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**Inside story: product placement and adolescent consumer identity in young adult fiction**

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In 2006, Running Press, the publishers of *Cathy's Book: If Found Call 650-266-8233* (Stewart and Weisman 2006), entered a marketing agreement with Proctor and Gamble, manufacturers of Covergirl cosmetics. References to shades of Lipslicks lip gloss and Covergirl mascara were introduced into the novel. In return, *Cathy's Book* was publicised on Proctor and Gamble's Beinggirl website. The marketing agreement was particularly controversial in the United States where, it is claimed, more children than anywhere else in the world 'believe that their clothes and brands describe who they are and define their social status' (Schor 2004: 13). This state of affairs, which arguably extends beyond the borders of the heartland of consumer capitalism, has been widely attributed to the extensive advertising exposure to which the youth of today are subject. As the first publicised instance of formally-arranged product placement in a young adult novel, *Cathy's Book* marks a watershed in the commodification of children's literature and its appropriation as an instrument of consumer capitalism.

Much has been written about the commodification of child and youth culture, in particular how screen texts are used to socialize the young into consumer society. Disney led the way, using its films and characters as part of its broader marketing strategy from the 1930s. The sale of licensed merchandise provided publicity for the films, and the films advertised the product, combining two mutually reinforcing 'registers of consumption' (de Cordova 1994). Today, screen texts are routinely used to promote a range of disparate brand name items via cross-selling and product placement. Indeed, it has contributed to the hybridization of entertainment and advertising (Kenway and Bullen 2001; 2008), that is, the integration of advertising into film and television texts (and vice versa). The conflation of the pleasures of

entertainment with the pleasures of consumption is a key mechanism in the enculturation of the young into consumer society.

Although children's and young adult fiction has generally avoided being actively or extensively co-opted into the agendas of consumer capitalism in this way, informal product placement in novels for this audience is actually not uncommon. However, the implications for the socialization of readers into consumer culture have not been subjected to the scrutiny that screen texts receive. Taking an emerging subgenre of YA fiction distinguished by the conspicuous consumption of its affluent teenage characters as its cue, this article examines brands as signifiers of class identity and affiliation. Focusing on the first novel in J Minter's *The Insiders* series, it explores the ways in which the semiotic capacity of brands intersects with narrative strategy to promote consumption. In its contextualizing discussion of product placement and consumer identities in young adult fiction more broadly, this article attends to one of the new socializing agendas in children's literature, and begins by elaborating on the way in which fiction for the young is currently positioned in relation to the commodification of child and youth culture.

### **From Little Mermaid to Bacardi**

Although children's fiction has been used for cross-promotion and licensed merchandising, most notably titles that have been made into films, marketers have paid comparatively little attention to it as a medium for formal product placement. This is because it has not attracted the mass audiences of film and television that make these media so appealing to advertisers. The success of JK Rowling's *Harry Potter* series arguably brought the marketing potential of children's literature to the attention of advertising. Complete with cross-media versions including film and games, licensed merchandise, cross-promotion, and reverse product placement (*Harry and Ron's* preferred jelly beans, *Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Beans*, are manufactured by the Jelly Belly Candy Company), *Harry Potter* demonstrates the marketing potential of the genre.

Although the children's book industry has never operated independently of the market, children's literature has until relatively recently constituted what Bourdieu

(1993) would call an inalienable cultural field, which it is to say that it has been *perceived* to be above the values of the market. Children's literature is policed by a range of adult and institutional gatekeepers, including the state, education departments, publishers, teachers, librarians, parents and authors. Although the interests of some of these stakeholders are clearly market-related, the relationships between actors in this cultural field do not operate in the same way as they do in children's popular culture. Whereas screen texts are understood as entertainment and, so, principally a source of pleasure, children's fiction is understood to play a role in values, literary, literacy, cultural, and other forms of education. Such understandings do not make it inalienable, but assumptions about its role and attributes do help explain the controversy surrounding *Cathy's Book* (even if YA fiction occupies an uneasy middle ground between popular and literary cultural fields). Whether or not such views have had a moderating effect on predatory marketing practices may be debatable, but it may also help to explain the fact that scholarly discussions of the commodification of children's fiction tend to focus on the extra-textual aspects of production and consumption and the text as commodity. The intra-textual promotion of brands and the consumer subject-reader position the novel constructs have received far less attention.

Extra-textual studies like children's literature scholar, Jack Zipes', examination of the Harry Potter phenomenon points to a publishing industry increasingly 'driven by commodity consumption', which 'at the same time sets the parameters of reading and aesthetic taste' (2001: 172). His analysis situates children's fiction in relation to the commercialization of the culture industries more broadly and the closest he comes to the intra-textual implications is to quote from Tom Engelhardt's article, *Reading May be Harmful to Your Kids* (1991). Discussing the effects of the 'coming of adult publishing methods to the children's book world', Engelhardt notes that 'in a number of best-selling children's books, shopping habits have come to serve as a telling indicator of "character"' (1991: 56). However, like Zipes, he is chiefly preoccupied with what he sees as the 'blandness' of an increasingly formulaic literary product, and the notion of books for young readers as 'either Product themselves or enmeshed in the world of Product' (1991: 58). Neither critic extends his analysis to explore the product enmeshed in the narrative, nor the way its advertising capacity is influenced by the narratological features of the text itself. Amy Pattee's (2006) more recent

article on *Gossip Girl* addresses the presence of brands in the series, a reading to which I will return, but it likewise focuses principally on the novels as commodities in their own right and, thus, in relation to the series' peri-textual and extra-textual aspects.

It could be argued that the product placement in *Cathy's Book* only came to media attention because it involved a formal partnership between the authors, publisher, and Proctor and Gamble (Rich 2006). Given that the manuscript originally referred to Clinique, the significance of the shift to Covergirl is symbolic rather than substantive, with the marketing agreement being seen as 'selling out' of children's literature. Co-author of the novel, Sean Stewart, defended the decision to enter into a marketing agreement in an online interview in 2006, saying it made the difference between the novel being published or not. He also said:

[Co-author] Jordan comes from the world of games and movies, where cross-promotion is pretty standard. What he says is that whether you're making the Sistine Chapel or E.T., someone always pays the bill for art, and that at the end of the day, the audience is going to judge it by the same fundamental yardstick it always has: did it entertain me, delight me, move me—or did it suck?

Although the deal with Proctor and Gamble clearly sets a precedent for much more interventionist narrative manipulation by advertisers, the controversy brings into relief the fact that formal product placement is judged differently to its informal use.

The limited critical attention given to informal product placement in fiction may be because its presence is seen to reflect a social reality in which brands have become one of the dominant signifiers of identity, social affiliation and status—in Bourdieu's terms, distinction (1984). References to brands, therefore, may not principally be seen as promoting consumption or as free advertising, even if the idea of the teenager has always been intertwined with the economy, as much a market segment as an identity category. Even SE Hinton's 1967 novel, *The Outsiders*, considered a landmark in young adult fiction, refers to brand name products: Corvairs and Mustangs, English Leather aftershave, Coke and Pepsi, Kool cigarettes.

Four decades later, consumption is so normalised that the marked increase in references to brands in novels like *Feeling Sorry for Celia* (2000) can be interpreted as no more than mimetic devices. In Jaclyn Moriarty's YA novel, references to Twix, Pringles, Sprite, Kraft cheese slices, Coco Pops, Little Mermaid (the licensed merchandise not the Hans Christian Andersen fairy tale), M&Ms, Bacardi and other products are integral to not only the creation of a realist setting, but to the characterization of 15-year-old Elizabeth as a 'typical' teenager of her day. The references to brands are used simultaneously to construct her identity and to position the implied reader to identify with her. Feeling Sorry for Celia is story about growing up, about the pressures of conformity, and what it means to be a 'real teenage girl'. The narrative could be summarised as charting the transition from Little Mermaid to Bacardi.

In her comparative study of Canadian, American, and British teen girl diary novels, Deidre Baker makes particular mention of the product placement in Meg Cabot's *Princess Diaries*. She notes a number of the many instances of references to brands of food (Rings Dings, Quarter Pounders, Coke, Pepsi), stores (Ikea, Bergdorf Goodman, Kmart) and designer and 'name products' (Donna Karan, Doc Martens, Birkenstocks) (2004, 683–4). In the context of Baker's discussion, 'that other language of American culture—brand names' (2004: 683) is a signifier of national identity. She contends that 'Cabot is both mocking American consumerism and exploiting it' and she does so by simultaneously 'establishing [main protagonist] Mia's urbanity ... and feeding her [American] readers' consumerism via the names of familiar franchises and chains' (2004: 684). However, in suggesting that the brand reference 'has a precise significance ... assuming the reader/consumer knows the referent' (684), Baker overlooks how brands function as a hidden curriculum. While she states that all 'those brand-name references' feed 'readers' desire', she does not explain what might persuade them to eat.

Advertisers use marketing strategies to sell products to consumers by persuading them that they need and want them. Advertising is successful because it shows people who they want to be and what they should buy to be that person by associating 'consumption with human desires to which it has no real referent' (Williams

1980:189). Likewise, novels use narrative strategies to persuade readers to accept the fictional version of the world and to subscribe to the text's values and ideology and, very often in the case of fiction for the young, to be the people they ought to be. This is typically achieved through reader positioning, that is, by positioning the reader to identify with focal characters and their subjectivity.

Explaining how children's texts act to socialize readers into the ideology of their culture, John Stephens argues that 'at least for the duration of the reading time, the reader's own selfhood is effaced and the reader internalizes the perceptions and attitudes of the focalizer and is thus reconstituted as a subject within the text' (1992: 68). This positions readers to align 'their own sense of selfhood with ideas of self [that are] constructed in and by the text' (1992: 68). Voskuyl (2007) elaborates, explaining that

The reader freely and independently cedes part of their liberty to the authority of the author for the sake of the benefits to be derived from reading that novel. A subject-reader position, uncritical of the text, leaves the reader open to the intellectual manipulation seen in didactic texts.

The more readers identify and empathise with the characters, the more likely they are to accept the version of the world the narrative constructs and the values (and brands) it thereby promotes. Ideological subtexts are all the more persuasive if the reader is positioned to uncritically absorb them.

This understanding of the relationship between the reader and the text does not mean readers invariably respond as they are positioned to by text or that they respond in the same way anymore than consumers buy or desire every product advertised to them. Nevertheless, given that advertising and fiction for young people have in common 'an impulse to intervene in the lives' of their 'target audience' (Stephens 1992: 8), product placement in children's and young adult fiction, whether formal or informal, creates a situation in which two technologies of persuasion and socialization operate simultaneously. I would argue that these two technologies actually converge in the service of consumer capitalism in an emerging genre of YA fiction that is distinguished by the conspicuous consumption of its teenage characters and that the

informal product placement in them points to the hybridization of advertising and fiction.

The following extract from *Nobody Does it Better*, the seventh in Cecily von Ziegesar's Gossip Girl series, exemplifies this hybridity:

At least Blair had an excuse to use the delicious L'Occitane sandalwood body shampoo the housekeeper stocked in Nate's shower. She towelled herself off with a thick navy blue Ralph Lauren towel, slipped on her flimsy pink silk Cosabella underwear, zipped up her blue-and-white seersucker Constance Billard School spring uniform skirt, and buttoned two of the six buttons on her white linen Calvin Klein three-quarter-sleeve blouse. (2005: 10)

In the first of Zoey Dean's *The A List* (2003) series, Anna gives up wool pashminas and Blahnik boots for bikinis and Oakley sunglasses when she moves from Manhattan to Los Angeles, while in J. Minter's first novel, *The Insiders* (2004), the narrator, Jonathan, has a fetish for expensive shoes to rival Carrie Bradshaw's in *Sex and the City*. The first in a series of YA novels concerning the exploits of a set of privileged Manhattan teenage boys, *The Insiders* is dripping with references to designer brands: Tom Ford for Yves St Laurent; JM Weston; Prada; Miu-Miu; and Crocket and Jones—and these are just the brands of men's shoes.

It could be argued, as Pattee does of the Gossip Girl books, that the fact that these are luxury brands and their consumers 'a minority of privileged, white New York City-dwelling teens' sits in tension with the series' claims 'to address "universal" teen concerns' (2006: 164). She quotes Matt Freeman, who describes the series as a 'glamorous fantasy, for most of us' (2006: 166) and notes a narrative ambivalence in the positioning of the reader—at times as 'peer' and at other times as 'wanna-be'—particularly in *Because I'm Worth It* (2003). The reader, Pattee suggests, will identify with second-rate wanna-be, Jenny, who, 'with her stumbles, proves to readers how unattainable our wish for wealth and luxury might be' (2006: 167). Because of the unattainability of the protagonists' wealth and luxurious lifestyle, she argues, what the novels offer the reader is 'a certain awareness of the power of self-display, which, with certain appropriate purchases and attitudes, can put us on a track running parallel



to that of the series characters' (2006: 167). The implication is that they offer the implied (female) reader a gendered subject position rather than an (unattainable) consumerist one. Even if consumption and postfeminist girlhood go hand-in-hand, this reading undercuts the notion that the novel promotes the particular brands and products that appear in it.

Given its parallels with Gossip Girl series, the same might be said of *The Insiders* series. In the eponymous first novel, product placement informs the semiotics of taste which not only provides the criteria used to classify the central characters, Jonathan, David, Mickey, Arno, and Patch as 'insiders', but also to identify and penalize the 'outsider' character, Jonathan's older cousin, Kelli, from St Louis. The patterns of consumption it endorses are intricately linked to a sense of 'them' and 'us' which constitutes the class affiliations, distinctions and antagonisms in this novel. Above all about identity and lifestyle, shopping and parties, the slight plot centres on the disruption to the social and romantic lives of the insiders created by Kelli during her week-long visit to New York. The novel presents the point of view of the very rich, and although it shifts between 16-year-old Jonathan's first person narration and a third person narrative voice, it is consistently focalized through 'insider' characters. It is from their perspective that the reader is invited to judge Kelli as an 'outsider'. The implied reader is thus positioned to distance themselves from the "wannabe" character. By using brands and consumer preferences to construct not only desirable, but undesirable subject positions, *The Insiders* offers the reader a consumer-subject position aligned with its wealthy protagonists. Indeed, the novel ultimately puts the implied reader not on a *parallel* track to the characters, but *convergent* paths towards adult consumer identities. The remainder of this essay seeks to justify these claims in relation to the current cultural milieu and the young adult reader, sex and the semiotics of brands, and class identity and reader positioning.

### **Let me tell you about the very rich**

According to F Scott Fitzgerald, the very rich 'are different from you and me'. This may have been the case in 1926 when he wrote these words, but is it the case under consumer capitalism? According to Pakulski and Waters (1996), consumer capitalism has spelled the 'death of class', with distinct class cultures being displaced by 'a non-

exclusive cultural complex that is shared' by 'all members of society' (1996a: 681). This 'democratic' cultural complex is predicated on consumption and lifestyle. Mike Savage suggests that class now presents a 'conundrum', because 'entrenched class inequality can [and does] go hand in hand with the cultural invisibility of class' (2002: 60). If his research points to a growing perception of classlessness surprising in the United Kingdom, the pervasiveness of the American Dream has long led many Americans to believe that the United States is a classless society. Given that The Insiders is produced in the US and has its largest market there, such perceptions are salient to the relationship between the novel's readers and its representation of consumer practices. This is particularly so if, as bell hooks argues, 'The notion that everyone can be wealthy has supplanted the idea of the United States as a classless society' (2000: 80).

In her chapter on youth consumers in *Where We Stand: Class Matters*, hooks makes the case that fantasies of consumption 'cut across class' and precisely attributes this to advertising: 'Through the manipulation of images, it constructs a fictive United States where everyone has access to everything' (2000: 80). In regard to teenagers, she makes the following point:

Today's youth culture is centered around consumption. Whether it's wearing designer clothes or cruising in luxury cars, materialism becomes the basis of all transactions. For young people, the world is their marketplace. All one's worth, mass media advertising tells them, is determined by material things. Ironically, such thinking produces a symbolically 'classless' society in which these values are shared by youth culture irrespective of race, gender, or class positionality. (hooks 2000: 81)

hooks goes on to say that more and more teenagers are not only denying 'the reality of class', but identifying 'solely with the values and mores of a predatory ruling class' (84). This suggests that in spite of the reality that many teenage readers will not be able to afford the luxuries enjoyed by Jonathan and his friends in The Insiders, the cultural milieu in which the novel is read is conducive to reader identification with the characters' lifestyle and consumer preferences.

John Berger provides one insight into one reason for the disjunction between the material and symbolic dimensions of class when he argues that advertising is 'credible' because it is judged 'not by the real fulfilment of its promises, but by the relevance of its fantasies to those of the spectator-buyer. Its essential application is not to reality but to daydreams' (1972: 146). In the case of the young adult consumer, the 'wishful dreaming' (Campbell 1989: 203) promoted by advertising and adolescent fantasizing converge. Both are connected to an imagined future, which also characterizes the findings of Mary Ann Moffit's qualitative study of adolescent girl readers of romance in which

Readers reported consistently that reading substituted for an experience they could not yet enjoy—for example, having a boyfriend—and also allowed them to experience first, in the moment of reading, roles and feelings they expected to face as an adult, such as making love, being married, having money, and being a success. (1993: 245)

For readers growing up under consumer capitalism, this may well include the expectation of wealth and a capacity to buy the brands that appear in The Insiders. The novel offers aspirational adolescents a comparable 'pseudo-experience' of a luxury consumer future regardless of their actual material circumstances. The extent to which they identify with the characters and their lifestyle thus lies not in the connection of the fictional reality to the reality of its readers, but to their fantasies about themselves and their futures. It is a fantasy that becomes all the more persuasive when one considers the resonances between the narcissism that consumer culture is said to promote, the egocentrism commonly attributed to adolescence, and the solipsism of Minter's characters. In this respect, the economic significance of the brands and commodities in the novel is ultimately secondary to the forms of adolescent identity they construct.

Commodities have cultural and symbolic as well as economic value. They are objects of exchange, but as Martyn Lee explains, they also provide a 'symbolic resource by which ordinary people [can produce] their life' and construct 'a wide varieties of identities' (1993: xi). Although the exclusive brands and designer goods in The Insiders are indeed signifiers of wealth and used as markers of class distinction, the

cultural and symbolic values they embody are not necessarily exclusive to those who occupy a particular economic location. This is because readers are given access to the cultural and symbolic values encoded by the brands. Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital helps explain how. An individual's capacity to accumulate cultural capital—the knowledge, dispositions and artefacts of the legitimate or dominant culture, in this case consumer culture—is influenced by economic capital. However, 'Actual physical possession [of consumer cultural artefacts] is not really the point. More importantly, cultural capital comes from having access to the codes of such artefacts: knowing how they work, what they do, what to say about them, how to appreciate, value and evaluate them: in short, how to consume them as cultural signs' (Thwaites et al. 1994: 196). It is partly 'autonomous of economic capital' because it is symbolic. Via novels like *The Insiders*, readers have access to these symbolic codes even if they do not yet or will never have access to the goods themselves. These codes centre on distinctions of taste and style as markers of identity and for which the novel offers a pedagogy that is reinforced by the characterization of the outsider, Kelli.

That taste and style can to some extent operate independently of economic location is apparent in the disjunction between the insiders' view of Kelli, and what can be deduced from the little detail that is given of her circumstances. The fact that she is in New York to attend a selection interview at the Sarah Lawrence College, her reference to Noam Chomsky, and her mother's plans to attend a performance of La Boheme imply the cultural capital of 'high' culture. Yet she is referred to as 'trailer trash' by one character, and Arno tells Jonathan, 'Class runs thinner than water in your family' (20). Although class is used here in a double sense of the word, Kelli's failures of style, taste, and manner are linked not to a lack of economic capital, but of consumer cultural capital. The brands of clothing, food, drink and entertainment consumed by the various characters in the novel function as signs, which are used to construct identities and have a phatic function, which is to say, they construct relationships, in this case creating a sense of 'us' and 'them'.

The role of brands in social recognition and differentiation is established early in the novel in the contrasting descriptions of the clothing and footwear Jonathan and Kelli wear to a party at Patch's house. Jonathan's description of his outfit is outlined with a degree of specificity more common in fashion magazines. He does not simply wear a

shirt, jacket and shoes, but ‘the yellow Ralph corduroy blazer I was into that week’ (13), ‘brown suede JP Tod’s loafers’ (14) and a ‘white Prada button-down [shirt]’ (16). His soon-to-be ex-girlfriend, Liza, wears ‘black Gucci boots, a black Marc Jacobs knee-length skirt, and matching black silk turtleneck’ (37). Brands in this context serve to reflect their identities as insiders and function as signs by which they recognise each other as members of that group. Jonathan does not ‘recognise’ Kelli in this way, describing her simply as ‘done up in a short white skirt and pink sweater’ (13) and ‘cheap red pumps’ (38). Conversely, Kelli does not recognise the signifiers of taste and style privileged by the narrative. At the party, Kelli comments on Liza’s skirt, saying, ‘It’s cool, but like in a really conservative, non-sexy way. Definitely wouldn’t attract the wrong kind of attention, or any attention. Huh?’ (37).

In contrast to Liza, Kelli does not use brand name clothing to signify her identity. Indeed, her clothing remains undistinguished by brand names until the end of the novel when she wears a pair of Helmut Lang jeans. Otherwise, the only labels she wears are on her T-shirts and they say things like ‘Lick Me’ (241) and ‘I’m the talent’ (181), which the novel suggests may indeed ‘attract the wrong kind of attention’. Certainly, they position the implied reader alongside the majority of the insider characters to associate Kelli’s inexpensive clothing with sexual cheapness. In fact, her ‘sexiness’ functions as a form of capital to the extent that Arno falls in ‘love’ with her and, much to Jonathan’s consternation, she does not need his connections in order to get into exclusive night clubs and parties, capture the attention of a rising artist and, through him, meet celebrities like Calvin Klein. Kelli is ‘sexy, but in a cheerleader-gone-bad kind of way’ (14), and ultimately her sexiness does not function as legitimate cultural and symbolic capital among the insiders.

Kelli is perceived to be the cause of the various romantic tribulations the insiders endure during her stay, and widely disliked as a result. However, she is not as easy as everyone thinks and the ambiguity surrounding the extent of her sexual activity casts the insiders’ perceptions of her as ‘cheap’ into doubt. Narrative unreliability of this sort is often used to construct textual meaning by negation, that is, by showing its opposite. But the novel neither corrects the perceptions of its focalizing characters nor positions the reader to empathise with Kelli. Even the surface endorsement of her character that insider Arno’s infatuation with her might imply is subverted. Her sexual

unavailability makes her a desirable to him in the same way as expensive luxury products designed for an exclusive market are desirable, but there are no grounds to assume he would have treated her any differently to the caterer's Hispanic assistant with whom he satisfies his sexual appetite. As this suggests, it is not as if insider characters are not promiscuous themselves. What is important are the distinctions made around sexuality and, thus, the way in which consumption, sexuality and age are articulated through the semiotics of the brands that appear in the novel. Brands confer a distinct identity on a product; in the novel, they confer distinct identities on the insiders and label the outsider in ways that work to discourage reader identification with Kelli and thereby construct a consumer subject-position aligned with the insiders instead.

While adolescent sexual activity is part of the transition to adulthood, Kelli's sexuality is not only coded as cheap, but childish and unsophisticated by the brands and products used as signifiers of her identity. She smells of 'artificial fruit flavouring and baby powder' (101), and the 'Savage Sour Apple Bubblicious' (31) and 'Blue Blowout Bubblicious' (140) bubble gum she chews is marketed to children. The semiotics of the names of these flavours become significant in the context of the characterization, since from the point of view of the insiders Kelli is loud (blowout), unsophisticated (savage), sexually tempting (apple) and risqué (blue), but also spoiled in the sense of having gone bad (sour). This final connotation is reinforced when her style is described as 'Mickey-Mouse-Club-Gone-Bad' (74). Disney, as Henry Giroux puts it, is 'synonymous with the notion of childhood innocence' (1999: 17), albeit underwritten by the commodification alluded to in my introduction. But the reader is positioned to see Kelli as neither innocent nor wholesome. Kelli is older than her 16-year-old cousin, and it is implied she should have left such childishness behind. Images associated with her suggest the decay of childhood and spoiled goods rather than the beginning of adulthood. The reference to Happy Meals serves a similar function. Before Arno realises that the two are cousins, he quips to Jonathan, 'Where'd you say you picked this Kelli up? ... The West Side Highway for twenty bucks and a Happy Meal?' (20). Kelli, he implies, is the like fast food—cheap, tasteless and unwholesome. The reference to the Happy Meal complicates the inference of adult sexual experience, the association of Kelli with the childlike tastes and values that the Happy Meal again suggesting age inappropriateness.

As a collocation of Happy Meal, McDonald's brings a further level of signification. According to Douglas Kellner, McDonald's

projects an ideology of the US as a melting pot in which all citizens participate equally in its democratic pleasures, irregardless of race, class, gender, and age. ... Going to McDonald's for denizens of the US is thus joining the consumer society, participating in the national culture, and validating common values. (1999: 189)

That all the characters in *The Insiders* have joined the consumer society goes without saying, but Kelli is associated with an icon of consumer capitalism that, according to *The New York Times*, is now seen 'as uncultured, unclassy and uncool' (Day 2003). In contrast, the brands associated with the insiders suggest much more discerning, individualized and, most importantly, adult consumer tastes. Unlike the denizens of McDonald's—or members of the Mickey Mouse Club for that matter—they know that consumer culture offers a more sophisticated and varied menu.

This is reinforced by the representation of consumption practices around food and drink, in particular alcohol. Worried about how she will behave at Patch's party, Jonathan imagines Kelli will 'get wrecked and end up sleeping on the floor ... with her arms curled around a chair leg and a quart bottle of crème de menthe' (15). The image evokes adolescent excess and lack of restraint and, given the liqueur's sweet mint flavour, an immature palate. Crème de menthe is generally undistinguished by a brand name and thus fails as a signifier of sophistication and mature discernment. When she does select a branded drink, it is 'a pint can of Miller Lite ... bought at the corner store' (99). The insiders drink beer, too, but choose imported beers like Heineken (30), del Sol (36), Grolsch (198), Stella Artois (86) and Tsingha (174), suggesting more cosmopolitan tastes than the domestic American beer of Kelli's choice. They do not drink simply rum or whiskey, but Bacardi 151 (174) or Jack Daniels (171). The characters may be only 16-years-old, but few experience difficulties accessing alcohol in public or in private. After all, they are insiders and know where they can buy drinks without being 'carded' (160); their age is no impediment to a consumption practice legally limited to adults.

The ‘adultification’ of the insiders extends to their taste in restaurants and clubs. They go to actual New York restaurants including La Luncheonette on Tenth Avenue (77), the Corner Bistro for burgers (160), and Florent (213). They frequent real New York clubs and bars like Save the Robots (212) and Siberia (246). The novel offers the teenage consumer/reader a roadmap for finding the right products, shops, clubs and restaurants. They do not need to be familiar with the referents: Minter provides addresses and stockists. From this perspective, product placement in The Insiders makes it as much a style manual of aspirational consumption as a novel, and as much a pedagogy of consumerism as a snapshot of the lifestyles of privileged teens.

The distinct identity that is bestowed on the insiders by their consumption preferences is clearly an adult one. That the capacity of Jonathan and his friends to assume this form of consumer identity is materially dependent on class is self-evident. However, although the novel promotes brands as signifiers of class status, the key distinctions of taste and style are also linked to identity categories that are classless. In other words, by situating the insiders’ adult tastes in luxury brands in opposition to the juvenile brands associated with Kelli, the novel equates the transition from child to adult consumer with the developmental transition from adolescence to adulthood, a trajectory that makes no class distinctions. In stigmatizing the failed consumer in this way, the only reader-subject position the novel offers the implied reader is one aligned with the insiders, rewarding him or her with access to what Kelli lacks: knowledge of the cultural capital of consumer society and the forms of social and symbolic capitals that particular consumption practices accumulate. To the degree that readers uncritically assume the subject position of the privileged protagonists, they are invited to identify as consumer equals, to align themselves with the characters’ tastes and brand preferences, and provided with the ‘pseudo-experience’ of an imagined consumer future. In this sense product placement in Minter’s novel possesses an advertising capacity.

### **Conclusion**

The Insiders, and the subgenre of fiction to which it belongs, represent extreme cases of product placement in young adult fiction. However, in that the semiotics of the



brands referred to in these novels take on the narrative capacity to tell stories about the characters, they demonstrate the way in which product placement in fiction has the potential to draw on two mutually reinforcing registers of persuasion—advertising strategy and narrative strategy—that promote consumer desire. Because the use of brands contributes to the realism of the fictive world, acts to flesh out the identities of the characters that consume them, and establishes realms of shared experience between protagonists and the implied reader, they normalise characters’ consumer identities and practices. From a critical perspective, the ideological implications of informal product placement are no less compelling for the fact that reference to brands is not informed by a deliberate intention to sell products or promote consumer desire. The double standard around formal and informal product placement is problematic, precisely because the impact of narrative on readers cannot be reduced to delight or entertainment as co-author of *Cathy’s Book*, Sean Stewart (2006), argues.

As scholars like Engelhardt and Zipes show, children’s literature is not an inalienable cultural field, but it is no longer the case that the influence of the market is limited to the production and marketing of books. Nor can its influence on textual content be limited to a tendency towards literary blandness. Texts for children and young adults are a major technology of socialization; it thus follows that hybridization of narrative and advertising strategy manifest in product placement in *The Insiders* and others like it functions to promote a particular developmental path of the reading audience into consumer adulthood. The persuasiveness of this mix suggests that incursions of the market into the text are likely to increase.

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