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English 112B

Critical Annotated Bibliography

### Contemporary Realistic Fiction and Identity Issues

In the late 1960's, publishers were more accepting of writers creating coming of-age stories (Donnelson, Pace 39). They identified these books as new realism or as problem novels. These are usually autobiographical and are usually referred to as "apprenticeship novels" (Donnelson, Pace 39). These new problem novels are different from earlier books in various ways. Characters in problem novels are now more diverse. The protagonists are from different social and economic backgrounds. Additionally, characters aren't don't live in perfect, happy environments. Instead, they live in harsh places where they meet many obstacles. Also, authors use colloquial language to further the point out that characters are part of *real* backgrounds. The final main difference is the change of attitude and mode. Problem novels now are written more in the tragic or ironic modes. The books listed below cover all of these characteristics of the problem novel. However, this annotated bibliography specifically focuses on young adult characters that struggle with their identities.

The struggle for identity is a broad theme, and so with the texts I have chosen for my annotated bibliography, I have tried to include a diverse selection of books. There are some books that deal with cultural identity, such as Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. Other books discuss physical identity issues, such as race or disability. Overall, each of the books follows young people trying to identify who they are in relation to the world around them. Personally, I struggled for my own identity growing up. As a Mexican-

American, I felt that I never quite fit into the Mexican or American categories because I always felt that I was in between these two cultures. However, books that dealt with identity issues helped me through my own challenges. Alexie's book is one I read in high school and it helped me process through my identity because I could relate to Junior in various ways. The books listed below are ideal examples of literature that can help teens that don't know where they fit in.

#### Work Cited

Donelson, Kenneth L., and Aileen Pace. "Contemporary Realistic Fiction: From Tragedies to Romance." *Literature for Today's Young Adults*. 8<sup>th</sup> ed. New York: Pearson Education, Inc. 39-55. PDF File.

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

This book follows 14-year-old Junior as he leaves his school on the Spokane Indian Reservation for a mostly white school in a nearby town. He deals with the awkward stages of not only him growing up, but also of him trying to fit in with his new environment. This book is helpful for young adults because Junior is dealing with his cultural identity. He is trying to identify as a Native American but also as an American, and he doesn't know quite where he fits. It furthers my topic because Alexie comments not only on Junior's identity but also on the identity issues of Native American communities. (I have read this book before).

Beam, Chris. *I Am J*. New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2011. Print.

This book deals with J who was born Jennifer but growing up always identified as a boy. We get to know him as a teenager who after an argument with his parents decides to start classes at a school for transgender and gay teens. He begins to take testosterone treatments, hoping he can finally be the male he always felt he was. In terms of literature for young adults, I would bring this into a classroom to further explore identity issues. This book brings up a different type of struggle with identity: sexual orientation. (Summary is from Amazon.com)

Chbosky, Steven. *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*. New York: Pocket Books, 1999. Print.

Charlie is a freshman in high school that sees himself as a wallflower. He's shy, smart and keeps to himself. He's not essentially a complete outcast or a popular jock. This book is formatted in letters, where Charlie writes to an anonymous person about his everyday struggles. This book is packed with identity issues and one of the toughest parts of growing up is not knowing exactly where you fit in. It's an ideal text for any young adult (popular or not) who is trying to figure out who they are. (Summary is from Amazon.com)

Crutcher, Chris. *Whale Talk*. New York: Harper Collins, 2001. Print.

T.J. is an adopted young male who finds it hard to fit in with his community because he is African-American, Japanese and Caucasian. He is a gifted athlete, but refuses to participate in his school's sports teams. However, a moment between tough jock Mike Barbour and Chris Coughlin infuriates him to the point of deciding to put together a swim team. He puts together a team made up of the outcasts of school, but they create strong friendships. This book is a problem novel because of the diverse characters and the tough community T.J. lives in. T.J. also deals with figuring out how to identify himself, and his other team members struggle with that too. (We read this book in English 112B.)

Edmond, Stephen. *Happyface*. New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2010. Print.

This is a graphic novel about Happyface (a pseudonym) who is a nerdy artist. He moves to a new town and tries to fit in with his classmates. This graphic novel is helpful in my topic because

Happyface actually creates a new identity for himself in the new town. He molds himself into an outgoing, fun guy, hoping that it will be enough to gain him friends. Though it is a graphic novel, I would still consider it a realistic text because Happyface faces many hard obstacles. (Summary from Amazon.com)

De la Pena, Matt. *Mexican WhiteBoy*. New York: Ember, 2010. Print.

Danny has never felt like he fits in anywhere. He is half-Mexican and half-Caucasian and he doesn't feel that his Mexican side of his family accepts him or his Caucasian side. He spends the summer with family in his dad's old neighborhood and he decides to start saving up money to find his dad in Mexico. Like T.J. in *Whale Talk*, Danny is also outcast by his community, who is mostly made up of Latinos, because they don't think he is Mexican enough. Danny is desperately trying to find who he is amongst the many contradictions he stands for. (Summary from Amazon.com)

---. *We Were Here*. New York: Ember, 2010. Print.

Miguel is a troubled teen who is placed in a group home after doing time in a juvenile detention center. He accidentally killed his older brother, Diego, while they were both fooling around. He becomes unlikely friends with Rondell and Mong and they escape the group home. They head for Mexico, hoping to create a new life there. Miguel, Rondell and Mong struggle with their identities. They only define themselves based on their past crimes. This book helps my topic because it essentially centers on Miguel's difficulty in accepting his past; and, that in turn, doesn't give him the chance to separate his identity from his past. (We read this book in English 112B).

Durrow, Heidi W. *The Girl Who Fell From the Sky*. North Carolina: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2010. Print.

After a family tragedy, Rachel, the daughter of a Danish mother and an African-American G.I., is the only survivor. She moves to a new city with her African-American grandmother. Her new community is mostly black and her physical appearance makes her stand out. This novel deals with cultural identity issues; Rachel is light-skinned with blue eyes and immediately she is the outcast of her community who don't look like her at all. It is a story of a young girl who is uncertain about her identity and her parents' death only enhances that. (Summary is from Amazon.com)

Green, John. *Looking for Alaska*. New York: Penguin Books, 2005. Print.

Miles is a 16-year-old who doesn't quite fit in with his classmates. He leaves Florida for and Alabama boarding school. Here, he becomes friends with an odd group and the leader is Alaska Young. Miles becomes fascinated by his new group of friends who spend a lot of time on partying as well as literature. He develops an intense crush on Alaska. This book furthers my topic of identity because the characters switch back and forth between identifying as part of their

biological family and identifying as part of a group of friends, separate from family. (Summary from Amazon.com)

Johnson, Harriet McBryde. *Accidents of Nature*. New York: Henry Holt and Company LLC, 2006. Print.

Though she has cerebral palsy, 17-year-old Jean has always felt that she is “normal”. She never really questions about what her role in life is until she attends Camp Courage. Her cabin mate (and eventual friend), Sara, calls it Crip Camp, and this is the moment that first begins to change Jean’s perspective about her disability. This book fits in with my topic because Jean is a young girl who has only ever identified herself as someone with a disability; but, with Sara’s friendship, she starts the journey of identifying as someone outside of her condition. (Summary is from Amazon.com)

Konigsberg, Bill. *Openly Straight*. New York: Arthur A. Levine, 2013. Print.

Rafe Goldberg has always only been known as the “gay kid”. When he moves to a prep school in Massachusetts, he attempts to create a new identity that doesn’t include his sexual orientation. This attempt creates many issues and dilemmas. This book helps my topic because unlike the other texts, Rafe purposefully tries to *deny* his identity. He tries to fit in by creating a new person, and he is exploring what it means to be Rafe. (Summary from Amazon. Com as well as book talk presentation sheet).

Na, An. *The Fold*. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons Books for Young Readers, 2008. Print.

Joyce’s Aunt Gomo offers to pay for surgery to make her Asian eyelids look more Western. Joyce isn’t sure if she should go through with the surgery. She struggles with wanting to fit in with her Caucasian community and with her own fears of forever altering her face. This book is helpful because it follows Joyce’s inner conflict with whether she thinks it is right to “fix” her eyelids. It also deals with the issues of outside pressures, like Aunt Gomo, who think that beauty is not diverse. (Summary from Amazon.com)