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Contemporary YA Literature: Approaching Issues of Race and Prejudice

Over the course of the last century the world has progressed in many ways, and although the sting of social darwinism is not quite as acute as it once was, racism still finds its place in everyday life. Race and prejudice are topics that always carry around with them an abundance of negative feelings, wherever they are brought up. The reality of racism is sometimes hard to understand as it appears to be such an ignorant way of thinking. Unfortunately it may be something that humanity will have to deal with until the end of existence. For this reason, it is important for young adults to have an understanding of how racism has played a part in human history, as well as how it still manifests itself to this day. As adolescents become responsible and contributing members of society they must be able to recognize where racism is being experienced. The most dangerous aspect of racism is that it can go unnoticed and find its way into a nation's institutions. The difficulty with discussing racism in a classroom setting, is that everyone experiences it differently. It is hard to explain to a student just how much racism can affect an individual or a community, if that student has never experienced it on a personal level. Statistics, figures, graphs, and pictures can be powerful, but they cannot put a person into the mind of someone who has felt the touch of oppression. Literature offers a solution to that problem by presenting a safe medium through which young adults can learn about race related issues.

Realistic fiction and non-fiction literature can be used to show students the detrimental effects that hate and prejudice can have on a community. The list of contemporary literature in this bibliography was put together with the intent of showing young adults a variety of perspectives on race relations in both the United States, and the rest of the world. The texts cover topics such as apartheid in South Africa, the Jim Crow era in the United States, the Holocaust, and the Civil Rights Movement. First hand accounts, told through the lives of the characters in a particular text, offer various perspectives on how racism is experienced by individuals. Young adults will come into contact with characters that are either witnessing some form of racial prejudice, or are the victim of it themselves. This will allow readers to see a side of prejudice and intolerance that they otherwise may not have known even existed. The following works in this bibliography are meant to educate young readers about the history of racism, and to help prepare them to deal with any form of discrimination/prejudice they may witness in their own lives. Hopefully adolescents will extrapolate from this list of literature, the importance of standing up for those that are being oppressed, and not to turn a blind eye to injustice in society.

Annotated Bibliography

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

This is the story of a 14 year old Native American boy named Arnold Spirit Jr, struggling with issues of racial identity. The occurrences that the narrator describes in this novel are based on the real life experiences of the author, Sherman Alexie. Arnold does not fit in on reservation, and he is cast aside by the rest of the community. He decides to leave the reservation and attend the white school 20 miles away in a small farm town, where the only other Indian around is the school's mascot. Caught in between both worlds, Arnold faces discrimination on either end (Goodreads.com). The novel demonstrates what it is like to live as a mixed race individual in a society where race is an integral part of a person's identity. The themes of racial identity and discrimination in this book will help young readers understand that racism comes in all shapes and sizes, but is harmful nonetheless. The Native American experience in contemporary United States is not one that is often reported on, so it is important for young adults to be exposed to this unique life perspective.

Crutcher, Chris. *Whale Talk*. New York, Greenwillow Books, 2001.

Whale Talk is narrated from the point of view of a mixed race high school student named The Dao Jones. T.J. does not fit in at his school, on account of his mixed heritage, but also because he refuses to participate in the jock culture that surrounds him. T.J. faces various

instances of racial prejudice throughout his life, both in and out of school, but with guidance from loving adults, such as his parents, he is able to overcome this adversity. One day, T.J witnesses a student with a learning disability, Chris Coughlin, being picked on by one the jocks at his school. The issue arose over Chris' legitimacy in being able to wear the school's letterman jacket, as he is not an athlete. T.J decides to stand up to the bully, and his narrow minded colleagues, by forming the school's first swim team, composed of all the outcasts he can find, including Chris. *Whale Talk* presents young readers with a story about racial identity and confronting discrimination within a community. T.J. is exposed to the towns discriminatory habits, because of his race, but the rest of the members of his swim team also face prejudice due to other physical attributes. This novel helps to illustrate the ignorance and blind hate that helps fuel racism in a society.

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

This novel chronicles the events that take place in a small Vermont town in 1924, after the arrival of the Ku Klux Klan. Hesse tells her story based on real experiences. She writes in free verse poetry, from the perspective of a handful of characters, and divides the events into five acts. At the center of the plot are two young girls: Leonora Sutter, who is black, and Esther Hirsch who is Jewish. They have recently become the target of the newly formed Klan, lead by the town's overzealous preacher. Things take a violent turn and all of a sudden the whole town is on edge. The various perspectives given by each character create a unique lense through which to observe the devastating impact that racism can have on a community. This book can be used to explore the ways in which racist ideologies can start to takeover a community and tear it apart.

Like some of the other novels in this list, *Witness* paints a picture of what it is like to experience racism on a personal level.

Hughes, Langston. "Langston Hughes: Theme for English B." *Langston Hughes: Theme for English B*, www.eecs.harvard.edu/~keith/poems/English_B.html.

This poem by Langston Hughes is told from the perspective of black student attending a white school. The student has been asked to write a personal paper of his choosing for an English class. The speaker begins by introducing himself as a colored student from Winston-Salem, attending a school in Harlem. He then describes the various neighborhoods he walks through on his way to and from school. The speaker explains that it is not easy to explain exactly who he is, so he begins listing off things that he believes are part of his identity. In the final stanza he points out that because he is black and his professor is white, they each will have unique perspectives on life. Although the speaker will never experience what it is like to be white, and vice versa, they both can learn from one another. This poem is included in the list, because it presents a unique voice of a person trying to assimilate into a society that has actively worked to oppress them. There are certain aspects of the speaker that can attributed to his ethnicity, but for the most part, his wants and desires are reflective of American culture.

Kidd, Sue Monk. *The Secret Life of Bees*. New York, Viking, 2002.

Lily Owens is a fourteen-year-old white girl living on a peach farm with her father, in Sylvan, South Carolina. Her father is abusive and Lily lives with the guilt of possibly having killed her mother. The novel takes place in 1964, right in the middle of the Civil Rights

Movement, and Lily watches President Lyndon B. Johnson sign the Civil Rights Act. Lily is mentored by her black housekeeper, Rosaleen Daise, and she learns from her as she witnesses the type of discrimination and violence that is directed at black people. Lily was brought up in a racist household, but the more time she spends with Rosaleen, the more she begins to understand the full extent of racism in the United States. This novel gives readers a chance to experience racism through the eyes of an innocent onlooker. Lily may not be black, but she still suffers from racism regardless. The novel demonstrates the irrationality of racism, and the importance of supporting one another when ignorance and hatred seeks to tear us apart.

Lee, Harper. *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Philadelphia, Lippincott, 1960.

Scout Finch and her brother Jem live at home with their father, Atticus, in the small Alabama town of Maycomb. The Great Depression has hit the town hard, but Atticus manages to get by thanks to his profession as a lawyer. The story is told from the perspective of an adult Scout, reflecting on her time in the rural town. Scout and Jem are typical children, playing all day during the summer, getting into trouble, and going to school. Things take a more serious turn when Atticus decides to defend a black man named Tom Robinson. Tom has been accused of raping a white woman, and the predominantly white town is out for blood. Scout and her brother are subjected to abuse and consternation from other townsfolk, because of her father's decision. The events of the trial unfold, until Tom is unjustly sentenced to prison, where he is shot upon trying to escape. This novel is one of the first and most powerful canonical works in young adult literature that tackles the issue of race relations in the United States. Prejudice and discrimination

are central themes in this story from which young readers can learn. The story points out just how flawed racist ideologies can be, and the harm that come them.

Mathabane, Mark. *Kaffir Boy: The True Story of a Black Youth's Coming of Age in Apartheid South Africa*. New York, Macmillan, 1986.

Mathabane only attends school to appease his mother, but he soon learns to love it. He eventually graduates from primary school with a scholarship, which allows him to afford his secondary education. Mathabane begins reading many books, from which he learns English, and he begins to play tennis. He joins his high school tennis team, but the decision is met with controversy as it is illegal for black students to participate in the sport. With the help of Wilfred Horn, owner of the Tennis Ranch, and renowned tennis player Stan Smith, Mark is able to play tennis. His skills on the court earn him a scholarship, and an opportunity to attend university in the United States. This story is author Mark Mathabane's autobiographical account of his escape from life in Apartheid South Africa. It focuses on the vicious nature of the apartheid system and his journey to becoming a well-known tennis player. It depicts the life of young black children dealing with racism and stereotypes, and shows that by embracing education Mathabane was able to find a way out.

Sheinkin, Steve. *The Port Chicago 50: Disaster, Mutiny, and the Fight for Civil Rights*. New York, Roaring Brook Press, 2014.

This story revisits the events surrounding the disastrous explosion of a munitions supply warehouse in the port of Oakland, during World War II. The explosion destroyed freighters,

docking ships, ports, and a few barracks. The aftermath of the explosion found 800 casualties and over 300 black Navy servicemen killed. When black navy men seek justice for the dangerous living conditions they are subjected to they are met with harsh resistance from the U.S. armed forces. The historical narrative follows the perspective of several characters who describe the subpar living conditions that were made available to black soldiers, as well as the discrimination they fell victim to at the hands of the U.S. Navy (Nguyen). Using real life documents and testimonials surrounding the event, Sheinkin is able to shed some light on some the racism that exists within American institutions. This is an important novel in the list, because it is easy to believe that a single individual can harbor racist attitudes, but young adults may not quite comprehend the full extent of institutionalized racism.

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

This is a graphic novel consisting of three separate, but parallel stories. The first storyline is based upon the legendary Chinese folk tale of the Monkey King. The second storyline follows the life of second-generation immigrant Jin Wang. Jin has moved from San Francisco's Chinatown to a predominantly white suburb. He struggles to fit in at school and within white American culture in general. His story links the other two tales. The third story depicts the life of a white American boy named Danny. Danny is visited by his Chinese, cousin Chin-Kee, who displays many of the stereotypical attributes of the Chinese. *American Born Chinese* was included in this list, because it touches on issues of racial identity and the harmful effects of racial stereotyping. The story demonstrates how racism can be so powerful that people of color

begin to judge themselves and reject their own ethnicities. It helps to show that even in contemporary times, racial prejudice continues to affect people in their daily lives.

Zusak, Markus. *The Book Thief*. New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 2006.

This novel is told from the point of view of Death, and it depicts Death's perspective on the events surrounding World War II in Germany. The story centers on Liesel Meminger, a young girl sent to live with foster parents at Himmel Strasse. As the war unfolds, Hitler becomes more and more powerful, and prevalence of the Nazi regime becomes more evident. Liesel finds solace within the pages of literature and she finds a means of escaping the hatred surrounding her. Through her relationships with members of the Himmel Strasse community, as well as her affinity for books, Himmel discovers the power of words. She learns that words can spread pain and hatred, but that they can also propagate love and hope (Kamrar). *The Book Thief* is an important addition to this list, because it covers one of the most horrific displays of human cruelty in recent history. The Nazi regime was purely based on racism and discrimination, and as a result Europe was changed forever. Young adult readers will be introduced to an instance of violent, institutionalized racism that occurred outside of the United States, but which affected the entire world.

Works Cited

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