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ENGL 112B

25 November 2020

Books about Courage, Written by Women Authors

For my annotated bibliography, I was inspired by the several books with themes of bravery that we’ve read this semester so decided to focus my project on courage. I began thinking about the idea of bravery as described in literature with the very first book we read this semester, *After the First Death* by Robert Cormier. Upon my initial read of the text, I was shocked that it was considered young adult literature due to the heavy subject matter, being a story about a terrorist attack. I was especially surprised with the finale of the book and the dark themes presented within it. After finishing the book, though, one of the major themes I kept coming back to was the bravery shown by the character Kate in particular. Later in the semester when we read the book *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson and I read of the bravery of Melinda I decided to center on women authors. Unintentionally, this emphasis on women authors also led me to focus on books centering on women and girls, for the most part. The one outlier of this theme is *Frankenstein*, which I chose as a canonical text to include and juxtapose against my otherwise fairly contemporary choices. *Frankenstein* stands out not only as centering a male protagonist but also as a book about fear more than bravery. This juxtaposition, too, was intentional and is further detailed in the book’s annotation below. Though I didn’t make my choice for the theme for this annotated bibliography until partially through the semester, I‘ve always enjoyed books with courage as a theme, and they seem to be the ones I pick as favorites more often than not. The book *Divergent* by Veronica Roth, cited and discussed below, became one of my favorites as soon as I read it upon its release. In moments of strife in my own life, I hear Tris’s words to “be brave” echo in my head. That something so simple, just the reading of acts of bravery within fiction, has stuck with me so intensely is something to be celebrated, I think. I chose all the books within this annotated bibliography specifically because they do just that.

1. Bray, Libba. *Beauty Queens.* Read How You Want, 2014.
   1. Though I’ve always enjoyed Libba Bray’s works, I fell head over heels in love with her stories after reading *Beauty Queens* upon its release in 2014. The book features the participants of a beauty pageant who become stuck on a deserted island after their plane crashes. The group does their best to survive and stay positive while practicing their routines so they can compete when they’re hopefully saved. The book centers women and girls as leaders and shows that beauty queens are to be taken seriously, as well as the harm of the “I’m not like other girls” mentality. The book exemplifies the second, third, fourth, and seventh Exeter qualities described in *Literature for Today’s Young Adults* by Alleen Pace Nilson and Kenneth L. Donelson. One way it does so is by putting a major focus on girls not only enjoying their girlhood but flourishing in it. The book takes the joke of the stereotypical airhead fashionista and turns it on its head, showing how teen girls are not only prepared for the apocalypse but can thrive in any condition you put them. I chose this novel for my annotated bibliography because it shows courage not because the girls aren’t scared, but because they are scared and yet persist anyway.
2. Gatwood, Olivia. *Life of the Party*. The Dial Press, 2019.
   1. This annotated bibliography would not be complete without a selection of poetry, and this collection is a fantastic one. Gatwood’s newest book of poems centers on girlhood, reflecting on her own and speaking on what it is to grow up too much “girl” for the patriarchy. While girlhood is a main focus of the book, it especially speaks on what it is to be a *teen* girl, so fits well into a YA focused read. This book shows the fifth and seventh Exeter qualities but is significant for the eighth quality especially. Since the book is made of poems, it allows readers to interact with poetry and learn poetic language, while the colloquial language within the text may help students connect with the poems more easily. Though I’m a big fan of poetry, my biggest struggle with poetry in the classroom during high school was that I didn’t feel I could connect to most of what we read; using books such as this can help meet students halfway by using colloquial language and potentially familiar experiences along with interesting poetic forms. I’ve included it as young adult literature under a loose definition of the term, as the book focuses on young adulthood and, though it is made of individual poems, it *does* have a narrative arc through the text.
3. Halse Anderson, Laurie. *Speak.* Square Fish, 1999.
   1. This book was new to me this semester but became part of the inspiration for my choice of topic for this annotated bibliography. The book centers around Melinda and her journey after she was sexually assaulted at a party before the school year. The story follows her through her sophomore year as a social outcast relearning the importance of her voice. While many of the books in this annotated bibliography showcase courage in theoretical, fictional ways, this book shows bravery in an all too common situation. This book thus exemplifies the seventh Exeter quality, especially because the text directly addresses Melinda’s growth through her engagement with her survivorship.
4. Miller, Madeline. *Circe*. Back Bay Books, 2020.
   1. I purchased this book early in the semester after a friend recommended it and after realizing I would need to read five new books outside of class, and I’m glad I did. This book is for the fans of Greek mythology and brings a new take on the witch from the classic *Odyssey* by Homer. *Circe* is about the daughter of Helios, the Sun God, and her life as a being not powerful like her father nor lovely like her mother. The book tackles patriarchy within the myth, and shows Circe as a woman, not a goddess and not ungodly, and the power that is inherent in humanity. The book shows the second and fourth Exeter qualities, especially through Circe’s interest in humanity from her childhood and teen years in Helios’s home to her actual interactions with them later on. In a classroom, the book can be used in conjunction with all or part of *Odyssey* as a significant modern retelling.
5. Niven, Jennifer. *All the Bright Places*. Penguin Books, 2020.
   1. After Kaylin’s book talk on *All the Bright Places,* I decided to purchase the book and read it for myself. After reading the book, and having seen the movie just weeks before this semester began, I knew it would have to be added to this annotated bibliography. The book follows Finch and Violet as the two become unlikely friends and more. The two find comfort in one another while attempting to navigate Violet’s grief for her sister and Finch’s struggles with mental health. Similar to *Speak*, this book is significant in its use of the real to explore courage while executing the third Exeter quality. Especially as so many young adults have or will experience both depression and grief, *All the Bright Places* uses fiction to show that asking for help is a brave act. The book also shows the seventh Exeter quality in these heavy issues, especially through the character of Violet and her growth throughout the story.
6. Power, Rory. *Wilder Girls*. Macmillan Children's Books, 2020.
   1. Though I have not read *Wilder Girls* by Rory Power, Clara’s book talk presentation convinced me to add the book to this list. According to Clara’s presentation and somewhat similarly to *Beauty Queens* by Libba Bray, *Wilder Girls* is about girls that live on a deserted island attempting to quarantine from the “Tox,” a terrible disease. After the main character’s best friend goes missing from the infirmary, though, she begins to question the truthfulness of what she has been told. This book was described as a take on *Lord of the Flies* but centering on girls instead of the boys featured in the canonical classic. From my understanding of Clara’s book talk, this text seems to signify the second and fourth Exeter qualities above all. In a classroom setting, the text could be used in conjunction with Bray’s *Beauty Queens* and juxtaposed with *Lord of the Flies* for a unit on the retelling of stories or appropriation art as it applies to literature.
7. Roth, Veronica. *Divergent*. HarperCollins, 2014.
   1. One of the first books I decided to include in this annotated bibliography was the *Divergent* series by Veronica Roth, but especially the first book of the trilogy of the same name. The book is about a girl, Tris, who lives in a dystopian society that is split into five factions that value different qualities: Amity values kindness, Candor values honesty, Erudite values intelligence, Abnegation values selflessness, and Dauntless values bravery. Born into Abnegation, Tris has to decide her values and so where she wants to live and belong: will she pick Abnegation and selflessly not separate herself from her family, or will she be brave and pick Dauntless? This series was incredibly significant to me in middle and high school and was huge in teaching me to be brave. The book shows the third and fourth Exeter qualities best. It shows the fourth through the interesting dystopia of Tris’s world and the challenges she faces, while also showing experiences that many teen readers will go through. For example, Tris’s choice between Abnegation and Dauntless can be likened to collegiate choices for students deciding to pursue interests their family expects of them versus interests they may have separately.
8. Shelley, Mary. *Frankenstein.* London, Colburn and Bentley, 1831.
   1. I wanted to be sure to include one already canonical text on this annotated bibliography, so I decided to read and include Mary Shelley’s famous *Frankenstein* this semester. The book centers on a scholar and scientist, Victor Frankenstein, as he creates a monster and gives it life. After he realizes his creation lives, he spirals into fear and regrets his unholy invention. I chose this text specifically because of this fear within the book. Because of the havoc created by Frankenstein’s refusal to follow through with, care for, or even accept the consequences of his monster, Shelley’s work can be read as a tale about the punishments of reacting to fear and not being brave. Had Frankenstein’s initial reaction to his fear been to overcome it and deal with his mistakes, he would have been better off and prevented the havoc that follows his fear in the text. Though this book shows many of the Exeter qualities, one of the most significant is the eighth quality.
9. Yoon, Nicola. *Everything, Everything*. Ember, 2017.
   1. Initially, I had planned to do my book talk presentation on *Everything, Everything* after reading the synopsis of it, but when I emailed my book talk choice I realized I had accidentally selected the other choice by the same author, *The Sun is Also a Star*. This choice was fateful, though, as it led me to read *both* books this semester and introduced me to the amazing artistry that is Yoon’s works. *Everything, Everything* is about a girl named Maddy who has a medical disorder that means she may have severe allergic reactions to many things outside, so she must live inside within a clean bubble. When Olly moves in next door, though, she finds herself falling for someone who she will never safely be able to touch. This incredible book is about being brave through uncontrollable circumstances. It shows the seventh Exeter quality most significantly, in the way that love, grief, and abuse are discussed through the book. It’s especially an interesting read during the time of Coronavirus, as it shows a couple who must stay apart to keep healthy and safe.
10. Yoon, Nicola. *The Sun is Also a Star*. Ember, 2016.
    1. As mentioned in the previous entry to this annotated bibliography, I did my book talk presentation on Yoon’s *The Sun is Also a Star*. The book is about a girl, Natasha, who is going to be deported the next day back to Jamaica. She meets Daniel, a Chinese-American poet and student, and he tries to convince her that fate and love are real. The book centers themes of fate and identity while also allowing readers to fall in love with the romance between the two main characters. Though this book shows many of the Exeter qualities, such as the first, third, fifth, seventh, and eighth, it best shows the sixth. The book tackles bravery through both characters, but especially through the character of Natasha as she stands up to fight against an unfair system that doesn’t want her. Her courage especially in the face of her losing the only home that she knows drives the plot forwards, as well as the courage to accept *when* to fight.

Works Cited

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