Friend Me: the evolution of friendship and young adult science fiction predictions.

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Our lives are becoming increasingly self-absorbed, which can be partially attributed to our use of social media that encourages individuals to perform and exhibit themselves to an unknown audience. Social networks, like Facebook, rely heavily on the individual user to construct their identity in conjunction with other users' identities. Young adult science fiction, like *Feed, Scored* and *The Unidentified*, has begun to speculate on potential futures derived from social media by portraying often dark and dystopian worlds, emphasising not only the desire, but the need for close friendships. By comparing and contrasting these three novels, this paper will examine the concept of friendship and speculate on how it may develop in the future.

> "There are times when friendship feels like running down a hill together as fast as you can, jumping over things, spinning around, and you don't care where you're going, and you don't care where you've come from, because all that matters is speed, and the hands holding your hands"(Anderson *Whales on Stilts* 187-8).

Friendship is a common theme in M.T. Anderson's young adult fiction but, unlike the friendships in *Whales on Stilts*, in *Feed* the relationships are decaying much like the world the characters inhabit, made complacent by the feed - an embedded wireless Internet connection. In Lauren McLaughlin's *Scored* the notions of friendship are tested when students are forced to put their own futures before that of their friends, devaluing loyalty and kindness for the sake of personal ambition. In *The Unidentified* by Rae Mariz, the entire novel is set up within a corporation sponsored education system, also known as the Game, to examine the idea of conformity and social interactions between teenagers, focusing on a non-conformist who prefers to keep her friendships "close and manageable" (31).

Explaining what makes a friend isn't easy. A close friend may have a dozen positive attributes: they're funny, kind, smart, selfless, but then those very same attributes could also apply to teachers or neighbours so what makes a friend different? Montaigne stated in his essay on friendship in regards to his own relationship with Étienne de La Boétie: "If I were pressed to say why I love him, I feel that my only reply would be: 'Because it was he, because it was I'" (Montaigne 97). He implies that true friendship cannot be defined; however, there are key components that can be explored.

Shared history is important in creating a binding friendship but, unlike famous friendships such as Achilles and Patroclus, this shared past is not often filled with courageous acts or life defining moments. According to Alexander Nehamas, Professor of Philosophy at Princeton University, friendship is "manifested only through a series of actions that occur over time"(269) in the most ordinary of situations.

Friendship in fiction requires a fair amount of "inconsequential moments and events"(Nehamas 271) to realistically portray a true friendship or else the actions by a character could easily be construed to be motivated by love, duty or stupidity. In *Feed* we know the characters are friends because Titus, the protagonist, tells us, "you need the noise of friends, in space" (4) but Anderson emphasises the group's friendships by a series of ordinary moments: playing with the armrests during the flight to the moon, watching a football game and trying to get into clubs. This type of friendship is familiar to us, which brings it all the more home to us when the relationships begin to sour.

Young adult science fiction frequently speculates on the future of friendship. How it is evolving is examined and its role in the teenage identity is explored especially in relation to recent studies performed by the National Institute of Mental Health indicate that media is changing the way the adolescent mind develops. By examining friendships in fiction, we can have a better understanding of how relationships function in our own lives, but what is friendship and how is it changing?

In the ancient worlds of Greece and Rome where many relationships were based on business transactions such as marriage, friendship wasn't an everyday occurrence. A true friend or soulmate was something rare and, like Homer's Achilles and Patroclus, was portrayed in dramatic and often tragic proportions. At learning of his friends death, Achilles proclaims, "my dear comrade Patroclus has fallen- he whom I valued more than all others, and loved as dearly as my own life" (Homer Book XVIII).

Aristotle was one of the first scholars to examine the importance of friendship and wrote, "without friends no one would choose to live…"(Book VIII). He divides friendship into three categories. The first two were relatively common. The friendship of utility: where individuals gain something from the other, and the friendship of pleasure: where individuals take pleasure in another's company. These are lesser forms of friendship as the focus is upon the self and Aristotle claims "are easily dissolved, if the parties do not remain like themselves; for if the one party is no longer pleasant or useful the other ceases to love him"(Book VIII). Aristotle's third kind of friendship is closely tied to moral virtues and quality of character, thus the most rare of friendships is truly a higher calling. "Those who wish well to their friends for their sake are most truly friends," Aristotle states, "for they do this by reason of own nature...; therefore their friendship lasts as long as they are good-and goodness is an enduring thing"(Book VIII).

During the Medieval period, the heroic ideals of Aristotle were replaced by the growing popularity of Christianity that encouraged a strong bond with God rather than with others. William Deresiewicz, an American writer and critic, comments that friendship during this period "entailed specific expectations and obligations, often formalised in oaths"(1) . It wasn't until the Renaissance that we saw a revival in the classical idea of friendship.

Montaigne writes of his close friendship with La Boétie as "a friendship so complete and perfect that it's like has seldom been read of, and nothing comparable is to be seen among the men of our day. So many circumstances are needed to build it up," he continue," that it is something if fate achieves it once in three centuries" (92). Montaigne's basis for this claim is that most friendships in society "mix some cause, or aim, or advantage with friendship, other than friendship itself"(92), but this too eventually began to change.

In the 18th and 19th century these notions of the perfect friendship continued with notable friendships such as Byron and Shelley, and Wordsworth and Coleridge, yet the modern idea of friendship was beginning to appear. Business was becoming separate from one's private life and close friendships could be formed without being dependent on their economic worth. Close friendship was no longer restricted to two people but could be extended to many.

The Bloomsbury group, a collective made up of writers and thinkers including Virginia Woolf and E. M. Forster, was linked through shared ideas and attitudes. Forster famously wrote in his essay What I Believe, "if I had to choose between betraying my country and betraying my friend, I hope I should have the guts to betray my country"(78). This essay was published a little over a year before the official outbreak of World War Two.

Friendship in war, like the relationship between Achilles and Patroclus, is built upon trust, camaraderie and shared experiences, often horrific. Poet and soldier Robert Graves wrote the poem Two Fusiliers in 1917, the last stanza as follows:

Show me the two so closely bound

As we, by the red bond of blood,

By friendship, blossoming from mud,

By Death: we faced him, and we found

Beauty in Death,

In dead men breath (1).

He writes of friendships created during a time of shared stress and hardship and these bonds of brotherhood would survive long after the war. This type of relationship has become uncommon in the Western world, especially in Australia, where we live in relative safety and peace.

The post war world of the later half of the 20th century saw a change in the family unit, becoming much smaller, and friends became the family we could choose. The Australian Bureau of Statistics state that over the last hundred years, the average household size has declined from 4.5 in 1911 to 2.6 in 2006, predicting it'll drop further to 2.3 in 2026(1). Since families began to downsize during the early 20th century onwards, the average woman went from having seven to eight children to two to three. Extended families have become a lot smaller, and the friendship pool children had whilst growing up, brothers, sisters and cousins, has shrunk dramatically. As communities spread out further and further during the 20th century, individuals became more isolated yet more connected than ever before with television, the telephone and eventually the Internet.

M. T. Anderson explores in *Feed* the ultimate connection. In a decaying materialistic world where the majority have been fitted with a feed, memories can be recorded and transmitted, a telepathy-like communication is a reality and information is instantly accessible. Anderson's portrayal of friendship in *Feed* emphasises the human desire to be connected, although his depiction is a dark one. Language is used to not only emphasis the characters immaturity by mimicking current teenage slang, but his word choice indicates a particular way of thinking.

"We went to the moon to have fun, but the moon turned out to completely suck. We went on a Friday, because there was shit-all to do at home. It was the beginning of spring break. Everything at home was boring. Link Arwaker was like, "I'm so null," and Marty was all, "I'm null too, unit," but I mean we were all pretty null, because for the last like hour we'd been playing with three uninsulated wires that were coming out of the wall" (3).

Instead of dude or man, the characters instead use the term "unit" as an informal term of address. Anderson's choice to use "unit" implies a group mentality or desire to be connected; however, when Titus and his friends are disconnected from the feed, it seems to bring the group closer together. This is only short-lived as they are reconnected, but this short period of disconnection reveals what we can lose if we are submerged in this artificial connection with others. Titus' relationship with Violet, a girl he met on the moon, eventually threatens to cut him off from his friends as he's forced to choose between her ideas of non-conformity, which attracted him to her in the first place, and the safe familiarity of his school friends. But how valuable are our friends? Are they first and foremost a reflection upon ourselves? Like with what we wear, do who we hang out

with play a role in forming our identity? How far have we come from Aristotle's ideals of the "perfect friendship?"

Today friendship has been carefully labelled and certain rules apply. To avoid the sexual anxieties of straight male relationships the term "bromance" is applied and even encouraged through television and film. Group friendship dynamics are demonstrated in TV shows such as *Friends*, *Sex and the City* and *How I Met Your Mother,* many characters single and over thirty. All these characters define themselves through their interactions with their friends rather than their families, but these friendships largely remain dependent on face-to-face interactions.

Social Media has become so entrenched in our lives that it is hard to imagine life without it. Yet our brains have adapted to handle this technological heavy world. In the article "Is Google Making Us Stupid?" Nicholas Carr questions whether Google is "remapping the neural circuitry, reprogramming the memory" and changing the way he thinks as his mind "now expects to take in information the way that the Net distributes it: in a swiftly moving stream of particles"(Carr 1). The results, he claims, seem to be loss of concentration and focus, and an inability to absorb longer texts.

Dr Jay Giedd is part of a team currently conducting a twenty-year study on how adolescent brains develop at the National Institute of Mental Health. They've discovered that, with the increase of technology use, the adolescent brain is changing to become more capable at multi-tasking; however, increasingly unable to focus entirely on one thing. Our brains are being rewired to take advantage of new technology and Social Media, but what does this mean for friendship? How are we hardwired to process friendship and is this changing?

With the introduction of social networking sites such as MySpace, Facebook and Google +, our ever increasing circle of friends are on show to the whole world to see. Anyone can be your friend with a simple click of an accept button. We can follow our favourite actors or musicians on their Facebook page or get instant updates via Twitter. How successful we are can be ranked with the amount of friends and followers we have, making us feel, even if only artificially, that we're valuable.

In Lauren McLaughlin's novel, *Scored*, an individual's value as a person is explored as every student is monitored round the clock to determine their score. The higher the score, the better their career opportunities, while a low score destines them to a life in the army or worse. The score ranks them into score gangs, removing the choice of whom they can socialize with, and takes into consideration everything they say, what they look at and even the way they walk. Imani is a relatively high scorer sitting on a 92; however, she risks her rank and dreams to become a marine biologist by socializing with her friend Cady whose score is well below her own. When her friend does the unthinkable by having a relationship with an unscored boy, Imani's score drops by association to 64 and she becomes determined to get her rank back up, even if she must betray a friend.

McLaughlin addresses the themes of privacy, surveillance and human value as well as friendship and loyalty; however, she offers both the positive and negatives of using such technology. The surveillance gives all the students an equal opportunity to achieve as well as making many places a lot safer, but it is inflexible and forces students to abandon their parents values:

"'I guess you need to do what's right," [Imani's] father said, breaking the uncomfortable silence. "What's right for you, I mean'"(McLaughlin 36).

Montaigne's belief that a true friend is your other half is truly out-dated by Imani even thinking about betraying a friend although she eventually recognises the value of loyalty and honesty.

In Rae Mariz's *The Unidentified*, friendship is closely linked to being popular, which equals winning a sponsorship in the Game, a "school" system run by corporate sponsors who use the Game as a testing ground for new products. Friendships are managed much like friends are managed on Facebook now with a dash of Twitter as friends are interchangeable with followers. Kid, has a total number of eleven followers subscribed to her stream, yet she still posts updates because she finds it easier to understand her feelings when she puts them into words and sends them out into the world(Mariz 47).

Who we chat to, like or follow contributes to who we are online, yet these online networks cannot stand in place of actual face-to-face interactions. These simulacrums of ourselves and our friends are useful only in complementing other forms of communication, but when it is the only connection between individuals that problems may ensue. Miscommunications, typos and trolling can cause serious harm. Kid's idea of friendship changes throughout the novel as she falls victim to cyber-bullying from both her best friend and complete strangers. Due to low self-esteem and her own desire to keep her friend means she does nothing about it and is bullied for the entire book until she severs the relationship entirely.

In the media there has been an outcry about the ethics and responsibilities of interacting online either as your self or behind an anonymous avatar. In August 2012, media personality and ex-model Charlotte Dawson attempted to take her own life after being harassed online through twitter. This cyber bullying, known as trolling, is different from other forms of abuse as bullies can hide behind a shield of anonymity.

Leo Traynor, an Irish writer, suffered his own troll that became so extreme that he feared for his and his family's lives. The troll went from sending vile direct messages calling him a "Jewish scumbag" to packages to his home including a Tupperware container filled with ashes and a note saying "Say hello to your relatives from Auschwitz." Remarkably, a friend in IT was able to help him legally track down the troll responsible and he was shocked to find it was the seventeen-year old son of a friend. When he confronted the boy, whom he'd known since the boy was a child, the teenager said he did it all because it "was like a game thing"(Traynor).

The power we can gain from being online can be used positively and negatively, to give us freedom or to bully others and this power is free to anyone no matter their age. With technology advancing so rapidly, it is difficult to predict where it may take us and what its effects will be on our relationships with others. Like the seventeen-year-old troll, are we becoming so desensitised online that it's starting to bleed over into our everyday lives? The influence of social media has created another type of friendship. Aristotle divided friendship into three categories: friendships of utility, pleasure and the good. Montaigne suggested one that is similar to Aristotle's friendship of the good, which could be described as soulmates or one soul in two bodies.

I offer yet another: the cyber friendship. It can complement face-to-face friendships whilst offering another creative dimension to an already established relationship by participants actively moulding how themselves and their friendships appear to the wider world. In comparison to the more traditional forms of friendship, however, this kind of friendship is shallow at best and cannot function without a real life friendship to accompany it. According to Shea Bennett, co-editor of the blog All Twitter, 24% of people have admitted to missing "witnessing important moments because they were too busy trying to write about them on their favourite social network… while they were taking place." He continues on to say that "almost two in five people spend more time socialising

online than they do face-to-face," (Bennett) which Anderson portrays in *Feed* when, despite being right next to each other, the characters still talk to each other via the feed.

Our online friendships are heavily based on image, how we present ourselves, the photos and videos we post and the links we share; however, friendship is made up of shared experiences. So what happens when we spend more and more of our time online? The consequences of the online world have become a focus of many authors trying to determine or at least offer potential outcomes.

In *The Unidentified,* Kid eventually understands that no one is listening to her online persona despite being sponsored and decides to act, abandoning the Game and the online world it represents and discovering new, genuine friends who she'd initially written off due to their own representations. In *Scored,* "of the five key elements of fitness, peer group is number one in importance" (32), yet Imani had a friendship pact with her best friend despite being placed in two separate score gangs. She still sits within her gang at school, however, and it isn't until she realises that the gangs "are a bug, not a feature" (214) of the system, a way "for kids to avoid making conscious decisions about their peer group" (172), that she finally rises above the power the score holds over her.

In *Feed,* Titus' love for Violet, despite her feed-induced illness that results in a painfully slow death, comes second to what his friends think of him and how Violet affects his image and, though he struggles to do what is right, he eventually chooses to do nothing at all. His inaction, motivated by peer pressure and a healthy dose of denial encouraged by the social media world he exists in, represents the wider community that is decaying at an ever-increasing rate. He realises too late what he's lost when he finally sees her for the last time, telling her,

> "There's an ancient saying in Japan, that life is like walking from one side of infinite darkness to another, on a bridge of dreams. They say that we're all crossing the bridge of dreams together. That there's nothing more than that. Just us, on the bridge of dreams" (296-7).

Anderson's vision of the future is a hopeless one, a warning and, as Lisa Kerr comments, "threats to mind and body not only spark personal growth, but also inspire young adults to change their worlds" (Kerr 34), which is Anderson's objective. His look at friendship, although set in a dystopian future, echoes what is happening in our own time, presenting an idea of what friendship should be by showing us what it isn't.

William Deresiewicz states: "We have given our hearts to machines, and now we are turning into machines. [This is] the face of friendship in the new century;" however, although how we make, communicate and keep friends may be changing, friendship will always be valued and how we maintain friendships will continued to be explored in young adult science fiction.

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