The Relevance of Young Adult Literature

Inviting young adult books into the canon helps adolescents connect to literature and confront weighty life problems.

B. Joyce Stallworth

Recently, a teenage girl sat down next to me in the hair salon. As she settled into her seat, she pulled out *The First Part Last* by Angela Johnson. I immediately perked up, learned that the girl's name was Jennifer, and got into a discussion with her about Bobby, the main character in this young adult novel. I was impressed to learn that Jennifer would be graduating fourth in her class from one of our finest local high schools and heading to Agnes Scott College. Jennifer was impressed to meet a random adult in a beauty salon who enjoyed reading contemporary young adult literature. We had a delightful discussion about books.

Contemporary young adult literature (YAL) is an electrifying genre for getting today's young adolescents reading and exploring who they are. Such literature contains themes, plots, language, and characters that are consistent with young adults' experiences. Advocates of the genre sometimes promote young adult novels as a bridge to reading the classics, but the genre merits a prominent place in the curriculum in its own right. Today's young adult literature is sophisticated, complex, and powerful. It deserves to be part of the literary tradition in middle and high schools.

Quality young adult fiction can help tweens and teens handle the plethora of emotional, social, developmental, and physical changes they experience. Integrating such works into the curriculum increases "life literacy" by helping adolescents develop the reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills they need to succeed in school and by increasing their capacity to manage life problems.

Tackling Tough Questions

Many contemporary young adult novels contain themes and content that mirror problems facing many of today's young people (Stallworth, 1998), from bullying and sibling rivalry to more serious issues like teen pregnancy. Some parents may object to the tendency of many teen novels to center...
Award-Winning Young Adult Novels

- Every Time a Rainbow Dies. Rita Williams-Garcia. (2001). New York: HarperCollins. Teenage Thulani has been an unwelcome guest in his brother's home since the death of his mother three years earlier. Thulani lives quietly as the caretaker of pigeons until he helps a young girl recover from a brutal attack.
- The Earth, My Butt, and Other Big Round Things. Carolyn Mackler. (2003). Cambridge, MA: Candlewick Press. Fifteen-year-old Ginny Shreves believes she is an outcast both at school and among her beautiful family. A traumatic incident that befalls her brother at college acts as a catalyst for change in the Shreves household and transforms Ginny's perspective.
- The Rag and Bone Shop. Robert Cormier. (2001). New York: Delacorte Press. Twelve-year-old Jason is wrongly accused of murdering a young neighbor and is forced to confess after hours of interrogation. Readers learn of his reprieve only at the end of this mystery.

For more information on award-winning young adult literature, visit the American Library Association's Web site on literary awards at www.ala.org/ala/alsc/awardsscholarships/literaryawds/literaryrelated.htm.

I agree with Donelson and Nilsen's perspective that the best of today's young adult problem novels illustrate different viewpoints and portray characters involved in realistic problem solving. Young adult literature enables students to tackle tough questions and provides them with a forum for contemplating and deciphering authentic answers (Salvner, 2001). Such books offer tweens the opportunity to learn vicariously, in safe classroom communities, about situations they may face as they make the transition into high school.

A word of caution about censorship is appropriate here. From young adult literature to works from the traditional canon, books used in schools and libraries are routinely challenged for many reasons. So when teachers introduce contemporary young adult literature, it's important to choose titles that are developmentally appropriate and that fit curricular objectives. Teachers should inform parents about what literature will be included in the curriculum before assigning controversial titles, and they should be prepared for challenges and objections. The Web sites of the American Library Association (www.ala.org) and the National Council of...
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Teachers of English (www.ncte.org) offer help with responding to such challenges.

Two Profiles of Engaged Classes
Profiles of two teachers who skillfully integrate young adult novels into their curriculums demonstrate how this literature can motivate tweens to read and write, help them connect literature meaningfully to life, and spur rich discussion.

Dina: Teaching Life Lessons
Dina took my graduate young adult literature class several years ago, and she and I often collaborate on literacy projects. Dina teaches at a middle school at which 98 percent of students are black and low-income. Many of her 8th graders are struggling readers who may not have had adults in their lives read to them. Yet when Dina uses books like Speak by Laurie Halse Anderson, The Rag and Bone Shop by Robert Cormier, and Stargirl by Jerry Spinelli, her students are engaged as a community of readers, writers, and problem solvers.

During one of my visits to Dina’s classroom, students were discussing Melinda, the 9th grade protagonist in Speak. Melinda is raped by a popular senior at a party but decides not to tell anyone. Jamarcus, an 8th grade boy, asserted during the discussion that

Girls need to wake up and stop being scared to tell on a boy. Sometimes boys think they got power over girls and do things they shouldn’t, and that ain’t right.

Anisha countered Jamarcus by saying that she understood why Melinda didn’t tell anybody:

I would just keep it to myself ’cause it’s better than everybody knowing what happened to you. Nobody would understand.

I saw in Dina’s class how reading about tweens’ battles with difficult issues helps young people develop the kind of empathy and morality that cannot be taught through more traditional methods like a “character trait of the day.” Dina encouraged this empathy by assigning students to write to the prompt, “What would you do in Melinda’s place?”

After reading Speak, Dina’s students engaged in activities that demonstrated their understanding of the book and spurred them to connect it to larger life issues. Students could choose any two of the following projects: write a two-page response agreeing or disagreeing...
with Melinda's choices, write a poem or make a poster that expresses the theme of the story, create an original picture book, write a song that summarizes the story, or dramatize a scene from the story. Young adult books give teachers countless opportunities like these to extend the curriculum, even within the constraints of narrowed content, mandated standards, and high-stakes testing.

**Leah: Broadening Perspectives**

Leah, another teacher with whom I collaborate, commonly uses three books with 9th graders at her affluent high school: *Make Lemonade* by Virginia Euwer Wolff; *The Earth, My Butt, and Other Big Round Things* by Carolyn Mackler; and *Speak*.

Leah, who teaches both regular English and advanced placement classes, believes that students benefit from a variety of reading materials that give them a wider perspective on less sheltered adolescent lives. Both Leah and Dina teach from the view that using young adult literature helps build an inclusive curriculum. A 9th grade teacher shared her students present book talks to the class on their chosen novel. Many otherwise reluctant readers jumped at the chance to take ownership of a book that was meaningful to them. One student serendipitously learned to enjoy historical fiction through reading *A Single Shard* by Linda Sue Park. In an end-of-unit reflection, he wrote,

I felt like I was there with Tree-ear (the main character) during his dangerous journey. History can be more than dry facts.

**Breaking Through Reluctance**

For each of the last six years, I have taught a graduate-level course focused on integrating young adult literature into teaching. My students are in-service English teachers and practicing library media specialists. Each time I teach this course, several students are initially reluctant to believe that young adult literature is a legitimate genre. Invariably, they exit the class as advocates. When these educators have the time to read and discuss young adult authors, they realize how powerfully books that mirror adolescents' lives can also improve literacy skills.

My experiences teaching this course have given me insight into why some teachers and librarians are reluctant to bring young adult literature into the middle school curriculum—and how those of us who believe in the genre can respond to this reluctance.

For example, Janice, a 9th grade English teacher, attributed the lack of
young adult novels in many classrooms to a lack of teacher knowledge or understanding of this resource. She decided to teach with young adult novels partly because of how they can expand into other areas of the curriculum. She noted that some historical fiction can be incorporated into the social studies curriculum. Young adult novels stimulate conversation about different historical periods in a way that textbooks can't.

Carolyn, a 7th grade teacher, agreed that we need to convince skeptical teachers of the quality of young adult literature:

"From historical fiction to graphic novels to science fiction, this literature is about the human experience, just as all good literature is. Young adult books encourage students to read more. They can be gateway experiences for all students."

Craig, a middle school librarian, commented that "these books facilitate teaching the same literary elements covered in The Scarlet Letter or any traditional title."

One way to encourage teachers who may be Velcroed to using a few classic texts to become more open to young adult novels is to enlist the school librarian and promote teacher-librarian collaboration. Librarians have the ability to delve into hundreds of young adult titles and present the best to teachers in a way that makes clear these books' worth and potential. Providing teachers with suggested booklists, arranging book talks, writing book reviews and annotations of specific novels, and displaying author studies are good ways to increase collaboration.

The right young adult novel can provide teachers with a way to reach an individual student struggling with the standard curriculum.

Annotations are an excellent way for teachers and librarians to organize, store, and share essential information about novels. An annotation should include all pertinent facts about a young adult book, including publication information, relevant Web sites, genre, suggested reading level, story setting, basic plot and central conflicts, and profiles of central characters. It's also helpful to clue interested educators in to major themes reflected in the book, how it could best be used with students, what kinds of students it might appeal to most, and any sensitive or censorship-related issues to watch for, such as sexual or religious content.

A Forum for Tweens
To what extent should teachers use young adult literature with tweens? I suggest that teachers must, at a minimum,

- Read widely and deeply
- Involve students in the process of literature selection.
- Give students choices.
- Collaborate with colleagues, including library media specialists.

Educators who make the most of young adult literature understand the power of this genre not only to teach literary elements but also to provide a forum for tweens to talk about common experiences and serious life problems, gain confidence as reflective problem solvers, and build empathy and values. Inviting young adult literature into the curriculum increases the likelihood that young adolescents will turn into avid, mature, and lifelong readers.

References

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