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English 112B

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Book Talk: *To All the Boys I’ve Loved Before* by Jenny Han

Author’s Webpage: http://jennyhan.com/

http://www.jennyhan.com/bio.html

Biography

Jenny Han writes books for young adults and her works focuses on the relationships of teenagers. Her works include *Shug*, *The Summer I Turned Pretty* series, *Burn for Burn* series (co-author), and the *To All the Boys I've Loved Before* trilogy.

Quick Facts:

* Previously a children’s book seller and children’s librarian.
* Hogwarts House: Slytherin
* Favorite books? *I Capture the Castle* by Dodie Smith, *The Hundred Dresses* by Eleanor Estes, *Never Let Me Go* by Kazuo Ishiguro, *Rebecca* by Daphne du Maurier

Summary

When Lara Jean Song Covey has an uncontrollable crush of a boy, she writes a love letter to him… and puts it in her a box in her bedroom closet. One day, her the letters are enigmatically sent to their respective intended recipients. This is where it gets complicated: Josh and Lara Jean’s sister Margot have history, Peter is dating her ex-best-friend Genevieve (Gen), Lucas is gay, John Ambrose attends a different school, and Kenny never receives her confession.

In an attempt to keep her relationship with Josh “normal” when Margot goes away for college, Lara Jean enters a fake relationship with Peter, who has recently broken up with Gen. But what happens when Lara Jean and Peter start developing “real” feelings for each other?

1. “Do you know what it’s like to like someone so much you can’t stand it and know that they’ll never feel the same way? Probably not” (71).

* Why it is important: This is a line from Lara Jean’s love letter to Peter; she is trying to tell Peter that she has overwhelming feelings for him, but he is unrelatable because he does not have to deal with having a crush because he is attractive and girls flock to him. Within the context of the letter, it is full of vitriol because Lara Jean despises Peter for cocky attitude even though she has a crush on him; this shows that their relationship starts out unconventionally, one that spawns out of peculiar love-hate. Also, there is irony because near the end, the roles are reversed and Peter is put into Lara Jean’s shoes.

1. “When someone’s been gone a long time, at first you save up all the things you want to tell them. You try to keep track of everything in your head. But it’s like trying to hold on to a fistful of sand: all the little bits slip out of your hands, and then you’re just clutching air and grit. That’s why you can’t save it all up like that. Because by the time you finally see each other, you're catching up only on the big things, because it’s too much bother to tell about the little things. But the little things are what make up life” (294).

* Why it is important: Lara Jean is discussing how it feels to interact with Margot after her sister returns from Scotland for the holidays. This line is important in characterizing Lara Jean’s relationship with Margot after the Josh incident; her sister being gone, Lara Jean is not able to bond with Margot about the “small” things and it seems that the “big” thing, Josh, overshadows their relationship (at least in Lara Jean’s mind). Further, this quotation is powerful because it hits at a truth about human relationships as a whole: the small things matter most because they are what make the relationship special. Finally, this line can also be a metaphor for how painful it is for Lara Jean to “remember” her mother: her memories are like the sand and she is slowly forgetting as the sands slips through her fingers. Talk about being at a loss for words for figurative language!

1. “You only like guys you don’t have a chance with, because you’re scared” (311).

* Why it is important: This line, spoken by Peter to Lara Jean, regards how she feels regarding her “love” for him; it is a fantasy because she is scared of having real feelings. This is her character conflict for most of the novel and it is revealed here that he reason for writing letter stems from fear; these love letter are fantasies because it does not take into account the feeling of the recipient. After much rumination about what Peter means to her, she decides to face her fear and write a “real” letter to Peter and the words “Dear Peter…” end this novel.

How might you use this book in a classroom?

**Teaching Ideas/Resources:**

1. A pair text with *Romeo and Juliet*: “Teen being stupid, and they die for it.” That’s a line that gets playfully thrown around with the Shakespeare play quite often. This texts has some of the “stupid teenagers” elements to it, but a little less of the death aspect of it. The main characters pair quiet well.

* Compare Lara Jean and Romeo. *Some pointers:* What are their motivations? What about their relationships with family? In which way are they similar in their respective infatuations of the opposite sex?
* Compare Peter and Juliet. *Some pointers:* How do they respond to getting letters? How do they respond to or challenge the person “in love” with them?

1. Have students watch the film after reading the book. Have students write down elements they see similar and different between the two. At the end, ask every student to share one thing they wrote and then discuss certain the points as a class and how the choices/changes affects the meaning of the novel.
2. Discuss Halloween (and costume parties if showing Baz Luhrmann’s *Romeo + Juliet*) and its meaning to YA characters like Lara Jean and others they have seen in various books. What is the significance of dressing up as someone/thing else? Ask students to think about their Halloween costume this year if they want to wear one, as ask if not dressing up has meaning too.
3. Have students write about what they think will happen in the next book based on what they have read. For those who already know the events of the next book, have those students explain why think they Jenny Han took the books in that direction.
4. Have students write a letter about whatever they want at the beginning of the year/unit, even before reading the book, not giving any pointers about who it is for or what it has to be about. Then have student seal it in an envelope and save it for the end of the year/unit. Ask students what they want to do with the letter after having read the book. Everyone will open their letter (so that no one gets weird love letters outside of class) and reflect on how they feel about the art of letters now after reading what they wrote.

**Reasons to read this book/present it to a teen:**

1. Because it is about “Real-life Experiences”: Lara Jean does many of the things a teenager would do, and some things that a teenager would not do, and that is why she is a relatable character; she has he teenage routines and quirks. Most people have a high school story they want to tell, and it has to do with usually something in the realm of first love, regret, liking someone. This book takes that, factors in a worst case scenario, and tells the story of the resulting fallout; not every day does this happen to a person.
2. Because it is about “Facing Death and Loss”: An often overlook theme in this book is how Lara Jean faces the loss of her mother. She is able to talk with Peter about it during a tender moment in which he reveals how his father abandoned their family before the events of the novel. Lara Jean also has to deal with that seems like the loss of interacting with her sister because they both like the same boy for years and how she balances that with unconditional sisterly love.
3. Because it is about “Identity, Discrimination, and Struggles with Decisions”: Identity? Yes. Struggles with Decisions? Big Yes. Discrimination? Subtle, done so in an “invisible” way, talking about how her classmates get to wear anything during Halloween but she is stereotyped. Perhaps in not going to far, audiences can discuss larger issues as whole, such as why the novel seems to lack culture beyond a few moments. Does this tell us something about minority voices/stories that we would not expect?

Text Complexity

**Lexile Level**: 630. Recommended for ages 12 to 17.

**Dale-Chall Formula worksheet**

Raw score 1.6534 [ ? ]

Adjusted Score: (3.6365 + 1.6534) [ ? ]

Final Score: 5.3 [ ? ]

**New Dale-Chall Readability Index:**

Grade level: Grades 5 – 6

Qualitative complexity: This novel possesses several of the Exeter qualities, but it excels in the third Exeter quality of “reflecting teen experience,” especially that of strong female protagonists. Being written in first person and by a woman writer who shares the race of her character, Lara Jean feels like a friend we could have whose story we want to hear. She is talking to the audience, as if this is metafiction and this is a memoir about letters that changes her life.

Reading this novel as an adult, I feels strong emotions that I suppressed like Lara Jean that never got out because people respected my privacy. That is where literature gets it power: these emotions are universal, but this this story is unique, unlike any other day before it. Years of experience and age help people understand this better, but there is no reason a teenager cannot live it and learn about it at the same time.

Reader-Task considerations: This novel is written in small chapters, with there being seventy-two total. Since *To All the Boys I’ve Loved Before* is recent YA, Han has taken into consideration how attention spans have changed over the years: long chapters are only fun to read by a particular kind of university student; most other people like to have small sections that tell about a moment or two and how it fits into the bigger picture. It would be nice focus could be improved through more reading, but it is harder to change cognitive psychology and habits than it is to adapt the text structure. So this book written in 2014 takes this consideration seriously and allows readers to enjoy the book at his/her own pace.

Implicit complexity: This novel’s complexity comes particularly with themes that may not be readily apparent; this includes race, sex, and character motivation. As the scores above about suggest, the words used in this novel are written for a person as young as twelve years of age, but younger audiences may not be able to understand the larger issues of this book. There are reasons why Lara Jean is mixed-race. There are reasons why the mention of some characters having sex carries weight. There are reasons why characters make choices they do beyond trying to move the plot forward. For that reason, the complexity of this book is hard to classify. The ideal age for this book like so many others is hard to perfectly pin down because of this dichotomy of Lexile level and theme.

Standards

*To All the Boys I’ve Loved Before* addresses the Reading Standards for Literature very well at both the high school level:

* **Grade 9-10, Standard 3**: Analyze how complex characters (e.g., those with multiple or conflicting motivations) develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the theme.
* **Grade 9-10, Standard 7**: Analyze the representation of a subject or a key scene in two different artistic mediums, including what is emphasized or absent in each treatment.

Reading Standards for Literature (Middle School):

* **Grade 6, Standard 3**: Describe how a particular story’s or drama’s plot unfolds in a series of episodes as well as how the characters respond or change as the plot moves toward a resolution.
* **Grade 6, Standard 6**: Explain how an author develops the point of view of the narrator or speaker in a text.