



## LAYERED LITERACIES

Shelbie **Witte**  
with  
Pamela Unruh **Brown**



# Finding Our People:

## Kinship Connections and Young Adult Literature

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**W**hile the commonly accepted notion of *kinship* is a synonym for family ties, our analysis of YA literature supports the idea that kinship is more complex, going far beyond one's family tree. As Brown, Castle, Rogers, Feuerhelm, & Chimblo (2007) describe this theme in their study of an elementary teacher's lifeworld, "Kinship refers to the network of caring relationships with children, families, and colleagues" (p. 11) that may cross over from typical teacher-student relationships. Young adults in the midst of searching for their own identity seek a place within kinship networks, both traditional and nontraditional. These networks may be as small as two people or much larger, including groups of trusted friends who support and push one another; groups with whom they share a passion for a particular activity, such as music or archaeology; or even their own families, sometimes writ large across generations. Kinship is formed of "meaningful, long-lasting relationships" (Brown et al., 2007, p. 11), often requiring time to discover, build, and nurture. Just as with adults, adolescent and preadolescent kinship ties can transcend time, distance, and culture. Kinship going beyond expected family ties is difficult to define, but its assonance resonates for those who hear its tone, even though others outside the circle may be

deaf to its sound, its meaningful presence.

As we explore the layered literacies of YA literature with multimodal resources, we highlight below three kinship themes focused on adolescents and preadolescents. Through each lens, we highlight YA titles we feel bring dimension and perspective to the conversation. We also share some of our favorite film and digital resources to illustrate, extend, or offer additional information to conversations surrounding kinship communities.

### Marching to the Beat of Your Own Drummer

There are many interesting and complex young adult novels that celebrate the unique attributes of adolescents. While the individuality of the characters is highlighted in the books below, we would like to draw attention to how those who march to the beat of a different drummer find kinship within the communities and places they live.

#### Story Synopses

*MISS PEREGRINE'S HOME FOR PECULIAR CHILDREN*  
BY RANSOM RIGGS (2011)

In this delightfully bizarre tale, Jacob and his grandfather share a close and special bond forged through the grandfather's sharing of stories and photographs of characters from his Welsh roots. When his grandfather is murdered, Jacob journeys to Wales in search of answers to his mysterious death. The cast of characters Jacob knew only through his grandfather's eyes is brought to life through plot twists and turns, with his-

torical references, coming of age angst, and the perfect amount of peculiar. Jacob and these characters work together to fight the evils of the world and bring Jacob closer to understanding his grandfather and himself.

#### **STARGIRL BY JERRY SPINELLI (2000)**

In an ode to the nonconforming teenager, Jerry Spinelli tells the tale of Mica High School's Leo Borlock, who does his best to blend in with everyone else in his class. His universe is quickly turned upside down, however, with the arrival of Stargirl Caraway, a formerly homeschooled, quirky, and artistic teen who challenges the status quo and quickly rides the wave of popularity. Stargirl's love of people and optimistic attitude soon begin to irk the moody teens of Mica High, proving that even when you have the best of intentions, one day you can be "in" and the next day, you can be "out." Leo's friendship and love of Stargirl are tested when she tries to conform to them as "Susan," but eventually, individuality wins.

#### **WHALE TALK BY CHRIS CRUTCHER (2001)**

TJ Jones is fed up with the bullying of his classmates at the hands of the jocks and athletic elite at Cutter High School. A gifted athlete in a school dominated by winning teams and their coaches, TJ rejects organized school sports in general, but decides to recruit the bullied to form the school's first swim team. Traveling to meets, all of which are in distant towns, the swim team members bond on the bus rides, finding kinship in the group. At school, however, the team of misfits continues to be mistreated, as the letter-jacket elite of the school feel the swimmers are neither worthy to participate in a sport nor worthy of a jacket for their effort. Tensions build and violence ensues with a real test of who will provide support when life becomes difficult. TJ discovers more about his own family and the family he gains through swimming.

#### **FILM: INSIDE OUT (DOCTER & DEL CARMEN, 2015)**

In the animated film *Inside Out*, 11-year-old Riley is coming of age and learning to handle all of the emotions that live within her. A family relocation to San Francisco sends Riley into a tailspin. Riley's personified emotions—Joy, Fear, Anger, Disgust, and Sadness—govern the Riley Control Center at Headquarters where her happy core memories are put at risk. The film is an entertaining and dynamic reminder for pre-

adolescents that despite all of the complex emotions we have within us, we are all okay. Riley's kinship communities exist not only within her old school and hockey team in Minnesota and her new school and friends in San Francisco, but also within herself.

#### **Teaching "Marching to the Beat of Your Own Drummer"**

Each of these texts represents kinship beyond family. These adolescents, who feel like misfits in their school settings but come to embrace their uniqueness or "different drummer" roles—as seen in *Whale Talk* and *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children*—may, in fact, encourage other misfits to find strength in an unexpected commonality. *Stargirl* and *Inside Out* represent a different take on the misfit role, given Stargirl's and Riley's (personified by her emotions) quirky ways and insightful perspectives. These texts have the potential to push those who have previously succumbed to the traditional female and student

power structures out of their comfort zones, allowing students to question what they value and honor. All of the books include the protagonists' family members, but they also go far beyond the nuclear family in their identification of kinship bonds. Jacob's story (*Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children*) is most closely blended between family and more complex kinship, as he discovers other misfits through his relationship with his grandfather.

Educators might use a documentary lens to approach the instruction of these texts. Each of the texts in this section can be viewed through such a lens, much like a case study of the uniqueness of individuals. A class reading or viewing of some of these texts would encourage students to document, using vodcasts through school computers or personal smart phones, the ways in which they are interacting with the world around them. Posing the question, "What makes you unique?" would allow students

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opportunities to discuss how they march to the beat of their own drummers through engagements such as in-school and out-of-school activities, volunteer work, or family and community interactions. Tools like FlipGrid (<https://info.flipgrid.com/>) allow students

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to document their own life experiences as well as compare and contrast their experiences with the characters they have read and viewed.

In consideration of a kinship lens, each of these novels demonstrates that finding like-minded people, often through shared struggles, can strengthen an adolescent's perceptions of familial experiences—both positive and negative. During trying times, friends can feel like closer allies than family.

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### **How a Sense of Community Guides Us**

Whether connected by relationship, location, or shared interests or values, we often find that adolescents seek examples of the ways in which communities can guide and support who they are. We can draw on these adolescent tendencies by considering how communities can influence us. This includes the negative impact of a community. In each selection below, we see examples of how the communities with which we identify can impact us in both positive and harmful ways.

#### **Story Synopses**

***ALL AMERICAN BOYS* BY JASON REYNOLDS AND BRENDAN KIELY (2015)**

Rashad and Quinn are typical teenagers, going about their usual routines, when their lives are changed instantaneously by the police brutality experienced

by innocent Rashad and witnessed by Quinn. Rashad is merely shopping for chips at a convenience store when he is wrongly accused of a crime and suffers a brutal attack at the hands of Quinn's mentor. The juxtaposition of the boys' two viewpoints, along with the real world overtones of police brutality and racial tensions, highlight and mirror the fact that racism still exists in America. Anger, sadness, fear, and confusion all fuel the community's response to the attack, where consequences to actions are oftentimes as complicated as the actions themselves.

***ORPHAN ISLAND* BY LAUREL SNYDER (2017)**

The small island has rules. Exactly nine children live there, and when a small green boat brings a new little boy or girl, alternating gender, it is time for the eldest child to board the boat, which immediately disappears into the mist. The boat, without captain or tiller, arrives and leaves once a year. The nine "orphans" enculturate the youngest with traditions and tasks passed down over the years, and the children learn to swim, read, and cook a meal during their first year. Other more nuanced roles develop following the first year, with each child working to his or her strengths on behalf of all of the children. The nine children create a functioning family. They look out for one another even in the midst of disagreements. When one child breaks an island rule, the island is no longer inherently safe. Jinny, the eldest, must take action on behalf of the group.

***THE ABSOLUTELY TRUE DIARY OF A PART-TIME INDIAN* BY SHERMAN ALEXIE (2007)**

Arnold, called Junior by family and friends on the Spokane Reservation, is a gifted student with serious health problems. He enjoys creating satirical cartoons depicting his life events. Encouraged by a teacher's recommendation that he change schools in order to keep his hope alive, Arnold walks 22 miles to and from school nearly every day. He leaves his school on the Rez in favor of attending the public high school in the nearby white community. This transfers his basketball skills to a new team. Author Sherman Alexie tells Arnold's story in first person in this somewhat autobiographical tale. The family into which Arnold is born paradoxically becomes even more important to him, as his distance gives him better perspective on what family truly means.

**FILM: OKJA (BONG, 2017)**

In the Netflix original movie *Okja*, Mija and her giant mutant pig Okja have lived together in South Korea for ten years. A multinational conglomerate, Mirando, has populated the world with these engineered animals only to repossess them after a decade. The company takes Okja from Mija in an attempt to exploit Okja as the face of their new meat products. Mija sets out to rescue Okja, who is much more to her than just a pet. A kinship community of supporters, united by a shared disdain of the practices of Mirando, come together to aid Mija in her rescue of Okja.

**Teaching “How a Sense of Community Guides Us”**

In each of these texts, the protagonists face challenges outside of their control. While Jinny has come to know the challenges she and the other orphans face on Orphan Island, she understands inherently the importance of the kinship community on the island, which is organized using an apprentice or mentoring approach. Junior, in his efforts to join a new community, learns the importance of the kinship community he is leaving behind on the Rez, where tribal kinship is everything but which is paradoxically both nurturing and harsh. Mija journeys to rescue Okja, who is taken from her without her consent. And most abruptly and violently, as Rashad and Quinn face the aftermath of police brutality, they encounter a combination of community support and opposition. As they experience a racial divide, Rashad and Quinn, along with Jinny and Junior, try to navigate the opposing forces of doing what they know is right and doing what their kinship communities perceive to be right. While the racial and violent divisions present in *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* and *All-American Boys* are significantly more complicated on the surface than the tensions in *Okja* or *Orphan Island*, we believe each establishes a scaffold for complex discussions that can emerge from engaging with these texts.

This set of texts reminds us about ways we can use social media to discuss how different conceptions of community may be merged through the use of technology. Adolescents use technology to share, situate, and negotiate their identities. They also use it to make connections across peer groups and in relation to the world. But social media can also be used to bring adolescents and kinship communities together—often

for positive reasons, but all too frequently for negative reasons, as well.

Through the work of the Why We Post initiative (<http://www.ucl.ac.uk/why-we-post>), a series of ethnographic studies focused on social media, Costa and Nicolescu (2016) found that not only do social media reinforce traditional social networks, such as families divided by place and distance, but it has also allowed for a new type of social relationship, kin ties, in what they term *scalable sociality* (Costa & Nicolescu, 2016). Particularly intriguing in the context of adolescence is the value of relationships built by choice (versus relationships formed by birth). Through our work with adolescents, we know that social media apps constitute contemporary trends for staying connected. Adolescents are intricately connected through social media tools such as Snapchat, Instagram, Facebook, as well as others being invented as we write.

As we drafted this column, we were struck by the news of negative online kinship communities, such as an online suicide game called Blue Whale. Adolescents are instructed to complete 50 tasks and commit suicide on the final day (Timm-Garcia & Hartung, 2017). We are torn about whether or not, as teachers, we would address the game of Blue Whale directly with students, as drawing attention to the game could have deadly consequences. Negative and destructive communities are not new to our work with adolescents—a long history of gangs as kinship communities exists. However, social media avenues that can be used for good can also be used for evil. For every positive relationship adolescents build with like-minded individuals around the world, a negative relationship is cultivated. We need to remind ourselves and the adolescents in our classrooms about the importance of critical media literacy, and we must teach social media interaction behaviors to counteract negative influences.

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Sources from the National Association of Media Literacy Education (<https://namle.net>) and websites such as Media Literacy Now (<https://medialiteracynow.org>) offer easily accessible resources that can be used in conjunction with the texts above. One particularly powerful activity promoted within critical media literacy is offering adolescents opportunities to become media creators, rather than media consumers. Asking adolescents to create a public service announcement, for example, can open their eyes to the

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ways others cultivate their support, encourage them to buy a particular brand of shoes, or even draw them into more nefarious relationships. Encouraging media literacy and awareness allows adolescents to critique what they are seeing, so they can celebrate the positive connections they find while critiquing the threatening ones.

## **Finding Your People When Life Gets Hard**

In addition to celebrating the unique attributes of adolescents, it is important to provide examples of the ways in which we find “our people” during difficult times. Taking the perspectives of others is often a matter of becoming aware, with consciousness-raising being a natural part of becoming an adult. The following set of YA novels explores how characters form kinship bonds with others during challenging times. These others see them as individuals, rather than as stereotypes.

### **Story Synopses**

#### ***ASK ME NO QUESTIONS* BY MARINA BUDHOS (2006)**

Fourteen-year-old Nadira and her older sister find themselves alone when their Bangladesh-born father is placed in a Canadian detention center for illegal immigrants after leaving the United States following 9/11 in the wake of anti-Muslim sentiment. Their mother leaves the sisters to finish the school year in

New York so she can be near her husband. The sisters—with a relationship usually fraught with sibling rivalry—find their true family in one another as they keep their illegal status hidden from friends and teachers. They had always been sisters, but their dangerous shared status allows them to acknowledge the true importance of family.

#### ***EVERYTHING, EVERYTHING* BY NICOLA YOON (2015)**

Madeline (Maddy) suffers from an immunodeficiency that requires her to remain in her home at all times. A modern-day Bubble Girl, she has no exposure to the outside world. In a carefully controlled and sterilized environment, Maddy interacts only with her mother and her nurse and passes the time living through the books she reads and observing her new next-door neighbor, Olly, and his family. Olly and Maddy soon find ways to communicate with one another, and Maddy risks her containment in order to save Olly from a dangerous situation. It isn't long before their connection grows stronger, putting Maddy in a place where she is willing to risk it all to have a few moments of wonderful versus a lifetime of seclusion. Once she takes the risk, Maddy learns she is stronger than she thinks.

#### ***WE ARE OKAY* BY NINA LACOUR (2017)**

After her grandfather's death, Marin leaves San Francisco for New York, where she completes her first semester of college. In this introspective text, grief and betrayal drive many of Marin's actions as she shuts out her past life and friends. Mabel, Marin's best friend, visits the dorms for the winter break in hopes of convincing Marin to come home with her for the Christmas holiday, where she is always welcome. Marin works through her grief in flashbacks and musings, illustrating for the reader that the journey to understanding why a loss has occurred can be as challenging and important as the loss itself.

#### **FILM: *WONDERSTRUCK* (HAYNES, 2017)**

We are excited about the YA adaptation of Brian Selznick's (2011) *Wonderstruck*, which follows the story of two deaf children, Rose and Ben, through their journeys through New York City—Rose in 1927 and Ben in 1977. The juxtaposition of the muted sound in 1927 coupled with the contemporary scenes with deaf characters in 1977 elicits the idea of kinship spanning



five decades through shared experiences of deafness and deaf culture, in addition to solving the puzzle of how the two characters are connected.

### Teaching “Finding Your People”

While traumatic and difficult experiences seem to be the common denominator among these four texts, we believe it is the resiliency of the protagonists that deserves the most attention. Nadira, Maddy, Marin, Rose, and Ben each demonstrate their resolve in different ways and on their own timelines, but not without the need to find their people, their kinship communities, to help them navigate through the trauma itself. Nadira and her sister, while hiding their status from their friends, depend on one another, while Marin actively retreats and tries to depend on herself. Between the two are Maddy, Rose, and Ben, who are alone in distinctive ways and would give anything not to be. Each of the texts is a stark reminder of the havoc adults make in the world. In each case, the healing begins when each protagonist persists, refusing to be victimized by the lives the adults hand them.

Our approach to teaching this set of texts and helping students understand the importance of “Finding Your People” would be an investigation of the resources available. Many websites provide information on kinship, including resources that provide support for families and kinship groups. The US Department of Health and Human Services provides resources about kinship care through their website at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/outofhome/kinship/>, which includes information about family preservation and counseling services.

Michigan State University offers the Kinship Care Resource Center (<http://kinship.msu.edu/>). The Center defines kinship as “the full time care, nurturing, and protection of children by relatives, members of their tribes or clans, godparents, stepparents, or any adult who has a kinship bond with a child.” The site offers information on training and publications for caregivers and others interested in kinship services.

Additionally, there are a growing number of resources to support LGBTQ+ families and individuals seeking support or kinship experiences. PBS LearningMedia (<https://oeta.pbslearningmedia.org/>), in conjunction with experts and the NYC Department of Education Guidance Office, created a toolkit for educa-

tors, *The LGBTQ+ Identity*, which supports educators and students in navigating information and discussions that consider or involve LGBTQ+ students and topics. The First Person video series also highlights narrative experiences and provides teaching tips and conversation guides.

### Why Kinship Matters

The notion of kinship as extending beyond family can be powerful for adolescents and preadolescents as they search for their identities and seek their niches and their people. In a consideration of the nuances of kinship, we recall an account shared by an elementary teacher who was the focus of a study a decade ago (Brown et al., 2007). She described the annual campout her previous year’s students and their families held in her large, flat yard. Parents brought tents and bedrolls, and they read aloud to groups of children, including some older and younger siblings of her students, effectively extending and blending families for that evening, night, and the following morning. She saw this event as a culmination and validation of the open door, open communication policies she had quietly put into place over the academic year, with books at the center. The need for meaningful relationships is real, and YA literature, including books, films, and websites, can help adolescents navigate their way. Providing them a kinship lens to focus their attention may offer a light for their paths.

The YA books, films, and websites we include here are examples only, and we considered a wealth of other texts. In scanning our own experiences with YA texts through the kinship themes, we surfaced many possibilities. We hope you will consider the three themes we have shared here as a starting point in your own quest to help students find their kinship communities through literature.

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**Shelbie Witte** (@shelbiewitte) is the Kim and Chuck Watson Endowed Chair in Education and an associate professor of Adolescent Literacy and English Education at Oklahoma State University, where she directs the Oklahoma State University Writing Project and leads the Initiative for 21st Century Literacies Research. Her research focuses on the intersection of 21st century literacies and pedagogy, particularly at the middle level. She is coeditor, along with Sara Kajder, of NCTE's *Voices from the Middle*.

**Pamela Unruh Brown**, a professor of Curriculum Studies at Oklahoma State University, holds the Stella V. Andersen Endowed Professorship. Her research interests include critical media literacy, teacher autonomy, and teacher research. She is involved with one current project engaging preservice teachers with YA texts that include issues of diversity and another exploring how teacher educators conceptualize professional teaching dispositions.

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