Contemporary Canadian Verse-Novels for Young People: Calling for Classroom Research on an Increasingly Popular Literary Form

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Abstract

This qualitative content analysis identified patterns and trends in a contemporary set of Canadian verse-novels for young people. Twenty-two books were located in our search for titles published between 1995 and 2016, and many of these emerged as award-winners in various contexts including the Governor General's Award for children's literature (text). Dresang's notion of Radical Change, adapted for this interrogation, illuminated particular elements of these societal artifacts worthy of notice. In particular, the verse-novel form seems to be on the rise for young Canadian audiences, with predominantly female authors offering texts that range from realistic fiction (most common) to historical fiction and fantasy (least common), in first-person present-tense narratives that generally feature teenage protagonists. Readability conventions noted include various types of headings, strategic use of fonts and stanzas, and the inclusion of additional information that supports deep comprehension of the subject matter. While studies have occurred regarding other textual forms or formats in relation to reader response, specific work with the verse-novel and its use with struggling and reluctant readers is very limited, with professional articles appearing in place of research-oriented discussions. In the current study, scrutiny of available verse-novels is an important contribution as our findings may open a door for further exploration of these resources with participants in classroom settings. Implications for further research with students in schools are discussed in detail.

Introduction

Verse-novels, a form evolving from classic texts such as Homer's *Illiad*, are advancing as poetic narratives within the field of children's and young adult literature. We define the verse novel as a book-length story in poetry format and, judging from the 22 contemporary Canadian titles interrogated in this current research study, verse novels are managing to present rich and powerful stories in succinct ways. Van Sickle (2006) identifies three subcategories within this emerging genre: the poetic singular voice, the dramatic monologue, and the multiple voice, and each one carries expectations that may relate to the creation, readability, and evaluation of verse novels. Alexander (2005) provides an overview of the publishing history of verse novels and spotlights the manner in which verse novels are generally presented in short sections, each with its own heading or title that is sometimes the name of the character if multiple voices are present. Because of the visual and immediate language—not exclusive to verse-novels, certainly, but common— verse-novels are often strong choices for reading aloud and this, combined with their potential for

enhanced readability related to independent decoding, may make them a rich and versatile classroom resource.

This research study was developed to identify contemporary Canadian verse-novels for young people and then interrogate these novels for current patterns and trends in form and content. The study set was collected through a variety of methods to achieve the group of 22 titles. Following the collection of books, content analysis was conducted utilizing emerging categories, including definitions of genre adapted from Kiefer (2010), as well as criteria based on Dresang's (1999) work on Radical Change—the notion that books for children are evolving with respect to forms and formats, perspectives, and boundaries.

Content analysis has been specified as a "careful, detailed, systematic examination and interpretation of a particular body of material in an effort to identify patterns, themes, biases, and meanings" (Berg, 2009, p. 338). This process of content analysis involves the "simultaneous coding of raw data and the construction of categories that capture relevant characteristics of the document's content" (Merriam, 1998, p.160). We also applied an adapted version of Braun and Clarke's (2006) model for conducting thematic analysis in a step-by-step manner. Working to become familiar with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, and defining and naming themes, were stages completed prior to presenting the themes in this article.

The categories the researchers in this study employed in content analysis were thus determined by a combination of both inductive and deductive means (Berg, 2009; Merriam, 1998), utilizing Dresang's (1999) ideas about Radical Change relating in particular to changing forms and formats in books of the digital age, as well as other categories inspired by previous studies on Canadian novels for youth (Brenna, 2010, 2015). See Appendix A for a copy of the initial analysis chart that was applied to each book. In addition to these headings, notes were also taken under "Other" for additional information that emerged during the reading of the set of books.

Definitions and Summary of the Literature

Cullings' (2015) doctoral dissertation identifies that there is very little published work regarding novels in verse. According to Alexander (2005), the verse-novel is a "new phenomenon in the world of children's literature" that is "becoming increasingly apparent" (p. 269). However, as Campbell (2004) notes, "A long story told in verse is probably the prototype for all literature, but this approach to storytelling faded away with the appearance of the prose novel in the eighteenth century" (p. 1).

Cullings' (2015) definition of verse-novels describes a text where "the entire story is told in the form of non-rhyming free verse. Very often each section is less than a page in length and only rarely more than two or three pages. Usually each of these sections is given a title to orientate the reader, which may indicate the speaker, or contextualize the content, or point to the core theme. The form lends itself to building each section around a single perspective or thought or voice or incident" (p. 270). Alexander also indicates that such a definition is "elastic, since…it is still evolving" (p. 270). While Alexander's article references the growth of the verse-novel in Australia and the United States, with its prominence in Australia further verified by Holland-Batt (2013), and with some indication that verse-novels are also beginning to appear in the United Kingdom (Alexander, 2005), there is little focussed discussion on the body of available Canadian work or its impact in classrooms, a gap in scholarly discourse which this current study is intended to identify.

While large-scale studies of Canadian work are lacking in relation to the rise of verse novels, there are a number of available explorations of particular titles and content. Van Sickle's (2011) book chapter on three verse novels, for example, includes Kevin Major's (2003) *Ann and Seamus*, focusing on how landscapes and elements of the natural world are included as integral to plot and characterization. Kokkola's (2016) analysis, while not relating to Canadian content, also highlights the importance of nature, opening further a possibility that the verse novel form may lend itself to sensory feedback from the world around us, just as Michaels' (2003) discussion interrogates images of "home." Other work (e.g., Campbell, 2004; Sieruta, 2005) addresses the validity of verse novels and issues of assessment.

While surprisingly little academic study can be located in relation to the use of verse-novels in classroom settings, especially where the Canadian context is concerned, a number of professional articles are available that recommend this increasingly popular narrative form. Verse Novels have thus been extensively described as useful materials for today's classroom (Angel, 2004; Cadden, 2011; Campbell, 2004; Gallo, 2006; Leiper-Estabrooks, 2011; Napoli & Ritholz, 2009; Rose, 2012; Scales, n.d.; Schneider, 2004, 2012; Vardell, 2014). Verse novels are discussed in particular as supports for English literacy classes (Angel, 2004; Cadden, 2011; Campbell, 2004; Leiper-Estabrooks, 2011; Napoli & Ritholz, 2009; Rose, 2012; Scales, n.d.; Schneider, 2004), and also in relation to social justice topics in the classroom (Vardell, 2014).

One reason for the popularity of verse novels in the field of Education, according to professional discussions, relates to their unique form in verse (Angel, 2004; Cadden, 2011; Scales, n.d.; Schneider, 2004), which makes verse novels not only materials for poetry learning, but also offers an engaging form of story in order to develop students' imaginations. In terms of the use of verse novels, Angel (2004) and Scales (n.d.) suggest that teachers can employ verse novels to introduce poetry studies. Assisted by strong connections to characters and situations in verse novels, it is even suggested that through verse novels, readers can turn into poetry lovers (Leiper-Estabrooks, 2011). Actual classroom research is required, however, in order to identify whether verse novels really do pave the way for the enjoyment of poetry.

Verse novels are specifically listed as important materials in poetry writing classes (Schneider, 2004, 2012). In terms of assisting teachers, verse novels are suggested as instructional supports to garner ideas for teaching poetry writing (Schneider, 2004). Also, Schneider (2004) suggests that verse novels assist with classroom management, as interest is kept through the study of several poems in each class while at the same time the story is moving forward. Again, classroom studies that look further at link to Education—for example, through enhanced classroom management and student attention—are highly recommended.

According to Cadden (2011), the uniqueness in verse novels is that novels in verse offer a connection among three different genres: drama, poetry, and novels, although this view may be problematic when we consider how many texts in addition to verse novels blend all of the above. Nevertheless, as Cadden notes, verse novels may be a powerful way for students to develop understanding and comprehension of different genres, assisting appreciation of contemporary literature that involves multiple genres or media.

In addition to supporting studies of poetry and multigenres, because a verse novel is composed of short passages, it is discussed in the professional literature as promoting students' imaginations towards fully and vividly understanding the novel as a whole (Angel, 2004; Scales, n.d.; Schneider, 2004). Since not all the details are written in the text, students can employ their own imagination to "fill the blanks" (Scales, n.d., para. 10), developing inference skills.

Verse novels are also listed in many professional articles as appealing reading materials for students, especially struggling readers in the class (Angel, 2004; Leiper-Estabrooks, 2011; Napoli & Ritholz, 2009). Napoli and Ritholz (2009) pose that verse novels can maintain struggling readers' interests in reading through easily understandable language and established personal connections between readers and characters. The connections between readers and the characters in verse novels are described in relation to feelings such as those which might appear when reading someone's personal diary (Napoli & Ritholz, 2009; Winship, 2002).

In addition, in Angel's (2004) article, verse novels are described as widely and appealingly utilized in classrooms because they are short and easy to read for students. While this description is not necessarily accurate with respect to all verse novels, it may be correct to suggest that fewer words in most verse novels, as compared to prose novels, result in more expedient decoding by readers, although the amount of thinking required can equate to similar time on task in terms of deep comprehension. Novels in verse can appear deceptively simple, and research on young readers' comprehension strategies in regard to verse novels would be highly informative.

Angel (2004) suggests that another reason for welcoming verse novels into schools is that students may already be familiar with their forms, as these readers may connect them, in terms of their layout, to song lyrics which are increasingly available online. Angel concludes that such familiarity promotes the acceptance of verse novels among young readers, although in depth research is also necessary here to validate this statement.

In addition to increasing students' interest in reading, verse novels are discussed as assisting students in tests (Rose, 2012). Focusing on Smarter Balanced Assessment (SBA), Rose (2012) noted that verse novels can be good materials for increasing young readers' familiarity with literary devices which frequently appear in testing situations. A bonus here could be that verse novels often provide a diverse and large number of literary devices in one book (Rose, 2012), and yet so might prose novels and poetry; further differentiation is required if we are to isolate verse novels as particularly beneficial for reasons of test scores or mastery of literary knowledge.

Murphy (1989) identifies that the verse novel, like its counterpart in prose, is continuing to evolve, and as such, a conceptualization of the verse-novel must remain conditional, relative, and developing. It appears critical to take stock of verse-novel characteristics in current time periods, noticing common patterns and themes, as well as considering trends over time through ongoing analysis. It is also important to explore the effects of verse-novels with students, however in order to do so, researchers are well advised to understand the status of the field generally, with information about verse-novels currently available. So, then, emerges this study as a summary of available Canadian verse-novels for young people, and content therein, in order to inspire and advance further research in classroom settings. As Campbell (2004) questions, prompting us to go further, "…do the kids really like these books?" (p. 4).

Methodology

Qualitative content analysis was chosen as a process for data collection in this comprehensive survey of contemporary Canadian verse-novels. Such content analysis was developed as a "careful, detailed, systematic examination and interpretation of a particular body of material in an effort to identify patterns, themes, biases, and meanings" (Berg, 2009, p. 338). This process of content analysis resulted in "simultaneous coding of raw data and the construction of categories that capture relevant characteristics of the document's content" (Merriam, 1998, p.160). Inductive as well as deductive means were thus applied to derive categories for investigation (Berg, 2009; Merriam, 1998). See Appendix A for the data analysis chart.

The book set of 22 titles (see Appendix B) was achieved through multiple sources. These sources included: word-of-mouth; the responses of 68 Canadian publishers to query emails; use of the WorldCat Encyclopedia; and reviews from the online *CM Magazine* as well as articles and reviews in *The Canadian Children's Book News*. Efforts were made to interrogate only Canadian materials, using Canadian publishers and Canadian authors as the two required conditions for including books in the study set. It was the intent of the research team to locate and analyze all of the Canadian verse novels published since 1995, with the goal of identifying patterns and trends over a twenty-year period, although our study set did extend into titles published in early 2016.

Titles considered for our study, but not included, are Jenn Kelly's "Jackson Jones" series, published in 2010 and 2011. Although Kelly resides in Ottawa, her verse-novels are published by Zonderkidz, an international publisher rather than specifically Canadian. Perhaps contrarily, another Ottawa author's work, *5 to 1* by Canadian writer Holly Bodger, was included in the study set, because the American publisher, Knopf, has a Canadian counterpart. One other title considered but disqualified was Anne Carson's (1998) *Autobiography of Red*, as it was written for adults. While some of the titles we have included do include prose as well as poetry, at least half of each book involves poetic forms, and most of the titles on the list are composed entirely of poetry.

Following individual content analysis applied to books in the study set, results were compared to explore differences as well as similarities. Patterns in the data as a whole were identified, along with trends emerging from one decade to the next. Limitations in results may be attributed to the qualitative nature of the analysis, with individual researchers operating through a personal interpretive stance. In addition, particular Canadian verse-novels may have been missed although diligence was applied in attempting to achieve a complete sample of books in print.

Findings

General Patterns and Trends

The publication of Canadian verse-novels appears to be increasing, with Figure 1 (below) identifying this trend. Before 2010, approximately one verse novel was published each year since 2003 (with none in 2004) while beginning in 2010, three have been published each year (except for 2012). By the time of this study, in early 2016, one verse novel had already been published with the potential for more by year's end.
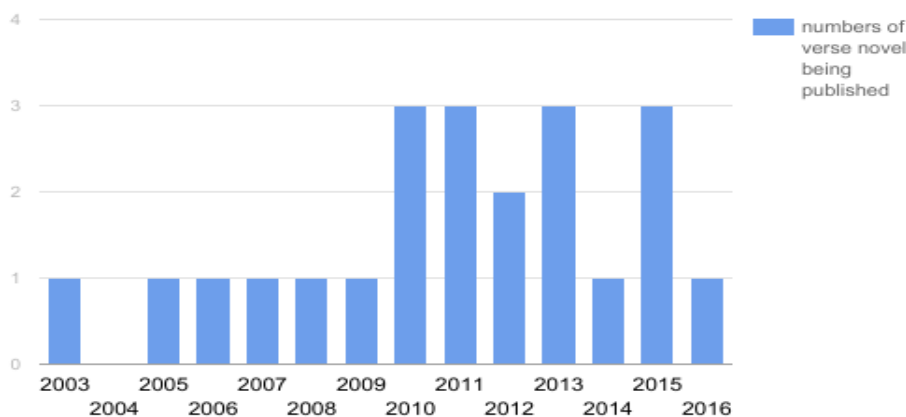

Figure 1: Number of Canadian Verse Novels Published Each Year

Interestingly, almost all of the verse-novels were written by female authors, with only three male authors in the mix (one of whom published two of the books) compared to thirteen female authors (two of whom published two books each, with another one publishing four books each). Another interesting finding relates to genre: twelve of the verse-novels are realistic fiction; five are historical fiction; one is a blend of historical fiction and fantasy due to the inclusion of a ghost character; another one is a blend of realistic fiction and fantasy; and three fantasy titles appear. Of these three fantasy titles, one is a dystopian fantasy, one is a modern fairy tale/fantasy blend, and another one is a humorous contemporary fantasy. In contrast to the humor of the latter two fantasy titles, both written in rhyming couplets by the same author, all of the other books rely on serious subject matter, a common and striking pattern in the set of verse-novels, with one title, Green's *Root Beer Candy and Other Miracles*, offering some opportunities for comic relief through the characterization of a spoon-stealing grandmother.

It is anticipated that classroom study could support and deepen the social justice potential inherent in many of these 22 titles. *Root Beer Candy and Other Miracles*, for example, presents a secondary character with cystic fibrosis whose role is to inspire the book's protagonist to live in the present even as her parents demonstrate a possibility of divorce. Other titles that involve secondary characters with disabilities include Fullerton's (2010) *Burn*, provoking questions about ability in relation to primary versus secondary characters.

Settings that invoke social consciousness appear in a number of titles including Fullerton's (2008) *Libertad*, a story that can inspire discussions about illegal immigration. Bodger's (2015) 5 to 1, a dystopian novel set in futuristic India, presents themes on gender selection and arranged marriage well worth classroom consideration and debate. Ostlere's (2011) *Karma*, another title set in India but during the 1984 assassination of Indira Ghandi, elicits responses on religion and cultural conflict. Porter's (2005, 2011) novels *The Crazy Man* and *I'll Be Watching*, both placed in historical, rural Saskatchewan, present aspects of prejudice worth considering carefully in today's climate, while Leavitt's (2012) *My Book of Life by Angel*, one of the most gripping titles in the set, introduces child prostitution. Bullying appears as a common theme in many novels, including Phillips' (2010) *Fishtailing*, MacLean's (2013) *Nix Minus One*, and Choice's (2013) *Jeremy Stone*, while suicide appears in Fullerton's (2007) *Walking on Glass* as well as in her previous (2006) title *In the Garage*.

Perhaps most striking is that most of the 22 titles under investigation carry multiple themes of a highly serious nature, offering the opportunity for in depth classroom discussion and response to important topics. These serious themes will be discussed again later in this article with respect to the activation of critical literacy (Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002).

Patterns also appear relating to the target audience-age and other story choices that include point-of-view, story tense, character age, and character gender. In terms of audience, most of the titles—evaluated for complexity of language as well as content— seem geared towards a wide reading age, with only one title, Weston's (2013) rhyming fairy tale fantasy *Prince Puggley of Spud and the Kingdom of Spiff*, limited to readers younger than twelve. Two of the titles, Porter's (2005) *The Crazy Man* and Green's (2016) *Root Beer Candy and Other Miracles* are deemed suitable for eight-years-old and up, and a great many of the titles seem appropriate for later elementary school as well as high school-age and older, potentially operating as crossover young adult/adult material. Leavitt's (2012) *My Book of Life by Angel*, chronicling the story of a fictional young prostitute working Vancouver's downtown Eastside at the time of the Pickton murders, is one such potentially crossover title.

In terms of point-of-view and story tense, the group of verse-novels appear overwhelmingly in first person present tense, with only two titles—both Weston's (2008, 2013) and comprised of rhyming couplets—written in third-person past tense, and another title— Leavitt's (2012) *My Book of Life by Angel*—written in first-person past tense. Character age tends towards the high teens, while a few titles present secondary characters through even older adult voices. There is only a slightly higher number of female characters in this set of books as compared to male characters, interesting in comparison to the number of authors who are female (thirteen female vs three male).

Many of the stories unfold as journals or diaries, or otherwise personal writing such as what Ostelere's (2011) character Sandeep keeps in a notebook. Similarly, Weston's most recent title is framed as a memoir by the grandmother of one of the characters. In contrast, Phillips' (2010) book is developed as poetic assignments written by each of the four characters for a high school English class in addition to two other voices: their teacher and a guidance counsellor. Almost all of the books have received reviews of excellence, and higher numbers of these 22 books than what might be expected from a disparate group of texts are award winners. Three of the 22 are Governor General's (GG) Award winners, with four others appearing on the GG shortlist. Numerous other titles have received Canadian Library Association honours, or awards such as the Geoffrey Bilson Award for historical fiction as well as provincial award recognition.

It is interesting to consider the prevalence of award winners in this set of books. Awards for contemporary verse-novels are evident in other countries, as well. Kwame Alexander's *The Crossover*, a story about twin brothers who are basketball stars, won the 2015 Newberry Medal from the American Library Association. *One,* Sarah Crossan's title about conjoined twins, recently won the 2016 Carnegie Medal, the most coveted children's book prize in the United Kingdom. Because of the small number of verse-novels published worldwide, it seems interesting that so many of them are notable award winners.

Other intriguing findings appear in relation to conventions for readability. Rather than a particular formula for supporting comprehension, each author/publishing team seems to have developed individual strategies for their respective books, although several commonalities appear: use of headings (section titles, chapter titles, and titles of individual poems); use of font, stanzas, and additional pages to support clarity; and use of conventions to set up dialogue.

Headings

Many of the books set each separate poem on a new page, with the title at the top in bold and/or larger and/or different font from the rest of the poem, and reserve a single or double page for chapter or section titles. Sometimes titles of poems are repeated, and flagged as repeated, serving to enhance connections, as in headings from *The Apprentice's Masterpiece* (Little, 2008): "Commission (1)" (p. 28) and "Commission (2)" (p. 96). Major's (2003) *Ann and Seamus* uses the first sentences or phrases of each poem as the title, and this line appears in capital letters at the top of the poem without additional spacing afterwards. Similar in technique related to poem titles, Maclean's (2013) *Nix Minus One* employs, in bold, the first words, phrases, or sentences that lead in to each poem, with an extra space between this connecting title and the rest of the poem. For example, this book's first installment appears like this:

I'm puffing up the hill

> to Swiff Dunphy's place,
> delivering a letter from our PO Box
> that should've gone in his. (p. 1)

In multiple voice verse-novels, such as Phillips' (2010) *Fishtailing*, clarity is sometimes enhanced further as each separate poem is titled with the name of the character who is speaking. Similarly, Weber's (2011) *Yellow Mini*, with a cast of 13 characters, presents the name of each character under the title of their poems, while Pignat's (2014) *The Gospel Truth* includes the phrase "according to…" and the name of the character, beside each title. In addition, the titles of poems in *The Gospel Truth* are distinguished by wider spacing between their letters in comparison to the spacing between letters in the words of the poems themselves.

Other books, such as Ostlere's (2011) *Karma* and Bodger's (2015) *5 to 1*, establish voice through naming the sections or individual chapters with the character's name. Some of the books employ section titles in creative spots, either as running headers or, in one case (*The Apprentice's Masterpiece*) as horizontal reminders running down along the right-hand side of each page. In *The Apprentice's Masterpiece*, as well, titles of each separate poem appear in the left margin of the same line in which the poems begin. Weston's (2008, 2013) verse-novels separate the story into more traditional chapters that unfold in stanzas comprised of rhyming couplets. Prendergast (2013, 2014), in the bodies of her series' books *Audacious* and *Capricious,* employs reverse white brushstroke font on black patches for the chapter titles, and poem titles in bold black capital letters, clearly distinguishing these headings for readers.

Font

In one of the books, Leavitt's (2012) *My Book of Life by Angel*, more traditional titles are not used for chapters or individual poems, just quotations from *Paradise Lost* on full pages that lead into each section of the book. The first letter of each poem is bolded, a subtle yet effective way of separating the poems from each other, and, as with the other books, the beginning of each poem always occurs on a new page.

In addition to differing font sizes between headings and the body of the text, font changes are also used throughout the text for a variety of reasons. Italics are fairly commonly used (i.e., *Jeremy Stone*; *I'll Be Watching*) to flag situations where characters remember lines from reading materials or recall dialogue, as well as to emphasize individual words or phrases. Similarly, capital letters and font size are both used to create emphasis. For example, in *Capricious* (Prendergast, 2014), Genie says to Ella, "*But what on EARTH is your sister wearing*" (p. 59). In Zorgamazoo (Weston, 2008), varying sizes of font are often used to catch the reader's attention.

Font is also used to flag the inclusion of languages other than English, as in pale type for the Spanish titles that flag poems repeated entirely in Spanish in Fullerton's (2008) *Libertad*.

One other use of font towards keeping track of the speaker occurs when both Phillips (2010) and Weber (2011) utilize different types of font to flag particular characters. In Weber's *Yellow Mini*, this occurs along with background colour, where one character's contributions occur entirely as black print on a gray background.

Stanzas

All 22 books in the set employ stanzas, with spaces between, rather than continuous lines. The stanzas themselves support reader comprehension as through their organized content they illuminate the progression of key ideas. Like many of the other authors of these books, Prendergast

(2013, 2014), for example, uses short stanzas with spaces between each, much as a writer might devise paragraphs, and includes additional spacing as line breaks when the thinker or speaker changes. Another unique treatment of stanza capability appears in Green's (2016) *Root Beer Candy and Other Miracles*. Here, the author includes onomatopoeia flush left, italicized, in its own brief section:

Beep.
Beep (p. 176).

In addition, Green (2016) also inserts stanzas in play script formatting, representing Bailey's imagined speeches with an inanimate object.

Variations on stanza length can also be found in works like *Jeremy Stone* (Choyce, 2013) and *I'll Be Watching* (Porter, 2011), where the authors present single words in a line for emphasis. Both of these books also employ indented lines for emphasis or as a strategy to connect ideas, enhancing understanding, while other verse-novels, such as *The Apprentice's Masterpiece* (Little, 2008), insist that each line begin flush left.

The most striking example of stanza length and spacing appears in Leavitt's (2012) *My Book of Life by Angel* (p. 80-82), where at a particularly grim point in the story as Angel's pimp brings in a new, younger child as a prostitute, each phrase of the continued narration appears on separate pages: "…an angel. (page break) A little one. (page break) A little girl. (page break). Another example of stanza size that enhances comprehension is in reference to the character of Addie in *I'll Be Watching* (Porter, 2011); small Addie's voice is heard in particularly spare lines of limited number (i.e. p. 109).

Bodger (2015) alternates free verse stanzas with sections of prose, helping readers distinguish between the two first-person voices that carry this story through the style of their contributions. Fullerton (2007) alternates between two voices where BJ writes in prose and Alex enters thoughts into a poetry journal. Phillips (2010) includes between her free verse stanzas the occasional memo between an English teacher and a guidance counsellor, and Sherrard (2013) includes a prose "Letter to Dad.docx (conclusion)" (p. 197) as the very last entry of the novel.

The general use of short, economical lines, particularly noteworthy in books for younger audiences age ten and up, such as *The Crazy Man* (Porter, 2005) and *Burn* (2010), is another support for comprehension as readers can digest key ideas without the extraneous vocabulary of syntax. Because all of these verse-novels emerge from a first-person point of view, formal metric patterns may take second place to the rhythms of ordinary speech, something that Campbell (2004) notes more generally in terms of the precedence of natural language.

Walking on Glass (Fullerton, 2007), for example, for ages 14 and up, commonly displays three or four words per line, and an average of ten lines per page that invoke concrete images, supporting relatively easy decoding of tremendously complex subject matter about teen violence, parental suicide and assisted death. *Fishtailing* (Phillips, 2010) is another verse-novel written for older readers ages 14 – 17, and deals with teen bullying, violence, rebellion, alcoholism and suicide, in contributions as short as three lines, with poems rarely extending beyond a single page.
Additional Pages

Some of the verse-novels include sections of information such as prologues (*I'll be Watching*; *The Apprentice's Masterpiece*) or maps on the fly leaf (*Libertad*) that set up the action or report necessary historical details related to story background. Other books (*Libertad* included) present additional information in an *Author's Note* at the end, particularly if it is interesting but

not crucial to understanding the story. Occasionally, key terms are also defined through introductory pages (*The Apprentice's Masterpiece*) rather than relegated to a glossary at the end of the book. Weber's (2011) *Yellow Mini* includes sketches, sometimes as full-page spreads, to represent key aspects of the action. Similarly, seven of Canadian artist David Blackwood's prints are included in Major's (2003) *Ann and Seamus*, complementing the story by reflecting action occurring in the text placed opposite.

Dialogue Conventions

One of the trickiest aspects of format in verse-novels involves dialogue. Unlike standard paragraphs, where indenting and quotation marks, as well as commonly including the name of the speaker, are conventions readers learn through experience, the formatting of dialogue in verse-novels has occurred through many book-specific techniques. For example, in *Jeremy Stone* (Choyce, 2013), understanding of the speaker during sections of dialogue between Jeremy and his mother, when he discovers her lying on the living room floor, is enhanced by spacing the conversation in left and right columns.

Are you okay?	Yes.
She sounded annoyed.	
What are you doing?	I'm meditating.
	Just shut up so I can
	meditate. (p.36)

Sections in two-voice format also appear in Ostlere's (2011) *Karma*, with one voice left-aligned and the other voice right-aligned. Sherrard's (2013) *Counting Back from Nine* offers similar spacing with respect to texting that occurs between two characters.

Reading Comprehension and Critical Literacy

With respect to reading comprehension and the complexity of these 22 verse-novels, it appears that difficult subject matter is generally communicated through minimal yet rich vocabulary, presenting perhaps simpler reading in terms of the process, yet accompanied by demands on higher-level thinking. The critical reading experience of most of these verse-novels will involve serious expectations around making inferences, with a necessity that readers interpret between the lines as time and speaker change between individual pieces of text and sections of text. This reliance on inferencing to achieve deep comprehension is similar to what is expected in graphic novels, where readers must invent the action occurring between panels. It means that while the actual number of words, and straightforward decoding time, may be shorter than for regular novels, the thinking and interpretation involved requires depth and complex processing.

In some of the verse-novels, repetition of particular words and phrases appears that might double as both aesthetic accoutrement, activating rhythm, and comprehension support, where the repeated words operate as a placeholder while the reading brain skims ahead to predict the new text while simultaneously resting on the familiar. Ostlere's (2011) *Karma*, for example, includes lines like the following: "How to begin. / Click. / How. To. Begin. / Click. Click. Click. / I like the sound of a ballpoint pen. / Click. Click. Click. Click. Click (p. 4)".

The use of concrete poetry in works like Fullerton's (2010) *Burn* is one other way that comprehension is advanced, with the shape or style of the text reinforces its meaning. For example, words such as "floats through the air" (p. 42) is written on an ascending line, and the word

"disappears (p. 43) is written in faded type. *Jeremy Stone* also offers word pictures, as in the following example:

> but
> he
> thinned
> down (p. 13).

Another author who occasionally includes this kind of concrete poetry is Bodger (2015), with inclusions such as "A n#mber" (p. 7), although critics have listed this technique as potentially distracting from the line of her story. One of Weston's books, *Prince Puggly and the Kingdom of Spiff* (2013), presents concrete poetry on almost every page, enthusiastically embracing every possible use of this technique. Critical literacy also accelerates deep comprehension when readers combine decoding with evaluative social thinking. This practice is conceptualized by Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys' (2002) four dimensions framework regarding critical literacy: "(1) disrupting the commonplace, (2) interrogating multiple viewpoints, (3) focusing on sociopolitical issues, and (4) taking action and promoting social justice" (p. 382). The serious themes of Osteler's (2011) *Karma* and Leavitt's (2012) *My Book of Life by Angel* present voices and subjects previously unheard in children's literature. Asking students to consider these and other books in a critical literacy framework might be highly productive. Another classroom focus could involve literary awareness of forms and formats, with students asked to evaluate and experiment with stylistic choices. How different is a story presented in prose narrative? In rhyming couplets? In free verse? Asking students to transpose a story from one form to another, and consider the results, might be an insightful critical thinking activity related to author choices and styles.

Conclusions and Implications for Further Research

According to Radical Change, Dresang's (1999; 2008) notion of how children's literature is changing over time in relation to digital age innovations, changes in forms and formats, perspectives, and boundaries can be seen in contemporary North American books for young people. The increase of verse-novels can be contextualized within the discussion of forms and formats, acknowledging how various techniques such as word-pictures (Dresang, 2008) are appearing in this framework along with the provocative inclusion of silence through empty spaces on the page. In addition, verse-novels also seem to lend themselves to changing boundaries and changing perspectives, as demonstrated by the integration of very serious subject matter in a great number of the titles in this study set.

In addition to the influence of current technologies on children's text and illustration, an increasing awareness of supports for struggling readers also impacts book production, with research needed in relation to the verse-novel and reading comprehension. While studies have occurred related to various text types and struggling readers (e.g., Rasinski et. al, 2016), specific work on the verse-novel and its use with struggling and reluctant readers is limited, with professional articles appearing (e.g., Raybuck, 2015) in place of research-oriented discussions.

Combined with ideas about the simplicity of verse novel texts, in terms of decoding, serious subject matter, as well as the necessity of interpreting multiple formatting conventions, may cause a difference of opinion when analyzing verse novels for difficulty. What could be seen by some as a simplistic or easier version of a story may, in fact, be of equal or greater difficulty in terms of

the demands on a reader's thinking—although the sum of the number of words in verse novels may indeed be less than their prose narrative counterparts.

We encourage further research into the potentiality of verse-novels with particular groups of readers. We are interested, for example, in whether the amount of print on the page has an effect on reading comprehension for populations of struggling readers or learners for whom English is a second language. Does the emotional punch carried by many verse-novels engage reluctant readers in ways other texts do not? Do particular ages or genders of readers gravitate towards verse-novels when opportunities for self-selection are offered?

We also encourage explorations of metacognitive reading comprehension strategies students apply before, during and after the reading of verse-novels, and comparisons of these strategies to reading behaviors attached to other forms such as regular narrative novels and graphic novels. What aspects of verse-novels make meaning easier or harder for students to access? Do verse-novels really demand more inference-making, through gaps in the lyrical narrative? And what types of instruction support comprehension and enjoyment related to verse-novel reading?

Considering another avenue for research, what is the relationship between access to verse-novels and the reading and writing of other types of poetry? Do verse-novels really offer a bridge to poetic forms in more productive ways than individual poetry selections can provide?

We are cognizant that school resources are hugely important, and that choices are critical related to selecting children's literature for the classroom, especially if we are to engage and instruct contemporary students in the most productive ways possible. Attention to the verse-novel in its capacity to support lifelong readers as well as carry us to new heights of classroom instruction, for a variety of purposes, is highly recommended. The success of verse-novels, evident through their increased publication and their numerous literary awards, beckons us towards an excellent opportunity to ask and answer important questions about their potential application in schools.

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Appendix A: Verse-Novel Content Analysis Chart

Title/Series? Author Name & Gender/Year	Main Character(s) Name/ Age/Gender	Genre*	Audience Age*	Point of View*	Format*	Conventions for Read-ability*	New Perspectives.*	Changing Boundaries*	Parents*	Setting*	Story and time frame*	Book Awards

**Notes were also taken for "Other" regarding additional information

Specific Analysis Criteria Relating to *:

*Genre: Realistic Fiction; Historical Fiction; Fantasy-animal; Fantasy-human based in real world; Fantasy-human based in other world; Science Fiction; Mystery; Non-fiction; Narrative non-fiction; Other (specify)

*Audience Age: Birth-7; Junior 8+; Intermediate 11+; Young Adult 14+; Adult (for multiple audience, include all e.g., J/I/YA)

*Point of View: First Person/Third Person; Present/Past Tense

*Format: Sequential/Non-sequential in terms of time

*Conventions for Readability (specify): Header? Chapter Titles? Use of Italics for…? Bold Print for…? etc.

*New Perspectives (specify): Multiple Perspectives; Previously Unheard Voices (e.g.: exceptionality; minority culture; dialect; minority sexual orientation; occupation; socio-economic level)

*Changing Boundaries (specify): Subjects previously forbidden; new Settings; Unresolved Endings

*Parents: 1/2; specify marital status

*Setting: Landscape (urban, rural, unknown)/Context (Canadian, non-Canadian, unknown)

*Storyframe: Days/Weeks/Months/Years/Unknown; Timeframe: Contemporary/Past/Unknown
Appendix B Bibliography of Verse-Novel Set

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