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The depiction of emerging adulthood in three selected novels

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1 Introduction

The starting point for this thesis was an interest in the millennial generation and its representation in literature. This generation tends to have a negative public image: they are lazy, spoiled, think they can just be whatever they want and refuse to grow up. That last one especially led to further questions: What exactly does this mean, not wanting to grow up? How does this manifest? And what are some of the reasons behind it? This quickly opened the door to the field of developmental psychology, specifically the phase of emerging adulthood, and with it, Jeffrey Jensen Arnett. He is a professor of psychology who specialises in developmental psychology and is most known for his research into this particular phase. Arnett wrote his first article on this subject in 2010 under the title *Emerging Adulthood. A Theory of Development from the Late Teens Through the Twenties*, in which he gave this phenomenon a name. He describes the fact that, in the Western world, many young adults between the ages of 18 and 25 - this is not a fixed range - take longer to reach certain milestones and enter into the age of adulthood considerably later than the generations before. In emerging adulthood, feelings of instability and feeling 'in-between' dominate and there is a focus on the self and one's identity. The main research questions of this thesis were formed: is the phase of emerging adulthood represented in contemporary literature? If this is the case, does it get thematised enough to think of it as its own category or subgenre? And how does city life influence the development of young adults?

The three novels selected offer the perfect material to study these questions in depth. All of them are set in large cities in the Western hemisphere: London, Toronto and New York, which also represent the nationalities of the respective authors. This decision was made deliberately in order to represent different English-speaking countries, offer a variety of viewpoints and illustrate the wider scope of these issues. At the time of writing, the oldest book of the three is ten years old, having been published in 2009. The other two were published in 2016. Choosing truly contemporary literature comes with its own challenges. On the one hand, the topics covered in the texts are current, which makes them very relatable. On the other hand, there are not many articles or commentaries available which discuss these novels as they are such recent publications. The same is true for emerging adulthood – its representation in any form of literature has not yet been widely researched. Because of this, this thesis will borrow the markers for this developmental phase from the field of psychology to analyse its description in the novels. Furthermore, a few extra aspects have been added to showcase the common themes in the chosen texts.

As the phase of emerging adulthood is such a modern phenomenon, the primary literature had to be too. The novels selected for this thesis are: *The Bricks that Built the Houses* by Kate Tempest, *Holding Still for as Long as Possible* by Zoe Whittall and *Why We Came to the City* by Kristopher Jansma. Each novel focuses on a group of close friends in their mid-twenties and chronicles their daily adventures both big and small. They thematise the characters' development towards adulthood and, therefore, can be placed within the genre of the coming-of-age novel. However, in this thesis, it will be argued that the material suffices to define a variation, maybe even a new category, within the coming-of-age novel. One pillar of these novels is the phase of emerging adulthood and the way it is dealt with within the texts. The second pillar is the aforementioned geographical setting: urban centres, big cities, even metropolises. They do not only act as a background but add another layer to illustrate the emotional journeys of the protagonists. The urbanity presented in these novels is integral to the stories they tell and the relationship towards it changes as the characters themselves change. This thesis first looks at the existing genre definitions and variations, exploring the uniqueness of the selected novels and their place within the genre of the coming-of-age novel and opening up the discussion of a possible subcategory for the urban millennial novel. Then, the millennial generation will be described and different definitions will be analysed. The main chapter focuses on millennials in literature, which encompasses the presentation of the selected novels, the identification of their common characteristics, a detailed description of what makes an urban millennial novel, a comprehensive explanation of emerging adulthood and its application to the literary texts, and further vital and unifying topics. Finally, the topic of urbanity in the context of millennials and emerging adulthood will be described, always concentrating on its portrayal in the selected novels.

2 Genre Discussions

Be it in politics, society, academia or art and literature, the process of growing up is a subject so fundamental to any human's existence that its representation is widespread. This development covers a long period of time and is therefore prone to being divided into subsections. Adolescence is one of these sections, in itself difficult to define and dependant on where the focus is placed. Steinebach remarks: "Das Jugendalter kann aus biologischer, psychologischer, soziologischer und rechtlicher Perspektive betrachtet werden."¹ Therefore, there are numerous definitions subject to the respective area of research. This means that the results will differ depending on whether adolescence is considered within the legal system or in terms of biological development and, even within one area, no definition is absolute.

The age of majority delivers a clear example to illustrate this fact. In The United States, an individual reaches that state at the age of eighteen but there are three states where this happens at nineteen (Alabama, Nebraska and Puerto Rico) and in Mississippi you have to be twenty-one before you are considered to have reached majority.² This shows that, even within one country, there is no agreement about when a young person actually reaches the state of maturity. In the European Union, the rule is as follows: "The age of majority is 18 years in all EU Member States except for Scotland, where children are considered to have full legal capacity from the age of 16 years."³ These variations make it obvious that there is some randomness involved in the setting of the age of majority as it is unreasonable to argue that young people in Scotland reach maturity five years earlier than those in Mississippi. As Professor Steinberg mentions in an interview: "Chronological age is not a particularly good indicator [of maturity], but it's something we need to do for practical purposes [...]."⁴ This shows how subjective the policies concerning the age of majority are. With that in mind, the age of adolescence is also difficult to define. Puberty is often used as a guide but this too is a truly individual experience that varies from person to person: "The term 'adolescent' refers to the time when a child develops into an adult. [...] The term is less defined in national legislation; only five Member States use it to describe children between the ages of 12/15/16 and 18 years."⁵

¹ Steinebach, Christoph: *Entwicklungspsychologie*. Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2000, p.133.

² See <https://www.youthpolicy.org/factsheets/country/united-states/>. [Last viewed: 20.06.2019].

³ European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights: *Age of Majority*. URL: <https://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2017/mapping-minimum-age-requirements/age-majority>. [Last viewed: 20.06.2019].

⁴ Beck, Julie: "When Are You Really an Adult?", in: *The Atlantic*. 5th January 2005. URL: <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2016/01/when-are-you-really-an-adult/422487/>. [Last viewed: 20.06.2019].

⁵ European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights: *Age of Majority*. URL: <https://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2017/mapping-minimum-age-requirements/age-majority>. [Last viewed: 20.06.2019].

Why is any of this relevant to the discussion of millennials in literature? The young adults who are the protagonists in the novels chosen for analysis in this thesis are no longer adolescents but they may not be adults either. The goal here is not to come up with a new definition for adolescence, or to decide which country has the ‘correct’ age of majority regulations. Instead, the figures above are given to underline how complex this issue is as, even within state regulations, there is not just one correct decision but variations on the same principle.

This may be one of the reasons why the discussion of adolescence in literature is not a simple matter. As Kenneth Millard argues: “The difficulties of genre, and their particular relevance to adolescence, are revealed in the very language of critical discussion of adolescence. For example, the word ‘bildungsroman’ was coined in Germany in 1819, and it means a novel recounting the early emotional development and moral education of its protagonist [...]”⁶ Unfortunately, however clear the roots of the term might be, its ramifications for literature today are unclear. The term *Bildungsroman* was mainly spread by Wilhelm Dilthey in 1870 and describes a novel which focuses on the outside influences on the protagonist rather than their personal character development.⁷ *Entwicklungsroman* is often seen as the umbrella term but also defines a novel which thematises the development of the protagonist, both internal and external, and usually ends with them reaching some form of maturity.⁸ It has to be said, though, that the borders between these two terms are in no way permanent, or even fixed, and elements of the different genres are often mixed within one text.⁹ Additionally, in English academia, the term ‘coming-of-age novel’ is used to address the topic of adolescence and maturity. Due to the variety of definitions it is necessary to illustrate their differences and examine their relevance to the discussed works of literature in this thesis. The next few chapters will look at both the *Bildungsroman* and the coming-of-age novel, examine their relevance to the analysis of the chosen texts, and propose a new term to better describe these novels while remaining within the realm of the existing genres.

2.1 Bildungsroman – Novel of Education

There are numerous definitions of the term *Bildungsroman*. For the sake of this analysis, the focus will lie on definitions within the circle of English academia. In *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, *Bildungsroman* is seen as “[...] more or less

⁶ Millard, Kenneth: *Coming of Age in Contemporary American Fiction*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007, p.2.

⁷ See Von Wilpert, Gero: *Sachwörterbuch der Literatur*. 8., verb. U. erw. Aufl. Stuttgart: Kröner, 2001, p.91.

⁸ Ibid., p.215.

⁹ Ibid., p.215.

synonymous with *Erziehungsroman* [...]”¹⁰ and “[...] refers to a novel which is an account of the youthful development of a hero or heroine (usually the former). It describes the processes by which maturity is achieved through the various ups and downs of life.”¹¹

Although the novels discussed in this thesis do focus on the development of the main characters, there is a big difference: there is not one individual hero, not one protagonist in these texts. Instead, the narrative focuses on a group of friends and their struggles and achievements together. This does not fit into the existing definitions of the *Bildungsroman*, as becomes apparent in the following description:

The classic *Bildungsroman* deals with the psychological and emotional development of a central character, and traces his or her evolution from youthful naïvety to maturity. The prototypical example is Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (1795-6). Familiar examples include Flaubert’s *Sentimental Education*, Dicken’s *David Copperfield* and Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. In the German philosophical tradition, *Bildung* is associated with the idea of the cultivation of formation of the self, and with the Enlightenment notion of the ‘cultivation of mankind’ (*Bildung zum Menschen*).¹²

Considering the final sentence, the genre of the *Bildungsroman* could be interpreted in a much wider sense. Any novel that concerns itself with maturation or development of the self could, at least in some way, be categorised as a *Bildungsroman*.

Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister* is the novel that “[...] has established itself in literary history as the prototype of the *Bildungsroman*”¹³ but it is not the first one: “The earliest example is usually taken to be Wieland’s *Agathon* (1765-6). The most famous (and most often imitated) examples are Goethe’s *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* (1774) and his *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (1795-6) [...]”¹⁴ In all of the various definitions of this term, one element is never disputed: The fact that Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* is *the Bildungsroman*. This also becomes evident in the following definition: “A kind of novel that follows the development of the hero or heroine from childhood or adolescence into adulthood, through a troubled quest for identity. The term (‘formation-novel’) comes from Germany, where Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (1795-6) set the pattern for later *Bildungsromane*.”¹⁵ It has a long history in German literature as that is where the term originated but has been applied to literature in other

¹⁰ Cuddon, John A.; Claire E. Preston: *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*. (4th ed.) London [et al.]: Penguin, 1999, p.81.

¹¹ Ibid., p.82.

¹² Macey, David: *The Penguin Dictionary of Critical Theory*. (Paperback ed.) London [et al.]: Penguin Books, 2001, p.43.

¹³ Buckley, Jerome Hamilton. *Season of Youth. The Bildungsroman from Dickens to Golding*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974. URL: <https://www-degruyter-com.uaccess.univie.ac.at/view/product/249416>. [Last viewed: 6.02.2019], p.12.

¹⁴ Cuddon, John A.; Claire E. Preston: *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*. (4th ed.) London [et al.]: Penguin, 1999, p.82.

¹⁵ Baldick, Chris: *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*. (3rd ed.) New York [et al.]: Oxford University Press, 2008, p.35.

languages, especially Romance languages, though maybe not for as long as one would guess. In Italian, for example, it is used alongside the term *romanzo di formazione*, in French three different names are used: *roman d'apprentissage*, *roman de formation* and *roman d'éducation*. However, the “[...] term *Bildungsroman* would still not appear in English-language dictionaries or literary handbooks until the 1950s [...]”¹⁶ Even though *Bildungsroman* is a recognised and widely used term within English and American academia today, this was not always the case. This is surprising, as the theme seems as universal as any theme could be: “A novel which describes the protagonist’s development from childhood to maturity. [...] This common genre developed in popularity at the same time as autobiography, which also tends to focus on the relationship between experience, education, character and identity.”¹⁷ In the English speaking world, the topic was just as important in literature, it was simply studied within a different frame, the coming-of-age story, which will be examined in the next chapter.

2.2 Coming-of-Age Novels

The term ‘coming-of-age novel’ can be defined as follows: “An English term adopted as an approximate equivalent to the German *Bildungsroman*, although with an implied distinction in terms of time-span.”¹⁸ This distinction is not only a minor detail but a fundamental aspect. It continues: “Whereas a fully developed English *Bildungsroman* or ‘education novel’ such as Dicken’s *David Copperfield* (1849-50) will follow the maturation of the protagonist from infancy [...] to early adulthood, a coming-of-age novel may be devoted entirely to the crises of late adolescence [...]”¹⁹ This means that coming-of-age stories are not as strongly connected to the age of the protagonist as traditional *Bildungsromane*. It is still implied that the protagonists are young and find themselves in some form of developmental journey “[...] involving courtship, sexual initiation, separation from parents, and choice of vocation or spouse. One among many modern examples is H. G. Wells *Ann Veronica* (1909), which opens with the eponymous heroine at the age of 21 about to run away from her father’s home to explore life for herself.”²⁰ This shows that the main characters do not have to be teenagers in order to appear in a coming-of-age novel, as long as they are confronted with some sort of maturation.

¹⁶ Fraiman, Susan: *Unbecoming Women. British Women Writers and The Novel of Development*. New York [et al.]: Columbia University Press, 1993, p.4.

¹⁷ Gray, Martin: *A Dictionary of Literary Terms*. (2nd rev. ed.) London [et al.]: Longman [et al.], 2008, p.43.

¹⁸ Baldick, Chris: *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*. (3rd ed.) New York [et al.]: Oxford University Press, 2008, p.64.

¹⁹ Ibid., p.64.

²⁰ Ibid., p.64.

The research about both the *Bildungsroman* and the *Entwicklungsroman* within the English language is often dominated by the term ‘coming of age’, which in itself poses new questions, as it is “[...] used to mean ‘to reach full legal adult status’[...].”²¹ This factor can be important in certain discussions but, for the purpose of this thesis, the age at which one reaches legal status does not correlate with the development that is being discussed.

It is also important to note the cultural differences of the concept of coming of age. “The term also carries an imprecision and a cultural relativity that needs to be taken into account. When exactly does a character come of age and what specific experiences are deemed to be integral to it? Is it possible for fictional characters to come of age in their twenties?”²² This may seem unusual, as coming of age is generally used to describe the experiences that happen during puberty, as Millard continues: “Formative experiences can occur at any age, but in terms of literary genre the expression ‘coming of age’ is conventionally used for adolescence [...]”²³ Even so, a shift in thinking may be in motion as the borders between adolescence and adulthood become less strict and the meaning of both phases becomes more multifaceted. The development we are seeing in the field of psychology can also be observed in contemporary literature. “Perhaps, in fact, there is a trend in the *Bildungsroman* of the early twenty-first century for characters to come of age in their twenties, where previously those experiences would have occurred during childhood and adolescence?”²⁴ There is a generational tendency that certain milestones, such as getting married or having a child, happen later in life. This means that there is less of a rush earlier in life to experience certain things or go through certain challenges. Reaching full adult status is not something that happens automatically after adolescence is over. This in-between phase could be seen as a form of coming of age just as much as the process of adolescence could. “The specific age of a fictional character is therefore perhaps not the best guide to that teleological process which is the proper focus of the coming-of-age narrative.”²⁵ The concept of coming of age could therefore be applied to emerging adults just as much as to adolescents. In an article listing the 50 greatest coming-of-age novels, not all of them feature teen protagonists. One of them, the novel *My Education* by Susan Choi, focuses on the story of two characters who are 21 and 33 years old. “Yes, these characters are older than the classic teens-in-trouble you usually find in this category—but they come of age all the

²¹ Millard, Kenneth: *Coming of Age in Contemporary American Fiction*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007, p.4.

²² Ibid., p.4.

²³ Ibid., p.4.

²⁴ Ibid., p.5.

²⁵ Ibid., p.5.

same. Turns out you can do it at almost every age.”²⁶ The three novels analysed in this thesis do fit that description. None of the protagonists are in their adolescence. They are all in their mid-twenties but still face several challenges that force them to overcome certain obstacles and grow as individuals. Many of the processes of coming of age that have started during adolescence are not yet completed. They mature as their storyline progresses and end up being more evolved than they were at the beginning. Through events outside of their control, they are forced to examine their situation in life and confront the reality of their current situation, where they see themselves in the future, and the gap between these two positions. As these novels don’t fit into any of the standardised categories, a new category is needed to illustrate the place these novels inhabit within the existing genres of the *Bildungs-*, the *Entwicklungsroman* and the coming-of-age novel. The next chapter will discuss this further.

2.2.1 The Idea of an Urban Millennial Novel

While discussing two contemporary Canadian novels – *What We All Long For* by Dionne Brand and *Soucouyant* by David Chariandy – Alison Mackey argues that a new category should be created as these books are difficult to place within existing genre classifications: “While, strictly speaking, these novels stray significantly from the traditional Bildungsroman form (for example, centring on several main protagonists who are well into their twenties), I suggest that there is a need for alternative ways of exploring contemporary coming of age than the conventions of the genre allow.”²⁷ Saskia Hertlein presents a similar argument when she comments on the selection of the novels in her study and the difference between other studies that focus on the concept of coming of age or the *Bildungsroman*:

[P]reviously, such texts and studies have concerned themselves with protagonists that were children and adolescents, and they concluded with the protagonists having reached adulthood. They marked the transition from institutional guidance, parental or other societal guidance, to an adult self within the continuing framework of society and its markers of transition – for example marriage, having a job, or children – and from dependence to relative independence.²⁸

This is not the case in the novels selected for this thesis as the protagonists do not start out as adolescents but are, in a legal sense, already adults at the beginning of the novels.

²⁶ Temple, Emily: *The 50 Greatest Coming-of-Age Novels. Summer's Almost Over . . . Just Like Your Childhood (Sorry)*. In: Lithub, 26.08.2019. URL: <https://lithub.com/the-50-greatest-coming-of-age-novels/2/> [Last viewed: 1.09.2019].

²⁷ Mackey, Allison: “Postnational Coming of Age in Contemporary Anglo-Canadian Fiction”, in: *English Studies in Canada* 38, No. 3/4 (September 2012), pp.227–53. URL: <http://search-ebshost-com.uaccess.univie.ac.at/login.aspx?direct=true&db=hus&AN=109563078&site=ehost-live>. [Last viewed: 04.03.2019], p.229.

²⁸ Hertlein, Saskia: *Tales of Transformation. Emerging Adulthood, Migration, and Ethnicity in Contemporary American Literature*. Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2014, p.4.

There is still some ambivalence concerning these texts. They do fulfil some of the requirements for being placed in the category of the *Bildungsroman* but there are some characteristics that would dispute this choice. Mackey continues: “Perhaps the focus on the interrelationships between these youth, instead of centring on the development of one individual, as well as the belated nature of their independence might better reflect the realities of growing up as a second-generation youth in the twenty-first century.”²⁹ Even though Mackey’s assumptions are based on novels that centre around the experiences of second-generation immigrants, her thoughts are applicable to contemporary literature that focuses on telling the stories of young people in general. The content-related features of the novels that Mackey is referring to could also be used to describe the three texts which are at the centre of this thesis, as becomes evident in Mackey’s following statement: “Both novels feature young adult protagonists in their early twenties who are caught between adolescence and uncertain adult futures in the city. An aspiring artist, a university student, an entrepreneur, and others who are seemingly frozen with indecision, these protagonists reflect the anxious yet also cautiously hopeful attitude of contemporary youth.”³⁰ This description could be just as easily used for any of the main novels chosen for analysis in this thesis. Each of them tells the story of young adults trying to find their place within their community and their city. They are unsure about what the future holds for them but are still determined to make something of themselves and to claim their rightful place in the world. Hertlein summarised her opinion on this matter in a very similar way, as the following arguments shows:

The main focus of the texts in this study is on the characters being legal adults, but experiencing a time of changing dependencies and inter- as well as independencies. The characters have left the institutional guidance of childhood and adolescence, but enter into a society that does not provide as much of a framework as before. In addition, the markers of transitions, while potentially celebrated, do not mark an initiation into society in the same sense as before, but have rather lost their function. Instead, the characters need to create their own sense of what being an ‘adult’ entails for them.³¹

These stories depict coming of age, but not in the way it is traditionally defined. They can therefore not be classified as coming-of-age novels per se and, as has been shown here, the genre of the *Entwicklungs-* and *Bildungsroman* is exceptionally vast. I propose a new term to better define novels which fall into this category: the urban millennial novel. This could be seen

²⁹ Mackey, Allison: *Postnational Coming of Age in Contemporary Anglo-Canadian Fiction*. In: *English Studies in Canada* 38, No. 3/4 (September 2012), pp.227–53. URL: <http://search-ebscohost-com.uaccess.univie.ac.at/login.aspx?direct=true&db=hus&AN=109563078&site=ehost-live>, p.229, [Last viewed: 04.03.2019].

³⁰ Ibid., p.228.

³¹ Hertlein, Saskia: *Tales of Transformation. Emerging Adulthood, Migration, and Ethnicity in Contemporary American Literature*. Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2014, p.4.

as a subcategory within the coming-of-age novel or as a variation of the coming-of-age story. The name already shows the two most important characteristics that define this category: the where (urban) and the who (millennial). There has been some debate about the existence of ‘the millennial novel’ for a few years now. In 2016, the author Tony Tulathimutte wrote a piece for the *New York Times* titled “Why There’s No ‘Millennial’ Novel”,³² in which he ponders just that question:

[W]here’s our “voice of a generation” novel? One of those all-important lifestyle accessories that supposedly speak to, and for, the sensibilities and circumstances of an entire American cohort? Not only is the current front-runner, Lena Dunham, not even a novelist, but her fictional avatar in “Girls” dismisses the idea of such a generational voice in the show’s very first episode.³³

It is true that the television show *Girls* is often the first thought that comes to mind when thinking about millennials in the media. But, while the show addresses several issues, it certainly is not a novel. Tulathimutte remarks that the problem might already be contained within the question: “I’d go even further and argue that the “voice of a generation” novel never existed to begin with. For starters, why did we ever pretend novels by straight white guys about straight white guys spoke for entire generations?”³⁴ This addresses a complex issue: who should have the right to speak about an entire generation? Is that even possible, and if so, is it desirable? The individuality of every person, even while representing a generation, should not be forgotten. “The experience of identity — whether it’s race, religion, nationality, gender or generational membership — is certainly necessary for a full portrait of a person, but never sufficient. There’s also memory, thought, feeling, perception, neurochemistry, mood and everything else”,³⁵ and as soon as any person, or any text for that matter, gets reduced to one issue, all of this complexity is lost. It is natural to seek representation in literature, but to want one text to voice the thoughts of an entire generation, nation, religion or gender would limit the expression and the power of these texts. Tulathimutte sees this issue as follows: “There’s nothing wrong with wanting to see yourself reflected in a book, and there’s nothing about novels like mine that prevent people from doing so. But the desire to universalize that feeling, and declare that any book speaks for everyone, ends up shortchanging both the novel and the generation.”³⁶ Taking this statement into account, there can never be the one millennial novel. Leaving these questions aside, as this is not what this analysis wishes to focus on, there is

³² Tulathimutte, Tony: “Why There’s No ‘Millennial’ Novel”, in: *The New York Times*. 7.12.2016. URL: <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/07/books/review/why-theres-no-millennial-novel.html>. [Last viewed: 23.01.2019].

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

another way of looking at novels that try to express concerns and dreams of one generation, as Tulathimutte so fittingly describes: “Peel away the grandiosity and usually what you’ll find is just a genre: contemporary social novel, set in one or more major cities, with a large cast of unhappy, mostly young, middle- or upper-class characters who emotionally develop in some not-too-traumatic way.”³⁷ That’s exactly what will be argued here: that we are, in fact, looking at a genre, be it only a subgenre. He calls this genre the ‘contemporary social novel’, which is not an academically defined term but sounds vast and could include a multitude of settings, characters and events. The novels presented for analysis in this paper do fit this description but it could be argued that Tulathimutte’s definition allows for a large number of novels to do so. What this thesis will call the urban millennial novel from here on has a few further characteristics that must be present in order for a text to fit into this new category. As mentioned before, the two key components are the setting and the protagonists. The location is a city, usually a larger, well known city with a big enough population to be called a metropolis such as New York, Paris, London, San Francisco, New Delhi and so on. The other important component is the characters. At the centre of the urban millennial novel is a group of close friends that have known each other for some time. They are young millennials, generally in their early twenties to early thirties. They may study at university or have just graduated. They may have started to work, are looking for employment, are about to leave a job or have just left a job. They may or may not be in a relationship and this will probably change at least once within the novel. They might be straight or bisexual and there will be at least one gay character, although this is not what defines them, nor is it made into a big issue. They are neither rich nor poor, but generally come from middle- or upper-class families. They struggle with anxiety or depression and are generally feeling overwhelmed by the state of the world and their future prospects. At the same time, politics do not play a role in these stories. In fact, the absence of politics is quite surprising. Creativity and the arts are a part of the characters’ lives and at least one of them is an artist or has artistic ambitions. In the course of the novel, they will face an event that challenges their feeling of what it means to live life successfully and it will most likely involve death in some form.

To qualify as an urban millennial novel, not all of these points have to be presented in exactly this way, but the majority of them will exist in this or a similar form. Chapter 4.2 will analyse the separate features in greater detail and offer examples from the chosen novels.

³⁷ Ibid.

3 Millennials

3.1 The Phenomenon of Emerging Adulthood

If you search the term ‘millennial’ in the Urban Dictionary Online, the second definition is the following: “Name an old person gives a young person they don’t like.”³⁸ This is, of course, not to be taken as a serious definition but it does reflect the general feeling of a majority of people. The word ‘millennial’ is often used in a derogatory way to talk about younger people who may try to act in a mature way while still figuring out how to function as an adult in society. Often, they find themselves in a transitional period between adolescence and adulthood where they sometimes behave in a way that ‘grown-ups’ might criticise.³⁹ To the speaker using the word ‘millennial’, it doesn’t matter whether their target is actually part of Generation Y.

This illustrates the confusion of two similar yet different terms: millennials and emerging adulthood. The two can be easily seen as one and the same, but it is important to understand the difference. ‘Millennials’ refers to a generation. It describes all the people born in a distinct time bracket. It is often used as a synonym for Generation Y, which is also true for this thesis. The generation before that is Generation X, the generation after has been given the name Generation Z. So, when talking about certain traits that are supposedly characteristic for millennials, is it an observation about an entire generation. Frequently, especially in the media, the term ‘millennials’ has been used whenever talking about young people, any young people. At the time of writing, the oldest millennials, depending on the definition, are 39 years old. This fact alone means that, when talking about millennials, it is almost impossible not to mean, exclusively or at least predominantly, *young* millennials.

Emerging adulthood identifies a specific period in a young person’s life. It describes the phase that comes after adolescence and before adulthood. The signs for that period in someone’s life can vary, as can the duration of the phase as a whole. Not every emergent adult will deal with the same or even all of the issues that are connected with that phase. There is, however, a general state of instability and indecision that marks this time. Many different aspects of this period will be discussed at length in chapter 4.3.

The confusion between the two terms can be easily explained as the research about emerging adulthood only began roughly twenty years ago and is completely based on Generation Y. However, the vision is that emerging adulthood constitutes a universal stage of development in

³⁸ Urban Dictionary: *Millennial*, 12th September 2018. URL: <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Millennial>. [Last viewed: 04.06.2019].

³⁹ See, for example, the following article: Linn, Allison: Millennials: *Lazy, Entitled—or Maybe Just Young*. CNBC, 15th May 2014. URL: <https://www.cnbc.com/2014/05/15/millennials-lazy-entitled-or-maybe-just-young.html>. [Last viewed: 20.06.2019].

the same way that childhood, adolescence and adulthood are recognised as universal stages in every human's development. There has been a lot of debate about this in the psychological community. The psychology professor and leading academic in the field, J.J. Arnett, wrote about just this question⁴⁰ and there are several articles concerning themselves with this issue.⁴¹ Unfortunately, the scope of this thesis does not allow for the in-depth discussion of Arnett's thesis or the surrounding articles. Emerging adulthood is not only seen as a way to describe the post-adolescence of millennials, it could also be valid for the generations to come. Obviously, this will only become apparent with time.

To avoid any confusion, here are the definitions for the terms used in this thesis: the term 'millennials' is used to talk about young members of the millennial generation, mostly in their twenties to early thirties. Emerging adulthood will be used when analysing a stage of development in young people, generally in their mid-twenties. The two terms won't be used interchangeably, even when talking about the same group of people, because they do not mean the same thing.

In the three novels analysed here, the protagonists are both emerging adults and part of Generation Y. The different aspects examined are all concerned with emerging adulthood, and the characters are part of the millennial generation. The focus will lie on their developmental stage, but them being a part of a certain generation will also be taken into account. It simply should be kept in mind that the two terms thematise separate issues, even though they might coincide at certain points during the analysis in this thesis.

3.2 Who are They?

The definition of the term 'millennials' varies. Most of the data used in this chapter concerns the United States but it can equally be applied to many Western countries. 'Millennials' is the name of the generation that follows Generation X, which followed the baby boomers. The Pew Research Center⁴² sees millennials as those individuals who were born after 1980 but before 2000 so, in 2014, millennials were between 18 and 33 years of age. Kaklamanidou defines them as "[...] those individuals who were born between 1984 and 1992 and who came of age after

⁴⁰ See Arnett, Jeffrey Jensen: *Debating emerging adulthood: Stage or process?* New York [et al.]: Oxford University Press, 2011.

⁴¹ See, for instance, Hendry, Leo B; Kloep, Marion: *How universal is emerging adulthood? An empirical example*. In: *Journal of Youth Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 2, April 2010, pp 169-179 DOI: 10.1080/13676260903295067. [Last viewed: 20.06.2019].

⁴² Pew Research Center: *Definitions*. URL: <http://www.pewresearch.org/methodology/demographic-research/definitions/> [Last viewed: 15.02.2018.]

2000.”⁴³ A different definition counts everyone who was born between 1985 and 2000 as a member of Generation Y. The period during which they went through adolescence has therefore fallen between the years of 2000 and 2015.⁴⁴ There are differences in both the starting points and the duration of generations but the general conclusion is always very similar.

The descriptions of the characteristics of Generation Y are dominated by new media: “Sie besteht aus den ersten Digital Natives, die online aufgewachsen sind. Computer, Tablets und Smartphones gehören für sie genauso selbstverständlich zum Alltag wie Google, Apple und Facebook.”⁴⁵ This generation grew up with new technology, which brought great changes in the way they could communicate with each other as well as how they consumed media: “Die Neuen Medien ermöglichen völlig neue Formen der Kommunikation, die sich auch auf soziale Umgangsformen und kulturelle Lebensstile auswirken. Auch die Funktion von Information und Wissen wandelt sich.”⁴⁶

Something to note is the overwhelmingly negative image of millennials. The generation has been given the unflattering name ‘Generation Me’, by the professor of psychology Jean M. Twenge. The full title of her book about this generation is *Generation Me: Why Today’s Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled – and More Miserable Than Ever Before*.⁴⁷ The book was first published in 2006 and a new edition was published in 2014. She defines the generation as follows:

I focus here on young people, born in the 1980s and 1990s. Right now in the 2010s, GenMe ranges from high school kids to thirtysomething adults. They are sometimes called GenY or Millennials. I don’t expect the Generation Me title to replace these other labels, but it does nicely capture the group of people who grew up in an era when focusing on yourself was not just tolerated but actively encouraged. This trend has been building for a long time – I was born in 1971, right in the middle of Generation X, yet was exposed to plenty of GenMe ideas, experiencing the first stirrings of the hyperindividualism GenMe would come to take for granted.⁴⁸

Twenge uses the same time period to define this generation as has already been mentioned in this paper. Simply by calling it Generation Me, she adds a level of characterisation which implies that this generation is a truly selfish one: “A neat twist on the Generation Me label is iGeneration. The first letter is nicely packed with meaning: it could stand for Internet (as it does

⁴³ Kaklamanidou, Betty; Tally, Margaret [ed.]: *The Millennials on Film and Television. Essays on the Politics of Popular Culture*. Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2014, p.5.

⁴⁴ Hurrelmann, Klaus; Albrecht, Erik: *Die heimlichen Revolutionäre. Wie die Generation Y unsere Welt verändert*. Weinheim, Basel: Beltz Verlag, 2014, p.17.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p.24.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p.24.

⁴⁷ Twenge, Jean M.: *Generation Me: Why Today’s Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled – and More Miserable Than Ever Before*. New York: Atria Paperback, 2014.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p.5.

in iMac, iPhone, and iPad) or for the first-person singular that stands for the individual.”⁴⁹ The focus on the self and on the individuality of every person dominates these definitions and will be explored in this chapter and in chapter 4.3.1 and 4.3.3 in detail. It is important to point out that the data Twenge presents “[...] is based on what young people say about themselves – not what older people think of them.”⁵⁰ This means that there is some truth to the negative characteristics this generation usually receives. It is important, though, to look at the whole picture and not to merely criticise certain decisions millennials make.

Where does this focus on the individual come from? Twenge has a simple reason: “Since GenMe’ers were born, they’ve been taught to put themselves first.”⁵¹ This shows that the cause for their behaviour lies not just with them as a generation, but also with the way they were raised. Twenge continues: “Reliable birth control, legalized abortion, and a cultural shift toward parenthood as a choice made them the most wanted generation of children in American history. Television, movies, and school programs have told them they were special from toddlerhood to high school, and they believe it [...]”⁵² So, from a young age, strictly speaking starting at birth, children were told how ‘special’ they were, and how they could achieve anything they could dream of: “They take it for granted that they’re unique, special individuals [...]”⁵³ because that’s what they were told, and not just by their parents. Twenge explains that this does not mean that the generation is spoiled, just that they believe that they themselves, their hopes and their dreams are important: “GenMe believes that people should follow their dreams and not be held back by societal expectations – not necessarily a selfish viewpoint, but definitely an individualistic one. Taking a job in a new city far from one’s family, for example, isn’t selfish, but it does put the individual first.”⁵⁴ This expression – putting the individual first – may be a good way of characterising millennials. It is important to remember that this is not the same as being egotistical. Instead, this should be seen as a positive development.

There are, of course, negative aspects too: “But their high expectations, combined with an increasingly competitive world, have led to a darker flip side, in which they blame other people for their problems and sink into anxiety and depression.”⁵⁵ Twenge found alarming data concerning mental health and growing up: depression and anxiety are on the rise. She did some research and it turns out that “[...] the average college student in the 1990s was more anxious

⁴⁹ Twenge, Jean M.: *Generation Me: Why Today’s Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled – and More Miserable Than Ever Before*. New York: Atria Paperback, 2014, p.5.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p.7.

⁵¹ Ibid., p.7.

⁵² Ibid., pp.7-8.

⁵³ Ibid., p.8.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p.8.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p.9.

than 85% of students in the 1950s and 71% of students in the 1970s.”⁵⁶ This shows the growing tendency towards mental health problems, which also continues into the new millennium: “Anxiety also increased: Thirty percent of college freshmen reported feeling ‘overwhelmed by all I have to do’ in 2012, nearly twice as many as in the 1980s. More also described themselves as below average in mental health.”⁵⁷

Not all facets of millennials are as bleak as this one. The Pew Research Center published an extensive study in 2010 covering numerous aspects of the lives of members of Generation Y in the United States. “Generations, like people, have personalities, and Millennials – the American teens and twenty-somethings who are making the passage into adulthood at the start of a new millennium – have begun to forge theirs: confident, self-expressive, liberal, upbeat and open to change.”⁵⁸ This report provides the generation with a largely positive portrayal. It also shows that they are hopeful about their future, even though the current state is less than ideal. “Millennials have not escaped the current economic downturn. But even though they’re not happy with their current economic circumstances, they remain highly optimistic about their financial future.”⁵⁹ This trait is widely shared with emerging adults and chapter 4.3.5 will discuss this in detail. Another feature of this generation is its relationship to technology, specifically to the internet, smartphones and social media:

They are history’s first “always connected” generation. Steeped in digital technology and social media, they treat their multi-tasking hand-held gadgets almost like a bodypart – for better and worse. More than eight-in-ten say they sleep with a cell phone glowing by the bed, poised to disgorge texts, phone calls, emails, songs, news, videos, games and wake-up jingles.⁶⁰

This involvement with technology has a lot of benefits: it’s easy to stay in contact with people and the internet is able to serve as an educational resource for every subject imaginable. However, there are also downsides. Both the pressures of social media and having access to global news 24 hours a day could easily overwhelm anybody but they are especially demanding for emerging adults. These effects will be thematised at a later point in this thesis.

Millennials might not be as unusual as they are often made out to be. Yes, certain factors have not been an issue for the generations before – think of the internet, news cycles, smartphones and social media – but becoming an adult was also a struggle for previous generations, as author Kelly Williams Brown expresses: “It’s not just hard for Millennials, I think it was hard for Gen

⁵⁶ Twenge, Jean M.: *Generation Me: Why Today’s Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled – and More Miserable Than Ever Before*. New York: Atria Paperback, 2014, p.145.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p.146.

⁵⁸ Taylor, Paul; Keeter, Scott [ed.]: *The Millennials: Confident. Connected. Open to Change*. Pew Research Center, 24th February 2010, URL: <http://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2010/10/millennials-confident-connected-open-to-change.pdf>, p.1 [Last viewed: 14.01.2019].

⁵⁹ Ibid., p.20.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p.1.

X-ers, I think it was hard for Baby Boomers. All of a sudden you're out in the world, and you have this insane array of options, but you don't know which you should take.”⁶¹ This thesis won't attempt a generational comparison of this process but it should be kept in mind that, even though Generation Y is facing new challenges, the transition between adolescence and adulthood has never been without its problems. But due to historical factors and changes in societal conventions, the options are no longer as limited as they used to be. Therefore, Millennials find themselves in a unique position between seemingly boundless possibilities and virtually zero guidance. Precisely this juxtaposition is portrayed in the selected novels, which will be presented in the next chapter.

⁶¹ Beck, Julie: “When Are You Really an Adult?”, in: *The Atlantic*. 5th January 2005. URL: <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2016/01/when-are-you-really-an-adult/422487/>. [Last viewed: 20.06.2019].

4 Millennials in Literature

4.1 Main Novels Discussed

The following chapters present the novels chosen for analysis in this thesis. The similarities between the texts will quickly become apparent. The settings are similar because each novel is located in a global city (London, Toronto, New York) and each originates from the English-speaking world, albeit from different countries: The United Kingdom, Canada and the United States. There is a group of young friends at the centre of each text and, while their individual backgrounds and stories may vary, their issues and struggles are remarkably alike.

4.1.1 *The Bricks that Built the Houses* by Kate Tempest

The Bricks that Built the Houses is Kate Tempest's first novel. She was born in 1985 in London, where she still lives today. She won prizes for both her poetry (among them the Ted Hughes Award) and her music (Mercury Music Prize) and was named a Next Generation Poet in 2014⁶² before publishing this novel in 2016.

The novel opens with a scene that shows four friends leaving the city in a car: "We first meet [them] in a speeding car [...] on the getaway from a heist. The novel then steps backwards in time, Pulp Fiction-style, to show the trio moving through a London whose cocaine shimmer barely covers its grottness and venality."⁶³ It focuses less on plot and action and rather on the thoughts and feelings of the protagonists. In each chapter, the narrator centres either on Becky, Harry or Pete, and their families. We follow them in their everyday life, often doing mundane tasks, generally being more unhappy than anything else. Additionally, some biographical backstories, almost mini episodes, of people of various importance in their lives are told throughout the book: "These miniature biographies [...] are 'the bricks that built the houses' of the title. In Tempest's London, no one is insignificant; everyone has a story. The devotion and care with which she recounts these tales may initially seem distracting, but the cumulative effect is deeply affecting: cinematic in scope; touching in its empathic humanity."⁶⁴ Together with the life stories and dreams of the protagonists, this novel creates a raw portrait of both life in a city and life as a young adult in a specific generation that doesn't shy away from certain truths and

⁶² See <http://nextgenerationpoets.com/kate-tempest/>, [Last viewed: 21.06.2019].

⁶³ Preston, Alex: "The Bricks That Built the Houses by Kate Tempest Review – Daring and Vivid", in: *The Guardian*, 3rd April 2016. URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/apr/03/bricks-that-built-houses-kate-tempest-book-review>. [Last viewed: 26.02.2019].

⁶⁴ Byers, Sam: "'The Bricks That Built the Houses' by Kate Tempest", in: *The New York Times*, 1st June 2016. URL: <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/05/books/review/the-bricks-that-built-the-houses-by-kate-tempest.html> [Last viewed: 26.02.2019].

is not afraid to be gloomy and depressing. This is one of the aspects in which this novel differs slightly from the other two selected for this thesis, while still tackling many similar topics.

There is a difference in societal standing between the characters in *The Bricks that Built the Houses* and the other two novels discussed in this paper. They come from different backgrounds, and the whole novel has a more ‘working class’ feeling to it. The setting is rougher and everything feels more immediate, more existentially important. The key elements are the same: a group of young adults, living in a metropolis, trying to figure out how they are supposed to lead their lives, what they want from it and how they could possibly get there. The city is portrayed as a dark place but the characters still identify strongly with it. In an interview, Tempest was told that “[t]here’s a world weary jaded air to these characters”⁶⁵ and asked whether that was specific for the (her) generation or just the characters. Tempest answered thus:

I feel that something has happened to this generation, my generation. [...] I think what we’ve learned - and it’s sad to say - we’ve realised we can’t trust anything. Nothing will change. The things that make the world go round are beyond anyone’s control because it’s all about corporate control and profit before people. This is what we’ve grown up with. Our legacy is this culture of greed and it makes us believe we can’t believe in anything. We don’t trust those who govern for us. I say we - I don’t mean to speak for anyone other than myself or my characters - there’s just this feeling of disillusionment.⁶⁶

This ‘feeling of disillusionment’ that Tempest describes is the perfect portrayal of the emotion that the novel evokes within the reader. It focuses on “Becky, an aspiring dancer who subsidizes her stalling career by working as an erotic masseuse, and Harry, a young woman saving for a future of imagined freedom by dealing cocaine to rich partygoers.”⁶⁷ Then there is also Pete, Harry’s brother. Becky becomes the person that connects Harry and Pete, both factually and emotionally, as “the dancer they both fall for”⁶⁸. Together they make for an interesting group. All of them are insecure in their own way. Due to the set-up of the novel, it is clear from the beginning that the story is building towards a big reveal. It consists of an unfortunate turn of events involving angry drug dealers and forces them to flee the country. The novel ends with a return to the city after some time. This time apart has changed the way the protagonists relate to it and they themselves have changed too.

⁶⁵ BBC Radio 4, Open Book: *Kate Tempest on Writing her First Novel, The Bricks That Built the Houses*, 14th April 2016. URL: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/v56CrV1Ys3K81gpd3PCnwC/kate-tempest-on-writing-her-first-novel-the-bricks-that-built-the-houses> [Last viewed: 26.02.2019].

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Byers, Sam: “‘The Bricks That Built the Houses,’ by Kate Tempest”, in: *The New York Times*, 1st June 2016. URL: <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/05/books/review/the-bricks-that-built-the-houses-by-kate-tempest.html> [Last viewed: 26.02.2019].

⁶⁸ BBC Radio 4, Open Book: *Kate Tempest on Writing her First Novel, The Bricks That Built the Houses*, 14th April 2016. URL: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/v56CrV1Ys3K81gpd3PCnwC/kate-tempest-on-writing-her-first-novel-the-bricks-that-built-the-houses> [Last viewed: 26.02.2019].

4.1.2 *Holding Still for as Long as Possible* by Zoe Whittall

In her novel *Holding Still for as Long as Possible*, the author Zoe Whittall, who was born in 1976 in Quebec, Canada, tells the story of three young adults living in Toronto. Zoe Whittall started her career by publishing poetry collections. *Holding Still for as Long as Possible*, published in 2009, is her second novel. It was nominated for numerous literary prizes and won a Lambda Literary Award.

In *Holding Still for as Long as Possible*, Whittall plays with different points of view to illustrate her characters' inner lives. Every chapter is written from the perspective of one of the alternating protagonists: Amy, Josh and Billy. At the beginning of the novel, Amy and Josh are a couple, although there are already hints of them drifting apart, as illustrated in the following scene: "[...] I leaned onto the bed to touch Josh's forehead with the other [hand]. I pressed my palm against it, as though I were a mother checking for fever. He once told me this was the most comforting touch, someone's palm against your brow. But now he rolled away, covering his head with my pillow, irritated."⁶⁹ The intimacy between them is still there, but their feelings towards it have changed. Along the same lines is the realisation Amy has just moments afterwards, when she says "[...] it was our four-year anniversary today, and both Josh and I had forgotten."⁷⁰ They stay together for some time after this encounter but break up about halfway through the novel. Amy is a student and filmmaker and Josh is an emergency medical technician: "The book is grounded in Josh's EMT work, weaving cardiac arrest and twelve hour shifts among the nuances of these characters' relationships with each other, creating a foundation of trauma that expertly juxtaposes life against death."⁷¹ The immediacy of Josh's job is actively represented by the novel's structure. The first headline of the book starts with terminology used during emergency communication between ambulances and hospitals: "5:32:10 p.m. Delta unconscious. 92-yr.old F. Not alert."⁷² This terminology appears throughout the book as a constant reminder of the fragility of the current state, suggesting that everything could change within seconds. This corresponds to the inner state of one of the protagonists, Billy.

Billy, whose full name is Hilary, is introduced as having just separated from her long-term girlfriend, Maria. She used to be a teenage popstar and, even though she was somewhat famous, due to unfair arrangements by her manager, who is also her uncle, and some thoughtless

⁶⁹ Whittall, Zoe: *Holding Still for as Long as Possible*. (2nd ed.) Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2014, p.53.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p.55.

⁷¹ Gillette, Courtney: 'Holding Still for As Long As Possible' by Zoe Whittall. 9th May 2011. URL: <https://www.lambdaliterary.org/reviews/05/09/holding-still-for-zoe-whittall/> [Last viewed: 19.02.2019].

⁷² Whittall, 2016, p.3.

spending on her part, she is basically broke. She is “[...] half-heartedly attempting a part-time English Lit degree”⁷³ and struggles with anxiety and panic attacks.

Throughout the novel, the relationship status of all three of the characters changes. We observe their everyday experiences and see them navigating both the highs and the lows of life until, close to the end of the book, a dramatic event changes everything. As Gillette remarks: “These three voices narrate the life of the young and queer in Toronto, juggling breakups, hangovers, gentrification and the onset of adulthood with charming realism.”⁷⁴ These protagonists, consequently, serve as a great example for studying the portrayal of the generation and its concerns in contemporary fiction.

4.1.3 *Why We Came to the City* by Kristopher Jansma

Kristopher Jansma was born in 1982 and grew up in New Jersey. His first novel *Unchangeable Spots of Leopards*, published in 2013, was nominated for several awards, including an Honourable Mention for PEN/Hemingway Prize. His second novel, *Why We Came to the City*, was published in 2016 and its French Edition won a Prix du Livre de Voyage Urbain. He lives in New York with his family.

The title of Kristopher Jansma’s novel *Why We Came to the City* already prepares the reader for what’s to come. It tells the story of a group of close friends living in New York City. The group consists of five friends: Irene, Jacob, the couple Sara and George, and William, who is the newest addition to the group. All of them try to build a life for themselves in the metropolis. The reader follows both their mundane daily struggles and their search for something more meaningful to sustain them in the future. Irene, one of the protagonists, gets a devastating diagnosis at the beginning of the novel and her illness dominates the first half of the book. Her sickness and eventual death force all of the characters to navigate an intense emotional experience and the monumental change that follows. The cast of characters come from a variety of backgrounds but one fact unites them: all of them are highly educated. In fact, they met at university. They are not rich in the classical sense but they do not have to struggle to pay the rent or be able to afford groceries.

The novel has two parts and both start with a short chapter reflecting on life in the city. The second part ends with one too, and they are all written in the first-person plural. This creates a strong communal mood. As Zhao describes: “This swirling, almost mythological image of a

⁷³ Ibid., p.59.

⁷⁴ Gillette, Courtney: ‘*Holding Still for as Long as Possible*’ by Zoe Whittall, 9th May 2011. URL: <https://www.lambdaliterary.org/reviews/05/09/holding-still-for-zoe-whittall/> [Last viewed: 19.02.2019].

collective “us” proves to be enticing.”⁷⁵ The first one carries the title of the book and talks about all the reasons they loved and hated living in the city. “We came to the city because we wished to live haphazardly, to reach for only the least realistic of our desires, and to see if we could not learn what our failures had to teach, and not, when we came to live, discover that we had never died.”⁷⁶ This opening captivates the reader immediately and delivers a fast and mesmerizing introduction to the story. The second one is called *Why We Left The City* and talks about all the reasons why they think they should not stay in the city. The final one is called *The City That Is* and focuses on the changes the characters went through in the course of the text. It centres on the transformation of their relationship towards the city. It remains unclear whether the city has changed because of them or whether the city may have changed them in some way, too. This illustrates how the city doesn’t just play an important role in this novel, but that the novel couldn’t exist without it. The protagonists’ lives are strongly mirrored in their relationship to the city and the progression of the interludes. They begin with joy and excitement about the struggle to find your place in the metropolis, continue to a less optimistic outlook on life and the idea of leaving the city, then finally take a distanced look at a place they have grown disillusioned with and in which they can no longer see themselves. It can also be seen as a parallel to the personal evolution that these young adults experience and is therefore a perfect example of the representation of millennials in literature.

4.2 Features of Urban Millennial Novels

When debating any form of genre, it is crucial to remember that genres are not a natural occurrence but something that is created by those who occupy themselves with literature.

Zymner explains it as follows:

[...] Gattungen >gibt< es nicht einfach. Gattungen werden von Menschen erdacht. Und zwar von Menschen, die über Literatur reden oder auch schreiben: von Dichtern und Lesern, Bibliothekarinnen und Buchhändlerinnen, Philosophinnen und Verlegern, Zeitungskritikern und akademischen Literaturwissenschaftlerinnen. Gattungen sind keine realen Sachen wie ein geerbtes Buch oder eine selbst beschriebene Festplatte: Gattungen existieren nur durch *Begriffe*, die wir uns davon bilden.⁷⁷

This fact shows the elasticity of genres in general. If they are not defined by existence but by attribution, they are open to change, meaning that definitions can be modified, corrected or

⁷⁵ Zhao, Emily: “‘Why We Came to the City’ Dreamy and Divided”, in: *The Crimson*, 25.02.2016. URL: <http://www.thecrimson.com/article/2016/2/25/why-we-came-to-the-city/> [Last viewed: 16.02.2018].

⁷⁶ Jansma, Kristopher: *Why We Came to the City*. New York: Viking, 2016, p.3.

⁷⁷ Zymner, Rüdiger [Ed.]: *Handbuch Gattungstheorie*. Stuttgart, Weimar: J.B. Metzler, 2010, p.7.

expanded. It also means that genre definitions must be viewed while remembering the historical period they represent.

When categorising literature, doing so primarily according to content is a common way of organising different texts. This is true for most forms of genre: “Die Inhalte, Themen, Gegenstände, Stoffe und Gehalte (literarischer) Texte [...], die nach Gattungszugehörigkeit unterschieden werden, spielen für die meisten Konzeptionen von <Gattung> und für die meisten Gattungsbestimmungen eine Rolle.”⁷⁸ Of course, depending on the focus of any study, there might be a stronger emphasis on form over content, but both factors are usually relevant when categorising literature. A recent article in *The Guardian* talked about the possible existence of a millennial novel and the journalist Olivia Sudjic defined it as follows:

The crop of recent novels that have been termed “millennial” depict a rootless, anxious life: a rat race whose illusory prize for sacrificing your soul is a bare minimum of social acceptance and financial security. Their protagonists tend to be navigating or avoiding adulthood, usually desperate, disenfranchised, displaced, ironic, full of rage or grim humour that covers unbearable shame and sadness.⁷⁹

This description could easily be applied to the novels selected for this thesis. It describes the ‘millennial’ part of the definition of urban millennial novel clearly. Sudjic continues: “These may be the characteristics of the genre, but there is still no consensus on whether a ‘millennial novel’ is qualified by an author’s age or that of its main protagonists, or even the age of the readers it is marketed to.”⁸⁰ These different markers, described as options to aid in the definition of the millennial novel, show the range of opinions that emerge when talking about genres or variations on them. Sudjic chooses the age of the novelists and the ‘mood’ of the novel as her definition of millennial novels – two elements which are not of great importance to the definition used in this thesis. She continues to identify another common component in millennial novels: the alienation the protagonists feel and their way of reacting to it. This is something that will come up again in chapter 5.3, where the idea of creating space for yourself and your peers within an existing structure is explored.

A longing for a place of security and stability that can insulate characters from, if not fix, their alienation. It is one thing to hate the world and want to change it, as many books that “defined” previous generations did, but if you hate yourself, nowhere feels like home for very long; relief is found in certain physical places, memories, a person, a routine or mind-numbing substance. The need for these in millennial novels is always, at least in part, a response to the death throes

⁷⁸ Ibid., p.35.

⁷⁹ Sudjic, Olivia: “Darkly funny, desperate and full of rage: what makes a millennial novel?”, in: *The Guardian*, 17.08.2019. URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/aug/17/what-makes-a-millennial-novel-olivia-sudjic> [Last viewed: 1.09.2019].

⁸⁰ Ibid.

of a ruthless economic system that makes us feel like outsiders to ourselves, a system propped up by ecocide, racism, sexism, the class system and heteronormativity.⁸¹

Another factor Sudjic touches upon is the banality of the subject matter. Millennial novels thematise “[...] questions of survival – the mundane rather than heroic kind. They dignify the everyday struggles of their protagonists with deadpan humour, irony and reflections on their own privilege.”⁸² These novels often focus with great detail on certain dull sequences of everyday life, but in this mundanity find the subject matter which is truly significant. These characteristics are not random choices made by the authors. This becomes clear as soon as it is looked at within the existing system and even more so when the structures surrounding the generation are taken into account. Sudjic points out: “Any writer is a product of their age, just as any member of a generation is shaped by material conditions. As Jia Tolentino points out in her essay collection, *Trick Mirror*: ‘a generation doesn’t start living a certain kind of rootless way, doing certain kind [sic.] of flexible, temporary jobs, writing certain kinds of books, because of personality.’”⁸³ So it is necessary to look at the bigger picture and to consider the context of the emergence of these novels while thinking about any categories to better describe these novels.

The next chapters present the idea of the urban millennial novel and the general characteristics of it before analysing the specific details of this new category.

4.2.1 Basics

There are a few key elements that are present in all of the novels chosen for analysis in this paper. These encompass the publishing details, the geographical setting and the main characters. Firstly, every chosen novel is written in English and was published in the last ten years. Secondly, they all take place in a large city. The different locations are London, Toronto and New York City, all of them centres of business, finance and fine arts. Lastly, each novel has a group of young friends at the centre of the story. The exact number is not important and varies from book to book. However, they all have known each other for a significant amount of time and consider each other to be central people in their lives. The novels are set in the present, meaning that all the protagonists are part of Generation Y as well as being emerging

⁸¹ Sudjic, Olivia: “Darkly Funny, Desperate and Full of Rage: What Makes a Millennial Novel?”, in: *The Guardian*, 17.08.2019. URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/aug/17/what-makes-a-millennial-novel-olivia-sudjic> [Last viewed: 1.09.2019].

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

adults. Apart from these factors, there are a number of other similarities that will be discussed in the next chapters.

4.2.2 Romantic Entanglements

The romantic relationships of the protagonists in each novel undergo a lot of change. The characters do not stay with the same partners throughout the stories. In every text, there is a significant change such as the starting, crumbling or ending of a relationship, as well as adulterous behaviour. This is not confined to one character but includes the entire group of friends at the centres of the novels. In *Holding Still for as Long as Possible*, two couples go their separate ways (first, it is Billy and Maria, then Josh and Amy) while other alliances grow. Josh flirts with his crush, Jenny, and also starts seeing Billy, while Amy starts seeing Maria. During this process, they still remain friends. There might be some awkward moments, but they never leave each other or end their friendships altogether. At the very end of the novel, a conversation takes place between Billy and Amy, two women who are now in relationships with their respective former partners. Billy says: “‘Maybe you and Maria can come over for dinner sometime.’ ‘Yeah, totally. We should.’ The offer is genuine, but I’m not sure it will happen anytime soon.”⁸⁴ It is clear that their friendships have been through a lot, which means things are not the way they used to be, but the desire to keep the group together is there.

In *Why We Came to the City*, one couple, Sarah and George, get engaged at the beginning of the novel and their relationship remains constant and strong. William and Irene’s relationship starts as a one-night stand, but slowly becomes serious while she is getting sicker and weaker and eventually dies. Jacob has a boyfriend, Oliver, but neither are completely monogamous. Jacob in particular has difficulty with the concept of mature long-term relationships. While hooking up with a bartender he just met, Jacob’s thoughts return to Oliver: “*How awful*, he thought, *to cheat on your boyfriend and then imagine you’re with him*. He shuddered, half at Jeff’s touch and half at his own mental use of the word *boyfriend*. And it wasn’t cheating, was it, when just a few hours ago they’d been discussing the openness of their arrangement?”⁸⁵ This scene shows how Jacob struggles to balance his desires and responsibilities concerning romantic relationship, a distinctive characteristic of emerging adults.

The Bricks that Built the Houses contains fluctuating romantic relationships too. Becky plays a central role as she starts a relationship with Pete and later with Harry, who happens to be Pete’s sister. Becky and Pete’s romance is far from perfect. Becky gives erotic massages to strangers

⁸⁴ Whittall, 2016, p.296.

⁸⁵ Jansma, 2016, p.163.

in hotel rooms, which is one of her sources of income. Pete is unable to trust her and decides to test her by sending a friend to Becky as a client, who then tries to seduce Becky. When she finds out, she is furious: “Becky feels nothing but rage. She looks at Pete and doesn’t recognise him. Can’t see him. All she can see is disgust and guilt and blame and months of silent, moody control.”⁸⁶ At the end of the novel, everybody is single again.

The instability that results from these changes in romantic relationships is not confined to a single character but can be seen as representative of their lives. Nothing is certain and everything can change in an instant in a positive or a negative direction. The protagonists go through different stages in their dating life: getting together with their crush, dating around, breaking up after years of being together, getting married, and being single. All of this behaviour is representative and typical for young people going through emerging adulthood. Chapter 4.3.2 will discuss this further.

Considering urban millennial novels, a multitude of romantic relationships exist. There can be a stable one – for example, Sarah and George in Jansma’s novel – but there is always at least one character, often more than one, who is single, dating, having one-night stands or cheating. This behaviour is prominent, and it does bring a certain amount of instability to the character’s lives.

4.2.3 Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation

Another factor to consider is the presence of bisexual and gay characters. Every novel selected for this analysis has at least one non-heterosexual character as a protagonist. *The Bricks that Built the Houses* has one lesbian (Harry) and one bisexual (Becky) character, *Why We Came to the City* contains one gay character (Jacob) and one who appears to be heterosexual but has been with a same-sex partner in the past (Irene). The cast of *Holding Still for as Long as Possible*, is the most diverse: Josh is a transsexual man, both Amy and Billy are bisexual, and Maria is lesbian.

By drawing on these facts, one can safely say that gender and sexuality play a big role in these novels, but not in the way one might expect. None of the characters actively struggle with their sexuality, and coming out is never an active subject. There may be two reasons for this. Firstly, the characters are no longer adolescents. They have already collected their initial sexual experiences and have, in a way, figured themselves out. If they had to come out to family and friends, be it as homosexual, bisexual or transsexual, they already did that many years ago. Secondly, they are part of a generation in which social norms regarding one’s sexual orientation

⁸⁶ Tempest, Kate: *The Bricks that Built the Houses*. London: Bloomsbury Circus, 2016, p.368.

have changed on a legal and personal level. One indication of this is the generation's attitude towards gay marriage, according to a study by the Pew Research Center in the United States: "Millennials [...] continue to be far more supportive of same-sex marriage than older age cohorts. Today, 73% of Millennials say gays and lesbians should be allowed to marry legally, while just 24% say they should not."⁸⁷ Apart from the debate about same-sex marriage, LGBT people have been the focus of a number of studies. LGBT is an umbrella term and refers to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people. In the *OECD Society at a Glance 2019* study, the first chapter is called "The LGBT challenge: How to better include sexual and gender minorities?"⁸⁸ This study brings a few interesting details to light, but one fact in particular is of relevance here:

Disclosure of LGBT status in nationally representative surveys is consistently on the rise from one survey round to the next. This trend is likely to continue in the future since disclosure is more frequent among younger cohorts. In the United States, for instance, only 1.4% of people born before 1945 consider themselves as LGBT, against 8.2% among millennials (born between 1980 and 1999).⁸⁹

This means that more and more people identify themselves as part of the LGBT community. As the community grows, the chance of someone knowing a person who is part of this community increases and, with that, acceptance increases as the following statement shows clearly: "About three-quarters (73%) of those who know a lot of gays and lesbians [...] say they support same-sex marriage. And nearly half (48%) of Americans with many gay acquaintances, and 38% of those who have close friends or family who are gay, strongly favor allowing gays and lesbians to marry legally."⁹⁰ This might also be the reason why the subject of sexual orientation is not a big issue in these novels. In a circle of friends, it is likely that at least one will identify with the LGBT community and, therefore, the acceptance rate is much higher. This fact, combined with the fact that the protagonists are part of Generation Y, which, as has been shown, is the most accepting generation in this matter, explains why it is never overemphasized that these characters don't conform to heteronormative standards. Millennials "[...] enjoy unprecedented freedom to pursue what makes them happy and to look past traditional distinctions based on race, gender, and sexual orientation."⁹¹ If a character is gay it is mentioned

⁸⁷ Pew Research Center: *Support for Same-Sex Marriage at Record High, but Key Segments Remain Opposed*. June 2015. URL: <https://www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2015/06/6-8-15-Same-sex-marriage-release1.pdf>, p.6, [Last viewed: 04.06.2019].

⁸⁸ OECD: *Society at a Glance 2019: OECD Social Indicators*. Paris: OECD Publishing. URL: https://doi.org/10.1787/soc_glance-2019-en. [Last viewed: 04.06.2019].

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Pew Research Center: *Support for Same-Sex Marriage at Record High, but Key Segments Remain Opposed*. June 2015. URL: <https://www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2015/06/6-8-15-Same-sex-marriage-release1.pdf>, p. 16, [Last viewed: 04.06.2019].

⁹¹ Twenge, Jean M.: *Generation Me: Why Today's Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled – and More miserable Than Ever Before*. New York: Atria Paperback, 2014, p.9.

in passing or not mentioned at all. The reader will notice it from context sooner or later. This may leave the impression that sexual orientation is not an important factor in everyday and professional life, and that bias against people in the LGBT community is not a problem. This is, of course, not the case: “On average, more than one-out-of-three LGBT respondents in OECD countries report having personally felt discriminated against because of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity.”⁹²

In an urban millennial novel, at least one character is gay, bi- or transsexual. This could also be extended to include intersex and asexual people. However, their sexuality is not the defining feature of these characters but something the reader finds out in passing. Their personal history might be mentioned but coming out or seeking acceptance by loved ones is not strongly thematised. The fact that these characters are not heterosexual is simply a fact, not an agenda, and it is just one of the many features of the characters.

4.2.4 Life-Changing Event

In each of the presented novels, the protagonists are confronted with one major event which changes the course of their lives. The most serious matter is the death of one of the protagonists in *Why We Came to the City*, which separates the story in two parts - before and after the passing of Irene. The entire group of friends gathers around Irene in her last moments on earth: “Little by little she changed. Her breaths became shorter until they could barely tell if she was breathing at all. [...] In the end none of them could put their finger on the exact moment it happened. But afterward they knew they’d all seen it happen together.”⁹³ They do not find it easy to talk about this tragedy and it does alter the course of their relationships and their lives. In *The Bricks that Built the Houses*, Harry is trapped in a situation that forces her to make a quick decision. She is in the midst of picking up drugs from a seller, when she realises that she is not meeting the person she is supposed to meet: “It hits Harry then, like a punch in the face from a passing stranger. *This isn’t the guy. This isn’t the guy I’m meant to be meeting.*”⁹⁴ The situation starts to escalate and her friend, Leon, steps in and starts hitting the man until he is incapacitated: “Harry sighs, gets up and moves without thinking; she heads to the stash, takes one of the massive packages and squeezes it into her briefcase. She leaves the rest, goes for the money. She stuffs bundles into the waistband of her trousers, the lining of her jacket.”⁹⁵ In a

⁹² OECD: *Society at a Glance 2019: OECD Social Indicators*. Paris: OECD Publishing. URL: https://doi.org/10.1787/soc_glance-2019-en, p.10. [Last viewed: 04.06.2019].

⁹³ Jansma, 2016, p.240.

⁹⁴ Tempest, 2016, p.278.

⁹⁵ Tempest, 2016, p.279.

split second she decides to do something – taking money which doesn't belong to her - which then continues to have consequences for everyone. She regrets it as soon as they are on the run, but by then it's too late: "‘I shouldn't have taken the money.’ Harry's voice is low and haunted, full of dread. [...] Leon shakes his head. Speaks calmly. ‘You did what you had to do.’"⁹⁶ In fear for their lives, they pack up and leave London.

In *Holding Still for as Long as Possible*, it is also a confrontation with death that forces the characters to mature. Billy and Amy are involved in a car accident. They were riding their bicycles when they were hit. Both women end up in hospital, and Josh thinks about the situation: "I don't want to worry her [Amy] with the fact that Billy might not live. Amy can talk, form sentences, make sense. [...] She'll be home tonight or tomorrow morning at the latest. She won't remember this conversation, likely, but she's here now, in front of me. All of her. Not like Billy."⁹⁷ For a while it is unclear if Billy will survive. The final chapter focuses on the time after the accident, and Billy feels different: "I'm so grateful to be here. It sounds cornball, but now I've got a straightforward second chance. I spent so much time afraid to live; maybe this shock was all I needed. All I needed to be okay."⁹⁸ For Billy, the accident forces her to re-examine her life choices and it makes her strive towards living a happier and more content life. In each and every one of these situations, the unifying topic is death. The characters are facing the fact that life is fleeting, which forces them to mature and look towards the future.

In urban millennial novels, there is one major incident involving the main characters, which has an enormous impact on their lives. More likely than not, death will be of importance. Either a character dies or has a brush with death in some other form, such as in an accident or through serious illness.

4.2.5 Employment, Unemployment and Being In-between

Another important element within the selected novels is the difficulty surrounding occupation, which can be compared to romantic relationships. Here, too, there can be a protagonist with a steady and secure job, but there are also those who struggle to find a job, are truly unhappy with their work, or are unsure about the kind of profession they should pursue.

In all of the selected novels, there is at least one protagonist who struggles with their work situation. In *The Bricks that Built the Houses*, both Becky and Pete are unhappy with their jobs or lack thereof. Harry earns her money by dealing drugs, but she doesn't see this as her permanent source of income. In *Why We Came to the City*, there is a mixture of different

⁹⁶ Tempest, 2016, p.280.

⁹⁷ Whittall, 2014, p.271.

⁹⁸ Whittall, 2014, p.293.

attitudes towards and situations concerning work. George is an astronomer who is facing some difficulty at work but he still enjoys working in his preferred field: “George had fallen in love, thirteen years ago, with the dream of all the infinite things in the universe still to be discovered, of theories to be pieced together and daring connections made.”⁹⁹ The jobs the other characters have are a mix of passion and necessity. *Holding Still for as Long as Possible* also thematises the difficulties of starting a career for millennials. After Billy loses her job, she meets Josh and he says: ““So, I hear you need another job. I hear about this television research place that my friend Jenny was working at while she was at school. It’s crappy but good money.’ This always happened: As soon as I quit or got fired from one service job, another one fell into my lap within twelve hours.”¹⁰⁰ Billy is moving from one meaningless job to the next and never stays too long.

In an urban millennial novel, the protagonists all find themselves in a different working situation. Among the protagonists the following characteristics are probable: one of them has a university degree, one has a stable and meaningful job, one is unemployed and one is working a meaningless job.

4.2.6 Further Features: Social Media, Creativity and the City

There are numerous other features present in urban millennial novels, which will now be briefly discussed. The novels are set in the present day and have members of Generation Y as protagonists, who by definition grew up as digital natives. Even though technology is used throughout all the novels, it is not as dominant as one might expect. Of course, phones are used to talk, chat and communicate in general, but other social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram or Twitter do not play as big a role as might be anticipated. Some of them are mentioned in the selected novels but, considering how important the internet and its possibilities are to young people, this discrepancy is striking. The general connotation of social media is a negative one: it evokes more feelings of sadness and jealousy than of joy. This point will be analysed further in chapter 4.4.2.1 alongside the impact of mental health and the connection between the two subjects.

In each of the urban millennial novels, creativity is of great importance. At least one of the protagonists considers themselves an artist. There’s Becky the dancer (*The Bricks that Built the Houses*), Irene the sculptor and Jacob the poet (*Why We Came to the City*) and Amy, who is a

⁹⁹ Jansma, 2016, p.39.

¹⁰⁰ Whittall, 2014, p.148.

filmmaker (*Holding Still for as Long as Possible*). Creativity and urbanity are closely connected, a fact that will be explored later.

Urbanity in general is another unifying element of urban millennial novels. In each of them, the city is of significant value. The geographical location is not just the backdrop of the stories, it is an essential part of the narrative. The protagonists identify with the city, they see it as *their* city and see themselves a part of it. The city itself can be considered a protagonist in these novels and it acts as a mirror to the characters' conditions and feelings, as becomes evident from the following statement in *The Bricks that Built the Houses*. Pete and Becky have spent the night together, and afterwards Pete becomes insecure: "Pete starts walking. The city lurches all around him. People push past and swear at him and he feels lost amongst it all."¹⁰¹ Chapter 5.2 goes into detail concerning this topic.

Another unusual detail in millennial novels is the absence of politics. The characters do have discussions concerning serious topics, but no specific political issues are thematised and no actual politicians are mentioned. It is almost as though they live in a kind of bubble where they only concern themselves with their individual problems, without making associations with systematic issues or policies.

4.3 Aspects of Becoming an Adult: Emerging Adulthood

As societal rules and regulations change, so does society itself. This means that the development of children into adolescents and further into adults is no longer as regulated as it used to be. In particular, the period of emerging adulthood – a phase that didn't exist some decades ago – shows the changes within the system, as Arnett explains in the following statement:

The timing and meaning of coming of age – that is, reaching full adult status – is different today than it was 50 or 100 years ago, different in fact than it has ever been before. The social and institutional structures that once both supported and restricted people in the course of coming of age have weakened, leaving people with greater freedom but less support as they make their way into adulthood.¹⁰²

The consequences of these shifts are numerous. As young adults are no longer presented with one or two options for the future but with endless possibilities, both the advantages and disadvantages of this newfound freedom become very clear. This chapter will describe the developmental phase that has been named 'emerging adulthood', illustrate the difficulties that

¹⁰¹ Tempest, 2016, p.166.

¹⁰² Arnett, Jeffrey Jensen: "Emerging Adulthood: Understanding the New Way of Coming of Age", in: Arnett, Jeffrey Jensen; Tanner, Jennifer Lynn [ed.]: *Emerging Adults in America. Coming of Age in the 21st Century*. Washington: American Psychological Association, 2006, pp.3-19, here p.4.

young people have to overcome in society today and show how contemporary novels depict this transitional phase.

Almost ten years ago, in 2010, an article was published in the *New York Magazine* with the title “What Is It About 20-Somethings?”¹⁰³ In it, the author asks the question that apparently occupied the entire nation: “Why are so many people in their 20s taking so long to grow up?”¹⁰⁴ There is a scientific exploration for this development, which will become clear when looking at the chosen novels for this thesis. The protagonists in the novels discussed are not only part of Generation Y, they also find themselves in a transitional period in their life. Arnett explains the phenomenon of ‘emerging adulthood’ as follows:

This period is not simply an “extended adolescence,” because it is very different from adolescence—much freer from parental control, much more a period of independent exploration. Nor is it really “young adulthood,” since this term implies that an early stage of adulthood has been reached, whereas most young people in their twenties have not made the transitions historically associated with adult status—especially marriage and parenthood—and most of them feel they have not yet reached adulthood. It is a new and historically unprecedented stage of the life course, so it requires a new term and a new way of thinking. I have proposed that we call it *emerging adulthood*.¹⁰⁵

The term ‘emerging adulthood’ seems to fittingly describe the stage the young characters in these novels are in. They are mostly not in committed relationships, have uncertain jobs and living situations, and are generally insecure about the direction their lives should or could take. One reason for this new stage is the fact that, over the past decades, the age at which men and women enter into marriage or start a family has risen dramatically.¹⁰⁶ This is, however, not the main reason for the development of emerging adulthood: “Rather, they were reflections of other vast changes taking place in modern societies. Four revolutionary changes took place in the 1960s and 1970s that laid the foundation for the world as we know it today, including the new life stage of emerging adulthood: the Technology Revolution, the Sexual Revolution, the Women’s Movement, and the Youth Movement.”¹⁰⁷ He continues to explain the different movements and their meaning for the population, in particular Generation Y: “Because of extraordinary advances in technology, machines became able to perform most of the manufacturing jobs that were once the main source of employment in developed countries.”¹⁰⁸ Due to this shift in the economy from the manufacturing to the service-based, there was a

¹⁰³ Henig, Robin M.: “What Is It About 20-Somethings?”, in: *The New York Times Magazine*, 18.08.2010. URL: <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/22/magazine/22Adulthood-t.html> [Last viewed: 04.01.2019].

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Arnett, Jeffrey Jensen: *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens Through the Twenties*. New York [et al]: Oxford University Press, 2014. DOI: 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199929382.001.0001., p.2, [Last viewed: 20.06.2019]

¹⁰⁶ See Arnett, Jeffrey Jensen: *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road*, 2014, p.3.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., p.3.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., p.3.

stronger need for more highly educated people: “Consequently, an exceptionally high proportion of young Americans, nearly 70%, now continue their education beyond high school. [...] Most young people wait until they have finished school before they start thinking seriously about [...] marriage and parenthood, and for many of them this means postponing those commitments until at least their late twenties.”¹⁰⁹ Both the sexual revolution and the women’s movement helped to establish women’s rights and opportunities. The realisation that there is more to life than finding a husband, having children, and then staying home to raise the children and take care of the husband, gave women the chance to think about what they wanted from life: “With so many options open to them, and with so little pressure on them to marry by their early twenties, the lives of young American women today have changed almost beyond recognition [...]. And most of them take on their new freedoms with alacrity, making the most of their emerging adult years before they enter marriage and parenthood.”¹¹⁰

A further factor, the youth movement, describes the idea that adulthood will come soon enough, and that there is no rush to get there: “In their late teens and early twenties, marriage, home, and children are seen by most of them not as achievements to be pursued but as perils to be avoided. It is not that they reject the prospect of marriage, home, and children—eventually.”¹¹¹ They have the mindset that they will have enough time for all those things and can explore and try things before responsibilities stop them from having this freedom, because “[a]dulthood and its commitments offer security and stability, but also represent a closing of doors—the end of independence, the end of spontaneity, the end of a sense of wide-open possibility.”¹¹² Adulthood is seen as a phase which leaves no option to return to the one before. Once you become an adult and take on those responsibilities, there is no going back.

Arnett’s research is focused on the United States of America but can be applied to most developed countries.¹¹³ It should be noted that this existence of a phase between adolescence and adulthood is only possible in industrialised and to some extent wealthy nations. Gansel argues that:

[...] erst in modernen Gesellschaften größere Gruppen der Bevölkerung die Chance haben, sich in einer relativ offenen und unbestimmten Jugendphase auf die Suche nach den eigenen

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., p.4.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., p 6.

¹¹¹ Ibid., p.6.

¹¹² Arnett, Jeffrey Jensen: *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road*, 2014, p7.

¹¹³ There have been studies in a number of countries in addition to the United States. For Europe, for example, see: Zukauskienė, Rita [ed.]: *Emerging Adulthood in a European Context*. London, New York: Routledge, 2016. URL: <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.uaccess.univie.ac.at/lib/univie/detail.action?docID=4218501>. [Last viewed: 02.04.2019].

Möglichkeiten zu begeben. Unbestritten dürfte sein: materielle Sicherheit und familiäre Geborgenheit erzeugen Vertrauen, und dies wirkt sich wiederum auf die Zukunftspläne aus.¹¹⁴

This means that there has to be a certain amount of familial and, even more importantly, financial security for an individual to even have the option of not becoming an adult by the age of twenty. David Brooks called this period the ‘Odyssey Years’, the “[...] decade of wandering that frequently occurs between adolescence and adulthood.”¹¹⁵ He continues to explain what those years can look like: “During this decade, 20-somethings go to school and take breaks from school. They live with friends and they live at home. They fall in and out of love. They try one career and then try another.”¹¹⁶ In other words, it is a time filled with instability and uncertainty. This is not the same as being lazy, not wanting to work or partying all the time: “The odyssey years are not about slacking off. There are intense competitive pressures as a result of the vast numbers of people chasing relatively few opportunities.”¹¹⁷ It is a time where the stakes are high and the decisions that are being made have a long-lasting influence: “These twenty-somethings live in a world of radical freedom, flux and insecurity. Surveys show they are very pessimistic about the state of the country, but amazingly optimistic about their own eventual destiny.”¹¹⁸ They don’t know a different time. The idea of having the same job for decades seems both impossible and undesirable and flexibility within the job market is both valued and demanded.

The establishment of the scientific field of emerging adulthood is a fairly recent development. Jeffrey Arnett, who is the main scholar in this area, published his first article on this subject in 2000.¹¹⁹ His initial idea was met with a lot of interest and confirmation “[...] because there were many people who had concluded, from their own research experience as well as their personal observations, that there was a need to distinguish the years from age 18 to 29 developmentally and to give this period a new name that would reflect its distinctiveness.”¹²⁰ This time in one’s life had already been seen as a distinct phase, but never had a name that accurately represented it. Arnett lists the following as names this life period had been given:

¹¹⁴ Gansel, Carsten: “Zwischenzeit, Grenzüberschreitung, Störung – Adoleszenz und Literatur“, in: Gansel, Carsten; Zimniak Paweł [ed.]: *Zwischenzeit, Grenzüberschreitung, Aufstörung. Bilder von Adoleszenz in der deutschsprachigen Literatur*. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2011, pp.15-48, here pp.17-18.

¹¹⁵ Brooks, David: “The Odyssey Years”, in: *The New York Times*, 9.10.2007. URL: <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/09/opinion/09brooks.html> [Last viewed: 23.01.2019].

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Brooks, David: “How Adulthood Happens”, in: *The New York Times*, 12.06.2015. URL: <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/12/opinion/david-brooks-how-adulthood-happens.html> [Last viewed: 23.01.2019].

¹¹⁹ Arnett, Jeffrey Jensen: “Emerging Adulthood. A Theory of Development from the Late Teens Through the Twenties”, in: *The American Psychologist*, May 2000, Vol.55 (5), pp.469-80.

¹²⁰ Arnett, Jeffrey Jensen [ed.]: *The Oxford Handbook of Emerging Adulthood*. Oxford [et al.]: Oxford University Press, 2016, p.1.

“extended adolescence, prolonged adolescence, the transition to adulthood, early adulthood, and young adulthood [...]”¹²¹ Those names, Arnett continues, have never described the phase fully: “[...] for example “adolescence” of any kind never fit well when applied to people in their 20s who were long past puberty – but by 2000, the typical experience of people aged 18-29 in developed countries had changed so much in recent decades that there was a serious need for a new conceptualization of this age period.”¹²² ‘Young Adulthood’ also conveys the wrong idea about this time period, as “[...] 18-29 had become a time not of settling into adult roles, but an exceptionally unsettled time.”¹²³ Therefore, Arnett realised the need for a new name for an already existing phenomenon. ‘Emerging Adulthood’ made sense to many people as a term for a new life stage, to distinguish it from puberty-based adolescence and from a more stable young adulthood.¹²⁴

Arnett defines five features that mark emerging adulthood: “They are proposed as *distinctive* to emerging adulthood but not *unique* to it. That is, they may be experienced in other life stages as well, but I propose that they are more prevalent and prominent in emerging adulthood than in other stages.”¹²⁵ He found the following characteristics:

1. *Identity explorations*: answering the question “who am I?” and trying out various life options, especially in love and work;
2. *Instability*, in love, work, and place of residence;
3. *Self-focus*, as obligations to others reach a life-span low point;
4. *Feeling in-between*, in transition, neither adolescent nor adult; and
5. *Possibilities/optimism*, when hopes flourish and people have an unparalleled opportunity to transform their lives.¹²⁶

Each of these aspects will be further discussed in the analysis section of this thesis.

While Arnett can be seen as the pioneer in this field, he is by no means the only academic interested in this phase. On the contrary, there has been a lot of attention and further studies in the field of psychology in recent years, and the interest in this period of transition can be traced even further back. According to Labouvie-Vief, a professor of developmental psychology, the “topic of emerging adult thought structures – and the possibility of a new stage they imply”¹²⁷ first appeared some fifty years ago. The psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg “laid out a broad cognitive-developmental theory proposing levels (or stages) of complexity that undergird

¹²¹ Ibid., p.1.

¹²² Ibid., p.1.

¹²³ Ibid., p.1.

¹²⁴ Ibid., pp.1-2.

¹²⁵ Arnett, Jeffrey Jensen: *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road*, 2014, p.8.

¹²⁶ Ibid., p.9.

¹²⁷ Labouvie-Vief, Gisela: “Emerging Structures of Adult Thoughts”, in: Arnett, Jeffrey Jensen; Tanner, Jennifer Lynn [ed.]: *Emerging Adults in America. Coming of Age in the 21st Century*. Washington: American Psychological Association, 2006, pp.59-84, p.60.

individuals' understanding of social reality at different points of development.”¹²⁸ Labouvie-Vief continues to explain that, in 1969, Kohlberg, together with his colleague Kramer, continued his research and found out that “[...] many individuals who in their late adolescence had appeared to have acquired a principled and universal sense of morality appeared to have regressed some years later, after entering college. Many of these youth had begun to show signs of relativism and questioning the firm values they had previously held.”¹²⁹ It took some movement in the field to look at the evidence in a different way, but both Kohlberg and his colleague, Turiel, then came to the realisation that it might not be a sign of regression but of questioning a “closed form of thinking”¹³⁰ and that it might be a first step towards “further structural advances in adult thinking.”¹³¹

In a different study, William Perry studied Harvard students. He argued that they believed they would learn to know what was right and wrong during their time at university. Being able to do that means that there has to be a binary way of looking at things: “Taken aback at first by the coexistence of so many truth claims, many of these students soon came to understand that the source of their confusion was their own dualistic view of the nature of knowledge. Thus, the sense that there were safe, objective facts that were somehow outside the realm of human subjectivity began to crumble [...]”¹³² To put it in simpler terms: they realised how complicated and complex life can be and that no decisions are black and white: “In general, the capacity emerges to think beyond the conventional and accustomed and to develop more system-oriented views about reality.”¹³³ The fact that most issues are multifaceted can bring joy and further interest, however it can also give young people the feeling of being overwhelmed or unprepared. The challenge comes from balancing these emotions and realising that there are no simple answers for most questions. While reviewing the situation of emerging adults in Europe, Oliver Robinson focuses on the UK and shows, with the following account, that the state of young people in Europe is very similar to that of the United States:

Most young adults have more time to explore life in a non-committal way than in the past, and as a result they study more, travel more, experiment more, and spend longer preparing for occupational environments that are becoming ever more complex to navigate. The challenges of the emerging adulthood period eventually cede to the trials of finding a sustainable and stable

¹²⁸ Ibid., p.60.

¹²⁹ Ibid., p.60-61.

¹³⁰ Ibid., p.61.

¹³¹ Ibid., p.61.

¹³² Labouvie-Vief, Gisela: “Adult Thoughts”, 2006, p.61.

¹³³ Ibid., p.71.

life structure. This process of settling down is a challenging one, and can often lead to a major crisis.¹³⁴

This ‘crisis’ of a young person trying to find their way into adulthood is not a new image, but due to the historic developments, it has become more prevalent. It shows that freedom never comes without sacrifice and that, for emerging adults, these sacrifices constitute taking risks and having to make decisions on their own, decisions with significant consequences. Preferably, emerging adults work their way through this difficult period and learn from it in a way that they can then apply to challenging situations later in life, as Labouvie-Vief expresses: “This period of emerging adulthood might be thought of, then, in Eriksonian terms as a crisis. The ideal outcome of that crisis is the ability to contribute to society in a principled manner – in a way that reflects not only the internalization of cultural values and roles but also a capacity to reflect on them and a creative ability to work with them and transform them.”¹³⁵ This transitional period demands a lot of work. Most of it concerns identity and the self as well as relationships with others and one’s place in the world, as will become apparent in the following chapters. The protagonists in the selected novels personally go through this phase, and each of the characteristics of emerging adulthood will be illustrated by the choice of texts in this thesis.

4.3.1 Identity Explorations

The topic of identity explorations is central to emerging adulthood. It shows young adults trying to figure out who they are and where they see themselves, both in the present and the future. Arnett notes that this is an aspect thought to happen in adolescence, but which generally isn’t completed in that phase. Although some exploration of identity happens in adolescence, it may be more truthful to say that it starts there and continues into the next phase, which spans approximately the ages of 18 to 25.¹³⁶

The phase in which it is often believed that identity explorations take place is adolescence. This is true, of course, but it is not over once teenagers leave that stage and move on to the next one. Arnett clarifies this as follows: “Emerging adulthood is the age of identity explorations in the sense that it is the period when people are most likely to be exploring various possibilities for their lives in a variety of areas, especially love and work, as a prelude to making the enduring

¹³⁴ Robinson, Oliver: “Emerging Adulthood, Early Adulthood and Quarter-life Crisis. Updating Erikson for the Twenty-first Century”, in: Zukauskienė, Rita [ed.]: *Emerging Adulthood in a European Context*. London, New York: Routledge, 2016, pp.17-30. URL: <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.uaccess.univie.ac.at/lib/univie/detail.action?docID=4218501> pp.21-22, [Last viewed: 15.06.2019].

¹³⁵ Labouvie-Vief, Gisela: “Adult Thoughts”, 2006, p.71.

¹³⁶ Arnett, Jeffrey Jensen: *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road*, 2014, p.10.

choices that will set the foundation for their adult lives.”¹³⁷ It gives them the space and time to figure out what they want from life and where they see themselves in the future. They still exist within a safety net - their parents – which allows them to risk more without having to fear severe consequences. Arnett continues:

Emerging adults have become more independent of their parents than they were as adolescents and most of them have left home, but they have not yet entered the stable, enduring commitments typical of adult life [...]. During this interval of years when they are neither beholden to their parents nor committed to a web of adult roles, they have an exceptional opportunity to try out different ways of living and different possible choices in love and work.¹³⁸

These identity explorations manifest themselves in a number of ways. The search for a steady romantic partner forces emergent adults to “[...] know what kind of person they are – that is, what their likes and dislikes are and what they want their daily lives to be like in adulthood.”¹³⁹ The same is true in the workplace, as dealing with questions concerning employment and figuring out what kind of job they would like to have is only possible once they know who they are, “[...] that is, what they enjoy doing and what they are good at.”¹⁴⁰ It is not only in these specific areas that emerging adults have to develop their own identity and grow into themselves as independent people. This is, of course, also applicable on a more general scale, as Arnett explains: “In forming a worldview that addresses questions about values and religious beliefs, emerging adults also address identity issues in these areas, because deciding on their values and beliefs also means deciding who they are and how their worldview is similar to and different from the one held by their parents.”¹⁴¹ Emerging adults are trying to find their place in society and, in order to do that, they have to experiment in a number of areas to find what works for them.

In *Holding Still for as Long as Possible* Amy asks her former boyfriend, Josh, about Billy, who he has started spending more time with. She wants to know what he sees in Billy and what makes her so fascinating. His answer: “I’m not sure. [...] It totally seems like she’s having an identity crisis, but you know what? I think that’s brave. She keeps it together, but I just think there’s something really commendable about allowing yourself the freedom to unravel and question yourself.”¹⁴² In his description of Billy, he encompasses everything that emerging adulthood represents. She doesn’t know who she wants to be, she questions the choices she has made so far and thinks carefully about how she should proceed. At the same time, she does not

¹³⁷ Arnett, Jeffrey Jensen: *Emerging Adulthood: Understanding the New Way*, 2006, p.8.

¹³⁸ Ibid., p.8.

¹³⁹ Ibid., p.8.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., p.8.

¹⁴¹ Arnett, Jeffrey Jensen: *Emerging Adulthood: Understanding the New Way*, 2006, p.8.

¹⁴² Whittall, 2014, p.196.

try to be someone she is not and she doesn't hide the fact that she finds herself in an identity crisis. She should not have to, as questioning your identity is a crucial part of growing up in general, particular during emerging adulthood. This can be easier for some people, represented in the character of Roxy, Amy and Josh's friend: "Roxy had always appeared odd to other people, so she never experienced angst about it. Never belonging had given her the strongest sense of self-esteem of anyone I knew."¹⁴³ The fact that she never fit in has made her stop wanting to blend into the crowd. She does not have to be unsure about herself anymore, because she is used to being the one who is different. Being odd in the eyes of others defines her character and gives her the opportunity to be herself.

Unlike Roxy, Amy is unsure of who she is supposed to be. She especially doubts her talents as an artist, seems to have lost her inspiration and doesn't find the time to actually make any art herself: "I was co-coordinating a project. Somehow my life had become a series of related projects. [...] The more I got involved in organizing festivals or teaching how-to-edit-film workshops, the less art I was actually making. But my inspiration had been dry anyway."¹⁴⁴ This uncertainty in your own abilities is a major factor in the exploration of one's identity. Amy does not know which direction her career will take and, while she is working on different projects, she is not feeling inspired to create her own art. In turn, she is losing confidence in herself as an artist.

In order to be yourself, you first have to know who you are. During moments of uncertainty, the questions surrounding your identity can become more conflicted. After Amy and Josh have broken up, Amy reconnects with an old boyfriend, Jason. They had an intense relationship during summer camp as teenagers but lost touch after that. Jason reached out to Amy via e-mail and she can't wait to write back: "I started to write back to Jason with details of Amy's Life as an Adult, but stopped halfway through the second paragraph, aware that I sounded like someone trying to write a fake Christmas letter, trying to prove to myself, more than to him, that I'd grown into a successful and happy person."¹⁴⁵ She quickly realises that she was not behaving like herself but portraying herself in the way that she thought Jason would approve of: "I could see it all so blatantly on the screen in front of me. I didn't know what I was doing. Probably for the first time ever, I didn't have any answers [...]."¹⁴⁶ Realising that she is not who she thought she would be at her age leaves her feeling insecure and uncertain. In that way, this scene represents a natural and common step in any emerging adult's life: not knowing who you are

¹⁴³ Whittall, 2014, p.110.

¹⁴⁴ Whittall, 2014, pp.55-56.

¹⁴⁵ Whittall, 2014, p.156.

¹⁴⁶ Whittall, 2014, p.156.

and being unsure of who you are supposed to be. This realisation leaves Amy facing an identity crisis and therefore, by definition, maturing.

This maturation culminates at the very end of the novel, when the two female protagonists are involved in an accident while cycling in the city. During this episode, they are not referred to as Amy and Billy, but as Yellow Raincoat and Pink Dress. There is a description of them, and also of the generation they belong too, unlike any in the book before.

You might guess by their fashion, the way they articulate sentences, that they each have half a Cultural Studies degree, or maybe they study fine arts. [...] They give almost believable tarot card readings, can shoot whiskey straight without wincing. They believe in ghosts, but consider themselves rational. They own multiple Noam Chomsky books and have read at least one. They are from the generation that had e-mail addresses like PonyGirl85@hotmail.com by Grade Four and took cell phones on their first dates. They aren't used to being unreachable.¹⁴⁷

This description creates a specific image of a generation. It paints a picture of a certain class that both Amy and Billy belong to. The whole episode is filled with nostalgia and has a vintage feel to it. They are both very drunk and cycling home after a night out. They stop for a break and “[...] Yellow Raincoat lights a cigarette and stares at Pink Dress, [...] ‘I can’t wait to be out of my twenties. I hear the thirties are where it’s at. Everything is supposed to feel like less of an emergency,’ Yellow Raincoat says. Pink Dress fears her thirties. ‘I hope to accomplish something by then,’ she says.”¹⁴⁸ The need to *be someone* by the magical age of thirty is a very common phenomenon. It creates a lot of stress and pressure to achieve certain goals and it doesn’t seem to matter whether or not the individuals actually wish for these goals themselves, it is simply seen as something society expects from them.

The characters in *Why We Came to the City* are also at an age at which they struggle with their identities, wanting both to be unique and to fit in at the same time. George realises this issue at the party at the beginning of the novel: “He looked around, smiling at everyone and no one in particular, as a sensation crept up his spine that somehow they could tell that he was from the Midwest, that these artists could see the sleepy cornfields in his complexion.”¹⁴⁹ He is afraid that someone thinks he is not from this city (New York), or even from any city, and that this fact would somehow disqualify him. At the same time, he finds it strange that everyone else was different in the same way: “There were an awful lot of piratical mustaches going on around him. Two - no, three different guys with muttonchops. What was the point of looking different in exactly the same way as everybody else?”¹⁵⁰ Finding your own personality and being comfortable in your own skin marks a big step towards adulthood. The phenomenon of

¹⁴⁷ Whittall, 2014, p.256.

¹⁴⁸ Whittall, 2014, p.259.

¹⁴⁹ Jansma, 2016, p.13.

¹⁵⁰ Jansma, 2016, p.15.

everyone wanting to be ‘alternative’ and then all of them being alternative in the same way is a symptom of emerging adulthood. It takes some time to find yourself - your character, likes and dislikes, dreams for the future – and this struggle can also manifest itself on the outside. This means that following certain external trends (fashion, hair, style) is very common during this formative period, as is observed by George in the party scene.

The character of Pete in *The Bricks that Built the Houses* is struggling with multiple issues, but especially his own identity. He is generally unhappy with his life and, while he is trying to make some changes, luck is not on his side. He is feeling the pressure from his family and society and none of these factors make it easy for him to figure out who he wants to be: “The jobcentre’s killing him. Becky’s love is killing him. Coming home to his childhood bedroom is killing him. Everything is killing him, and yet his life just keeps on dragging; the morning comes and here he is, awake again. Alive.”¹⁵¹ He represents emerging adults in the way he is feeling beaten-up by life without yet knowing how to get rid of these feelings and seize the day in order to pursue his plans for the future. His mental health is, of course, also affected by his situation, just as his situation affects his mental health. This cycle is difficult to break, particularly during this transitional developmental period.

4.3.2 Instability

Instability can almost be seen as the umbrella feeling which accompanies emerging adults in all areas of their life. “Emerging adults know they are supposed to have a Plan with a capital ‘P,’ [...]”¹⁵² and this leads them to try and develop certain rules or conditions about their life, things they believe are expected of them and that they should achieve. They have numerous options for their future and know that this is the time for them to decide where they want their life to lead: “The explorations of emerging adulthood make it not only an exceptionally stimulating and eventful period of life but also an exceptionally unstable one.”¹⁵³ This can be seen both as a physical instability, with a high number of changes in residences, as well as a mental one: “The high rate of residential change from the late teens through the mid-20s reflects the many profound changes that take place in the lives of emerging adults.”¹⁵⁴ Arnett lists some of the fluctuations that happen naturally during this period in their lives, and how each of these changes also means a difference in the ‘Plan’ that emerging adults make for themselves, be it a

¹⁵¹ Tempest, 2016, p.206.

¹⁵² Arnett, Jeffrey Jensen: *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road*, 2014, p.11.

¹⁵³ Arnett, Jeffrey Jensen: *Emerging Adulthood: Understanding the New Way*, 2006, p.9.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., p.9.

shift in studies, partner, career direction and so on.¹⁵⁵ This alone causes instability, as it means that they continuously discover more about themselves and, with that, also change themselves: “With each revision in the Plan, they learn something about themselves and take a step toward clarifying the kind of future they want. But even if they succeed in doing so, this does not mean that the instability of emerging adulthood is easy.”¹⁵⁶ They are confronted, often for the first time, with the loss of structure and rules and, while this can be a freeing and hopeful change, it also comes with its own challenges: “In emerging adulthood the insecurities of adolescence diminish, but instability replaces them as a new source of disruption.”¹⁵⁷

This disruption can manifest itself in a number of ways. Apart from moving from home to home, one of the most common aspects is the ending and changing of romantic relationships. A breakup brings its own emotional challenges but, additionally, it disrupts a routine which has developed in the past weeks, months or even years. Whether the emotional attachment was intense or whether it was more of a casual relationship, the people involved had become used to having each other around and, depending on the length of their involvement, may have even adapted their life choices to the other person’s lifestyle. When Becky is asked about the state of her relationship with Pete, she remarks that they’re “[...] fighting all the time.”¹⁵⁸ They are not happy in their relationship anymore. After another question, Becky makes the following statement: “I’m pretty sure he only wants us to be together because he’s scared of what will happen to his life if I leave.”¹⁵⁹ Becky assumes that Pete has become so used to having her in his life that he can no longer imagine his life without her, not because of love or romantic attachment but simply because of dependence and fear of the alternative.

Another area in which this instability is apparent is employment. In *Why We Came to the City*, a few of the protagonists have changing working situations. William gets fired in the middle of the novel: “William counted his disappointments on both hands [...] He was there, on a weekday afternoon, because, four, he had finally been laid off at Joyce, Bennet, and Salzman. At first he’d been almost glad to have it over with, but then, five, none of the other firms had been hiring.”¹⁶⁰ William finds himself in a very common position for millennials: he has been through higher education and had found a good job but he lost it and now can’t find a new one. Therefore, he won’t be able to stay in his apartment and will be forced to move back in with his parents: “Six, his severance and savings were being so rapidly consumed by his rent that it

¹⁵⁵ Arnett, Jeffrey Jensen: *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road*, 2014, pp.11-12.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., p.12.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., p.12.

¹⁵⁸ Tempest, 2016, p.260.

¹⁵⁹ Tempest, 2016, p.260.

¹⁶⁰ Jansma, 2016, p.178.

seemed like only a matter of time before he would be forced to move back home again.”¹⁶¹ In his specific situation, he is not unhappy about this change, as he can now spend more time with Irene, but he is aware that this is not a sustainable plan for the future and that he will have to face the consequences at some point.

Jacob is also struggling with his work. He does his job well but does not take it too seriously. His true vocation is writing and he used his post at the mental institution as a way to have a stable income. His affair with his employer, Oliver, also enhances his feeling that the entire situation is casual. Especially after Irene’s death, he uses his occupation as a way to escape from reality. But, even then, he often thinks about leaving it all behind: “For the hundredth time, Jacob thought about walking out on the job, on Oliver, on his life. [...] Of calling Sara, only he had no idea where to begin.”¹⁶² The instability in his life is not limited to his work but also his friendships. After the passing of their friend, the entire group struggles to keep in touch and to return to their normal routine. After this traumatic experience, everyone starts looking at their own lives and focusing on themselves, which is another characteristic of emerging adulthood.

4.3.3 Self-focus

As the word self-focus has a strong, mainly negative, connotation, it is important to define how it should be interpreted in the context of emerging adulthood: “Emerging adults are self-focused in the sense that they have little in the way of social obligations, little in the way of duties and commitments to others, which leaves them with a great deal of autonomy in running their own lives.”¹⁶³ A lot of emerging adults move out of their parents’ home by the time they are 18 or 19 years old, especially if they continue their education at university, but there is a lot of variation depending on their geographical location. Whether or not they continue living at home, they experience a new freedom, although this is especially true if they move out of their family home. Not living with their family means that they decide by themselves how they want to live their everyday life - what to have for dinner, when to do laundry, when to come home after a night out and so on.¹⁶⁴ This also means, though, having to face some bigger and more important decisions on your own: “Go to college? Work full- time? Try to combine work and college? Stay in college or drop out? Switch majors? Switch colleges? Switch jobs? Switch

¹⁶¹ Jansma, 2016, p.178.

¹⁶² Jansma, 2016, p.261.

¹⁶³ Arnett, Jeffrey Jensen: *Emerging Adulthood: Understanding the New Way*, 2006, p.10.

¹⁶⁴ See Arnett, Jeffrey Jensen: *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road*, 2014, p.14.

apartments? Switch roommates? Break up with girlfriend/boyfriend? Move in with girlfriend/boyfriend? Seek someone new, and if so, how and where?”¹⁶⁵ Not all of these decisions depend on whether or not the young adults have left home, but it illustrates the amount of questions and uncertainties they have to deal with and how easy it can be to feel overwhelmed. Of course, they can ask for help in making these decisions, but in the end, it is up to them: “Even for emerging adults who remain at home, many of these decisions apply. Counsel may be offered or sought from parents and friends, but many of these decisions mean clarifying in their own mind what they want, and no one else can really tell them what they want.”¹⁶⁶ This realisation can feel more like a burden than a blessing, especially in the beginning. Self-focus is not the same as being selfish.

The presence of self-focus can be observed in all of the selected novels, and it is strongly connected to the previously discussed issue of identity explorations. Arnett explains the purpose of self-focus as follows:

Emerging adults are self-focused with the goal of attaining the self-sufficiency that is at the heart of their view of what it means to be an adult (Arnett, 1998, 2004). Only after attaining self-sufficiency do they feel like they have reached adulthood and begin to view themselves as ready to become more other-focused by entering marriage and parenthood. Identity issues are relevant here; being self-focused allows emerging adults the psychological space to contemplate the “who am I?” questions that are at the heart of identity and to pursue opportunities in love, work, and education that will promote their self-knowledge.¹⁶⁷

Most of the day-to-day activities of the protagonists can be interpreted as falling into this category. Both the fun times they have - exploring different relationships, the ability to live their lives without any responsibilities towards other people and without too much of a routine yet¹⁶⁸- and the serious moments they have to face during that time. Arnett continues: “Although most people enjoy having the freedom to be self-focused during their emerging adult years, they do not expect or even desire to be self-focused forever. Rather, they view it as a necessary step before committing themselves to enduring relationships with others, in love and in work.”¹⁶⁹ It is a way for emerging adults to get to know themselves at a point in life where they can afford to make mistakes without having to fear the consequences of their unpredictable lifestyle.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., p.14.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., p.14.

¹⁶⁷ Arnett, Jeffrey Jensen: *Emerging Adulthood: Understanding the New Way*, 2006, p.10.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., p.10.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid, pp.10-11.

4.3.4 Feeling In-between

The final main characteristic of emerging adulthood left to be discussed is the feeling of being in-between. Arnett presents his research in connection with this aspect as follows:

One of the questions I have asked from my earliest research on this age is, “Do you feel that you have reached adulthood?” I have found that very few people beyond age 18 consider themselves to be in adolescence, even late adolescence. It is easy to understand why. Unlike adolescents, 18- to 25-year-olds are not in secondary school, they are not going through the biological changes of puberty, and most of them no longer live with their parents. However, most of them do not see themselves as adults, either. In response to the question about whether they feel they have reached adulthood, most 18- to 25-year-olds respond along the lines of “in some ways yes, in some ways no.”¹⁷⁰

Developmentally speaking, emerging adults are, in fact, between two stages: adolescence and adulthood. While the criteria for adolescence has been studied and researched for decades, there are no verified markers for having reached adulthood. It can be stated that someone is no longer adolescent, however, this does not mean that they are automatically an adult. You do not become an adult overnight, nor do you start to feel like one: “The reason why so many emerging adults feel in-between is evident from the criteria they consider to be most important for becoming an adult. Their top criteria are gradual, so their feeling of becoming an adult is gradual too.”¹⁷¹ Additionally, these reasons for feeling adult are highly subjective and are generally not measurable, in contrast to important events in the lives of young adults. These milestones, such as finishing school or getting married are seldom the reasons for young people feeling more adult.¹⁷² There are three main reasons emerging adults give as signs of feeling like they are becoming an adult and these are: accepting responsibility for yourself, making independent decisions and becoming financially independent.¹⁷³ As previously mentioned, none of these explanations happen from one day to the next. They are developments that take time and that happen independently from measurable milestones. At some point, though, they start to feel more adult than not: “Once they reach their late 20s and early 30s most Americans feel they have definitely reached adulthood, but even then a substantial proportion, about 30%, still feel in-between. [...] Thus for most people, the feeling of being fully adult takes a long time to attain, and for a substantial period they feel in-between [...].”¹⁷⁴

In *The Bricks that Built the Houses*, Harry finds herself feeling in-between. She wishes to be an adult but does not see herself as having reached that stage yet: “She wants to be more than

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., p.11.

¹⁷¹ Arnett, Jeffrey Jensen: *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road*, 2014, p.15.

¹⁷² Arnett, Jeffrey Jensen: *Emerging Adulthood: Understanding the New Way*, 2006, p.12.

¹⁷³ Arnett, Jeffrey Jensen: *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road*, 2014, p.15.

¹⁷⁴ Arnett, Jeffrey Jensen: *Emerging Adulthood: Understanding the New Way*, 2006, p.12.

she's been. [...] She wants to stop this endless circling. She wants to be an adult with a life. She wants to be in love and travel and eat food in the evenings. She feels screwed up so tight and small. She wants to stretch out underneath somebody's hands."¹⁷⁵ One of the reasons why Harry wants to 'be an adult' is because she believes that her life will be more balanced and fulfilled at that point, although being an adult and feeling like one is not necessarily the same thing. Seeing yourself as an adult is a vital aspect of growing up, but it seems increasingly to happen at a later point in life: "The reason why it is so important to investigate the role of conceptions of adulthood in understanding the variance in development between the ages of 18 and 29 is that increasingly more young people are not feeling like adults until increasingly later into the third decade of life."¹⁷⁶ This means that it is crucial to study emerging adults' views on adulthood. Otherwise it will be impossible to understand what keeps them from feeling 'adult' themselves, especially at a stage where it generally would be assumed to have been reached. One example is the scene at the beginning of *Why We Came to the City*, where the party ends abruptly: "Then, more or less without warning, it was all over. [...] Irene gave the caterers their checks and tips from Juliette's [her boss'] envelope, and the bartenders kindly left behind a few half-empty bottles, and then there was no one left but them."¹⁷⁷ The five characters are surprised by this fact but also very content: "This had never happened before, in the years they'd been coming to the party, and they were as thrilled as young children allowed to stay up after the adults had gone to bed."¹⁷⁸ This may be a metaphor, but it also works in the literal sense. They still feel that the label of 'adult' belongs to other people, not themselves. At the same time, they start to realise that they should feel like adults, that they are, in fact, adults. However, they still don't fully identify themselves with that word and everything that is connected to it. There is an episode in the middle of *Holding Still for as Long as Possible* describing the moments before a young woman, Alison, is involved in a car accident and in need of an ambulance. The description of her life features some strong ideas about adulthood. She is about to turn 28 years old: "She still couldn't quite believe she had a husband, a house, all of these symbols of adulthood, when just two years ago she'd been in first year at nursing school, drinking at downtown clubs on the weekends, speculating about the future."¹⁷⁹ The aforementioned 'symbols of adulthood' are, in this case, marriage and living in or owning a

¹⁷⁵ Tempest, 2016, p.314-315.

¹⁷⁶ Nelson, Larry J.; Luster, Stephanie S.: "'Adulthood' by Whose Definition?: The Complexity of Emerging Adults' Conception of Adulthood", in: Arnett, Jeffrey Jensen [ed.]: *The Oxford Handbook of Emerging Adulthood*. Oxford [et al]: Oxford University Press, 2016, pp. 421-437, here p.424.

¹⁷⁷ Jansma, 2016, p.27.

¹⁷⁸ Jansma, 2016, p.27.

¹⁷⁹ Whittall, 2014, p.80.

house in the suburbs as opposed to being unmarried and living in the city. For many people, however, this no longer represents their feelings towards adulthood. According to studies done in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the factors that young people use to measure their level of adulthood were much more difficult to measure than life events such as marriage or the birth of a child. Instead, they “found that intangible internal markers of adulthood were highly endorsed, most notably accepting responsibility for self, being able to make decisions independently, becoming less self-oriented, and (more tangibly) gaining financial independence.”¹⁸⁰ The notion of being financially independent is still one of the main indicators of feeling like an adult. Amy used to receive financial support from her parents. Now that she and Josh don’t have to lean on that anymore, she begins to see herself as an adult: “Now I no longer had to take anything from my parents and it felt good. [...] We were both adults now, supporting ourselves [...]”¹⁸¹ Joan Didion, the American writer and journalist, writes about this in her essay about leaving New York: “I never told my father that I needed money because then he would have sent it, and I would never know if I could do it by myself.”¹⁸² She believed she had to make a point and prove herself to others, especially to her family. She needed evidence that she was capable of living on her own, earning her own money and knowing how much she could spend and still afford necessities.

Financial independence is one major symbol of adulthood and marriage is another. Alison, the woman from the accident mentioned earlier, somewhat fell into adulthood by marrying and moving to the suburbs, but she is still not used to her new role. Her following thoughts depict this perfectly: “Alison didn’t like driving on the highway, but she’d started to get used to the daily route from Ryerson to her house in the suburbs of Toronto, a house she’d bought with John when they decided they had better start planning for the future. She wasn’t used to it yet, the new renovations, the quiet at night, having to drive to get anywhere.”¹⁸³ This describes the stereotype of a married women, as if it were impossible to be married without changing your life and personality or leaving your old life behind. Jacob, in *Why We Came to the City*, sees this in a critical way and therefore doesn’t approve of his friends getting married for exactly those reasons. He sees it as the end of a time period he desperately wants to hold on to. “Of course, Jacob had known this would happen eventually. It had been coming for years now – the

¹⁸⁰ Nelson, Larry J.; Luster, Stephanie S.: “‘Adulthood’ by Whose Definition?: The Complexity of Emerging Adults’ Conception of Adulthood”, in: Arnett, Jeffrey Jensen [ed.]: *The Oxford Handbook of Emerging Adulthood*. Oxford [et al]: Oxford University Press, 2016, pp.421-437, p.424-25.

¹⁸¹ Whittall, 2014, p.54.

¹⁸² Didion, Joan: “Goodbye to All That”, in: *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*. London: 4th Estate, 2017, pp.225-238, here p.229.

¹⁸³ Whittall, 2014, p.80.

end of all this. No more drinking champagne in hot tubs at three in the morning or joking about fox hunts.”¹⁸⁴ It is an event that will change everything both for him and their group, or so he believes, and he also feels a little betrayed and left behind: “The end of years they’d spent discovering this city like strangers in a strange land. Now they were just here. Now half of them would be married – hopelessly monogamous. Why would anyone do such a thing? Now they’d be just another lame, sexless couple and he’d be left with Irene.”¹⁸⁵ Jacob knows that marriage is a next logical step for people in committed relationships but, at the same time, he doesn’t want his friends to move in that direction. He sees this as a final step towards adulthood, which he does not find desirable, even though he has started to feel this shift himself: “And now that they were there, sitting in a hot tub on the top floor of one of Manhattan’s most exclusive hotels, he was steadily feeling less and less like a child left home alone without the grown-ups around and more like they *were* the grown-ups.”¹⁸⁶

4.3.5 Possibilities and Optimism

While instability is a dominant factor during the phase of emerging adulthood, the feeling of optimism also plays a role. As Arnett explains: “Emerging adults look to the future and envision a well-paying, satisfying job, a loving, lifelong marriage to their ‘soul mate’, and happy children who are above average.”¹⁸⁷ The seriousness of life and the obstacles that young people have to overcome are not unknown to them, however they truly believe that they will be able to overcome them: “The dreary, dead-end jobs, the bitter divorces, the disappointing and disrespectful children that some of them will find themselves experiencing in the years to come—none of them imagines that this is what the future holds.”¹⁸⁸ What Arnett describes here is an important fact: emerging adults believe that their life will be different, that it doesn’t have to be as disappointing as the life they believe their parents had and that there is an alternative for them. They find themselves at an age where they have mostly left the schedules of school and home life behind and can finally be their own person – or at least that is how they see it: “A simple but crucial feature of emerging adulthood in this respect is that typically emerging adults have left their family of origin but are not yet committed to a new network of relationships and obligations.”¹⁸⁹ This strong feeling of independence fills them with optimism, especially when they do not have a large number of responsibilities to tie them down.

¹⁸⁴ Jansma, 2016, p.31.

¹⁸⁵ Jansma, 2016, p.31.

¹⁸⁶ Jansma, 2016, p.31.

¹⁸⁷ Arnett, Jeffrey Jensen: *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road*, 2014, p.16.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., p.16.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., p.16.

It is hard to dispute that emerging adulthood is a difficult time filled with explorations and new experiences. However, above all, the feeling of possibility and hope remains one of the strongest emotions during this time. Arnett explains this as follows:

Emerging adulthood is the age of possibilities in two ways. One is that emerging adulthood is a time of great optimism, of high hopes for the future. [...] In emerging adulthood, virtually no one expects to end up with a dreary, dead-end job or join the nearly 50% of Americans whose marriages end in divorce, or make mistakes that drive life into a ditch. Even if their current lives are a struggle, as is the case for many emerging adults, they continue to believe that they will ultimately prevail. During emerging adulthood, high hopes reign.¹⁹⁰

In *The Bricks that Built the Houses*, Becky's fight for success is the perfect example of this optimism. She has her personal dream - she is a dancer and would love to join a company - but it has not been going well for her. She is introduced to the reader as follows: "Becky is twenty-six years old but feels like she's on her last leg. She's leaning against the bar; all around her are monsters and slimeballs and showgirls, shouting and screaming to prove they exist."¹⁹¹ She does not feel like she belongs with the people she is surrounded by and is unable to be herself: "Beside her in the busy room, a girl called Aisha is looking around for important people. Aisha is rich with confidence. The brutal, unnerving confidence of a twenty-one-year old. She has, for some reason, attached herself to Becky [...]. She makes Becky feel old."¹⁹² Becky is at the launch party for a new single and the accompanying music video she danced in. The video is being played at the event in "a constant loop"¹⁹³ on large monitors covering an entire wall. She can't escape watching herself, "[...] cringing at the face she's making, the pouts you have to pull to get seen."¹⁹⁴ In the course of the novel, Becky's dream continues to slip away from her. She tries to stay optimistic but, with the growing number of rejections, this starts to become an almost impossible task: "She had found herself marooned, looking for work. Unable to get auditions. The classes she went to were at The Place, the home of the school she'd trained at. She attended as many as she could afford; she aimed to make three a week but she could feel her fitness slipping."¹⁹⁵ Becky finds herself in a difficult situation and she is unsure if a career in her chosen field is still possible for her. She knows the industry she aspires to be part of very well and is therefore able to assess her chances realistically: "With every year that passes an out-of-work dancer is more prone to injury, less fit. [...] They would never choose to see her at an audition over an eighteen-year-old. Her CV was laughable and for every part that came up,

¹⁹⁰ Arnett, Jeffrey Jensen: *Emerging Adulthood: Understanding the New Way*, 2006, p.13.

¹⁹¹ Tempest, 2016, p.13.

¹⁹² Tempest, 2016, p.14.

¹⁹³ Tempest, 2016, p.15.

¹⁹⁴ Tempest, 2016, p.15.

¹⁹⁵ Tempest, 2016, p.203.

hundreds and hundreds of women applied. There was no hope for her.”¹⁹⁶ She is close to giving up, but something stops her from actually doing it. Somehow, she believes that this could not have been it, that there must be something else she could try: “The Place was running an annual festival of new work. This was, she felt, the last push.” Becky sees this as an opportunity to try, one last time, to realise her dream, show her work as a dancer and hopefully leave the state of desperation and hopelessness she has found herself in. She knows that she needs to put in the work and she takes this very seriously: “She stepped up the classes. Started going daily. She could feel her muscles tightening, her Achilles tendons lengthening. She would have to pay her dancers, rent the studios to work in, conceive the piece and teach it without any support. But The Place would put it on stage and give her a journalist to review it.”¹⁹⁷ Even though none of the signs in her life point towards Becky becoming successful, she persists. She continues to try and does not give up on her quest for success. It is this optimism that allows her to view the future not as a bleak and dark place but as a bright goal worth struggling towards. Joan Didion mentions this kind of positivity in her writing too: “I still believed in possibilities then, still had the sense, so peculiar to New York, that something extraordinary would happen any minute, any day, any month.”¹⁹⁸ Didion didn’t need any reassurance, she simply believed that things would work out if she continued to work hard and disregard any setbacks.

As well as the kind of optimism which Becky exemplifies, there is a second factor which contributes to emerging adulthood being seen as an age filled with possibilities. Arnett writes: “The second way that emerging adulthood is the age of possibilities is that it represents a crucial opportunity for young people who have experienced difficult conditions in their family lives to move away from home and to steer their lives in a different and more favourable direction before they enter the commitments in love and work that structure adult life.”¹⁹⁹ If a child grows up in a difficult environment at home, they have little chance to leave these circumstances. They are, quite literally, stuck there. They might not have high hopes for the future, or even any hopes, because it is difficult to imagine anything positive while living in a situation that seems hopeless to them: “Emerging adulthood is the age of possibilities in part because it represents a chance for young people to transform their lives, to free themselves from an unhealthy family environment, and to turn their lives in a new and better direction.”²⁰⁰ This boils down to a very simple fact, which plays a major role in this development. “Simply being able to leave home is

¹⁹⁶ Tempest, 2016, p.203.

¹⁹⁷ Tempest, 2016, p.203.

¹⁹⁸ Didion, Joan: “Goodbye to All That”, in: *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*. London: 4th Estate, 2017, pp.225-238, here p.229.

¹⁹⁹ Arnett, Jeffrey Jensen: *Emerging Adulthood: Understanding the New Way*, 2006, p.13.

²⁰⁰ Ibid., pp.13-14.

a big part of it. Children and adolescents are unable to leave a destructive environment [...]”²⁰¹ and they have to stay in homes where life might be less than ideal. But, with the beginning of emerging adulthood, this changes and so can the lives of these emerging adults.

4.4 Representation of Emerging Adulthood in Urban Millennial Novels

Now that the specific aspects of emerging adulthood have been explained and analysed, the next chapter will look at some specific areas in which these characteristics can be studied in detail and how these topics are represented in the selected novels. At the centre of this are the issues of relationships, whether within the family, with friends or with romantic interests. The other important topic deals with the way emerging adults think they are supposed to live their lives and how the media, both social and traditional, influences the manner in which they plan their future.

4.4.1 Relationships

4.4.1.1 *Familial Relationships*

Relationships in their various forms are at the heart of each of the selected novels and they offer an opportunity to analyse the aforementioned aspects of emerging adulthood. The interactions between the protagonists establish the basis of the stories they tell. Their connections are exceptionally intimate, sometimes even more so than those they have with their families. The bond to their biological families is often not as strong as expected, and often their relationships with their parents are strained. Some grew up with single mothers and some encountered negative reactions once they showed their true selves to their families. Either way, the traditional family is not the key issue in these novels, but it still plays an important enough role to merit further analysis.

In the selected novels, a variety of familial relationships are depicted. The characters in *Holding Still for as Long as Possible* don't often mention any people outside of their close group of friends, much less their parents. They are talked about, memories of childhood troubles are shared, but there is not a lot of contact with parents, be it in person or over the phone. It is difficult to say whether this is typical for millennials: “Research has documented an increase in contact between young adults and their parents over the past decades.”²⁰² However, even if this may be the case looking at the generation as a whole, it is in no way true for all millennials, as

²⁰¹ Ibid., p.14.

²⁰² Fingerman, Karen L.; Yahirun, Jenjira J: “Emerging Adulthood in the Context of Family”, in: Arnett, Jeffrey Jensen [ed.]: *The Oxford Handbook of Emerging Adulthood*. Oxford [et al]: Oxford University Press, 2016, pp.163-176, here p.164.

the study continues: “[...] nearly a fifth of young adults are in contact with parents less frequently than once a week.”²⁰³ The first mention of family happens at the beginning of the novel, when Billy and Maria are having dinner with Maria’s mother, who is celebrating her birthday. The couple have broken up in the early hours of the morning that day but “[...] we’d decided not to tell anyone about the break-up yet. It was too new, and it just seemed easier to play along for her mother’s birthday.”²⁰⁴ This shows how difficult it can be for emerging adults to be honest about their relationships in front of their parents. The desire to appear ‘adult’ can sometimes lead to dishonesty, especially surrounding romantic relationships. Meeting the parents of a (new) girlfriend or boyfriend is often the culmination of the anxiety and stress that surrounds these affairs.

In *The Bricks that Built the Houses*, Becky is invited to meet Pete’s parents at their home for lunch: “Miriam answers the door smiling and drying her hands on a tea towel. She beams at Becky. ‘Hi,’ she says, ‘you must be Becky!’ Becky smiles. ‘Hi,’ she says. Wanting to run.”²⁰⁵ Becky doesn’t feel comfortable in this situation but it is not so much the parents that make it uncomfortable as Pete’s behaviour. The real surprise for Becky is meeting Pete’s sister, who turns out to be the girl she has met before, Harry: “‘Harry, this is Becky,’ Pete says, standing between them. Harry stands in the doorway. ‘Becky, this is my sister, Harry.’ Harry feels her guts lurch. Her body is a dry sponge. Becky feels her lungs expand, each pocket fills with air. She is suddenly aware of every organ in her body, working at the same time.”²⁰⁶ The uncertainty of this new situation intimidates Becky, making her question her relationship, her identity and the course her life has taken so far.

Whittall’s novel depicts family struggles in a number of ways. Billy speaks to her mother on the phone once, trying to open up about her difficulties with the direction her life is taking, but she is not being taken seriously:

‘I’m having a quarter-life crisis,’ I announced to my mother.
 ‘My generation never had those, we just had babies and thought about killing them from time to time.’
 ‘Gee, thanks.’
 ‘Oh, not you, Hilary. You were an angel. I meant your sister. I left her at the mall one day when you were in kindergarten and I almost didn’t try to find her. I went crazy. She wouldn’t stop crying.’²⁰⁷

This conversation shows that, while Billy is in contact with her mother, their relationship cannot be characterised as a close one. She doesn’t turn to her mother for actual advice in these difficult

²⁰³ Ibid., p.165.

²⁰⁴ Whittall, 2014, p.35.

²⁰⁵ Tempest, 2016, p.221.

²⁰⁶ Tempest, 2016, p.227.

²⁰⁷ Whittall, 2014, pp.105-106.

times. As the conversation continues, they do start talking about more serious issues, but it is still in a superficial and somewhat mocking way:

‘Well, none of my friends are giving birth. I don’t think any of us could quit smoking long enough to have a kid.’

‘That’s true. You’re all chimneys, angry little chimneys.’ [...] ‘Not to mention, gay.’ My mother was one of those people who thought gay people just didn’t ever have children, as if it wasn’t possible.

‘That doesn’t make it biologically impossible, just a little harder, logistically.’ [...] ‘And stop labelling me. [...]’²⁰⁸

While marriage might be relevant for some of the characters, the idea of actually starting a family and having children doesn’t seem to be on Billy’s mind. This becomes obvious in the scene above, which also comments on a few of the additional issues the generation faces.

Amy has an ambivalent relationship with her parents. She reflects on this as follows: “I’m the youngest of four siblings: lawyer, surgeon, physics professor, and me, the artist who provides my parents with plenty of worry and lots of whispered speculation, the accidental baby twelve years younger than the rest. I am the beloved baby girl, the family pet, since lawyer and Dad are allergic to dogs.”²⁰⁹ Even though Amy might have her issues with her family, she is in regular contact with them, having her mother over for brunch and going shopping with her regularly.²¹⁰ She may not lean on her mother for constant support but they are a part of each other’s lives, which is not a given.

It is common for relationships between children and parents to be strained during the periods of both adolescence and emerging adulthood. Usually, parents want the best for their children. They want them to be happy, successful and financially independent. The children, too, want to appear self-sufficient in front of their parents and to show them how they have matured. This can lead to uncomfortable situations, as the following exchange between Pete and his stepfather demonstrates:

‘So, what have you been up to then, Pete? Any developments on the work front?’ David looks at him over the top of his glasses [...]. ‘I had two weeks moving office furniture. That was good. And then I set up an eBay account for a friend’s nan and helped her sell off some of her late husband’s suits. She gave me fifty quid. So, that was good.’ [...] ‘And are you any closer to working out what you want to do, in the, erm, long run?’ [...] ‘Erm. No,’ Pete says. ‘Nope.’ His family watch him, waiting. He looks at them. ‘There is nothing for me out there.’²¹¹

Pete is embarrassed by his unemployment, especially in front of his parents. The pressure of wanting to present a ‘perfect’ life to their family creates distance between them. Sometimes, this distance is already there, as it was for Harry, who has had difficulty with her parents while

²⁰⁸ Whittall, 2014, p.106.

²⁰⁹ Whittall, 2014, p.49.

²¹⁰ See Whittall, 2014, p11.

²¹¹ Tempest, 2016, p.235.

growing up. She explains it to Becky: “‘I didn’t speak to my mom for, like, ten years.’ Becky’s eyebrows climb. Harry shrugs. ‘She couldn’t deal with my...’ She breaks off into a quietness. She looks for the words but can’t find them. ‘The way I am.’”²¹² This also becomes clear when looking at an earlier exchange between mother and daughter: “‘And how’s work, Harriet? Recruitment, isn’t it?’ She flinches as she always does when people call her Harriet. It feels like someone else’s name. A constant reminder of all she gets wrong. But her mother won’t call her Harry. *I gave you a name for a reason*, she had said. *You are my daughter after all*.”²¹³ Even though her mother loves Harry, she is incapable of respecting her wish to be addressed by a different, less feminine first name. So even though, as mentioned previously, the coming-out of any character is never a main focus in the novels, that does not mean that it is never referred to. In the selected novels, the parents still struggle to accept the sexuality and gender of their children. For the children – the now emerging adults – this means that painful memories of hurt feelings and fear often resurface.

Jacob, in *Why We Came to the City*, is someone whose relationship with his parents never recovered after he revealed his true self to them: “Jacob remembered coming out to his own parents at age fifteen to Royal Shakespeare Company-level hysterics. His father had sworn solemn oaths, and his mother had literally beat her breast.”²¹⁴ They did accept him after some time, however their relationship is not a close one, which is not only his parents fault: “Jacob hardly called his parents now and only visited on his birthday. He wondered how it would feel to be an orphan.”²¹⁵ Jacob does not turn to his parents for advice, nor do they speak on a regular basis, which is why he is surprised by how they have changed when he visits them in Florida: “He hardly recognized his parents. It was [...] as if aliens had abducted the weary, grumpy people who had raised him, leaving behind these revitalized, reprogrammed retirees.”²¹⁶ His parents have changed so much during their time apart that he doesn’t even know them anymore. And they continue to surprise him when he finds out that they became “more Jewish”²¹⁷ and made religious friends who Jacob assumes won’t be too happy about his sexuality: “‘Better not let them meet your gay son then,’ Jacob said. But his mother shook her head. ‘Oh, who cares? They all watch Will and Grace now. Nobody cares you’re gay. Just do me a favor and tell them you go to services for Shabbat.’”²¹⁸ Apparently, a gay son is no longer an issue as long as he is

²¹² Tempest, 2016, p.248.

²¹³ Tempest, 2016, p.140.

²¹⁴ Jansma, 2016, p.269.

²¹⁵ Jansma, 2016, p.269.

²¹⁶ Jansma, 2016, p.302.

²¹⁷ Jansma, 2016, p.302

²¹⁸ Jansma, 2016, pp.302-303.

not also an atheist. This shows that, whatever children do, parents can always find something to be unhappy about. Jacob also realises that they have kept themselves busy, so his presence goes almost unnoticed. At dinner, though, when his father shows off his new iPhone, Jacob realises that they may not have changed that much after all: “And Jacob watched as his father held the phone up over the bowl of calamari and scrolled, slowly, through a list of contacts with his thumb. Jacob watched as his mother craned her neck to see who was coming into the restaurant and if it was anyone she needed to wave at. Maybe they were still his parents after all.”²¹⁹ It seems as though Jacob is the one who has changed and therefore views the relationship with his parents in a new light. Even if they have changed their routines or their lifestyle, at their core, parents remain parents and children remain their children, no matter their age.

4.4.1.2 *Friendships*

One of the connecting aspects of all the three novels is the importance of friendship. All of the novels have a group of friends at the centre and their relationships are a big part of both the narrative and the character’s lives. This is a characteristic that becomes clear from the very beginning. In *Why We Came to the City*, the opening chapter is a monologue raving about life in the city, both the good and the bad. It ends with the following sentence: “And if our apartments were coffins and our desks headstones and our dreams infections – if we were all slowly dying – then at least we were going about that great and terrible business together.”²²⁰ It seems as though they could face anything as long as they get to face it together, which makes Irene’s illness and death even more tragic. It pulls the group together and they all pitch in and try to help her in every way possible. Still, the situation overwhelms them.

William was there most of the time, but he was hopelessly disappointing at these tasks. George and Jacob came nearly every day to help out for a few hours, and this gave Sara some time to do her editing and to sleep and to take anxious walks around Madison Square Park [...]. There were laminated lists of hospital phone numbers for each of them to keep in their wallets in case there were questions. And still it felt like they were losing this fight.²²¹

The friends try their best to support Irene and they physically take care of her as a family would be expected to do. This is a common theme in the selected novels: the protagonists see their friends as family. This can be an addition to their existing family, if they have a good relationship with them, or a substitution, if they have deliberately stopped talking to their relatives or have simply lost touch. This becomes apparent at Irene’s surgery, where Sara made sure they were all allowed to be with their friend in the hospital: “Sara had been through three

²¹⁹ Jansma, 2016, pp.303-304.

²²⁰ Jansma, 2016, p.6.

²²¹ Jansma, 2016, pp.204-205.

hundred hoops to make sure they had permission to wait in the recovery room, when regulations permitted only family.”²²²

Jacob also realises the importance of his friends when he meets Sara again after Irene’s death. They are not doing well: “Unlike George, as Sara got more anxious, she drank less. *Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way*. Damn, that was a good line. He had never liked it before, mainly because he felt his own family was unhappy in a generic kind of way.”²²³ But Jacob always thought only of his parents when thinking about his family. As soon as he started to include his friends, he viewed the situation differently: “Now it seemed undeniable to him that, whereas his New York family had indeed been happy in the way that all groups of young dreamers are happy before they’ve given up, they were all quite unhappy now, each in their own special ways. That was what made it all the more miserable: they couldn’t even be unhappy together.”²²⁴ This statement demonstrates two separate issues. After Irene’s death, the group of friends, the ‘New York family’, is devastated, and this devastation unintentionally drives them apart. But, at the same time, it shows them how close they actually were as a group. They were so close, in fact, that they considered each other family.

This is a common feature in all of the selected novels. In Whittall’s novel, the friendship between Billy and Roxy is an example: “Roxy pretty much slept with everyone when she first met them. She had tried to hit on me, but I was with Maria so we had quickly slid into sibling roles.”²²⁵ Treating friends as siblings, having this amount of intimacy with each other, and sometimes being there for each other because actual, biological, family isn’t – all of these themes are present within the texts. This also underlines the importance of close friendships within urban millennial novels. For Christmas, a time people generally spend with family, they have created their own ritual: “Back at the apartment, Roxy was hanging up out stockings and making invitations to our annual Christmas Eve dinner party for friends who don’t visit family for the holidays. [...] The holiday season fuelled Roxy, filled her with kindness for all the local orphaned twenty-something misfits.”²²⁶ Friends become their new families, sometimes replacing and sometimes in addition to the original families.

After Irene’s death, when the group of friends starts to fall apart, Sara is trying to reconnect with Jacob:

²²² Jansma, 2016, p.144.

²²³ Jansma, 2016, p.314.

²²⁴ Jansma, 2016, p.314.

²²⁵ Whittall, 2014, p.110.

²²⁶ Whittall, 2014, p.142.

Sara texted him now three or four times a week. *When are you coming up to Boston? Write me a poem! Are you still dating that doctor? Why don't you quit that stupid job and come up here to be a lobsterman?* His responses were absolutely minimal. *Where? No. Yes. Gross.* She was very excited about the U.S. team's chances for gold in Vancouver, wasn't he? [...] How could she be bubbly? How could she be watching sport?²²⁷

Sara wants to put the sadness of losing her best friend behind her and stop thinking about it, whereas Jacob finds this behaviour almost disrespectful. With the intimate connection these friends have developed, there also comes the need to defend each other. Jacob experiences this feeling after looking at photographs from Irene's wake, which he couldn't bring himself to attend: "Who were all these people? If these were her friends, where had they been all year? How dare they enjoy themselves while what was left of Irene sat on a back wall shelf in that monstrous, tacky metal urn that George had picked out from the funeral home catalog?"²²⁸ Jacob believes that only Irene's true friends, the ones who cared for her when she was sick, should be allowed to mourn her. The other acquaintances hadn't earned that right.

William lost touch with the group after Irene's death. He was, however, invited to the opening of the exhibition showing Irene's art a year after her passing. He decides to go, but doesn't feel completely welcome once he is there:

William had deliberately avoided [the photographers'] flashes and, once he could, ducked away before Sara or George could introduce him to anyone. They hadn't spoken to him more than a few times all year, and he was surprised to have even gotten an invitation to the show. When he'd called Sara to accept, she'd acted as if they'd always been old friends, but he knew they hadn't been and soon wouldn't be again.²²⁹

The situation was too complicated for them to recover from it. The fact that he had come into their lives at the same moment that Irene became ill and that he was primarily *her* friend, didn't allow for William to become part of the group of friends after all.

After family, friendships are not the only important connections for millennial emerging adults, although chapter 5.3 about community and the city will explore this subject further. Their romantic endeavours make up a large part of their interactions and the next chapter will analyse the depiction of this in the selected texts.

4.4.1.3 Romantic Relationships

All of the three novels analysed in this paper deal with the topic of romantic relationships, albeit in different forms. Emerging adults, having left the stage of adolescence where they have had the chance to explore romantic and sexual desire, are ready for more serious romantic

²²⁷ Jansma, 2016, p.251.

²²⁸ Jansma, 2016, p.252.

²²⁹ Jansma, 2016, p.328.

involvement. This does not mean, though, that emerging adults desire a committed long-term partner, as Schulman points out: “Yet despite the increasing likelihood of becoming involved in intimate and committed relationships, current evidence suggests that in Western cultures emerging adulthood is not uniformly characterized by commitment to a long-term relationship.”²³⁰

In *Holding Still for as Long as Possible*, one of the central couples, Amy and Josh, have been together for about two years. Now Amy is feeling unsure about Josh because she doesn’t understand how a relationship that in the beginning felt like a “religious conversion”²³¹ can now leave her feeling empty and sad. Her friend, Tina, doesn’t give her the advice she is looking for: “Her longest relationship was an affair she’d had with her married lesbian doctor. Two years of clandestine hotel encounters, cell phones used only with each other, and neurotically safe sex. Tina thought I needed to cut Josh loose. ‘He was your first big-deal relationship. You’re almost twenty-four. Let him go and make some mistakes.’”²³² Tina implies that Amy should use her youth to explore her sexuality with a number of romantic partners. Amy has been struggling with the state of her relationship for some time now. In a scene at the beginning of the novel, she and Josh are in the car together: “Josh put his hand on my leg. I turned and for a moment saw him the way a stranger might. I tried to picture us together in five years. Who would we be?”²³³ She doesn’t know what she wants either from life or from her relationship, not just concerning the distant future but also the present. Shulman and Connolly suggest, while writing about the difficulties of romantic relationships for emerging adults, that “[...] only when young people are more confident about their life plans and partner’s support will they seriously consider becoming involved in a long-term relationship.”²³⁴ This means that not knowing where you want to go in life impedes the ability of young people to make a true, long-term commitment. Amy knows that her personal struggles about the future have an effect on her relationship: “To be with someone in a healthy way, you had to be able to be alone in a healthy way. I believed this firmly. Right now the possibility of being alone made me hear horror-movie screaming. I hated that the universe seemed to be steering the wheel and I had no ability to get myself back on course.”²³⁵ The thought that the world has a plan for her, one she cannot see, scares Amy the most. Amy is not alone in this feeling. Josh also has concerns about their

²³⁰ Shulman, Shmuel; Connolly, Jennifer: “The Challenge of Romantic Relationships in Emerging Adulthood”, in: Arnett, Jeffrey Jensen [ed.]: *The Oxford Handbook of Emerging Adulthood*. Oxford [et al]: Oxford University Press, 2016, pp 230-244, here p.230.

²³¹ Whittall, 2014, p.51

²³² Whittall, 2014, p.52.

²³³ Whittall, 2014, p.56.

²³⁴ Shulman, Shmuel; Connolly, Jennifer: “The Challenge of Romantic Relationships”, 2016, p.240.

²³⁵ Whittall, 2014, p.58.

relationship: “Now she turned away from me at night. Any cuddling was accidental. We’d decided it must be a phase. I wasn’t sure, though. Something has changed, and I couldn’t quite figure out how to change it all back. For all my mechanical intelligence, my ability to take things apart and put them back together with ease, I couldn’t see the plan ahead for us.”²³⁶ What Josh is describing is very common in emerging adults. While it is not unusual for them to be in romantic relationships, they do not automatically lead to a life-long commitment: “These seemingly exclusive relationships do not necessarily indicate progress toward commitment, but rather a search for convenience or even a masking of commitment difficulties.”²³⁷ Emerging adults don’t want to be alone, but that doesn’t mean that they are looking for their partner for life: “Over a span of almost 10 years, many young people in the industrialized world are in and out of relationships. Even those who are more likely to be found in a steady relationship might have difficulties committing and building future plans.”²³⁸ What Schulman describes is the need for human connection but the inability or aversion to planning for the future as a couple.

Apart from the more serious romantic relationships, Whittall’s book is filled with crushes. At the beginning of the text, Amy recounts the following interaction when she runs into her “[...] random crush. She was this little tomboy thing, blonde, messy-haired, always dropping something, always in a hurry. We’d progressed to nodding and smiling at each other [...].”²³⁹ It appears that a seemingly random encounter has become a ritual. They start seeing each other by chance on other occasions as well. They actually meet and introduce themselves towards the end of the novel, during a night out: “I leaned against the window and watched a cute, blonde, scruffy tomboy lock her bike to the gas line. When she turned, I recognized her as the girl I saw everywhere lately – at the farmers’ market, at Starbucks [...], at the art supply store across town, once at the doctor’s office. [...] I called her the Everywhere Girl.”²⁴⁰ They introduce themselves and end up sharing a few drinks and getting along well: “We giggled at each other like idiots. I felt the kind of insanity that accompanies a crush out of nowhere, a bomb in the chest.”²⁴¹ The language used resembles that used to describe falling in love, certainly the early stages of it, which is characteristic of a crush. They then have a typical conversation about city life:

She gave me her business card: Maria. Street Outreach Worker.
 ‘Okay, so I know the world is small, but did you used to date someone named Billy?’
 ‘Yes, for many years, actually.’ Maria looked at me curiously. ‘Do you know her?’
 ‘Yes, she’s roommates with one of my best friends, and dating my very recent ex.’ [...]

²³⁶ Whittall, 2014, p.90.

²³⁷ Shulman, Shmuel; Connolly, Jennifer: “The Challenge of Romantic Relationships”, 2016, p.234.

²³⁸ Ibid., p.234.

²³⁹ Whittall, 2014, p.55.

²⁴⁰ Whittall, 2014, p.223.

²⁴¹ Whittall, 2014, pp.225-226.

Maria looked at me and grinned. 'I feel like I'm on some ridiculous reality show. Or I'm about to get punked.'

'Nope. Pure small-world syndrome.'²⁴²

This might feel like a huge coincidence, but it is not that uncommon. When you meet someone new, you often find out that you are already connected with them in some way, especially if you run in the same circles, live or work in a similar location. It will often be easy to find a connection that you share with them.

Josh, the EMT, meets his crush, Jenny, at a training weekend for emergency responders. He is almost surprised by the sensation that it evokes within him: "She winked at me. Winks. I wasn't used to someone being so blatant. I had forgotten about this part – the moment when a new girl became interesting."²⁴³ Even after Josh starts seeing Billy, Jenny somehow stays in his mind. He especially appreciates the simplicity of it all: "She was so easygoing it was like she was a straight guy. She didn't get jealous. When I told her I had something complicated with Billy, she didn't get upset. She didn't make demands. She was fun to be around. I'm not sure why. It felt good to have an uncomplicated relationship."²⁴⁴ Josh enjoys the effortlessness of this new and uncomplicated relationship, including the fact that he doesn't have to choose one over the other. They can simply coexist.

Sometimes, emerging adults can't deal with a serious relationship even though they have met someone they truly like. This is the case for Becky in *The Bricks that Built the Houses*, where she struggles with the idea of a serious and committed relationship and prefers casual encounters. This can be seen as perfectly normal behaviour, since "[...] a majority of emerging adults, both men and women, will experience one or more of these CSREs."²⁴⁵ CSRE stands for Casual Sexual Relationships and Experiences and is used to describe the acts that happen outside of committed relationships, as Claxton explains: "Notably, the word 'casual' does not refer to the salience or importance of these relationships/experiences, but rather it denotes that these relationships/experiences occur outside of the context of formal romantic relationships."²⁴⁶ For Becky, they represent an emotionally safe option with less chance of getting hurt: "No strings and flings, and one-night stands, she's not after any more than that. She prefers to keep things simple. She likes girls and she likes boys. If something is exciting,

²⁴² Whittall, 2014, p.226.

²⁴³ Whittall, 2014, p.125.

²⁴⁴ Whittall, 2014, p.242.

²⁴⁵ Claxton, Shannon E.; Van Dulmen, Manfred H.M.: "Casual Sexual Relationships and Experiences in Emerging Adulthood", in: Arnett, Jeffrey Jensen [ed.]: *The Oxford Handbook of Emerging Adulthood*. Oxford [et al]: Oxford University Press, 2016, pp.245-261, p.245.

²⁴⁶ Ibid., p.245.

she lets it be exciting. But the minute people get to keen, she cuts them off.”²⁴⁷ Becky sees her casual experiences as something fun, something she doesn’t want to overcomplicate with the addition of emotions. One-night stands seem like a logical conclusion: “Not surprisingly, because these experiences last only one-night, one-night stands include fewer emotional acts than booty calls or committed romantic relationships.”²⁴⁸ In Becky’s case, her casual hook-ups are also a way of protecting herself. The ambivalence of needing intimacy without being able to commit to anything more is nothing unusual, especially for emerging adults: “In an age of increased sexual freedom, hook-ups may be a way for young adults to meet their sexual needs at a time when they are not fully able to commit to a long-term partnership.”²⁴⁹ For Becky, this seems to be the case. She doesn’t feel equipped to deal with the emotional stress that can accompany a romantic relationship, especially if things don’t run as smoothly as hoped. This becomes evident in the following statement describing her attitude towards romantic relationships: “She can’t handle any more than casual things. It gets too painful. You give too much, they take too much, they want too much, or not enough, and suddenly you find yourselves emptied out and open-handed, grabbing for some more.”²⁵⁰ She stands by this even after she meets Pete: “She was hesitant. Kept telling him she wasn’t up for anything serious and he agreed, of course, he wasn’t up for that either.”²⁵¹ Even though they agreed on this and have similar ideas of what their relationship should look like, their actions contradict their words. They start seeing each other almost every day. Becky continues to stick to her original ideas: “She kept telling herself it was no big deal. They were seeing how it went. No strings. No commitment. She had too much that she was committed to as it was. She didn’t want a boyfriend. She made it clear that she was up for seeing other people. He told her yeah, that’s what he wanted too.”²⁵² This is a very common pattern for emerging adults: having some form of romantic attachment without the responsibilities that come with a serious relationship. As stated earlier, during emerging adulthood, the individual changes a lot as they figure out who they want to be, take on more responsibility and ideally start to build a career that they care about. This change can also affect their romantic relationships, in particular when only one of the parties involved matures while the other one still feels stuck. Pete and Becky’s relationship is the perfect example:

Pete hated all the time she was spending in rehearsals, hated her being on call every night. He’d got his CSCS card and found a few week’s work labouring. But he shrank from the banter onsite.

²⁴⁷ Tempest, 2016, pp.54-55.

²⁴⁸ Claxton, Shannon E.; Van Dulmen, Manfred H.M.: “Casual Sexual Relationships”, 2016, p.248.

²⁴⁹ Claxton, Shannon E.; Van Dulmen, Manfred H.M.: “Casual Sexual Relationships”, 2016, p.233.

²⁵⁰ Tempest, 2016, p.55.

²⁵¹ Tempest, 2016, p.174.

²⁵² Tempest, 2016, p.174.

It made him feel like an impostor in his own sex. He wanted to take Becky out with the money he made. But she was never around. The work dried up after three weeks, and he was back on the dole.²⁵³

Pete has great difficulty in accepting not only Becky's fight for her dreams, but the fact that she is actually moving in the right direction. He feels the need to disparage her and insult her performance in a show where she plays a small part. He belittles her, as becomes apparent in the following statement: "[...] I could hardly fucking see you up there, you had like two things to do in the whole fucking thing, and you're telling yourself you're living your dream. [...] It's not *real*. None of it's real. And it does my fucking head in."²⁵⁴ Instead of supporting her and realising that her success would also benefit him, he feels the need to drag her down. He is angry that he is not more successful and also that she thinks she can be something more while he believes that he already knows that accomplishing one's dreams is impossible. They break off their relationship towards the end of the novel. They enjoyed each other's company, but never had much of a future. This is also a common phenomenon: "Even when in a steady relationship, many might not be committed or have joint plans for the future."²⁵⁵ So it is possible, normal even, for emerging adults to have a romantic partner for some time without seeing it going somewhere in the future or making plans to spend the rest of their lives together. The romantic endeavours of the characters in the selected texts have illustrated this fact substantially.

4.4.2 How are we Supposed to Live?

The key theme driving all of the characters is the future. They are in the middle of a developmental phase which is meant to prepare them for adult life. They are supposed to confront their ideas about their future in order to decide what direction their life could take and what they have to do to get there.

In all of the selected novels, the protagonists spend a lot of time thinking about the future. This does not stop them from living in the moment and focusing on issues in the present. It does mean, however, that the future is on their minds, and not always in an abstract sense. They also wonder about what they will leave behind, what they contribute to society and if they should have achieved more in their lives so far. In *The Bricks that Built the Houses*, Pete struggles with those thoughts shortly before his birthday: "In seven days he turns twenty-seven. That's the age that rock stars die at. If he died at twenty-seven, he would leave nothing behind him. No legacy.

²⁵³ Tempest, 2016, pp. 204-205.

²⁵⁴ Tempest, 2016, p.217.

²⁵⁵ Claxton, Shannon E.; Van Dulmen, Manfred H.M.: "Casual Sexual Relationships", 2016, p.233.

Nothing of note. Nothing to separate him in any way from the countless other bodies that he's spent his life amongst. A man in the mass. Part of the crowd."²⁵⁶ While optimism may be one of the reigning emotions during emerging adulthood, it should not be forgotten that this does not apply to every situation and is not always the strongest feeling present. Emerging adults are, of course, also confronted with situations that make them feel sadness and despair.

Harry thinks about how everyone is trying to build their own life in the city, to create something for themselves and the people they care about: "Everybody's looking for their tiny piece of meaning. Some fleeting, perfect thing that might make them more alive."²⁵⁷ This shows how people try to carve out their own space and make something that gives them purpose and joy. This can be seen as a characteristic of emerging adulthood. By growing up, young people have to figure out what makes them happy and whether this can be realistically achieved. If that is not the case, if what they would like to pursue is seemingly impossible, their view of the future can become increasingly depressing.

One area in which this feeling of gloom is especially widespread is the field of employment, as has been described in the earlier chapter 4.2.5. The analysis here focuses on how emerging adults try to come to terms with the harsh reality of the working world. This also includes having their dreams crushed from time to time. In *Why We Came to the City*, Jacob does have a regular job, but it is not what he imagined he would be doing with his life: "Once Jacob had written poetry, but now he was just a poet. He specialized in a certain type of epic that was a tough sell in an age of text messages. [...] Now he tended a herd of mental patients who, upon occasion, needed to be held down and syringed and straightjacketed."²⁵⁸ Jacob dreamed of being a published author, but he had to let go of this dream, at least for the time being. He does appreciate his job, but it is not where he sees himself for the rest of his life.

In *The Bricks that Built the Houses*, problems with employment are abundant and affect every one of the protagonists. The character of Pete shows some of these issues clearly and can be seen as the portrayal of a young person feeling very insecure and depressed about the way his life has turned out so far. The feeling of optimism might be a prevalent one in emerging adulthood but there is also room for a lot of negative emotions and difficulties during this phase. Pete finds himself at a low point in his life. He lives with his ill father, has been unemployed for some time and doesn't seem to have any close friends who could support him. He has a university degree but is still unable to find work. Pete finds himself at the jobcentre for his mandatory appointment: "Pete sits down and watches an older guy – a few teeth missing, dirty

²⁵⁶ Tempest, 2016, p.337.

²⁵⁷ Tempest, 2016, p.124.

²⁵⁸ Jansma, 2016, p.17.

face, long hair, scars mess his skin up like piss lines in a sandpit. He's got a cap on, can in his pocket. Mumbling to himself. Pete feels a faint terror. *Am I you?*"²⁵⁹ This offers him a glimpse into his future, or so Pete believes. He is terrified that there might not be any positive change in his life and that the routine in which he is stuck at the moment is the one he will have to live for the rest of his life. He knows he can't protest against the "horrible fake patience they use"²⁶⁰ and the employee at the centre "who's making peace with the fact he never had any friends at school by asserting his authority over anyone he possibly can."²⁶¹

Pete isn't the only character who is filled with insecurities about their future. Though, later on in the story, Becky is fighting for her dream of being a dancer, she struggles with fears about how her life will develop. She is working in a café and feeling especially vulnerable after an exchange with some rude customers:

She can see the next twenty years playing out in the space between counter and the flat and the casting calls and the auditions she can't get and the missed opportunities and the pie and mash and the pub and the injuries and her body in the mirror. [...] Twenty years and she'll be here, cleaning up the café, still trying to prove to Auntie Linda that she can trust her with the seasoning. Twenty years of nothing changing but the rent.²⁶²

The fear of never getting anywhere and of having already peaked dominates Becky's thoughts. She is scared that life has nothing more to offer. This can be seen as one of the reasons why she decides to try and go after her ideal career once more instead of accepting the current situation as the final one. Becky is also aware of the sacrifices her family made for her, especially her mother: "Her mum had the impossible dream of being a photographer on her own terms. She never saw it through but she was close. She got so close. She owes it to them both not to just stagger blindly but to choose the route and walk it."²⁶³ The fact that her mother gave up her own dream in order to create a future for her daughter makes Becky want to fight for a life she deems worth living: "She wants to join a company. Really be a part of something. Dance beneath the guidance of a choreographer that she respects. Push herself before it's too late. For every member of her family who ever lived and died."²⁶⁴ This gives her the strength to continue to aim higher and not give up on herself just yet.

²⁵⁹ Tempest, 2016, p.95.

²⁶⁰ Tempest, 2016, p.95.

²⁶¹ Tempest, 2016, p.96.

²⁶² Tempest, 2016, p.98.

²⁶³ Tempest, 2016, p.105.

²⁶⁴ Tempest, 2016, p.106.

4.4.2.1 Social Media and Anxiety

Even though the different social media platforms are not at the centre of any of these novels, they are sometimes mentioned, especially in *The Bricks that Built the Houses*. At one point, Pete is sitting in the café where Becky works: “He stretches his legs out underneath the table and checks Facebook on his phone. It tells him things he doesn’t need to know about people he hasn’t seen in years. He absorbs their aggressively worded opinions and quasi-political hate-speak.”²⁶⁵ By opening Facebook, he is confronted by other people’s lives, or at least their portrayal of them online. Whether or not he sees the reality of other people’s lives is irrelevant. He starts to think what his life looks like online and wonders if he can keep up with the posts and updates of his acquaintances. This is not uncommon, as Clayton expresses:

The intense affect [sic.] of websites like Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, etc., are weighing down our generation in ways we have sadly become accustomed to. We live for the approval of others rather than ourselves. [...] Why must we constantly share our daily activities with hundreds of people we don’t even talk to? We clearly focus on what others are seeing rather than what we are doing.²⁶⁶

Pete falls right into this trap: “He sees a photograph of his ex-girlfriend with her new boyfriend smiling at a picnic and he realises, with a strange cascade of emptiness, that she is pregnant and wearing an engagement ring. The comments are jubilant. He reads every word before he forces himself to put his phone down. A loneliness descends.”²⁶⁷ The platform gives him a glimpse into a parallel life he could have had. He automatically and habitually starts to compare his life to the one of someone he knew some time ago. He sees his ex-girlfriend in a new relationship and about to start a family while he has not achieved any of these things himself. He is in the same place he was before he met her. Whether or not he actually wants those things in his life right now is irrelevant. He automatically feels behind, like he is supposed to be further ahead than he actually is.

Harry feels similarly towards the end of the novel, after their difficulties with her drug distributor, where she and her business partner end up hurting someone and running away with stolen money. She is back at home and has started to think about the consequences of their actions: “She has no girlfriend, no children, she sells drugs for a living to people she can’t stand. She can feel the city caving in on itself.”²⁶⁸ This change in her ‘life plan’ makes her feel as if her world is crumbling. She evaluates her achievements so far and is unsure what she has to

²⁶⁵ Tempest, 2016, p.101.

²⁶⁶ Clayton, Mahogany: “The Facade of Social Media”, in: *HuffPost*. 29th September 2014. URL: https://www.huffpost.com/entry/the-facade-of-social-medi_b_5895994. [Last viewed: 16.05.2019].

²⁶⁷ Tempest, 2016, p.101.

²⁶⁸ Tempest, 2016, p.310.

show for herself. Comparing herself with other people on social media only strengthens her feelings of unworthiness: “She wakes up in the morning and stares at Facebook profiles of people she never liked and sees photographs of their wedding days and their charity runs and their children’s birthday parties and their wild nights out.”²⁶⁹ The benefit of continually seeing other people’s milestones online, not even people she knows well and likes, is unclear. She does not enjoy it either but something compels her to keep coming back for more.

4.4.2.2 *Fear and Threats*

All things considered, the protagonists in each of the novels live a mostly comfortable life. They go through their ups and downs but they all have a place to call home, friends they can trust and enough money to put a meal on the table. This does not mean, however, that they live a carefree life. The topic of fear, both about the present and the future, is prominent in *Holding Still for as Long as Possible*. A short time after Josh starts his current job, the SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) epidemic happens. This is a historical fact. The epidemic occurred in the early 2000s, as the website of the World Health Organizations records: “The disease appeared in November 2002 in the Guangdong province of southern China.”²⁷⁰ From there, it spread globally: “An epidemic of SARS affected 26 countries and resulted in more than 8000 cases in 2003.”²⁷¹ Toronto was one of the few places outside of Asia where “[...] human-to-human transmission occurred after early importation of cases [...]”²⁷². This means that someone in Josh’s position was actually in a risky and dangerous situation, especially at the beginning of the epidemic when not enough was known about the disease.

It comes as no surprise that this is described as a very intense experience for both Josh and Amy. He was scared due to his work and the extra safety equipment made it feel even more serious: “The uniform was hot already and when I took all the proper precautions against SARS, I just sat there sweating. It was almost biblical, the amount of sweat. [...] The heat made everyone even more nervous.”²⁷³ At home, Amy made him be extra careful as well, and he obliged. Even though he knew it wouldn’t change much, he “[...] wanted to make her comfortable.”²⁷⁴ As terrifying as this was, they somehow got used to it all: “I don’t know how, but I got through that time – the protocols started to become normal. But a lot of the procedures

²⁶⁹ Tempest, 2016, pp.310-311.

²⁷⁰ World Health Organization: *International Travel and Health. SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome)*. URL: <https://www.who.int/ith/diseases/sars/en/> [Last viewed: 19.06.2019].

²⁷¹ Ibid.

²⁷² Ibid.

²⁷³ Whittall, 2014, p.26.

²⁷⁴ Whittall, 2014, p.26.

that were put into place for SARS are no longer happening, now that the scare has come and gone. It's amazing how quickly we forget."²⁷⁵ Josh touches upon something very important here: the fact that we as a society often forget about specific negative events as soon as the feeling of immediate danger has passed. It might be better described as suppressing rather than forgetting. This can lead to surreal feelings, especially when looking back and rethinking the situation, as Josh does: "So you have a room full of people coughing and sneezing and bleeding; if anybody does have an infection and they come in, shit will spread like wildfire. I'm surprised SARS didn't get a lot bigger."²⁷⁶ The threat of global epidemics is not new, but it has never been as likely or as conceivable as it is today due to the increase in international travel and the speed with which this travel takes place. Commercial air travel has made it possible for millions of people to move around the world in record time so, by the time a risk is detected, a disease could already have spread very widely. It is therefore almost unexpected, as Josh expresses in these sentences, that certain illnesses don't spread in the way projected or feared, especially with the way the media tends to cover these events. With the way the news cycle works, we now know more about events that happen in other countries and continents. This can make us feel more connected with cultures we are unfamiliar with and open our minds to new information and experiences. However, it can also contribute to the feeling that there are a higher number of catastrophes and a lot more terrible events happening now simply because more gets reported. Federmann describes this as follows:

We live in a world where we're constantly on the receiving end of negative news. An amalgam of information about assault, murder, accidental death, economic downturns, war, terrorism, environmental disaster, and political upheaval comes at us in a constant stream of tweets, e-mail blasts, subscribed news feeds, texts, web pages, and social media. This incoming information stream often occurs without our intention to connect with information sources. And if we do elect to seek it out, all the bad news one can digest is only a click away. Gone are the days when we hear about events on the nightly news or through the less frequent publication of the Sunday paper. Now they're just add-ons to the 24-hour news stream that floods us with negative information.²⁷⁷

This 24-hour news cycle comes with both advantages and disadvantages. In Jansma's novel this is mentioned at the very beginning: "We couldn't stop watching the news. Every ten seconds we refreshed our browsers and gawked at the headlines."²⁷⁸ On the one hand, it has never been as easy as today to both stay informed and to inform, and social media has given

²⁷⁵ Whittall, 2014, p.26.

²⁷⁶ Whittall, 2014, pp.26-27.

²⁷⁷ Federmann, Russ: "Millennial Distress: Why So Much? Why Now? Socioeconomic and social media influences upon young adult psychopathology", in: *Psychology Today*, 12th November 2017. URL: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/bipolar-you/201711/millennial-distress-why-so-much-why-now>. [Last viewed: 21.02.2019].

²⁷⁸ Jansma, 2016, p.5.

civilians the power to spread news online to, not just media outlets. On the other hand, this also means that there is such a vast amount of news out there that it is impossible either to have an overview or to be certain of which stories are based on fact. Federmann continues:

What makes this problematic is that we assess stability and security through information we receive about our environment. The world of 1980 may not have been any safer than our world today, but certainly our awareness of negative events was less in the foreground. The heightened awareness of negative news leads us to perceive a much higher potential for negative turn of events than we did when we received less news volume and lesser news frequency. As with the economic picture, people live with a greater sense of insecurity and fear of what the future holds in store.²⁷⁹

This means that the world has not become less safe, but that the focus of reporting has shifted towards the negative. This, combined with the fact that we receive news around the clock through a number of different channels, leads to a lot of uncertainty and fear about both the present and the future: “I try not to think about SARS, and mostly it never comes up. You can’t spend your life worrying about shit you can’t control. It’s a waste of time.”²⁸⁰ This attitude, although it may seem cynical, might not be a bad way to deal with the constant stream of scary news which is sent into the world on a daily basis.

The way news is reported also means that there is a stronger identification with tragedies, even when they are happening far away, as illustrated in the following thoughts from Billy, referencing Hurricane Katrina:

[T]he air was wet and tragic – and making that pronouncement was factual, not pessimistic or overly poetic or whatever. Even in Toronto, 1,791 kilometres from New Orleans, people wore the after-effects of Hurricane Katrina on their faces like badly matched liquid foundation. Strangers with deep caverns under their eyes had conversations on the subway about whether or not the world was ending. The biblical people looked more purposeful, strutting confidently, clutching their pamphlets.”²⁸¹

This specific tragedy has no direct effect on the characters, but it is still present in their lives and seemingly impossible to escape.

The impact of the terror attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York City on the 11th September 2001 (9/11) is not a focus of Whittall’s novel but it is mentioned. Josh and Amy had a strange experience of the incident. They were just out of high school and had started living together: “We were both revelling in first-time independence and playing adult.”²⁸² They were both ill, so they weren’t keeping up with the news that day: “We didn’t know anything had happened until the evening, when we stumbled downstairs to the living room and turned on the

²⁷⁹ Jansma, 2016, p.5.

²⁸⁰ Whittall, 2014, p.27.

²⁸¹ Whittall, 2014, p.61.

²⁸² Whittall, 2014, p.101.

TV to watch our 6 p.m. *Law & Order* rerun. We were aghast at what we'd missed."²⁸³ As soon as they found out what had happened, they reacted similarly to many people around the world: "We watched the news until we couldn't bear it, then opened the windows and stared outside at the ordinary day. Switched channels and watched the fires, the people walking across the Brooklyn Bridge, the horrified faces. Amy tried in vain to call friends in New York, flipped from news story to news story to try to catch every angle."²⁸⁴ It was an unimaginable event, and with all the horror and fear also came a level of fascination that made it difficult to look away from the news. It was a truly formative event, especially for young people, who until then had never experienced that form of trauma so close to home, as Josh remarks:

But we were both shaken by what we'd seen. It was as though someone had peeled the mask off certainty and our first-world assumptions about safety. Bombs happened halfway around the globe, not nearby. We were used to the abstract faraway injustices and violence. We'd been cushioned our whole lives, had no idea how to act or what to think when faced with this disaster.²⁸⁵

The terror attacks on the Twin Towers are generally seen as a break in history. They are even used as marker to define millennials by the Pew Research Center "Most Millennials were between the ages of 5 and 20 when the 9/11 terrorist attacks shook the nation, and many were old enough to comprehend the historical significance of that moment, while most members of Gen Z have little or no memory of the event."²⁸⁶ This is, of course, focused on millennials in America. The impact of this attack on European millennials is less studied but it can be assumed that it is of less relevance for them due to the geographical distance.

It seems impossible to have a novel set in New York City after 9/11 and not mention the attacks on the World Trade Centre or the construction site now in their place. As *Why We Came to the City* takes place in New York, readers might expect that the topic of 9/11 will not be completely avoided. In fact, the terror attacks are mentioned a few times in passing throughout the text. Jacob is meeting Sara in the city, and he thinks she is pointing "[...] across the street, toward the high fences that marked off the construction site there, and the hundred-story cranes [...]."²⁸⁷ He answers her with the following remark: "Oh, I know. Can you believe it? Eight years later and still just a fucking hole in the ground?"²⁸⁸ By this point the attentive reader can possibly already guess where this conversation is going: "Sara didn't know what he meant, until she realized that she'd been standing there – trying to live in the moment and to be observant

²⁸³ Whittall, 2014, p.101.

²⁸⁴ Ibid.

²⁸⁵ Whittall, 2014, p.102.

²⁸⁶ Dimock, Michael: *Defining generations: Where Millennials end and Generation Z begins*. Pew Research Center, 17th January 2019. URL: <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/01/17/where-millennials-end-and-generation-z-begins/>. [Last viewed: 14.02.2019].

²⁸⁷ Jansma, 2016, p.119.

²⁸⁸ Jansma, 2016, p.120.

and aware – for twenty minutes directly across the street from Ground Zero without having the slightest idea that this was where she was standing.”²⁸⁹ As New Yorkers, they have become so used to the “[...] eternal construction around the World Trade Center site [...]”²⁹⁰ that they don’t even recognise it anymore. It can be seen as a metaphor for their time in the city in general: they are used to so many obstacles that they hardly even notice them and simply continue their daily life. The next chapters will look at the relationship between the characters and the city in detail.

²⁸⁹ Jansma, 2016, p.120.

²⁹⁰ Jansma, 2016, p.337.

5 Millennials and the City

In each of the selected novels, the cities are not simply the backdrop to the story that is told, but a constant presence of utmost importance. It is a prerequisite for the stories: they would not exist if it were not for the cities.

To speak of the city as an additional character in the stories is a cliché, though there is some truth to it. The city is always there. It exists whatever the characters go, it is there when they celebrate and there when they mourn. It allows the protagonists to project their feelings onto something else. Their struggles, their developments and all of their issues are mirrored in the space that surrounds them. As the emerging adults experiment, they see the urban jungle as their playground, as something that is presented to them that they now get to conquer. They see this as their homework, as something at which they have to succeed even though do not know how the winner will be determined or rewarded.

The next few chapters will demonstrate the complex relationship between the protagonists and the city, the way they identify with it, the importance of community within the city and finally the motif of leaving the city. All of these characteristics are central to urban millennial novels.

5.1 City of Opportunities – City of Disappointments

The image of the city in literature is not a single one. Cities have been used for centuries to illustrate various points of view by authors with their own assumptions about what a city in literature can and should be used for. It is impossible for readers to ignore their own image of the real-life city, which is a complicated one to begin with, as Pike notes: “The city always speaks, and with many voices. It has been a powerful image in literature since literature began: Whenever writers have chosen to use it, they have evoked and orchestrated responses with many overtones for both themselves and their readers.”²⁹¹ This also means there is no single history of the city in literature. The representation is so varied that it is impossible to reach a singular conclusion: “The history of the city in literature is as lengthy and rich as the histories of literature and cities themselves.”²⁹² Consequently, this thesis won’t attempt an overview of the topic of the city in literature but will focus instead on the ways the city is used in the selected novels. Here, the city is an object of desire, a stand-in item onto which the protagonists project their hopes and dreams and a mirror for their internal difficulties and struggles.

²⁹¹ Pike, Burton: *The Image of the City in Modern Literature*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981, p.ix.

²⁹² McNamara, Kevin R: *The Cambridge Companion to the City in Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014, p.1.

Most aspects of living in a city can be seen either as positive or negative, depending on the perspective. This ambivalence between opportunity and disappointment might be one of the things that makes it so appealing, as the following quote by the author Adam Sternbergh illustrates:

[T]he very things that make it such an exciting city to visit – the crowds, the ceaseless onslaught of enticing events, the overall energizing electricity of the city – can make it a huge pain in the ass to actually live in. New York is a city where there are always a million exciting things to do at any given moment, and a million other people who are doing them at the exact same moment as you are.²⁹³

This also applies to other large urban centres that offer a variety of cultural activities, living options, public spaces and community events. It is true, though, that the city of New York holds a special position in this conversation. Sternbergh formulates this as follows: “To paraphrase Winston Churchill’s famous observation about democracy: New York City is the worst place in the world to live, except for all the others.”²⁹⁴

The entire opening of *Why We Came to the City* talks about this basic tension of life in the city: opportunity and disappointment. The collective ‘we’ portrays an almost stereotypical image of the city, of young people trying to make something of themselves: “We wanted to dig deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to be overworked and reduced to our last wit.”²⁹⁵ They choose this life and they did it knowing what to expect. They knew that long hours and a low salary were part of the deal: “Still we lived frantically, like hummingbirds; though our HR departments told us that our commitments were valuable and our feedback was appreciated, our raises would be held back another year.”²⁹⁶ It describes a way of living in the moment, without worrying about the future, without even thinking about it. They are filled with a strong sense of optimism as they feel they will earn their rightful place in the city: “We said let our affairs be endless and convoluted; let our bank accounts be overdrawn and our benefits be reduced. Take our Social Security contributions and let it go bankrupt. We’d been bankrupt since we’d left home; we’d secure our own security. Retirement was an afterlife we didn’t believe in [...]”²⁹⁷ They are filled with a hunger for life and they are willing to risk almost everything in order to achieve their dream. What this dream might entail is never mentioned but something comes across quite clearly: they do not regret their decision and they virtually praise these hardships, wearing them as badges of honour: “Why shouldn’t we live with such hurry and waste of life? We were

²⁹³ Sternbergh, Adam: “Me love Brooklyn”, in: Botton, Sari [Ed.]: *Never Can Say Goodbye. Writers on Their Unshakable Love for New York*. New York: Touchstone, 2014, pp.119-124, here pp.121-122.

²⁹⁴ Ibid., p.121.

²⁹⁵ Jansma, 2016, p.3.

²⁹⁶ Jansma, 2016, p.3.

²⁹⁷ Jansma, 2016, p.4.

determined to be starved before we were hungry.”²⁹⁸ The fear of boredom is much stronger than the fear of being overworked, underpaid and maybe even unhappy. As long as they challenge themselves and keep busy, everything is as they feel it should be. They are ready to work but they also feel that they are entitled to their success: “We were determined to be promoted or else to set the building on fire on our way out.”²⁹⁹ They are aware that there are different ways of leading a life and that hectic and stressful city life was not the only option: “Dully, we read blogs of friends of friends of friends who had started an organic farm out on the Wachito River. They were out there pickling and canning and brewing things in the goodness of nature. And soon we’d worry it was time for us to leave the city and go.”³⁰⁰ Even though they know that different ways of living are possible, it does not really seem like an alternative for them. On the contrary, their version of an exciting and fulfilling life seems to be tethered to living in the city. The text continues as follows: “But we’d bide our time, and after some months or years, our farmer friends would give up the farm and begin studying for the LSATs. We felt lousy about this, and wonderful.”³⁰¹ They almost see their time in the city as a trial that separates the inhabitants into two categories: the strong ones, who stay in the city and the weak ones, who leave. By remaining in the city, they fight against the odds, against everything that makes their daily life difficult: “Soon we began to hate the forever cramping of our lives. Sleeping on top of strangers and sipping coffee with people we knew we *knew* but couldn’t remember where from. Living out of boxes we had no space to unpack.”³⁰² Even though they know, deep down at least, that this way of living is temporary, the thought of leaving the city, of going back home, alarms them: “Our parents were our guarantors in name only; they called us from their jobs in distant colorless suburban office parks and told us we could come home anytime, and this terrified us always.”³⁰³ Going home would feel like giving up to them, like not being up to the challenge and leaving the game early. They would be quitters. It is never said what exactly they are trying to achieve, but it is implied that it is worth all these difficult circumstances. Sometimes, they know they were doing things the right way:

But then came those nights, creeping up on us while we worked busily in dark offices [...]. We’d call each other to report: a good thing happened, a compliment had been paid, a favor had been appreciated, an inch of ground had been gained. Those nights, we remembered why we came to the city. Because if we were really living, then we wanted to hear the cracking in our throats and feel the trembling in our extremities.³⁰⁴

²⁹⁸ Jansma, 2016, p.4.

²⁹⁹ Jansma, 2016, p.5.

³⁰⁰ Jansma, 2016, p.5.

³⁰¹ Jansma, 2016, p.5.

³⁰² Jansma, 2016, p.5.

³⁰³ Jansma, 2016, p.6.

³⁰⁴ Jansma, 2016, p.6.

This shows that the thrill of living in the city means exactly that. It should be thrilling, exciting and difficult, just like an adventure. In the final part of the novel, reflecting on the city, it is pointed out that cities can offer a variety of experiences and that they can be the location of both negative and positive events: “There is the city where we are falling in love, and the city where we have lost all hope, and the city that never lets us down. There is the city that comes at us from all sides and knocks us down into puddles of something [...]”³⁰⁵ It can sometimes be easy to forget that the city itself is an unpredictable place filled with contradictions and that it can symbolise many different things.

5.1.1 Anonymity or Loneliness?

One of the most obvious examples of the different ways of looking at life in the city is the comparison between anonymity and loneliness. Whereas some people enjoy the possibilities of being an anonymous person in a big city and therefore living a life without constant judgment, others might experience it as a downside of city life. They find themselves living in an environment where it is easy and normal to be alone and, as a consequence, also feel lonely.

In 2016 Olivia Laing wrote a book called *The Lonely City* in which she discusses a number of artists and the correlation between the two themes – the city and loneliness – in their work and lives. It is an autobiographical account of living in not just any city, but in *the* city: New York. She writes not only about her personal experiences but also provides detailed research about artists such as Edward Hopper and Andy Warhol, focusing on the connection between urbanity and the sense of being alone. She opens her book as follows:

Imagine standing by a window at night, on the sixth or seventeenth or forty-third floor of a building. The city reveals itself as a set of cells, a hundred thousand windows, some darkened and some flooded with green or white or golden light. Inside, strangers swim to and fro, attending to the business of their private hours. You can see them, but you can’t reach them, and so this commonplace urban phenomenon, available in any city of the world on any night, conveys to even the most social a tremor of loneliness, its uneasy combination of separation and exposure.³⁰⁶

The theme of loneliness in literature is not a new one. On the contrary, there is a longstanding interest in that theme in its various forms. The research on the subject of loneliness in academia is complex as, even before considering everything it stands for, the definition of the word itself is not clear-cut. The term ‘loneliness’ is difficult to grasp, “[...] weil der Begriff einen menschlichen Gefühlszustand beschreibt und sich jede wissenschaftliche Annäherung an einen

³⁰⁵ Jansma, 2016, p.418.

³⁰⁶ Laing, Olivia: *The Lonely City. Adventures in the Art of Being Alone*. Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2016, p.3.

Gefühlszustand kompliziert gestaltet.”³⁰⁷ Maybe that fact, that it is always a subjective experience, contributes to loneliness being such an interesting and popular field of study. Academia knows that this is one of the difficulties in this area: “Auf diese Schwierigkeit weisen alle einschlägigen wissenschaftlichen Untersuchungen zum Einsamkeitskonstrukt hin. Gefühle können nicht objektiv festgemacht werden, sie bleiben immer subjektiv und werden damit auch immer unterschiedlich wahrgenommen.”³⁰⁸ Additionally, it is crucial to view the term ‘loneliness’ within its time. This means that it has been understood to mean different things at different times in history. The word ‘loneliness’ has been around for a very long time, and it has been found that “[...] Einsamkeit als Phänomen von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart zu jeder Zeit einen zentralen Platz in der Wissenschaft und in der Kunst innehat.”³⁰⁹ This thesis will not try to undertake an in-depth analysis of the subject of loneliness and isolation in cities in literature, but it seems necessary to point out that it is something present in all of the chosen novels and that it would be a fascinating extension of study.

The topic of anonymity is generally present when talking about city life. In *Holding Still for as Long as Possible*, Maria, Billy’s ex-girlfriend, moved closer to the city centre after they broke up: “She craved anonymity and an under-seven-minute subway ride to work.”³¹⁰ The fact that you can walk down the street without being recognised, as one among many in the crowd, is usually seen as a positive characteristic of life in the city. It also allows people to feel as though they can simply be without having to perform for anyone who might be watching. The following scene in *The Bricks that Built the Houses* thematises just that: “She looks tired and sad in the way people look when they don’t know that anyone is watching. The anonymity of a city street makes it a safe place to let your guard down.”³¹¹ This safety to ‘let your guard down’ becomes something scarce in the demanding lives of the protagonists and is therefore something to be treasured.

5.1.2 Conquering the City

In *The Bricks that Built the Houses*, the city is described in a truly visceral sense. It is gritty and dark and generally presented as a hostile environment: “The rain rushes through the gutters and the traffic clogs the roads. Sharp financial buildings rise like fangs in the city’s screaming mouth. Harry’s vision is blinkered by office blocks and advertising hoardings and high-rise

³⁰⁷ Gösweiner, Friederike: *Einsamkeit in der jungen deutschsprachigen Literatur der Gegenwart*. Innsbruck [et al.]: Studienverlag, 2010, p.33.

³⁰⁸ Ibid., p.33.

³⁰⁹ Ibid., p.33.

³¹⁰ Whittall, 2014, p.61.

³¹¹ Tempest, 2016, pp.256-257.

builds that make her keep her eyes low [...].”³¹² In spite of this, Harry moves through the streets with confidence. She is not filled with disgust or negative emotions. Instead, she accepts her surroundings for what they are. She also believes that she is different and that she will be able to use the city for its maximal potential, and not the other way around:

Her feet land lightly as she sways like a boxer down the road. [...] The city is not going to get her like it got the others. She knows it. She nods at the thought. Ducking and weaving, she passes through the teeming crowds. She runs across the road, through the traffic, the rain falls against her face, music blares from bars and people shout to be heard as they walk side by side. She steps over puked-up kebab meat and dropped chips and bops on, invisible.³¹³

Harry sees the city as her territory, her place to make her own, and the place where she can succeed against all odds, even if she doesn’t yet know what success would be or what her goals should be. She is filled with faith for the future and belief in herself. Didion, the American journalist and author, also touches upon this theme in her essay about leaving New York, talking about the feeling of endless possibility that came with living in the city: “Nothing was irrevocable; everything was within reach. Just around every corner lay something curious and interesting, something I had never before seen or done or known about.”³¹⁴ The city represents the life she has yet to experience. It is filled with possibilities and options she couldn’t even imagine. This mirrors any emerging adult’s feeling about the future in general. Life seems open and full of promise, and the city seems like the best place to experiment with these unknown options and to find the right path. Didion also writes about having the ability to make mistakes without suffering terrible consequences because of it: “I could make promises to myself and to other people and there would be all the time in the world to keep them. I could stay up all night and make mistakes, and none of it would count.”³¹⁵ She describes feeling safe while experimenting and not having to immediately justify the choices she makes – a perfect description of emerging adulthood.

At the very beginning of *Why We Came to the City*, Irene is introduced to us as follows:

Irene Richmond ran down the narrow foyer, helping guests get out of their coats, which were dusted with flakes of snow that had been coming down heavily all day and still drifted lightly onto the hotel balcony. Coats that cost more than she earned in a month and that were works of art themselves. [...] Irene got a thrill from just holding them, but it was always short lived. By the time the guests had finished warning her not to crease the collars or wrinkle the hems, there was someone else making an even more fashionable entrance.³¹⁶

This metaphor can be used as a way of considering life in the city. It can be immensely fascinating and compelling, but still lose its magic as soon as something new comes along.

³¹² Tempest, 2016, p.20.

³¹³ Tempest, 2016, p.28.

³¹⁴ Didion, Joan: “Goodbye to All That”, in: *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*. London: 4th Estate, 2017, pp.229-230.

³¹⁵ Ibid., p.230.

³¹⁶ Jansma, 2016, p.7.

There are a large number of people in a small place and a lot of them want the same things. Not everyone can get what they want and, more importantly, they can't always keep it. This struggle of fighting for what you believe you deserve can be seen as one of the major themes of this novel.

This party at the beginning of the novel is attended by all the main characters and it is where Sara, a journalist, gets engaged to her long-term boyfriend George, who is an astronomer. This party is a yearly event: "The K Gallery's annual holiday party at the Waldorf Astoria was always an impressive affair."³¹⁷ It shows both the financial and social standing the characters have, as this is an elite event that they feel lucky to attend: "[N]ot that living in the city wasn't sometimes glamorous, but never anything compared to this. There were seventy-eight people on the exclusive guest list [...]. Honest-to-God movie stars attended. This was that other New York: always around them but never visible. For this one night it belonged to them too."³¹⁸ They may be living in New York, but there are two versions of the city (there are numerous versions of a city, but for the purpose of this analysis it is best to focus on just two): one for the rich and famous, where everyone knows everyone and they hop from one private party to the next, and then there's the one our characters feel part of. They aren't extreme opposites, as the protagonists aren't struggling to find a job or to make rent, but they haven't achieved what they wanted to yet. They want to make names for themselves and to carve out a space just for them in the city. Not having a lot of money seems almost a prerequisite of that kind of lifestyle. The characters constantly moan about how expensive living in the city is, and at the same time use their money for superficial and expendable things. Sara is the only member of the group who actually has a trust fund and could technically afford to live very differently, but she doesn't: "Sara found it much easier to simply pretend the money wasn't real and to live paycheck to paycheck like everyone else. Her mother kept telling her to just get a broker, hire a wedding planner, get a cleaning service, go to the tailor. But Sara refused to pay others to do what she could manage herself."³¹⁹ Sara wants to stay part of the group. She doesn't want to be seen as different, as someone who can't understand the difficulties her friends face: "And meanwhile she always looked forward to the days ahead of them, when everyone's hard work would pay off, and George would have tenure somewhere, and Jacob would get a Fulbright, and Irene would sell her art for thousands, and they could all finally travel together, with all their future children tagging along behind them."³²⁰ Sara lives under the impression that the situation her

³¹⁷ Jansma, 2016, p.8.

³¹⁸ Jansma, 2016, p.8.

³¹⁹ Jansma, 2016, p.106.

³²⁰ Jansma, 2016, p.106.

friends are in is temporary. She believes that all the hard work they are putting in will pay off and someday they won't have to worry about money. They might even be 'rich' and the city will deliver its promises.

Another representation of the tension of city life can be studied within the character of Jacob. He is a writer, a poet. He struggles with his art, but the city provides him both with inspiration and motivation: "Though the 1 train was quiet in an early-afternoon sort of way, Jacob transferred to the express 2 train at 96th Street, hoping to move even more swiftly to Fourteenth Street and the coffee shop that he required to sit in and write his poem."³²¹ He has a specific place that he not only likes to work in, he feels as though he can only work there: "It was the only place he could breathe easily enough to tease it out. The challenge, as always, was to hold this impish idea in his threadbare net until he could get there."³²² The city can also take away what it provides. It gives him a space in which he can focus on his poetry and actually write but it is also filled with many possibilities of disruption. This balance of inspiration and distraction can make life in a metropolis exciting and fulfilling but it may also be one of the difficulties faced by the creative class.

In *Holding Still for as Long as Possible*, Billy describes herself as follows: "I looked as if Toronto had beaten me up and neglected to feed me."³²³ This builds on the image of a city as a tough and difficult place to live, a place where you have to fight in order to earn your place and where it is very easy to be rejected and find yourself forced to leave. While this might be the case, the characters still see themselves as part of the city, which will be explored in the next chapter.

5.2 Identification with the City

The protagonists in *Why We Came to the City* don't just live in the city, they see themselves as part of it. At the party at the beginning of the novel, they find themselves outside on the rooftop looking at the view: "The sky above was pink-gray and starless, as it always was in the city. They gazed across Lexington at the office windows. Far below were taxi horns and car alarms and the rumble of the M102, going south from Harlem to the East Village."³²⁴ Without further comment, these descriptions would not necessarily indicate a particularly strong identification with the city. However, this is how it continues: "These were the noises of their great,

³²¹ Jansma, 2016, p.50.

³²² Jansma, 2016, p.50.

³²³ Whittall, 2014, p.36.

³²⁴ Jansma, 2016, p.33.

unsleeping city. The familiar creaks and groans of their home.”³²⁵ Here, there is a strong sense of identification with the city. They do not see it as just any city, but as *their* city. They feel possessive, almost as though the city belongs to them. In a later scene, Jacob sees “[...] his city, lit up and unreal, as ever.”³²⁶ They find it difficult to separate their own identities from that of the city. This can also be seen as a factor contributing to the fact that they don’t seem to be able to leave the city, no matter how tough it gets. They are willing to put up with a number of difficulties just to be able to stay in their home, their city.

The same is true for Harry in *The Bricks that Built the Houses*. She is presented to the reader while she is moving through the city: “She looks sharp. She moves in confident strides. Feet fast, she takes long steps. She is all London: cocksure, alert to danger, charming, and it flows through her.”³²⁷ Harry is not just an inhabitant of the city but an integral part of it. She lives and breathes London, her city. The characters’ emotions change the way that they respond to their surroundings too. After Becky starts seeing Pete regularly, they not only feel the change in their relationship but also in the way they see their environment: “The city opened up to them. Everything was theirs.”³²⁸ The otherwise harsh side of the metropolis vanishes and, suddenly, they belong everywhere. This positive feeling can, of course, be taken away as quickly as it appears.

Towards the end of *Why We Came to the City*, Jacob finds himself in an unpleasant situation. He finds out that his boyfriend, Oliver, has also been seeing someone else. He feels unhappy and depressed and he realises that he has been feeling like this for a while. The betrayal amplifies his feelings of insecurity about the state of his life: “As the skyscrapers emerged on the horizon, and the city noises grew in his ears, and the world outside the car filled up with people, rushing around with such purpose, Jacob felt like no part of it at all.”³²⁹ He feels separated from the city, a location to which he used to feel a strong connection. His situation makes him feel like a stranger in his own city, even while being surrounded by close friends: “He let the night happen to him, moving through it all like a ghost.”³³⁰ Jacob no longer feels like a part of the city and he also feels detached from his friends. They try to cheer him up, telling him that he doesn’t need Oliver and that things will improve. This does not help him: “He wasn’t feeling like this because of Oliver. This was how he’d felt all along [...]. He was

³²⁵ Jansma, 2016, p.33.

³²⁶ Jansma, 2016, p.152.

³²⁷ Tempest, 2016, p.27.

³²⁸ Tempest, 2016, p.174.

³²⁹ Jansma, 2016, p.316.

³³⁰ Jansma, 2016, p.316.

absolutely lost.”³³¹ He leaves his friends and heads to the subway. In that passage there are a number of descriptions which depict Jacob as a native of the city, from feeling the breeze on the platform, “the first signal to every real New Yorker that a train was coming”³³², to him knowing “where to stand to have the doors open right in front of him.”³³³ Even when he no longer feels a part of his city, the city remains his. He can’t undo the connection he has and the knowledge that comes with it. Instead he moves on autopilot in a way that is very familiar to him. He also does something else that is often considered to make you a real New Yorker: he cries in public:³³⁴ “And then, with no one there to see, Jacob wept for the first time since Irene had died. And he kept weeping, even after he transferred to a train at 72nd Street. Nobody minded much. It wasn’t so odd, in the city, to see a grown man crying in the middle of a whole lot of people.”³³⁵ He had kept his feelings about the death of his close friend bottled up inside but the fact that his boyfriend betrayed him was too much for Jacob and he is no longer able to bury these emotions. In the anonymity of a subway car – be it empty or filled with people – he is finally able to confront his sadness. After this somewhat freeing subway journey, he walks through the streets of his familiar city and looks at his surroundings in a different way: “Everyone seemed younger than they had been a year ago; everything felt bigger. It was always the same city, only more so, and this was why he’d had to subtract himself from it.”³³⁶ For him, his connection to the city correlates with his love for Irene. Their relationship was forced to change when she became ill and died, but the city remains the same. This is difficult for him to comprehend: “He couldn’t stand to see it not being less so: the bums and the bridges and the bodegas and the bottles that overflowed the trash cans on the corner. She wasn’t there, and it seemed impossible that all this could still be going on.”³³⁷ He sees it as an insult, both to Irene’s memory and their relationship, that life in the city simply continues without any changes visible to the public. His loss is so strong that it seems as though there should be a physical manifestation of it. Where better than in the familiar streets of New York, a place he considers home?

³³¹ Jansma, 2016, p.316.

³³² Jansma, 2016, p.317.

³³³ Jansma, 2016, p.317.

³³⁴ This is also thematised in an episode of the popular sitcom *How I Met Your Mother* (season six, episode four: “Subway Wars”). In it, the group discusses what makes a ‘true New Yorker’. Robin, one of the protagonists who is originally from Canada, gets teased by the others, who each have their own definitions of what it takes to call yourself a New Yorker: Ted believes it is until you have stolen a cab from someone who needs it more than you, Marshall, until you have killed a cockroach with your bare hands and Lily believes that you are considered a true New Yorker after you have cried in public and didn’t care what everyone else thought.

³³⁵ Jansma, 2016, p.317.

³³⁶ Jansma, 2016, p.317.

³³⁷ Jansma, 2016, p.317.

Compared to the other two novels discussed in this thesis, the characters' identification with the city is less strong in *Holding Still for as Long as Possible*. Toronto is mentioned in the text quite a few times but never in the form of personal identification. The city is used as a backdrop and is sometimes given specific, mostly negative, characteristics such as loneliness or fear. At the beginning of the novel, Josh is in an ambulance following an emergency call: "The streets were mostly empty. Everyone walking alone looked exaggeratedly lonely."³³⁸ Here, the emptiness of the streets reflects Josh's assumption of everyone's loneliness. It is as if Josh knows that the scene could be seen and interpreted as being more dramatic than it actually is. This also happens in another scene when Billy is having a panic attack and is recounting all the thoughts in her mind: "What is wrong with me? This is it. This is a sign. That lady is a sign. My hands are shaking. I'm having a stroke. Who has a stroke at twenty-four? People who live in toxic cities. Maybe I should move home."³³⁹ The fact that Billy has these thoughts while having a panic attack does not mean that they aren't describing a real fear. It does, however, manifest a distorted impression of reality. Billy never talks about not wanting to be in the city or not feeling safe there, be it physically or psychologically. She does mention, in a previous scene, that she doesn't move too far away from her home anymore. Her reason for this is imagined safety: "If I was going to collapse, I'd want to do it near my house, so people would recognize me and tell the ambulance crew or police or whatever that if they just brought me back to my doorstep, I'd be fine."³⁴⁰ Her fear isn't to do with the city itself but with everything that is outside of her home and this wouldn't be any different if her home were in the countryside. Toronto is not represented as a big and evil city that scares young women and stops them from leaving their houses. On the contrary, the focus seems to lie on the fact that Billy suffers from a mental illness, which is underlined many times throughout the text by scenes like the ones just described and by her therapist, who says the following: "'Billy, I think you might [be] depressed. It is common for people with anxiety disorder to also develop depressive symptoms.' 'No, I don't think so. I'm just tired of being anxious.'"³⁴¹ Billy's symptoms are never dismissed but are always recognised as an illness, at least by everyone except Billy herself.

The image of the city being a dangerous place is not a very prominent one in this novel. It does, however, come up in connection to the terror attacks on New York City. Josh speaks to his Grandmother, who lives in a small city about 100km south of Toronto: "When I called my

³³⁸ Whittall, 2014, p.18.

³³⁹ Whittall, 2014, p.96.

³⁴⁰ Whittall, 2014, p.61.

³⁴¹ Whittall, 2014, p.143.

grandmother in Guelph she said, 'If it gets bad in the city, come here. Bring all your friends.' The sound of fear in her voice shook my calm."³⁴² His grandmother believes that he would be safer if he left the city because the chances of getting hurt are smaller in a small town than in a metropolis. Whether or not that is true is debatable, but the importance of community is clear. Be it in the countryside or in the city, having friends or family close by has a big impact on quality of life. The next chapter focuses on the depiction of community and the city in the selected novels.

5.3 Community and the City

A constant worry in *The Bricks that Built the Houses* is the changing of the city and the effect this will have on certain groups in society. The following quote can be taken as an example:

But Peckham's changed. It's unrecognisable now. She'd heard the rumours start five, six years before that Peckham was becoming desirable, trendy. But she didn't believe it. She thought south London would hold its own for ever. But her home town is dying, it's half-dead already. All that she knows to be true is suddenly false. Communities flattened to make room for commuters.³⁴³

Often, the characters do not feel welcome in their own districts and wonder whether they are pushed away intentionally or whether it is a natural process of city development. The separation of people according to their social standing can be seen everywhere, as is observed after a dance performance: "Even here in the bar, the dancers group themselves according to status. The leads are in the middle, sitting with the choreographer and the director, making a literal inner circle; the lesser dancers ripple out around them. Becky, Pete, Patrice and Marina, not even in the company, take a table tucked away in the corner, by the toilets."³⁴⁴ The protagonists often feel mistreated and think that other people believe they are worth more and therefore get to look down on them. When Harry and Becky meet, this is one of their main topics of conversation. Harry opens up and shares her dream with Becky: "'It'll be a restaurant and café and a bar, so that it pays for itself. But also it will be, like, a community centre. There'll be workshop space. You know, it'll be a place for people to go. To relax and hang out and learn things.'"³⁴⁵ Harry articulates the need for a space for people to come together, to have somewhere where people who otherwise wouldn't necessarily have a place to go can connect with others in similar situations. She believes that she is excluded from specific places and experiences because of her social background. She expresses herself as follows: "I'm sick of the way that if you're

³⁴² Whittall, 2014, p.101.

³⁴³ Tempest, 2016, p.122.

³⁴⁴ Tempest, 2016, p.211.

³⁴⁵ Tempest, 2016, p.43.

from where we're from, you're not supposed to want nice atmosphere and good people and conversation. As if all we want is shit beer and silence, beans and chips and fucking scratch cards."³⁴⁶ Harry feels that the city is only catering to the needs of certain people and that she is not included in them. She refuses to believe that this is happening by accident. The bar where they find themselves in that moment serves as the perfect example of Harry's theory:

The attractive bar staff wishing they weren't there, everything dark and red and antique, but no soul in any of it. All of it just a clever idea dreamed up by some savvy bunch of business people, seeing a trend and throwing their money at it. Everything, from the drinks they serve to the colour on the toilet walls, all cleverly done to keep certain people out and get certain people in.³⁴⁷

This is just one of the reasons why she dreams about opening up her own place, something that could be different, an inclusive establishment that doesn't look for a specific kind of customer. Harry continues explaining: "[...] I want to open up a place where couples would come, and families, and groups of mates, all different kinds of people. [...] A lovely place that makes people feel welcome. A space for people to meet. We're lonely. We're so lonely in this city. We need places to go, I think."³⁴⁸

The importance of having somewhere to go is also a prominent topic in *Holding Still for as Long as Possible*. Josh and Amy's relationship had its beginnings in friendship. Josh came to the city to stay with a friend, Roxy when having surgery on his chest and that is how they met. They used to joke about their sexualities and gender when they were younger and that seems strange to them now: "It seems funny now, that we used to care about those things, be hung up on the politics and the way we were seen. But I suppose it's natural to question, given the hostility of the entire universe outside our safe bubble of progressive folks."³⁴⁹ In the friendships they have now, they have created their own safe space, a community where they can be their true selves without having to worry about judgement or unfair consequences. Having such a group is necessary for survival, especially in a large city where it can be easy to feel lost in the masses. It is also not a given, that such a group even exists. It takes people with a big heart and a lot of enthusiasm to work to bring other people together. Roxy is such a person, as Billy reflects: "She was pretty much how I made all my friends in Toronto. She made an effort to make plans with friends, and to introduce them to others, like a community hub. There – Roxy was a community hub. She was rarely alone. She was always up to somethings

³⁴⁶ Tempest, 2016, p.45.

³⁴⁷ Tempest, 2016, pp.46-47

³⁴⁸ Tempest, 2016, p.45.

³⁴⁹ Whittall, 2014, p.47.

interesting.”³⁵⁰ Without individuals like her, it can be very difficult to find your people in a big city.

Even once you have found your circle, life in the city can still be tough. The city keeps changing, which can make it difficult for certain people to maintain their lifestyle, as Harry realises in *The Bricks that Built the Houses*: “It makes Harry sick to her stomach. The way London’s changing. And not just this side of the river, either. It’s changing down south. She hardly recognises it these days. It’s heartbreaking.”³⁵¹ She therefore sees that the only option is for them to create their own spaces. She plans on saving the money she makes at the moment and using it to build something that no one can take away from her: “They weren’t gonna shit this money away on new clothes and gold chains. They were going to have their own place: a bar, a restaurant, a club of their own. Something that was theirs where no one could bully them and where anyone who came in would be safe.”³⁵²

Whereas building a community is a high priority in both Tempest’s and Whittall’s novels, *Why We Came To The City* focuses less on community in general and more on the importance of good, close, personal friends. This is exemplified in the way they all care for Irene when she is sick. The interest in whether there is a place for their kind in the city is marginal. It only gets discussed in connection to death. Irene thinks about what happens after her death, and whether they still bury people: “Jacob thought about it. ‘I think you have to have bought a plot somewhere. I don’t know if you can just do it last minute. There must not be a lot of space left in the city.’”³⁵³ The irony of this statement – that there doesn’t even seem to be enough space for someone to die in the city – is lost on the characters. They simply start looking for alternatives.

In the second half of the novel, after Irene has died, Sara and George have moved to Boston, William is no longer part of their group and Jacob gets lonely. He spends his time working and staying at his boyfriend’s place and realises that he “[...] hadn’t even been to his apartment under the church since December, nor to the city at all. He didn’t know anybody there anymore.”³⁵⁴ This makes it clear that the connections the characters have with others within the setting are as important as the place itself. This means that, to Jacob, the exciting city of New York is not as appealing now that his friends are no longer there. Cities can lose their appeal in a number of ways, some of which will be shown in the next chapter.

³⁵⁰ Whittall, 2014, p.64.

³⁵¹ Tempest, 2016, p.47.

³⁵² Tempest, 2016, pp.194-195.

³⁵³ Jansma, 2016, p.233.

³⁵⁴ Jansma, 2016, p.254

5.4 Leaving the City

As the previous chapters explored, living in the city is full of potential but also comes with disadvantages. At some point the bad may outweigh the good, as the author Roxane Gay reflects about her time in New York: “There were teaching jobs and other opportunities in New York. I had, just before the visit, turned down an editorial position at a magazine because I couldn’t fathom living in the city on the offered salary. In my thirties, I’ve found that I am not as interested in struggling or suffering as I once was, at least not from one day to the next.”³⁵⁵ This feeling of ‘having had enough’ is an omnipresent motive in all of the selected novels which culminates in the characters leaving the city. This talk about leaving the city is evident in all the novels.

The topic of people, especially artists and writers, leaving the city of New York while still loving the city and everything it represents is widely popular. Joan Didion’s essay, “Goodbye to All That”, is often cited as the prototype for this kind of exploration. In it, she talks about her love for the city and why she had to leave it behind. She opens her essay as follows:

It is easy to see the beginnings of things, and harder to see the ends. I can remember now, with a clarity that makes the nerves in the back of my neck constrict, when New York began for me, but I cannot lay my finger upon the moment it ended, can never cut through the ambiguities and second starts and broken resolves to the exact place on the page where the heroine is no longer as optimistic as she once was.³⁵⁶

This resembles the feelings of the protagonists in *Why We Came To The City*. The change in their feelings didn’t happen from one day to the next, but gradually, at first to indifference and then even aversion. It developed over time, without there being one single cause: “It is a different city than the one we knew. It changed while we weren’t looking, and while we were. We will never really understand how it changed because of us. Our words and motions moved its air and entered its vines.”³⁵⁷ The symbiotic effect of life in the city changed them but they also left an impression on it and the city is a different place because of their presence in it. Additionally, no one experiences a place in the same way. The city will always have different meanings for different people, filled with different memories and attached to different feelings: “Still, my city is not your city, and neither of ours is the same as the city that belongs to the rest of them. To all the people elsewhere, remembering, or expecting it. There is a city that none of us knows at all.”³⁵⁸ Even after living in a city like New York, or indeed London or Toronto,

³⁵⁵ Gay, Roxane: “Strange Lands”, in: Botton, Sari [Ed.]: *Goodbye to All That. Writers on Loving and Leaving New York*. Berkeley: Seal Press, 2013, pp12-18, here p.17.

³⁵⁶ Didion, Joan: “Goodbye to All That”, in: *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*. London: 4th Estate, 2017, p. 225-238, here p. 225.

³⁵⁷ Jansma, 2016, p.417.

³⁵⁸ Jansma, 2016, pp.417-418.

there will always be an unknown experience left, whether of an actual physical place that has not been explored yet or of a personal state of mind that has not happened there.

The novel ends with the following sentence: “There is a city we can never go back to, and a city we have never left and a city that was never built, and even one city that we all, each of us, believe in, that never fully leaves us.”³⁵⁹

Joan Didion’s essay “Goodbye to All That” talks about her time in New York, her experience getting to know the city, finding her place in it and eventually leaving it behind. She makes it clear that these experiences are not bound to this specific city and that this is simply her story: “Of course it might have been some other city, had circumstances been different and the time been different and had I been different, might have been Paris or Chicago or even San Francisco, but because I am talking about myself I am talking here about New York.”³⁶⁰ Her general experiences could easily be transferred to any other city, although they may be of greater relevance to New York: “It is often said that New York is a city for the very rich and the very poor. It is less often said that New York is also, at least for those of us who came there from somewhere else, a city for only the very young.”³⁶¹

The fluidity of the inhabitants is just one of the characteristics of big cities. A lot of people move through them without seeing it as a permanent location, so it can sometimes be difficult to see their lives there as stable and tangible. All of the protagonists in the novels discussed think about life outside of the city, wonder about a routine away from the hustle and bustle in a metropolis and what it would be like to have neighbours they actually know. Didion explained it as follows: “[I]t never occurred to me that I was living a real life there. In my imagination I was always there for just another few months, just until Christmas or Easter or the first warm day in May.”³⁶² She also makes a distinction between the way people from different parts of the country view New York. For those from the East it is “[...] just a city, albeit *the* city [...]”³⁶³ while for those from the West and South “[...] New York was no mere city. It was instead an infinitely romantic notion, the mysterious nexus of all love and money and power, the shining and perishable dream itself.”³⁶⁴ This feeling that New York is the most desirable location has been strongly present for a long time. New York is still seen as the navel of the world and continues to be romanticised in all forms. The global capital draws dreamers from all over the country and the world who will try to make it in the city and succeed in whatever field they

³⁵⁹ Jansma, 2016, p.418.

³⁶⁰ Didion, Joan: “Goodbye to All That”, 2017, p.226.

³⁶¹ Ibid., p.227.

³⁶² Ibid., p.230.

³⁶³ Ibid., p.231.

³⁶⁴ Ibid., p.231.

have chosen for themselves. It is necessary to point out the vastness of this theme in literature, which won't be covered in this thesis. The topic of people coming to New York, or in fact any big city, and trying to build their life there is not the focus on this analysis. These two points alone would deliver enough material for their own research paper.

Didion shows in her essay that, during her life in the city, she learned a lot about herself and about how she wants to lead her life: "That was the year, my twenty-eighth, when I was discovering that not all of the promises would be kept, that some things are in fact irrevocable and that it had counted after all, every evasion and every procrastination, every mistake, every word, all of it."³⁶⁵ This shows that she realised that life had finally caught up with her and she started to take responsibility for her actions. She grew up and understood that living the way she did was no longer sustainable. She moved through emerging adulthood and entered adulthood, slowly but surely. In her case, growing up correlated with her feeling the need to leave the city and live somewhere else, which in itself remains a strong image. It represents the idea of leaving everything behind and starting fresh somewhere new where nobody knows you and your past mistakes.

The Bricks that Built the Houses has a prologue called "Leaving" that starts as follows: "It gets into your bones. You don't even realise it, until you're driving through it, watching all the things you've always known and leaving them behind. They're driving past the streets, the shops, the corners where they made themselves. Every ghost is out there, staring. Bad skin and sunken eyes, grinning madly at them from the past."³⁶⁶ It takes leaving to realise what they had, both the good and the bad, or rather the things they have come to love even though they never lived up to their expectations. Even if leaving seems like the logical next step, there is always a lot that gets left behind:

But here they are, leaving the stress and shit food and endless misunderstandings. Leaving. The jobcentre, the classroom, the pub, the gym, the car park, the flat, the filth, the TV, the constant swiping of newsfeeds, the Hoover, the toothbrush, the laptop bag, the expensive hair product that makes you feel better inside, the queue for the cash machine, the cinema, the bowling alley, the phone shop, the guilt, the absolute nothingness that never stops chasing, the pain of seeing a person grow into a shadow.³⁶⁷

This list shows the mundane objects (the laptop bag), the places (the cinema) and the more serious matters (the guilt) that can be left behind. It can also be described as the number of things they are no longer willing to accept, the different negative aspects of city life that may have seemed exciting or a necessary part of the experience of becoming an adult but have

³⁶⁵ Ibid., p.233.

³⁶⁶ Tempest, 2016, p.3.

³⁶⁷ Tempest, 2016, p.4.

completely lost their charm. Jansma's interlude in *Why We Left The City* explores all of these themes: "We left the city for good reasons, or at least they seemed good at the time. We had more lives to live and couldn't spare another hour waiting for the G train. We couldn't keep paying more and more for the same square inches. We couldn't keep asking the landlord to fix the same refrigerator. We couldn't move into a twelfth apartment."³⁶⁸ They have grown tired of fighting – and for what? Paradoxically, the city that was once the place of opportunities and potential now holds them back. Suddenly, they don't see opportunities but competition and obstacles. The city is depicted as a place that depletes you of all your energy. A place where they work hard constantly but still can't afford a reasonable apartment. It is the principle of maximum input but minimal rewards, something that can't be withstood for an extended period of time. And so, they leave the city: "We left over bridges and through tunnels, still hoping for our security deposits. [...] Anywhere else we could own property. Anywhere else we could own cars! Anywhere else we might be anyone else, or maybe our long lost selves were only a U-Haul ride away. We lay up at night, wondering, *What sorts of people would we be if we were no longer nervous and frayed?*"³⁶⁹ They also believe that they themselves would change if they changed their surroundings, that they would have the potential to be what they wanted to be as long as they were somewhere else: "Anywhere else, it seemed, it would be more. Other cities, other towns promised us benefits, made better offers. We could always come back, couldn't we? We'd had everything we wanted here, once. Hadn't we been told that now we'd made it here, we could make it anywhere? Only none of us could say, exactly, what it was we'd made."³⁷⁰ They know what to expect from the city, they are prepared for the natural developments and they don't surprise them anymore: "In Midtown there was a place where a burger cost twenty-nine dollars. [...] The L train wouldn't be running for the next nine weekends. The price of a MetroCard was going up again. We hardly noticed, and that scared us more than anything."³⁷¹ They are afraid of becoming complacent, of no longer questioning certain changes but simply adapting to the new situation and accepting that there was nothing to do about it anyway. There is also the fear of routine, of repeating the same things over and over again without even thinking about it anymore: "It was remarkable how easily and insensibly we'd fallen into routines, beating the same track from apartment door to office elevator, stopping midway only for the same *pain au chocolat* and coffee at the same café with an ever-rotating staff."³⁷² It is no longer a place of excitement. They are almost bored by it now,

³⁶⁸ Jansma, 2016, p.243.

³⁶⁹ Jansma, 2016, p.243.

³⁷⁰ Jansma, 2016, p.244.

³⁷¹ Jansma, 2016, p.244.

³⁷² Jansma, 2016, p.244.

paralysed by the constant exposure to it. They have become so used to the city that they have become immune to it: “The bars were the same, the drinks were the same, even the new ones (especially the new ones), and afterward we took cabs home and didn’t even look out the window.”³⁷³ There are also feelings of nostalgia mixed with these feelings of discouragement and the need for a change: “There were parts of the city we hadn’t seen in years. They reminded us of people who had left us, and we excised them from our maps before they could spread. *It’s not the same*, we said, *it’s just not the same. It’s not like it was, before.* We never said before what, but it was understood.”³⁷⁴

Leaving the city does not have to be permanent. Sometimes, simply leaving the busyness behind for a day or an afternoon helps to balance everything out. In *The Bricks that Built the Houses*, Harry, Leon and Becky drive to the seaside one afternoon: “‘Seaside!’ She opens her window to feel the cold city wind. Smiling into it as it blows her hair back. She watches the road fall away beneath the car as they turn onto the motorway. [...] ‘This is nice,’ she says to Leon. ‘Yeah,’ he says. ‘The open road, eh?’ He drums his hands on the wheel. ‘Can’t beat it.’”³⁷⁵ In *Why We Came to the City*, the group of friends take a short trip to the beach, where a lot of things don’t go as planned. However, the act of leaving the city is seen as positive by all of them: “It was a relief to be leaving the city at last.”³⁷⁶ This does not mean that they all wish to leave the city permanently, but it is necessary to leave every once in a while to regroup.

At the end of *The Bricks that Built the Houses*, Becky returns to London a year after having left. She is somewhat shocked and surprised how the city feels to her now: “Her London has changed. Becky looks around for all the things that she has missed so much, but nothing is the same. [...] The swimming baths have been bulldozed, along with the old town hall where she used to go to playgroup. [...] Everything has been or is being turned into flats. The actual flats stand empty [...].”³⁷⁷ Becky is amazed by the change that happened in just one year, how it was possible to destroy so many of her memories and her history in such a short amount of time: “Becky watches all the strangers that she passes with increasing panic. Is it just her imagination or are these people really fuller in their faces? Glossier? Healthier? More robust? What’s different? The streets are as busy as ever, but it feels empty.”³⁷⁸ It almost seems as though Becky has lost the strong connection she used to feel to the city, specifically to that part of

³⁷³ Jansma, 2016, p.245.

³⁷⁴ Jansma, 2016, p.245.

³⁷⁵ Tempest, 2016, p.259.

³⁷⁶ Jansma, 2016, p.124.

³⁷⁷ Tempest, 2016, pp.390-391.

³⁷⁸ Tempest, 2016, p.391.

town. By being away for some time, she has changed or the city has changed or maybe even both.

6 Conclusion

The theme of growing up has always been prominent in literature. As society changes, it is only natural that its representation in literature changes too. That was the main goal of this thesis: to show that the societal change which has led to the developmental phase of emerging adulthood is also reflected in contemporary literature. To illustrate the depiction of this phase, three novels were selected and studied: *The Bricks that Built the Houses* by Kate Tempest, *Holding Still for as Long as Possible* by Zoe Whittall and *Why We Came to the City* by Kristopher Jansma. They were chosen because they exemplify the portrayal of emerging adulthood and demonstrate the subject matter in a clear and distinct way.

This thesis was able to answer the main research question positively and show that emerging adulthood is indeed represented in contemporary literature, so much so that there is room for a distinct category to describe novels with the features present in the three selected primary texts: there is an urban millennial novel. However, this variation should always be thought of as existing within the genre of the coming-of-age novel, not separate from it.

The urban millennial novel has a number of distinctive characteristics that make it easy to identify. Apart from the geographical setting in a city and a group of friends as the main characters, further features distinguish it. There have to be a number of romantic relationships, both long- and short-term, and there will be significant changes to the statuses of these relationships in the course of the texts. Not all of the characters identify as heterosexual and, while this plays a big role, it is never a major plot issue. The protagonists will go through some sort of life-changing event that will have an impact on the make-up of their group and force them to mature and grow up. Employment is an important factor, some of the characters will be looking for a job or will be unhappy in their current one and, as the story develops, there will be some change in this area as well. Social media, while being used, is not overly mentioned and questions of creativity will arise. The combination of all of these topics make up the subgenre of the urban millennial novel.

The characteristics of emerging adulthood are strongly intertwined with those of the urban millennial novel. To put in differently: most of the features of the urban millennial novel are a manifestation of emerging adulthood. Identity explorations, instability, self-focus, feeling in between, and the feeling possibilities and optimism – each of these aspects of emerging adulthood can be found in the description of the urban millennial novel.

Urbanity is connected with emerging adulthood in another way. In all of the selected novels, there is a parallel between the phase of emerging adulthood and the city that surrounds the

characters. Their life in the city mirrors their feelings and their overall development both in their professional and personal lives. Their living situations change and are often less than ideal, yet they are filled with optimism. The city offers them a number of opportunities and shows them their full potential. This leads them to focus on themselves and to try to figure out who they are. The circumstances of city life confront them with difficult situations in which they are forced to grow as a person and figure out what they want and need from life. The city is a companion, a mirror. It reflects the changes these young people go through and helps to lead the way into their future.

Each of the novels, while similar in many ways, concentrates on different aspects of growing up and the image of the city itself. In *The Bricks that Built the Houses*, Kate Tempest shines a light on characters that are surrounded by a sense of neglect. She focuses on hardship, sadness and disappointment and doesn't shy away from telling heart-breaking stories. By also diving into the backstories of some of the characters, she gives them a fuller profile and allows a stronger connection between them and the readers. *Holding Still for as Long as Possible* also deals with hardships, but Zoe Whittall decided to emphasise the idea of leaving them behind and the possibility of a different life. Topics of mental health, gender and sexual identity dominate this story. Her characters are overwhelmed by life. Often, they still behave like teenagers and don't look too far into the future. At the same time, they feel burdened with stress and anxiety and are unsure of themselves and their roles. The characters in *Why We Came to the City* seem superficial at the beginning, mainly wanting to party and network. It is only through the tragic event of Irene's illness that they have to face reality. They start to reflect on what they really care about and what moves them. They are forced to confront reality and, while they try to ignore what is happening for a long time, rather than dealing with it in a mature way, in the end, they have no choice. The decision is made for them as their friend's death shifts their entire belief system, changes what they value and the way they react to situations and events in their lives.

As an outlook, an expansion of the primary literature used in this thesis could deliver exciting results. Studying contemporary novels in other languages and looking at the depiction of millennials in other national literatures could allow us to evaluate whether the concept of the urban millennial novel is applicable there too. Of course, the parameters of emerging adulthood would always have to be considered. Certain conditions have to exist for emerging adulthood to be possible, and the choice of primary texts would therefore have to be limited by the parameters set in this thesis, namely the publications dates, setting and character focus of the novels would have to be similar to those presented here.

Millennials in literature as a general field of research has a lot of potential to grow. The topic of emerging adulthood is just one of the many specialisations possible and is in itself still a fairly recent one. As such, it is probable that several new areas will appear – both in the general analysis of millennials and the study of emerging adulthood in literature - that can be studied and explored. Emerging adulthood has, for now, only been applied to millennials and it will be interesting to see if it is relevant for the generations to come and how it will be processed in their literature.

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8 Appendix

Abstract

This thesis examines the representation of millennials (born between 1980 and 2000) in contemporary English literature and shows that a new category is needed to characterise this specific form of literature, for which the term ‘urban millennial novel’ will be proposed. The focus lies on the transitional phase in young people’s lives between adolescence and adulthood, which the psychologist J.J. Arnett’ has named ‘emerging adulthood’. Emerging adulthood is a phase dominated by instability, which manifests itself in a variety of aspects: exploring different types of (romantic) relationships, changeable living situations and a general focus on the self. Three contemporary novels are at the centre of this thesis: *The Bricks that Built the Houses* by Kate Tempest, *Why We Came to the City* by Kristopher Jansma and *Holding Still for as Long as Possible* by Zoe Whittall. They are all set in large cities (London, New York and Toronto respectively) and have a group of friends, all young millennials, as protagonists. The location of the novels is crucial as the protagonists’ connection to the cities they live in often mirrors their situation. They are filled with optimism and hope about the future but, at the same time, are overwhelmed by the obstacles they must overcome in order to achieve their dreams. This thesis analyses the novels within the existing genres of the novel of education, the Bildungsroman and the coming-of-age novel and describes the features of the variation that makes ‘the urban millennial novel’.

Zusammenfassung

Diese Masterarbeit setzt sich mit der Darstellung von Millennials (geboren zwischen 1980 und 2000) in der gegenwärtigen englischsprachigen Literatur auseinander und kommt zum Schluss, dass eine neue Kategorie notwendig ist, um diese spezifische Form der Literatur zu beschreiben: hierzu wird der Begriff der „urban millennial novel“ eingeführt. In der Analyse wird der Fokus auf die Übergangsphase zwischen Adoleszenz und Erwachsenenalter gelegt, welche durch den Psychologen J. J. Arnett mit dem Begriff „emerging adulthood“ benannt wird. Diese Entwicklungsphase wird durch Instabilität dominiert, die sich in unterschiedlichen Aspekten manifestiert: unterschiedliche Formen von (romantischen) Beziehungen, wechselhafte Wohnsituationen und ein allgemeiner Fokus auf das Selbst. Drei kontemporäre Romane stehen im Zentrum dieser Arbeit: *The Bricks that Built the Houses* von Kate Tempest, *Why We Came to the City* von Kristopher Jansma und *Holding Still for as Long as Possible* von Zoe Whittall. Alle spielen in großen Städten (London, New York und Toronto) und haben eine Freundschaftsgruppe junger Millennials als Protagonisten. Die geographische Situierung der Romane ist essenziell, da die Beziehung der Charaktere zu der Stadt, in der sie leben, oft ihre Situation spiegelt. Sie sind voller Optimismus und blicken hoffnungsvoll in ihre eigene Zukunft, obwohl die Hürden, die sie zur Erreichung Ihrer Ziele überwinden müssen, sie gleichzeitig überfordern. Diese Arbeit analysiert die Romane innerhalb der Genres des Bildungsromans, des Entwicklungsromans und des Coming-of-Age-Romans und präsentiert die Charakteristika, die eine „urbanen millennial novel“ ausmachen.