Deakin University

Rebecca Hutton

Prose fiction's 'infinite playlist': encountering music in fiction narrative

Abstract:

This paper will argue that reference to music in young-adult prose fiction stimulates movement across narrative and artistic boundaries in ways that facilitate a unique reading encounter. The inclusion of musical reference opens up a space for a multisensory experience that is beyond that of the reading experience devoid of musical association, even when the audio is not immediately available at the time of reading. This experience is bound to the role of the reader, however, be it through the remembered or imagined experience of the music that is signaled in-text, or even the reader's pursuit of the audio in response to the reading. As 'a threshold literature' (Eaton 2010, np) that targets a young audience for whom 'popular music is globally acknowledged as affectively and culturally central' (Bloustien & Peters 2011, 4), young-adult fiction is an apt space for explorations into the potential that exists when a text includes musical reference. In particular, Gerard Genette's paratexts (1997), J Hillis Miller's 'membranes' (2005) and T Austin Graham's 'literary soundtrack' (2009) will be used to examine how Rachel Cohn and David Levithan's young-adult fiction novel *Nick and Norah's infinite playlist* (2006) functions as an 'infinite playlist' in itself via a series of paratextual and epitextual elements. Discussion of the latticework of music-narrative interaction that exists as a part of this text will facilitate an understanding of how musical reference can encourage movement within and beyond the narrative towards a potentially unique reading experience.

Biographical note:

Rebecca Hutton is currently undertaking a PhD in Creative and Professional Writing at Deakin University. Her areas of research interest include children's and young-adult literature, and the use of music and visual art in young-adult prose fiction.

Keywords:

Music – Young adult fiction – Paratexts – *Nick and Norah's infinite playlist*

When written references to music are featured in works of young-adult fiction they are often considered atmosphere, characterisation, or intertextuality at the expense of recognition of the greater role they may have in the reading experience. Yet it can be argued that reference to music in prose fiction stimulates movement across narrative and artistic boundaries in ways that facilitate a unique reading encounter. The inclusion of musical reference opens up a space for a multisensory experience that is beyond that of the reading experience devoid of musical association, even when the audio is not immediately available at the time of reading. This experience, however, is bound to the role of the reader, be it through the remembered or imagined experience of the music that is signaled in-text or even a reader's voluntary pursuit of the audio in response to the reading.

Literary theorists have recognised musical reference as being of importance in the reception of works by writers such as James Joyce and F Scott Fitzgerald.[1] But within the canon of young-adult literature – targeting a young audience for whom 'popular music is globally acknowledged as affectively and culturally central' (Bloustien & Peters 2011, 4) – current critical perspectives relating to the significance of musical reference in fiction are limited. It is a curious absence when there is such a presence of musical expression within young-adult prose fiction. Rachel Cohn and David Levithan's collaborative young-adult fiction novel *Nick and Norah's infinite playlist* (2006) has been chosen as the focal point of this analysis primarily for the latticework of music-narrative interaction that exists as part of the text. The narrative rests on a chance meeting between protagonists Nick and Norah at a concert that leads them to spend an 'infinite night' travelling through New York. This night constitutes a series of physical and emotional 'encounter(s)(s)(s)' (Cohn & Levithan 2006, 167) for the protagonists and, for the reader, a series of musical encounters. The text references a number of songs and musicians, some constructed specifically for the narrative and others that are recognisable as existing outside of the fictional world. The text itself thus becomes an 'infinite playlist' of musical connection and divergence, directing the reader to an accessible (but not obligatory) musical experience subsidiary to the reading of the text through musical reference and, in doing so, potentially transcending boundaries between the music and 'soundless' print prose fiction.

Much of the discussion to come concerns spaces that 'bridge' or are 'between' artefacts, in this case a young-adult text and music. Anthony Eaton (2010, np) argues that young-adult literature exists as a 'midpoint on the continuum between "children's" and "adult" literature' and is 'driven by a degree of liminality that places it between worlds'. Young-adult fiction is, as he terms it, inherently 'a threshold literature'. While Victor Turner's definition of liminality was originally used in anthropological contexts it has since been widely utilised within literary scholarship, including scholarship concerning children's and young-adult literature.[2] In literary contexts, the ambiguity and hybridity inherent in this concept – as 'neither one thing nor another; or […] both; or neither here nor there; or […] even nowhere' (Turner 1967, 97) – suggests spaces of transgressive and creative potential (Joseph 2011, 139). The confluence of young-adult fiction and music shares in this potential. When the implied audience's experience is shaped to encourage a music-related reading through the construction of both the narrative and the text as a whole, this experience

potentially draws on the affective and cultural associations of the audience and the 'betwixt and between' nature (Turner 1967) of these sites of 'creative power' (Joseph, 139).

In the early nineties, some interest was taken in the representation of music in children's and young-adult literature[3] but limited emphasis was put on the value and wide-reaching potential of further research into this area. For example, in the music-themed edition of a children's and young adults' literature specific journal, the editors point to the value of representing 'other arts that appear in children's books' – that is, arts other than pictures – yet their hope that the content would be 'thought-provoking' (Smith and Zipes 1992, vii) does not necessarily encourage sustained scrutiny. Subsequent downplaying or overlooking of the ideological, pedagogical, and creative potential of the music-narrative relationship in children's and young-adult texts has seemingly resulted in a void in this area. But even without the popularity of texts such as *Glee* renewing scholarly interest in the role of music in young-adult texts, the music-narrative interaction remains relevant. As Bruce K Martin argues (1998, 38), 'the interaction between fiction and popular music reminds us that no art form proceeds by itself but is inextricably caught up with other human activities, artistic or otherwise'. He further credits music with establishing 'points of personal reference and self-definition more readily and more lastingly than other kinds of popular culture – more even than film or television' (22).

T Austin Graham (2009, 519) argues the presence of musical reference in prose fiction (namely the works of F Scott Fitzgerald) can still result in 'a musical-textual moment that fluctuates between the known and the unknown, the familiar and the foreign, the literally audible and the suggestively abstract'. He asserts that the 'soundtracked novel' (which he specifies as involving 'written references' to music in the narrative) creates a 'productive dialogue' between 'two generically distinct arts'. In arguing that there is a symbiotic relationship between music and prose fiction, Karen Collins (2005, 176) also refers to 'a sharing of ideas [that] flows two ways between the [artistic] genres'. This sharing is likewise addressed by Stephen Benson (2003, 298), albeit as 'a two-way transfer'. One such possibility of this transfer can be seen in Benson's use of phrasing from David Malouf's 1981 poem 'An die Musik' where 'a new species/taps at the boundaries' (Benson 2006, 41). Importantly, each of the aforementioned theorists refers to the music-narrative interaction as, to some extent, stimulating multidirectional flow, dialogue or reciprocal transference across the boundaries between art forms without the reader necessarily having the audio immediately available.

The notion of travel is significant in the potential for an encounter with the 'new species' of art born of the music-narrative interaction. As such, this encounter may be facilitated through the construction of the text in ways that allow for transmission, reception and evolution beyond the borders of the narrative. Such movement is intimately associated with points in the text that allow for flow beyond borders, specifically *paratexts* – 'a zone not only of transition but also of transaction' (Genette 1997, 2). Gerard Genette (1997, 1–2) considers the paratextual elements of a text as an '"undefined zone" between the inside and the outside', not 'a boundary or sealed border' but 'rather, a *threshold*' [original emphasis]. The opening paratexts of *Nick*

and Norah's infinite playlist set up how the text is to be experienced, as per Genette's assertion paratexts constitute *transactions* influencing the intended audience in a way that serves a 'better reception for' and 'more pertinent reading of' the text (1997, 2) and Philippe Lejeune's (1975, 45, cited in Genette, 2) parallel placement of the paratext as 'a fringe of the printed text which in reality controls one's whole reading of the text'. The paratexts of particular significance to this discussion are the roughly drawn map of lower Manhattan and bordering areas prior to the title page, the title itself, and 'The acknowledgments playlist' (see Figure 1) following the title page and publishing information.

The title, containing the prophetic phrase 'infinite playlist', initiates a relationship between music, narrative and movement. The phrase 'infinite playlist' in itself notably signals an immediate association between this text and a musical experience. Through continuous references to specific songs, the narrative progresses track by track much in the same way a playlist – as a custom-grouped list of musical selections to be played, ideally, as a progressive whole – would. As Marcin Stawiarski (2010) argues, a title implying an aspect of music can direct a reading that facilitates engagement with the text in a way that embraces an association with music. This association is 'potentially disseminated within the entire text', as:

> when a title suggests the literary work in question draws on some kind of musical technique or structure, say a symphony, […] then readers may be expected to draw parallels between music and text at virtually any juncture. (2010, 100)

The map, which albeit only features in the 2008 third edition of the text, signals further parallels that engage with the music-narrative interaction set up by the title. In providing a visual representation of multiple landmarks that are featured in the narrative, the text links the narrative to established music and experience beyond the fictional world. Houston Street and Ludlow Street in particular are sites of significant musical reference in the text over the course of the night: the Cure's 'Pictures of you' plays as Nick and Norah travel down Houston Street; The Beatles' 'I want to hold your hand' is discussed on Ludlow Street; and then the Beatles' 'Something' is discussed when they return to Ludlow Street at the end of the narrative. The title and map thus impart discernible movement through these associations, movement that is reinforced in-text as, according to the narrative, Nick and Norah's infinite night is not a single song but a movement 'from song to song, from lyric to lyric, from chord to chord' with 'no ending' (Cohn and Levithan 2006, 173–74).

J Hillis Miller's 1979 'The critic as host' offers an important elaboration on the prefix 'para' that aids in articulating the potential movement within and beyond the latticework of musical presence at work in *Nick and Norah's infinite playlist*. Miller determines 'para' to signify:

> something simultaneously this side of a boundary line, threshold, or margin, and also beyond it […] A thing in 'para', moreover, is not only simultaneously on both sides of the boundary line between inside and out. It is also the boundary itself, the screen which is a permeable membrane connecting inside and outside. It confuses them with one another, allowing the outside in, making the inside out, dividing them and joining them. (2005, 18)

Passage or *crossing* is implicit in both Genette's thresholds and Miller's membranes and when associated with the two paratexts mentioned thus far indicates these elements are integral initial points of communicative potential. This boundary crossing is continued via the list of acknowledgments that assign accessible music to individuals and groups who exist outside of the text (under the heading of 'The acknowledgments playlist'[4] – Figure 1).

Figure 1: Excerpt from The acknowledgments playlist

7. The Cure—'Pictures of you' (for Melissa Nelson and Isabel Warren-Lynch)

8. Louis Armstrong—'A kiss to build a dream on' (for all the good people of Knopf)

9. The Beatles—'Paperback writer' (for our dear author friends)

10. Julie Andrews—'The sound of music' (for our loving families)

The references in these acknowledgments simultaneously relate to two areas beyond the printed text – real music and real people. The authors' families are assigned 'The sound of music', their friends are given 'Paperback writer', and individuals such as Melissa Nelson and Isabel Warren-Lynch receive 'Pictures of you'. Additional songs by the Beatles are also mentioned within the narrative and although these songs are different to the song featured in the acknowledgments, the repetition creates intersections between the real music outside of the text, the paratext, and the musical reference that features in-text.

Looking more thoroughly at references to the Beatles as an example here, the audience is enabled to move from an initial point of connection (such as a band that is referenced and its catalogue of music) to multiple points across the text. While reference to a well-known and prolific group like the Beatles opens up a vast potential for associations due to the great number of songs the band has released, the primary association is subsequently focused through the specific reference to an identifiable audio track – 'Paperback writer' – which if not already known can be accessed via multiple avenues if the reader desires to pursue this (a condition that will be discussed further shortly). The acknowledgments cite this track as being 'for our dear author friends'. The intended paratextual function embedded in this reference is in this case associating the song with a personal aspect of the production of the text, as according to Genette an acknowledgement or dedication 'proclaims a relationship, whether intellectual or personal, actual or symbolic' (1997, 135). The acknowledgment referred to here credits these 'dear author friends' with an undisclosed, by still noteworthy, role in producing the text that is expressed through the musical association.

The spatial associations encouraged by the map, as discussed earlier, are also at work within the narrative alongside the musical references that occur. The Beatles are associated with locations where the characters are situated when related musical reference occurs, be it points on the map in the 2008 edition of the text and/or the written mention of an identifiable location in editions that do not feature the map. The narrative itself does not mention 'Paperback writer' but instead includes repeated mention of 'I want to hold your hand'[5] and a single mention of 'Something'. Both of

these occur on Ludlow Street – a real world location – but at different points of the night. Connections 'allowing the outside in, making the inside out, dividing and joining them' (Miller 2005, 18) abound in this architecture of referential convergence and divergence, as regardless of whether the in-text references to these songs are termed as atmosphere, characterisation, or intertexuality, the references still draw context and existence from the original audio track.

Musical references can also play an extended role in the narrative. In the case of the Beatles, 'I want to hold your hand' is linked to a recurring motif of handholding in the narrative that is both overtly and covertly attributed to the song. For example, Dev 'glides his hand into [Nick's] and intertwines [their] fingers' (118) as they first discuss the song, and on the final page of the novel Norah 'grab[s] hold of [Nick's] warm hand' (183). The song is also discussed in terms of musical history in a way that signals more (almost infinite) associations, as according to one character '[e]very single successful love song of the past fifty years can be traced to "I wanna hold your hand"' (118). The single mention of 'Something' occurs as part of a discussion between the protagonists that is prompted by, and therefore intersects with, yet another reference to 'I want to hold your hand' (see page 176). In these examples then, it is music associated with the Beatles that traces lines to different points within the narrative. But just as importantly these lines also reach beyond the narrative to specific, named points outside of the text (namely real people, locations, and accessible songs and artists, but potentially also cultural and musical history).

Similar movement is present in other instances where a song is implied to be playing in the narrative itself. The Cure's 'Pictures of you' is one such track as it features in the Acknowledgments playlist (Track 7), functions as part of the narrative as a topic of discussion between Nick and Norah (see page 43) and is implied to be playing across three pages of the narrative. Numerous songs are signalled as playing in the background during the course of the narrative, with at least sixty pages of the 183-page narrative occurring with implied background music. This is yet another instance of how the use of specific track structures a path that can be traced to multiple points beyond the narrative. Stawiarski (2010, 94) endorses 'musical presence within the literary paratext' as generating 'specific semiotic implications, such as performativity'. His argument positions this presence 'as an act and not simply a verbal construct' (94), with 'the modes of relationship between text and paratext and those between paratext and music' potentially 'overlap[ping] and complement[ing] one another' (97). By Genette's definition, paratexts 'surround [the text] and extend it, precisely in order to *present* it…to *make present*' (1997, 1), a perspective which Benson enforces in his assertion that in 'represent[ing] music to the reader', the text 'make[s] music present' (2006, 141). Benson likewise likens these representations to performances, functioning as 'one more instance of music making (in both senses of the term)' (2006, 4). The presence of the Cure's 'Pictures of you' in the narrative is one such type of music-making, whereby a single song is performed in concurrent ways via a single text: in dialogue, in prose, and in paratext, all of which are irrevocably linked to the audio track that sits at a distance from the text.

The performative potential of the musical references of *Nick and Norah's infinite playlist* extends beyond that of the aforementioned paratexts (map, title,

acknowledgments) as even the music that features *within* the narrative could be considered somewhat paratextual. Graham positions F Scott Fitzgerald as a pioneer in creating 'a new, musical mode of reading and writing' (2009, 520) through the inclusion of musical reference – or, a 'literary soundtrack' – in his narratives. The paratextual nature of the literary soundtrack itself can be seen in Graham's own definition of the soundtrack as 'a series of written references to specific pieces of music that compel extra-literary responses in readers *and thereby heighten, color, or otherwise comment upon the text that contains them*' (519) [own emphasis]. When set alongside the previously mentioned descriptions of the paratext as influencing the reading and reception of the text, the literary soundtrack then resembles a type of paratext: particularly, an *epitext*. Epitexts are those paratextual elements 'not materially appended to the text within the same volume' (Genette, 344). Sitting at a 'distance' from the text, rather than within the text itself, epitexts are therefore 'a fringe of the fringe' (346) that 'circulat[e], as it were, freely, in a virtually limitless physical and social space' (344). Such descriptions are particularly reminiscent of the intangible nature of much contemporary audio material that, in current standard formats (MP3 rather than compact disc or record), can be accessed with relative ease via multiple pathways. Living in an 'era of a seemingly infinite audio archive that is always available to anyone with a computer and an internet connection' (Stewart 2010, 325), the music of this text is situated in a doubly liminal space; already having lost the tangible compact-disc format in many instances, its location is also in association with when and where the reader-listener chooses.

The infinite playlist of *Nick and Norah's infinite playlist* is thus a synonym for the literary soundtrack. The presence of numerous musical references and 'backing soundtrack' to a third of Cohn and Levithan's narrative create what could be an illusory additional element that sits between the narrative and the visible paratexts. The 'infinite playlist' of Nick and Norah's 'infinite night', while not specifically listed in the same way as the Acknowledgments playlist, still constructs a progression of tracks which is meant to be considered a cohesive whole. This narrative-constructed playlist links to material not physically 'appended to the text' but is still considered to belong to the textual experience. The songs that are signaled as playing throughout the narrative, coupled with the additional songs that are referenced in a way that allows for some level of identification, constitute an *implied* playlist that fulfils a paratextual function. Each track can be identified as belonging to the infinite playlist set up by the title and it is through this association that the playlist is *created* by the text. But while the infinite playlist/literary soundtrack does present the reader with the opportunity to pursue and participate in an extra-literary experience, it is still very much a conditional opportunity. The potential for encounter is bound to the role and importance of the reader. Where the literary soundtrack functions as both 'a coded message' and 'a process to be participated in' (Graham 2009, 525), access to these messages remains reliant on 'audiences to make the necessary connections between narrative and a famously slippery mode of expression' (519).

Some limits of music-based epitexts can be witnessed in Graham's discussion of the inaccessibility of some of the music featured in Fitzgerald's texts as 'dead links' that create 'strangely inaudible musical moments' (2009, 520). The loss of physical access

to a piece of music is only an aspect of this limitation. He also notes the inaccessibility of the experience: the atmospheric pops and crackles associated with the audio experience of playing a record, for example, can be difficult to recreate, meaning that the experience once available to Fitzgerald's readers at the time of publication has been diminished for contemporary readers. In contrast, the compilation of songs featured in *Nick and Norah's infinite playlist* was predominantly produced in a musical era dominated by the compact disc (early 1980s onwards), a format that while losing tactile and visual experience retains a similar audio experience when translated into the MP3 formats that have become standard. In most, though not all[6], instances of musical reference in this text, then, these dead links are instead 'live' links or points of accessibility. Granted, this infinite playlist has been brought closer to 'visibility' through the existence of two types of subsidiary playlists: 1) actual playlists for the text constructed by the authors that can be accessed online, and 2) by the soundtrack created for the film adaptation of the book. However, each of these playlists does not entirely mirror the playlist created by the text itself and therefore are not directly created *by* the narrative. This means that while they are still paratextual in nature neither one functions as the infinite playlist, or literary soundtrack, to the narrative. Instead they are avenues that facilitate easier access to the audio tracks.

When musical reference appears in print formats such as prose fiction the musical association tends not to be considered 'experience' but rather atmosphere or characterisation. The purpose of this discussion is in part to begin an argument against this dislocation of print narrative from musical experience to contend that a work of prose fiction can have a soundtrack in itself born of a compilation of written references and that this implied soundtrack can enhance the experience of the narrative. As such, Levithan and Cohn's *Nick and Norah's infinite playlist* can be considered an infinite playlist in itself. The text is a latticework of music-narrative interactions that, when accessed by the reader, present an experience akin to the 'new, musical mode of reading and writing' Graham attributes to Fitzgerald's literary soundtrack. It is in these moments of intersection that the performative, transcendent, and creative possibilities of the music-narrative interaction are apparent in this work of, as Eaton terms in, 'threshold literature'. The encounter is not solely narrative-based, nor is it purely musical, but instead a joining of the two to create an experience auxiliary to the reading of the text.

Endnotes

1. See for example Bruce K Martin 1998; Ruth Prigozy 1977; TA Graham 2009.

2. See for example Naomi Harmer 2003.

3. See for example Perry Nodelman 1992; Ann Phillips 1992; Jan Susina 1992, Colleen Reardon 1996.

4. The Acknowledgments Playlist features in all editions of the text.

5. Referred to as 'I Wanna Hold Your Hand' [sic] in the narrative.

6. *Nick and Norah's infinite playlist* also involves fictional music created purely for the narrative such as bands, songs and protagonist Nick's musical compositions but to discuss this in the detail it deserves is beyond the scope of this paper.

Works cited

Benson, S 2003 'For want of a better term?: polyphony and the value of music in Bakhtin and Kundera', *Narrative* 11: 3, 292-311

—— 2006 *Literary music: writing music in contemporary fiction*, Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing Limited

Bloustien, G & Peters, M 2011 *Youth, music and creative cultures: playing for life*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan

Cohn, R & Levithan, D 2006 *Nick and Norah's infinite playlist*, New York: Alfred A Knopf

Collins, K 2005 'Dead channel surfing: the commonalities between cyberpunk literature and industrial music', *Popular Music* 24: 2, 165-78

Eaton, A 2010 'Making to unmask – the creation of and reaction to *Into white silence*', *TEXT* 14: 2, at http://www.textjournal.com.au/oct10/eaton.htm (accessed 1 December 2012)

Genette, G 1997 *Paratexts: thresholds of interpretation*, trans Jane E Lewin, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Graham, TA 2009 'The literary soundtrack: or, F Scott Fitzgerald's heard and unheard melodies', *American Literary History* 21: 3, 518-29

Harmer, N 2003 'The city as a liminal site in children's literature: enchanted realism with an urban twist', *The Looking Glass* 7: 1, at http://www.the-looking-glass.net/index.php/tlg/article/view/217/215 (accessed 1 December 2012)

Joseph, M 2011 'Liminality', in P Nel and L Paul (eds) *Keywords for children's literature*, New York: New York University Press, 138-40

Martin, BK 1998 'Music and fiction: the perils of popularism', *Mosiac* 31: 4, 22-39

Miller, JH 2005 'The critic as host', in J Wolfreys (ed) *The J Hillis Miller reader*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 17-37

Nodelman, P 1992 'Males performing in a female space: music and gender in young adult novels', *The Lion and the Unicorn* 16: 2, 223-39

Phillips, A 1992 '"Home itself put into song": music as metaphorical community', *The Lion and the Unicorn* 16: 2, 145-57

Prigozy, R 1977 '"Poor butterfly": F Scott Fitzgerald and popular music', *Prospects* 2, 41-67

Reardon, C 1996 'Music as leitmotif in Louisa Alcott's *Little women*', *The Lion and the Unicorn* 24, 74-85

Smith, L & Zipes, J 1992 'Editor's note', *The Lion and the Unicorn* 16: 2, vii

Stawiarski, M 2010 'This is all but a book: musicalized paratextuality in literature', *Neohelicon* 37, 93-112

Stewart, J 2010 'Intervections', *Contemporary Music Review* 29: 3, 323-35

Susina, J 1992 'The voices of the prairie: the use of music in Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little house on the prairie*', *The Lion and the Unicorn* 16: 2, 158-66

Turner, VW 1967 'Betwixt and between: the liminal period in *Rites de passage*', in *Forest of symbols: aspects of the Ndembu ritual*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 93-111