

Enough Apologetics:

Time to Be *Critical* of YA Literature

If young adult literature has finally come of age, then why do we still endlessly define it, defend it, award it, and argue for it, but seldom question it, critique it, admit sometimes (for good reasons) to disliking it, and argue *about* it? Even a cursory look at a database like Academic Search Complete or ERIC reveals journal articles that cover many diverse topics, but the great majority are laudatory, such as “Young Adult Literature and the Common Core: A Surprisingly Good Fit” by Ostenson and Wadham (2012), or “Border Crossings: Undocumented Migration between Mexico and the United States in Contemporary Young Adult Literature” by Cummins (2013), supporting the use of YA literature to encourage empathy and understanding.

NCTE (National Council of Teachers of English) and IRA (International Reading Association) journals, library journals, and other publications are replete with *mostly* supportive book reviews and recommendations. Positive articles and books make sense in education—readers, usually educators, are looking for what may work for them and their students. But shouldn't there be a place for bad and even mediocre reviews, too? A forum for disagreements about the meanings and value of diverse works? An opportunity to ask questions about the business of publishing YA books as well as various connections and implications across the media? Given the popularity and influence of such novels as the Harry Potter series, or the Hunger Games series, even among discriminating adult readers, and the lasting power of such young adult novels as *The Outsiders*, it is time to be *critical* of YA literature. The literature deserves it, as do scholars, educators, and young readers in the classroom and

out.

Sadly, censorship of YA literature remains a problem, and many educators still refuse to acknowledge the diverse richness offered by YA literature. However, advocates of YA literature too often remain protectionist. For example, Meghan Cox Gurdon, children's book reviewer for the *Wall Street Journal* (“My ‘Reprehensible’ Take on Teen Literature,” 2011), comments on the biting, outraged feedback she received from American Library Association members as well as some young adult authors when she wrote an essay titled “Darkness Too Visible” about the many young adult novels that are becoming more lurid, violent, and negative. She was accused of not understanding the real world of teens and even of advocating censorship, which she did not. Gurdon quotes one librarian, however, who says that educators are naïve if they think that kids don't believe adults condone bad or harmful behavior through such books. Gurdon concludes, “It is that question—the condoning of the language and content of a strong current in young adult literature—that creates the parental dilemma at the core of my essay. It should hardly be an outrage to discuss the subject” (A.15).

Indeed, why not discuss the subject with students, as well? Siegemund (2007), studying YA literature through author interviews and student, librarian, and teacher surveys, indicates that many see YA literature as valuable because students like to read it, no matter what the content, behaviors, or creeds that emerge. Siegemund states that the idea that students benefit simply from reading “has led to a booming market that feels entirely justified in publishing works whose purpose is to ‘engage’ young readers and instill

in them a 'love of reading' . . . while ignoring that what one reads does help one forge a moral map, a social map, a sense of one's place in the world and that therefore *what* one reads is of utmost importance" (pp. 420–421). Valuable literature should have

more to offer than what my college students term "relatability" or relevance. Even in our postmodern era when notions of "high culture" no longer dominate, ideas related to quality, moral behavior, and purpose deserve critical consideration.

Why and how should the field itself become more critical of young adult literature, and what kind

of "critical"? For many teachers and scholars, critical literary work means analysis, employing the basic terminology of literature to understand how the literature works. This kind of approach is clear in state educational objectives. The TEKS (Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills) online document for ninth-grade English, for example, lists the abilities to comprehend poetry, drama, and fiction, including such terms as point of view, figurative language, and flashbacks. Perhaps such knowledge is also seen as part of one's general "cultural literacy" (Hirsch, 1987). One Texas high school teacher with whom I have worked is collecting evidence that students can master such objectives just as well if not better when studied in YA literature rather than the standard canon. It seems that criticism as literary analysis continues to have a place.

Moreover, formal literary criticism, understood as "the reasoned consideration of literary works and issues" (2013, "Literary Criticism," *Britannica Online Encyclopedia*) based on literary theory, or "the set of concepts and intellectual assumptions on which rests the work of explaining or interpreting literary texts" (2013, "Literary Theory," *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* online) has already had an impact in the field of YA literature. Formal criticism may not be as influential or common in middle or high school as in college, but literacy criticism emerging from diverse theories is reflected in such books as Moore's *Interpreting Young Adult Literature: Literary Theory in the*

Secondary Classroom (1997), Appleman's *Critical Encounters in High School English: Teaching Literary Theory to Adolescents* (2000), and Latrobe's and Drury's *Critical Approaches to Young Adult Literature* (2009). In addition, we see scholars and teachers applying literary criticism to YA literature, as reflected in such articles as Schieble's (2012) "Critical Conversations on Whiteness with Young Adult Literature" and Hinton's (2004) "'Sturdy Black Bridges': Discussing Race, Class, and Gender." Such work encourages teachers and students to examine YA literature through different lenses such as critical theory or feminism, following Daniels's (2006) argument that "if we want YA literature to be recognized and appreciated as literature, then we should utilize the same theories with it we use with other literatures . . ." (p. 80). Literary criticism can be a powerful tool for understanding YA literature, human beings, and society, too. There is room for more of this kind of critical work.

What seems to be largely absent yet in most discussions or study of YA literature are questions of quality, purpose, ethical value, and worldview. YA literature textbooks such as *Literature for Today's Young Adults* (Nilsen, Blasingame, Donelson, & Nilsen, 2013) list suggestions for evaluating the realistic or "problem" novel, and insist that there be a "worthwhile theme" and "a way of dealing with the problems so that the reader is left with insights" (p. 121), but such suggestions are vague. Moreover, questions remain. Given the huge number of YA offerings published every year now, how can educators find out which are not so good, which are just mediocre, and which are much better than others? More important, how can students themselves learn to evaluate YA literature? How can they learn to think critically, choose to like and/or not to like a work, discover why, and agree or disagree with others?

Soter and Connors (2009) declare, "If we ever expect young adult literature to find a place in the classroom, then those of us who work in the trenches or who have a passion for thoughtful, smartly written books must be willing to subject it to the same high standards as we hold for adult literature" (p. 66). These standards include moral and cultural values as well as literary ones. Content matters. In fact, such critical reading might reveal to readers more about their own beliefs, ideas, and approaches to reading—what Schraw and Bruning (1996) call readers' "im-

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plicit models of reading.” Applying media or digital literacy to YA literature is one way of encouraging this kind of criticism.

YA literature has grown up in the digital age, and approaching it as a kind of media is one way to increase critical thinking. The standard definition of media literacy—the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and create various kinds of media for various purposes and audiences—certainly accommodates other kinds of criticism as well. What a media literacy approach adds is the idea that literature is created by certain people within a certain historical-social-economic context for certain reasons. Literature is not handed down on tablets of stone; it is a human creation that reveals much about not only its authors but the culture from which it comes. Thus, key questions to ask texts (suggested in the *Core Principles for Media Literacy Education* from the National Association of Media Literacy Education) include the following:

1. Who made the message and why?
2. Who paid for this?
3. What is left out of this that might be important to know [or consider]?
4. How might different people understand this differently?
5. What is my interpretation and what do I learn about myself from this?
6. What are the sources of the information, ideas, and assertions (if applicable)?

These questions may lead to a more complete critique of YA literature. For example, YA literature has an economic basis; publishers publish works to make money by selling books (and related products), not to improve the lives and education of adolescents. Thus, sex sells, as in the case of the *Twilight* series. Sex is a major subject for adolescent readers. Yet how is this relatively chaste but dramatically romantic version involving all kinds of absurd behaviors and the baddest of bad boys, a vampire, different from pulp fiction? What/who is left out of this series? Well-adjusted, happy, average, sane teenagers, to be sure. But what about a believable plot (even within the fantasy genre)? Beautiful or striking use of language? Complex ideas? Adolescent readers have the right to their own “guilty pleasures,” of course, as Gershowitz (2013) acknowledges. However, adolescent readers should understand that they are making choices. Students

should also understand the *business* of the media. The *Twilight* series is a money-making machine, as Gershowitz observes:

There are many, many of these volumes mooning all over the world in book form, not to mention e-iterations. Add to that the movie franchise plus the soundtrack and merchandise (action figures!). Mix in the tabloid coverage of on-again, off-again Kristen and Rob . . . sheer exposure adds to the series notoriety. (p. 84)

The number of YA books is growing because there is money to be made. Scholars, educators, and students need to ask themselves and one another how this

fact affects quality. Media literacy questions lead to bigger questions. Is the book literature or just mass entertainment? Is there a difference? What makes a book popular? What makes it important or lasting or part of the canon? Is the book better than or merely different from the film

version? What are the strengths and weaknesses of various storytelling media, from TV to epic poems to YA novels?

In addition, the key media literacy question about how other people might understand a text differently leads to deeper understanding and perhaps the ability to think outside of one’s own box. I am no fan of the *Twilight* series, and yet Robillard (2009) makes a thoughtful argument that these books are “certainly a departure from much of the other contemporary young adult literature. . . . Rather than extol the virtues of materialism, alcoholism, and tawdry, pervasive sex, *Twilight* is ultimately about sacrifice” (p. 17). Another reader may open one’s mind to other ideas, complicating one’s evaluation.

The question about sources of information and ideas can also aid a critical appraisal of YA literature. Some writers, such as Clare Vanderpool (*Moon over Manifest*, 2010), do extensive research for their novels, while other writers are not so careful. Historical accuracy deepens a work of fiction. Accuracy and reliability of information are also key in evaluating YA nonfiction. Are multiple, complex, and conflicting points of view acknowledged? Is technological content accurate? Do nonfiction works have reliable lists of

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references? Media literacy expands the questions we ask of literature in the classroom. Hobbs (2011) defines digital or media literacy as including the following:

1. The uses of texts, tools, and technologies to access both information and entertainment [and persuasion].
2. The practice of message composition and creativity.
3. The ability to engage in reflection and ethical thinking. (p. 14)

Both more reflection about YA texts and thinking about ethics are important. Thoman's (1999) definition of media literacy declares it to be "the ability to create personal meaning from verbal and visual symbols we take in. . . . It's the ability to choose and select, the ability to challenge and question, the ability to be conscious about what's going on around us . . ." (p. 50). YA literature deserves such study.

It seems clear, then, that emphasizing critical thinking and media literacy with YA literature also has implications for those of us who teach YA lit. I can only speak for myself here. I need to do a better job of asking the difficult questions and encourag-

ing college students to do the same. When and how exactly should we include YA literature in high school English in our diverse communities? How should we involve parents? What about issues of violence or foul language? How can we argue that one book is better or more literary than another? Do some young adult novels normalize teen sexual activity or substance abuse? How does Hollywood treat YA literature? How do social media affect adolescent reading? Where can we find reliable information about authors and books, beyond Amazon? Many questions must be posed and openly discussed. Critical thinking demands that we examine the social and economic contexts of young adult literature, the marketing of YA literature, the

ways various literary theories may apply, the fans and fads, and the connections to and in other media.

Good literature comes in many forms and genres; so does rubbish. If we are sure that YA literature has come of age, offers good writing and thoughtful stories, is actually educational and does more than serve as therapeutic, then we need to stop coddling it. We need to encourage colleagues and students to read it critically. To study literature means finding it relevant and meaningful to me, yes, but challenging, too, stretching me to learn new things, to examine my own assumptions, and to value the literary arts in new ways. Criticism of various kinds of literacy, including media literacy, as well as unapologetic study of the controversies related to YA literature deserve to be strong in the field; how else can critical thinking find a place in schools? Less apologetics; more critique!

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