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“We Do Have a Voice!”  
Trends in Adolescents’ Submissions to Teen Ink Magazine, 1990 to the Present

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Trends in Adolescents’ Submissions to Teen Ink Magazine, 1990 to the Present

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with input from Stephanie and John Meyer and Project Zero’s DM2 Research Team  
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### **Abstract**

In seeking to identify trends in adolescent writing over the past twenty years, we analyzed over five hundred pieces published in Teen Ink, a magazine of teen art and writing which has been in existence since 1989. We found a number of notable trends, including (in fiction) increasing emotional nuance and a rise of dystopian fiction, and (in non-fiction) an increase in international concern and data-driven argumentation. However, while there have been certain changes, much has stayed the same over the years, including choice of subject matter, social issues addressed, and types of argumentation employed.

## Introduction

Here is what we know about AquaGem: her real name is Tori, she lives in Kalamazoo, Michigan, and, as of this writing, she has been a member of the website of the teen literary magazine Teen Ink for sixteen months, twenty-five days, twenty-three hours, thirty-four minutes, and forty-eight seconds. According to her personal profile on the site, she loves “going to concerts, having [her] own opinions, and debating the complexity of life.” She counts her iPod Touch and her Blackberry among her favorite gadgets and enjoys “aquarium keeping,” “Law and Order SVU,” and the music of Flyleaf and Disturbed. (She has even “seen a lot of these bands in concert.”) AquaGem writes short stories, “attempts” poetry, and, at only seventeen years old, has “finished 3 novels.” Having published one poem and three short stories on the Teen Ink website and one short story in the print magazine, she is among the more prolific and successful contributors to the magazine.

What sets AquaGem apart from most of the website’s membership, though—and there are currently over a hundred thousand active users—is her story “Opulence,” which was published in the December 2008 issue. The story is currently ranked by fellow members as the first most liked and third most commented-upon short story on the magazine’s website. Set in a presumably not-so-distant future, “Opulence” is the first in a trilogy of stories featuring a seventeen-year-old orphaned girl named Jade Wordsworth. Written in the first person, the story revolves around the concept of an all-powerful government—an increasingly common theme of popular Teen Ink stories—which Jade describes in her self-introduction to a potential recruit: “As a tracker, I find people like you and I bring them to O.P.U.L.E.N.C.E. (Official Political Understanding Lending Everyone Navigation for Co-Existing Ethereals.) Every witch must register, train, and become a member by law. In fact, the organization is like a government

targeted toward witches.” The story (and its two sequels), which the website classifies as “action adventure,” is at once an adventure story, a comment on contemporary society and politics, and a meditation on courage, alienation, and power.

Clearly, “Opulence” resonates with Teen Ink’s readers: to date it has received 576 comments, with more added almost daily. In line with the enthusiasm and mutual support that generally characterize the website’s social atmosphere, these comments are also exemplary of the types of comments that much of Teen Ink’s content receives. Comments<sup>1</sup> tend to fall into several categories, including: the superlatively complimentary (“i love this story!!! its so addictive, you emidiatly get cought into it!!! its awsome and i hope that i can read the rest soon!!!! thankk you so much! please keep writeing!:D”); the type of “constructive criticism” high school teachers encourage their students to use (“The beginning is extremely intriguing. I like that we see what it's like from the ‘finder's’ perspective... I would be interested to know how she *feels* about all that she does. The narrator seems a little cold. Overall, very interesting piece”); the unhelpfully negative (“i think it was kinda boaring but ya thats ok”); and the pleas for readers of this piece to read commenters’ own submissions (“Love it! Soooooo cool. Plzzzzzz someone give me some feedback for my work. I REALLLLLLLLLLY NEEEEEEED IT!!! (: .”)

“Opulence” clearly speaks to Teen Ink’s adolescent readership. My colleagues and I believe that the story’s draw lies in the fact that it contains both elements which have remained popular with Teen Ink readers over the years as well as now-common elements which were not typically present in the magazine’s early issues.

My colleagues and I have been examining adolescent writing that spans the last two decades in efforts to identify what has waned, what has persisted, and what has changed and

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<sup>1</sup> All writing directly quoted from Teen Ink and its website is presented as is, without alteration or editing of any kind.

developed over time. We aim to tie our findings from our Teen Ink analysis with our larger research question regarding the ways adolescents (as individual members of a generation) and adolescence (as a developmental phase) have changed in the past twenty years. This paper will address the ways these changes have manifested in the archives of Teen Ink's fiction and non-fiction archives. Before addressing our findings, however, we will briefly contextualize our data within basic information about the magazine.

### **Background and Methodology**

Prior to conducting research in the archives of Teen Ink, my research team conducted a series of focus groups with adults who have worked with adolescents in a variety of capacities for twenty or more years. (Much of our previous work has focused on the influence of new digital media-- such as the internet, cell phones, and the like-- on teenage lives and culture, and we decided that the upswing in technology's influence on society began around 1990, and thus that the timeframe of our study would be twenty or so years.) After concluding these focus groups, we decided that to compare that which adults told us about teens to that which teens told us (via their writing) about themselves.

Over the course of several months, I combed through over five hundred pieces of writing published in Teen Ink<sup>i</sup>. At first, I generated a representative sampling of data by selecting a certain number of pieces of a certain genre (broadly divided by the magazine into fiction and non-fiction, and further subdivided into categories such as science fiction, personal essay, etc.) from a periodic temporal span. For instance, I selected twenty-five short stories from 1990, 1995, 2000, 2005, and 2010 (or 2009 for months which had not yet passed in 2010), and analyzed them in consecutive order. After combing through this first set, I created thematic codes<sup>ii</sup>, which I then

applied to that set of data retroactively, and then in further randomly-selected and evenly-spaced data samplings. After several courses of this type of analysis, I had a coding scheme with which to look at the data through a more holistic and context-driven lens.

At this point, other members of our research team and I met with John and Stephanie Meyer, who founded and have run the magazine out of Newton, Massachusetts since its inception. We talked with them about our research and the trends we found in Teen Ink's archives as well as more general aspects of the magazine, including its editorial structure and anecdotes from interactions with its contributors over the years. In the following section, I will discuss my findings as well as the information gleaned from that discussion and the Meyers' interpretations of the data I analyzed.

Before diving into the data, I will briefly enumerate a number of primary facts any reader of this paper must know in order to understand my findings. Teen Ink was founded in 1989; it began as a regional publication, and its first issues were sent to teens in the greater Boston area. A few years later, distribution was broadened to the rest of New England and greater New York. In 1996, the magazine began to be distributed nationwide. As awareness and interest grew, so did the number of submissions; the Meyers estimate that last year the magazine received 100,000 submissions, nearly 100 times the number in 1990. The magazine's website, [teenink.com](http://teenink.com), which was founded in 1999, has become increasingly popular in recent years—today there are more than 100,000 registered users—and the ability to submit work online has resulted in a dramatic surge in submissions. The website also enables far more submissions to be read and viewed by its readers; there are thousands of articles on the website that do not appear in the print edition. (Fewer than two percent of submissions are published in the print edition.) Crucially, the website also enables Teen Ink readers and contributors to interact with each other, creating an

international community of teen writers and artists who read, view, and encourage each others' work. In some ways, at this point in time it might be said that the print magazine is a byproduct of its online version, and not, as has arguably been the case until two or three years ago, the other way around.

The editorial process is relatively straightforward. Every submission is read by a staff reader, who decides whether the piece should be tossed, published on the website, or published in the print magazine-- as well as a rationale of that decision. The editors then review the highest-rated pieces, and choose what to publish in the print edition, taking into account the quality of pieces as well as diversity factors. These factors include geographic range and stylistic variety as well as a desire for a range in quality. Explaining this last factor, John Meyer explain that the editors want readers to think, "I could have written [or drawn, painted, etc.] that"; or "I could write [or draw, etc.] better than that." In other words, he wants each issue to inspire more teens to submit more work. Editorial filtering is by design extremely sparse: the only submissions that are rejected outright are those that glorify sex or violence. Controversial topics and political stances are deemed acceptable if they are considered to be well-argued.

### **Findings: Opinion and Non-Fiction<sup>iii</sup>**

Having run the magazine for over two decades, the Meyers have perceived a number of trends in submissions—which, with very few exceptions, aligned with the trends I found in the course of my archival research.

For one, over the course of Teen Ink's run, teens have been extremely reluctant to engage with both time-sensitive and long-standing political issues. By and large, the magazine's personal essays and opinion pieces read as timeless; that is, without noting the date of its

publication, a reader (putting aside stylistic changes) would be hard-pressed to tell whether an essay's argument springs from the nightly news broadcasts of 1990 or from far more recent coverage in the Huffington Post. The topics that come up, again and again, tend to transcend the ever-changing minutiae of daily (and even yearly) news. The topics of foremost concern and attention, established in 1989 and 1990, have remained remarkably constant over time: relationships with family; romance and attraction; nostalgia for childhood; and rumination on the paths to wisdom and ways to do good in the world.

That being said, over the years there have been periodical “blips” (as John Meyer calls relatively short-lived spikes in submissions regarding certain extraordinary national events.) The first such blip occurred in the wake of the Columbine shootings in 1999. However, though there were many articles on the attack submitted to the magazine, their numbers may indicate a degree of concern that their authors did not actually possess. John Meyer notes that these submissions did not exhibit the type of macro reflection one might attribute to them by assumption; rather, he noted, these articles were largely self-focused—they tended to spin the event in terms of “it could happen to me.”

The events of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 triggered a more voluminous and sustained outpouring of submissions, which lasted well until 2002. The magazine received so many submissions, in fact, that the Meyers decided to dedicate the January 2002 issue almost entirely to pieces related to 9/11 and New York City. Interestingly, the editors chose to spin the issue around positive representations of diversity—specifically regarding Islam and immigrants from the Middle East, featuring articles with titles like “My Afghan Mom” and “Introduction to Islam.” John Meyer said that 9/11 prompted a “discussion of larger global issues” for some time after the event; however, in keeping with the politically apathetic and self-focused nature of the



majority of submitters, this has quieted (though not completely disappeared) in recent years.

After 9/11, the two other events that drew a notable number of submissions were Hurricane Katrina and the 2008 presidential elections (particularly Barack Obama's campaign). However, these events did not trigger the type of outpouring inspired by 9/11, and the "blips" were relatively short-lived. Generally speaking, submissions to Teen Ink—at the time of the magazine's inception into the present day—overwhelmingly favor personal experience over matters of national (or international) attention. However, in recent years, these issues, which were traditionally limited to the political non-fiction section of the magazine, have become increasingly prominent—in the fiction section. I will address this later in this paper.

Much about Teen Ink's material has stayed remarkably consistent over the nearly twenty-two years of its existence. For one, the vast-majority of personal essays and opinion pieces exemplify reductionist argumentation—that is, these pieces take naïve and often simplistic stances (with which no reasonable person would disagree) and argue them with equally simplistic persuasive logic.

One 1995 essay, entitled "Should the Death Penalty Be Banned," begins: "There are many things in this society which should be banned, but the death penalty is not one of them. It is definitely the right way to go as far as capital discipline is concerned." The author goes on to argue, "If we had the death penalty, all people would be able to use the streets[,] even in troubled areas." Another, entitled "Free Bambi," which opposes killing suburban deer, argues: "Deer are harmless creatures, and besides, they look so beautiful when they are playing in the snow. It makes you wonder, who would even think of killing such a gentle animal, or any animal at all, because they walk in your yard? Think about it. Do we shoot our neighbors because they walk in our yard?"

Another essay, entitled, “The Creation of the Universe: Where Did the ‘Big Bang’ Come From?” proceeds thusly:

The Big Bang, the theory that the universe was created by the explosion of an immensely dense basketball-sized object, is the most accepted of all the creation theories circulating in the scientific world today. The one problem with this theory is why would this seemingly innocent basketball-sized object explode and create the universe?... So this is what I believe happened. There was not one, but TWO of these objects, lying hundreds of billions, possibly trillions of light years apart, each with a gravitational field millions of times more powerful than that of the largest known black holes. They sat about, spewing gravity until one attracted the other, and vice versa. ...

At least that's my theory. And it's pretty good, mostly because it is the only theory of what caused the big bang that I have heard as of yet. The scientific world may scoff and dismiss my theory, but hey, got any better ideas?

This category of non-fiction writing has, however, changed in one noteworthy way. Early pieces’ evidential paragraphs were generally comprised of platitudes or well-known facts (such as one piece on the Israel/Palestine conflicts which concludes, “When people see that happiness is found through peace, the people can do nothing but demand that the conflict end”) occasionally they cited facts that one would be likely to find in an encyclopedia in order to back up their non-controversial claims. (One essay from 2000, which argues that rainforests are important and need to be protected, cites many rainforest-related statistics, including its estimated number of plant and animal specials as well as its daily rate of destruction.) While more recent pieces exhibit similarly reductionist logic, they tend, by and large, to cite more sources and incorporate more facts. Attributing this loading-on of facts to the effortless availability of the internet—and Wikipedia in particular—seems eminently reasonable.

Aside from a tendency toward simplistic argumentation, there are other phenomena which, for the most part, have remained prominent in non-fiction over time. First is the fact that

the magazine's autobiographical essays (which were and continue to be the mainstay of the non-fiction section) tend to be self-aggrandizing and pedantic. These pieces tend to be simplistic in tone as well as implicit argumentation, suggesting that the writer exemplifies such traits as generosity, open-mindedness, and profound wisdom. These essays often exhibit the same brand of reductionist reasoning exemplified by non-autobiographical expository pieces.

The author of a 1990 piece entitled "Are These Your Friends?" describes "a group of five kids who always seem to be hanging around together. On the outside you would think that they were very happy together. ...If you asked them they'd probably agree, but are they?" The essay goes on to turn the negative experience into a lesson:

In order to be real friends with somebody there are certain qualities you must have. First of all you should respect your friends and their opinions... Another important characteristic is loyalty.... You would never talk about them behind their backs, or tell their secrets to other people...

Now back to the five kids. If these kids really consider themselves best friends, they clearly do not understand the meaning of friendship at all. They put on acts to impress each other and to feel accepted, which shows their lack of respect for who they really are. Also as long as they're included they don't care who they leave out or hurt. Worst of all has to be the way they constantly stab each other in the back...

I'm telling you this as a warning. Don't let it happen to you. I know so much about the situation from experience. I was one of the five kids! Since then I have changed a lot and my friendships have improved because of it.

Many of these essays' tone seems almost parent-like, as if they were parroting adults' advice.

Some authors of this type of piece go even further and criticize their peers' naïveté and foolishness. One such essay, titled "Conformities" and written in stanzas, as in a prose poem, is very harsh on high school students:

The majority of the youths walking before her look and walk... the same way... They also have no opinions of their own...

Individuality is lost, all in the name of false friendships with other clones. Things must change. After spending four years with their exclusive cliques, these poor children will enter the “real world” with no concept of independence. Usual activities include drinking, smoking, drug use... Students need to be taught in a manner that encourages more creativity and independent study. They need to be helped by their teachers and guidance counselors to be themselves. They must be encouraged to appreciate literature, movies, and music in terms of quality not popularity. Most of these teenagers are individuals striving to express themselves. This must be brought out, before or during high school, not afterwards when it’s too late.

Regardless of the author’s motivation for writing this piece—whether it stemmed more from a desire to criticize or enlighten fellow teens—its tone is unambiguously pedantic toward the “poor children” who are the author’s peers (and the intended readership of the piece).

In other essays of this type, imperiousness is not as explicit. In “Mis Amigos”--exemplary of the type of “lesson learned” pieces which relate the wising experience(s) which enable the author to bestow her wisdom upon readers—the author describes her dismay upon learning that not everyone has been able to eradicate racism from their worldview:

She told me... the Mexican guys were kind of scary. I thought that was a mean thing to say but I listened and didn’t even say hello to them...

I decided to say hello to some of the Hispanic men anyway...

My favorite person at the club turned out to be Felipe, one of the chefs. He was the nicest person I had ever met. He always yelled Chreeesy! when I came in...I learned that he had a wife and a son. He worked every day to support them and never complained... He and Porferio, who also worked in the kitchen, always offered to help me. If everyone had the work ethic of those two, the world would be a much better place.

After three months of working with these perfect gentlemen, all my preconceptions about Hispanic people were gone...

No matter what I do with my life, I will remember the man who taught me that no matter what we look like on the outside, we are all the same on the inside.

I know there is nothing I can do to change other people's minds, but I can try to show them how I feel. I can teach them that it is wrong to look down on others just because of their nationality. My town is very racist toward Hispanic people. I was like that once too, but when I met Felipe and Porferio, my views changed dramatically. If I had never met these amazing people, my life wouldn't be the same, and I wouldn't have grown as much as I have.

Like all pieces published in the magazine, pieces of this genre have in recent years exhibited more subtle argumentation and increasingly nuanced analysis of self and society. While more recent first-person essays do exhibit the confidence of earlier pieces, the self-analysis tends to be more ambiguous. "The Swan," a 2009 piece which the magazine categorizes as memoir, describes a moment which the author regards with ambivalence, and seems to not understand. She describes a Christmas gift given to her mother by her father, and her own condescending response to mother's less-than-enthusiastic reaction. The author describes chastising her mother's rudeness and ingratitude, then being sent to her room; afterward, she observes her parents "sitting on the couch, talking, laughing, and acting like nothing happened." The piece ends on an unsure note: did the author do the right thing? What was going on between her parents that she didn't understand? Unlike the authors of those earlier sententious pieces, she leaves her own actions open to interpretation—and, consequently, potential criticism.

Besides stylistic changes, there have been other changes in Teen Ink's non-fiction over time. Pieces published in more recent years display more awareness of the outside world and portray or allude to characteristics of cultures and countries other than middle-class white America. Prior to the late 2000s, there were few pieces that dealt with non-local issues; exceptions include "The Land of Milk Honey," a "why can't we all just get along" piece from 2000 about an Israeli girl's friendship with a Palestinian girl; and "The Gift of Appalachia," a first-person essay about a service trip to rural Virginia (which can be summed up by the line "We

had accomplished something far greater than a house: we'd found unity.'')

In contrast, by the latter half of the 2000s, there were dozens of pieces every year on international issues. Interestingly, the vast majority of these relate typify the narcissism of other types of autobiographical essays; the most common category of internationally-themed essays profound lessons during brief stays in foreign countries. Take for example, 2009's "Sights from Another World," in which the author, who has visited rural China and assumes a moral stance even more patronizing than most:

My friends in China, and many Chinese friends in the United States, consider me the most unpatriotic person they know. Perhaps they're right. Or perhaps I am deficient in some special skill that would allow me to sit in a walnut-paneled room, feasting on dishes from exotic provinces and enjoying the service of uniformed waitresses, giggling with my prep-school friends without thinking about that shack by the stream. I lack, evidently, the ability to react with apathy when I hear laughter drifting from socializing politicians in the next room. Instead I think of herders searching for green pastures in the dry, cracked earth, or the hiccupping peasant I saw wandering the Beijing train station, burlap bag in one hand and liquor bottle in the other, staring wildly through red-rimmed, empty eyes.

The type of identity proclamation exemplified above also manifests itself in what I have termed the "pre-professional" essay. In these essays, teens elucidate their identities in terms of proclivities and abilities—such as writing fiction or playing the violin-- thus rooting their identities in what they do, rather than how or what they think. This number of articles of type has swelled in recent years. Our focus group participants, who also observed this phenomenon, believe that this is due in large part to the increasingly all-consuming and competitive nature of the American college admissions process. This trend began to aggregate in the early 2000s.

Another phenomenon of which the Meyers spoke in conversation is teens' increasingly openness about personal subject matter—as well as, relatedly, their seeming willingness to make themselves vulnerable by discussing these topics. Though pieces of this nature were occasionally

published in the 1990s, this trend became increasingly prominent in the twenty-first century. (The one vulnerable topic that appeared relatively frequently throughout the 1990s was the confusion and social isolation that stems from being biracial.) There has been an increase in pieces about general teenage angst-- one author, describing how writing is a salve for the stresses of daily life, wrote,

I write because otherwise I would scream. Because if I didn't have a pen in my hand, my feelings would circle my mind until they clawed their hurtful essence into the walls of my brain for good. If I didn't write, I would be more confused than a penguin at the North Pole. I write because I would go homicidal if I didn't vent somehow.

Though there are more recent pieces of this type, their content tends to be similar to past essays on personal, vulnerable topics. The most common topics remain issues with friends, schoolwork, and parents.

However, essays which are less generalizable—those that describe issues to which many teens would have difficulty relating—have become increasingly frequent in recent years, and tend to be more emotionally vulnerable than essays which describe a more widely applicable, unspecific *weltschmerz*. Essays of this type tend to concern rarer and/or more controversial topics, most of which concern psychological distress, and many contextualize their own suffering into lessons about tolerance and compassion. Examples of this type include “The Torment of the ‘One in Ten,’” about the difficulties associated with being gay (“Aside from the obvious, homosexuals are no different from heterosexuals. I should know—I am one”); “One Won’t Hurt” (You see, I’m on a ‘strict diet’. You might refer to it as *anorexia nervosa*”); and “Silent Suffering” (“I always felt that I had to conceal my [diagnosis of Crohn’s disease] to be treated with mercy, not to be chastised for having to handle this and have doctors touch my body in ways that most people would find revolting”).

Frank discussion of such matters speaks to a coincident rise in popular culture of intimate matters being discussed online. Though the Meyers noted that the 1994 death of Kurt Cobain incited an upsurge of submissions about suicide, the drastic increase in essays of this type has correlated with the growing ubiquity of online media. Teens who write for the magazine today have grown up in a culture in which personal matters are aired in public online for such as Facebook, MySpace, and the blogosphere. Yet this culture of emotional transparency is not unidirectional; those who share their painful experiences are often virtually embraced by supportive readers—and sometimes even by individuals who have had similar experiences.

Teen Ink’s website is remarkable in many reasons, not only because it has created a community of mutually supportive like-minded young people. One phenomenon that the website allows (and is a benefit unforeseen by John Meyer when he created the website in the mid 1990s) is the creation of what might be called a “safe space.” The author of the essay about his struggle with Crohn’s disease, for instance, was swamped with comments, not a single one of which was derogatory or hurtful. Though most are encouraging of the author and his piece in broad terms (“I read the first three lines and I was immediatly hooked! This is amazing! I'm sorry you have to go thru such struggle, but at least you can turn your experience into something inspirational and amazing. Great job, seriously. (:”), some reference commenters’ similar experiences and their joy at their ability to identify with peers who suffer from this relatively uncommon affliction (“By the time I finished reading this, I was crying. Seriously, crying. I've had Crohn's for almost four years now [I'm 14], and never have seen anyone else [Ha. Under age 50 at least] who had it. I understand everything absolutely you talked about. ...”) The Meyers noted that while the comments are monitored, there have been extremely few instances in which a comment had to be erased because it was insulting or otherwise antagonistic.



In this way, the non-fiction sections of the magazine (both in its print and online versions) provide teens a way of expressing and relating to concrete challenges both rare and universal. By contrast, the fiction section of the magazine enables teens to transcend the world of “real life” in order to address more abstract concerns and interests.

### **Findings: Fiction**

More has changed in Teen Ink’s fiction pieces than in its non-fiction. In general, the biggest change in fiction is that pieces published now are more sophisticated in terms of plot and emotional nuance than those published in the magazine’s early years. More than anything, this finding has more to do with the sheer volume of submissions—the editors have a much broader selection of pieces from which to choose, and there are simply more exceptional stories.

As is the case with Teen Ink’s non-fiction, its fiction submissions can be analyzed through the lenses of a number of content and style categories. One style code that arose in my review of earlier short stories is what I called “author like narrator.” In more recent years there have been fewer pieces of this nature. This code pertains to pieces which read like magazine’s autobiographical essays but are categorized as non-fiction, and which are often written in the third-person. Though we can’t know anything about the author other than his or her name and city, even with this information the degree to which over half of the stories from magazine’s first ten years read like personal experience (that is, these stories are written by, say, Brittany in Baltimore, and featured teenage female protagonists navigating high school striking.) Though there are a good number of stories like this in every issue, this “author like narrator” code has become less and less frequent over the years.

On the other hand, one phenomenon which has risen in frequency (though it still remains

relatively rare) is that of fiction submissions which don't quite fit into any one genre. These tend to be pieces which a) (ethically) appropriate pre-existing ideas or content, and/or b) pervert or hybridize traditional genres (such as fairy tale, science fiction, etc.) For instance, "The Other Side" turns a classic sci-fi style on its head:

"At last," said the Hero. "At last, it has come to this. Goodness stands in the heart of the Citadel, and Evil trembles before the Light." He raised his sword and pointed it at the hulking shadow on the throne. "Here, it will be finished. This is the final battle. Prepare yourself, ye demon!"

Azharis sighed. There was silence for a moment.

"Have you nothing to say, Shadowkind?" demanded the Hero, waving his holy sword imperiously.

"What? No, not really," said the Dark God. "I was just wondering if you were done."

The Hero blinked His face was hidden behind the arcane silvery metal of his helm, but Azharis could still tell. He was a god, after all; he knew these things. Quickly, though, the Hero regained his composure.

"No, fiend," said he, stepping forward. "It is you who are done. Your reign will finally be ended. The people of this world will be free of your scourge forever."

Shaking his head, Azharis folded his black, clawed hands together. "It's always this way with you heroes. Never any consideration. Never any sympathy. And they call me the nasty one."

The Hero paused. This wasn't how it was supposed to go.

Similarly, "Three-Bit, Run-On Fairy Tale" takes advantage of the stock style of a fairy tale, also to humorous effect:

Picture it now, if you will: a winding, generic woodland by a nice hamlet. Or if you don't know what a hamlet is, just don't imagine that part. But perhaps I ought to start with the bit about the miller. Yes, yes, that seems more fitting. Ahem.

Once upon a time, there was a miller. Now the miller was

everything one would expect from one who mills....

The pieces from which these excerpts are taken exemplify the kind of playfulness inherent to fiction that experiments with notions of genre, structure, and ownership of narratives and ideas (such as certain fairy tale tropes, or the classic good/evil dichotomy of much of classic science fiction.) Moreover, it is interesting to note that, unlike the overwhelming majority of fiction (and non-fiction) published in Teen Ink, the pieces excerpted above are purposefully humorous.

In conversation, the Meyers noted that humor has been conspicuously absent throughout the history of the magazine. John Meyer hypothesized that this may be related to teens' fear of risk-taking, a phenomenon which our focus group participants attributed to today's youth. (It is interesting to note, however, that while our focus group participants say that today's teens take fewer risks than those in the past, the risk of trying to be funny in writing did not manifest itself in the 1990s—an era the focus groups proposed harbored more risk-taking teens.)

In my research, I found that, from the magazine's inception to the present, all of the intentionally humorous pieces I came across were characterized by a certain type of humor. All of these pieces were sarcastic and biting—their humor came from assessing the author's intent (which was the opposite of what was stated), rather from content inherently funny unto itself.

Aside from the phenomena mentioned above, one of the most notable trends of recent years is the rather rapid and prominent rise of dystopian short stories. It seems that, in many ways, these nuanced pieces of fiction compensate for the sophisticated social commentary that is lacking in Teen Ink's nonfiction section. In the early years of the magazine, there were relatively frequent stories set in the far future and/or on another planet, which featured familiar "futuristic" themes and entities like time travel, flying cars, machines that make any meal imaginable with the touch of a button, and other sci-fi notions a la "The Jetsons." 1992's "Not the Routine Experiment," for instance, features a cyborg led to believe that he is human, who lives in a world

of “teleportation machines” and intellectual contests between humans and “Venusians.” In “Utopia,” a high school girl, who has the ability to fly, has access to all kinds of fancy futuristic technology, such as a “laser print pen” which, when clicked on “turned the knob to essay script mode,” and the ability to get dressed by throwing a pill to the ground.

Beginning in the late 1990s, however, stories set in the future (including those that feature humans on other planets in the future) strike much closer to home, so to speak. These stories can be read as commentary on contemporary politics and culture, and feature ideas and phenomena that preoccupy us in present times, such as cloning, genetic engineering of humans, wiretapping, and the destruction of the environment. Yet these topics are not addressed head-on; instead, they are, by and large, examined quite sophisticatedly, by intellectually and emotionally nuanced protagonists who are aware that, somewhere in the distant past, humanity went wrong--by, for instance, giving governments too much power over citizens’ private lives, or so destroying the environment that humanity was forced to live underground.

Fascinatingly, this rise of dystopian fiction in Teen Ink began to noticeably take shape several years before a similar rise took place in mainstream young adult literature. Both Scott Westerfield’s *The Uglies* trilogy and Suzanne Collins’s *The Hunger Games* trilogy, for instance, reads very much like the best dystopian fiction of Teen Ink. And yet, both Teen Ink’s dystopian fiction and currently popular YA dystopian literature share characteristics that distinguish them from other eras’ dystopian fiction. When I spoke with Linda Schlossberg, an English professor at Harvard, she pointed out that these stories—unlike, say *Brave New World* and *1984*—do not make pointed, specific political statements. The characters in *Animal Farm*, for instance, clearly align with specific political figures (involved in World War II) and make pointed statements about fascism. By contrast, dystopian fiction published in Teen Ink (as well as the trilogies of

Collins and Westerfield) are more general warnings about what could happen if humanity does not vigilantly protect future generations against a variety of dangers (all of which are implicit, and range from plastic surgery to war to environmental destruction to a merging of reality with reality TV.)

## **Conclusion**

What to make of all of this? Ultimately, the wealth of data and insights gleaned from our study of the archives of Teen Ink lead to even more questions about young people and the literature they create. Why has emotional and intellectual nuance increased in Teen Ink's fiction but not in its non-fiction? Why have teens become increasingly open about very private issues like sexuality and illness, but still remain extremely hesitant to engage in far less personal subjects of broader political and societal concern? Why are teens eager to impart lessons of social and moral import, rather than expertise on less subjective, controversial topics such as a teachable skill or trade?

In considering these questions, we must attempt to contextualize our deliberations within the adolescent writers' cultural and developmental contexts. It is likely, for instance, that the rise of non-fiction about personal struggles has been influenced by the confessional culture of recent years, which exposes teens to personal blogs, intimate social network status updates, and reality television shows which document the intimate minutiae of strangers' lives. Analysis of the increasing number of articles about struggles with sexual identity would not be complete without noting the increasing visibility of openly gay public figures, as well as the increasingly vocal struggle for gay rights. Similarly, articles about "blip" events like Hurricane Katrina and Barack Obama's presidential campaign are not submitted in a vacuum; these submissions arise in a time

of intense societal reaction and discussion of these same events.

Furthermore, we must seek to understand the patterns of psychosocial and intellectual development which may (or may not) influence the magazine's writing. Is it possible, for instance, that the reductionist argumentation on display in so many expository pieces reflects the ways adolescent brains organize and process information, or that the tendency to refract national events through the lens of personal consequence is typical not only of adolescent writing but also adolescent experience?

Moreover, we must also consider the various literary and educational influences on Teen Ink's writers. Is it possible that the remarkable rise in the maturity of the magazine's best short stories is due to an increased attention on creative writing in the authors' high schools? Is writing fiction "cooler" now than it was in the 1990s? In what ways has the meteoric rise of the internet and its countless opportunities to publish and critique one's amateur writing influenced the literary ambitions, opportunities, and atmosphere of today's teens?

In seeking to address these questions, we must take care to regard the writing in Teen Ink both at face value, separate from whatever forces influenced its creation, and as a mirror and indication of its culture and times. We must also note the comprehensive depth and richness of Teen Ink's archive while also acknowledging its singular and anecdotal qualities. That is, the twenty years' worth of writing from Teen Ink has a lot to tell us—about adolescents and adolescence both—but its characteristics are not by themselves generalizable unto teenage culture and experience at large. In beginning to make sense of all that teens have said—and continue to say—in this one remarkable magazine, we might begin to fathom the ineffable variety of the lives and minds of adolescents, both today and in the past.

## Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> Over the approximately 500 pieces I read, approximately 25% were from 1990, 10% were from 1995, 15% were from 2005, 40% were from 2009 and 2010, and the remaining 10% were from other years. I took these ratios into account when determining trends and patterns. These imbalanced ratios were determined by a preliminary effort to read a large number of stories from 1990 and 2009, and subsequently by a number of factors, including the steep increase in the number of pieces submitted in more recent years, as well as my efforts to study in further depth pieces which exemplified particular codes (such as futuristic fiction and personal essays on travel).

<sup>ii</sup> Partial list of codes (categories) used in analysis (in alphabetical order; those that are in bold were the most common):

- **“author like narrator”** (fiction only)
- challenge and adversity
- futuristic fiction (fiction only)
- genre-bending (fiction only)
- humor
- lesson learned
- love
- nostalgia for childhood
- **pain and struggle**
- **preachiness/pedantry/vainglory** (non-fiction/opinion only)
- race
- **reductionist argumentation** (non-fiction/opinion only)
- societal criticism
- unresolved issue/intentional ambiguity

Note that many pieces were characterized by numerous codes; some were characterized by none. These codes are neither mutually exclusive nor exhaustive.

<sup>iii</sup> Over the course of the magazine’s existence, its non-fiction and opinion sections have contained a number of subcategories, which are noted on the website and in each issue’s table of contents. The following is a list of subcategories, the years they existed, and the number of articles that they contained over the course of their existence:

- Community Service: since 1992: total of 678 articles
- College essays: since 1991, 665
- Environment: since 1998, 677
- Health: since 1998, with 320
- Travel and Culture: since 1998, 564
- “What Matters”: 2001-2007, 134
- Science and Technology: 1998-1998, 145
- 9/11: 2001, 31