

## Beyond Relevance to Literary Merit: Young Adult Literature as “Literature”

“Thus the act of recognizing literature is not constrained by something in the text, nor does it issue from an independent and arbitrary will; rather, it proceeds from a collective decision as to what will count as literature, a decision that will be in force only so long as a community of readers or believers continues to abide by it.”

—Fish, 11

**W**hen Melanie Hundley, on behalf of the new editors of *The ALAN Review*—Steven Bickmore, Melanie Hundley, and Jacqueline Bach—asked us (Anna and Sean) to write a column for their first issue of the *The ALAN Review* on the theme, “Young Adult Literature Gaining Stature at the High School,” we responded with a resounding “Yes!” Anna’s work in promoting the literary qualities of young adult literature and her seminars with middle and high school teachers on the application of a platter of critical approaches to a wide range of young adult novels, speaks to outgoing editors Jim Blasingame and Lori Goodson’s assertion that young adult literature is “quality” literature (3). Likewise, Sean’s work with aspiring teachers among the college juniors and seniors who take his required introductory course in young adult literature focuses on a similar attribute.

We take the stand in this column that young adult literature has already come of age in terms of its relevance to adolescents. We also believe that the time is ripe for us, and for *The ALAN Review*, to push

for its acceptance as “Literature” by high school teachers. We have found, both in our teaching and in our personal reading, that a considerable body of young adult literature can withstand the test of close literary scrutiny. We consequently argue that the next move is to engage those who might otherwise question young adult literature’s literary merit in what Peter Elbow describes as a “believing game” (1), thereby helping them become more receptive to the possibility that

young adult literature is not only about subjects and themes that are relevant to adolescent readers, but that its treatment of those subjects and themes reflects a level of sophistication that invites serious interrogation on the part of readers eager for a marriage of intellectual and affective engagement (cf. Soter, Faust, and Rogers).

We support our assertion with two vignettes, the first drawn from Sean’s teaching at The Ohio State University. For the past few years, Sean has taught a course that is designed to introduce undergraduates interested in pursuing a career in secondary education to the field of young adult literature. During

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that time, he has found that a good number of students—particularly those who are English majors—enter the course holding strong ideas about young adult literature’s educational value. Most students readily acknowledge young adult literature’s relevance to adolescent readers; they are less apt, however, to recognize its literary merit.

To challenge their thinking, Sean opts to begin the course by asking the students to work in small groups and answer the question, “What are the defining characteristics of ‘Literature?’” His intention is to establish a foundation that will allow them to read with an eye toward determining for themselves whether or not the characteristics they associate with “Literature” are evident in the assigned novels. The exercise invariably proves vexing for the majority of students. Faced with the need to unpack their definition of “Literature,” they struggle. Asked to explain why they think this is the case, they often tell Sean that they have not considered this question before and, perhaps more significant, their perceptions of what “counts” as “Literature” have been shaped largely by the texts they read as high school and university students, the majority of which, not surprisingly, were canonical and written for an adult audience. That literature for adolescents might be stylistically complex, that it might withstand rigorous critical scrutiny, and that it might set forth thoughtful social and political commentaries has simply not occurred to them.

That the adult literature customarily studied in high school is challenging is acknowledged by most, if not all, English teachers. Similarly, it is a given that students other than above-average readers lack the motivation needed to study advanced literary texts (Marshall, Smagorinsky, & Smith). Recognizing this, we find that we are confronted by a number of questions. What makes a body of literature appear to be “grown up”? What defines a body of literature as worthy of the title “Literature”? Is it that the adult literature typically selected for study in high schools constitutes what we collectively consider to be a “body of knowledge that [students] should share with others” (Marshall, Smagorinsky, & Smith 23)? Is young adult literature not viewed as the kind of literature that conveys this implicitly valued “body of knowledge,” the result of which causes it to be regarded as, at best, a supplementary form of reading material? Does Markus Zusak’s *The Book Thief* not qualify as “Literature” in

the same way that Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* does, and, if so, why not? Is not Cormier’s *The Chocolate War* on a par with Hardy’s *The Mayor of Casterbridge*?

Many would argue that the young adult novels we have identified here should not be compared with the canonical literary texts; indeed, some would suggest that such comparisons are drawn at the expense of the young adult novels. We believe, however, that the aforementioned young adult novels do indeed qualify as “Literature,” and that they, along with the other young adult novels we refer to in this column (among others) are deserving of literary study precisely *because* they have literary merit. To demonstrate this point, we would like to share a second vignette.

Students, whether undergraduate or graduate, generally have a moderate to strong background in canonical literature and typically assert a strong love of literature. They tend to be curious about young adult literature, but are not convinced that it is as rich, as deep, as powerfully moving, and as complex as the literature they are accustomed to reading. Knowing that Sean’s undergraduates and her own graduate students in a seminar on Young Adult Literature and Literary Theories either have strong backgrounds in English literature or have taught English for many years in middle and high school settings, Anna decided to challenge their thinking.

At the start of Anna’s course named above, Anna presents students with a list of 20 excerpts—ten drawn from young adult novels and ten from literature written by canonical authors, although not the most commonly taught novels. Each excerpt is “blind” (author and title are omitted) and consciously selected for its lack of clues to the protagonists’ age or circumstances; the intention is to have students focus exclusively on the texts’ stylistic aspects—sophistication of insight, depth in treatment of character, thematic complexity, and fine, incisive writing that lures read-

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ers in. Given the students' strong literary background, she assumes that they have reasonably strong beliefs about what does and does not constitute "quality" literature.

After distributing the excerpts, Anna asks students to identify which excerpts are drawn from YA novels and which are drawn from canonical texts. The results, albeit informal to date, reveal that detecting sources is far more challenging than the students anticipate. They freely admit that when they identify an excerpt as coming from a young adult text, it is

usually a guess based on inferred clues about a character's age or circumstances. Some have memories of reading a young adult novel (e.g., Naylor's *Shiloh*; Taylor's *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*; Spinelli's *Maniac Magee*) when in upper elementary and/or middle grades, but because these students typically fill the ranks of highly proficient literary readers, their literary diet in the middle and high school years quickly shifts to an exclusive focus on canonical texts. What is important to note, however, is that they rarely make a selection based on style—that is, they do not argue that one excerpt is more simplistic in its por-

trayal of character, setting, or perspective. The results of this informal experiment inevitably surprise the students and pique their interest in young adult novels; they begin to suspect that YA novels have "more to offer" than they originally thought, an observation that is shared each time this experiment is conducted.

This does not surprise either of us, however. Rites of passage, hero journeys, and identity issues are a common preoccupation among all writers—we seek to discover ourselves in terms of the contexts in which we find ourselves; we seek to grow no matter how afraid we are or how painful the passage toward growth may be. To be sure, rites of passage,

identity issues, placement of self in the larger social and cultural context, and discovery of self in terms of (and against) defined roles are very much issues that confront young adults as they emerge from childhood. They are not, however, the sole domain of adolescence. To the contrary, they are issues that concern all of us as human beings, regardless of age.

Much like literature written for adults, we believe that young adult literature is capable of providing thoughtful social and political commentary that raises questions about complex issues—immigration (Anna's *A Step from Heaven*), the exploitation of children (Patricia McCormick's *Sold*), sexual orientation (M. E. Kerr's *Deliver Us from Evie*), terrorism (Cormier's *After the First Death*), roles of men and women in contemporary culture, social and political responsibility (M. T. Anderson's *Feed*), the individual challenge of social and political institutions (Suzanne Collins's *Hunger Games*), social conformity, religion (Pete Hautman's *Godless*), poverty, political morality (Walter Dean Myers's *Fallen Angels*), patriotism (Collier's *My Brother Sam Is Dead*), the strength of individuals to face disaster (Paul Volponi's *Hurricane Song: A Novel of New Orleans*), and the individual in search of enduring truths (Gary Paulsen's *The Island*), among others.

In their initial encounter with young adult novels, and prior to their extended reading in our courses, our students have argued that young adult literature lacks the sort of artistic mastery evidenced in canonical texts. Yet neither of us regards the sort of engaging writing that draws readers into a work of fiction as the exclusive property of adult literature. The dramatic, unapologetic, sparse replay of a violent moment in a school football game that introduces us to the protagonist of *The Chocolate War* serves as an example:

*They murdered him.*

*As he turned to take the ball, a dam burst against the side of his head and a hand grenade shattered his stomach. Engulfed by nausea, he pitched toward the grass. His mouth encountered gravel, and he spat frantically, afraid that some of his teeth had been knocked out. Rising to his feet, he saw the field through drifting gauze but held on until everything settled into place, like a lens focusing, making the world sharp again, with edges. (1)*

Likewise, one might consider the opening passage from Mary Stolz's *Cezanne Pinto: A Memoir*:

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*In 1860, when I ran from the plantation in Virginia, I decided to be twelve years old. Could've been anywhere from nine to fourteen, but as Frederick Douglass, that great man said, you might as well ask a horse how hold he is as a slave.*

*Twelve sounded all right to me, then. Now my beaky nose is pushing the ninety mark (or past it, who knows?) and one day follows another like one boxcar coupled to another boxcar, all of them back of an engine going nowhere. This is an observation, not a complaint. I have had a life crammed with love, labor, exhilaration, exhaustion, rage, pain, pleasure.*

*And now?* (3)

As we do with our students, so, too, would we challenge readers to ask what makes one novel worthy of the title “Literature” and another not. Is not a good story a good story no matter what the age for which it is written? Can we declare, definitively, and with good “scientific” evidence, that the following excerpts from two adult novels written by authors who are high on the canonical pedestal (each in their own countries, studied for the literary merits of their works) are more worthily “literary” than the aforementioned examples? The first excerpt is drawn from the opening lines from Huxley’s *Island*:

*“Attention,” a voice began to call, and it was as though an oboe had suddenly become articulate. “Attention,” it repeated in the same high, nasal monotone. “Attention.”*

*Lying there like a corpse in the dead leaves, his hair matted, his face grotesquely smudged and bruised, his clothes in rags and muddy, Will Farnaby awoke with a start. Molly had called him. Time to get up. Time to get dressed. Mustn’t be late at the office.* (1)

Or consider the opening paragraph of Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises*:

*Robert Cohn was once middleweight boxing champion of Princeton. Do not think that I am very much impressed by that as a boxing title, but it meant a lot to Cohn. He cared nothing for boxing. In fact, he disliked it, but he learned it painfully and thoroughly to counteract the feeling of inferiority and shyness he had felt on being treated as a Jew at Princeton. There was a certain inner comfort in knowing he could knock down anybody who was snooty to him, although being a very shy and thoroughly nice boy, he never fought except in the gym.* (3).

Again, we ask what qualifies each of these opening paragraphs as adult/canonical literature, and what distinguishes them from the opening paragraphs excerpted from the young adult novels cited earlier? We confess that we are hard-pressed to find a differ-

ence in terms of quality of engagement. In both cases, we find that the capacity of each of the texts to draw us into the rest of the fiction is equally compelling; the opening lines suggest engrossing possibilities; the flavor is equally stylistically sophisticated.

Appleman’s arguments for the incorporation of literary theory in high school classrooms echo those made by Soter. Yet, whereas Appleman focuses exclusively on canonical texts, Soter advocates using literary theory to gauge the literary quality of young adult texts. Regardless, both authors assume that the texts themselves can bear the scrutiny of the discerning, thoughtful, reflective reader. Literary theory, argues Appleman,

“sharpens one’s vision and provides alternative ways of seeing”; “brings into relief, things we fail to notice” in first readings; and “recontextualizes the familiar and comfortable, making us reappraise it” (2). The chief difference between Appleman’s and Soter’s work is that the latter argues an additional case—specifically, for the inclusion of young adult novels in the high school classroom on the grounds that this literature, today, is powerfully written and rivals the best of adult literature for enduring, compelling, deep subject matter and themes. Like Phelan, we recognize that:

*Sophistication is not the same as difficulty (although the two may sometimes overlap). Difficulty is a measure of a text’s accessibility, while sophistication is a measure of its skill in bending means to ends. Subjecting the text to the questions provided by literary theory is an excellent way of testing its sophistication.* (xi)

That young adult literature should have “grown up” so far as the issue of literary sophistication is concerned is hardly surprising. Indeed, the crossover success experienced by J. K. Rowling’s Harry Potter books has motivated a number of accomplished authors that have written for adult audiences to try their hand at writing for teenagers. Notable titles published in recent years include Sherman Alexie’s *The*

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*Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, Joyce Carol Oates's *Big Mouth and Ugly Girl*, and Jennifer Donnelly's *A Northern Light*. Indeed, M. T. Anderson, whose two-part novel, *The Astonishing Life of Octavian Nothing: Traitor to the Nation*, is notable for its literary ambition, has attested to his commitment to "being part of [a] movement for true literature for teens, as opposed to simply books written for teens" (Goodnow par. 11).

As we see it, the challenge in terms of the educational system rests in acknowledging what many

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teachers already know—namely, that the key benefit in adopting young adult literature as a core curriculum for the study of literature and literary elements lies in its accessibility to young people. To be sure, the relevance issue is significant. We are all more readily able to connect to that which speaks to us because it represents experiences with which we can identify. Librarians have long touted young adult literature

because they, more than teachers, are familiar with what adolescents check out of school libraries and local community libraries. That said, we would argue that relevance is but *one* reason for embracing young adult literature. It's potential literary sophistication, coupled with its treatment of complex social issues, are equally important. Glenn et al. reveal how young adult literature provides teachers with the means for turning reluctant readers into avid readers. Yet they also chronicle how teachers can use such texts as an avenue for teaching close reading—the kind of reading that is essential for successful performance on state standardized tests, and the kind of reading, not coincidentally, that is valued in many high school English classes.

In conclusion, when we consider the state of young adult literature as it exists today, it is impossible not to recognize the growth it has experienced. We have moved well beyond the sort of didactic fiction that was once written for adolescents (i.e., the

junior novel) and that we remember reading as kids. Indeed, like Mertz, we admit to having enjoyed reading many of those books, didactic as they were, and, as teenagers, we preferred them to the classics. And yet we believe that, as a field, we continue to set forth the same, somewhat tired argument for using young adult literature, one that focuses on its relevance to teenagers. This isn't to suggest that such an argument doesn't have its place. It does. We willingly concede that young adult literature reflects the interests and concerns of teenagers, and we suspect that most secondary teachers would agree. However, we also believe that young adult literature has the kind of literary merit that canonical literature demonstrates.

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 we hold for adult literature. Indeed, as Daniels argues, "If we, as scholars and as readers, don't bother to hold the YA work up to the light of crucial literary standards, then it is no wonder the works are not being taken seriously" (79). The fact of the matter is that young adult literature has grown up. The question is, will we, as scholars, continue to grow with it?

*Dr. Anna Soter is Professor of English Education/Young Adult and Children's Literature at The Ohio State University. Anna has long held a passionate interest in promoting Young Adult Literature as a field worthy of inquiry and as a playing field for literary analysis (e.g., in publications such as How Porcupines Make Love II and III with Alan Purves and Theresa Rogers; Reading Across Cultures, coedited with Theresa Rogers; Young Adult Literature and The New Literary Theories; and most recently, her coedited book, Interpretive Play: Using Critical Perspectives to Teach Young Adult Literature). She is also a poet and an active member of the poetry community in Ohio. Over the past six years, she has developed workshops and seminars in the teaching of poetry in middle and high schools. Her enduring passion has been to bring recognition to the value of young adult literature as a body of literature that merits critical attention; even more important, in her eyes, she promotes YA novels as a body of literature that intellectually and affectively engages and challenges readers of all ages.*

*Sean Connors is currently pursuing a Ph.D. in English Education at The Ohio State University. Prior to returning*

to graduate school, he was a high school English teacher for twelve years, the last five of which he spent at Coconino High School in Flagstaff, Arizona. Since he began doctoral studies, Sean has taught undergraduate courses in Young Adult Literature and an English Education Lab Experience course for potential preservice English language arts teachers. He is particularly interested in the growth of graphic novels as a field of inquiry and in expanding the use of diverse critical perspectives in secondary school literature curricula. He enjoys spending time with his wife and dogs, rooting for the Red Sox, and reading graphic and young adult novels.

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