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Accomplished Young Adult Novels About Identity: Why Recognizing Diversity and
Identity is Significant for Teens

I haven't ever really put much thought into young adult literature and why it would be so impactful as content for the youth reading it until I took this course. Most of high school we read books like *The Great Gatsby*, *Of Mice and Men*, and *Romeo & Juliet*. I didn't feel like these books were significant to my life or added any new kind of perspective that I could learn from. *The Great Gatsby* is about an overtly successful businessman who traffics alcohol during the prohibition- and 'oh no' he dies at the end. I enjoyed some of the narrative, but the plot's themes of materialism and privilege was off-putting. In *Mice and Men*, it did share tensioned story that had a lot of controversial decision making involved, but ultimately I didn't find the book's message of, "if you kill the person responsible, then nobody can be held responsible," to be all that appealing. It's not the best solution and it only considers George's opportunity of upward mobility. Don't even get me started on *Romeo & Juliet*. A completely dramatized love story between two teenagers that have to commit suicide if their other half were to die, for the love is too overpowering. Then popular young adult series that my peers were reading throughout high school would be *Harry Potter* and *The Hunger Games*. I didn't have much of any interest in these series because, well, the fantasy genre is doesn't accommodate much appeal for me. I would find it hard to apply it to my life when the surroundings of the genre influences the characters so much. But I will hand it to them, for they do involve a lot of important messages that teens need to learn such as teamwork and trust.

Something I found out from this class, is that my favorite theme in young adult literature is identity. Stories about people's identity or people finding identity is not only relevant to being a young adult, but is also a learning experience. A character vulnerably shows some kind of new perspective on their identity to the reader. This knowledge is the kind of knowledge I genuinely believe everyone needs because it builds empathy and understanding. Once people learn each others experiences, they have a better understanding of that person's life, culture, and insight. It's such valuable information to have and it's everywhere in young adult literature. This insight on identity is also crucial for teens (the intended audience) as they are often still learning about themselves. This kind of understanding of identity does not limit to only teenagers though, as there are plenty of grown men with orange skin and fake hair that could use a decent dosage of perspective.

I knew I was going to do my annotated bib on the theme identity, but I wanted to make it more specific. I started thinking that the most successful books about identity are probably the most effective in achieving that goal of providing the reader a unique perspective and learning experience. This prompted me to decide to conduct my annotated bibliography on the theme of identity in accomplished young adult novels. These accomplishments vary in results of popularity and established rewards, and the accomplishments are an outcome of their success.

Alexie, Sherman. *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. Little, Brown Books For Young Readers, 2007.

Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* is a National Award Winning novel and a *New York Times* Bestseller. The book shares the experiences of Native American teenager, Junior. Along with having family problems involving alcohol abuse, Junior suffers from a disease called Hydrocephalus. This causes Junior to be undersized, have a speech impediment, and even receive seizures. Sherman Alexie shares what he claimed to be about "78%" of true experiences he encountered with being Native American in a school that was predominantly white. This shared experience provides us insight into the identity of being a Native American in modern America. It also shows us the perspective of receiving criticism based off of traditional values within Junior's family's culture, and managing to keep his head up and moving forward.

Reference: Wikipedia contributors. "The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian."

Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia. Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, 13 Nov. 2018. Accessed 20 November 2018.

De La Pena, Matt. *We Were Here*. Random House Inc., 2009.

(Have read)

We Were Here by Matt De La Pena shows the mind of a young and troubled teenager, Miguel. Miguel runs away from a teenage correction facility, along with two friends, trying to reach Mexico. In this narrative of this teenage mind sparked the interest of many readers, which

De La Pena received Newbery Award for. Miguel is joined with his companions from the detention center during this escape, Mong and Rondell. In their travels, Miguel and Rondell witness the drowning and suicide of Mong. Overtime during their escape, Miguel admits to himself the crime he committed- stabbing his brother. He then decides that the right thing to do is to return, turn himself in, and accept his punishment. Miguel's story admits the wrongs in life and becoming honest and mature. It is a pivotal moment in developing as a person and being true to their identity. This shares the value in accepting responsibility and pursuing the adversity that comes with it.

Farmer, Nancy. *The House of the Scorpion*. Atheneum Books For Young Readers, 2002.

The House of the Scorpion by Nancy Farmer received a huge amount of critical acclaim as it was a National Book Award Winner for Young People's Literature, Newbery Honor Book, & Printz Honor Book. It is a science fiction plot that comes from the perspective of the main character, Matt, who is a clone. Matt is not any ordinary clone though, he is a clone of a infamous drug lord 'El Patron.' Because of Matt's identity is a clone of El Patron, he is suppose to be given a compound at birth that essentially makes his body's only purpose for organ donations. Since he did not receive the compound, the story's perspective follows Matt as he rebels against the massive drug industry El Patron controls. Matt's experience shares the value of individualism and originality. He won't abide the system that assigns him to be a particular person (being a pointless clone). The value of Matt's difference in this society allows us to learn the power of being different, and that it isn't a bad quality.

Reference: Wikipedia contributors. "The House of the Scorpion." *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, 13 Nov. 2018. Accessed 20 November 2018.

Halse Anderson, Laurie. *Speak*. Square Fish, 1999 New York.

(Have read)

In the novel *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson, Anderson reflects on a young girl, Melinda Sordino, who has a secret that will only harm herself if she keeps it inside. Anderson's *Speak* was a National Award Finalist for Young People in 1999. Melinda Sordino was raped in the Summer before high school, but she also called the cops afterwards. She begins her high school phase being degraded from her old friends and isolating herself from making any positive social resolution. This novel isn't an identity crisis of *she just can't fit in* or *she can't get a date to homecoming*. Melinda shows a unique situation in coming to terms with her identity and finding comfort in being vulnerable. This shares a value beyond Melinda simply finding her identity. It expresses the importance in opportunity that speaking up is empowering and can ultimately help people find a solution to their problems.

Myers, Walter Dean. *Monster*. HarperCollins, 1999 New York.

(Have read)

Monster by Walter Dean Myers is a *New York Times* Bestseller and a recipient of the Margaret A. Edwards Award. The narrative comes from Steve Harmon, a teenage black man who is facing sentence of 25 to life in a trial. Harmon is targeted from peers in his community, the plaintiff's lawyer, and even the police. While Steve is waiting in jail, he is working on a

screenplay, that is the entirety of *Monster* itself. In this screenplay, the book also includes interruptions of Steve's diary entries while he was detained in jail. The insight of Steve Harmon's identity crisis is centered around on the outside expectation of a black person in society. Steve's perspective gives us the insight of how it feels to be targeted and doubted from the basis of his physical identity. His insight's value allows people who do not experience these circumstances to learn the effort it may take to prove racism and prejudiceness wrong.

Reynolds, Jason. *Ghost*. Atheneum/Caitlyn Dlouhy Books, 2016.

Jason Reynolds' *Ghost* is a National Book Award Finalist about a young African American boy named Castle Crenshaw, also known as Ghost. Ghost is a running fanatic and competes on his middle school track team. Ghost is mentioned to have had a very troubling past including him and his mother almost being murdered by his father. He finds a new found inspiration in his track coach, an ex-Olympian Medal recipient. Although, Ghost has to face the intimidation of his own wrong-doings in his life, while attempting to become the best athlete he can be and hoping to make it into the Junior Olympics. This story of Ghost's identity helps others that have faced situations that may resemble something similar to Ghost's. His perspective teaches us the value behind a work ethic and facing personal struggles head on.

Reference: "Ghost Book by Jason Reynolds." *Simon & Schuster*,

<http://www.simonandschuster.com/books/Ghost/Jason-Reynolds/Track/9781481450164>

Accessed 20 November 2018.

Schmidt, Gary D. *Okay For Now*. Clarion Books, 2011.

Gary D. Schmidt's *Okay For Now* is a National Book Award Finalist that shares the story of a teenage boy trying to re-establish himself after moving to New York. The main character, Doug, encounters tensioned circumstances as he is abused from his father and his brother returns from the Vietnam War with a very scarring outlook. Doug meets a young lady by the name of Lil Spicer, whose personality is exciting and interests Doug. Because of Lil Spicer, Doug is finally able to begin to feel comfortable in this new and stressful environment that is his life. This book teaches the message of hopefulness and using friends as an outlet to become comfortable with life. It's important when facing a scary and new setting in life that there are people to turn to and that there are people who can help. Doug's story of finding himself with the help of Lil Spicer is a great example of that.

References: Wikipedia contributors. "Okay for Now." *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*.

Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, 13 Nov. 2018. Accessed 20 November 2018. // "Okay For

Now by Gary D. Schmidt." *Scholastic*,

<https://www.scholastic.com/teachers/books/okay-for-now-by-gary-d-schmidt/> Accessed 20

November 2018.

Silvera, Adam. *More Happy Than Not*. Soho Teen, 2015.

More Happy Than Not by Adam Silvera is a *New York Times* Bestseller that covers the struggling life of Aaron Soto. Aaron's father committed suicide and leaves him with a pit in his stomach. Aaron moves to a lower income city in New York with only his mother and brother. Aaron encounters the his peers at school that do not consider the possibility of living in a low income society and this makes Aaron feel different. Along with his attraction to other men,

Aaron turns to a institution that he feels he needs. This institution conducts conversion therapy, for Aaron feels he doesn't feel comfortable with his sexuality. Through this experience Aaron learns to accept himself and his sexuality. The insight in this book reflects the values of learning about one's identity and welcoming the factors in life that make us different. This story shares an experience that many people go through, feeling as if they aren't living a 'correct' life, but this plot acknowledges that there is no such thing as a 'correct' life.

Reference: Bellafante, Ginia. "'More Happy Than Not,' by Adam Silvera." *New York Times*, 19 July 2015.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/21/books/review/more-happy-than-not-by-adam-silvera.html>

Accessed 20 November 2018.

Spinelli, Jerry. *Maniac Magee*. Little, Brown Books For Young Readers, 1990.

(Have read)

Maniac MaGee by Jerry Spinelli won a Newbery Medal and received the Young Reader's Choice Award, which is chosen from children from Canada and The United States. The main character, Jeffery Lionel, is an orphan from the result of his parents being killed in drunk driver accident. Jeffery faces homelessness and uses the Zoo as a place of shelter after running away from his Uncle's home. He is given the nickname "Maniac" from this other side of town and becomes a familiar name from his demonstration in athletic ability. Jeffery finds comfort in his identity on the other side of town, so much more than his adoptive family (his aunt and uncle) that Jeffery even risks being homeless just to be there. He shows the amount of risk he is willing to take just to have the connection he has been longing for following his parents death. This book

considers the people who have lost important figures in their life and whom they may feel lost as a result of that. Jeffrey's story shows the value in taking a risk and being accepted in a time that one may feel disoriented from the loss of significant people in their life. The importance of this experience can help others apply that risk into finding their own identity following a tragic happenstance.

Whelan, Gloria. *Homeless Bird*. HarperCollins, 2000.

In Gloria Whelan's *Homeless Bird*, a National Book Award Winner, is about an Indian thirteen-year-old bride, Koly, whose husband dies soon after their arranged marriage. After Koly's husband dies, her father-in-law teaches her how to read and write, but her mother-in-law only treats her as a burden. Unfortunately, Koly's father-in-law also passes and she faces the intimidation of her mother-in-law who does not favor Koly one bit. Koly has to withstand the poor living situation with her mother-in-law, which cues her mother-in-law to leave her. Koly is eventually finds a job and meets a man (Raji) who builds her a room in his farm. Overtime, Koly and Raji marry and she finally finds a satisfying home. This story reflects the patience it takes while overcoming many tragic situations in life. Koly's perspective gives a unique insight on the sense of hope and determination. This experience being shared shows the value in continuing to keep moving forward to find the happiness one desires.

Reference: "Homeless Bird." *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. 30 October 2018,

https://simple.wikipedia.org/wiki/Homeless_Bird Accessed 20 November 2018.