



Contrasting Points of View (And Then Some)

Does art reflect life or does life reflect art? This might seem like one of those questions best reserved for late night college dorm “rap” sessions, but the question is certainly a legitimate topic for any thoughtful discussion about what is the role that art should play in a democratic society. And certainly in light of recent events—with the threat of global terror and the impending presidential election of 2004—it is probably best to ask the question, what role should young adult literature play in informing teenagers about the current political, social, and moral aspects of American life? Should young adult literature expose teenagers to exigencies of modern American life, or should literature reflect the true lives that they are living everyday?

At first, it might seem that I am asking the same question—should literature reflect life as teenagers know it? Yet, on second glance, as the following article reviews will reveal, two separate educators have very different ideas about what role young literature should play in students’ lives. They discuss passionately about how much literature really reflects what is

happening in their daily existence. Should students read books about events that they have never experienced—school violence, excessive brutality, and sexual assault—or should they read books that merely reflect popular culture and not what students know as their everyday reality? The questions are intriguing, and the following expounds upon this ever-present dilemma in public school instruction.

Enjoy the read, along with a few choice adolescent research websites as well.

Politicizing Young Adult Literature

An enlightening article and a must read is “Politicizing Young Adult Literature: Reading Anderson’s *Speak* As A Critical Text,” by Janet Alsup (*Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, October, 2003). In this critical work, English educator Alsup discusses the impact of critical literature on the emotional and intellectual growth of young adults, using Laurie Halse Anderson’s acclaimed novel *Speak* as the basis for her analytical remarks. Her thesis is

that reading literature can be an ethical as well as intellectual process, and as such it can assist adolescents in coping with their tumultuous lives. In light of recent events—the rise in teenage bullying, school violence, and global terrorism—Alsup writes that English and reading teachers, like teachers of every discipline, can help students find good books that address these highly complicated and emotional issues.

Reading and English teachers, Alsup asserts, understand the power of literature. They know that literature can help young adults become more empathetic and critical thinkers, or, as she writes, “critical feelers.” This intangible quality is the ability to discern meaning from a literary work and expound upon its global understanding of the human condition. Reading makes us more human because we begin to see the world through the eyes of another. Citing the work of Rosenblatt (1938), Bushman and Bushman (1993), Nussbaum (1997), Donelson and Nilsen (1997), Yagleski (2000), and Carey-Webb (2001), Alsup underscores the special potential of literature to reveal to its readers the

commonality of the human experience. Creating world citizens, as Nussbaum writes, rests in literary creations that enable individuals to comprehend the motives and choices of people different from ourselves. By sharing stories from all walks of life, Nussbaum concludes, readers develop a “narrative imagination” and become more caring people.

The problem, though, Alsup contends, is that there are too few books for high school or upper adolescent audiences that address serious issues. Most young adult authors, Alsup writes, focus on a middle school aged audience because this age group is where publishing companies have identified the greatest potential for sales. Agreeing with her, Donelson and Nilsen (1997) have underlined several reasons for this marketing strategy, ranging from demographics (e.g., there are currently fewer children of high school age in the United States) to more negative pronouncements about today’s youth (e.g., older kids don’t read; they play video games). Another reason might be, they assert, that more middle school teachers are implementing whole language or “immersion” approaches to reading instruction, thus buying more trade books for their classrooms. Regardless, Alsup asserts, a mere glance at bookstore shelves reveals an apparent greater number of YA books with middle school age protagonists that address the concerns of early adolescence. Simply, topics like drugs, alcohol, violence and sex are seldom discussed in books aimed at older readers, and if so, they are few and far between.

Alsup’s thesis is that English and reading teachers must find these texts and use them in their respective classrooms to motivate young people—especially older adolescents—to talk about these difficult, and often, explosive issues. They must be read and discussed in high school classes, Alsup pleads, because whether we like it or not, these issues—violence, drug use, and sexuality—are real in students’ lives.

This is the reason Alsup finds Laurie Halse Anderson’s *Speak* (1999) such an admirable and desirable young adult text. She argues that this fictionalized account of the aftermath of the raping of a young high school girl is a perfect vehicle to help English teachers redefine and broaden the use of young adult literature in a high school classroom. For, unlike most young adult novels, the character is squarely a high school student—not a prepubescent middle schooler—but a full-fledged young adult whose is victimized by an adult crime. And while sometimes teachers are reluctant to use such books for fear of possible resistance from administrators and parents, controversial texts, Alsup argues, must be made available to students. These difficult yet engaging works can be a valuable first step towards helping students come to terms with the difficult issues that they often face.

Alsup chose *Speak* because it is about girl named Melinda who is raped at a beer party the summer before her first year of high school. As a result, she becomes depressed and alienated, retreating into silence throughout most of the novel. The book is written in an

unconventional style including short vignette-like chapters and life-like visual representatives of Melinda’s report cards (her grades steadily fall throughout her freshman year). What makes the novel so powerful, however, Alsup argues, is that the reader does not learn about the rape until the very end of the novel (although there is much foreshadowing of it). We simply know that Melinda is intensely unhappy, none of her former friends will talk to her, she is failing in school, and she cannot talk to anyone about it, not even her parents. What keeps Melinda going is her own ironic, subtle sense of humor that sustains her, even in her darkest moments. And although Melinda hardly speaks aloud, the reader senses her palpable pain with great sadness and vigor.

Speak, Alsup writes, is a perfect vehicle for high school students because it ‘speaks’ to teen readers about dating violence, divisive peer groups, powerful cliques, feelings of isolation, and school alienation. And while, some conservative districts might have a problem with teenagers reading a book about violence, drugs, alcohol, and sexuality, all teachers—regardless of discipline—should make controversial books available and thereby politicize their classrooms. Controversy is not to be avoided, Alsup argues; it is to be relished.

Moreover, self-censorship is to be avoided. Self-censorship is when teachers do not introduce books into their classrooms for fear of what retribution might occur, not what has already occurred. “While teaching or making available a

book such as *Speak* might be a risk,” writes Alsup (2003, 162), “we can no longer draw a thick line between what students are really doing after school hours and what we can talk about in school.” Teachers can no longer waste the ethical possibilities that literature provides in the face of increasing teenage apathy, anger, and violence. The stakes are too high.

In the remainder of Alsup’s article, she describes specific strategies that teachers can use to engage their students in the novel *Speak*. She also notes the handful of books, geared to older adolescents, which address controversial issues. They are Melvin Burgess’ *Smack* (Avon, 1996) about teenage heroin addicts; Stephen Chbosky’s *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (Pocket Books, 1999) (drug addiction); Chris Crutcher’s *Whale Talk* (Greenwillow, 2001) (school violence); Alex Flinn’s *Breathing Underwater* (HaperCollins, 2001) (violence towards women); Walter Dean Myers’ *Monster* (HarperCollins, 2001) (reality of life in the inner city); Leslea Newman’s *Fat Chance* (Putnam, 1994) (bulimia); Todd Strasser’s *Give A Boy A Gun* (Simon Pulse, 2002) (school gun violence); and Ellen Wittlinger’s *Hard Love* (Aladdin, 1999) (lesbian relationships). Each of these novels, as Alsup contends, is difficult in its own right, but they are must-reads for young people. They address controversial issues in an engaging manner, heightening their significance and dilemma in a fictionalized account for older adolescents.

When Alsup writes of politicizing the curriculum, she is asking teachers, especially high school

teachers, to expand upon the established literary canon of traditional English literature texts and to reach out to more contemporary and relevant young adult authors. This politicization of the curriculum, she writes, is filled with risks, but the need to address these issues is paramount if a new cultural narrative is to become the embodiment of the high school curriculum. Such moves are bold, she asserts, but essential to developing a new generation of critical and creative thinkers. Truly, Alsup has written a significant treatise on the power of literature to transform curriculum.

Reality Check – Violence in Young Adult Literature

In “Reality Check” (*School Library Journal*, October 2003), middle school educator Kathleen Isaacs presents a slightly different point of view than Alsup’s need to confront serious issues head on in young adult novels, and thus, is worth reading for its apparent contrast in content and tone.

Isaacs discusses the growth of violence in books for young adults. She mentions that, yes, sex and violence have been staples of young adult literature since its inception, but that most of the action and victims have been offstage. And, moreover, when graphic sex and violence first appeared onstage in single scenes, as in Robert Cormier’s *The Chocolate War* (Pantheon, 1974), and Judy Blume’s *Forever* (Bradbury, 1975), they caused an uproar that was felt throughout the young adult literary community. But now, 30 years later, Isaacs contends, the violence,

especially in young adult literature, is pervasive, and the passages are even more descriptive and disturbing.

Isaacs is dismayed by this recent trend in the growing escalation and depiction of violence in young adult literature, a trend she feels is being patterned after the continued display in graphic films and video games. She arrives at this conclusion after reading hundreds of recommended titles for the American Library Association booklist called Best Books for Young Adults from over the past two years (2001-2003). Her careful research and learned observations leave her wondering where this sensational description of violence is coming from and what effect it might have on teen readers.

To defend her thesis, Isaacs cites some recent examples from well-regarded books for young adults. In Kevin Brooks’ *Lucas* (Scholastic, 2003), the protagonist is nearly raped by her brother’s friends, and the title character seems ready to cut the rapist’s private parts with his knife. In the rarefied world of Nick McDonnell’s *Twelve: A Novel* (Grove, 2000), the brother of a party-giver displays his love for guns and weaponry with a horrendous and bizarre shoot-out. Isaacs remarks that even the book’s cover appears to have been splattered with blood as if violence is an everyday event in teenagers’ lives. In Dennis Foon’s *Skud* (Groundwood, 2003), readers are shown four different techniques for managing anger and violent impulses through the lives of four unique male icons. They are a brutal hockey player, a seemingly perfect air force cadet, a hardened

criminal, and a young boy who aspires to play the role of a punk. As Isaacs asks: is this how young boys' lives are now defined in contemporary America? And do readers need to know all the gory details?

Isaacs continues her lament by noting that such violence as child abuse was once only carefully alluded to in stories of hostile, angry teenagers. Now, stories of child abuse are front and center in young adult novels. In such recent works as E.R. Frank's *America* (Atheneum, 2002), Teresa Toten's *The Game* (Red Deer, 2001), and Jeanne Willis' *The Truth or Something: A Novel* (Holt, 2002), the painstakingly hidden memories of sexual abuse are revealed in graphic detail. Moreover, she writes, in Adam Rapp's *33 Snowfish* (Candlewick, 2003) and Paul Fleischman's *Breakout* (Cricket Books, 2003), the sexual abuse is part of daily living and a regular occurrence in the book.

Not stopping there, many young adult novels, Issacs notes, depict violence in other aspects of human endeavor. The brutalities of detention centers are vividly exposed in books like Jack Gantos' *Hole in My Life* (Farrar, 2002) and Rebecca Fjelland Davis's *Jake Riley: Irreparably Damaged* (Harper Tempest, 2003). Issacs questions whether we need to see the protagonist of *Irreparably Damaged*, Jake Riley, abusing young calves or read with vivid certainty about the creation of a killer in John Halliday's gruesome *Shooting Monarchs* (McElderry, 2003). How important is it, asks Isaacs plaintively, to know that in *Shooting Monarchs*, young three-year-old

Macy was tied to a swing in the rain?

Naturally, Issacs notes, stories of school shootings have recently appeared in young adult novel form. Yet, their language and descriptions have been vivid in detail and likeness, and perhaps, too disturbing. One only need turn to Ron Koertge's *The Brimstone Journals* (Candlewick, 2001), David Klass's *Home of the Braves* (Farrar, 2002), and Alex Flinn's *Breaking Point* (HarperCollins, 2002) as vivid examples of young adult novels capitalizing on the spate of school violence. What Isaacs questions are their excessive detail and appearance as ordinary occurrences that students should justifiably fear. It is a trend in young adult novel writing that she finds disturbing at best.

Similarly, Issacs remarks, fantasy stories have heightened the gore as well. In Steve Niles' *Thirty Days of Night* (IDW, 2003), a rather traditional vampire story is matter-of-factly illustrated with page after page of bloodspots. Is the gore necessary? Does it heighten the reader's sense of intrigue and mystery gratuitously? More to the point, Isaacs continues, a recent adventure story as Melvin Burgess's *Bloodtide* (Tor, 2001), a legend based on Icelandic mythology, places readers right there as the character's legs are amputated. How real do we need to get?

Isaacs' point is that the preponderance of young adult novels with vivid descriptions of violence runs counter to the lives of most teenagers. True violence, she counters, is relatively absent in their daily occurrences. Indeed, she argues, sex is more relevant to their

lives than violence. Teenagers, she writes, take sexual content in stride because sex is something they have been hearing about all their lives and they are eagerly looking forward to growing up and being sexual beings themselves; however, their reaction to violence, she argues, could not be more different.

Violence, Isaacs contends, is pretty much absent from the lives of teenagers. Yes, young adults are aware that some teenagers do live in violent worlds, but the majority, she contends (at least the majority she sees) do not. They have never witnessed corporal punishment in school and many have parents who do not believe in spanking. In fact, Issacs says, when they read books in her middle school class where a parent or teacher slaps, spansks or beats a child, they are surprised and appalled by such behavior. Indeed, such scenes, Isaacs writes, spark spirited classroom discussions. Moreover, Isaacs continues, actual physical fighting is a rare occurrence in her students' sheltered, supervised lives. From birth, she asserts, most of the children Isaacs teaches have lived lives of idyllic splendor. During primary years, they did not walk to school on their own, and many have had relatively little unstructured play experience. They were not free to roam their neighborhoods, whether their neighborhoods were city streets or suburban backyards and woods. In fact, Isaacs contends their understanding of violence comes not from life, but from art. The silver screen and the printed page are their first-hand experience with violence; an event they only know for its possibilities and not its

actual pain and suffering. And hence, Isaacs contends, the vividness of the tortured character portrayals and lengthy descriptions of violent acts is something they deliberately shy away from, preferring, instead, the cartoonish “bounce back from the near death experiences” that they know so well from television and movies.

Indeed, reading about violence in graphic detail in these young adult novels is something, Isaacs writes, that her students prefer to avoid. They would rather, she contends, “fill in the holes” themselves, allowing their imaginations to replace gory, uncomfortable and seemingly gratuitous descriptions and details. For Isaac contends that when young people read about acts of cruelty that are beyond the reach of their imagination and experiences, they are done a disservice because they are forced to deal with issues that they are not prepared to understand or discuss. She mentions that when her fifth-graders read Jean Craighead George’s *Julie of the Wolves* (HarperCollins, 1972), they universally protected themselves by completely missing the rape. Similarly, she finds more advanced novels depicting graphic violence—as those previously mentioned—beyond the scope and comprehension of most teenage readers.

Isaacs’ conclusion is that young people are often presented books depicting violence that they will never experience, cannot comprehend, and are, for the most part, unrealistic in content and style. She does not believe that these gritty books represent reality, but are just representations that authors, editors, and book buyers have

bought into to promote their wares.

To buffet her argument, Isaacs cites how since 1993, serious crime rates in the United States have declined steadily. Violent crime, reports Isaacs using Bureau of Justice Statistics (1973-1993), has decreased resulting in fewer robberies, homicides, and rapes. More importantly, similar statistics reveal that the number of violent crimes committed by juveniles has declined, citing her own Washington, D.C., as an example. There, where she teaches middle school, the total number of juvenile arrests fell from 5,151 in 1998 to 2,102 in 2002. And two-thirds of those arrests were for what are called acts against property or acts against public order, rather than acts against people. Isaacs’ contention is that violent crime is not as prevalent as the media would have us believe and the result is the reporting of a steady diet of unnecessary fear.

She writes that a number of social indicators have been steadily on the decline, and this should give comfort to us all. Namely, child abuse is on the decline. Corporal punishment has been banned in schools. School shootings are on the wane. Student-reported crime is down. And an overwhelming number of young people have not been victims of violent crimes. And yet, the majority of American people believe our schools are riddled with violent crime, unruly students, and unsafe conditions. Nothing, according to Isaacs, could be further from the truth.

Thus, educator Isaacs says that before young people are urged to read graphic and violent teenage problem-driven novels, authors and

educators, editors and publishers, should ask themselves if these books are really necessary or are they just contributing to the sensational hype of the popular media and prevailing culture? Isaacs closes her piece with a survey conducted by Neal Howe and William Strauss of a large number of high school students. In their research, *Millennials Rising*, Howe and Strauss offer a hopeful and positive image of today’s young adults. They write that they are, for the most part, “optimistic, hopeful, high achieving, and very sheltered” young people who do not all resemble the vulgar, violent, sexually charged young people that are too often seen in the popular media. Maybe, stories about everyday reality—normal people doing normal things in a normal way—are what these young people really need. True, she says, violence is a fact of life for some people, but a steady diet may prove equally unrealistic and corrosive.

To be sure, Washington, D.C. middle school teacher Kathleen Isaacs gives us something to think about.

Children’s Choices for 2003

Now, here’s a novel idea.

Each year, 10,000 school children from different regions of the United States read and vote on the newly published children’s and young adult trade books that they like best. After the results are tabulated, the Children’s Choices for 2003 list is published in *The Reading Teacher*, a journal of the International Reading Association (IRA) and is meant to be read and

used by professionals and book lovers alike. Children's Choices is a project of a joint committee supported by IRA and the Children's Book Council (CBC). IRA is, of course, the professional educators' organization devoted to scholarly research and dissemination about the instruction of reading worldwide and CBC is the nonprofit professional association of U.S. publishers and packagers of books for young people. Since 1969, IRA and CBC have worked together to produce this eye-catching list about what is exciting young people in the world of children's and young adult books.

The process of selection of the Children's Choices for 2003 is an involved procedure that involves young people monitored by publishers and professional educators. Initially selected by publishers, close to 700 books printed in 2002 for young people—ranging from beginning (ages 5-6) to advanced readers (10-13)—were sent to five review teams located in different regions of the United States. Each team consisted of a children's literature specialist plus one or more classroom teachers who in turn worked with other classroom teachers, school librarians, and more than 2,000 children. Throughout the school year (2002-03), the books were in classrooms, being read to or by children.

After the books were read, teachers and librarians asked young students to list their favorite books for the academic year. The children's votes were then tabulated in March 2003, and the top 103 titles were announced by the International Reading Association in May. The review teams con-

cluded their work by providing an annotation for each title on the list.

The Children's Choices for 2003 is a smart list of what's good in children's literature and worth exploring for an informative look at what young children find enjoyable in literature aimed at their age level. More importantly, the books for the advanced readers provide young adult teachers and researchers with a bird's eye glimpse of what advanced readers (ages 10-13) enjoy. The advanced readers children's choices include the following young adult novels—Avi's *Crispin: The Cross of Lead* (Hyperion, 2002), a fourteenth-century feudal England adventure story about missing parents; Margaret Peterson Haddix's *Among the Betrayed* (Simon & Schuster, 2002), a science fiction adventure story about kidnapping and mind control; Terence Blacker's *The Angel Factory* (Simon & Schuster, 2002), about a child selected to save the earth from evil; Cynthia Voigt's *Bad Girls in Love* (Atheneum, 2002), a true to life story about teenage rebellion; Marsha Qualey's *One Night* (Dial Books, 2002), the story of a recovering heroin addict; Deborah Ellis' *Parvana's Journey* (Groundwood Books, 2002), about living in war-torn Afghanistan; Jan Cheripko's *Rat* (Boyd's Mills Press, 2003), a moving tale about a handicapped's boy love for basketball; and Phyllis Reynolds Naylor's *Simply Alice* (Atheneum, 2002), a gentle book in a continuing series about a young girl coming into her own as a high school freshman.

Complete with tips for parents and teachers about reading, instruction, and becoming involved in the

yearly selection, this is a good list for all educators and researchers to use to pursue their own scholarly studies about what young people are reading.

Interview with Richie Partington

Finally, a quick nod and heads up must be devoted to a web site that has proven to be one of the best young adult literature resources available. The site is richiespicks.com, a place where you can find comprehensive lists of the best in children's and young adult books published in recent years. There, avid book lover Richie Partington has developed a web site based on his extensive knowledge and experience with books for children and teenagers. It is worth a look and a favorite setting on your computer for its lists and accompanying reviews are a treasure trove for researchers, teachers, and readers who are interested in learning about the latest and greatest in books for kids.

This site came to my attention in our own *ALAN Review* editor's James Blasingame's article "An Interview with Richie Partington" in the October 2003 issue of the *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*. There, Jim conducts a two-page one-on-one interview with this inveterate book lover, discussing how he came to create such a delightful website, his reasons for selecting the works he does, his insatiable love for reading books aloud to young children, and his immediate plans to expand and expound his informative web site for book lovers everywhere. Both the interview and the web site are

definitely worth a look. Until then, happy reading.

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