



New Perspectives in Young Adult Literature

All of us lead busy lives, and our ability to read everything about a subject we love—young adult literature—is impossible at best. Too often, we give a cursory glance to that we favor, hoping someday, we will have the time and the inclination to read all that we missed, and then some. The purpose of this column—*The Research Connection*—is to help alleviate this very concern. True, you want to read every young adult novel that crosses your path and every article about young adult literature that is left unread on your desk and coffee table, but time just does not permit. And, even if you did, would it not be good to have someone else digest the latest about young adult literature for your own reading pleasure?

That is the purpose of this column. *The ALAN Review Research Connection* is designed to inform readers about what is new in the study of young adult literature, and what still needs to be said. As the field of young adult literature grows, more and more teachers are beginning to incorporate young adult short stories and novels into their classroom lessons. Today, it is not as unusual to hear about a novel by

Chris Crutcher, for example, appearing along side a classic by Twain or Dickens. Indeed, my daughter read Crutcher's *Chinese Handcuffs* (Laurel Leaf, 1996) the very same year that she read *Romeo and Juliet*. I was pleased that her eleventh grade English teacher made time for both. And the fact that she did only underlines how far we have come as active leaders in the dissemination of young adult literature as a vital and engaging part of today's standard middle and high school English curriculum. It means we are doing something "right."

That said, here is a summary and review of some of the more recent and prominent articles concerning the field of young adult literature:

Female Body Image in Young Adult Literature

Researcher Beth Younger provides a comprehensive and provocative read about the role of female body image and sexuality as portrayed in young adult literature written from 1975 to 1999. In her article "Pleasure, Pain, and the Power of Being Thin: Female Sexuality in Young Adult Literature" (*National*

Women's Studies Association Journal, 2003), Younger notes in her analysis of young adult novels (1975-1999), that there is a definite embedded link between body image, weight, and sexuality: thinner young women are portrayed as powerful and in control, while larger women are depicted as sexually passive and irresponsible. Young adult literature, she writes, reflects societal stereotypes, and although literary critics often ignore this genre, it remains an important body of work that deserves our attention for not only whom it entertains, but also for what it says about the human condition.

Younger writes that young adult fiction frequently depicts female sexuality as a threatening force. For young females in a patriarchal society, sexuality—particularly, sexual desire—is often represented as a primitive force that must be regulated. In Peggy Orenstein's *Schoolgirls* (1994) and Joan Jacobs Brumberg's *The Body Project* (1997), coming to terms with sexuality in a society that treats women as sexual objects is demonstrated as a prevalent and pervasive struggle for young women everywhere. Indeed, Younger contends that girls turn to young adult

fiction because it is a genre that provides many representations of young adult girls as sexual beings.

Author Judy Blume is cited as one of the forerunners of a movement in young adult fiction in which female bodies are portrayed in a frank and open manner. Now critically acclaimed, Blume's early years—*Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret?* (Bradbury Press, 1970) and *Forever* (Simon and Schuster, 1975)—are marked by works that contain frank and graphic portrayals of sexuality, and often, Younger contends, these and other sexually explicit young adult novels are dismissed by critics as not worthy because they are so bold.

Nevertheless, as Michael Cart argues in *From Romance to Realism: Fifty Years of Growth and Change in Young Adult Literature* (HarperCollins, 1996), many young adult texts that are scorned by adult reviewers are wildly popular with young readers. The reason, as both Cart and Younger assert, is that in such young adult novels as Blume's frank *Forever*, teens find a faithful and unvarnished version of true life in all its extremes and emotions.

Younger contends that embodied in most young adult novels about sexuality is another more subtle and telling theme about the self-image of young girls—the obsession with weight and body image. True, Judy Blume's *Forever* focuses on the protagonist's loss of her virginity and her subsequent discovery of sexual prowess and pleasure, but it is her depiction of her young body that draws most of the attention of the reader.

Similarly, two texts by Norma Klein, *It's OK If You Don't Love Me* (Fawcett Crest, 1977) and *Breaking*

Up (Random House, 1980), illustrate sexually open young women who derive all their power from their looks: they are in control, powerful, responsible, and ultra-thin. In *Nell's Quilt* (Farrar, Straus, & Grioux, 1987), author Susan Terris portrays a young woman who gains control of her life only after she starves herself into near anorexia. Judith Ortiz Cofer's *An Island Like You* (Penquin, 1995) shows young girls struggling with their ethnicity as they grow into their

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bodies and awareness of their sexuality. Cherie Bennett's *Life in the Fast Lane* (Random House, 1998) graphically shows one beauty queen's battle with her weight and her sense of self as a sexual being. In Connie Porter's *Imani All Mine* (Houghton Mifflin, 1999), the young hero Tasha has a baby at age fifteen, combats poverty, and struggles to accept herself even though the image of thin girls she sees in *Seventeen* magazine makes her feel huge. Similarly, *Name Me Nobody* (1999), author Lois-Ann Yamanaka presents a protagonist, Emi-Lou, who diets secretly and tries to come to terms with her sexuality and body image.

What makes these depictions so powerful, researcher Younger contends, is that even though these narratives portray ethnically diverse

young girls, they also show how the contemporary hyper-thin European ideal of beauty is prevalent in much, if not all, of young adult literature. Younger demonstrates that in all instances, heavy girls are represented as sexually promiscuous, passive, and powerless, while thin characters appear responsible and powerful. These associations of weight with sexuality are subtle and suspect, but they haunt young adults novels with a fervor often unspoken, and thus reveal much about how we perceive them and their self-images.

Younger also contends that weight and race are often the unspoken notions of the novel. Thus, when the race of character is not specifically delineated, white is assumed. Similarly, when the weight of a character is not detailed, the reader is most likely to assume the character is thin. Only if the character is considered abnormal, Younger writes, is her weight mentioned at all, and more often than not, they are called fat or, at least, chubby. And this is particularly true when the depiction is of a woman.

Young adult novels conform to the stereotype that thin is desirable, and fat is desperate and unhappy. In *Forever*, the protagonist Katherine is thin, promiscuous, but in control, while her best friend, Sybil, is fat, desperate, and vulnerable. In *Breaking Up*, sixteen-year-old Alison Rose embodies the thin ideal, not even having to exercise to maintain her perfectly proportioned body. Tasha, in *Imani All Mine*, dreams of being thinner, no matter how much it might hurt, because she believes pain is less important than looking good. And in *An Island Like You*,

fourteen-year-old Sandra longs to be more than thin and flat-chested, desiring to be like her friend, Jennifer, voluptuous and big-breasted. All these examples, and more, demonstrate how powerful body image is in the narratives of young adult fiction—as elsewhere,—and how the connection between female sexuality and body image—so prevalent in our popular culture—is just as prominent in young adult literature. Moreover, Younger concludes, young adult literature should be taught in women’s studies and feminist theory courses as well as in courses that focus on adolescent and children’s literature to illustrate the participation of these texts in the construction of female sexuality and body image.

Sexual Orientation and Young Adult Literature

In her essay “Homophobia, Why Bring it Up?” African-American activist and writer Barbara Smith writes, “homophobia is usually the last oppression to be mentioned, the last to be taken seriously, the last to go. But it is extremely serious, sometimes to the point of being fatal (p. 112).” Smith continues that schools are “virtual cauldrons” of homophobic discrimination and anger from graffiti on the bathroom wall to the heterosexual bias of most textbooks. As an African-American lesbian, Smith is particularly conscious of how human beings are not stereotypes, but an amalgamation of temperaments, all layered and complex. Her argument is that discussion of attitudes toward sexuality must begin in public school classrooms, and that it should include literature about sexual orientation.

Educator Patti Capel Swartz makes this very same case in her article, “Bridging Multicultural Education: Bringing Sexual Orientation into the Children’s and Young Adult Literature Classrooms,” (*Radical Teacher*, 2003). She believes that classes in children’s and young adult literature must include works that discuss racism, classism, ableism, sexism, and homophobia; otherwise, discriminatory attitudes will not change. Swartz argues that in discussing gay issues, the focus should be about gays in regard to community and culture, and not gay sex. Discussion about sexual orientation, she insists, can be brought into the classroom in the same way as any other multicultural issue: through literature, discussion, and writing.

Swartz readily acknowledges, however, that discussion about sexual orientation might be difficult for some teachers—and for many reasons. Some might object on moral grounds, others to avoid controversy, and still others because they lack background knowledge about sexuality and gender orientation. To help, Swartz suggests two books, *Social Perspectives in Lesbian and Gay Studies: A Reader*, edited by Peter Nardi and Ralph Bolton (Routledge, 1998) and *Curriculum, Cultures, and (Homo) Sexualities: Queering Elementary Education: Advancing the Dialogue About Sexualities and Schooling*, edited by William J. Letts and James T. Sears (Rowman and Littlefield, 1999). Both works help teachers understand how social constructions affect notions of justice and equality, and how such knowledge can shape classroom instruction. Thus, teachers can begin to make great

strides by introducing young people to literature that discusses sexual orientation.

For early elementary students, Swartz suggests Rosamund Elwin and Michelle Paulse’s *Asha’s Mums* (Women’s Press, 1990). In this picture book, Asha’s class is going on a field trip, but her teacher will not accept her permission slip because it is signed by both of her mothers. She tells Asha that she cannot have two mothers. The book concludes with a description of how hurt her fellow classmates are when they learn of their teacher’s actions, and how elated they feel when the teacher realizes her error.

Some other picture books include Tommie dePaola’s *Oliver Button Is a Sissy* (Harcourt Brace & Co., 1979), Barbara Lynn Edmonds *Mama Eat Ant, Yuck!* (Hundredth Munchy, 2000), Joseph Kennedy’s *Lucy Goes to the Country* (Alyson, 1998), Leslea Newman’s *Heather Has Two Mommies* (Alyson, 1998), Johnny Valentine’s *One Dad, Two Dads, Brown Dad, Blue Dads* (Alyson, 1994) and Michael Willhoite’s *Daddy’s Roommate* (Alyson, 1991). All these books, in vivid pictures and stories, depict life with parents who are of the same sex and present the lifestyle in a clear, straightforward, and non-judgmental manner.

Books suitable for older children include Marion Dane Bauer’s *Am I Blue? Coming Out of the Silence* (HarperCollins, 1994), Chris Crutcher’s *Athletic Shorts* (William Morrow, 1991), and *Ironman* (Laurel-Leaf, 1995), Gigi Kaiser’s *Love Makes a Family* (University of Massachusetts Press, 1999), Jacqueline Woodson’s *From the Notebooks of Melanin Sun*

(Scholastic, 1995) and *The House You Pass On the Way* (Laurel-Leaf, 1999). Kevin Jennings' *Becoming Visible: A Reader in Gay and Lesbian History for High School* (Alyson, 1994) is appropriate for middle school as well as high school children. Again, these works, all subtle in tone and style, discuss the issue of homosexuality in a respectful and resonant voice, underscoring the significance of a character who is gay and non-threatening. In some of these works, the gay character is secondary to the principal story, but all are representative of what it means to be dissimilar in a world where differences are often hidden.

"As teachers," writes Swartz, "we need to deconstruct the biases of education to allow all of our students to think critically and to live full and vital lives" (p.15). Teachers need to create a safe place for difference, whether that difference is "concerned with race, gender, sexuality, class or ability" (p. 15).

Learning Disabilities in Children's and Adolescent Literature

In "Learning Disabilities in Children's and Adolescent Literature: How Are Characters Portrayed?" (*Learning Disability Quarterly*, 2003), Mary Ann Prater describes the result of research that analyzed ninety fictional books that portrayed at least one character with a learning disability to determine how learning disabilities and related topics were addressed. Prater's results indicated that most of the characters with learning disabilities were dynamic, meaning they changed or grew through the course of the story line. Also, most

of the stories, she writes, centered on a main character with a learning disability telling the story from his or her point of view, and illustrating for the reader how the character's learning disability had a major impact on the plot. In the stories analyzed, Prater concludes the predominant learning disability was in the area of reading and written language, with the characters receiving help for their disability in a school resource room. And although the diagnostic/evaluation process was often described, few details about instructional methodology for improving student-learned behavior were discussed.

In general, Prater writes that fictionalized or true-to-life characters with a known learning disability often serve as role models and/or as bibliotherapy for children with disabilities. In addition, such written and visual characterizations of children with learning problems may inspire other children without disabilities opportunities to vicariously experience and learn about disabilities, or, at the very least, inspire future characters who represent a diverse and multidimensional community of learners.

Teachers and researchers have long advocated for the use of fictional literature as a means to teach students about disabilities (Andrews, 1998b; Blaska, 1996; McCarty & Chalmers, 1997; Sridhar & Vaughn, 2000; Prater, 2000). Still, despite such optimism, few authors have systematically studied these portrayals. Instead, a comprehensive review of the literature, Prater notes, reveals only four studies in which contemporary characterizations of learning disabled fictional portrayals have been examined empirically. In these studies, researchers analyzed

characterization of (a) disabilities in general (Ayala, 1999; Harrill, Leung, McKeag & Price, 1993); (b) mental retardation (Prater, 1999); and (c) mental retardation and autism (Dyches, Prater, & Cramer, 2001).

In the first study, Ayala (1999) analyzed 59 fiction and nonfiction books for young children, published between 1974 and 1996. The number one disability was orthopedic impairments. Also, Caucasian children were portrayed more than characters of other ethnicities. Few of the books showed such individuals as victim or social outcast, and fewer than 20%, according to the researcher's criteria, were portrayed realistically; that is, the characterization of the disability was recognizable to the real concern. In contrast, Harrill et. al (1993) randomly selected children's literature published prior to and following implementation of P. L. 94-142 (1978). This law established equal educational opportunities for our nation's disabled youth in public schools. Using a pre-determined set of criteria, the authors concluded that notable improvements in the depiction of characters with known physical disabilities were seen in books published after the post-special education legislation.

Similarly, Prater refers to her own study (1999) in which she examined 68 books, published between 1965 and 1996 and written for children and young adults in which characters with mental retardation are portrayed. In general, Prater found the books generally favorable in tone and depiction, but few are written from the point of view of the character with mental retardation. And generally, the action occurs outside of a school

setting, with peers and family members as the helping agent. Teachers are rarely central to the story.

Finally, Dyches et. al. (2001) reviewed twelve children's fiction books published in 1997 and 1998 that included portrayals of characters with mental retardation or autism. The study found that, in general, characters are portrayed as having more independence, and being educated in more inclusive settings than the characters found in Prater (1999) study, although few of the books are written from the point of the view of the character with disabilities.

Building upon these studies, Prater (2003) conducted an examination of books portraying characters with learning disabilities (LD) in a fashion similar to the study of characterization of mental retardation and autism conducted by Prater (1999) and Dyches et. al. (2001). As mentioned, Prater read ninety books in which the central characters were labeled learning disabled. Results indicated that most of the characters with learning disabilities were dynamic, meaning they changed or grew during the course of the story line. Also, in most fictional books for children and young adults, the learning disabled child was the main character; the story was told from the child's point of view; and the learning disability had a main impact on the plot. More commonly, the learning disability was in the area of reading and written language, with the character receiving services in a school resource room.

In addition to children's books, Prater reviews a number of young adult novels where the central character has a reading problem. Caroline Janover's *How Many Days Until Tomorrow?* (Woodbine House,

2000) tells the story of Josh and his older brother, Simon, who spend an adventurous summer on an island off the coast of Maine with their grandparents. Josh feels that particularly his grandfather is always unfavorably comparing Josh's reading ability to Simon's. Josh wishes that Simon were the one with

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dyslexia. Two other books in this category are Cynthia Voigt's *Dacey's Song* (Atheneum, 1982) and the sequel *Seventeen Against the Dealer* (Atheneum, 1989). In both works, Dacey's younger sister, Maybeth, has a learning disability. In Barthe DeClements' *Sixth Grade Can Really Kill You* (Scholastic, 1985), Helen has academic difficulties and misbehaves. And C. S. Adler's *Kiss the Clown* (Clarion Books, 1986), Barbara Barrie's *Adam Zigzag* (Delacorte, 1994); Theresa Nelson's *And One for All* (Orchard, 1989); Jan Mark's *Handles* (Atheneum, 1985); Virginia Euwer Wolff's *Probably Still Nick Swanson* (Holt, 1988); Caroline Janover's *The Worst Speller in Junior High* (Free Spirit, 1995) are all books, suitable for young children and middle school

students, in which either the central character or a leading secondary character has a learning disability, and the disability plays a prominent role in the story.

Prater underscores her analysis by stating her emphatic belief that teachers can and should use books in which the characters have learning disabilities. The purposes are many, but foremost is to focus on the life of individuals with academic problems, and to portray the diversity in our society. Prater laments that there are not more books that include characters with learning disabilities, and not just as the singular character problem, but also as an incidental element of their character portrayal. Given the incidence of learning disabilities in our society, Prater concludes, one would expect more such books.

Final Note

Michael Cart, award-winning author and recognized expert in the field of young adult literature, is also founding editor of a semi-annual journal named *Rush Hour*, a journal aimed at older young adults, and including original material by young adult authors. The journal will be published semiannually, in two editions, hardcover for the institutional market, and trade paperback, for retail. (*Publishers Weekly*, July 7, 2003).

Cart and George Nicholson, his literary agent, began discussing this project nearly a decade ago. They both felt that young adult literature needed a magazine for older young adults, a market yearning for its own niche and marketing image. Both believe the young adult book industry has changed greatly through time, evolving into three distinct literary phases. First, young

adult literature began as teen novels filled with innocence, then the problem novel—those that touched kids with social issues, and then within recent years, books that are more realistic and darker in tone.

With all this in mind, Cart and Nicholson proposed a literary journal with the aim of changing how young adult literature is thought of and published. The first volume will be 224 pages and include fifteen original submissions, all from young adult authors. For this and future issues, never-before published material will include short fiction, poetry, creative nonfiction, personal essays, and excerpts from forthcoming novels. Each issue of the journal will focus on a single theme. “Sin” has been chosen for the first volume, with “Bad Boys” and “Face” following in issues two and three. April, 2004, is the scheduled date of first publication, and with distribution through Random House Children’s Books.

As researchers, teachers, and just plain lovers of young adult literature, we eagerly await the publication of this exciting new journal. Sophisticated, provocative, and all-inclusive are words that hallmark its arrival, and for sure, it will provide much discussion for future young adult literature projects and research.

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