

A Parallel Journey: Inward and Outward Progression in Young Adult Literature

A common theme in young adult adventure and mystery novels is a physical quest paired with an inward quest of self-discovery. In Robert Cormier's novel, *I am the Cheese*, Adam Farmer ventures on his bicycle southward down the East Coast in pursuit of the truth regarding his family's and his own identity. As his adventure progresses, Adam learns more about himself and has flashbacks to events in his family's history that help him make sense of his world.

I am the Cheese sets up a parallel structure between Adam's outward, physical journey and his inward, mental journey. This structure is present in many young adult novels -- and adult novels as well -- because it is a fairly accurate reflection of reality. People set out on tasks in order to accomplish a discreet goal and end up learning about themselves or the world as an unintended consequence. A road trip with one's family may be undertaken with the express purpose of reaching a destination, such as Yellowstone, but it may turn out that those involved discover things about themselves and each other along the way -- perhaps, that the youngest sibling has no sense of self-preservation when it comes to confronting bison on the front porch of the cabin.

A dual-journey is a well-utilized and effective story-telling strategy. Stories in which an inward and outward journey are paired work very well in terms of character

development and plot progression. A physical journey alone may be entertaining and action-filled, but often lacks the character development that satisfies a reader and makes the story seem worthwhile. A purely mental journey of self-discovery results in a character who has gained maturity, but it can also bore the reader with a lack of action. The most effective novels are those which find a harmonious balance between the two - a captivating story to keep the reader's attention and a meaningful progression of character so it doesn't feel pointless.

A good method for incorporating stories like these into a classroom is to have students write about a significant event in their lives that taught them something or resulted in personal growth. Once the students can recognize the parallel journey, have them read stories that exemplify this structure. Students can then make a timeline that reflects the stories' inward and outward progressions.

Annotated Bibliography

- 1) Cormier, Robert. *I Am the Cheese*. New York: Knopf, 1977. Print

I Am the Cheese follows young Adam Farmer in his quest for the truth regarding his history and that of his family. Along the way, he uncovers repressed memories of his father's Mafia troubles and the FBI's efforts to establish his family's new identity.

This is a great book for young readers because there is a palpable sense of mystery that is sustained throughout the story. As Adam journey's toward Maryland, he uncovers more and more about himself and his character as a young man.

I read this book in its entirety.

- 2) De La Peña, Matt. *We Were Here*. New York: Delacorte, 2009. Print.

We Were Here follows the story of Miguel as he is sentenced to serve time in a group home for a crime he committed against his brother, Diego. Instead of serving his time in the group home, Miguel runs away with a couple of the other juveniles sentenced there. As he journeys south from San Jose toward Mexico, he learns a lot about himself and his two companions who he had previously written off.

This story is an important one for a number of reasons. It is written in a manner that is easily accessible to someone not accustomed to reading, and it deals with some pretty heavy topics including murder and accidental manslaughter. The characters that are focused on make meaningful progress in their own maturation.

I read this book in its entirety.

- 3) Paulsen, Gary. *Hatchet*. New York: Bradbury, 1987. Print.

Hatchet follows the story of Brian Robeson, a thirteen-year-old boy who is stranded alone in the wilderness after the man piloting the plane he is on suffers a heart attack and dies, crashing the plane in the process. Through sheer determination and the help of a hatchet given to him by his mother, Brian manages to survive long enough to retrieve the plane's distress beacon and summon help.

Although Brian is terrified by the plane crash and the death of the pilot, he uses his ingenuity and self-reliance to survive. As he establishes a shelter and scopes out his new situation, he learns a lot about self-reliance.

I read this book in its entirety.

4) Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Hobbit*

“Bilbo Baggins, a respectable, well-to-do hobbit, lives comfortably in his hobbit hole until the day the wandering wizard Gandalf chooses him to take part in an adventure from which he may never return.”

Bilbo learns about the world around his own small hometown. After facing a dragon and outwitting a gang of trolls, Bilbo gains courage and volumes of tales for book he will write later, after his travels.

5) Green, John. *Looking for Alaska: A Novel*. New York: Dutton Children's, 2005.

Print

“Miles finds adventure, uncertainty, and excitement in spades at Culver Creek, the boarding school he transfers to for his junior year of high school. He gets to be pretty good friends with the Colonel, Takumi, and Alaska through smoking, pranking, and making mischief... and he falls madly in love with Alaska in the process.”

“The truth is, John Green shows us how formative teenage friendship, love, and grief are—and he does it without making teenagers seem small and their situations contrived. He doesn't just show us the peaks and valleys of friendship, but instead he attempts to show us how Miles works through his grief following Alaska's death and forgives himself for letting her go.”

I have not read this story.

6) Zusak, Markus. *The Book Thief*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006. Print.

“Trying to make sense of the horrors of World War II, Death relates the story of Liesel — a young German girl whose book-stealing and storytelling talents help sustain her family and the Jewish man they are hiding, as well as their neighbors.”

Works Cited:

<http://www.shmoop.com/looking-for-alaska/>

<http://www.npr.org/2012/08/07/157795366/your-favorites-100-best-ever-teen-novels>

The Hobbit

The Book Thief