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ENGL 112B

Professor Warner

27 November 2023

Growth For All Through Realism in YA Literature

Books are a part of life that can help any young or older person grow, as long as they are open-minded and can discern the important information that they can use. While young adult literature sometimes has a bad reputation for being immature or only catering to a younger audience, that is false. People of any age group can find ways to relate and learn through the literature taught in schools and on their own. Just because a piece of literature is categorized as young adult, doesn’t mean that children’s struggles are any less universal than adult ones. In fact, many struggles that young adults go through are the same as adults, and it is incredibly important to legitimize their issues and worries. There are many ways in which a writer may go about telling their story, but one powerful method is through realism. This method in particular, either in fiction or nonfiction, can connect to the audience through experiences many of them may recognize and go through, and situations that maybe aren’t so common, but still possible, and allow the audience to grow from a circumstance that isn’t their own.

The selection of literature I chose is all realistic fiction, except for one that is a true story. Most of the books are those that I have read recently, like *How Dare The Sun Rise, We Were Here, Witness,* and *Speak,* and in the past, like *The Fault in Our Stars*, *We Were Liars*, *The Outsiders* and *The Giver*. The last couple of books are not ones that I have read, but *The Perks of Being a Wallflower,* and *13 Reasons Why* all have film/TV adaptations that I’ve seen pieces of if not all. The fact that they were made into film shows their popularity.

*How Dare The Sun Rise* by Sandra Uwiringiyimana was an incredibly impactful story about a young child of war who experienced a massacre while living in Africa and then immigrating to the U.S. for safety. While this is a unique and terrifying experience, there is a lot of truth in some of the struggles that Uwiringiyimana goes through such as racism, transitioning to a new country, being a child of immigrants who are unfamiliar with the society she’s growing into, having mixed cultures, and more. We see a similar theme of racism in *We Were Here* by Matt De La Pena, but there is a much different kind of depth in this story of family struggles and finding ways to accept yourself. There are many things that may be hard for kids to accept in their lives, such as tough topics like death, abuse, sexual assault, lies, and more that can be reflected in realistic YA literature such as *Speak, The Fault in Our Stars, We Were Liars, The Giver, The Perks of Being a Wallflower,* and *The Outsiders*. This selection of books all have unique ways of representing these themes like in *The Fault in Our Stars* which focuses on the perspective of a teen with cancer who is depressed and feels like she is waiting for death at her doorstep. In this representation, she works through the feeling of being a burden on her family and questions about is anything is meaningful or worth it. While the readers are likely not all terminally ill patients, these feelings can be understood by a mass of people, young and old.

In this bibliography, I hope to reinforce the idea that YA literature facilitates growth for people of all ages and legitimizes the situations that young adults go through and feel. Through these pieces of literature, anyone can learn more about the world, themselves, or those around them in a way that helps them navigate through life a little easier, or a little more wisely.

Annotated Bibliography

Asher, Jay. *Thirteen Reasons Why*. Razor Bill, 2007.

* (Have not read- have watched all parts of the show that are in the book) *Thirteen Reasons Why* tells the story from the perspective of assiduous high schooler Clay Jenson. He receives a mysterious package with 7 double-sided tapes recorded by a classmate of his who recently committed suicide. In these tapes, she describes thirteen reasons, including people, that contributed to her decision to end her own life. He is puzzled as to why he received this package but slowly begins to understand his place. The reader follows Clay Jenson as he travels around his town, listening to her story and uncovering *her* truth and struggles.
* In this book, young adults see the process of characters making important life choices and the effects of their decision-making. Amongst their relationship issues, identity formation, and being in the middle of abusive situations, not everyone goes about things in the right way. Readers can learn from their mistakes and consider their relationships and actions differently and with more care. The story is engaging for young readers as it switches between Clay’s perspective and Hannah’s tapes telling about different points in her life. Of course, the mystery surrounding the story can be Clay’s supposed role in her suicide as well as all of the elements that led to it with plenty of tension as we uncover the events and connect them to the people Clay witnesses after finding out. Readers will likely be able to find ways to understand their own feelings by seeing how the characters in the book represent them, like depression, wanting to fit in, their reputation, etc… Hannah’s sexualization is, unfortunately, a scenario that brings light to the truth of how women and girls are treated that many teens may have gone through.

Chbosky, Stephen. *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*. Pocket Books, 1999.

* (Have not read- have watched the movie ) Chbosky’s book is written from the perspective of an introverted high school student named Charlie writing to an unknown friend. He essentially journals about his day-to-day experiences as he moves through high school witnessing the lives of those around him and learning how to partake in his own. Through his newly formed relationships with a group of friends, and his high school teacher as well as developing his bond with his siblings, he finds himself in unique situations that force him to see the world differently than before. He reminisces events from his past that he didn’t fully understand or take a part in as well and remembers traumatic instances he once suppressed. He finds a way to move forward despite his trauma.
* Charlie learns how to actively participate in his own life and starts making decisions to move it forward one step at a time. People of any age can look through their lives and find ways in which their experiences may hold them back and cause them to run away from daunting situations. Humans are all about the ways they interact with the world and work through their relationships with their family, friends, peers, etc… and Charlie attempts to make his way through these, questioning where he is placed amongst it all. We see a representation of a youth learning how to cope with the deaths of those close to them, abuse that has been done toward them and others they care for, and overcoming the resentment they feel for being wronged. The structure is well made as it has some flashbacks of Charlie’s past, but also many different settings to keep the story lively. There are many instances that include surprise and secrecy that create engagement. We also see some truth in the experiences of the LGBTQ+ community and mental illnesses which is important to reach those readers.

De La Pena, Matt. *We Were Here.* Random House Inc., 2009.

* (Have read) This book, *We Were Here* by Matt De La Pena, is from the perspective of the teen Miguel. Miquel talks about how he did something bad and because of that, he has to go to a boy group home and write in a journal. He struggles with the guilt of his mistake and the separation from the family whom he feels can never see him the same way. He escapes from the group home to go to Mexico with two other boys in the home, Rondell and Mong. During this journey, he learns from the two other boys and discovers more about himself. He learns about how the world isn’t so black and white, and even though the world doesn’t always forgive you, you can forgive yourself.
* Miguel and the other characters provide a wide variety of representations that can resonate with young adults *and* older readers. Miguel struggles with familial issues after his mistake and not only feels guilt toward them but also sadness for what he perceives as resentment. He makes “friends” with Mong and Rondell but even their relations are strange in that they are all troubled teens who don’t always know how to properly communicate or handle situations in a mature manner. Like some of the previously mentioned books, Miguel has to learn how to cope with the deaths of those close to him. As Miguel is a young boy, we see his naivete (despite how smart he is) in romantic relationships which most people can identify with. A nickname that Rondell calls Miguel is “Mexico” even after his constant responses saying that he has never been to Mexico, nor does he speak Spanish which makes him feel like he’s a fake who just got lucky to be privileged. The formation of identity for those who are mixed race is incredibly common- even I struggle with it personally. The book is structured in a very interesting way as it shifts between telling the story and being excerpts from his journal in his recount of the events. There is plenty of mystery as the reader doesn’t know what Miguel did to get in trouble, and lots of excitement and surprise as they break out of the boy group home and run away. It tells of some wider-world truths about justice, good and bad, prejudice and racism, and more. The book is sophisticated as the main character is quite smart and philosophical as well, forcing a new perspective on the reader.

Green, John. *The Fault in Our Stars.* Penguin Books, 2012.

* (Have read the book and watched the movie) This book is told from the perspective of Hazel Grace Lancaster who is a current cancer patient who had thyroid cancer spread to her lungs. After realizing her depressed state, her parents and doctor have her go to a support group for cancer patients. While there, she meets a young man named Agustus Waters who is an ex-cancer patient with an amputated leg there to support their mutual friend. The two connect and share some of their favorite stories, become very close, and care for one another dearly. When Agustus gets in contact with Hazel's favorite author through email whom she had never been able to get a hold of, they plan out a journey to Amsterdam to meet him and find out the ending of her favorite book which ends in the middle of a sentence to signify the main character’s death.
* This book, while being unique in experience because most teens are not terminally ill, allows people to empathize with being scared to hurt others, being depressed with one’s current life and feeling stuck, and worrying about feeling hurt by losing those close to them. Hazel makes choices to move her situation further by putting herself out there despite her depression and making wonderful relationships that, despite their tragic endings, she feels were worth it in the end which can push readers to make advancements in their own lives despite being scared. She feels guilty about being a burden on her parents and those close to her which some teens and adults can find themselves worrying of themselves. The book is very attention-keeping as the audience is constantly wondering what will happen next with her illness, what answers her favorite author gives her about his character’s family (and therefore her own), and her progression with her relationship with Agustus. Here we have a strong female protagonist who continues to fight through her dying body and worries for those around her.

Halse Anderson, Laurie. *Speak.* Farrar Straus Giroux, 1999.

* (Have read and watched the movie) *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson tells the life of a young girl named Melinda Sordino who has been recently outcasted by her friends and entire school for calling the cops at a party. What no one knows, and won’t hear an explanation for, is that Melinda was raped at that very party. The readers follow her as she struggles with speaking up about her traumatic experience and works through her depression and anxiety about her sexual assault. Melinda describes life at home with both parents’ below-par communication tactics, and the constant misunderstandings between her and her family, friends, and teachers. She works through her feelings through the use of art but finds out her ex-best friend starts dating her rapist and she is afraid to say the truth.
* Melinda goes through much trial and error when making important life choices. She tries to find moments to tell of her experience but finds that she has to work through her trauma on her own more before she can do that. *Speak* is one extremely famous story because of how many people come to the author and tell of their own secrets about sexual assult, making this book, very sadly, something many victims, young and old, can find themselves represented in. Melinda has to make some important choices about friends and telling her truth for her own sake and for anyone in the future. Her family issues and ways of strained communication can hit close to home with those who don’t always know how to approach their families and find that they’re just sitting silent while the world moves around them. The story is interesting as the reader wants to find out exactly what happened to cause Melinda’s ostracization and what will happen if she ends up telling people about the sexual assault. The plot points are well structured as we move through Melinda’s points in different areas of her life from being at home, and at school, and the flashbacks of what once happened in her past with her friends before they separated and at the party that caused it all.

Hesse, Karen. *Witness*. Scholastic Press, 2001.

* (Have read the poetry book) *Witness* by Karen Hesse stands out from amongst the other works I have put on this list because not only is it free poetry, instead of a novel, but it is also set further back in time in 1924, making it historical fiction. This play is told from the perspective of many different characters, all somehow connected to the actions of the KKK. There are those who are conflicted by being on the KKK side, and those who are victims of their agenda. The KKK is recruiting members and many of the main characters, such as Ester Hersh and Leanora Sutter are experiencing prejudice and racism.
* This story shows the struggle of making life choices such as wondering if joining the Ku Klux Klan *really* is protecting their town, or if they are in over their head with the kind of violence and bad actions that the members take. Some people find themselves in between where they have loved ones involved but don’t approve, such as Viola Pettibone whose husband starts involving himself. It is a universal struggle for people of all ages to wonder where they fall amongst the values of those around them, as no one can be exactly alike. This poem book has elements of prejudice and discrimination which are worldly topics still prevalent today, and finding identity. The story is very interestingly structured in that it constantly flips through characters of different perspectives and ages, allowing for easy relation for audiences of all age groups. The voices are so well done that one could guess who was speaking just by reading the words with no name indication. Because the story is so fast-paced, it is easy for the reader to keep up and stay hooked with the individual stories and how they intertwine. Even though the KKK isn’t around the way it was in the setting of the books, racism, and violence because of prejudice and racism are very much still issues that young adults and grown-ups go through. Readers can grow by witnessing the events of the story by understanding how some people were manipulated and hurt by the Ku Klux Klan agenda. *Witness* informs about the wider world because, while the story is fictional, the kinds of terrible acts like the ones in the story are real.

Hinton, S. E. *The Outsiders.* Penguin Random House, 1967.

* (Have read the book and watched the movie a very long time ago) The Outsiders is about two rival gangs, the Greasers and the Socs, consisting of youths in the lower and upper-income brackets. The main character, Ponyboy, finds himself in the middle of the two gangs in that they always get into violence in trouble with one another but it’s a hard life for him. He feels like an outsider. He witnessed others getting hurt and being hurt himself because of the rivalry.
* The characters in *The Outsiders* can reflect teen readers because it is told from their perspective at a time when they are forming their identities and are influenced by the group around them. Even though Ponyboy doesn’t feel completely at ease with doing violence, he follows a lot of the gang's ways because of peer influence. Not only do teens resonate with peer influence, but anyone can. Even though the story goes beyond typical experiences, the themes of relationships, separation of class and economy, and violence are prevalent in today’s time.

Lockhart, E. *We Were Liars*. Delacorte Press, 2014.

* (Have read) In *We Were Liars* by E. Lockhart, the story is told from the first-person narration perspective of 17-year-old Cadence Sinclair. She is part of a wealthy family who owns an island and goes through constant rivalries among the parents about the grandfather's inheritance that they will receive once he passes. She spends her summers with her cousins and someone like a family friend named Gat whom she forms a romance. At the time of the book, Cadence explains that she had an accident that caused her to lose many of her memories and suffer from severe headaches. What the reader comes to find is a tragic past where she is the sole survivor of a scheme she and the group came up with to end the rivalries between their parent’s inheritance and burn the main building down. The biggest problem is that all of the schemers died, except for Cadence.
* Cadence makes the major choice of burning the building along with her cousins and Gat because of the extreme tension in her household. There were major consequences, but that is the decision she chose and it can be a lesson to the readers about the consequences of their actions. The story is based on the familial issues she witnesses. Greed, selfishness, and animosity are real-world feelings that can form- especially amongst family members as no one can choose who they are tied with. These kinds of feelings know no age. Cadence copes with loss and being alone which never only targets young adults. The story is structured in a very imaginative manner, piecing together Cadence’s past and her confusion about the present. The mystery of what happened to Cadence and what she has yet to remember keeps the reader hooked and the language is fast-paced.

Lowry, Lois. *The Giver*. Houghton Mifflin, 1993.

* (Have read and have watched the movie) *The Giver* by Lois Lowry is an extremely famous YA novel to the point where it also has a successful movie adaptation. While the story has many science-fictional or maybe even magic elements, there is much realism in the story which is why I included this one. The story revolves around a teenager named Jonas who is experiencing the day in which he moves onto the next phase in his life, the Ceremony of Twelve, where he will be assigned his job from thenceforth. In this world, the people and the environment are controlled to the minute detail where color, weather, politeness, and even family units are decided. Jonas worries about his ceremony as most people seem to have their identity figured out and can guess where they will be placed. Jonas is the first in a long time to become the Reciever of Memory, where he then learns of the world which the community keeps from the rest of the citizens. Upon discovering the secrets, Jonas wishes to share the relaity with everyone, so he goes on a journey to release them all, threatening those controlling the community.
* Jonas takes an active role in the story as he is brave and makes decisions that he believes are the best for everyone, showing the reader that they have power in choice and standing up for what they believe in. Jonas goes through familial conflicts because they don’t see eye-to-eye about his small- and then large- rebellions against their society and that will always be a universal experience for anyone trying to stray from the norm. At the beginning of the story, Jonas feels he doesn’t understand his identity and what he is made for. Young adults especially can find a relation in this feeling because no person is defined by one or two simple things, but society pressures people to identify who they are plainly so that they may be categorized. Not only do young adults go through this, but adults as well. This story in particular is addicting as the readers slowly find out more and more about the strange world and the secrets Jonas is holding. While the readers may not get the opportunity to enlight their entire world, they can grow from the courage Jonas has and the things he learns about his own values and what’s truly important about humanity- fully experiencing all of their emotions, and the things life has to offer, the good and the bad.

Uwiringiyimana, Sandra. *How Dare the Sun Rise: Memoirs of a War Child.* Harper Collins

Publishers, 2018.

* (Have read) This story tells the true events that Sandra Uwiringiyimana went through from her childhood to adulthood. Having experienced a brutal massacre where her community, some friends, and some family members were killed right in front of her, she is forced to cope with such a tragic experience before leaving her home country to go to America. While in America she finds herself immersed in a completely different culture where she is labeled and treated, unlike any way she had been in Africa. She uses her voice and knack for justice to work her way through prejudice and discrimination and tell the true story of her past, the good and bad.
* Uwiringiyimana is a strong female protagonist of the memoir in that, while she struggles heavily with PTSD and depression, she also works to help others and spread her story. Not only did she touch on the violence of the attack on her camp, but also sexual assult experiences which, as mentioned previously, are all too common. Young adults may not have gone through the tragedy that she has, but through this, they can learn about the wider world, more than just the depictions of Africa that they see on TV, but also understand all of what some have gone through who are not as privileged as them. As an immigrant herself, she conflicts with her family about the society she grows up in in America which many may find themselves in as cultures and values often conflict between generations. Uwiringiyimana went through immense loss, from her little sister and other friends and community members to her home in Africa, and even her innocence. This memoir is a powerful and wonderful story that transitions between memories of her time in Africa to the life she grew into in America. It is a coming-of-age where the ups and downs of a person are clear and realistic. One might learn to create their own ethical standards after seeing all that she stands for.