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Life is Not Guaranteed, but Death is

Young adult books cover various topics including darker themes such as death and loss. The use of death through heartfelt storylines forces young readers to consider how death shapes life as a whole. Exposure to existential questions, through reading, is just as necessary as any other topic that can be found in YA literature. There are hints of death and loss in children’s stories such as fairytales with the use of the orphan child. The archetype of the orphan allows for character growth and strength. Although it is fiction, the lessons a young reader takes away from such stories enable them to apply it to real life. This allows young adults to think about the hard reality of dying through a safe act such as reading.

Perhaps readers of this genre are lucky enough not to have been directly affected by the death of someone they know, but reading about death and loss regardless is a useful way of easing into issues that are inevitable. Moreover, for teens who are dealing with death of a loved one, finding characters undergoing similar experiences creates a sense of connection, and comforts that the reader that he/she is not alone. This is helpful especially for teens who are having a hard time coping and opening up about their feelings. The last thing a heartbroken teen wants to do is talk about their hardships to adults, perhaps after reading a story that resonates with them, the teen would be more encouraged to talk about their feelings. Death is not an easy thing for anybody be it a teen or an adult to talk about, but death is certain to happen, and even if it is not a personal problem, it allows people to have more empathy and knowledge in order to comfort a friend or classmate. Then of course are even more difficult topics such as suicide or even assisted dying as is Euthanasia.

With all things that are covered in the media such as mass shootings and utter violence, teenagers are so often desensitized in comparison previous generations through technology, and life experience because it is so far removed from their lives. Death is often normalized in video games. But death is not a game. In order to really deal with the difficult questions raised by death, people have to feel connected to each other. Social media has the power to bring people together momentarily before the next trend comes along, but books can also create emotional connections between readers. Cult favorites like the *Harry Potter* series have fans not only rooting for a fictional hero, but mourning the death of fictional characters. The significance of death in YA is that authors are reflecting back what they see every day; issues that affects us all are easier to digest when they are are not technically about us.

There are unfortunately adults who lack understanding or experience who might even discourage teens from sharing their grief. Teens that might be struggling with difficulty, might be pressured to act “strong” by an unknowing adult. Not everyone grieves the same, we can not expect fragile teens who are already in a difficult time in their lives to just recover. Teens need an outlet to grieve; however long the teen needs to grieve properly so that afterwards they can move on with their lives and not have anything bottled up inside. Teens are mature but they are not yet adults, they should be encouraged to cry if they find it necessary, especially young males, who unfortunately are often not encouraged to do so, or worse expected not to. Also, we assume that every teen has some sort of support system, but perhaps that is not always the case. Again, this is probably why the architype of the orphan is prevalent in literature. Young adults also need closure, and a good book can get them closer to the answers they need to continue their life.

Annotated Bibliography

Cormier, Robert. *After the First Death*. Penguin Books, 2016.

In this novel, Miro, a Middle Eastern teenager, and a small group of his fellow countrymen hijack a bus filled with five-year-old children. These hijackers believe they are fighting for their homeland. Kate, the teenage bus driver, finds herself drawn into a drama with a bunch of kids she barely knows. Ben Marchand, also is wrapped in the drama due to his father’s status. By the end innocent lives are lost.

Crutcher, Chris. *Deadline*. Greenwillow Books, 2009. Print

In Chris Crutcher’s interview we viewed in class, he gives a brief description of his book *Deadline*. The main character Ben has been diagnosed with a terminal illness and it is too late for treatment. Ben’s doctor gives him a year maximum to live, even after knowing this, Ben decides not to tell anyone, not even his family, that he is going to die. Instead, Ben goes on to fulfill his “bucket list,” basically he is going to do all the things he would never have done otherwise.

The Exeter qualities this novel contains is that is does not follow a simple chronology. We see the preceptive of three very different teens and how their environments created who they are. The plot is exciting as we wait to see what choices the teens are going to take next. Ben’s possible suicide comes off as a surprise, and we are left with an open ending. Terrorism is a global concern, but it is easy to forget the person behind the mask.

Green, John. *The Fault in Our Stars*. National Bookstore, 2014. Print

“He’s in remission from the osteosarcoma that took one of his legs. She’s fighting the brown fluid in her lungs caused by tumors. Both know that their time is limited… Green’s signature style shines: His carefully structured dialogue and razor-sharp characters brim with genuine intellect, humor, and desire. He takes on Big Questions that might feel heavy-handed in the words of any other author: What do oblivion and living mean?”

<https://www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/john-green/fault-in-our-stars/>

This love story goes beyond the two characters being two sick kids that are expected to die. They make the best of their time together. The characters go beyond typical experience of other teens that might also just be sick and waiting for an end. They decide to go on an adventure that although disappointing it gives them a light to continue on.

Ewing, Lynne. *Drive-By.* HarperCollins, 1996.

“Tito's older brother, Jimmy, is killed in a gang-related drive-by shooting. This is only the beginning of Tito's family's troubles, for while they cope with their grief, the gang attacks their house repeatedly, forcing the family to move. Following revelations about Jimmy's secret life, Tito's innocence is gradually stripped away; he confronts hard truths about gang life and takes action to protect his family and do what is right.”

<https://www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/lynne-ewing/drive-by-3/>

Although this book is rated for ages ten and up. The topic of gang violence is something much older teens have to deal with in the fragile age of puberty. This is a time where teens are trying to find a place in the world. They want to be accepted even if it is dangerous. This can definitely serve teens an advisory of the world of gangs.

Peña, Matt de la. *We Were Here*. Ember, 2011.

De la Peña’s book follows the life of a troubled teen who has landed himself into trouble. Because of this, his relationship with his mother is broken. While at a correction home, a judge orders him to keep a journal, he spends a lot of time reading and avoiding the other boys. That is until they decide to break out.

Matt de La Pena’s character Miguel is having a hard time coping with the death of his brother Diego. In turn he lashes out and breaks the already weak bond he has with his mother. The plot itself is exciting as the reader gets enticed to see just what is it that Miguel did to get himself stuck in that home. He finds companion hood in the least likely of places. The theme of belonging is a challenging issue that concerns teens all over the world.

Saenz, Benjamin Alire. *The Inexplicable Logic of My Life*. Clarion Books, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017.

“Everything is about to change. Until this moment, Sal has always been certain of his place with his adoptive gay father and their loving Mexican-American family. But now his own history unexpectedly haunts him, and life-altering events force him and his best friend, Samantha, to confront issues of faith, loss, and grief.”

<https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/23447923-the-inexplicable-logic-of-my-life?ac=1&from_search=true>

This story follows a family’s journey after the death of the matriarch of the family. These are characters who reflect the experience of readers that might not have a standard family unit.

Sebold, Alice. *The Lovely Bones*. Little, Brown, 2009.

*“The Lovely Bones* is the story of a family devastated by a gruesome murder -- a murder recounted by the teenage victim. Upsetting, you say? Remarkably, first-time novelist Alice Sebold takes this difficult material and delivers a compelling and accomplished exploration of a fractured family's need for peace and closure… But Susie isn't ready to release her hold on life just yet, and she intensely watches her family and friends as they struggle to cope with a reality in which she is no longer a part.”

<https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/12232938-the-lovely-bones?ac=1&from_search=true>

This is a fantasy of a young girl who wants to know who murdered her. There is an element of tension and mystery that keep the reader glued to the story trying to find out what had happened. This is a good piece to reflect on “why me” issues. Obviously, its for the *living* teen to see how precious life is, and just how fragile it is. The importance of family and the role of a strong female protagonist are prevailing themes in this story.

Silvera, Adam. *They Both Die at the End*. Harper Teen, an imprint of Harper Collins Publishers, 2017. Print

“… Death-Cast calls Mateo Torrez and Rufus Emeterio to give them some bad news: They're going to die today. Mateo and Rufus are total strangers, but, for different reasons, they're both looking to make a new friend on their End Day. The good news: There's an app for that. It's called the Last Friend, and through it, Rufus and Mateo are about to meet up for one last great adventure and to live a lifetime in a single day.” <https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/33385229-they-both-die-at-the-end>

In this imaginative story, we have two people battling with death at their door and making an odd companion; because thee drive is a fictional application, it definitely not a common storyline found in the canon making it more intriguing for young readers.

Stork, Francisco. *The Memory of Light*. Scholastic Incorporated, 2017. Print

“Vicky attempted to take her life by stealing sleeping pills from her stepmother. She had just lost her mother to cancer, her [perfect] older sister went to Harvard, her father remarried, and expects [Vicky] to excel like her sister at a prestigious private high school. The last straw was when he decides to send her nana back to Mexico since she is old and arthritic and couldn't care of them anymore. Vicky wakes up from her suicide attempt at a hospital where she met Dr. Desai and three other young people suffering from different mental disorders. Together they formed a group and they slowly began to trust each other and speak frankly about themselves and others.”

<http://www.librarything.com/work/16057926/reviews/129354239>

This story uses themes that allow the reader to engage with difficult and challenging issues such as death of a loved one, suicide, and parental expectations that are a concern of teens. With the rising rate of teenage suicide, this opens up a conversation on said topic. We have a strong female protagonist who in her most weak moments finds courage and a better understanding of life. Another Exeter quality that this story contains is that it allows teens readers the possibility of emotional growth through personal issues that they might face.

Uwiringiyimana, Sandra. *How Dare the Sun Rise: Memoirs of a War Child*. Katherine Tegen Books, 2017.

This memoir is the true story of Sandra Uwiringyimana, a girl from the Democratic Republic of the Congo who tells the tale of how she survived a massacre, immigrated to America only to face yet another ethnic disconnects. After seeing her mother shot and siblings murdered, Sandra miraculously escapes death but her ordeals are far from over. As Veronica Santos summarizes in her book talk of the novel, “it offers you a human face to the genocide.”

The plot of this story builds tension. Because this is a memoir of someone’s actual life, it goes beyond the experiences of young readers. Although they might not encounter such an extreme circumstance such as genocide in their everyday lives, it allows them to learn and apply lessons according to their own life. How to deal with the raw emotions of leavening everything you knew behind and starting over. Also in a way it provides insight dealing with survivor’s guilt. As in if they lost a loved one suddenly and how to deal with the feeling of everything seeming so unreal.