lanky

toy lizards and a rubber chicken” (*Dangerous* 73). An excess of items bombard like a visit to grandmother’s attic where all things strange and precious and magic are found. In fact, it was in this very cottage that Weetzie Bat found the magic lamp that started it all. Living in this cottage, Witch Baby makes her own magical discovery; she finds her place in the world: identity, belonging, and love.

Cherokee Bat and the Goat Guys also begins with a collage of sensory images, this time of “palm trees, hibiscus, bougainvillea [...] candles [...] flower children, paintings of Indian goddesses [...] Houdini’s magic mansion [...] stained-glass Marilyn Monroes [...]. leopard-spotted cars, gardens full of pink poison oleander [...] clouds and carousels [...] and antique windows” (*Dangerous* 161) that make up the canyons. *Baby Be-Bop* begins with a collage of senses that make up a childhood memory: “skin sticking to brown plastic, listening to the buzz of flies, smelling the honeysuckle through the faraway window, tasting the coating of graham cracker cookies and milk in his mouth, wanting to be racing through space” (*Dangerous* 379). This memory proves to Dirk that he has always known he was gay. His kindergarten nap times were spent thinking of naked men. While Dirk knew that there was something wrong with his thoughts, the imagery within the novel is positive; gay love is magic too.

As we know, Block’s thoughts gravitate to the dark as much as the light. Dark imagery is no less magical. The magic imagery in *Missing Angel Juan* is dark from the beginning. *Angel Juan* begins in

a funky green fog. It smells like hamburgers and jasmine. We don’t see anybody, not even a shadow behind a curtain in the tall houses. Like the fog swirled in through all the windows, down the halls, up the staircases, into the bedrooms and took everybody away. Then the fog beasts breathed clouds onto mirrors, checked out the bookshelves, sniffed at the refrigerator--whispering. We hear one

playing drums in a room in a tower (Dangerous 255).

The magical transformation of fog into mysterious beasts is enhanced by the awakening of the senses. Green fog. Opposing scents. Sniffing. Whispering. Listening to distant drum beat. The senses communicate the eerie magic stillness of the foggy setting.

Readers feel the intimacy of the characters, alone in the “green druggy fog” (Dangerous 256), and the senses tingle with an inkling of the sad exchange to come: Angel Juan will break Witch Baby’s heart with the sudden news, “I’m going to New York” (Dangerous 257). The magic is a dark bewitching kind that brings to life a sensory sadness. The sadness of Witch Baby looks like “flowers sticking out of the top [of a bag of groceries]. The flowers look like they are wondering what they are doing in this city like they flew here by mistake and... decided that ... bag was probably the best place to land” (Dangerous 281). And it looks like “men crumple-slumped in gutters like empty coats” (Dangerous 287). “Everything vicious and broken” (Dangerous 287). Witch Baby’s sadness tastes like “strawberry sky dusted with white winter powder-sugar sun. And nobody to munch on it with” (Dangerous 286). It smells like “garbage and Chinese food ... and cigarettes” (Dangerous 287) and sounds like “somebody whistling...silly but also sad, like whoever is whistling wants to stop but can’t or like a circus clown with a smile painted on” (Dangerous 281). Witch Baby’s sadness feels like “loneliness attacking all my cells like a disease” (Dangerous 291) and a “body slammed with sadness I see with no one there to put me back together in bed at night” (Dangerous 292).

The senses are used most originally when Block personifies the setting of *I Was a Teenage Fairy*. The San Fernando Valley takes on the sensory characteristics experienced by a teenager. The Valley is behaving like a teenybopper who

snaps big stretchy pink bubbles over her tongue and checks her lip gloss in the rear view mirror...plays the radio too loud and bites her nails, wondering if the glitter polish will poison her... She has a boy's phone number scrawled on her hand. Part of her wants to spit on it and rub it off, and part of her wishes it was written in huge numbers across her belly, his name in gang letters, like a tattoo. The citrus fruits bouncing off the sidewalk remind her of boys; the burning oil and chlorine, the gold light smoldering on the windy leaves. Boys are shooting baskets on the tarry playground and she thinks she can smell them on the air (Teenage 3-4)

The Valley is a girl with senses as ripe as the falling fruit and pitched to the sensual sensitivity of raging teen hormones. The reader's senses are alive too. The magic of that summer's day when you were 13 is back: you felt beautiful and free and bursting with passion for the pop song on the radio and for the idea that Robbie, or Alex, or Devon might at that very moment be thinking of you too. The sensory magic of that day is the Valley and the magic of the world. And sensory magic is the magic of love.

"Love is the ultimate magic wand" (Block, "Francesca") that makes reality a fantastical sensory experience. When Witch Baby and Angel Juan find one another as children, they are inseparable. Block creatively presents the experience of childhood puppy love through the senses:

They climbed up a jacaranda tree in the garden and sat in the branches until their hair was covered with purple blossoms; climbed down and slithered through the mud, pretending to be seeds. They sprayed each other with the hose, and the water caught sunlight so that they were rinsed in showers of liquid rainbows. In the house they ate banana and peanut butter sandwiches, put on music and pretended to surf on Witch Baby's bed under the newspaper clippings" (Dangerous 120).

As the children explore their bond, they share in sensory stimuli... particularly when they kiss. The kiss provokes in Witch Baby an image of a magical transformation: "Our

eyelashes brushed like they would weave together by themselves turning us into one wild thing" (Dangerous 257). Love makes the "heart play music like a magic bongo drum" (Dangerous 88).

Sexual exploration is the epitome of poetic sensory magic in Block's works. Real world sexual experiences are reflected through a collage of flashing images evoking taste, texture, sound, smell, and of course, emotion. When My Secret Agent Lover Man kisses Weetzie, it is

A kiss about apple pie a la mode with the vanilla creaminess melting in the pie heat. A kiss about chocolate, when you haven't eaten chocolate in a year. A kiss about palm trees speeding by, trailing pink clouds when you drive down the Strip sizzling with champagne. A kiss about spotlights fanning the sky and the swollen sea spilling like tears all over your legs. (Dangerous 29)

When Raphael kisses Cherokee, it is the awakening of their sexuality.

She could smell him--cocoa, a light basketball sweat. She could see his lips. All their lives, Cherokee and Raphael had given each other little kisses, but this kiss was like a wind from the desert, a wind that knocks over candles so that flowers catch fire, a wind, or like a sunset in the desert casting sphinx shadows on the sand, a sunset, or like a shivering in the spine of the earth. They collapsed, their hands sliding down each other's arms. Then they were reeling over and over among the feathers and dried flowers that covered Cherokee's floor.... each touch stung and sparkled. (Dangerous 194)

And when they have sex,

It was light-filled red waves breaking on a beach again and again--a salt stung fullness. It was being the waves and riding the waves. The bed lifted, the house and the lawn and the garden and the street and the night, one ocean rocking them, tossing them, an ocean of liquid coral roses. Afterward, Cherokee was washed ashore with her head on his chest. She could hear the echo of herself inside of him (Dangerous 199-200).

The collision of senses in sex inspired Block to write *Nymph*, a collection of short stories of adult erotica, in which the sexual imagery is as explicit as it is poetic. In her young adult books, sexual love-magic is common. She even uses sexual imagery metaphorically, as in her description of fireworks: "The sky filled with chrysanthemums and peacocks of fire like the sky was coming" (*Hanged* 43). I therefore suspect that Block shares Violet's comments: "I was born a sensuality addict; anything that stimulates my senses pleasurable is enough for me to do heroic deeds to obtain, and sex combined all senses at once when it was good." (*Violet* 57)

The quotes that support Block's use of imagery to make magic in the world also support a final source of enchantment for Block: excess. Zamora and Faris remark that there are no linguistic economies in magic realism. "Excess is a hallmark of the mode" (Zamora and Faris 1). Long lists of images combine so that each is a wave of sensuality, a wave of magic, one upon the other upon the other.... The reader is churned up, swept up, and spun about in a whirlpool of sights, sounds, tastes, smells until she is a drowned girl-mermaid swimming through a dream-world, drunk and dizzy from more sensory stimuli than she's used to.

Block's use of excess may be labelled *baroque* for its intensely imagistic poetry-prose, lavish strings of nouns and adjectives, and passionate, expansive energy. So dense is Block's imagery that one does, indeed, have the sense that Block and her characters have abhorrence for empty space, a particular qualification of the baroque style. Recall that Weetzie Bat's cottage, for example, is a clutter of colourful items from around the world, and Block's descriptive sentences are dense with striking imagery.

Each image is one of singular impact. From her artist parents, Block has learned the potency of a single image. Like her film-maker character Violet, Block seems driven to “pursue the perfect potent image at all times. And what else was filmmaking about if not a series of perfect and potent images strung together like the words of a poem?” (Violet 12). As it turns out, Block says, “the visual was really almost the religion in our house. [...] When I’m writing, it’s almost like I’m watching a film--I describe what I’m seeing in my mind. It’s all very visual and in colour as I’m writing it” (Block, “Block Party”). To brilliant effect, Block unites in a series the perfect, potent images flitting past her mind’s eye. Truly, “she is a master of the single detail” (Campbell, “People”), but in combination with one another, singular details produce an intoxicating collage. This is the magic of excess.

The single detail also has its turn in the spotlight, and is often humorous. Witch Baby cuts out pictures of destruction and disaster with “a pair of toenail scissors” (Dangerous 78). When she makes the serious decision to search the city for her birth mother, she packs “her bat-shaped backpack” (Dangerous 135). When the magic man gives her the magic globe lamp, “because she was so small, the lamp hid everything except for two hands with bitten fingernails and two skinny legs in black cowboy-boot roller skates” (Dangerous 83).

As Patti Campbell notes, Block’s imagery enables her to develop “character with great economy” (Campbell, “Pretty” 47). We know about Witch Baby, because she has “curling toes” (Dangerous 92) and “snarl-ball hair” (Dangerous 256), and plays drums “behind a cobweb curtain” (Dangerous 86). Likewise, we know Weetzie Bat’s character from her “pink Harlequin sunglasses, strawberry lipstick, earrings dangling charms, and

sugar-frosted eye shadow” (Dangerous 4); such details quickly convey the sweet character inside the package. Violet, like Weetzie, is cleverly summed up through taste and texture: Violet is “strong like muscle and sinew and sophisticated like silk velvet, liqueur.” (Violet 89).

The single detail and the sheer excess of imagery in Block’s writing become a most powerful source of the magic she sees in the world. Excess acts on the spirit with the intoxicating effect of sheer abundance. Block seems to feel that the more imagery she puts in her writing, the more enchanting it will be. And she’s right.

The same way Block’s Cinderella falls in love with the prince, we fall in love with Block’s magical view of reality. Block’s magic is the prince; Cinderella is the reader: “He planted in her a seed of white flowers with a dizzy scent; in the night garden the oranges hung like fat moonstruck jewels and the jasmine bloomed as she spun and spun” (Rose 64). We spin and spin.

The “Cool” Factor:

Alejo Carpentier describes “a profoundly baroque writer” (91) as one who is “an inventor of words, an enricher of [...] language” (91), and one who may “require *seventy-two* consecutive verbs” (96) to describe a scene. As we have seen, Block’s style shows an affection for a baroque-like conglomeration of imagery. But her affinity for the sound of a word and for L.A. pop culture also makes her ‘an inventor of words, an enricher of language.’ Block pokes fun at teenage lingo, as she incorporates inventive phrases like “lanky lizards,” “slinkster” and “clutch pig” into the prose of the *Weetzie Bat* books. Her

unique “L.A. slanguage” (Jones) must be an element in the illusive mix that makes Block one of the “Coolest People in L.A.”¹⁵ Witch Baby gets mad and calls her sister, Cherokee Bat “Cherokee Brat Bath Mat Bat” (Dangerous 89). Cherokee hears her boyfriend playing drums and says, “You are a slink-chunk, slam-dunk drummer, Raphael... You’ve turned into a love-drum, drum-love!” (Dangerous 90). Witchbabies can vote online for their “favourite thing Weetzie-Bat says”: “Honey-Honey,” “Lanky Lizards,” or “Slinkster Cool.” And many of the her fans have incorporated the lingo into their group posts, like when they discuss the “clutchy/nonclutchy characteristics” (Dezziemlm) of meat-eaters, or like gruntgoddess, who has to apologize for getting all clutchy, but her slinkster cat just died.

However, Block also incorporates actual teen-culture language, humour, and grrrl power, which certainly give her writing an edge of “cool.” Her hip language is combined with a bold grrrl move when a bully throws a sandwich at Violet and Claire: It “flew past just grazing her ear. It landed with a mayo-soaked slap on the pavement. There was only one thing to do--I picked it up and slammed it back where it came from” (Violet 12). The word “slammed” is mosh-pit cool, which, combined with the gutsy action helps to paint the character in an attractive fashion to other YA grrrls. And it’s funny. All three cool qualities--language, humour, grrrls being strong--combine again when Ashley, a rival for Barbie’s modeling career and boyfriend, makes an attack:

‘I hope you know I’m not going to be your runner-up anymore, girlfriend. You might have been cuter when we were little, but your tits never lived up to your namesake.’

‘Fuck off, bitch.’...

Ashley thrust her hands around in some kind of attempt at a gang gesture

¹⁵ Francesca Lia Block was declared one of L.A.’s 100 coolest people by now defunct Buzz Magazine. HarperCollins incorporates the fact into much of their advertising of Block, and proud fans post the quote on their personal web pages.

and walked away.” (Fairy 74)

Most of all, “an element in Block’s work that is often overlooked is the humour stemming from the collision of the fairy tale and the real world” (Campbell “People”). In fact, readers’ first introduction into the fairy tale aspect of Block’s writing is an amusing one. Weetzie Bat’s encounter with the genie is probably all the more humorous because it comes as a complete surprise to readers.

“Lanky lizards!” Weetzie exclaimed.

“Greetings,” said the man in an odd voice, a rich, dark purr.

“Oh, shit!” Weetzie said.

“I beg your pardon? Is that your wish?”

“No! Sorry, you just freaked me out.”

“I am the genie of the lamp, and I am here to grant you three wishes,” the man said.

Weetzie began to laugh, maybe a little hysterically.

“Really, I don’t see what is so amusing,” the genie sniffed.

“Never mind. Okay. I wish for world peace,” Weetzie said.

“I’m sorry,” the genie said. “I can’t grant that wish. It’s out of my league. Besides, one of your world leaders would screw it up immediately.”

“Okay,” Weetzie said. “Then I wish for an infinite number of wishes!” As a kid she had vowed to wish for wishes if she ever encountered a genie or a fairy or one of those things. Those people in fairy tales never thought of that.

“People in fairy tales wish for that all the time,” the genie said. “They aren’t stupid. It just isn’t in the records because I can’t grant that type of wish.” (Dangerous 18-19)

Weetzie makes her wishes and “the genie was gone in a puff of smelly smoke”

(Dangerous 19). As Weetzie wonders what was in that drink she had last night, readers wonder into what strange, realistic fairy world they have just wandered. “What a trip!”

(Dangerous 19).

Summary:

Francesca Lia Block sees a relationship in the world between reality and magic. She aspires to emphasize this connection in her writing. Block's personal sense of magic alters the manifestation of magic realist conventions. As we have seen, Block has developed her own interpretation of magic realism, inspired not only by the magic realism of Gabriel García Márquez, but also inspired by her own culture and upbringing steeped in fairy tale, modernist poetry, Hollywood ghosts, American pop sub-cultures, and visual art. Block also exhibits a refreshing sense of humour. Block chooses to believe in magic; her definition of real-world magic dictates a new interpretation of magic realism, whose spiritual heart seizes young adults confronting pain and existential questions. Young adults may even translate Block's magic realism as a new spirituality: a prescription for survival, if not happiness, self-respect, and love.

The following chapter describes the inspiration fans find in Block's texts and the unfortunate controversy that may keep Block's works from those who could benefit from her words. Then, Chapter 6 illustrates fans' gratitude to Block's creative coaching, as the chapter takes the form of a zine and examines why adolescents today may be attracted to magical realities.

CHAPTER V

The Controversy and the Inspiration: The Dark and Light of Block's Influence

In Chapter 4, I have explored the elements of Block's writing that have enabled her to cast a feeling of magic over the real world. Block evokes the fairy tale and draws on elements of poetry (including sound and imagery) and of magic realism (including contradiction and excess) to create her enchanted American reality. Chapter 4 has also introduced readers to the 'cool' side of Block, which may contribute to her popularity among young adult readers. In this chapter, I contribute further to an understanding of the appeal of Block's writing to young adults. Her young readers appreciate the influence Block has on their spirits and on their creativity. First however, I examine the criticism and controversy that may impede Block's influence on young adults and her growth in the young adult market.

The Controversy—Criticism... Or the reputation of a children's literature writer?

The majority of critics appreciate Block's lyric poetry prose... but not everyone. Some "find Block's relentless lyricism as irritating as a neighbor's wind chimes. [...] Her hipness--or as Weetzie likes to put it, 'slinkster cool'--can also grate" (Shulman). Patrick Jones feels that Block's "sentimental-tone prose poetry [...] distracts from her basic themes," (Jones) citing "rampant cleverness overload" (Jones) as the culprit. Defending

Block's honour, Patricia Campbell of *Horn Book* reminds Jones that "under this dazzling stylistic surface are stories that wrestle with the hard facts of pain and evil" (Campbell, "People"). Jones also contends that, "at times her books seem less novel and more travelogue for those wanting to find the hip and well-read--and well-fed, for there are many references to food" (Jones). Campbell, on the other hand, knows "of no other writer who has written so accurately about the reality of life in Los Angeles" ("People"). *Something About the Author* notes that it is the "very idiosyncratic nature of much of Block's work" that has drawn both praise and criticism:

Ramsay praised the quality of Block's work but wondered if she was not 'just a tad too Southern California cool for broad appeal.' ¹⁶ Campbell, in an overview of Block's work in *Horn Book*, argued, however, that 'many novels are set in New York, and [...] no one thinks those books are strange or labels them as depicting 'an alternate lifestyle' because the characters ride to work on the subway or shop at Bloomingdale's... Why should the second largest city in the United States be perceived so differently? It is doubly puzzling considering that America sees Los Angeles every night on television. (Peacock 24)

Block's portrayal of a multicultural Los Angeles also draws mixed reviews. Joshua Clover writes, "Block transforms into a Judy Blume for the era of identity politics. And worse, such a multiculti throwdown starts to feel like a demographic move; you can feel Block conjuring cool representatives of dispossessed groups like a programmatic card trick, as if to broaden her reader base." On the other hand, Chris Lynch thanks Block for the "pure, refreshingly unforced multiculturalism that produces characters like Angel Juan and Raphael Chong Jah-Love" (38).

Los Angeles to Block is an obsession. She has called the city her muse and takes

¹⁶ Ramsay, Ellen, *School Library Journal*.

obvious delight in personifying the city--over and over again--as a beautiful woman with attitude. Readers, however may find that repetitive imagery "over the top" ("*Violet*").

Likewise, Block has been accused of being too obsessive with her themes. Patrick Jones commented that Block's "prose poetry [...] distracts from her basic themes" (Jones).

However, the more Block writes, the more her themes become redundant. In the words of a fan, her work feels like "a general rehash these days" (Holly). "I don't really like her new book *Echo* tho," writes another fan. "it kinda seems she's repeating some of her themes... anybody else agree? or disagree..." (ihavemyowneyes).

I have to agree. Re-reading *Echo*, in preparation for writing this thesis, I found myself getting bored. There were the same themes and images again, this time all in one book: the dying father, the grieving child and mother, the search for true love, the references to sleeping beauty and gingerbread houses and glass slippers, the healing through self expression, the mermaid, the fairy, the anorexia, the Hollywood ghosts. All together, it seems forced, or in the words of Ilene Cooper, "some of the writing is pretentious" (412).

Shulman tires of Block's artistic heroines:

The characters are all glamorously beautiful, and she provides each of them with at least one, more often three or four, talents and creative pursuits. They dance, sing, sew, act, film, paint, write poetry, declaim it--they try their hands at every imaginable artistic endeavor (except writing young adult novels).

Shulman is also flippant about Block's repetitive theme of healing through love and art:

"fortunately, since this [*I Was a Teenage Fairy*] is a Block novel, the damaging past can be overcome and a more-or-less happily ever after arrived at: All it takes are love and

art.” Peter D. Sieruta is the most pessimistically critical of Block’s repetitive themes and images. Forecasting future trends in children’s book publishing, Sieruta predicts, in 2051, “Francesca Lia Block, the grande dame of young adult literature, publishes *Weetzie Battle-ax*, in which the whimsical characters live communally in a retirement home, take a variety of medications, and have parties. Critics complain it’s more of the same old stuff” (727).

Block has said, “I tend to be obsessed with certain themes and images but rather than fighting this, I allow myself to explore them fully. I believe this is what can give writing a charge and intensity” (Gallo 17). Fortunately, her devoted fans are obsessed too... although Elena Roston sees “a profusion of fans who can no longer stomach the Oki-dogs her characters subsist on.” When Block shifts the setting to New York, as she does in *Missing Angel Juan* and some of the stories in *Girl Goddess #9*, Richard Gehr is not alone in thinking that “the change of scenery is a smart and welcome change of pace.”

Controversial Categorization:

The primary area of criticism has to do with Block’s publication as a young adult. Paradoxically, Block is criticized (or penalized) both for writing youthful novels and for writing for a mature audience. Ironically, Block says being published for young adults came as a complete surprise to her. Since then, she has become both an example for the YA question and a spokesperson for the issues plaguing the label. The question that is debated now and again in libraries and school districts (and chat rooms) across America

is, for what age group should Francesca Lia Block's works be destined?

First of all, what's wrong with being a young adult author?

Rachel, a Block fan, posted an online plea to the Witchbaby group: "I'm trying to convince my teacher to let me do an author study on Francesca Lia Block, and as of yet, she's been persistent in her 'no' but, she said that if i could prove it is literary..."

Daphne, another Witchbaby member responds:

The problem with this is that Block really *doesn't* write literary fiction as it is popularly defined. She writes young-adult novels and erotica. No publications are going to give Block's work any serious critical attention, because the fact is that Block's intended audience will probably not be very interested in such considerations. That doesn't mean her work isn't enjoyable, but it is of questionable literary importance (Daphne, "hate").

How upsetting this statement is to advocates of young adult literature. And yet, how true in the eyes of the majority. Chris Lynch, a young adult author notes, "among the writers I know, there is a distinct feeling of, well, less than awe, at work produced for young adults" (37). A work of young adult literature is unfairly "looked at as the B-team of literature" (Lynch 37).

In an effort to explain why, Jack Gantos reasons, "Most adults haven't read YA fiction since they were young adults themselves. They haven't kept abreast of the growth in this area. A growth that is genuine" (Gantos, qtd. in Lynch 37). Yet, here we have from Daphne, in the words of an intelligent young adult familiar with young adult writing, the same condescending opinion of literature published for youths: "it is of

questionable literary importance.” Daphne has adopted the view of the majority, as she phrases it, the popular definition of literature (if “literature” can be defined at all).

She adds to the discussion when another Witchbaby member, Nimue Tara, notices some similarities (there are many, in fact) between Janet Fitch’s *White Oleander* and the works of Francesca Lia Block.¹⁷ “It reminded me of Our Authoress writing for a more grown-up audience” (Tara, “santa”), posts Nimue and asks the Witchbabies, “Was anyone else surprised when they learned that Mz Block says she tries to write for adults? granted, her books are mature, but one can very definitely see a target audience” (Tara, “santa”). Daphne answers,

Then I’d say Our Author (I can’t stand the term Authoress, really, much as I hate the term poetess--seems to imply a lessening of seriousness or skill) has a bit of growing up to do. Wonderful young adult novels they are, but they are as well the essence of teenage girlhood. I wonder what would happen if Block ever did write a book focusing on characters over the ripe age of twenty-five? I wonder if she could [...] She seems to have the archetypal Los Angelena fear of aging and physical imperfection. (Daphne, “wrestle”)

At once, Daphne defends and condemns the young adult writing of Block. She does not wish to lessen the “seriousness or skill” of Block’s writing, yet she also perceives the novels as substandard for being “young adult novels” and the essence of the teenage girl’s experience.

At the 1996 annual American Library Association conference, members, including Block, assembled to discuss “the immutable significance of the coming-of-age experience and the role it plays in literature for young people and adults” (McCormick

¹⁷ Both Fitch and Block use poetic prose and imagery, present a theme of the healing power of creative expression, and intertwine tales of child abuse with the Los Angeles landscape and lifestyle. It would be interesting to compare and contrast *White Oleander* with Block’s works to try to distinguish the elements that earned Block a YA publication, or those that earned Fitch publication as a writer for adults.

and Goldberg 55). Obviously, more such discussion is required before YA literature gains broad respect in mainstream thought. "Because it takes so much more than planting a teenager in a book to make it a YA" (Lynch 38).

A few months later, a new member of the Witchbaby group renews the Block-YA debate: "The one thing that frustrates me is that FLB is always in the young adult if not children section in my area. I wonder if that's the same everywhere" (Adrienne, "guess"). Daphne pounces again:

Maybe it's because she writes young adult fiction. She does not write literary fiction. she does not write in popular adult genres such as mystery or romance. she writes nice magical realistic novels and novellas about teenage girls that happen to be absolutely perfect for young teenagers who want a bit of fantasy with their angst. Hence, it is perfectly sensible that she should be placed in the YA category. I'm not sure why that should frustrate you. (Daphne, "adagio")

I believe it frustrates fans, because fans know it frustrates Their Author. Her label as a young adult writer has been an ongoing source of darkness for Francesca Lia Block since her first publication, *Weetzie Bat*.

I imagine Block curling her toes like Witch Baby as she recounts to an interviewer her reaction to the news that *Weetzie Bat* would not be published for adults her age. Block wrote *Weetzie Bat* as an undergrad and it was published in 1989, when Block was 28. "When I was published as a young adult," Block remembers, "I was a little surprised" (Block, "Block Party"). "I never planned to write for this audience and was published this way by chance" (Block, qtd. in Maughan). "I have been fortunate because I get to have a relationship with young people. [...] But then on the other hand, [...] I [encounter] a lot of people in their 20's, and they [are] saying, 'I never can find

your book!” (Block, “Block Party”) Block admits, “I do get frustrated by being placed in a young adult category at times” (Block, “gURL”).

Block’s primary issue with bearing the YA label is that publishers and book distributors qualify “young adult” as pre-teen and middle school readers. Writing her stories, Block has older teenagers and adults in mind. Why then has she been marketed to younger teens? Michael Cart has noted that it has been the buyers for “chain book stores in shopping malls” who have “defined YAs as eleven to fourteen years old, and publishers must follow; thus ‘fifteen-to-eighteen-year-old readers have become the endangered species.’” (Cart qtd in Campbell, “Rescuing”). Not good news for Block.

Chris Lynch sees Block as the perfect example of how wrong it is to group writing for mature young adults in the “Middle Reader section” (Lynch 38). It is to Block that Lynch wants to “awaken” (38) older teens that “go looking for adult books,” (38) to “the possibilities of contemporary fiction written specifically for them” (38). Lynch is passionate that “the teen experience is unlike any other, and it deserves its own literature. In fact, it’s got one” (38) he says. It’s got *Weetzie Bat* and *Witch Baby* and *Cherokee Bat and the Goat Guys*.... It’s got Block, and the readers who may appreciate it most, may not know about it. Writes Patty Campbell, “Currently there is only a small window of time--the years from eleven to sixteen--during which readers accept YA fiction without a disclaimer.” (Campbell, “Don’t Ask”). “What a pity for young people to disappear into humdrum adulthood without ever experiencing [...] the stylish surprise of Francesca Lia Block” (Campbell, “Rescuing”).

Block believes her older young adult audience is “wary” of exploring books in the “young adult section in bookstores [because it] is usually tucked away with the young

children's books" (Block, qtd. in Kloberdanz). Discussing the popularity of adult versus YA books with young adults, Matt Loy, a member of ALA's young adult literature listserv, makes a significant comment. "I don't think you ever stop loving YA literature. I just think you stop wanting to look like you love YA literature. It's a pride issue" (Loy qtd. in Campbell, "Don't Ask").

I think it is this pride issue, more than the reputation of YA literature or its location in children's areas of book stores and libraries, though they're interconnected, that is hurting Block's readership the most. Older young adults want to feel they have grown out of that kind of literature. From my own experience as an English tutor, any recommendation of a YA book to an older student requires a preface: "It's published as a book for young adults, but it's still one of the best books I've read...."

Reading comments about Block from adult fans, the recommendation to fellow adults, as Lynch and Campbell have expressed, needs qualification because of Block's YA label. In an adult fantasy chat group, one fan asks, "Has anyone read the Francesca Lia Block books? *Weetzie Bat*, *Witch Baby*, *Baby Bebo*, *Cherokee Bat and the Goat Guys*, *Missing Angel Juan*... They are the most wonderful things in the world. Ignore the silly titles. Ignore the fact that they are young adult books (well, I am assuming that most of you have reserves about YA books" (Andrea). Elizabeth Willey also asks her friends to brave a walk into the young adult section of the library: "*Weetzie Bat* and the sequels by Francesca Lia Block are in the YA section, but they're also considered urban fantasy" (Willey). Rachel Brown says, the *Weetzie Bat* books are "marketed for kids, but I think she has at least as many adult fans" (Brown qtd. in Sudberg). Fellow member Micole Sudberg answers, "Isn't she terrific?" But then there's always a Manda: "*Weetzie Bat* I

read last fall, and it confounded me. I loved it, but wouldn't admit it." (Choutka).

At the 1996 American Library Association's annual conference, Francesca Lia Block spoke about a need to distinguish "books appropriate for ages 12 and up (or middle school) from titles specifically published for older young adults toward Generation X" (McCormick and Goldberg 55). Said Block,

"Society is beginning to understand that childhood and adulthood are not really as separate as people think they are. [...] Childhood is filled with darkness, the need for love, the search for acceptance." She asked, "Why can't we create a category which all the barriers will cross? This is the intention in bookstores and libraries: books that appeal to young and old, gay and straight, openminded, and representative of different racial backgrounds. Maybe we can begin here to use literature as a way to connect rather than to divide." (Block, qtd. in McCormick and Goldberg 55).

Block seems an appropriate spokesperson for such a change, since many critics agree that her books transcend the young adult audience. There is no believe-it-or-not tone in their recommendations. "Don't be fooled by how her books are usually filed in the Young Adult section--" writes Charles De Lint of *Fantasy and Science Fiction*, "like the best fairy tales and myths, her stories are timeless and are as suitable for an adult as a teenager" (De Lint, "Baby"). In fact, Block's short story "Blue," from *Girl Goddess #9* ranks as one of his three "favorite stories, period" (De Lint, "Girl"). "Block has a true gift for capturing the contemporary moment and making it appear timeless" (De Lint, "Girl").

Timelessness is one of the qualities of Block's work that persuades Chris Lynch to use Block to help "everyone [realize] what a powerful, meaningful world is there in YA literature" (Lynch 38). Timelessness is the quality that her publisher Charlotte Zolotow uses to market to adults: Block's voice is "part YA novel, part timeless [...]"

storytelling.” Timelessness is what prompts Ilene Cooper of *Booklist* to comment, “Block’s story is more glittery fable than YA fiction” (412). “Block writes for the young adult in all of us, without flinching or condensation” (Gehr). Patty Campbell maintains that “Francesca Lia Block [...], as the definitive Gen X writer for young adults, has always been cross-catalogued” (Campbell, “Rescuing”) and quotes her editor, Joanna Cotler: “I thought she was for everyone from the first” (Cotler qtd. in Campbell, “Rescuing”).

No slave to the dark side, Block says she regrets having “spent a lot of time worrying about [her] books being in the YA category” and has “decided to let someone else take on that cause” (Maughan). Yet, since she made this statement in 2000, Block has continued to fuss. She has successfully published two adult books: *Guarding the Moon: A Mother’s First Year*, a memoir, and *Nymph*, a collection of tales of erotica, which, of course, her young fans have devoured. Subtract the explicit content, and these stories match her other tales.

Block’s most recent publication, *Wasteland*, may have been another effort to publish for an older audience. In a *School Library Journal* review of *Wasteland*, Catherine Ensley thinks “Block might reach a larger audience with this book; it does not stray too far from her characteristic terrain, but is set in a more realistic neighborhood than her otherworldly Shangri-L.A” (1172). In *Wasteland*, Block avoids references to fairy or folk tales. In fact, she avoids the supernatural altogether, relying solely on elements of poetry for a magical effect. How unfortunate if her drive to publish for an older, mainstream audience comes at the expense of her original magical reality.

The packaging of Block’s *Weetzie Bat* books has worked against her desire to

cross categorical boundaries. In regards to the 1991 publication of *Witch Baby* and the 1992 publication of *Cherokee Bat and the Goat Guys*, Shirley Fethernolf of *Book Report* comments, "Because of the unattractive cover [of *Witch Baby*], most students wouldn't pick up this book without a booktalk" (42) and therefore ranks the purchase of the novels as "optional" (42). The collection of *Weetzie* books were compiled in the 1998 publication of *Dangerous Angels* "with more mature-looking cover art and a higher price" (Kloberdanz) as part of "a push to expose her books to a broader audience" (Kloberdanz). Says Patty Campbell, "Cover art that transcends age interests is crucial to expanding the appeal of YA fiction." (Campbell, "Rescuing"). A new trend in marketing for "YA novels and picture books with crossover potential" (Britton 18), postcards, was recently employed to advertise Block's *Echo*. "'We did a college/ university buy with Go Card for the hardcover publication of *Echo* [...], reaching 220 locations,' reported Daisy Kline, director of retail marketing at HarperCollins" (Britton 18).

But the issue comes back to haunt Block time and again. A cocktail party can try Block's nerves. She explains, "There are times when, if I tell someone I write young adult books, their face just goes blank. They'll say, when you write a book for grown-ups, let me know" (Block, qtd. in Hotaling). Susan Stamberg does not hide her surprise that Block's "favourite read" is *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, by Gabriel García Márquez:

Stamberg: I have to say I was surprised when I learned that Márquez was your choice...
 Block: Uh huh.
 Stamberg: ...as a favourite author.
 Block: Was that because of the length and breadth of the epic of this, 'cause that would be what my first question might be.

Stamberg: Yes. And also your subject matter. Punk, pink kid, riding around in cars, diggin' the L.A. scene.

Block graciously explains that her writing takes inspiration from the magic realism of García Márquez: "obviously, his magic is a whole universe of other things, but there is that relationship" (Block, *Morning*). Block's sarcasm shows her frustration when she questions, "Should I go on my little soapbox and tell [adults] how these [YA] books actually cross over?" (Block, qtd. in Hotaling).

In *Guarding the Moon*, Block describes the changes that come with motherhood. Yet she uses the autobiographical mode to vent and broadcast her frustration over her YA reputation once again.

I've been called oversensitive and lately, though I don't have time to get upset as often, it seems to cut deeper. When the interviewer asks me if I'm ever going to write a real book, I get off the phone and burst into tears in my husband's arms. I don't know if I imagined the interviewer's anti-Semitism or not, but I didn't imagine the chilling hostility." (*Guarding* 160-161)¹⁸

Of course, the location of a book on the shelf does not determine its quality or worth. The interviewer's disrespect, insensitivity, and ignorance are enough to make anyone crave a roll around in the mud.

As a young adult author, Block does not always receive the respect most of her

¹⁸ This is the only comment that would suggest that Block is Jewish. Block does not describe what in the interviewer's comments made her think he or she was anti-Semitic. At this point in Block's life she is feeling drained from the responsibility of rearing her newborn. She adds to her load the thought of having to protect her child from anti-Semitism. Block is openly haunted by dark images--cancer, AIDS, her child being born with horrible disfigurements, and the Holocaust. She uses imagery of the Holocaust or the swastika as symbols for hatred throughout her publications, as anyone might. *Baby Be Bop*, about the hatred Dirk faces as a gay man, incorporates more of this imagery than Block's other publications. Dirk shouts at a girl wearing swastika earrings, disgusted that the swastika has become a punk fashion statement. When Dirk is beaten by skinheads for being gay, he associates the feeling of passing out with being gassed in a concentration camp.

critics have said she deserves. But the question remains and is debated now and again in libraries and school districts across America: for what age group should Block's works be destined? A discussion of Block's controversial content follows.

Controversial Content:

Ironically, if Block is not being accused of writing petty kids books, then she is being accused of writing books with content too mature for young readers. *The Hanged Man*, for example, "though well written, [...] certainly is for only the most mature of the young-adult audience" ("*Hanged*"), and "some adults may flinch at the frank portrayal of [the protagonist] Laurel, but there can be no doubt about the book's literary merit" (Makowski 30). Polly Shulman says,

Francesca Lia Block writes young adult novels so far out of the mainstream that I wouldn't be surprised to learn that the Association of Suburban PTAs had banned them from information centers across America. Her youthful heroines and heroes rarely spend much time in school, and they're too busy singing in rock bands, surfing, having babies out of wedlock, communing with ghosts, taking photographs, driving around Los Angeles in vintage convertibles and living happily ever after to bother with homework.

In fact, Block has been targeted by censors. *Hit List 2* reports that Block's *Baby Be-Bop* was "removed from the mandatory reading program at the Norman L. Sullivan Middle School in Bonsall (Calif.) in 2000 due to sexually explicit language" (Lesesne, Chance, and Crutcher 10). *Baby Be-Bop* was also

removed from Barron Wis. School District in 1998 because of the book's use of

vulgar language and sexually explicit passages. The ACLU of Wisconsin filed suit against the school district on Feb. 16, 1999. The books were then returned to the library while a federal court considered the lawsuit. On Oct. 8, 1999, it was agreed that the novel would remain available to students as part of the school district's settlement of the federal lawsuit. (Lesesne, Chance, and Crutcher 10)

One high school teacher admits, "Her books are wonderful to read, but I wouldn't teach them in high school" (Reid and Hutchinson). Librarian Rebecca Platzner wonders, "For what age do you think these books are appropriate? ... Thirty two... Twenty five... We think of these books as 'a find,' and imagine a time when we will be in a position to pass them on the just-the-right kids. For now, though, we'll share them with our friends." *Horn Book* critic Patrick Jones argues, "She's not dangerous to her readers, but she scares those who evaluate and buy young adult materials." The reason, believes Jones, is not because her books contain the usual controversial topics of "sex, violence, or foul language--but rather the alternative lifestyles of Block's characters." Jones says "tone and language; matter-of-fact attitude; the lack of adults and conventional families; and the overriding concern about becoming a good person in a world filled with death and disaster" will limit Block's readership.

Reviewers do express concern for the content (or lack of "proper" content) in Block's works, which may affect the availability of Block's titles in school and public libraries. Mary R. Oran in her review of *Baby Be-Bop* writes, "I am concerned that there is no mention of AIDS,"¹⁹ (33) and frowns upon Dirk's use of fake IDs. Oran concludes,

¹⁹ In fact, Block is very conscious of the risk of AIDS and refers to it in almost every publication. In *Baby Be-Bop*, Block eludes to AIDS: Duck's boyfriend Bam-Bam will not make love to him and ultimately leaves Duck, explaining in a note, "You will find your true angel. I am a dangerous one" (*Dangerous* 472). Since *Baby Be-Bop* is a prequel, readers associate Bam Bam with the close friend Duck loses to AIDS in *Weetzie Bat*.

“Librarians should consider these reservations in determining purchase of this well-written and ultimately unforgettable book” (33). Oran does not consider that AIDS and homosexuality are mutually exclusive.²⁰

Mary Hofmann, a middle school library media teacher worries about having to defend a title in her selection. She says she wants to provide her students with literature that can “challenge without being challenged” (Hofmann 44). She says, “I inherited a few titles by Francesca Lia Block and, though I really don’t care for her writing style and purposefully weird characters, I bow to the common wisdom of librarians and reviewers who love her. So her books stay, albeit uneasily” (Hofmann 45). Another reviewer remembers “arguing with a graduate student about Francesca Lia Block’s *Weetzie Bat* [...] It was clear that the book shocked and even upset her, but her rationale for why she would not purchase the title for a young-adult library collection was that it ‘was not well-written’” (Sutton 261).

If the books are purchased for library loan, they still may not find a readership. Ann Fisher, a member of a library and censorship groups writes, “We noticed barcodes torn from books left lying on the shelves last year--since we had the barcodes, we could check which books were gone: Allen Ginsberg, Francesca Lia Block, Oscar Wilde--we began to see a pattern.”

Since she must wear the label of YA writer, it is true that “Block continues to push at the limitations of ‘appropriate’ content [...]: she portrays transsexual, gay, and lesbian characters; she includes young people who drink alcohol and use/abuse drugs; and she describes sex explicitly and symbolically to convey both passion and emotional

²⁰ In *Witch Baby*, Block draws attention to the stereotype of the HIV positive homosexual. When Duck tells his parents he is gay, his father laughs: “Better take a life insurance policy out on you!” (111).

sterility” (Mercier 742). Of course Block knows she is “not dangerous to her readers” (Jones). To the contrary, she recalls, “I have received letters from lovers who read my stories to each other in bed, people who have named themselves, their pets, or bands after my characters, gay kids who tell me my books let them know ‘it’s okay to be gay,’ and wounded kids thanking me for helping them feel empowered” (Block, “Francesca”). “Despite the rave reviews, fears about the alternative lifestyles in Block’s books have kept them out of many school and public libraries” (Jones).

The Inspiration: Thank Goddess for Block Magic

Understanding Magic as a Reality for Block Fans:

Sometimes a flower is not a flower. Sometimes it’s more. The colour is too wilful, or the stem is curved in such a way that I think it’s inspecting me instead. Sometimes the trees are not simply trees. As I lie in bed, on a breezy morning, I watch their spindly tips pour tea for one another, discuss with hilarious animation the latest tree-top gossip, and shake with fits of insatiable laughter. On thoroughly windy days, the conversation becomes heated, and they wrestle with the same passion as, in gentler days, they joined hands and waltzed. Sometimes the mountains seem bolder than before. They shift from their backdrop repose and haunt with deafening stillness the distracted city below. I see Sasquatches lumbering. I sense tree spirits watching. An age-old mist in my mind blankets time. The earth whispers a history of enchantment.

Sometimes, with a shocking leap of the heart, I know the world is magic--that

things are more than they appear most times to be. Sometimes, with a selfless urge, I feel like laying low in the back of the garden, under a cedar bough, or sprawling flat in the depths of a flower bed to breathe in perfect, clean earthly smells, listen for worms, and watch--for what I'm not sure. But something. Something that I miss when I'm hurrying through. Something that I may have lost. Something that my heart's pulse tries to communicate to my mind in an ancient Morse code. I hope so, at least, for I feel more than that I belong.

Charles Kingsley, touted by Sheila Egoff as one of the first writers of *enchanted* realism for children (Egoff 45), remarked, "All day, glimpses from the other world--floating notes from that inner transcendental life, have been flitting across me, just as they used to in childhood, when the seen and the unseen were one" (Kingsley, qtd. in Egoff 45). The seen and the unseen are one in the world of Violet and Claire, Weetzie Bat and Witch Baby, and Girl Goddesses everywhere. Block's brand of magic realism sets wild and free the unseen magic we always knew surrounded us when we were young. In her essay "One World," Molly Hunter swears, "many people must [...] have recall of one [...] experience common in childhood--the feeling that around any corner one might catch a sudden glimpse of something strange and wonderful. I remember vividly how I longed for this something with an oddly poignant yearning" (214). Why should this life-affirming sensibility stay locked away in the days of mud pies, bare feet, and bedtime stories?

Things change. We have to grow up. For the majority of Block's readers, this realization--that they must leave childhood forever--may come around the same time as they read *Violet and Claire*. Violet realizes that, "one moment [girls are] these tough

little things racing around, jabbering, excited about just waking up to see what else is new in the world. [...] And then suddenly,” (Violet 32) they’re self-loathing creatures of despair. “It came right around when I had my first period,” (Violet 33) says Violet. Block, herself, in her auto-biographical *Guarding the Moon* remembers

the pain of fathers who stop seeing you when you reach adolescence, of boys drawing cruel pictures, the pain that led me to drink myself into reeling blackness, get into careening cars, sleep with men who didn’t love me, starve myself, imagine ways to cut myself open, trying to let out the hurt in my blood.
(87)

A dose of childhood magic seems to be just what Francesca Lia Block’s suffering young fans need, magic not so much as an escape, but magic as a positive and constructive belief system.

G. K. Chesterton finds no book so sensible as the fairy tale, for fairy tales remind him that the world is a magical place. Block’s stories remind readers that the world is a magical place, too. In our consumerist, fast-paced, war-threatened, tragic world we see the beauty and the possibility. Upon reading her books, adoring fans seem to make a conscious effort to view and experience the magic of their realities. “In essence,” writes one fan, “she taught me to live again, a life full of dreams when I’m awake. I learned to live with that child-like faith again, in that child-like place, where anything can happen and everything does, and everything is beautiful, if jaded” (screamingglory). Fans are thankful that “she makes magic in the world. There isn’t enough magic in the world” (Groppi).

Block was influenced by Randall Jarrell’s *The Animal Family*, a bed-time story her father read to her time and again about an unlikely family of a hunter, a bear, a lynx,

and a boy and a mermaid. The preface of *The Animal Family* reads, "Say what you like, but such things do happen--not often, but they do happen." And such magical things as wishes come true, fairies hanging out in flowers, and "skating hamburgers" (Dangerous 30) do happen in Block's fantastic reality.

Critics of magic realism have claimed that "mystery does not descend to the represented world, but rather hides and palpitates behind it" (Roh 16). In Block's America there is a sense that something magical is palpitating behind reality. The jacaranda trees do not just bloom in Block's world; they "flowered purple in sudden overnight bursts of exuberance as if startled at their own capacity for gorgeousness" (Rose 74). The plants have a magical awareness or self-consciousness about them. Similarly, Jane Yolen sees fairyland magic as "the soul beneath the skin" (50) of the real world. In Block's world, it seems like magic is the soul of reality. In an earthquake, Rev catches a glimpse of the soul of her city; the earth is personified.

When the earth quaked, the walls of Rev's house cracked; all the glasses and teacups in her cabinet careened out, covering the floor in a sharp carpet that cut her feet as she ran outside. Chimneys and windows wailed. Rev was amazed at how, with the power all out, she could see the stars above her, clearly, for the first time since she was a child on a camping trip in the desert. They were like the glass fragments on the floor.... Her feet were bleeding into the damp lawn. This is my city, Rev thought. Cursed, like I am cursed. Sleeping, like I sleep. Tear-flooded and fever-scorched, quaking and bloodied with nightmares. (Rose 75)

Block's enchanted realism gives back to the world its magical life-force, an energy that is often taken for granted, especially in the city.

Block's Los Angeles is personified often. "Los Angeles is a woman reclining billboard model with collagen-puffed lips and silicone-inflated breasts, a woman in a

magenta convertible with heart-shaped sunglasses and cotton candy hair” (*Fairy* 3). The city’s pools are “like the canyon’s eyes and the waves of palm, eucalyptus and oleander like the canyon’s swirly green hair.” (*Dangerous* 267) And the city talks. “In the day she growls with traffic, but real early or late at night she sings with mockingbirds and you can hear her wind-chime jewelry” (*Dangerous* 267). One of Block’s fans uses the concept of a magical energy behind the surface of the real world to describe the magic of Los Angeles: “the city [Block is] showing isn’t quite the real city, it’s the one just under the surface, the one people fall in love with. Reality hasn’t always got a lock on truth, after all” (Groppi).

Neil Philip has described magic realism as an invitation to “slip, as it were, behind reality” (151). In Block’s novels, as depicted in the examples above, characters do not physically slip behind reality, nor is the magic of reality particularly *hidden*. Rather, the magic of the real world is often a state of mind. Block, her characters, and her readers sense that they may choose to see the magic of their reality. Sometimes, we sense in the real world the vibrations of a magical, palpitating soul. They interrupt a negative thought and pause our hurried pace. We catch a glimpse of the magic that is always there, hidden only by doubts that increase with age. In a rush, that childhood feeling floods our senses, and we feel “that around any corner one might catch a sudden glimpse of something strange and wonderful” (Hunter 214). We glimpse a mystery, an added depth, a life-pulse that quickens our own. In Francesca Lia Block’s enchanted American realism, this magic is allowed free reign, even in the busiest of American cities.

Reality itself is presented in a magical light. Weetzie Bat, for example, “hated high school ... because no one understood. They didn’t even realize where they were

living.” (Dangerous 3) What Weetzie saw that her classmates did not was that reality was magic. The reality of her Los Angeles was fantastic:

Marilyn’s prints were practically in their backyard at Graumann’s; ... you could buy tomahawks and plastic palm tree wallets at Farmer’s Market, and the wildest, cheapest cheese and bean and hot dog and pastrami burritos at Oki Dogs;... the waitresses wore skates at the Jetson-style Tiny Naylor’s;...there was a fountain that turned tropical soda-pop colors, and a canyon where Jim Morrison and Houdini used to live, and all night potato knishes at Canter’s, and not too far away was Venice, with columns, and canals, even, like the real Venice but maybe cooler because of the surfers. (Dangerous 3)

In the words of the fans themselves, Block’s writing

something more than clever prose, and it’s something more than skilful plotting or witty dialogue. It’s the sense of wonder, the sense of magic, the ability to make me see the same old world in a whole new way. Suffusing everyday worlds with a brighter light. (Groppi)

In J. M. Barrie’s famous fantasy, *Peter Pan*, Wendy comments that one loses the ability to see the real world past the age of ten. The real world is magic when we are young and fades as we mature. We have believed in fairies that collect teeth, leprechauns that live under toadstools... Block writes about children who go “searching for elf homes” when they visit the park:

Elves liked the darkest, dampest, most overgrown places... Tweetie thought she could see elves leaping from leaf to flower. You couldn’t see them straight on, but you could glimpse them from the side. They had tilted eyes and sharp little teeth... They got drunk on flower nectar and fell asleep in the dirt, so you had to be careful not to squish one. If you made too much noise they scratched you with their long fingernails and put sand in your panties. (Girl 10)

The imaginative truths we invented when we are young are returned to us. Francesca Lia Block keeps the magic we once knew so well in the forefront of her reader's consciousness. Block's Dirk says, I saw "fairies [...] in the countryside when I was a boy. My father--he was a naturalist too--pointed them out to me as if they were just another form of insect so I never understood why people thought they were made up" (Dangerous 441). Tuck, another of Block's characters, says, "There are bears, deer and birds. There are also winged horses, a unicorn, a mermaid and a dragon. I believe in those just as much as the others. Because even if nature didn't make them, they exist" (Girl 42). Block's Mab, the fairy queen who counsels young victims of sexual abuse, explains,

"It's all about belief... They create a mind-set where I, for instance, am unbelievable. And they make you believe in 'they.' What is 'they' anyway? 'They' is a conceit they have created. There really is no 'they,' at least not a 'they' that has any authority. I am much more real than their 'they.'"
(Teenage 176-7)

Indeed, the world becomes a place of magic as readers' belief in their childhood imaginings is refreshed. Says one fan, Block's writing awakened my "fantastical outlook on life that was hiding just a layer beneath my surface" (iridescent_dreamer). When the modern world is a fantastical place, you can wish for love not only on "first stars and shooting stars" (Dangerous 117). You can

wish on everything. Pink cars are good, especially old ones... Planes will do if they are the first light in the sky and look like stars. Wish in tunnels, holding your breath and lifting your feet off the ground. Birthday candles. Baby teeth.
(Dangerous 117)

Everything is a source of magic and possibility and love.

Such a fantastical outlook on life may be all one needs to be “no longer afraid of anything” (*Teenage* 178). At the time Francesca Lia Block wrote *Weetzie Bat*, her first magic realist novel, she was homesick, anorexic, and dealing with her father’s terminal illness. Writing *Weetzie Bat* was a reprieve from her depression. *Weetzie Bat* is about “love-magic” (*Guarding* 51) and the magic of the city in which she lived. Unconsciously, magic realism was Block’s way to improve a world out of her control, and for her readers, it does the same. The next time readers meet a kindred spirit, enjoy chocolate the way you would when “you haven’t eaten chocolate in a year” (*Dangerous* 29), or make a wish that comes true, they must remember Block’s stories and feel full with the knowledge of the magic in the world. Block’s personal interpretation of magic realism blurs, or erases altogether, one’s conception of a reality separate from fantasy--maybe forever. Real world mystery is welcomed and magic acknowledged. Daydream is vision and imagination, truth.

The Inspiration of Magic Realism:

Seeing the world as a magical place of wonder and enchantment gives meaning to existence. True, some say fantasy of any kind is escapist. Simpkins says magic realism offers “a means to overcome the insufficiencies of realism” (153), and Gaston Bachelard refers to imaginative images as a “virtual drug” (158) which “possesses very pure efficacy” (158). When reality is painful, readers may seek to escape that pain in literature of any kind. Fantasy, however, is a genre that may change one’s interpretation of reality.

Fantasy, therefore, may serve not only as an escape from reality, but also as a remedy for sadness, a 'recovery' from reality, to use Tolkien's word: "Recovery (which includes return and renewal of health) is a re-gaining of a clear view [...] 'seeing things as we are (or were) meant to see them'-- as things apart from ourselves" (53). It's like cleaning your windows, explains Tolkien. Sheila Egoff believes the primary purpose of fantasy may be "to cast new light on some aspect of reality so that these perceptions of reality can be adapted to everyday situations" (240). Thus, she continues, "all serious fantasy might well be described as therapeutic" (240).

The therapeutic value of magic realism lies in its ability to foster a wonder in the reader and a faith that this wonder has meaning. Magic realism, which creates a magical interpretation of the real world, places humankind within the sphere of wonder. Tolkien has said that mankind is enchanted when he is within the Faerie Realm. However, magic realism suggests that man is *always* within that realm--though sometimes he forgets. The reading may serve as a reminder. G.K. Chesterton believes human happiness depends on remembering all the magical unknowns of the universe. Likewise, Jane Yolen has said, magic is "infinite unknowing" (50), and assigns to story the role of passing along to readers this sense of wonder. Francesca Lia Block's magic realism clearly functions as Yolen hopes, and blesses readers with renewed appreciation for real world magic. "Life is really full of that magic, but you need to acknowledge the reality, too, in order to perceive it." (Block, qtd in Roston)

As children we learn from the fairy tales to trust the law of Elfand, which Chesterton explains is essentially a trust in the incomprehensible. We learn from the fairy tales that the world is a magical place: oceans are swimming with mermaids,

flowers are friends of the fairies. We discover in the truths of the fairytales and the tangible intrigues of the real world “what all of us want and need to discover: a connection with the universe itself in all its various elements” (Coles xxiii).

Psychologists believe this attachment to the earth, in turn, creates a sense of belonging and a foundation for self-confidence and self-worth (Coles). As adolescents, we spend less time with fairy tales, less time interacting with the natural world, less time experiencing magic. Magic realist authors can renew our childhood beliefs and may even entice readers to explore anew their world.

Wonder, by its nature of incomprehensibility, gives purpose. Because Chesterton “had always believed that the world involved magic” (61) he is lead toward the “thought that perhaps it involved a magician. And this pointed a profound emotion always present and sub-conscious; that this world of ours has some purpose” (61). Paradoxically, it is the mysterious absence of reason in the world that gives it purpose. Bachelard reminds readers that there is always more in a closed box than in an open one. Magic realism depends on mystery and imagination to revive in the real world and in the reader’s heart a sense of magic and, through this magic, a sense of meaning and a faith in a purpose.

Magic realism revives mysticism. Chesterton promises that this “mysticism keeps men sane. As long as you have mystery you have health; when you destroy mystery you create morbidity” (28). Child protagonists of fantasy works for children have been known to voice a confidence in magic. Peter Pan and Wendy, for example, decidedly choose to believe in magic. E. Nesbit’s children do, as well, children like Gerald of *The Enchanted Castle*: “‘Well, don’t let’s spoil the show with silly old not believing,’ said Gerald with decision. ‘I’m going to believe in magic as hard as I can. This is an

enchanted garden, and that's an enchanted castle, and I'm jolly well going to explore'"

(Nesbit, qtd. in Egoff 81). C. S. Lewis' Puddleglum chooses to believe in Narnia:

Suppose we have only dreamed, or made up, all those things--trees and grass and sun and moon and stars and Aslan himself. Suppose we have. Then all I can say is that, in that case, the made-up things seem a good deal more important than the real ones...I'm on Aslan's side even if there isn't any Aslan to lead it. I'm going to live as like a Narnian as I can even if there isn't any Narnia." (Lewis, qtd. in Smith 174)

Block understands that the choice to believe or not to believe defines one's reality. Adolescents must lament the magic they leave behind in childhood. Block's magic realism very literally illuminates the connection between the fairy tale magic of childhood and an adult interpretation of real world mystery. Adolescents need magic realism stories to bring enchantment into their new worlds. Otherwise, as Chesterton suggests, adolescence will remain a morbid time, indeed.

Lovers of fantasy and magic realism do desire magic and *choose* to believe in magic, to satisfy daily their desire. For, the genre is but an imaginative interpretation of reality that turns sensory stimuli and emotional twangs into magical wonders. Tolkien writes:

But no time can I remember that the enjoyment of a story was dependent on belief that such things could happen, or had happened in "real life." Fairy-stories were plainly not primarily concerned with possibilities, but with desirability. If they awakened *desire*, satisfying it while often whetting it unbearably, they succeeded" (39).

Block brings to the attention possibilities; but she also breathes magical life into all that may *not* have been possible. Perhaps the sense of magic in the real world is not,

in Tolkien's words "concerned with possibilities." Chesterton has suggested that the magic may lie in the "solid and startling fact" (64) of what may *not* have been-- in all that has been possible, when there appears no reason whatsoever why it should be. Indeed, Block seems startled by all that *is*. And, her astonishment is contagious.

When readers carry with them Block's magical images, heightened senses, and an appreciation for all the real and natural stimulants of those senses, they choose to believe in their own imaginings. Thus, magical realism leads readers toward truth. Smith says children who read of Narnia will acquire "belief in the essential truth of their own imaginings" (175). Like C. S. Lewis' fantasy world, the world of magical realism inspires readers to unabashedly enjoy their own dreamy visions. Many of us, "in our hurried life, do not dream enough, and daydreams are important, for they are both the truest form of dreams and the modern counterpart of myths" (Marti-Ibanez 123-4). Everyone needs myth, for as Joan Aiken has said, "myth is the basic material of a rich inner life" (qtd. in Egoff 213) which is so "essential for human equilibrium" (qtd. in Egoff 213). In a discussion with music icon Tori Amos, the two agree some teens will "turn their power over to anything; that's cause they don't know the tools to go in" (Amos, qtd. in Block, "Volcano"). Block explains, "The tools are the myths themselves. Without them, we won't be able to understand who we are. This tapestry will dissolve, the faeries will be silenced, white horses will lose their horns, and the goddess will become the frightened girl forever" (Block, "Volcano").

Block's magical interpretation of the world provokes a plethora of mythological visions. Lloyd Alexander believes a faith in one's imaginings generates another valuable human quality, "one of the most precious," (147) in fact: hope. "Having once glimpsed

[the nature of fantasy], having once been caught up in the great dream, we can always dream again--and hope the dream will come true" (Alexander 147). Block gives back to adolescents the comforting magical daydreams of youth.

Magical realism's view may alter forever the reader's perception of the world. Sheila Egoff writes, "the children of enchanted realism do not change the world; instead they themselves are changed by their heightened concept of reality" (8). Readers of magic realism are changed, too. They can see the world of magic coexisting with the familiar world of realism. The imagination is "man's biological endowment, and ... man's success as a species has depended upon it" (Storr 66). Therefore, "we should use our capacity for phantasy to build bridges between the inner world of the imagination and the external world" (Storr 66). Block's magic realism is the product of such a fusion. "Whether it is the magic of wonder, the magic of language, or the magic of challenging a waiting mind, [...] it is up to the artist, the writer, the storyteller to reach out and touch that awesome magic..." (Yolen 80). Francesca Lia Block is up to the challenge.

The Inspiration of Francesca Lia Block:

The very elements for which Block is criticized are ones Block believes appeal to her teen readers. Block highlights love and artistic expression as a pathway through the darkest darks. This pathway may be the very thing teen readers are searching for. Block thinks that darkness is "something that kids are interested in and need to find in literature as a way to get through the darkness in their lives, especially if there's some kind of a resolution to that darkness at the end." (Block, All Things). Evidently, Block's publisher

is doing what they can to counter the controversy with education. The latest publication of *The Hanged Man* includes a “Reading Group Guide” consisting of critical acclaim and twelve questions for discussion. HarperCollins’ website promotes class readings of *Weetzie Bat* and *I Was a Teenage Fairy* by offering a “teacher’s guide” and a “reading group guide” for the novels, again incorporating critical acclaim.

There are many who confess to having something of an obsession with Francesca Lia Block. Members of her cult following communicate with one another through online groups. Chapter 6 describes this group communication in further detail. Those who are “obsessed with [...] Francesca Lia Block” (violetdoll2000) and have “been obsessed with her writings since *Weetzie Bat*” (Wahien), express sincere appreciation for Block’s works.

Block fans say that reading her words makes them feel better. Adrienne explains, “she makes me happy when i read her because although she depicts such sad stories, she imbues them with the all the promises of the future.” Mockeri says, “I read it [Violet and Claire] when I need something to cheer me up.” Thea advises a depressed friend to “read Charm by FLB” (Stone) to feel better. Pseudobif identifies with the Witch Baby character. It “comforted me, to know that there are girls thinking the same things i do and i sorta imagined myself in the stories,” (pseudobif) she says. Nicole complains, “i think i forgot what love feels like... i should read some FLB books, then i’ll prolly remember” (Ointment). Betsy Hearne concludes her review of *Weetzie Bat* with the following thought: “The power of human imagination is such that even books can become family” (Hearne, “Pretty” 47). Block’s books must be family for the fans who need a hug and reread a Block book to get one.

Block fans say she even changed their life. Marisa, for example, thanks the day she picked up a copy of *Girl Goddess #9*.

Choosing Girl Goddess #9 changed my life....I started to love self-expression and believe in magic and darkness and glitter... and it's true, now more magickal and beautiful things happen to me. when i look up i see the bursts of sun and sky and i imagine flying. i fall in love constantly--i'm in love with the sunset and the colours of words and cats and pillows and the city. it changed the way i think, in a way, or it made me realise that it's okay to think the way i do. what am i trying to say? i guess just that FLB is a goddess, and her beautiful stories inspire me more than anything else in the world. (Marisa or dreamlikemagic)

Rach Evil also says, "quite frankly, FLB changed my life. The *Weetzie Bat* books really made me see. It made me think about what was important. It changed what I wanted out of life." Sasha responds: "I feel very similar. The *Weetzie Books* pointed out to me what really is important, making all that has folded before make sense. She has such a magical style. I love all of the characters. She has mastered the art of making words vivid" (Gora). Screamingglory credits Block for reminding her how "to live again, a life full of dreams when I'm awake. [...] I could wear what I wanted and say what I wanted and be who I wanted, and I would always be so much more...she did help to bring out the desire in me to be so, the potential in me to be so, and the understanding that I could be, everything I want to be."

Block's inclusion of homosexual characters in her works helps gay and lesbian youths be their authentic selves, too. Recall that Block has been challenged for dealing with homosexuality, and Roberta Seelinger Trites and Laurie Walczak have criticized Block for perpetuating violence against homosexuals. However, Block has received fan

mail thanking her for showing readers that it's "okay to be gay" (Block, "Francesca.").

Perhaps most widely influential to Block's fans is her advice to explore their creativity. Time and again in her books, characters heal their internal wounds through creative self expression. *Zine Scene* is a manual completely dedicated to the act. Block's fans take note. Time and again, Block advocates self-expression in interviews and even responds to fan letters. One proud fan has posted her letter from Block online. It reads, "Dear Laura, Thank you for your lovely letter (hand writing included). I'm so glad you liked my books. Your words mean a lot to me. And don't be so sure about your bones-- they are probably more creative than you think" (Block, qtd. in Haft).

Block's fans are listening. They take her message and her example to heart. She and her characters become role models for many readers looking for a way to cope with the darkness in their lives. Block recalls that, before she could print, she would tell stories, and her mother would write them down. Block attributes not only her success as an author to this early validation of her "thoughts and expression" (Block, qtd. in Peacock 22), but also her survival through trying times. Block believes she has passed this message onto her readers.

One of the things about *Weetzie Bat* is that it has given readers freedom to take their own contemporary culture and write about it themselves seriously as fiction or poetry. In letters from my readers, I see that I have done something of the same service as my mother did for me writing down my early stories. I have made this other culture real and worthy. My readers discover it's okay to write about whatever is important to them and do it in a poetic way. (Block, qtd. in Peacock 25)

The online Witchbaby fan group often becomes a forum to trade personal poems and discuss creative endeavours underway. Some witchies are writing novels, some are

writing songs, playing/singing in bands, sculpting, etc. The following chapter in zine format exhibits some inspired fans' work. Rach Evil says, "I'm a poet at heart, but am working on my first novel. It's a YA, because of FLB [...] I am attending college to become a high school English teacher." Nimue Tara's "main goal" is to incorporate sensory images into her poetry (Tara, "no more"). Screamingglory claims, Block's "words taught me to express my own freely as a writer, full of poetry and sugar and fairy dust, devoid of unwanted structure or proper, common expectations." Block is "inspiration for art" (psuedobif).

Fans have been inspired by Block to start their own zines (Cart, Romance; Hotaling; Satifka). Manda Choukca informs the Witchbaby group that she has just put together her zine, *Fiesty*:

woo-hoo! i am so excited. this has been a personal project of mine this summer. i got the idea t write it after i read the story girl Goddess #9 by francesca lia block and read her book she co-authored with hillary carlip, zine scene... i love this! i can write about whatever i want without censorship, do it my way. woah. what a rush. i wish i had started this sooner.

It certainly seems that Block is "a great inspiration" (Ivy). "Weetzie Bat is a bona fide underground hero," notes Debora Hotaling, and *Weetzie Bat* was just the beginning.

Summary:

As readers have seen, there is a dark and a light side to Block's influence. Negativity comes in the form of controversy surrounding the quality of her works, their placement in the Young Adult category, and the maturity level of their content. Block is criticized for her devotion to specific themes and images. Yet the categorization of her

works as Young Adult literature is what truly frustrates her. She feels that there is a stigma attached to YA literature, that it is of lesser quality than adult literature. She would like her novels to reach the greater, more mature audience for whom she writes. Ironically, Block is also criticized by some for treating mature issues in her works. In particular, her novel *Baby Be-Bop* has received negative attention for its treatment of homosexuality.

Block's remarkably positive influence, however, eclipses any criticism. The effect of perceiving the world as a mysterious, fantastic place is psychologically and emotionally beneficial. Likewise, Block's personal influence has a beneficial effect on her readers' psyches. Readers thank Block for confronting the mature, often painful issues that come with growing up in America. They thank her for incorporating gay love into her works. And, they thank her for illustrating for them the healing power of creative expression.

The following chapter adopts the form of a zine and the voice of Block's young adult fans, who have taken inspiration from Block's style, character and theme of healing through creative expression.

CHAPTER VI

The Fans: Obsession with Francesca Lia Block

In Chapter 5 I have detailed both the negative and positive responses Block's readers take to her fiction. Block is criticized for her reoccurring themes and images and for dealing with mature content, particularly, homosexuality. On the other hand, Block draws faithful fans with her distinct style and honest confrontation of the taboo. Fans take comfort from Block's depiction of a magical reality, and they use creativity as an outlet at Block's suggestion and example. In Chapter 6, I use the zine format²¹, which Block has suggested to her readers as an effective vehicle of self-expression. In the voice of a typical young adult fan, I portray the extent of fans' obsession with the author and suggest that teenagers' marginalized status in society produces an affinity for Block's enchantment.

Introduction to BLOCKHEAD:

Meaghan Morris, a specialist in cultural studies, defines the discipline as "an investigation of particular ways of using culture, of what is available as culture to people inhabiting particular social contexts, and of people's ways of making culture" (qtd. in Driscoll 187-8). Francesca Lia Block and her fans have created their own culture from the myth and folklore of their youths, the painful experiences of adolescence, and the

²¹ I have created the imitation zine using Microsoft Publisher. A computer is not at all, however, needed to create a zine. As zine making is an artistic form of self-expression, many are created by hand, incorporating collage, photographs, original artwork, and hand-writing.

fears haunting the modern world. An examination of this culture offers insight into the relevance of Block's writing to young adults.

Young adults today may feel marginalized from the adult world, as I discuss further in the zine article, "Young Adult: An Oxymoron." Block recognizes the level of maturity in youths, their awareness and level of experience. In fact, the unacknowledged experience of children and young adults is a theme in many of her works, including *Violet and Claire*, *I Was a Teenage Fairy*, *The Hanged Man*, *Echo*, *Witch Baby*, and stories like "Tweetie Sweet Pea" and "Orpheus" in *Girl Goddess #9*. Characters in these works keep their thoughts and emotions separate from the adult world, choosing art as an expressive outlet.

Block believes, however, that young people are not as separate from adults as most adults think they are. She says,

I do believe that people have that *conception*—that childhood is care-free and adulthood is pain-filled—and at times I know I've felt that. But I really feel that it works both ways. The division's not so clear... I don't believe you can divide people so easily that way, 'Young people feel *this* way. Adults feel this *other* way'... *As an adult I [...] see the pain and the darkness around us, but I also know that children carry so much of the pain of the world.*" (Block, qtd. in Templeton).

Jane Asta Godfrey's conversations with young adults, compiled in her dissertation, "Adolescent Voices," support Block's opinion. The young adults Godfrey spoke to feel unfairly "excluded from the adult dialogue around them" (75). Seventeen-year-old Michelle says she is "ignored" (75) in a circle of adults, explaining, "They're in their own adult world" (75). Young adults sense the separation and stay to their own teen world. Godfrey's teenagers think adults act as if young adults "don't know what

[they're] talking about" (77) and "don't have any feelings" (77). Godfrey asks fifteen-year-old Jeremy what it feels like, "this feeling that when you talk nobody wants to listen" (78). Jeremy says, "It feels like a leash, like you kind of have to stay in your little zone because outside of that zone you have nothing. It's like outside of that zone you're a stray dog and the dog catcher is going to pick you up [...] Most kids feel like they can't say what they want to say" (Godfrey 78).

Block's works fly in the face of any invisible boundary between adults and teenagers' experience. Teenagers have feelings that need to be heard, and they may be cutting, starving, drugging, or acting out instead. Block validates the darkness of the young adult experience in her novels. Her young adult fans "love how Francesca writes about such taboo topics" (witchbaby_boi).

A significantly large number of Block fans have participated in Web discussions about the author and her works, strengthening an already cultish community of faithfuls. As one reads these fans' posts to online fan clubs, electronic diaries, personal Web-pages, and e-zines, an iconic "Block fan" emerges.²² I create a zine (see appendix 1) in which a generic fan and her best friend voice their passion for an author whose words have resonated within them with the impact of the coolest rock star deity. These characters, who call themselves Violet and Claire, speak in a voice that reflects actual fan's tone and comments. I also incorporate excerpts from actual fans' postings.

Francesca Lia Block has a significant influence on the zine community. Her short story "Girl Goddess #9" is a zine issue narrated by two friends (Block's readers are asked

²² There is an association between the Block fan and the culture of Riot Grrrls. Chideya and Rossi define the Riot Grrrl as "a sassy new breed of feminists for the MTV age." Riot Grrrls separate themselves from their parent generation's feminism, and are concerned principally with social issues, such as "incest, child abuse, abortion, eating disorders, harassment" (Chideya and Rossi), several of which Block deals with in her books. Punk music and zine-making and trading are also a part of the Riot Grrrl culture, and of course, a presence in the works of Block.

to imagine their artwork and formatting). Block's *Zine Scene* is a step by step guide to zine making. Block has not only inspired young adults to create their own zines, but she has also become the focus for many of these zines (Cart, Romance; Hotaling; Satifka). I have chosen to create a zine to physically exemplify the degree to which Block's fans are inspired by the writer. Through my zine, I also allow readers a glimpse into the passionate, fanatical world of Block fan chatter.

Francesca Lia Block may be the only young adult author to be received as both 'cool' and wholesome. One fan gushes, "Her books are like bibles!" Block's oxymoronic appeal is just the beginning of a style defined by contradiction. The fan's exaggerated remarks are just the tip of a hyperbolic iceberg of magic realist writing. There is a Block sub-culture out there, whispering through cyberspace, imagining themselves as girl goddesses. Who better to lead us into the depths of this Goddess culture than the worshipers themselves?

Violet and Claire's BLOCKHEAD zine is found in Appendix I (page 167). The characters relate the purpose of their zine and issue in "Editors' Notes," introduce themselves in "Who we are" and "More about BLOCKHEADS," then try to explain why they adore Block's writing in "Slinkster Style!" In the article, "Young Adult: An Oxymoron," I interrupt the fan voice with my own commentary in order to include theory and research that would not be a part of the typical Block fan's awareness. "Questions for Feedback" relate some repeated or interesting threads of discussion found in various Block fan groups. "www... of Interest to BLOCKHEADS" provides readers with actual web addresses of fan groups and popular Block related web sites. The zine is illustrated by Block-inspired art and photography.

CHAPTER VII

Conclusion

Summary and Conclusions:

The categorization, creation, and influence of Francesca Lia Block's fiction have been largely overlooked by those in the field of literary criticism. Block, despite her conglomerate of devoted fans, remains a diamond in the rough in North America. As I compiled sources in preparation for a literature review of Block's works, I became aware of a void in critical commentary on Block. Michael Cart, Patricia J. Campbell and Chris Lynch acknowledge Block for her originality and honest approach to mature themes and wish her writing was reaching the greater, more mature audience for which it is intended. Roberta Seelinger Trites focuses philosophically on the metaphor of photography in *Missing Angel Juan* and on perpetuation of the homosexual stereotype in *Baby Be-Bop*. Under her guidance, Laurie L. Walczak writes a Master of Arts thesis on anti-gay violence in young adult literature. She too sees *Baby-Be-Bop* as perpetuating homophobia and violence. Lois L. Warner is the only voice to question the attraction of young adults to Block's works. Warner suspects that Block's young fans use her novels as a last chance to experience fairy tale magic before they must experience reality. Chris Crowe identifies Block as a boundary maker and breaker in young adult literature for her densely poetic prose. Two questions of category remain unresolved by the close of the literature review. How does Block fit in in the fantasy tradition of children's literature?

And into which age bracket do her works fall?

Dealing first with Block's genre, I offer a new interpretation of Block's writing as enchanted American realism. Block draws heavily on traditional magic realism. She is inspired by Gabriel García Márquez and consciously incorporates magical events from myth, folklore and fairy tale into reality. Those magical events, however, are often less literal in Block's works than they are a potential state of mind. La's closet creature Blue, Barbie's Mab, Witch Baby's almost-grandfather ghost—these can be rationalized by the skeptic reader as figments of the protagonist's imagination. Furthermore, Block's reality becomes a magical one principally through her use of poetic language: sound and imagery make the mundane sparkle with new life. Block's magical view of the American reality demonstrates to readers the potential in us all to view reality as something more remarkable. Again, what is magical is a state of mind. Block's writing is enchanted American realism because of its setting in the American city and by definition of enchantment: Block makes reality glimmer with renewed wonder, affects the reader's mental state with poetic sound, and transforms readers' cognitive position.

I identify the sources of enchantment in Block's writing. Most obviously, Block enchants the American reality with characters and images from myth, folk and fairy tale. Fairy tale imagery, in particular, seamlessly weaves magic through reality as though the two were always one. Block also uses the flash of classic Hollywood glamour and thrill of celebrity to enchant the mundane. Modern Los Angeles also provides an intoxicating collage of ethnic cultures and sub-cultures that obliterates the ordinary.

Most uniquely and subtly, Block uses poetry to enchant the American reality. Block is enamored with the power of sound to enchant. Rhythm and rhyme, alliteration

and assonance create a euphonic poetry that takes readers to her dream world. Blending her poetry with cacophonic prose, Block reflects magic and reality. Poetic contradiction in the forms of paradox and oxymoron also reflect a world both magical and real. Block also believes strongly in the power of the senses to evoke magic. Block's imagery—strings of sensory stimuli—enchants the American experience. Block's imagery draws attention to the enchantment of physical and emotional love. Block's passion for words is evident, and her unique manipulation of language, evoking magic and reality, makes her “cool” in the eyes of her fans.

The fans become the focus of the second half of the thesis. Addressing the issue of Block's audience, I first draw attention to two factors: a need for a new, more mature age bracket to market Block's books to their intended audience, and the controversy surrounding Block's treatment of mature issues because of her place in the existing “young adult” category. Block wishes her books reached a wider audience that crosses over into early adulthood. She writes with a mature audience in mind. Yet, her works are marketed to “young adults,” which in the publishing industry means twelve and up. Since Block addresses mature topics like sex, rape, incest, homosexuality, she is a target for censorship.

Block nevertheless has a passionate and devoted audience of youths and adults. They express feelings of deep gratitude to Block for showing them the magic in reality, and for encouraging them to be true to their own creative voices. Block clearly does not believe that one must leave magic behind as one matures. She is also an example of overcoming pain through creative expression.

I give the fans a voice in Chapter 6. I imitate a zine, which I intend to be a

physical reflection of Block's influence over young adults. In the voice of a young adult, I describe the online community of fans, which I refer to as Witchbabies, and express common threads of communication that pass between them. I suggest that young adults are a marginalized group that finds their world reflected in Block's world of fantasy and harsh reality. Undoubtedly, Block's own life, the lives of her characters and her magical view of reality communicate that even the darkest world is full of possibility. No wonder her fans say she has changed their lives.

Limitations:

My research into Block's fans is limited to information found in their online postings to one another. An online survey designed specifically to assess Block's influence on her young readers would contribute to a superior understanding of what young adults glean or do not glean from specific aspects of Block's works.

Recommendations and Personal Conclusion:

Block has certainly changed my life too. I knew upon entering this thesis that I would feel inspired by Block to write, face frustration, and take creative risks. I feel inspired to continue writing creatively on a personal level, as well. I have spent many moons in Block's enchanted world, marinating in her densely poetic and imagistic prose, walking the pathways from darkness into light. I have wondered if I will be able to separate my voice from hers when I attempt to create an original story.

Further areas of study may research Block's influence on other authors. In footnote 16 of chapter 5, I mention that Janet Fitch's 1999 adult novel, *White Oleander*, shares the setting, themes and much of the same imagery as Block's works. Fitch's novel however, is realism. I know of no other author who has blended magic with reality in the way Block has done.

This leads me to an important question: Can there be another who writes enchanted American realism? Block's writing is a boundary maker and breaker (Crowe). Block's writing is so original that critics have avoided categorizing it. Perhaps the effort to categorize is in vain. While labelling is useful for the purpose of discussion, I question the validity of categorizing the unique. A work that is in a category unto itself, cannot by definition have a category at all, a "collection of things sharing a common attribute" (WordWeb). True art must always be in conflict with its label. Moving from the critic's side of the fence to take the artist's perspective, I hope we continue to have difficulty neatly filing Block's works away.

I hope, too, that Block is able to reach the wider audience she seeks. Alas, in recent months, I have discovered copies of the *Weetzie Bat* books in the discard bin of my local library. Chapters recently dumped stacks of hard-covered copies of *Violet and Claire* and *The Rose and the Beast* in the clearance section. This fills me with witchy pessimism. Then again, there is the potential for *Weetzie Bat* and *Witch Baby* to appear soon at a theatre near you. Block has had the stories developed into a screenplay; director Tim Burton, she says, has expressed interest. If a movie is what it takes to bring Block's inspirational writing to a greater majority, so be it. And when the crowds come out of the theatre exclaiming, "Lanky lizards! What a trip!" and wondering who what

where when how to classify her amazing stories, they can ask me. I look forward to the day Block magic takes over the world, when Block's enchanted American reality becomes just the usual way to look at things.

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Appendix I

Zine: "BLOCKHEAD"

**Violet and
Claire's**

BLOCKHEAD

#9

April 1, 2004

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Editors' Notes

welcome to BLOCK-HEAD #9. this is our obsession zine, our way of uniting with other fans obsessed with Francesca Lia Block. sometimes our zine gets personal. we include "journal entries, poems, essays, and letters" (Block and Carlip) on abuse, sexism, eating disorders... whatever we or our friends and readers are going through. some of our issues are "heavy with pain, but [Francesca Lia Block has taught us that] the energy of self-expression makes them dance" (Block and Car-

lip). some of our new readers are wondering just why we are so crazy for our fav goddess author, Francesca Lia Block. it's not like we're alone. in case you haven't heard, Ms. Block was named one of the Coolest People in L.A. by Buzz magazine! we think it's so inspiring that a writer for teenagers like us is one of the coolest people in one of the coolest cities! this issue is dedicated to exploring the reasons why we think Ms. Block really and truly is the most slinkster cool author in the world.



"Witch Baby"

Special points of interest:

- ♥ How to be a Witchbaby!
- ♥ Gain insight into Francesca Lia Block's slippery slinkster style!
- ♥ Why young adults succumb to the enchantment of Francesca Lia Block !

Who we are:

you can call us Violet and Claire, because we are best friends like the characters in one of our favourite books, *Violet and Claire*. we are also Witchbabies, so you can check out our profiles online. here's some info on the club:

Witch Baby, the sequel to Ms. Block's impressive debut novel, *Weetzie Bat*, asks, how

one can stand to "go on living when the world is full of so much sadness and horror?" (Betts). many computer-friendly fans like us have come together in Yahoo's user-created online group, "Witchbaby," to offer one another friendship and support through personal sadness and horror.

we, and the other 700+ members relate to Ms. Block's dark, wild, and tangled Witch Baby as much as we crave the author's shiny, enchanted words and images, that wash over us like pure love.

...more about **BLOCKHEADS**

Witchbabies sign on with loving salutations to fellow babies, slinksters, glittering pixies, dark enchantresses, beautiful witchies or witchie-darlings... and sign off with reverent images of "flower petals and angel feathers," "bloody roses and pixie dust," "love stardust fireflies and faerywings" (tara, "your depth") "Aww i luuuuv ya witchies!" shouts caughtin-beauty. true to Ms. Block's own sense of her audience, some Witchbabies are 12 and some are 35; they are almost exclusively female. some Witchbabies love girls, some Babies love boys, but we are all in love with love itself, and daydreaming, poetry, punk/rock music, kitties, vintage clothing, vegan/ vegetarianism, nature, faeries, libraries, glitter, magic, grrrl power, the shows *Charmed*



"Duck"

and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, and the colour pink. Oh, and combat boots, too. We love it when "People compliment [us] on [our] combat boots.

That something so angry is fashionable for women shows that things have changed" (Samantha qtd. in Chideya and Rossi).

creativity is particularly important to a Witchbaby. Witchbabies are inspired by Francesca Lia Block's faith in the healing power of self-expression. Witchbaby Daphne believes that the reason to get up in the morning (a persistent thread in the group) is "the sublimation that lets you turn pain into art" (Daphne, "getting kinda dark"). Witchbabies are painters, writers, sculptors, musicians, singers, poets, composers, lyricists, dancers,

Reason to get up in the morning:
the sublimation that lets you turn
pain into art.

photographers, and, of course, zinesters. plus, we're all avid readers. Witchbabies have read all of Block's books and continue to read them frequently. the online forum allows Witchies to share and critique one another's creative endeavours and discuss their mutual admiration and passion for Ms. Block's poetic style and mystical imagery.

the witchbaby group is the largest mailing list dedicated

to Francesca Lia Block, with a dozen or so posts per day. devout fans that we are, we also belong to all the other FLB groups: Dangerousangels,



—by Anne

Dangerousangels 2, FrancescaLiaBlock, Lankylizardslounge, Zinescene, Weetzie, Peachypie, Francescablock... we only get posts anymore from Witchbabies and Dangerousangels 2.

Slinkster Style!

since the birth of BLOCKHEAD, we have struggled to explain to our readers the exceptionality of Ms. Block's writing. how can we express the ticklish pleasure that her words spark in our bodies, or the dreamy dimension that becomes our reality. how can we explain the sigh of relief the escapes our soul as we read her magical words? "I think she's terrific and so strange that I've never been able to describe her writing to my satisfaction," writes one fan. (Sudberg, "so what"). we have had such a difficult (but enjoyable) time trying to articulate the inexplicable magic of Ms. Block that we find it rewarding to hear how others employ words to the same end.

here are some of the ways other fans attempt to express Ms. Block's style.... their expressions are so weird, and yet so true! enjoy!

"she's a swirly writer. I don't have any other word to describe her." (Wahien)

"HER WRITING IS LIKE A COTTON CANDY FIX"
(iridescent_dreamer)

"the closest I've come is 'jazz written down.' Billie Holiday mostly, and maybe some acid jazz...."
(Sudberg, "so what")

She writes like she's distilling magic, capturing something fragile and beautiful without hurting it in the process of putting it to page. (Groppi)

The lyrical prose of Francesca Lia Block is dreamlike, magical and stunning. her descriptions are yummie

and her characters explode into my life and never really let me go....' (Marisa)

"It's something more than clever prose, and it's something more than skillful plotting or witty dialogue. It's the sense of wonder, the sense of magic, the ability to make me see the same old world in a whole new way. Suffusing everyday worlds with a brighter light.... there's something very very right about Francesca Lia Block's books." (Groppi)

we love the warnings that come with invitations to read the works of Francesca Lia Block. Christina cautions that you may feel "flushed and red, exposed and embarrassed, new and raw," as though you "had been bitten by this beautiful angel, crunched between her teeth and spit out in astonishment." Gena writes, "Don't be surprised if you either cannot put it down once you start reading, or if you need to take breaks to run around or dance because you will be filled with joy!" She asks readers to be prepared, for Ms. Block's "stories will bring you to tears, comfort you, awaken your senses, and take your breath away!" (Gena).

the essence of Ms. Block's writing is difficult to relate without resorting to imitation. we find ourselves communicating what she's like by example, which is through poetry. we think Ms. Block's style may be particularly difficult to express because her novels are more of a sensory experience than anything else.

Sometimes the WAY something is said is what moves you to

tears, rather than WHAT it is saying. For instance, Francesca Lia Block's poetry. "He is a dangerous flamenco shadow dancer and a tiny boy playing music in the gutter. His soul sounds like my drums and looks like doves. He is fireworks. He is the black-haired angel playing his bass on the top of the tree, on the top of the cake. I want him to see the flowers in my eyes and hear the songs in my hands." Though some of these images are beautiful, most of what I like about this is the actual words, the sound. "Shadow dancer." "Black-haired angel." It is not because I am visualizing a black-haired angel that I like this phrase. It is because I like the words themselves, and how this whole passage fits together, in fact. It has little to do with what she's saying about the boy she is describing. Though that is beautiful too. Sometimes it is simple words or phrases that I like; it is not what they are saying. (swankivy).

basically, "francesca lia block is the best author of all time in the universe times infinity to the infinite power!" (starcrossed).

Young Adult: An Oxymoron

Note: I interrupt the voice of the young adult with text in *italics*

As mentioned in Chapter 3, "Literature Review," the magic realism genre is thought to emerge from a marginalized sub-culture. Yet, whether Japanese, German, Australian, British, Italian, or French, young adults around the world identify with and delight in Block's magic realism. Block's first magic realist novel was born when she, herself, was a young adult. Perhaps this age bracket has a special affinity towards the magic realist genre. Originally, magic realism was recognized as a Latin American genre. Like an immigrant to the Americas, young adults are still close to their magic-filled histories. A history steeped in folklore, "a history of both the marvelous real and the strange" (Carpentier 105) is a recent one to both minority cultures in America and young adults. Furthermore, each group has an "awareness of being Other, of being new, of being symbiotic" (Carpentier 100). Since magic realism does seem to reflect a marginalized reality, perhaps the appeal of Block's magical America among young adults reflects an identification with a marginalized status.

Jane Asta Godfrey, upon interviewing hundreds of young adults for her doctoral paper, *Adolescent Voices*, believes that "unintentionally [adults do] marginalize our adolescents and that perhaps their voices and ways of knowing do not find their way into the dominant culture" (74-5). As fantastic and strange as her magic elements are, Francesca Lia Block succeeds in voicing the reality of the teen subculture, and amassing a die-hard following of young adults.

Block, herself, attributes her teen following to an identification with the paradoxes in her writing. Block recognizes that teens live in a world of innocence and experience.

They grow up with AIDS now, and I didn't. And I think it makes them grow up faster. Also, they see so much more media than we did. They seem very sophisticated to me, but—at the same time (but

maybe this is just the kids who write to me)—there's an element of innocence and a yearning to hold on to that innocence in the face of all this stuff. That's why all of the fairy [motifs in my books] appeal to them. I open up their mail and glitter falls out of every envelope... flower petals, glitter, stick-ers. It's so sweet, yet at the same time they seem very sophisticated in the world and have been through so much already in their lives" (Block, "A Cool Bit").

Block's fans have expressed a paradox in their lives: a desire to enjoy immaturity and a need to deal with difficult issues as mature adults.

*"What time are we upon,
and where do I belong?"—
Witch Baby*

Our friend Annaleese (16) said, "It seems like each generation the kid grows up more and more. like I I now is like 17 once was" (Annaleese qtd. in Godfrey, 80). Block seems to understand that, at the same time, our generation is afraid...

i mean, i don't think [most adults] realize how many threats kids have to put up with all the time...I don't think drugs were as prevalent [in our parents' day]... i think sex is a lot more on peoples minds every day than it was then... the teenagers didn't so

early necessarily. I mean a lot of people now are losing their virginity at like 12 (Jeremy, 15, qtd in Godfrey, 82).

"a lot of adults didn't experience the same fears we do until whey were in their 20's....it makes you feel a little powerless... and more defensive. You can't really open yourself up as well." (Sonya, 16, qtd. in Godfrey, 82).

maybe this powerlessness is why some of Ms. Block's fans are riot grrrls. "Riot Grrrl embraces this contradiction as the secret strength of girls... Riot Girl is feminism with a loud happy face dotting the 'i'" (Chideya and Rossi). most teenage girls are a "bundle of contradictions" (Chideya and Rossi); we are innocent enough to "gush about some 'incredible cute bass player,'" (Chideya and Rossi) but experienced enough to have also "started a pro-choice group when [we were] 12" (Chideya and Rossi). when we were putting together our first zine, we discussed creating a grrrl zine as a means of "speaking out and fighting back against a society that often disrespects and dismisses women" (Block and Carlip).

just like there is a community of Riot Grrrls, we think there is a community of girl goddesses—a Block community that encourages girl power, freedom of expression, and creative aspirations. the community we feel we belong to is one who takes author goddess Block's words into our daily lives. we live every day with the goddess philosophy that love and happiness lie in all sensory experience; whether painful or blissful, any experience is beautiful! like what daphne said to one pouting witchbaby, we're going to "take it like a woman" ("bus"). We're going to take it like Ms. Block does and write or paint or sing or take pictures "of girls becoming goddesses, and goddesses becoming girls" (*Girl* 180).

Those fans who do not identify themselves as Riot Grrrls, or who do not speak out (using some form of self expression or another), may be letting out their frustrations by quietly starving themselves, purging, cutting, drinking, using drugs, and having sex immaturity. Joan Jacobs Brumberg, professor of human development and family studies and of women's studies at Cornell University calls this "a tragedy for American girls today" (Lang).

Despite all the new opportunities and freedoms open to young girls, sexual liberalism without a feminist basis and appropriate social supports leaves girls today tense, uneasy, and vulnerable to a variety of behavioral problems and diseases, including eating disorders and sexually transmitted diseases (Lang).

Studying young girls' diaries, Blumberg notes a "lack of discourse about provocative ideas or creative activities," (Lang) especially compared to diaries from previous decades. Blumberg blames "the influence of popular culture and sexual liberalism" (Lang) for leaving "girls today at risk and vulnerable to all kinds of problems" (Lang). Many Witchbabies are at the intersection of childhood and maturity, and the tension and unbalance at this junction sometimes manifests in ugly ways.

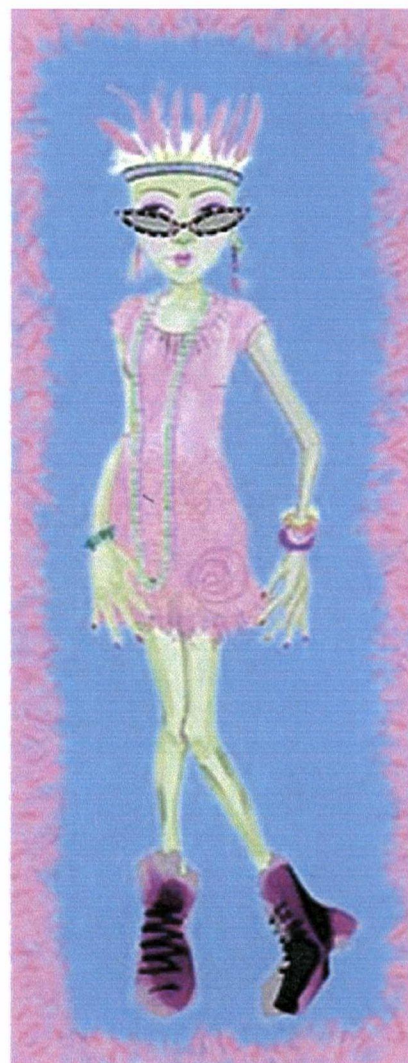
seems to us that the sadness and horror of the world is dawning on the Witchbabies. as Ms. Block herself has remarked, her fans represent a youth stretched painfully between innocence and experience. "I am holding my breath these days." writes Witchbaby Kelly.

It's fall in Pennsylvania, and the leaves are starting to turn but haven't dropped yet. I guess I feel similarly suspended, somewhere between Childhood and Adulthood. Terror and Ecstasy. In total anticipation (Kelly).

We read all the Witchbaby mail and there are a lot of girls who are suffering inside and dealing with their pain in the wrong way. Witch Baby, the character, acts out by shaving the beautiful curls from her head, wearing black, isolating herself from her family, refusing to eat, keeping to the cobwebs, running away, and collecting news articles and images of the world's pain. many of the Witchbabies confess more serious battles with chaos. the online forum often becomes a means to anonymously express the tortures of abuse, depression, cutting... For example, bethany writes, "life has been so stupid lately. and it's all my fault. i hate being bipolar." and confesses she's having a hard time dealing with "erin (stupid cousin who molested me when i was a kid)." she goes on to say, that she's meeting a friend this weekend, "and, er, maybe have sex. i don't really want to... i don't plan on doing it, but i have absolutely no willpower so it might happen.. *sigh* aiiie. i've been worrying about this for a few weeks now... i don't know what to do" (bethany). She should read *Girl Goddess* #9 again, because she reminds us of Rave. Rave thought that "her beauty was because of them" (*Girl* 117), because of all those Rock stars she slept with. Elizabeth posts, "I've only cut 3 or 4 times in the past year. That I did it at all is bad, I know, but I'm just super proud of myself for that. ::shrugs:: it's lovely to have skin not covered in strawberry-gashes, or blood-roses." Daphne replies, "Way to go. (No, that's not sarcasm. Yeesh.) I think the last time I cut was in April, when things went badly with Claire-of-much-drama" ("don't talk").

we appreciate Ms. Block's Witch Baby for the character's unjustified self-loathing... Brandi asks, "why is it that every character in a book has something wrong with them... they always have something to blame it on in the books. and it makes me feel like i am just f***ed up for no reason at all." It's not like this in Block's books. Witch Baby, for example, has not been sexually, physically, mentally, emotionally, verbally abused.... She's just "wild, snarled, tangled and angry" (*Dangerous* 26) with the same jealousies, fears, and questions that every human being must experience with painful intensity in adolescence. Ms. Block's Violet articulates the feeling well when she says, "Not that I envied children who had been abused, but I had to admit that sometimes

I wanted something more, something to explain why I felt so alienated and depressed" (*Violet* 23). Seems like it's just something that "happens to girls at a certain point in their lives. One moment they're these tough little things, racing around, jabbering, excited about just waking up to see what else is new in the world." (*Violet* 32) The next, they despise themselves and just want to die.



"Weetzie Bat"

Our Ms. Block makes us excited about the world again. She makes the same-old look new and shows us how to do it too, for ourselves.

Voicing our opinions in this zine is one of the best things we can do to feel more empowered. Ms. Block has taught us that we mustn't ignore our dark experiences. still, this darkness makes us feel kind of homesick for childhood. we know we are not the only fans of Ms. Block to experience this nostalgia. one of

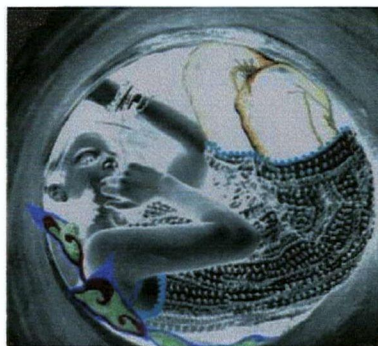
our friends writes in her web diary, "Her books make me nostalgic for innocence." Ms. Block's books embrace the magic of childhood as much as they address the darkness of what our parents refer to so annoyingly as "the real world." Screamingglory writes, "She taught me to live with that child-like faith again, in that child-like place, where anything can happen and everything does, and everything is beautiful, if jaded. Sparkles, things pink, and fairy princesses become my new best friends, after years of having rejected things like them." Vaerie Ivy says, "i think i might have been a faerie in one of my past lives; sometimes i sit in school when it rains and picture myself becoming six inches tall with beautiful transparent wings and flying around the classroom" ("no subject").

Block's *Violet and Claire* is a book popular with Witchbabies, for the friendship like ours, but also for its dealings with innocence and experience. Claire is an innocent, angel-wing wearing 17 year old girl and Violet is her more experienced and dark best friend. DryadsBubble remarks,

I see Claire as who I once was and Violet as who I'm becoming...That scene with the boys with shotguns really shook me up...in elementary school I was shy and had no friends. All I would do was read. The boys in my classes would tear me apart....Now that I'm in high school I'm really popular in the arts/theatre crowd. But there's still that scared little girl inside, like Claire. When I was younger I actually did believe that I was a descendant of the DeDanainns (once rulers of Ireland who in legend were forced to live underground and who legend corrupted into "the wee folk" or faeries) so when I read that about Claire I thought Fran-

cesca Lia Block had read my mind... But I think Francesca Lia Block really created characters that everyone relates to on some level in this book...Sorry, I just went off on a total tangent and got all emotional.

Dryad is an example of a young adult on the border between childhood and adulthood—a strange, new world, kind of in be-



"Adolescence"

tween two dimensions of fantasy and reality. Since the magic realism genre "seems to be closely linked with a perception of 'living on the margins'" (Slemon) and involves "issues of borders, mixing, and change" (Bahri), young adults may feel a natural affinity to Block's writing. Block writes about marginal subcultures and emotional change, in the tradition of magic realism; teenaged readers feeling that they are living on the margin between youth and adulthood may identify with these issues of change. Block has said,

I believe that during adolescence we are powerfully in touch with two realms. Still close to our childhood, we are innocent enough to perceive the fantastic all around us—in the music we hear, the movies we see, the books we read, even the foods we eat and in our relationships with others, mostly when we fall in love for the first time. But we are also almost adults and very aware of the harsh world we are about to enter, a world that has become increasingly vola-

tile, where the young are exposed to ever-greater dangers (Block, qtd. in S. Jones).

Ms. Block understands that, on the one hand, we all discuss music, movies, books, oh-so-yummy vegan pop tarts w/o frosting, the dreariness of a world without cheese, very yummy tofu curry (mmmm mmm good), rainy days perfect for tomato soup and grilled cheese sandwiches, the smell of apple crisp baking in the oven on a Sunday afternoon, and relationships--with something close to ecstasy. By the way, Thai food rocks! Sheda says, "there is nothing else better than reading *Violet and Claire* while eating grilled teriyaki garden burgers with seasoned fries and Italian sodas." Sasha agrees, "I have such a crush on Violet. I just want to sit here, watch silent movies with her, sharing popcorn and listen to her talk about film makers. I am jealous of such a friendship." on the other hand, teenagers are "so scared...things are going to be un-right, unhappy, and un-good" and express dark thoughts like, "falling asleep and never waking up..." (Reine).

Block's magic realism may reflect most accurately a young adult's reality. Young adults may see their world of sensory magic and dangerous reality reflected in Block's world. Young adults may find validation for their magically real experiences in Block's writing. This may explain why teenagers appear to relate to Francesca Lia Block's blend of whimsy and harsh reality.

The voices of Block's fans testify to a youth marginalized by the greater, more conservative adult population. Block's fans articulate feelings of rejection from the greater community as they experiment with sex, drugs, and various means of self-expression, such as dying their hair pink and getting tattoos and piercings.

Such issues may be considered typical of youths of any generation, yet some claim today's youth culture is more drastically different from previous generations. More than ever, youths today feel marginalized by insecurities related to body image, sexual identity and sexual experience. Girls, in particular, compare their weight, sexual experiences, and popularity against that of their peers. Godfrey, in her interviews with adolescent girls, learned from 14-year-old Megan that all the girls at her school are "hung up" on their

weight: "Everybody, there's only a couple of people who aren't stick thin... and they are trying to be or they want to be very much, they want to, everybody wants to..." (95). From 15-year-old Felicia, Godfrey learns that at Felicia's school, "you're either doing some type of sport...or you're in band, or you're having sex all the time... or you're nothing" (102). While several of the interviewees fear rape and know people who have been raped, 15-year-old Gabriella confesses that she has a difficult time dealing with the sexual abuse of a close friend: "I was like, God, it could have been me[...] I just try not to think about it. I know it's not good but we don't talk about it" (96).

Adolescents' fears and stresses are silencing, restricting, marginalizing. According to a historian at the College of Human Ecology, today, more than ever, adolescent girls are "overwhelmed with insidious feelings of unworthiness and low self-esteem as they obsess about boys and body image at the expense of more fruitful activities." (Lang 31) Youths' reality today may be one more private, more adult-exclusive, more on the margin of magic and reality, fantasy and sanity than ever before.

Block deals with mature issues of incest, rape, drug addiction, eating disorders, sexual identity, AIDS, and death... dark issues that touch even the most immature souls. yet, the



"Plastic wings and plastic smiles" (starcrossed)

magic realism genre gives vivid expression to the positive beauty of the world and the human spirit. Block says, "I love the magical realism in my work. It's not as if you can escape the world. You're in the world. You're part of it. But there is solace and hope through the magic. There is something of another world. Hope, but in a grounded way"

(Peacock 25). perhaps this hope is a fundamental reason why Ms. Block's magic realist fiction is found on young adult shelves. arguably, a defining quality of children's literature is a hopeful, if not happy ending. "When you close the door on hope, you have left the realm of childhood" (Huck 7). Professor Bahri perceives that characters of adult magic realism "rarely, if ever, realize the promise of a better life." however, a foundation of hope underlies Block's writing at all times and readers sense that her characters will achieve a better life. readers sense that happiness and pleasure are a frame of mind. the key is to "plug into the love current instead" (Angels 70).

"I want to be one of those people who can keep her creative inspiration all the way through her life.... Wish me luck!"

Obviously, you don't have to be a teenager to want a little more magic and hope in your life. "fear travels across age, gender, race, class and ethnic lines, affecting all of us in diverse, insidious ways. Children are feeling the effects of change and instability during a time when shifting demographics, cultural and economic changes, along with a sophisticated mass media system, creep into all of our lives." (Godfrey, 93)

Ms. Block has learned from reading fan mail from teenagers that there is an enormous "amount of pain out there" (Roston). Block helps her readers to acknowledge the pain, but to embrace a vision of a world alive with the energy of possibility, a world of ghosts and fairies and fairy tale truths. A fan under the name Psycho_Vampiress asks, "Ms. Block, you can make the rawest of emotions sound beautiful. How do you accomplish this?" (Block, "gURL"). Block responds, "I try to see the dark and light in everything. This is my way of comforting myself when I am dealing with those emotions" (Block, "gURL"). One of Block's characters reiterates, people are "afraid of their own dark natures. But that's what life is about.... It's about darkness as well as light. If you don't acknowledge the one, you are thoroughly fucked.

You will never know the other.... Carpe nocturn!" (Violet 54). dreamlikemagic testifies,

i started to ... believe in magic and darkness and glitter ... now i try to be more open to the pain and pleasure and beauty around me, more open to magic and glitter... and it's true, now more magical and beautiful things happen to me. when i look up i see the bursts of sun and sky and i imagine flying. i fall in love constantly--i'm in love with the sunset and the colours of words and cats and pillows and the city. it changed the way i think, in a way, or it made me realise that it's okay to think the way i do... FLB is a goddess, and her beautiful stories inspire me more than anything else in the world. (dreamlikemagic).

If only we can follow in the footsteps of Ms. Block. She can lead us to the true enchantment of our realities. We, like scyllaopal, hope we can "be one of those people who can keep her creative inspiration all the way through her life and not be run down by the everyday worries of reality. As I get older, though, it seems harder and harder to achieve. Wish me luck..." (scyllaopal).

Francesca Lia Block may have come onto the scene at just the right time. Incredibly, Block has fused what are arguably enemy and antidote for American teenaged girls: pop culture and creative power. The product is a genre that both appeals and heals. As one fan comments, Block's writing is "mind candy from a health food store." Too bad there are adults who find it too controversial to recommend or teach in school.



BLOCKHEAD

how you can reach us:

if you would like to subscribe to our zine, you can email us at:

Email: skatinghamburger@yahoo.com

VIOLET AND CLAIRE'S

Block magic forever!

Questions for Feedback

(we'll include your ideas in upcoming issues!)

- ♥ Which songs do you think are Francescaish?
- ♥ Tell us some "reasons to get up in the morning." (Kelly, "when")
- ♥ "Anyone know what high school Francesca went to?" (electric)
- ♥ "If you could spend a day with any Block character, who would it be and what would you do?" (22indigoplace)
- ♥ Are FLB's novels incredibly influential? Did other author's take her example and write more about hushed topics after she did? (supherostalkr)
- ♥ "Name every FLB-esque thing you can think of. movies. books. actresses. actors. places. whatever. okay.....go..." (childhoodcrush)

*Dear Laura
Thank you for your
lovely letter (and
writing included) and
so glad you liked my
books. Your words
mean a lot to me.
and don't be so sure
about your books—they
are probably more
creative than you think.
Love
Lia
Barnes & Noble*



Ducks are love. (Hex)

www... of Interest to BLOCKHEADS

- ♥ Our Author's official website:
<http://www.francescaliablock.com>
- ♥ Vote for your favourite Weetzie saying
<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/witchbaby/surveys>
- ♥ What's your fairy's name?
<http://www.emmadavies.net/fairy>
- ♥ Get together with FLB fans—details at the International Francesca Lia Block Meetup Day page:
<http://flblock.meetup.com>
- ♥ Liselotte Eriksson's fairies and mermaids are so FLB! <http://www.liselotteeriksson.com>
- ♥ Which Weetzie Bat Character are you?
<http://quizilla.com/users/SkeletonKiss/quizzes/Which%20Weetzie%20Bat%20character%20are%20you%3F>
- ♥ Join a Block fan group! Take your pick, or pick them all:
- ♥ "Witchbaby" @ <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/witchbaby>
- ♥ "Dangerousangels2" @ <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/dangerousangels2/>
- ♥ "Violet and Claire's Journal" @ <http://www.livejournal.com/community/violetclaire>
- ♥ "Witchbabies and Charlie Bats' Journal" @ <http://deadjournal.com/community/flb>
- ♥ "Dangerous Angel's Journal" @ http://livejournal.com/community/jah_love
- ♥ "Ducks and Lankas' Journal" @ <http://www.livejournal.com/community/slinkstercool>
- ♥ "Block Journal" @ <http://www.ujournal.org/community/francescalia>
- ♥ "Francesca Lia Block Community's Journal" @ http://www.livejournal.com/community/francesca_lia
- ♥ "Francesca Lia Block Discussion" @ <http://www.gnooks.com/discussion/francesca+lia+block.html>
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