

Superstar:

Selections from a Novel

by

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the Master of Arts degree

School of Creative and Professional Writing

Master of Arts in Writing Program

Spalding University

October 18, 2021

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Abstract

Superstar, by Katherine Yocum, employs the form of a verse novel to guide the reader through a teenager's coming of age and self-exploration. The themes of music and identity propel the story forward, and the use of both free verse and structured poems allow for a closer look into the protagonist's thoughts and feelings not only about herself, but also about her parents, her friends, and her new love.

To those who listened to me when I was lost and reminded me of my strength. Thank you.

D, C, M, & O

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Acknowledgments

Thank you to my mentor, Lesléa Newman, without whom this project would not have been possible. Lesléa was with me for both semesters of my degree—she pushed me and questioned me and encouraged me to dive deeper into my work. She often reminded me that “good” was not good enough, and that I should always strive for “great.” Lesléa was essential to my work, and I am so grateful for the time she invested into me and my writing.

Critical Introduction

From Ellen Hopkins to Kwame Alexander to Jacqueline Woodson, novels in verse for young adults are not only recognized as important works of literature but are also becoming more and more prevalent. There are many reasons an author would choose to write in verse; some do so purely for aesthetic purposes, some because they possess a deep love for poetry. While other authors, such as Ellen Hopkins, write verse novels because “besides the obvious white space, which allows room to pause when necessary, poetry has an innate beauty in the language which is alluring, though it’s mostly on a subconscious level. For reluctant readers, it allows successful exploration of the storyline without excess verbiage denying the experience” (Crowder).

Whether it be an aesthetic preference, or a way to encourage reluctant readers to pick up a book, verse novels are critical for young adults. In considering this, I chose to combine several of my interests for this selection of my verse novel. Combining personal interests and experiences with structure and style is quite a difficult task but, after reading works such as *The Crossover*, *Crank*, *Brown Girl Dreaming*, and *The Poet X*, I found common themes and ideas, as well as plenty of inspiration.

Kwame Alexander, author of *The Crossover*, and Ellen Hopkins, author of *Crank*, both employ free verse to “put readers right on the page inside [the] character’s heads” (Kendall). Free verse allows for an authentic stream of consciousness in which the audience is a participant in the protagonist’s thoughts and feelings. Alexander explains that he, too, writes in this way because “I love all the white space. I love the rhythm, the rhyme, and figurative language, and I like how you can say so much in so few words. I like to tell stories that are powerful and emotional in a few lines” (Drabble). Poetry is

intimate, and making unique structural choices, taking advantage of whitespace, and using free verse allows for a natural give and take between the reader and the words on the page.

Verse novels “get to the heart of a teenager with surgical skill. They mirror the cadence of actual teenspeak, and can provide a panoply of voices, real and truthful. Thoughts are fragmentary. People rarely think in complete sentences—teenagers, less so” (Shahan). Verse novels also “must have the music and imagery that we find in poetry, and at the same time character development and structure of a novel” (Pereira). These quotes served as a challenge and motivation for me as I attempted to commingle the “music” of poetry and literal music, as well as the difficulties one faces while learning more about themselves. I looked to Elizabeth Acevedo, Kwame Alexander, and Ellen Hopkins to see how my work could contribute to the historical context of verse novels. Because of this, and my desire to place my work in the specific tradition of verse novels, I decided to employ both free verse and specific structural poems, such as haiku.

Using both free verse, and structural poems, I hoped to combine traditional elements and more modern aspects of poetry that I found in books such as *The Poet X* by Elizabeth Acevedo and *Starfish* by Lisa Fipps. In addition to the inspiration found from established authors and their works, it was my desire to put my own spin on this early aughts verse novel and use mixed mediums. For example, I created a “mixtape” so that each song or artist that was mentioned throughout the novel could be listened to on a playlist. I also recorded the song that we see the protagonist working on throughout the piece. I did so in hopes that my work would have clear influences from other authors and other novels but also stand alone. Though a small snippet of a much larger work, this

chapbook is more than the sum of its parts. It shows the beginning stages of exploration, both in one's identity and sexuality, as well as one's place in the world.

Though coming of age novels are common for young adults, I find that slice of life works, like *The Poet X* or *The Crossover*, show young people that they are not alone in the "little things" they face day to day. As Ellen Hopkins says, books should "speak to the place inside [readers] that makes them want to be the best they can be. Teens are our future. I want to help them create a brilliant one" (Kendall). And I, through each of these poems, hope that my novel does the same. I hope to reach a young woman, like I was, and let her know that she should never have to apologize for becoming herself.

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BACK TO BLACK

Crystal missed her shift this morning
to sit on the crumbling stoop with me,
waiting for the
too small bus
to take me
to the too small school.

She feels an obligation on the “first day”
to iron my clothes,
pack my lunch,
load up my backpack
with the motherly instinct
that is missing every other day of the year.

She offers an occasional
pat on the knee,
and a piece of advice
she read from the cover
of a decades-old parenting magazine:
Try to come out of your shell this year!

Part of me is grateful for the effort,
and part of me knows
it will never last.
I try to let her in,
while keeping my distance,
but she is the only family I have.

AUGUST 28, 2007: FIRST DAY, SOPHOMORE YEAR

Everyone looks different now.
Like after a TV show comes back
from a season break.
The cast has new haircuts,
tans,
glowing skin.
Some have lost weight,
some have gained.

Maybe they won't recognize
me.
Sometimes I want
to not be
recognized.
To move through the hallways
like vapor.

Especially this year.
This new building.
But, as I stumble my way through this jungle,
I catch glimpses of my face in trophy cases.

My acne-spotted skin,
my cheeks, holding desperately
to baby fat,
my 3-year-old braces,
all remind me
I'm just me.

UNTITLED SONG: VERSION I

Verse I:

The grass always looks greener
when I'm covering my eyes.
No matter how much I water
I can't help but fantasize.
I have everything I've asked for,
everything and more,
but I can't stop the fears
that come banging on my door.

BEFORE CLASS, I SEE: MR. BOWIE HARRIS

Bold, like red lipstick and a smokey eye
Open, like a broken door
Wild, like mixing plaid with polka dots
Introspective, like an art history student in a museum
Energetic, like that pink bunny in sunglasses

Hotheaded, like a parent whose rules are ignored
Artistic, like a finger painting
Rare, like a designer handbag on sale
Rowdy, like friends at a sleepover with no parents
Intelligent, like a young Einstein
Sarcastic, like saying "I'm sorry" when he's not

FIRST PERIOD ENGLISH WITH MS. BOKANOWSKI

I have a
love /
/ hate
relationship with English.
Not the language
but the subject.
I often feel subject
to analysis of ancient text
when I would rather
snack
or sing
or sleep.
I appreciate attention to detail,
but when we read too much into words
it often makes them stale.

FOR MS. B, AN INTRODUCTION

Willow

As in

Willful

As in

Willing

As in

Willpower

As in

Will I ever feel accomplished?

Will I ever get ahead?

Will I ever be known?

Will I ever find success?

Will I ever see myself

as something more

than who I've been?

IN CONVERSATION WITH BOWIE, MY BEST FRIEND

I missed you, Wil! Obviously, you missed me.
Without him, life is gray
and he knows it.

How are you doing? I'm amazing, just so you know.
Burning through the generics,
cutting to the core.

Don't lie to me.
He points a painted finger,
through my bullshit—to my soul.

You need to allow yourself to be happy. Like I do.
16, and already
a self-help book title.

Don't you love my outfit? Pink and orange is my new favorite combo.
Shifting from bland to Bowie,
but I never mind.

I hate when we're not together.
He tugs on the sturdy strings
connecting my heart to his.

One day, I'm taking you out of this town. You don't have a say.
His buzzed hair bristles my forehead
as his arm cradles my shoulders.

I never want a say when I'm with him.

COME OUT OF YOUR SHELL

In biology, we learned
that turtles don't slip
in and out of their shells
like a trench coat or overalls.
They are part of their shells.
They are their shells.
Their spine is the very shell we think
they can remove and discard like old socks.
So what do I say
when Crystal tells me to
come out of my shell?
I am my shell.
And there's nothing
wrong with that.

A LUNCH TIME HAIKU

No seats are in sight
Pointless chatter fills the air
I'm over high school

AN ODE TO CAFETERIA CHICKEN NUGGETS

To your crispy, light coating,
your temperature, lukewarm,
your sandy, khaki color,
your indeterminate form.

Were you frozen in the morning?
Were you in the fridge for weeks?
Should you come with careful warning?
That you might be full of beaks?

To your moist, cardboard flavor,
and your firm and spongy feel,
to you, oh chicken nuggets,
my very favorite meal.

AMERICAN GIRL

Through crowds of
smelly,
stuck-up,
students,
a Star is seen.
Flashing,
flitting,
flying,
among zits
Axe deodorant
and cracked nail polish.
I clench my jaw,
to keep it from falling open.
She's a walking music video.
Hair trailing behind her
like a comet's tail.
Her head up,
in the clouds.
Not scanning
the ground.
Not faking
a smile.
Everything I wish I could be.
I follow her trail
of stardust,
hoping to catch
some stray sparkles
and set myself among the stars.

HALLWAY POSTERS

The hand-drawn posters plastering
the walls
live to advertise.

They reach out to me
with neon colors,
bubble letters,
magazine cut-out images.

Tempting me
to tutor,
train,
try out.

It catches my eye.
It holds my attention.
It knew I would see.
It is tucked away
behind SAT flyers
and pizza coupons.
It hangs on by a single staple.

The crudely drawn guitar
plucks a melody only I can hear.
The edges of the paper curl into a smile.
My fingers tingle, itching to play.

HI, AND YOU ARE?

I'm Ruby.

She speaks without stutter,
no hesitation.

I saw you looking at the Battle of the Bands poster. Are you auditioning?

Her stance is upright,
unafraid.

I want to sign up, but I need a band. Do you play?

Assured, unwavering,
a boulder in a storm.

Do you need a drummer? I'm available.

Direct, piercing eye contact,
like I'm the only person in the world.

I won Battle of the Bands at my old school.

Experienced and enthusiastic,
a gold-medalist among beginners.

What kind of music do you play?

I never answer questions,
I close myself to inquisition.

So, do you want to sign up together?

My side of the conversation was blank,
but my mouth musters a "Yes."

ONE OF THOSE GIRLS

My band,
our band,
the band I'm forming
with a complete stranger.

Ruby is the cover of Rolling Stones,
espresso hair with copper highlights,
choppy, layered, free.
Low slung jeans, too many bracelets,
seven piercings in one ear,
beat-up sneakers.

Her face is MAC,
mine is Walgreens.
Her clothes are Hot Topic,
mine are Walmart.

I'm like a kid dressing up as Ruby for Halloween
You see what I'm going for,
but I'm not quite pulling it off.

A SCHOOL BUS HAIKU

Never-ending route
The yellow of a crime scene
Louder than a zoo

ON THE PHONE WITH CRYSTAL, MY MOTHER

I have to close tonight. I'll be home late.

Relayed like this isn't habit,
like this isn't old news.

Your dad is still on that bullshit "tour" with his band.

When she speaks of him,
she spits.

He called, asking for you.

He chose music
over us. I'll do the same.

I told him you'd call back.

I don't want to,
but I can't escape him.

It's just us. Don't forget that.

I know, but it
never stops stinging.

There are pizza rolls in the freezer. Love you.

She always forgets
I hate pepperoni.

MY FATHER, MY MIRROR

My father isn't here, but never far
I can't escape the warped, fun house mirror
Like separating feathers from black tar
My father isn't here, but never far
Like scraping off a permanent, healed scar
When together, who I am is so much clearer
My father isn't here, but never far
I can't escape the warped, fun house mirror

A LATCHKEY LAMENT

O for a home-cooked meal!
For time with family spent around the dinner table.

O for a security system!
For the reassurance I won't be kidnapped.

O for a stable internet connection!
For looking up chord progressions.

O for a present parent!
For the feeling of being wanted.

FINDING THE MELODY

After a meal of instant noodles
and isolation,
I work on my music.
I've been practicing
for months.
Thought I'd be a pro
by now, but my fingers
still tumble from string
to string
like an amateur gymnast
on a beam
or a novice daredevil
on a tightrope.
When a melody finally
wraps me in its arms,
whispers in my ear,
begs me to tell its story,
I regain my balance
and play until my fingers bleed.

THE SECRET TO A PERFECT MILKSHAKE

The walk from my house to Shake It Up
is only twelve minutes.
The neon flash of the corner gas station
is my beacon.
Red and green bulbs pulse,
decorating the night like Christmas.

The low hum of milkshake machines
emanate from Pepto-Bismol pink walls.
I haven't had a shake
since Bowie left for the summer.
The spray can whipped cream,
the mouth-puckering,
sugar-glazed cherries
tempt my tired taste buds.

Bowie greets me in the parking lot with a *Finally*
and the hug of a venus fly trap.
His department store cologne,
his spiked, peroxide hair,
and the strawberry milkshake he hands me,
smell like coming home.

STRAWBERRY'S MY FAVORITE, YOU REMEMBERED

Have you been working on music? You know my dream is for us to be famous.
He always asks, though the answer
is always "Kind of."

Just quit school already! No successful musician ever finished.
He's not wrong.
He never is.

The second I can get out of here, I'm walking all the way to LA.
He doesn't quite understand
the distance.

I'll just take you with me. We could get matching tattoos! I gave myself one this summer.
He'll forget this idea
by the end of the night.

I met another guy. He's the love of my life.
They always are,
and they never are.

I saw you with that new girl—she's gorgeous... but she can't replace me.
Ruby,
and no one could.

If you're making a band, just remember that I play a mean tambourine.
How could I forget?
He's a superstar.

BEDTIME, 2 AM

It's hard to sleep
with all the songs
inside my head,
and the voices from the kitchen
from my mom and her work
Friend.

Whispers of
You're beautiful
and
You're not like other women
swirl around our house like smoke.
They stain the walls
acid yellow.

Crystal is Gwen Stefani,
bleach blonde hair,
red, pouty lips.

She says we're
Lorelai and Rory,
which isn't true.
She is less my mom
and more my roommate.

My tangerine songbook
bursting with
songs
and chords
and lyrics
is my relief.
Drowning out the *empty promises*
and *sweet nothings*.

AUGUST 29: CALL ME

After pages of Hamlet,
a plethora of Henry IV,
I am struck by
a tiny piece of paper,
carefully folded
into an origami envelope
grazing my shoulder.

A glance behind me reveals
Ruby,
squirreled away in the corner
a tower of books piled high on her desk
like a rampart.

Ruby is queen of her castle,
her auburn, chocolate hair
twisted and braided into a perfect crown.
She smiles at me with peach lips,
nodding at the flawlessly folded letter.

I open the gift like a shaken can of pop
and smooth the creases
with the pad of my thumb.
Hey bandmate, let's rehearse tonight!

I often pity myself
for not being
popular
pretty
perfect.
I close myself
to friends and opportunities.
But She refuses my excuses.
Reminds me to take a chance,
to try even though I'm terrified.

WHAT IS IT ABOUT...

RUBY

The center of a raspberry truffle

RUBY

The point of an arrow

RUBY

The crescendo of a symphony

RUBY

The mist of the morning

RUBY

The clasp of a locket

RUBY

The flow of a fountain pen

RUBY

The crunch of an autumn leaf

RUBY

AFTER SCHOOL SPECIAL

Crystal doesn't like my music,
says I'm *trying*
too hard,
says I'm *being*
too loud,
says I'm *getting*
too close
to her last taut nerve.

She threatened
to kick me out,
rehome me,
put me up for adoption,
cut my strings,
destroy my songbook.

Is this how
rockstars are made?

MY SONGBOOK

Full of hopes,
dreams.
Finished then
forgotten.
Started then
stranded.

A clementine collection
of the best
and worst
parts of me.

A trial and error,
a sketch,
an outline,
a draft,
an abstract.

Stickers of states and cities
I've never visited
cover its moleskin
like tattoos on flesh,
each marking
a future memory.
A proactive commemoration
of who I will be.

My songbook is
an extension
of my hand,
my brain
my soul.

Full of hopes,
dreams.
Finished then
forgotten.
Started then
stranded.

UNTITLED SONG: VERSION II

Verse I:

The grass always looks greener
when I'm covering my eyes.
No matter how much I water
I can't help but fantasize.
I have everything I've asked for,
everything and more,
but I can't stop the fears
that come banging on my door.

Chorus:

I'm scared that you will leave,
and I'm scared I never will.
I'm scared of not trying
and then dying on this hill.
I'm scared that you'll love me,
and I'm scared that you won't.
I'm scared you'll say "I do,"
and I'm scared I'll say "I don't."

HELLO

My finger bounces
from button to button.
Wrong number!
The dated, cream cord wraps itself
around my finger,
my arm
like a boa constrictor.
Wrong number!
I steady my hand.
I am a surgeon.
No more:
Wrong number!
The phone trills
like a drunk Tinkerbell.
Ring!
And Her voice fills my ears:
Willow! I'm so glad you called,
she lives just beyond
the woods near my house.
We're so close. I'll be there soon.
Click!

THE SONG-WRITING SESSIONS

My knees are shaking.
Not *you make my knees weak*, shaking.
More vibrating
more like *a wooden rollercoaster*, shaking.

What am I supposed to do for a guest?
Clean?
Cook?

The time trudges by.
3:00.
3:30.
4:00.
Crystal won't be home
for hours and hours.

Anxiety hums through my body,
like a spin cycle,
interrupted by the faint
rap rap rap
on my front door.

Through the foggy glass,
through the off-white doily, lace curtains,
stands Ruby,
her terracotta hair shining
like a sunset kissing the ocean.

CRIMSON & CLOVER: FORMERLY KNOWN AS RUBY & WILLOW

It's clever, don't you think?

A nod to the past,
a band name that puts our names together.

My parents are in a cover band, hence the old music references.

We are more alike than I knew,
goosebumps erupt all over.

Sometimes I feel out of place here—do you?

Like a mind reader,
extracting information effortlessly.

I'm never sure what's more important—being comfortable or being myself.

My brain whirs and whistles
searching for a response.

Would you show me any of the songs you've been working on?

I pause like a freeze frame,
nothing I've written is finished.

It doesn't have to be finished to be good.

DISCLOSURE

Her unblinking eyes encourage me.
The blood orange, sticker-slathered songbook
wiggles out from under my pillow,
nestles into my arms.

I've never shown anyone my songs,
and I never thought I would,
until I was famous.

Her smile nudges me,
lets me know that She, a stranger,
wants to know my music,
wants to know me,
wants to make music with me.

I flip through pages of half-finished lyrics,
lines and titles spill from my lips.
The butterfly wings of Her lashes
flutter, following my mouth.

You're a poet,
Her words coat my ears in honey.
I'm not.
But maybe
if Ruby thinks
I am,
then I am.

I think we can win.
And so do I.

BEST FRIENDS, RIGHT?

I thrive in comfort, never seeking change.
I strive for safety, knowing who I am.
But these new feelings bubble, they are strange,
The lion hears the whispers of the lamb.
I have not seen or known successful love,
My heart plays tug-of-war, but hasn't won,
I look for answers here and from above,
But what's occurring cannot be undone.
Could it be real? Or dream? A fantasy?
I cannot say it's ever crossed my mind.
Is it too late for truth to set me free?
Have I simply fallen too far behind?
 I've tried to clear the ceaseless, complex blur,
 But one thing that remains are thoughts of Her.

UNTITLED SONG: VERSION III

Verse I:

The grass always looks greener
when I'm covering my eyes.
No matter how much I water
I can't help but fantasize.
I have everything I've asked for,
everything and more,
but I can't stop the fears
that come banging on my door.

Chorus:

I'm scared that you will leave,
and I'm scared I never will.
I'm scared of not trying
and then dying on this hill.
I'm scared that you'll love me,
and I'm scared that you won't.
I'm scared you'll say "I do,"
and I'm scared I'll say "I don't."

Verse II:

What have I missed out on?
And what have I kept you from?
I can't be the reason
you stay but still feel numb.
I'm tending to our garden,
the weeds are out of sight.
They say look out for red flags,
but I see in black and white.

Chorus:

I'm scared that you will leave,
and I'm scared I never will.
I'm scared of not trying
and then dying on this hill.
I'm scared that you'll love me,
and I'm scared that you won't.
I'm scared you'll say "I do,"

And I'm scared I'll say "I don't."

Note on Author

Katherine Yocum is a writer and non-profit worker whose pieces have been published in *Inkspot Magazine*, *Input Magazine*, and *The Yard: Crime Blog*. She lives in the Midwest where she spends her time reading graphic novels, drinking coffee, and listening to true crime podcasts. She is passionate about diversity, justice, inclusion, wellness, and the arts.