

Are These Parents for Real? Students' Views of Parents in Realistic and Historical Fiction

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What do you think of a father who banishes his small son to his room for months for slamming a door? How endearing is a father who shows overt favoritism to his older son while neglecting the younger one? Can we possibly fathom what it is like for a young child to witness his father murdering his mother? What would you have to say to a gun-toting, free-spirited grandmother who follows her own rules, or to a young lady trying to deal with a new stepfather and a helpless mother as the Civil War changes everyone's lives? What words of consolation can you offer to a young girl whose tyrannical father literally abandons her in his quest for a male heir to the throne? When viewed collectively, these brief descriptions capture the wide range of parent characters we find in many young adult books. While these portrayals are only a small sampling of parental figures in several young adult novels, they lead us to ask the questions, "Are these parents for real?" and "Do young adult readers think so?"

Parents come in a variety of shapes and sizes in young adult literature and lead to interesting, if not unusual, relationships with the protagonists. In Vardell's perusal of parent characters of the Newbery winners in the nineties, she found an array of parental figures, while not always perfect role models, but who represented diversity in terms of gender, cultural, and language expectations as well as contexts (p. 163). As educators interested in adolescents and their literacy development, we value healthy parent-teen relationships and are encouraged when young adult authors include supportive parents or parental figures in their books. Nonetheless, the portrayal of parents in many young adult books does not necessarily reflect the positive and supportive characteristics we believe are important. Some authors of young adult books capture the attention of young adult readers by depicting parents in a less than positive fashion to create more interesting, rather than realistic, portrayals. Similar to the exaggerated and oftentimes offbeat situations presented in the media, adolescents want to read about parents whose behavior may be possible but not necessarily probable, especially in relation to their own lives. Some familiar yet rather negative portrayals of parents across different genres include such themes as domestic violence, abusive relationships, surrogate parents, abandonment, role reversals, present but negligent parents, no parents, and parental discord. On the other hand, there are young adult books that also present parents in more favorable roles, such as the caring and supportive parents in *Shabanu*, *Achingly Alice*, *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963* and *The Road to Memphis*.

Given the variety of parental roles in young adult books, we were interested in finding out how adolescent readers per-

ceived these roles themselves across different genres. We decided that an interesting comparison would be with realistic fiction novels and historical fiction novels, since both genres deal with human relationships. We posed several questions to guide our efforts. How do young adult readers view the role of parents in realistic fiction? How do they view the role of parents in historical fiction? Are there any differences across these genres? To find answers to these questions, we asked for volunteers in Monica's ninth and tenth grade English classes to participate in our project. The fourteen students who stepped forward to work with us ranged in age from 14 to 16 and had varied reading interests and abilities.

We then developed a teaching framework that enabled students to read, talk, and write about parental characters in three realistic fiction novels and three historical fiction novels, each containing a parent role mentioned in our introduction. Figure 1 contains a description of the parental involvement in each novel. Our selections represent differing themes of parental relationships, both male and female protagonists, and different configurations of parent roles (i.e., real parents, grandparents, divorced parents, step-parents).

In this article, we describe what students had to say about parental roles and also provide guidelines for implementing the instructional framework. Our description includes students' views about parental roles in real life, their expectations of parental roles in realistic and historical novels, their impressions of the parents they encountered in our selected books, and a comparison across genres about these parental characters. In addition, the guidelines for implementing the instructional framework include both discussion and writing suggestions.

Students' Expectations of Parental Roles in Real Life and in Literature

Parental Roles in Real Life

Most students had similar ideas about parenthood and expressed high expectations of parents, especially as role models for their children. They mentioned the need for supportive, caring parents who know how to create a balance between helping their son or daughter and allowing them independence to make their own decisions. Some comments were the following:

- Once they have taught me most of the basics, [they need] to let me go on to make decisions for myself and learn from my own choices.
- . . . to give me money, support, and keep me within the realms of sanity.

- To be there for me when I need them, to forgive me when I mess up, and take care of me when I'm sick.
- I expect my parents to care for me, and listen to what I have to say and respect me in no matter what I do.

From a realistic perspective, these students also noted that not all parents live up to these high expectations. Some comments were:

- Parents have a huge effect on their children; sometimes they leave mental scars that last for a lifetime. Others turn into best friends.
- Most parents these days are not good role models. They drink, smoke, shout, argue, and do other bad things in front of their children. They do not care about where their children are, or what they are doing and with whom they are doing it with. [Some] parents give their children money to keep them out of the way.
- Most parents are generally good parents. Other parents can be too strict or too nice. I think parents need to realize that kids are kids.

Parental Roles in Realistic and Historical Fiction

Overall, the students felt that societal changes would have an impact upon parental expectations and therefore expected authors to treat parental roles in realistic and historical fictions differently. Students noted differences in terms of relationships, values, discipline, family structure, and even amount of time spent together.

- In realistic fiction, I expect them to be more combative with their children, and in historical fiction, to be more supportive, maybe because in historical fiction, they may have gone through many trials together (like through wars).

- Definitely, as society changes, so do our roles as people, as does the role of parents. Parents had more time to be with their children in the past. In today's society they have jobs and many other things to do.
- In historical fiction I would expect authors to make parents high and mighty prevalent characters who do no wrong and hold absolute power. In realistic fiction, the parents are less than perfect and are not in total control of their children.
- Historically, parents had a very different role in the family. They had to teach their children a trade and were responsible for their children's limited education.

Students' Impressions of Parental Roles in Literature Parents in the Realistic Fiction Books

The students acknowledged that the authors depicted the parental relationships in a realistic manner. They viewed the mental and emotional abuse suffered by Bo in *Ironman* as more common and realistic than actual physical abuse, just as the psychological impact of Max's family history in *Freak the Mighty* would likely create a person like Max. Some, however, felt that Max might have had more psychological abnormalities as a result of his experiences. The students also felt that it is not uncommon to find fathers who find one of their children more interesting than another and play favorites, as in *Tangerine*. The students also voiced their impressions about expectations tied to living in today's society, the use of other characters as more positive parental role models, changes in parental relationships, and parental impact on children's behavior.

Expectations tied to living in today's society. As the students read the realistic fiction books, they maintained a refer-

Figure 1: Realistic Fiction and Historical Fiction Books

Realistic Fiction

Ironman by Chris Crutcher

Stemming from a strained relationship with his father, 17 year-old Beau Brewster constantly finds himself in power struggles with male authority figures in his life. An aspiring athlete who thrives on pushing himself beyond limits, Beau learns more about himself through discoveries he makes about his dad's adolescence and the similar rocky relationship he had with his own father.

Freak the Mighty by Rodman Philbrick

Maxwell Kane, son of Killer Kane, is an oversized eighth-grader who lives in the basement of his grandparents' home. With the help of his good friend, "Freak," Max comes to terms with the truth about his father's past and his mother's death. In the process he builds a better relationship with his grandparents, and a stronger sense of self.

Tangerine by Richard Bloor

Living his life as the quirky little brother of the town's football superstar, thirteen-year old Paul Fisher is used to the lack of attention he receives from his parents. After moving to the very strange town of Tangerine, Florida, Paul confronts his parents about his brother's cruelty and their willingness to excuse his abusive behavior. Although he is legally blind, Paul is the only one who can see the truth.

Historical Fiction

In My Father's House by Ann Rinaldi

Oscie and her stepfather, Will Mc Lean, have an uneasy relationship, as they are both strong minded, and often find themselves on opposing sides of issues. However, as they endure the turmoil brought on by the Civil War that quite literally commences and concludes on their homestead, they strengthen their relationship and form a strong bond of familial love and mutual respect.

A Year Down Yonder by Richard Peck

In 1937, 15-year old Mary Alice from the big city of Chicago has to spend a year living with her "trigger-happy" Grandma in a rural community. When Mary Alice arrives, she is apprehensive about her new life at Grandma Dowdel's and is counting the days until she can return to her "normal" life in Chicago. But when the year is up, Mary Alice is reluctant to leave this woman who has opened her mind and taught her so much.

Mary, Bloody Mary by Carolyn Meyer

Historically accurate, this book reveals the unusual relationship between Mary Tudor and her father, King Henry VIII. After Mary's mother, Catherine of Aragon did not produce a male heir, the king begins a new life with a new family and banishes Mary from her home, forbidding her to see her own mother.

ence to the here and now in order to understand the motives behind character actions. By focusing on behaviors that are acceptable in today's society, they were able to construct realistic impressions about story events and character actions. For example, in *Tangerine*, one student felt that the father's poor treatment of Paul was unacceptable, because "a child in today's society needs more than just one parent. Paul needs his father." Another student, in writing about her impressions of *Ironman*, pointed out that at the end, Bo's father was willing to work at improving their relationship and commented that "this makes the book more realistic, because today people have these options of going to have someone monitor their conversations and help the two people work on their relationship." The use of outside counseling as a way to solve family problems is an acceptable action by today's standards and therefore such actions heighten the verisimilitude of *Ironman*.

Other characters as more positive parental role models. While the students accepted the parents, especially the father figures in *Tangerine*, *Ironman*, and *Freak the Mighty* as less than admirable characters, several envisioned other characters in the novels as representative of more positive parental figures. The adolescent protagonists, who were embroiled in unhealthy relationships, confused about themselves and their identity, and faced with weighty decisions, find the support and direction they need from other characters. For example, some students commented about the role of Mr. Nak in *Ironman* as a supportive, caring adult model and both the grandparents and Gwen in *Freak the Mighty* serving as the mentors for Max. Even *Freak* encourages Max and also fills in as a parent figure at times as he looks out for Max. Paul in *Tangerine* had a somewhat sympathetic mother who did pay attention to him but in a rather negligent way. Nevertheless, she still represented, to some extent, a stable adult figure in Paul's life. Student responses about these peripheral characters, who actually play decisive roles in the novels, may be indicative of their stated beliefs that adolescents need understanding and caring parents. If these parents are less than desirable, then the protagonist must have another adult figure to provide support and guidance.

Changes in parental relationships. While most readers have an innate desire for happy endings, several students in this group maintained a realistic stance as they discussed the endings to the books in light of parental relationships. For example, Bo in *Ironman* changes his idea about his father once he learns that other people have poor relationships with their parents. Then "[he] comes to understand that he will be fine, even if his father never cares for him, but in order for him to do that, he will need the true love of others." This comment also reflects how the students view the adolescent need for others. Other students grappled with the complexity of relationships as they tried to rationalize outcomes that were not straightforward and simple. For instance, in his written response about the ending of *Tangerine*, one student commented, "Paul will [now] be closer to his father but [also] farther from his father [too]. I say this because Paul got his father's love by default." With the changes in relationships, the protagonists gain newer understandings about their parents even though the relationships may not be totally satisfying to the reader. While happy endings with these relationships do not occur, the authors do provide more realistic, hopeful endings for the protagonists. Bo learns to see his father through different lenses just as Max gains more insight into his grand-

parents. Paul, on the other hand, has to deal with accepting the "defaulted" place he has in his father's life.

Parental impact on children's behavior. Another thread running through student responses was the notion that the protagonists behaved the way they did because of the parents. Bo's anger at events and people at school stem from his father's need for power and control. Max has deep-seated problems interacting with others due to his father's bad deeds, and Paul must take care of himself because his father's attention is focused solely on his older brother. One student aptly described Paul's parents in the following manner:

No amount of parent counseling will help Paul's parents achieve an IQ level of over 80. Although they might learn how to be sensitive, they will not be the ones to account for Paul's character and moral development as well as responsibility. He will have to develop apart from his parents for they do not provide the strong foundation of discipline and guidance that he needs. He will enter into the world with self-taught morals and self-control since he was the one who ended up monitoring his character and ethical development. However, I'm sure he'll do fine.

While adolescents want to read books where parents are shadowy background figures or nonexistent, it seems apparent that readers cannot ignore parental figures. They are quick to analyze how parents impact the actions of the protagonist—especially when the impact is not positive.

Parents in Historical Fiction Books

The students also found much realism in the historical fiction books, even though several students felt that some character actions were somewhat "over exaggerated," especially Oscie's responsibilities in *In My Father's House*. They felt that the protagonist was too young to take on responsibilities of such magnitude, as in overseeing the plantation work. However, other students pointed out that the narrative was told from Oscie's point of view and therefore represents how she saw herself, not necessarily to the extent that she claimed to have such responsibilities. Some students also felt that Richard Peck exaggerated the audacious, plucky behavior of Grandma Dowdel in *A Year Down Yonder* because women during the Depression years would not have had that much independence. Other aspects of realism in student responses include their expectations about the historical period, the parental impact on their children's behavior, and changes in the parental relationships.

Expectations about the historical period. Students with a good grasp of history were able to formulate realistic opinions about the nature of the parental relationships in the selected books. These books spanned different time periods that would perhaps give rise to different relationships with parents—*Mary*, *Bloody Mary* in the 1500s, *In My Father's House* in the 1800s, and *A Year Down Yonder* in the 1900s. Nevertheless, the students focused mainly on justifying many actions and events as a result of the lowly status of females (all protagonists were females) during these times. Students also made references to other behaviors influenced by history, such as the social actions of royal families as depicted in *Mary*, *Bloody Mary*. The following is an example:

Her father is not really [a] father since affection is not shown between them and he never sees her. This, of course, [was] typical in the royal families of the earlier centuries. A daughter's

only useful purpose [was] to be used as a contract between two countries in order to increase wealth and chances of peace . . . I think for this time period of the royal family, [and] that this relationship [was] completely normal and acceptable.

Changes in parental relationships. Some students noted that the changes in parental relationships occurred because of the changing perspectives of the protagonists. In *Mary, Bloody Mary* students readily agreed that while King Henry began with love and ended with total indifference toward his daughter, it is really Mary's increasing awareness of her father's zeal for a son and his uncaring feelings for her and her mother that creates the change in their relationship. In addition, Oscie's relationship with her step-father and even her mother in *In My Father's House* also undergoes a change as Oscie matures. She begins to respect and admire Will and becomes her mother's caregiver, as evident in the following excerpt:

Oscie's relationship with her mother has shifted from idolizing her to taking care of her. Oscie learns to step down from the power when Will returns from his journeys, and [she] becomes more of a helper for Will than a hindrance.

In reference to *A Year Down Yonder*, one student noticed that the relationship changed between Mary Alice and Grandma Dowdel when "Mary Alice learns what a wonderful woman her grandma is. [Their] relationship is the perfect example of how people are affected by the people they are around while they are growing up."

Parental impact on children's behavior. Students particularly noticed how parents influenced characters in *Mary, Bloody Mary* and *In My Father's House*. These books illustrate parental impact in totally different ways and offer students an opportunity to examine the extremes of parental influence. In the case of *Mary, Bloody Mary*, many students commented on the detrimental effect of King Henry's actions on Mary's life and ultimate reign of England:

Although Mary tries to hide it, I think she is extremely sad about the way her father treats her (as a servant). She has been completely neglected and now she wants revenge. It is terrible to neglect a child, and the effects are clearly seen on Mary. Although Mary hated her father's ways, his acts were imposed upon her, and she ruled exactly like him, and was given the title of "Bloody Mary." This is an example of why some people think that a child will act just as they parents when they are older.

On the other hand, students were enamored with Grandma Dowdel's character in *A Year Down Yonder* and valued the positive influence she had on Mary Alice's life:

I love this relationship. I believe that is one of the healthiest relationships I have ever read about. Although Grandma never expresses her fondness for Mary Alice in words, her actions speak much more strongly. This is unbelievably effective. Each character is able to relate to the other much better because there isn't all this "static," verbal conversation between them. By learning to relate to her Grandma Dowdel through analyzing her actions, Mary Alice has learned to read other people's thoughts by looking at their faces or their body language. . . Mary Alice seems to have gotten wiser from her Grandma Dowdel's non-verbal teachings.

It may be that Grandma Dowdel embodies all the high expectations these readers have about the role of parents. She goes beyond these high expectations and is more endearing to

the readers because of her unique, eccentric mannerisms that lead to adventurous and amusing incidents.

Comparison Across Genres about Parental Characters

In general, the students found realism in the parental relationships in both the realistic and historical fiction books as they noted similarities and differences in the relationships across selected books as well as genres. They clearly emphasized the need for a reader to have background knowledge of historical events in order to analyze the realism of the historical fiction novels. Without this knowledge, a student would be unable to make a reasonable assertion about the realistic nature of parental relationships.

When juxtaposed against their stated beliefs about parental roles, some relationships fell far short whereas others exceeded their expectations. Regardless of how the parent characters compared to their expectations, the students still felt that many actions were realistic, although somewhat exaggerated at times. Students also weighed the relationships in the historical novels against accepted behaviors of today, as illustrated in the following journal entry about *Mary, Bloody Mary*:

I think, for this time period of the royal family, that this relationship is completely normal and acceptable. Family was not necessarily one you trust. Family was purely gene-related and nothing else. Of course, this is the reason why probably there were so many problems in the royal family and of course the lack of relationship is bad but that is the way it worked. I believe that is the reason why this day and age is much more successful than that time period is because of close family ties.

For *In My Father's House*, some students felt that Oscie's actions were perhaps more realistic for her time period, not the present day. They grappled with the amount of responsibility she had at such a young age. Some also felt that Grandma Dowdel in *A Year Down Yonder* was larger than life although her relationship with Mary Alice was still within the realms of believability.

In regard to the realistic fiction books, we noted some inconsistencies, especially with *Freak the Mighty*. Once again the students questioned the verisimilitude of the character, Max, more than that of his relationship with his grandparents. Several students wrestled with the idea that Max would have had more psychological problems and abnormalities as a result of his earlier experiences. Regardless, they still saw much realism in his relationship with Gram and Grim, who love him and take care of him. The power struggle between Bo and his father in *Ironman* also represents realistic behaviors to the students just as the favoritism of Eric's father in *Tangerine* lends believability to the novel.

In a discussion about which genre seemed to be more realistic in terms of parental relationships, the students felt that the historical fiction books were slightly more realistic. Given the selection of historical fiction books they read, this response appears to be in line with their initial comments concerning their expectations of parents in historical fiction. They expected stricter discipline, more rigid family life, and parents with absolute power.

Instructional Framework

This project not only yielded important insight into students' views about parent roles in realistic and historical fiction, but also provided students with an opportunity to actively

engage in non-threatening discussions that evoked both aesthetic and critical responses. The discussions enabled students to present their own opinions in a risk-free environment and allowed them freedom to choose their own topics, which, in turn, validated their ideas and served as a gateway to foster confidence in their writing. Drawing from their own experiences, background knowledge, and information gathered from the peer group discussions, the students were then prepared to write about their impressions and expectations of parental roles in realistic and historical fiction. We next present an outline of the procedures we followed in this project over the course of approximately four weeks. We describe initial tasks, the configuration of discussion groups, and the writing tasks, and provide ideas to help teachers replicate our project.

Getting Started

To begin the project, formulate questions that you believe will stimulate interest and discussion while providing opportunities for students to think critically and deeply about the characters in the books. Our questions included the following: (a) How do young adult readers view the role of parents? (b) How do young adult readers view the role of parents in realistic fiction? and (c) How do young adult readers view the role of parents in historical fiction?

The next step is to find appropriate books that will provide both interest and variety in both genres. As stated previously, the books we selected represented different themes of parental relationships, both male and female protagonists, and different configurations of parent roles. (Please refer to Figure 1 for a brief description of the six books we used in our project.) Prior to group discussions, pair up each historical fiction book with a realistic book. Students will discuss one pair of books each discussion day and take notes during the discussion to use later for the writing assignment.

Configuring Discussion Groups

The students will engage in several discussion groups, including an initial discussion about parent roles, a discussion of paired books from each genre, a discussion across each genre, and a discussion comparing genres based on the selected books.

Initial discussion. Before students read any of the books, conduct an initial discussion on the role of parents. Give each student a questionnaire to complete individually about their perceptions of parents (may be a homework assignment). After responding individually, have students use their responses as a springboard for group discussions about their expectations of parents. The group discussion can be done as a whole class or in smaller jigsaw groups. The following are examples of items to include on the questionnaire:

- Describe the role of parents.
- What is your view of parents?
- What expectations do you have of parents?
- Would you expect authors to describe parents differently in realistic fiction compared to historical fiction? Explain your response.

After this discussion, ask students to select at least one book to read from each of the two genres (realistic fiction and historical fiction). Students must keep a reflective journal in which to respond to the following prompts at each of the four designated stopping points for each book read:

- What do you know about the relationship between the protagonist and his/her parents?
- What are your impressions about this relationship so far?
- Make a prediction. (Include the parent relationship and how it affects the story.)

Discussion of paired books from each genre. Allow at least one class period to conduct each paired book discussion. Use the following prompts to guide the discussion:

- What kind of relationship does the protagonist have with his/her parents?
- Has this relationship changed? Explain how or why.
- Is this relationship realistic? Elaborate.
- What do we understand or discover about the protagonist through his/her relationship with the parents?

After facilitating a discussion for one genre, repeat this procedure for the other genre.

Discussion of books across each genre. Allow at least one class period each to conduct discussions of realistic fiction and historical fiction. Students will look for trends in parent relationships across each genre. Use the following prompts to guide the discussion:

- Compare and contrast the relationships the protagonists have with their parents.
- Discuss general and specific examples of how they are the same/different across the books.
- What conclusions can you draw about parent relationships in these books?

After facilitating a discussion for one genre, repeat this procedure for the other genre.

Discussion comparing genres based on the selected books. Allow at least one class period to conduct this discussion to compare the parents in realistic fiction and historical fiction. Students will look for trends in similarities and differences in parent relationships across both genres. Use the following prompts to guide the discussion:

- What conclusions can we draw about parent relationships in these two genres?
- How are they the same? How are they different?
- Are these parents realistic?
- Are these protagonists realistic?

Writing Tasks

The information gathered from these discussions lends itself to many possibilities for writing assignments. Students now have a wealth of ideas to use for initiating the writing process. A few sample topics to which students can respond with the information they collect from the book discussions are listed below. These writing responses can range from traditional essays to creative writing formats, depending on the objective the teacher wishes to achieve with the students.

• Description

Select two or more characteristics of the parent relationships in the books you read. Describe these characteristics in detail citing several specific examples from the texts. Make a statement about the characteristics you described.

Develop a readers' theater script of one episode in a selected book to illustrate a characteristic of the parental relationship.

- **Compare/Contrast**

Discuss your view of parents today as opposed to those discussed in the historical fiction book. Describe the similarities and differences in these relationships.

Write a poem in cinquain or diamante format to depict similarities or differences of parent characters in realistic and historical fiction books.

- **Argument**

Choose one of the genres (or one book) and discuss why you find the parents or parent relationships to be either realistic or unrealistic. Be sure to cite examples to support your point of view.

Write a letter to the author explaining your views about the parent characters in his/her book.

- **Analysis**

Analyze the parent relationships across one genre (or across both genres for a longer assignment). Select specific aspects of these relationships for a more focused analysis.

Write new lyrics to a familiar song that reveal important issues the protagonist might address to his/her parents.

Conclusion

This project proved to be very rewarding and motivating to the 9th and 10th grade students. They grappled with important issues about parent relationships in terms of their own preconceived ideas as well as those of their peers. They, in turn, used this information as a basis to critically analyze the ways in which authors of realistic and historical fiction for young adults depict parental roles in their books. By engaging in class discussions about these books, students gained a richer understanding and deeper awareness of the complexity of parent characters and how these relationships influence the

thoughts and actions of the young protagonists. Perhaps as the students read subsequent books, they will be mindful of how authors depict parent figures and will continue to ask themselves "Are these parents for real?"

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