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I Like a Girl Who Can Eat

Female Hunger, Food, and Desire in Maggie Stiefvater's Wolves of Mercy Falls Series

Abstract: In mainstream discourse on the genre, the contemporary young adult (YA) supernatural romance is frequently dismissed as one-dimensional and low quality; literature that reproduces traditional and conservative ideologies of gender and sexuality for an undiscerning adolescent female audience. In this article I contest this dismissal, arguing that the genre contains complex and contradictory representations of femininity and female sexuality, and that these representations expose and rehearse ambivalence surrounding adolescent girls and girlhood in the early twenty-first century. Drawing on the growing disciplines of both romance and YA studies, I conduct this contestation through close reading and analysis of Maggie Stiefvater's Wolves of Mercy Falls series, which consists of Shiver (2009), Linger (2010), Forever (2011), and Sinner (2014). Ambivalence and complexity are discussed in the series through representations of female gustatory and sexual hunger as well as food and feasting and the presence of the supernatural through representations of female lycanthropy. Through the symbolic associations of food with sexuality and sexual activity, scenes of female gustatory hunger and feasting within the corpus attempt to negotiate the engrained diet culture and repression of adolescent female sexual desire within the late 2000s and early 2010s in the anglophone world. Female hunger and appetite are at once encouraged and praised (within human characters) and presented as dangerous and in need of restriction (within female lycanthropes). This emphasises the still-rigid boundaries and fears surrounding feminine excess. In this article, I not only analyse the ambivalence and anxiety that surround adolescent girls during this period, but also emphasise the importance of popular literature as a site in which these attitudes and anxieties can be explored, resisted, and reproduced.

Keywords: young adult fiction, femininity, girlhood, feasting, scent, sexuality, food, Maggie Stiefvater

In the early 2000s, the contemporary supernatural romance genre hooked into mainstream culture, creating a publishing phenomenon that lasted several years (Keyser 51). The supernatural romance is situated within a larger “web” of romance fiction, which connects genres such as the supernatural romance to the gothic, horror, and fairy tales, and reveals the depth and breadth of the larger romance genre. The contemporary romance is often considered “triply shameful” (Frantz and Selinger 2–3), due to its content, female authorship, and popular readership, all categories which have been criticised and dismissed. Due to its association with an *adolescent* female audience, the contemporary supernatural romance could be regarded as quadruply so. As Lisa Bode argues, “for defenders of legitimate culture, the lower stratum of culture is constructed as gendered and infantilized” (712). Locating myself within the study of both romance and young adult (YA) fiction and focusing on close textual analysis of Maggie Stiefvater’s *Wolves of Mercy Falls* series (2009–2014), I dispute this dismissal. I argue instead that the genre is a multifaceted source of contestation and adaptation, negotiating, resisting, and reproducing traditional constructions of gender and sexuality. The *Wolves of Mercy Falls* series echoes both this ambivalence and complexity, as well as attitudes surrounding adolescent girls and girlhood held during the late 2000s and early 2010s. This negotiation can be seen through the texts’ representations of female gustatory and sexual hunger, food and feasting, and female lycanthropy.

Reading the Supernatural Romance: Method

My analytical approach in this article incorporates aspects of both narrative analysis and contextual investigation, acknowledging the location of the supernatural romance within this larger web, conducting close literary analysis of the texts and situating them within their larger cultural context. I use Elaine Showalter’s definition of close reading here, a “deliberate” detachment from storytelling to focus on “language, imagery, allusion, intertextuality, syntax and form” (98). Literary analysis of the texts uncovers the instability surrounding contemporary constructions of adolescent girlhood through the identification of contradictory and contested ideologies within the narratives. In doing so, this article reveals and acknowledges the unstable meaning of what it means to be an adolescent girl in the early twenty-first century Western world.

This intersection, and acknowledgement of the interaction between a text and its contexts, is the starting point of this article. The

texts studied are considered not only literary texts but also cultural products, due in part to attitudes surrounding popular literature and the supernatural romance genre. One of the ways in which I support this claim is through the conceptualisation of the “romance web” as a means of examining the contemporary supernatural romance, as both part of the larger romance genre (and, by extension, the romance genre’s own location within broader literary history) and evidence of the intersection of literature and culture within the genre. This idea of the romance web was inspired by the “fairy tale web,” a concept developed by Cristina Bacchilega (31), Donald Haase (225), and Christine A. Jones and Jennifer Schacker (37).

The fairy tale web refers to a conceptualisation of the history of the oral and literary fairy tale that acknowledges the multiple influences on the genre, the ways in which it developed in various countries and cultures, and the frequent lack of an “original version” of a tale. Through this acknowledgement of the multiple threads of a tale’s history, Haase contends, the folk and fairy tale traditions are located within a “web” rather than a linear chronology (225). Jones and Schacker similarly identify the fairy tale tradition and history as a web, noting that this history is “tangled” with “many tendrils [that] interlock” and patterns that “change depending on the vantage point from which one looks at them” (37). This echoes Haase’s argument that, in viewing the fairy tale tradition as a web, the multiple layers and voices present within the retellings are highlighted (224). For Bacchilega, the fairy tale web is not just a way of identifying the multilinear histories of the fairy and folk tale traditions, but an analytical space in which multiple retellings can be considered, with no true “original” (ch. 2). By identifying connecting “threads” that link multiple fairy tale retellings and tale types, the intertextuality of the tales, their location within specific societies and cultures, and the ways in which each variant and tale resists and reproduces the cultural norms and ideals of their time are revealed.

The conceptualisation of the romance genre as a web of texts and genres is therefore a useful approach for the discussion of the supernatural romance. Like the fairy tale web, this romance web spans genres, cultures, and historical periods. The genre has connections to literary categories and genres as diverse as medieval “pulp fictions,” Victorian ghost stories, “classic” literature, and contemporary romance novels, sometimes referred to as “Fabio books” (Kamblé et al. 14).¹ In comparison, the history of romance scholarship is a relatively new area, with the second-wave feminist movement providing context for research and interrogation

(Kamblé et al. 17). Frantz and Selinger (2), as well as Jayashree Kamblé, Eric Selinger, and Hsu-Ming Teo (17), provide clear and concise histories of romance scholarship, creating three “waves” – the early associations with the second-wave feminist movement, the 1990s, and the 2000s and beyond. Each of these waves reveal the distinct attitudes surrounding popular literature, and romance fiction specifically, in how they addressed and interrogated the genre.

The first wave is generally considered to be within the second-wave feminist movement, which provided “the crucial context for taking romance seriously” (Kamblé et al. 17). Frantz and Selinger assert that the field of romance studies “opened” in 1969 with the publication of a sociological study commissioned by romance publisher Mills & Boon (2). This period also saw the emergence of the contemporary erotic romance sub-genre, or “bodice ripper,” a term commonly associated with Kathleen E. Woodiwiss’ 1972 novel, *The Flame and the Flower* (Rodale 93). The sub-genre’s popularity led to the increase in sexually explicit content within romance novels, and in the early 2010s would later strengthen the threads between the erotic and contemporary supernatural romance, emphasising the interwoven nature of the romance web (Rodale 30).

The second wave, as per Kamblé and colleagues (18) and Frantz and Selinger (7), began in the 1990s, when romance novelists themselves began to interrogate their genre. This new wave emerged partly as a response to first-wave criticism, which was seen as condescending and overly critical (Kamblé et al. 18). This wave also saw the increase in meta-analysis, with academics such as An Goris arguing that the reaction and criticism of the second wave was in part a “ritual matricide” of older scholarship, rather than locating them within a broader contextual history. Kamblé and colleagues also argue that, while representations of race, gender, and sexuality within the genre were also beginning to be addressed, the field lacked an “academic infrastructure” (19), something that was well-established in other disciplines.

It was the establishment of this infrastructure that heralded the beginnings of the contemporary wave (Kamblé et al. 19). The early 2000s saw the emergence of the discipline in Australia, the United Kingdom, and Europe, as well as the re-development of the Romance Area of the Popular Culture Association and the creation of the International Association for the Study of Popular Romance (IASPR). It was during this period that the contemporary supernatural romance genre took popular culture by storm, temporarily saturating mainstream media. This popularity was in part due to the rapid and unanticipated fame of Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight*

series (2005–2008), a vampire/human romance aimed at an adolescent female audience. Twilight's temporary dominance of mainstream media influenced the popularity and success of the contemporary supernatural romance genre, with the publication of the Wolves of Mercy Falls series unarguably part of this boom.

In locating the texts within a larger literary tradition of the romance web, I can repair the link between the contemporary supernatural romance and the venerated tradition of "literature," which was previously dissolved through discourse focused on both popular and "high" culture. Literary analysis of the texts uncovers the instability surrounding contemporary constructions of adolescent girlhood through the identification of contradictory and contested ideologies within the narratives. In doing so, this article acknowledges the unstable meaning of what it means to be an adolescent girl in the early twenty-first century Western world.

Wolves of Mercy Falls

Set in the small (fictional) town of Mercy Falls, Minnesota, the Wolves of Mercy Falls series – consisting of four books, *Shiver* (2009), *Linger* (2010), *Forever* (2011), and *Sinner* (2014) – follows the relationship of adolescent girl Grace Brisbane and her lycanthropic boyfriend Sam Roth, as well as their friends and family, including Sam's wolf pack and Grace's classmate Isabel Culpeper (the hyper-feminine "mean girl" foil to Grace's down-to-earth "natural" femininity). While Grace and Sam begin dating in Grace's final year of high school, the couple classify their relationship as having started several years earlier, when then eleven-year-old Sam, in his wolf form, saved Grace after she was attacked by his wolf pack, which includes Sam's unofficially adopted/foster sister Shelby.² Although Sam regularly visits Grace (again in his wolf form), they do not meet as humans for six years, until the beginning of *Shiver*. Throughout the series, Grace's, Isabel's, and Shelby's gustatory appetites and scenes of feasting act as frameworks to explore their engagement with and negotiation of femininity, sexual pleasure and desire, and their relationship with lycanthropy and the supernatural.

Skinny Gluttons and Monsters: Food, Feasting, and Contemporary Femininity

The immense cultural and symbolic importance that food has is examined through and present within discourse surrounding femin-

inity, sexuality, and girlhood, including within YA fiction and media. Representations of food, feasting, and food preparation in literature are often used to judge and characterise female characters, and act as sites for both the reproduction and resistance of conventional norms surrounding femininity (Daniel 108). This is particularly true of representations of food consumption, which frequently act as shorthand for whether a character is performing femininity “correctly,” or whether they are deviating from it (Daniel 119). In the *Wolves of Mercy Falls* series, discussions surrounding food and its consumption, as well as the female gustatory appetite, act as a mediation of tensions surrounding adolescent femininity in the early 2000s Western world. While main character Grace Brisbane appears as a representation of ideal femininity, secondary characters Isabel Culpeper and Shelby reveal the consequences of overt engagement with impression management and uncover long-held fears of female monstrosity, respectively. Descriptions of specific food items, scenes of feasting, and representations of gustatory hunger in the corpus at once adhere to and resist traditional and progressive ideologies of gender, beauty, and sexuality, revealing the texts, and the supernatural romance, as sites of intricacy and incongruity. As with the contemporary supernatural romance genre overall, this negotiation can also be linked to the corpus’ connections to the fairy tale tradition (via the romance web).

Fairy tales have a long history of negotiating food, feasting, and appetites, with these representations mediating femininity, sexuality, and fear, often through what Carolyn Daniel refers to as “monstrous eating” (145), or the eating of seemingly incorrect food. This is in part due to the fairy tale’s connection to the pre-modern oral folklore tradition, which explored the material reality of the potential of attack by animals (and other humans) suffering from famine, natural disasters, and scarcity. This edibility or threat of consumption is present not just in pre-modern folklore, but genres such as horror and texts that feature supernatural beings (such as werewolves), who have what Daniel refers to as “abominable appetites” (139). This disruption of the social order, through incorrect eating, reveals the corporeality and weakness of the human body. However, these representations are not limited to the horror genre. As Emily R. Douglas notes, “women are already [regularly] represented as edible” (244), and furthermore, this edibility acts primarily as “a metaphor for sexual consumption” (245). Contemporary discourses on food and sexuality are frequently entwined and, as a result, it

is often difficult to detach them from each other. The overlapping of sensory and sensual pleasure in both sexual activity and feasting ensures that literature and popular culture frequently feature the entanglement of food and sexuality. Daniel notes that this is often true within children's literature, where descriptions of food and feasting can be read as representations of sensuous pleasure as well as emotional satisfaction, in ways comparable to scenes of sexual activity in adult literature (93).

Consumption, femininity, and sexuality intersect throughout Stiefvater's novels to create distinct commentary on the adolescent experience of the 2000s and 2010s. The ideal body type of the time, a slim and toned body, is unachievable for most women without considerable and visible effort. To reveal that effort (to visibly engage in bodily maintenance or to reveal cognitive focus on appearance) is to be considered superficial, vain, or shallow (Nelson 115). To actively appear to resist or critique this effort is frequently considered ideal behaviour. Furthermore, given the association of gustatory and sexual appetites, and the overall association of food with sex, representations of feminine hunger and consumption may also act as representations of female sexual desire and pleasure (Sceats 22). To be a woman who monitors her eating habits, who actively and publicly diets, is to risk being labelled as high-maintenance, shallow, and sexually unadventurous, due to the supposed connection between concern regarding her physical appearance and lack of engagement with sensory pleasure (Bans). This tension regarding sexuality and food has led to the rise of a specific figure in pop culture and literature, the "skinny glutton."

Predating Gillian Flynn's "cool girl" figure (a by now recognisable character trope in and of itself) the skinny glutton speaks of and to anxieties surrounding the beauty/authenticity double bind as it relates to the performance of femininity, feminine hunger (both gustatory and sexual), and the ideal female body of the late 2000s and early 2010s. This figure rejects established associations between femininity and food while simultaneously upholding and lauding the ideal female body and its presentation as effortlessly achieved. April Davidauskis notes that this figure "do[es] not possess the body of one who eats fast food on a regular basis" (172), despite being seen to regularly indulge in high-caloric and seemingly "unhealthy" meals. This figure appears to effortlessly adhere to the ideals of femininity and female beauty of the time, seemingly unconcerned with or ignorant

of the bodywork frequently required to obtain and maintain these ideals. Representations of the skinny glutton, then, present female power and pleasure from within specific and rigid boundaries.

In the *Wolves of Mercy Falls* series, Grace Brisbane is presented as this “skinny glutton,” proto-cool girl figure, adhering to contemporary constructions of ideal feminine beauty with little concern, while simultaneously criticising effort that other characters visibly expend. She embodies the characteristics of the figure’s incarnation in the early twenty-first century; vocally critical of diets and diet culture, she has a large gustatory appetite, and is unconcerned with impression management when eating.

In a scene where Sam makes a breakfast of oatmeal for the couple, for example, Grace notes that she is not “thrilled by the prospect” as she “had tried to make it before, and it had tasted very...*healthy*” (Stiefvater, *Shiver* 192). In another scene, where Grace, Isabel, and Sam are in a diner ordering food, Grace again shows little concern or interest in “healthy” food, requesting “anything that involves bacon” (Stiefvater, *Linger* 46). She (gently) mocks Isabel for her focus on her dietary choices, is regularly depicted baking cakes and other sweets for her friends and family, and chooses food considered “unhealthy” or “masculine” such as red meat, a food item that has long had associations with manhood and masculinity, particularly in America. As Michael Kimmel notes, by eating red meat you “literally” consume masculinity (137).

The association of sexual and gustatory appetite is reinforced through Grace’s attitudes surrounding food and eating. Throughout the series, Grace acknowledges and engages with her sexual desire, and pursues her own sexual pleasure. This includes frequently initiating sexual activity with Sam, having little (if any) shame or guilt regarding sex, and negotiating her sexual pleasure and desire alongside (and through) her heightened supernatural abilities. As she does not engage with impression management or concern regarding her food consumption, she similarly resists it in her sexuality.

Grace’s relationship with her sexuality is introduced early in the narrative of *Shiver*, in scenes that reveal Grace’s negotiation of Sam’s lycanthropic identity, her identification with this “wildness,” and her recognition of her own sexual desire and pleasure. Sam, as a shapeshifter and supernatural being, exists within the liminal space between human and animal, and has a conflicted relationship with his “primal” instincts. This boundary crossing, however, is what Grace is drawn to and engages with, finding Sam’s “animal” behaviour sexually appealing. Furthermore,

her (presently dormant) lycanthropic identity provides Grace with a heightened sense of smell, and it is this heightened sense that allows for Grace's negotiation of her sexual desire.

In one specific scene, Grace and Sam visit a chocolate shop, as both a date and a way for Sam to approach Grace's burgeoning supernatural abilities. In this scene, Grace acknowledges her previously repressed heightened sense of smell through enjoying the scents of the store, experiencing both sensory and sensual pleasure:

I closed my eyes, flared my nostrils, and let the scents flood in. [...] I could feel Sam's heart pounding behind me, and for once, I gave in. Peppermint swirled into my nostrils, sharp as glass, then raspberry, almost too sweet, like too-ripe fruit. Apple, crisp and pure. Nuts, buttery, warm, earthy, like Sam. The subtle, mild scent of white chocolate. Oh, God, some sort of mocha, rich and dark and sinful. I sighed with pleasure, but there was more. The butter cookies on the shelves added a floury, comforting scent, and the lollipops, a riot of fruit scents too concentrated to be real. The salty bite of pretzels, the bright smell of lemon, the brittle edge of anise. Smells I didn't even know names for. I groaned... I opened my eyes; colours seemed dull in comparison with what I had just experienced. (Stiefvater, *Shiver* 279–280)

Grace's sexual pleasure and desire are foregrounded in this scene, and she negotiates her sexuality through her interaction with food (via her sense of smell). This scene presents female sexuality as something to be enjoyed and pursued, rather than repressed. Grace's own narration is highly sexualised, from her exclamations to the descriptions of her groaning and sighing in pleasure, to the overall narrative pace leading to a figurative climax. Throughout this scene, Grace's sexual pleasure is presented not as negative or a high-risk activity, rather, as something Grace can acknowledge and engage in.

At the same time, however, Grace's "edibility" (as all women's edibility) is heightened, directly contesting her depiction as the skinny glutton figure. A skinny glutton, while still adhering to rigid ideals of femininity and feminine beauty, is an active subject. When simultaneously presented as an edible figure, Grace is seen, at times, as passive. This is emphasised through the construction of Grace as embodying literal food items through her scent. Grace's scent is both food-based and could be classified as "ingredients" rather than a complete food: sugar, butter, flour, and salt. This intersection of scent and "edibility" is directly referred to twice within the narrative, during the prologue of *Shiver* that describes

the wolf attack that infected Grace with lycanthropy, and in a later scene in the same novel where Grace is cooking for Sam and Isabel.

As a small child, Grace was dragged from her backyard by Sam's wolf pack, during what he refers to as the "longest, coldest winter of [his] life" (Stiefvater, *Shiver* 2). The pack was slowly starving and had been forced to scavenge for food in nearby houses. Sam's description of Grace in this scene, in particular her scent (butter, flour, and salt), can be seen as what lured the pack to the Brisbane's backyard. Grace's scent is of high calorie foodstuffs that would be particularly desirable during times of hunger. As a small child, Grace is presented as "easy food" for the wolves to drag into the woods, and she is extremely passive during the attack (potentially due to shock).

Grace's edibility, and by extension passivity, is again presented through her scent later in *Shiver*, when she invites Isabel to the Brisbane home to discuss lycanthropy. Grace makes quiche for herself, Isabel, and Sam, including from scratch pastry made with similar ingredients to her own scent. During the process, Grace becomes covered in flour, arousing Sam's (figurative and literal) hunger; he describes her as "so entirely edible that [he] ached with wanting to be alone with her, here now" (Stiefvater, *Shiver* 264).

Grace is presented, both figuratively and literally, as a source of food. She is an edible object for Sam to consume, a source of food for the pack as a child, and later a (flour covered) sexualised figure. Simultaneously, however, Grace is also an active gustatory and sexual subject, resisting being constructed as entirely passive through recognition of her own appetite(s). This characterisation reinforces contemporary tensions regarding adolescent girls, femininity, and sexuality through presenting Grace as adhering to traditional feminine beauty ideals seemingly naturally. Grace is a complex female figure, and throughout the *Wolves of Mercy Falls* series, she resists being presented as the "stereotypical" adolescent female character so commonly associated with the supernatural romance and texts aimed at an adolescent audience.

Conversely, stereotypical femininity is shown through Isabel's engagement with and performance of feminine beauty rituals and ideals, as well as through her food choices and the impression management she engages in when eating in public. Unlike Grace, Isabel is visually and actively focused on her physical appearance and the potentially negative effects that eating seemingly "unhealthy" food could have on her body and skin, making comments regarding her eating and exercise habits. In *Linger*, for example, Isabel notes that running is her preferred form of exercise as it helps her lose

weight and she likes the way her body looks as a result. In the same scene where Grace orders any dish involving bacon, Isabel refuses food:

Isabel just ordered coffee, taking a bag of granola out of her small leather purse after the waitress had gone.

“Food allergy?” [Sam] asked.

“Hick allergy,” Isabel said. “Grease allergy. Where I used to live, we had real coffee houses. When I say *panini* here, everyone says *Bless you*.”

Grace laughed [...] “We’ll make a panini run to Duluth some day, Isabel. Until then, bacon will do you good.”

Isabel made a face like she didn’t much agree with Grace. “If by *good* you mean *cellulite* and *zits*, sure [...]”. (Stiefvater, *Linger* 46)

This scene not only encapsulates Isabel’s outward and visible focus on food, but also reinforces Grace’s seeming lack of concern – the double bind at work. Similarly, in another scene Isabel orders pizza for herself and Grace, and she “blotted her pieces carefully with a paper towel” to absorb the oil, while Grace makes no alterations to her meal (Stiefvater, *Linger* 195). The conflation of sexual and gustatory appetite is again present in Isabel’s characterisation – Isabel actively restricts and restrains her sexual activity, refusing the sexual advances of her future boyfriend (and wolfpack member) Cole St. Clair until the fourth book *Sinner*, set several months after the first three texts.

Analysing the representations of both Isabel and Grace together reveals the ambivalence experienced by many contemporary women regarding femininity, power, and beauty. Grace’s refusal to engage in impression management regarding beauty ideals, as well as her acknowledgement of her hunger, can be seen as a form of resistance. At the same time, however, Grace’s construction as a skinny glutton figure reinforces the beauty/authenticity double bind, through her superficially effortless adherence to normative conventions of feminine beauty even as she actively and vocally criticises them. Comparatively, Isabel exposes the effort and “work” integral to adhering to contemporary feminine beauty norms – work which is considered as default or expected, yet simultaneously criticised.

An Abominable Appetite: Shelby and Monstrous Sexuality

As examined throughout this article, the conflation of sexual and gustatory appetite is common within contemporary attitudes to

both women and female sexuality (Sceats 22). Mainstream media frequently associates sexuality and food in discourse surrounding femininity and women (Sceats 22). These associations are only considered desirable and positive, however, when they are performed by women who meet the rigid requirements of “acceptable” femininity. When women deviate from these expectations, their appetites, and selves, are seen as monstrous or improper (Daniel 139). Within the corpus, the werewolf Shelby is represented as having a monstrous or inappropriate sexual and gustatory appetite. Her characterisation draws on the well-established anxieties surrounding adolescent girls as uncontrollable, sexually active, and dangerous, as well as traditional constructions of female lycanthropy. Representations of Shelby’s sexual and gustatory appetite reproduce traditional constructions of the female werewolf and highlight fears around “incorrect” female sexuality. These representations complicate the overall positive representations of adolescent female sexuality in the texts. As a result, they emphasise the contemporary ambivalence that still surrounds adolescent girls and girlhood.

June Pulliam argues that positive representation of lycanthropy constructs it as a phenomenon that allows for female freedom (74). The female werewolf confirms “patriarchy’s worst fears” about the seemingly natural monstrosity of women and reveals “coded exploration[s] of issues of gender, sexuality and agency” (Pulliam 73, 20). Anxieties surrounding lycanthropic characters are frequently representative of contemporary anxieties regarding adolescent girls and girlhood. This is seen through the character of Shelby, who is shown exploring the boundaries of appropriate, or “correct,” gender, sexuality, and agency through her unrestrained appetite(s). Robyn McCallum and John Stephens note that “transgression often implies, or even depends on, the strategies that contain it” (370). In exposing and exploring the boundaries of femininity and girlhood through Shelby, the *Wolves of Mercy Falls* series ultimately reproduces them through Shelby’s characterisation as a villain. This can be seen in Shelby’s introduction in *Shiver* where she is presented, despite being Sam’s unofficially adopted or foster sister, as a rival of Grace and a character who has embraced her lycanthropy at the expense of her humanity (to the extent that she is never presented in her human form during the events of the series, only in flashbacks).

Throughout the series, Shelby harasses Grace and her family; scent-marking her home, disrupting bags of garbage on their front porch, and at one point, attacking Grace and her father. In one of the earliest scenes featuring Shelby, food and hunger are representative

of her jealousy of and tense relationship with Grace. Shelby appears in Grace's backyard, watching Grace feed Sam (in his wolf form) off-cuts of raw meat from the Brisbane's dinner. Sam recognises Shelby as a threat to Grace, protecting her until she can return to her home:

As soon as I was inside, the white wolf darted forward and snatched the piece of meat I'd dropped. Though my wolf was nearest to her and the most obvious threat for food, it was me here eyes found, on the other side of the glass door. (Stiefvater, *Shiver* 21)

Shelby begins scent-marking the Brisbane home not long after this event, emphasising the overlapping of her primal instincts with her obsessive and monstrous dislike of Grace.³ Through maintaining eye contact, Shelby acknowledges Grace as the main threat, exposing her remaining connection to her human emotions as well as her relationship with Sam. Simultaneously, through stealing food, Shelby reveals her animal instincts, displaying her embracing of her "Other" or animal and supernatural identity. This is only reinforced through her stealing of garbage bags from the Brisbane's porch later in the novel. Throughout the series, Shelby is the only wolf in the Mercy Falls pack portrayed eating discarded food scraps and garbage (as well as scent-marking), depictions that emphasise her closer connection to the animal rather than human world, as well as her monstrosity.

Shelby's monstrous appetite, primal instincts, and "incorrect" female sexuality are combined in a flashback scene where she reveals the scars from her wolf attack to Sam, while both are in their human forms:

"Would you like to see my scars? [...] From when I was attacked. From the wolves."

"No."

She showed me anyway. Her belly was lumpy with scar tissue that disappeared under her bra. "It looked like hamburger after they bit me."

I didn't want to know.

Shelby didn't pull her shirt back down. "It must be hell when we kill something. We must be the worst way to die." (Stiefvater, *Shiver* 233)

In revealing her body to Sam, Shelby is constructing herself as both edible object and active consumer. Her sexuality is presented as "inappropriate" or incorrect, as she ignores Sam's refusal to look at her body, which she also compares to food for the wolves. Throughout the *Wolves of Mercy Falls* series, Shelby eats incorrectly or "badly";

consuming discarded raw meat to both feed herself and intimidate Grace, and stealing and destroying garbage bags of food on the Brisbane's front porch. Her sexuality is also presented as inappropriate or "incorrect" through her obsession with Sam, her refusal to acknowledge his resistance, and her violent reactions to his relationship with Grace. Shelby displays, therefore, an "abominable appetite."

Conclusion

Drawing on the well-established cultural associations between food, gender, and sexuality, the *Wolves of Mercy Falls* series simultaneously resists and reaffirms both conservative and progressive constructions and ideals surrounding female sexuality and femininity, echoing the ambivalence and anxiety surrounding adolescent girls in the 2000s and 2010s. In this article, I have argued that the immense social and cultural importance of food and feasting has created unique opportunities for this negotiation. The contemporary anxiety regarding femininity and the adolescent girl is reproduced through the characterisation of Grace as a "skinny glutton" figure. By invoking this specific character trope, the texts reproduce the beauty/authenticity double bind of contemporary society. This narrative is complicated, however, by the skinny glutton character trope also acting as a means of narrative opportunity for representation of active female sexual desire, through the association of sexual and gustatory appetite.

The complexity of the series is also seen in the construction of the female characters' "edibility" and monstrous eating. Contemporary ambiguity regarding constructions of the adolescent girl as at once vulnerable and out of control is rehearsed throughout the *Wolves of Mercy Falls* series in the form of Shelby. Her sexual and gustatory hunger resists the labelling of the adolescent girl as a passive (and edible) figure, drawing instead on traditional horror tropes regarding the uncontrollable adolescent girl, as well as anxieties surrounding female sexual subjectivity. Representations of hunger, sexuality, and food within the *Wolves of Mercy Falls* series reveal the nuance and contradiction present within the contemporary YA supernatural romance genre, elevating it beyond the superficial "froth" it is often stereotyped as.

Biographical information: Dr. Nicola Welsh-Burke is a children's and YA literature researcher, pop culture scholar, and folklorist at Western Sydney University, Australia. Her research focuses on representations of adolescent girls and girlhood, including their negotiation of femininity and sexual desire, pleasure and sexuality, female monstrosity and hunger, and romantic relationships within the romance genre, YA fiction, and fairy tales.

Notes

1 Although model Fabio Lanzoni has not posed for a book cover since the 1990s, the association remains strong within contemporary discourse outside of the field.

2 While Grace was infected during this attack, the spread of the "wolf toxin" (as lycanthropy is partially medicalised in the series) is temporarily halted due to a high fever Grace experiences. Her lycanthropy does not emerge until adolescence, during the events of the second book *Linger*.

3 An alternate reading of Shelby's and Grace's relationship opens potential for queer understandings of female monstrosity and obsession, reinforcing "patriarchy's worst fears" (Pulliam 73) about female relationships without a male presence.

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