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Discrimination in Contemporary Realistic Fiction: An Annotated Bibliography

For my annotated bibliography, I wanted to focus on the overarching theme of discrimination in its various forms: racial, sexual and physical. Sometimes discrimination is loud and manifests in the act of bullying, especially amongst children and teenagers at school. Sometimes discrimination is subtle, such as racial profiling amongst adults in the work field or on the streets in society. Either way, it is a prevailing idea that gets passed on from generation to generation. Without a conscious effort to improve tolerance towards others who are unique, or rather “different” from others, and without understanding that we are all a part of the same human race, discrimination will continue to harm and destroy us.

Additionally, I wanted to choose books that not only address the issue of discrimination but also depict protagonists that try to cope with and solve it. Chris from *Whale Talk*, Maleeka from *The Skin I'm In*, and Jeremy from *Rat* eventually learn how to stand up for themselves against their tormentors. Younger protagonists like Iggie from *Iggie's House* and Clover from *The Other Side* show a pure side of humanity by questioning segregation and discrimination, notions that are not inherent, but taught. Other characters such as Cait from *Lucas*, Josie from *Nineteen Minutes*, Charlie from *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* and Amir from *The Kite Runner* witness discrimination against someone close to them and either make the decision to stand against it or remain silent. Then there are the characters that try to find their own identity amidst all the hatred and discrimination around them, like the various characters in *American Born Chinese* and Arnold from *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*.

Although every character's circumstances are different, they suffer through the same thing: discovering who they are, where they fit in a world that sees them as the "other" and how to deal with being despised for petty reasons like the color of their skin, their physical handicaps, or sexual orientation.

Annotated Bibliography

1. Alexie, Sherman. *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. New York: Little, Brown, 2007. Print.

Summary

Arnold Spirit Jr. is a 14-year old aspiring cartoonist. The book deals with Arnold's life on the Spokane Indian Reservation and his transition to an all-white public high school in Reardan, Washington away from his reservation. No matter where Arnold goes, he is discriminated against. At his reservation, his own people attack him because he has physical handicaps such as his poor eyesight, frequent seizures, lisps and a stuttering problem. At the all-white high school, he is the only other Indian besides the controversial school mascot. The novel, which is based on the author's personal experiences, reflects a realistic story of a young Native American boy as he struggles to overcome tragedies and discrimination.

Commentary

This book is essential to any adolescent who is dealing with discrimination against race and physical disabilities. It is also refreshing to read in the perspective of a Native American protagonist, which is not widely represented in literature. Arnold's

predicament with attending a school that has a Native American mascot has been an ongoing debate since the 1960s and is still a racial concern that prevails today.

2. Blume, Judy. *Iggie's House*. Piccolo: London, 1982. Print.

Summary

The story is centered on Winnie, whose best friend Iggie has moved away. A new family, the Garbers, moves into Iggie's house and are the first African Americans to live in the neighborhood. Although Winnie quickly befriends the Garber children, the other neighbors are not so welcoming. Winnie soon realizes that some people, including her own parents, harbor racist sentiments and may be trying to drive the newcomers out.

Commentary

This book is unique in that the main protagonist is not the one facing racial discrimination but rather a secondary character. Winnie, having obviously grown up in a racist neighborhood and family, initially offends the Garbers with her unintentional racism. However, her desire to befriend the family is genuine and untainted by the ideologies of her family.

3. Brooks, Kevin. *Lucas*. New York: Chicken House/Scholastic, 2003. Print.

Summary

Cait is a teenage girl who lives on an isolated island off the coast of England. She eventually meets a mysterious boy named Lucas and is immediately drawn to him, but the other kids' reactions toward him are less than accepting. They call him a gypsy and

physically assault him. The book's themes focus on discrimination, xenophobia and redemption.

Commentary

I chose this book because of the author's characterization of Cait. She is the only one in her town to feel empathy and interest towards someone that is discriminated against seemingly for no valid reason at all. The book raises a human's intrinsic desire to do good and the desire to inflict pain and cruelty upon others. While examining Lucas' horrendous history with discrimination, readers also follow Cait's journey of self-discovery.

4. Cheripko, Jan. *Rat*. Honesdale, PA: Boyds Mills, 2002. Print.

Summary

Jeremy Chandler is a 15-year old who loves basketball but knows he can never join the school team due to a birth defect that rendered him handicapped and unable to compete. When Jeremy witnesses a coach raping a cheerleader, he testifies in court and his life is thrown upside down. The school's basketball championship is threatened, he loses his friendships with the other players, and his school life is miserable thanks to a vengeful player who is bitter about Jeremy decision to testify against the coach. Jeremy must learn to choose between doing what is right or the keeping friends as well as coping with his handicap.

Commentary

This book reminds me of Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak* because it also has a character that faces the unfair consequences of standing up for what he believes is right.

Jeremy already struggles through bullying and discrimination at school for his birth defect and a greater hardship is thrust upon him after he tells the truth about the basketball coach's wrongdoing. I especially like Jeremy's character development as someone who is insecure about his birth defect to someone who gains confidence from being different and unique.

5. Chbosky, Stephen. *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*. New York: Gallery, 1999. Print.

Summary

Charlie, a high school freshman, has a problem. He is shy, introspective and socially awkward—so shy, in fact, that the entire story is written through a series of letters to an anonymous stranger and from the main protagonist who simply chooses the name Charlie as an alias. Somewhere along the way, Charlie befriends a senior named Patrick, who is gay and secretly dating a football player. The novel follows Charlie's journey to emerge from his shell and also touches upon discrimination against Patrick's sexuality.

Commentary

Homosexuality, which used to be such a huge taboo, is slowly but surely gaining more support in the United States. Other places like Russia are showing activism in the opposite direction. I've grown up with a closeted friend and she has learned to embrace her sexuality openly in recent years. In a way, I see myself as Charlie and my friend as Patrick. I'm also painfully shy and back then, I wanted to protect my friend against her homophobic bullies but never found the courage to. Like Charlie, I finally found my

voice and stood up to her bullies for her, and she eventually learned to find confidence as well.

6. Crutcher, Chris. *Whale Talk*. New York: Greenwillow, 2001. Print.

Summary

A group of misfits in the form of a high school swim team struggles to find their places in a school that ignores their existence. The team, comprised of a multi-racial team captain, a fat kid, a one-legged angry kid, a genius, an unnoticed kid and a bodybuilding kid, eventually open up to one another, and their bond establishes a new place where they can find acceptance. The novel covers a large range of topics, such as multiculturalism, child abuse, various forms of discrimination from racism to ableism, and bullying.

Commentary

I really love this book. It touches upon every kind of “otherness” that society loathes and aspires to dispose of. For instance, Chris is slow and fearful of others and is therefore alienated. No matter how talented and warm-hearted TJ is, people like Barbour constantly acknowledge him only by his ethnicity. I liked how the swim team is comprised of outsiders and how they grow and mature through opening up to another, because the notion of a supportive community is inspiring and very much needed for those who feel alone in the world. Readers can pick and choose which character from the swim team they most strongly identify with, since there is a good variety of issues that each character faces.

7. Flake, Sharon. *The Skin I'm In*. New York: Jump at the Sun/Hyperion for Children, 1998. Print.

Summary

Thirteen-year old Maleeka Madison suffers from low self-esteem due to her dark skin color. Everyone else at school seems to have a problem with her skin, too, especially Charlese Jones, who often harasses Maleeka. Miss Saunders has a skin condition but is completely self-assured and Maleeka aspires to gain the same kind of confidence in herself in order to stand up to Charlese.

Commentary

The other books about racial discrimination deal with groups of different ethnicities. This book, however, is self-hate, or hatred for one's own ethnicity. Maleeka hates her dark skin and a fellow classmate of the same ethnicity harasses her for being "too dark." I wanted to choose a story that encompasses this problem and shows a young girl who strives to overcome her self-hate and stands up to her attackers.

8. Hosseini, Khaled. *The Kite Runner*. New York: Riverhead, 2003. Print.

Summary

Amir is a young boy from the Wazir Akbar Khan district of Kabul. His closest friend, Hassan, is his father's young servant and a member of Afghanistan's reviled Hazara minority. Set during the events of the fall of Afghanistan's monarchy, the exodus of refugees to Pakistan and the United States, and the rise of the Taliban regime, the story deals with the issue of discrimination implemented by the Taliban. Hazara people are subjected to ethnic cleansing.

Commentary

While the other books I have chosen take place in the United States and occur during times that are recognizable to most American readers, I wanted to pick a book that reflects a different audience. It's important to see discrimination and racial problems on the other side of the globe. Even though the events surrounding the discrimination are different, the core of the idea of racism is the same. Additionally, the two boys' friendship is an aspect that any reader can identify with.

9. Picoult, Jodi. *Nineteen Minutes*. Thorndike, Me.: Center Point Pub., 2007. Print.

Summary

A fatal school shooting suddenly devastates Sterling, a small and peaceful town in New Hampshire. The state's best witness, who is also the daughter of the deciding judge, cannot remember exactly what happened. As the trial unfolds, tensions begin to arise between the town's high school and the adult community, leading to the destruction of friendships and families. The book examines the right of judging someone else, the truth behind who people appear to be, and those who are "different" in society.

Commentary

Peter, the school shooter, and Josie's relationship is a sad, yet common reality. They are best friends, but Josie, who is ashamed and embarrassed to be seen around him, abandons him for the popular crowd that harasses him. Several characters that know nothing about Peter ridicule him just to fit in with everyone else. Peter is also repeatedly called a "homo" and "fag," leading him to question his sexuality. His sexuality and demeanor are reasons for his being alienated, but for those who don't know him, they are

reasons heard from the mouth of another to justify their cruel behavior. I chose this story because bullying and discrimination for certain reasons (or no reason at all) is a serious issue especially in schools where the harassment can remain hidden by the offenders or offended. Some kids feel the need to internalize all the pain, thus leading to a climax in the form of a school shooting or other heinous act of violence. School shootings are becoming more common in the media, but we should not grow desensitized to them or the reasons leading up to it.

10. Woodson, Jacqueline, and Earl B. Lewis. *The Other Side*. New York: Putnam's, 2001. Print.

Summary

Clover has been warned by her mother that it is dangerous to cross the fence that separates their African-American side of town from Anna's white side of town. Despite the warning and their differences, the two girls still find companionship in one another and defy societal rules by literally meeting in the middle. Clover and Anna soon realize that the fence, a symbol for segregation, should not even be there at all.

Commentary

This book is meant for children, but the message is something anyone at any age should learn. I found it more powerful that the protagonists, young children, are aware of the immorality of racial discrimination and segregation while the adults remain blissfully ignorant. Children are not inherently spiteful or hateful or hold prejudices against others—their ideals are shaped by their environment and adult figures. If people could

just revert back to the childhood innocence, there would be no such thing as the fence in the story.

11. Yang, Gene Luen., and Lark Pien. *American Born Chinese*. New York: First Second, 2006. Print.

Summary

The graphic novel is about a young American-Chinese boy who struggles with his racial identity and American stereotypes about East Asian ethnicities. It is told through three different tales with different characters that face their own set of problems. The first tale is centered on the Monkey King, a character from a classic Chinese novel. The second is about Jin Wang, a second-generation child of immigrants who moves from San Francisco's Chinatown to a predominately white suburb and struggles to fit into white American culture. The third is about a white American boy named Danny, whose Chinese cousin is the embodiment of Chinese stereotypes from his thick accent, appearance, and academics, and how Danny reveals his thoughts on being ashamed of his cousin. All three strive to solve their problems with racial identity.

Commentary

As a minority, I understand what it feels like to be discriminated against. All the stories I have chosen deal with the same type of alienation, but I identify most strongly with *American Born Chinese* because I have a deeper understanding and knowledge of the types of Asian stereotypes that the West has. I enjoy how the graphic novel is split into three sections and how it encompasses different perspectives that ultimately share and solve the same problem.

Sources

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