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Young Adult Literature and Empathy in  
Appalachian Adolescents

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A thesis  
presented to  
the faculty of the Department of Literature and Language  
East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree  
Master of Arts in English

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by  
Kelsey R. Kiser  
December 2017

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Dr. Phyllis Thompson, Chair  
Dr. Rebecca Adkins Fletcher  
Dr. Scott Honeycutt

Keywords: Empathy, Young Adult Literature, Multicultural Literature, Appalachia, Adolescence

ABSTRACT

Young Adult Literature and Empathy in

Appalachian Adolescents

by

Kelsey R. Kiser

Based on recent research concluding that fiction can increase empathy, this project examines how multicultural young adult literature may encourage empathy in Appalachian adolescents. Empathy encourages prosocial behaviors, but evidence suggests that young adults' ability to empathize has declined in recent decades. In addition, Appalachia in particular is still a relatively homogenous region as it is majority white, protestant Christian, and heteronormative. Because of this, young adults in Appalachia may encounter few diverse perspectives in real life; multicultural young adult literature can provide diverse perspectives with which teenagers can empathize in a region where they might not have similar opportunities in reality. This thesis demonstrates how three multicultural young adult novels (*The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (2007), *Accidents of Nature* (2006), and *The Porcupine of Truth* (2015)) can be used in a literature unit that encourages students to show emotional understanding despite personal differences.

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## AUTHOR'S NOTE

This project first emerged from my work in a Fall 2016 course called “Literature for Adolescents,” wherein we examined the uses of young adult literature—also known as YA—in the English classroom. In the course of our discussions on the genre as a whole, it came to my attention that YA is still looked down upon by many educators as “lesser” or “watered-down” literature. This problematic and mistaken view of YA contributes to its infrequent usage in the classroom as teachers continue to favor canonical or traditional texts. Because I greatly valued YA literature both as a teenager and now as an adult, this project arose out of a desire to defend its usefulness and importance for young readers. One aspect of the genre that often goes unsung is its ability to better introduce adolescent readers to diverse experiences that they might not otherwise encounter. This facet of YA prompts young readers to identify with and empathize with the lives of others, which is a skill I believe we sorely need.

At the same time my interest in YA literature and empathy was growing, the 2016 presidential campaign was in full swing. The campaign and its abundant media coverage highlighted a division in our country between those who tried to “feel the pain” of others and those who believed everyone should fend for themselves. As a result, people that spoke out against injustice and inequality, especially when they spoke on behalf of others, were mockingly called “social justice warriors,” akin to being called “crybabies.” This stark division over how we should respond to the needs of others led to frequent discussion of empathy and its value in a modern society—all of which affected the development of this project.

The choice to focus on Appalachia specifically arose from my own personal experiences, as I grew up in the region and now work and study here as an adult. Attending a small high school in Appalachia, I experienced firsthand how one can come of age in this region and encounter few diverse perspectives along the way, particularly in small towns. Unfortunately, this

still seems to be the case in certain parts of Appalachia. This personal experience with a lack of diversity first inspired my focus on the region, and subsequent research supported what seemed true anecdotally. Although Appalachia as a region is not homogenous, there are still communities within it that are overwhelmingly white, protestant Christian, and generally hostile toward homosexuality.

In addition, in the summer of 2017, I volunteered teaching English as a Second Language to adults in Johnson City, Tennessee. My class included highly motivated students from Russia, Ethiopia, the Ukraine, Indonesia, Brazil, China, Mexico, and the Dominican Republic. The racial and national diversity of the class astounded me, as Johnson City previously seemed highly homogenous. My experiences teaching this class revealed to me that it is possible to be surrounded by diversity without noticing it. Furthermore, the stories of my students in ESL about being international immigrants in Tennessee highlighted the low empathy of some of their new Appalachian neighbors.

Finally, this project arose from a desire to help and support educators in what is becoming an increasingly complex and difficult line of work. Various conversations with current and former high school teachers have suggested that in the modern education system, many educators fear to “branch out” into new material without extremely detailed research supporting their decisions. Because many teachers must submit highly detailed lesson plans, post the standards being addressed during each lesson, and prepare their students for extensive standardized tests, creative or experimental lessons—for instance, those involving young adult literature as opposed to traditional texts—may not be implemented for fear of backlash from administrators or parents. It is my hope that this Masters thesis will assist those educators interested in utilizing young adult literature and give them the tools necessary to defend their decisions.

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## CHAPTER 1

### WHAT IS EMPATHY AND WHY DO WE NEED IT?

The term “empathy” as it is used in everyday speech may refer to several cognitive and emotional phenomena ranging from the ability to visualize events from another person’s perspective, to supposedly “feeling” another person’s emotions as one’s own, or even the desire to take action in response to the suffering of another. Most researchers divide what we collectively call empathy into three main categories. For instance, Ronald E. Riggio, a professor of psychology and leadership at Claremont McKenna College, describes the three types of empathy as cognitive empathy or perspective taking, personal distress, and empathic concern; each of these corresponds respectively to the ability to view things from another person’s point of view, the act of feeling another’s emotions through emotional contagion, and the tendency to recognize another person’s emotional state and respond accordingly. Daniel Goleman, psychologist and author of *Emotional Intelligence*, divides empathy in the same way, although he calls his three types cognitive, emotional, and compassionate. In summarizing how these behaviors are combined, Danielle J. Scapaletti, the editor of *Psychology of Empathy*, writes that empathy “may be best characterized as the cognitively complex process of trying to understand what another person – whether real or imagined – is thinking or feeling (or what they might *typically* think or feel)” (3).

Goleman’s cognitive and compassionate empathies most closely resemble how the term “empathy” will be used for the purposes of this research. All three aspects of empathy are valid; however, the second category, wherein the observer “feels” another’s pain, is not necessary to the process and in fact may even impinge its effectiveness. One may become so overwhelmed in her own emotion that there is no subsequent response to the person actually suffering; this is one reason why the process is given the negative sounding term “emotional contagion.” Thus, in the



case of this research, “empathy” will refer to the ability to take another person’s perspective and subsequently display empathic concern.

Another term that is closely tied to—and often confused with—empathy is compassion. Melissa Radley and Charles R. Figley, in their research on compassion fatigue among social workers, consider “empathy” and “compassion” to be interchangeable—along with sympathy, pity, and commiseration (207). Other scholars, like those writing for Berkeley’s *The Greater Good*, consider empathy, compassion, and altruism to be evolutions of one another; empathy refers to taking the perspective of another and feeling their emotions, compassion is the desire to act due to shared perspective, and altruism is the actual selfless act. While the explanation offered by *The Greater Good* may go too far in establishing discrete meanings for each term, Radley and Figley do not do enough to separate empathy from related words. Thus, “empathy,” in this study could be considered “compassion”—but it is decidedly *not* the same as sympathy or pity.

At this point, it is worth specifying that most researchers consider empathy to be partially involuntary and partially a conscious decision; most agree that perspective taking can be automatic, while the following empathic concern is a matter of choice. As Daryl Cameron et al. write for *New York Times*, “we believe that empathy is a *choice* that we make whether to extend ourselves to others... the ‘limits’ to our empathy... can change, sometimes drastically, depending on what we want to feel.” Given this aspect of empathy, it seems perspective taking can be practiced like any other skill, and empathic concern can be actively chosen. In her research on empathy in nurses, Theresa Wiseman writes, “These authors define empathy as a personality attribute involving the capacity to respond emotionally, cognitively, and communicatively to other persons without the loss of objectivity... [empathy has] both ‘trait’ and ‘state’ components” (1163). Wiseman, like Cameron, asserts that empathy is the combination of

disposition—one can be a highly empathic person—and active choice. In short, empathy is the attempt to walk in someone else’s shoes *and* the decision to respond appropriately as a result.

So why foster empathy in the first place? In short, empathy helps facilitate connections between people in a society. Frederique de Vignemont and Tania Singer write extensively on this function of empathy in “The Empathic Brain: How, When, and Why?” In their words, empathy has a vital role in human society as “the motivation for cooperative and prosocial behavior, as well as help for effective social communication” (435). One only needs to look as far as a tense conversation between two people to see the necessity for this skill; when two people are gridlocked in argument, one may exclaim, “I wish you could understand how *I* feel about all this!” The ability to take another person’s perspective temporarily is vital in local level communication, but it may also lead to wider social benefits such as “moral sense, altruism, justice, prosocial behavior and cooperation” (439). Several recent studies have connected empathy with what is generally considered positive social behavior, such as lower rates of aggravated assault and robbery, increased volunteerism, and greater likelihood to donate to charity (Bach et al. 129; Konrath et al. 182; Vignemont & Singer 439; Scapaletti 4). Thus, it follows that we could all benefit from instilling greater empathy in our citizens.

Although empathy is an integral part of our everyday lives, it is far from our most refined interpersonal skill, particularly among young adults; Konrath et al. concluded that empathy has decreased among college students since the 1970s, while Van de Graaf et al. concluded that male adolescents in particular experience a drop in empathy (see Chapter 2 for further examination of empathy among young adults).

Even more troubling than this possible decline are the limits that often affect our ability to empathize. Cameron et al. write that our empathy is often affected by an us versus them mentality, so that even when we try to imagine the lives of others, we do not typically extend this

kindness to people of different socioeconomic status, race, sexual orientation, or gender identity. In other words, we try to understand what our peers are going through, but we do not try as hard to understand cultural differences or alternative worldviews. This means that in times of crisis, we often respond more strongly if those injured are perceived to be “like us”; for instance, when Paris, Beirut, and Baghdad each experienced terrorist attacks in November 2015, the Western world rallied around Paris while largely ignoring the other two tragedies (Zhao). This is true of natural disasters as well—as Emma Dwight writes in “Adopt a Disaster,” “a disaster in the Pacific must have 91 times as many casualties as an identical disaster in Europe to get the same news coverage.” These are extreme examples of our biased sense of empathy that affects how we respond to the suffering of those like or unlike us in our daily lives.

In addition to this limited aspect of our empathy, Cameron et al. reference a neurological experiment by Hogeveen, Inzlicht, and Sukhvinder which concluded that we exercise empathy even less when we perceive ourselves to be in a position of higher power than others. According to Hogeveen et al., those with high social power demonstrate an inability to “take the visual, cognitive, and emotional perspectives of others, relative to participants who feel relatively powerless” (755). People seem to feel that when they are in power, concern for the well being of others is less needed.

Clearly, there are troubling aspects to the way empathy manifests in our daily lives and there is reason to encourage improvement for the future; as Roman Krznaric, expert on empathy and founder of the Empathy Museum, wrote for *Time*, “it’s when we recognize a small part of ourselves in another person that we begin to care about their plight and that of others like them” (par. 4). As Krznaric suggests, greater empathy, or seeing ourselves in the life of another, can make us more supportive people; he even suggests that cognitive empathy resulted in European citizens demanding that their borders be opened to Syrian refugees in 2015. When we are better

empathizers, we are better citizens. With empathy, we are able to understand the situations of other people and respond accordingly, either by offering assistance ourselves or by participating in activism to affect change.

## CHAPTER 2

### EMPATHY IN YOUNG ADULTS

Adolescents are a group ideally suited for the development of a heightened sense of empathy. The period of adolescence typically ranges from the onset of puberty, which can occur anywhere from 8 to 15 years old, to “full physical and developmental maturity” (Salkind 28), which is somewhere between ages 17 and 21. Although definitions of adolescence vary and may extend all the way from ages 8 to 25, for the purposes of this research, “adolescence” will give focus to ages 14 to 18, frequently termed “middle adolescence.”

Adolescence is a period of remarkable change; Neil Salkind writes for *Encyclopedia of Human Development* that the changes during adolescence “are exceeded only during two other time periods: when the fetus is in utero and between the ages of 1 and 3 years” (28). In addition to this “boom” in physical development, adolescence is also a period of rapid social change. Young adults must endure a sort of metamorphosis; as children, they can rely on their identities in relation to their parents, but as teenagers they are expected to gradually emerge into the wider world with their own independent identities. Developing empathy is one part of the psychosocial change we expect of adolescents, along with a sense of self-control, the ability to operate within society’s moral code, and a tendency to display emotions appropriate for given situations.

Within this massive physical and social “upheaval,” the brain itself also changes drastically during adolescence. Several recent studies have concluded that adolescent brains are more malleable than at other ages (Salkind 28; Hamilton; Briklin; Steinberg). Jon Hamilton, a neuroscience correspondent for *NPR*, describes adolescent brains as “vulnerable, dynamic and highly responsive to positive feedback.” Likewise, Laurence Steinberg contends that the brain is more flexible and changeable during adolescence than it is in the years preceding it; he writes that the brain plasticity in adolescence is exceeded only by its malleability before the age of three.

Steinberg also argues that this neural flexibility decreases after adolescence, writing that “the drop in plasticity as we mature into adulthood is just as significant as the increase in plasticity as we enter adolescence.” This decline in mental malleability following adolescence means that our teenage years represent one of the final opportunities to significantly affect patterns of thought like gratitude, self-control, and empathy.

Although adolescence is a time of great change, there is evidence that suggests young adults can struggle to develop and sustain empathy on their own. In a recent longitudinal study conducted by Sara H. Konrath et al. at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, college students were asked to complete a questionnaire based on the Davis Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI) which measures four aspects of empathy. Responses were collected from students from the late 1970s to the 2000s and compared in order to determine whether empathy has changed in this age group over time. Konrath et al. found that two of the four aspects of empathy, empathic concern and perspective taking, notably decreased across this time period (181); in addition, the authors claimed that these two aspects are those most related to prosocial behaviors. Respondents with high empathic concern and perspective taking have such commendable traits as greater likelihood to volunteer in times of crisis, to return incorrect change, to donate money to charity, and to take care of a friend’s pet (182). Konrath et al. suggest that the decrease in empathic concern and perspective taking likely signals a similar drop in rates of such prosocial behaviors. As to the source of this decline in empathy, the authors propose several possible influences, including a rise in materialism (which has been linked to decreased prosocial behaviors in general), increased social media usage concurrent with decreased community involvement, and a constant bombardment of negative news, which can cause us to feel fatigued with empathy (Konrath et al. 183). In addition, Konrath et al. suggest that “strong achievement motivation” (190) and an increasing emphasis on individual success

may also contribute to decreased empathy in young adults; for example, they write that intense competition surrounding admission to American universities may lead to increased narcissism and decreased empathy (190). After leaving high school, young adults begin to focus on gaining acceptance into universities and winning scholarships to afford their education, which may change the way they interact with others: “empathy might actually be a detriment to individual success in that other people, including friends, might now be seen as competitors” (Konrath et al. 190). Although the authors cannot definitely cite its cause, they conclude that empathy has significantly decreased among American college students since the 1970s.

Similarly, Jolien Van der Graaf et al., writing for *Developmental Psychology*, contend that adolescence represents a period of fluctuation in our sense of empathy. Van der Graaf et al. found that while empathy may increase during late adolescence, many young adults experience a decrease in empathy first before it increases again around ages fifteen to seventeen. Even then, they concluded that it increases more slowly for young men than young women due to high levels of testosterone as well as gendered socialization (885). Thus, it is reasonable to conclude that focusing on empathy could help young adults, particularly boys.

Although there is some disagreement over whether empathy is a sociological or neurological phenomenon, this thesis will focus on its sociological aspect. Empathy itself seems to be a combination of the two; however, for the purposes of this research, the sociological side of empathy is more relevant as interpersonal behavior is more flexible than neurological response. Rather than dealing with the unconscious reflex of empathy, this project will focus on the active *choice* to try and understand another person.

Here, it may be useful to address those studies that have concluded children as young as six months old show signs of empathy, thus implying that empathy is inherent from birth; for example, Elizabeth Walter, a Stanford research fellow, writes that “when children saw other

people in pain, their brains became active in the same regions that process the experience of pain first-hand.” This seems to contradict the idea that youth is correlated with lower empathy; however, Van der Graaf et al. address this issue by making a distinction between affective empathy and perspective taking. They write that while affective empathy, which involves the vicarious experience of others’ emotions similar to Riggio’s “personal distress,” is evident even in young children, perspective taking is not. Adolescents do not need help “feeling the pain” of others, but stepping into another’s shoes to engage in perspective taking and real empathic concern. In other words, the neurological, rather than the sociological, aspect of empathy has been found even in infants; this does not change the findings related to adolescents and empathic concern.

Since young adults exhibit increased mental malleability and already experience great physical and social change, they are well suited to add “empathy” as yet another aspect of adolescent change. As research has demonstrated, adolescents are poised to learn how to be empathetic, yet they do not seem to be learning it on their own in the general course of coming of age, perhaps due to factors including increasing materialism, decreased community support, and greater emphasis on gaining individual success over their peers (Konrath et al. 183).

Fortunately, there is reason to believe that empathy can be taught; although the neurological aspects like activation of pain receptors upon witnessing the pain of another are difficult or impossible to change, the sociological aspects of empathy, like so many other parts of life, require practice and guidance. In their research for the *Making Caring Common Project* at Harvard’s Graduate School for Education, Richard Weissbourd and Stephanie Jones outline some advice for helping children and young adults develop greater empathy over time. First, they suggest that adults model empathy for adolescents, both by extending it to third parties such as the student’s classmates or the school janitor, and by showing empathy to the student herself so



she understands the benefits of empathy. Then, they recommend giving children and young adults the opportunity to practice empathy themselves, which typically means carefully guiding them through conversations that they initiate; for instance, Weissbourd and Jones give as an example a child that asks whether he should invite the new kid in the neighborhood to his birthday party even though his current best friend hates him. The authors argue that conversations like this offer adults the opportunity to guide children and young adults toward understanding the perspective of another person. It is worth noting that the guided conversations they describe are similar to the scaffolding that most teachers use in the classroom already—purposeful language meant to guide students to a certain line of thought without telling them the answer. Finally, Weissbourd and Jones propose that as young adults begin to demonstrate a sense of empathy, adults should try to help them expand whom they feel empathy for. As mentioned in the previous chapter, we feel empathy for those that are most like us, but we do not feel it as readily for those that differ from us (Cameron et al.). For this reason, the authors contend that it is imperative that young adults understand that empathy should be felt for everyone. In their infographic “Are We Raising Caring Kids?” through *Making Caring Common*, Weissbourd and Jones summarize these concerns: “A healthy community depends on adults who are committed to putting the common good before their own. Will kids today be able to step up to the plate?”

Although empathy may have decreased in young adults across the last three decades, hope is not lost: educators and caring adults can foster a greater sense of empathy through focused efforts.

## CHAPTER 3

### EMPATHY IN APPALACHIA

For many people, the word “Appalachia” brings to mind images of moonshine stills, violent family feuds, and thin, barefoot people in overalls. Others may have a more positive, yet similarly reductive, mental picture of noble, hardworking, “salt of the earth” laborers. As John C. Campbell wrote of the region, it is “a land...about which, perhaps, more things are known that are not true than any other part of our country” (Montgomery 147). As Campbell’s quote demonstrates, many non-Appalachians have a large body of “knowledge” regarding the region that is largely built on misinformation and mistaken assumptions that firmly relegate the region to a state of “otherness,” meaning it is often described in terms of how it is *not* like the rest of America. As William Schumann writes in *Appalachia Revisited*, “whether defined by the intensity of poverty, the dominance of energy interests, or the persistence of unorthodox lifestyles, each of these Appalachian stories operated on the principle of marking regional difference from a larger, more cosmopolitan United States. In fact, Appalachia has been defined by its distance from mainstream ideals and the practices of American modernity since the nineteenth century” (2).

Despite the plethora of reductive stereotypes and intense othering, Appalachia is much more complex than most people imagine. The discord between Appalachia’s image and its reality can be attributed to three main causes: local color writing, erasure of minority historical narratives, and economic exploitation. Many of the stereotypes surrounding Appalachia came from the rise of so-called “local color” writers in the late nineteenth century. These writers—who sought to appeal to the new audience created by the widespread availability and affordability of magazines—tended to focus on geographic remoteness, idyllic landscapes, and back-to-nature ideals, ignoring many other facets of Appalachian life (Lewis 59). Throughout the 1800s, most of the travel writing about Appalachia was written by outsiders during or after their brief visits to

the region. Thus, for a large portion of its history, outsiders, rather than Appalachians themselves, portrayed the region in the media.

These local color writers also contributed to the erasure of diversity in the region. Despite the presence of African Americans in Appalachia, first as slaves and then as freedmen, many accounts of the region in the late 1800s and early 1900s extolled the supposedly pure, Anglo-Saxon blood of its residents, erasing black Appalachians entirely (Inscoc 34). Though it was not often included in descriptions of the region, diversity has always been present in Appalachia, thanks in part to the extended period in which the region remained a frontier, or a boundary between two cultures wherein neither one had complete control over the intervening space. This meant that there was plenty of conflict, but there was also cross-cultural influence as different groups borrowed from one another in order to survive in a tumultuous area. European settlers, African Americans, and Native Americans adopted crops, tools, and agricultural techniques from one another in order to thrive in Appalachia (Blethen 20). This interdependence was so common that “outsiders regularly commented on how difficult it was to differentiate white hunters from Indian not only in behavior but also in appearance” (Blethen 20). Despite this long history of diversity, the exclusion of minority narratives in history means Appalachia has been long been considered an entirely White region.

The final factor in the warped portrayals of Appalachia is one that is still actively affecting the region today: economic exploitation. Since at least the antebellum period, and especially during the reconstruction era, those living outside the region have largely controlled industry in Appalachia. This reliance on outside capital meant that extractive industries like coal could wreak ecological havoc without harming the land where industrial barons lived themselves. This desire to gain as much wealth as possible from the region led to further skewed portrayals of Appalachia. In *Appalachia Revisited*, the phenomenon is explained thusly:

Presenting Appalachia's land, people, and customs as the foil of cosmopolitan America (Appalachian otherness) justified the exploitation of the region's resources. The public is able to reason that resource extraction not only allows for maintenance of the American standard of living, it also serves as a way of assimilating Appalachians into cosmopolitan society and affording them the opportunity to pursue the American Dream (Yahn 141).

Othering Appalachia served an important function in outsiders' commercial and industrial success; treating the region as fundamentally different from the rest of the nation made it easier to rationalize environmental damage as an evil that was necessary for the country's progress.

In response to these misrepresentations, the field of Appalachian Studies attempts to correct the misconceptions surrounding Appalachia by examining its history, literature, and culture; however, the field is still new. Until recently, Appalachian Studies was not a field in academia at all. This was partially due to bias against the region—the assumption that nothing more complex could be learned about it—and partially due to its unclear geographical boundaries. No matter the reason, serious scholarly work on Appalachian history and culture is still a relatively recent endeavor. As recently as the 1960s and 70s, Appalachian Studies as a discipline was still struggling to agree on what should be considered Appalachian Literature and how scholars should respond to it. For most of the twentieth century, Appalachian literature was considered part of Southern Literature rather than its own genre. Thus, although Appalachian Studies has experienced a renaissance in the last two decades, it is still fighting to reverse the incorrect assumptions that surround the region.

In addition to each of these factors, analysis of Appalachia is complicated by its relationship to the rest of the United States. Many of the prominent issues in rural Appalachia, such as decreased access to healthcare and high rates of poverty, are also common in other areas of the country. Thus, although Appalachia is typically described in terms of how it is different from the rest of the nation, it in fact shares many similarities that are often overlooked. In addition, the region itself contains diversity and variety that is often oversimplified in the quest to

describe Appalachia's contrast with the rest of the country. This complexity is summarized succinctly in Straw and Blethen's *High Mountains Rising*:

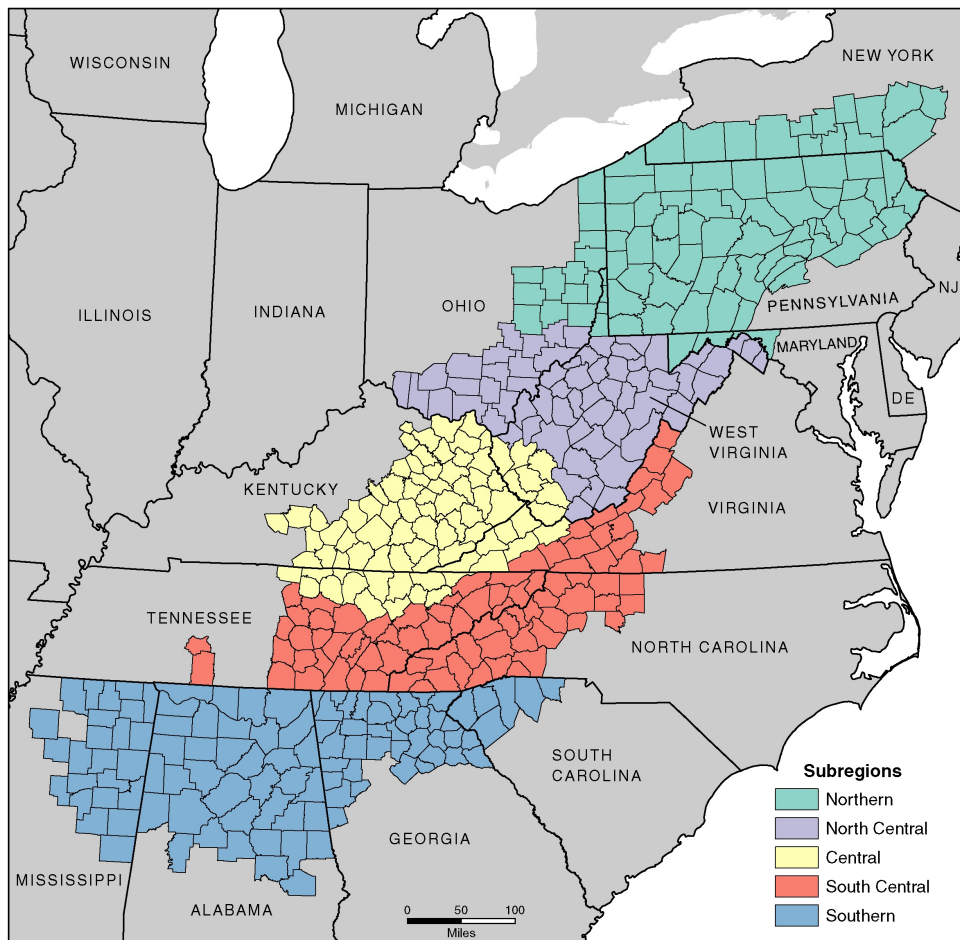
The culture of Appalachia is neither unique nor monolithic. Much of what is described as southern Appalachian folklife is also true of the broader region of the Upper South. On the other hand, within Appalachia, wide variety exists. Eastern Kentucky and western North Carolina, for example, have not had the same historical or cultural experience.... Appalachian folklife is not all ancient and unchanging. Songs are sung and stories told that are centuries old, but Appalachian culture will continue to change and redefine itself (Williams 145).

Although we will examine a variety of data regarding Appalachia in order to discuss its relevance to this project, we must do so with the awareness that it is a complex region that is often oversimplified, stereotyped, and deliberately misrepresented.

One reason for discussing empathy in terms of Appalachia in particular is that certain states within the region have been shown to have lower rates of empathy than other parts of the country. In their study of geographic variation and empathy, Bach et al. administered a test for empathic concern, perspective taking, and total empathy. These scores were subsequently compared by state of residence, with researchers controlling for racial composition of the states, sex ratios, age, and median income (Bach et al. 126). Their results demonstrate that Appalachia shows extreme variance in its rates of empathy, including both some of the lowest rates of empathy (Kentucky and Alabama) and the highest (North Carolina), as well as states falling in between (Tennessee and Virginia). While these results spark interest in empathy in Appalachia, they are far from conclusive and more future research would be required to make any strong statement regarding the region's empathy levels compared to the rest of the United States.

Nevertheless, the variety in Bach et al.'s results speaks to the assertion that Appalachia is not a homogenous region and never has been—thus, it is difficult to say “Appalachia is...” and speak of the region as a whole. As Obermiller and Maloney write in their examination of recent research on Appalachia, scholars often have a tendency to “lamine ‘Appalachian culture’ in a

fixed and unchanging way” (105). Or, As Linda Spatig and Layne Amerikaner describe this frustrating trend in *Thinking Outside the Girl Box*, “My part of the country is still characterized, to put it bluntly, as a bunch of ignorant hicks” (9). Such overgeneralization has led to many incorrect notions of Appalachia in the past and this history of misjudgment is something of which we must remain aware when discussing the region.



Map by: Appalachian Regional Commission, November 2009.

**Figure 1:** Appalachian Subregions, *Appalachian Regional Commission*

Because of this great variation across the region, describing specific subregions in Appalachia facilitates more accurate descriptions. For the purposes of this study, “Appalachia” will refer to the Central and South Central subregions defined by the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC), which include portions of Kentucky, Tennessee, Virginia, West Virginia,

and North Carolina (see figure 1). We will focus on these two subregions as they best exemplify the issues that complicate the development of empathy. As previously mentioned, any map of Appalachia and its subregions is necessarily flawed; as with all regions, it is too complex to be bound by stark borderlines. As Rebecca Adkins Fletcher writes in *Appalachia Revisited*, “Mapping a region is not a neutral action; rather, it is quite purposeful, necessitating decisions of inclusion/exclusion, connectivity, and representation” (Fletcher 276). Appalachia is a region of both urban centers and small rural communities, high poverty rates in comparison with the rest of the nation, and frequently homogenous religious and racial groups. Thus, we must recognize that although we are using the ARC definition, no map of the region can be wholly accurate or unbiased.

It is also worth noting here that there are people that live within the ARC’s official boundaries of Appalachia that may not identify with being Appalachian, and there are some living outside its borders that feel they should be included. Thus, while we will use the ARC definition of Central and South Central Appalachia throughout this project, it is with the realization that the region is not static and cannot be defined so simply.

Like the map of subregions included above, much of the research used in this project is from the Appalachian Regional Commission. The ARC, established by Congress in 1965, is made up of the governors of the thirteen states within the Appalachian region (as defined by ARC) as well as federal representatives and local governments. In their own words, the mission of the ARC is to “innovate, partner, and invest to build community capacity and strengthen economic growth in Appalachia” (“About ARC”). Every year, the ARC invests in Appalachia in order to facilitate education and job training, economic opportunities, community development, infrastructure, and more. In the course of this work, the ARC also collects extensive data on

Appalachia and its subregions and thus is a vital source in discussing the region's current status with regards to a variety of issues.

As a region, Appalachia is predominantly white, particularly in rural areas. According to Kelvin Pollard from the Population Reference Bureau, racial diversity in Appalachia by the year 1990 had stayed essentially the same as it had for the previous century. While racial diversity has gradually increased since 1990, most of the increased diversity is concentrated in certain counties, typically those surrounding urban centers. Of the 410 counties in Pollard's study, 215 had less than five percent non-white population. In *Appalachia Revisited: New Perspectives on Place, Tradition, and Progress*, William Schumann likewise addresses the racial composition of the region, writing that as of 2015, "about 84 percent of Appalachia's inhabitants were white, 9 percent were African American, 4 percent were Latina/o, and 3 percent were Native American... But the region's cultural diversity is unevenly distributed, with Appalachian Kentucky, New York, Ohio, Virginia, and West Virginia composed of 90-plus percent white populations" (8). This racial homogeneity in many Appalachian counties means that some young adults come of age with little to no contact with diverse races, and their perceptions of non-white Americans are subsequently at risk of being affected by mass media portrayals.

In work based on more recent data, "Recent Trends in Appalachian Migration, 2005-2009," Ludke and Obermiller corroborate the patterns found in Pollard's study, particularly with regards to Central and South Central Appalachia. Though Appalachia as a whole welcomed many international migrants from Asia, Central America, and Europe during this period, few of those new residents moved to Central or South Central Appalachia. As Ludke and Obermiller indicate, the South Central subregion had very few new residents from any source, and the Central subregion had the lowest number of international migrants when compared to the other four subregions (33). These trends in recent migration underscore how stable the population of



Appalachia remains, particularly in these two subregions. The stability in Appalachia's population during this period—with 86% of people living in the same residence in 2005 and 2009 and only a 1% net increase in population (31)—contributes to the overall homogeneity of the region despite reports of recent diversification.

In addition to this limited racial diversity, self-identified Christians vastly outnumber other major religions in Central and South Central Appalachia. In her Masters thesis analyzing how the media affects perceptions of Islam in what she called “Southern Appalachia,” Saundra K. Reynolds argues that because the region is over 80% protestant Christian, the media acts as the most significant influence on how the average person views other religions. Not surprisingly, this can lead to heavily biased views of other religions, as many news outlets use overwhelmingly negative language particularly when covering stories surrounding Islam.

In *High Mountains Rising: Appalachia in Time and Place*, Deborah McCauley contends that research regarding religion in Appalachia is unreliable because unequal focus is often given to nationally-linked churches as opposed to local, unaffiliated churches (181). She explains that in urban areas and large population centers, there tend to be large, nationally-linked churches, but in rural and mountain settings, churches are more frequently independent and not overseen by national or regional bodies. These smaller, independent churches are often not included in databases like the Yellow Pages or counted in census data as places of worship. This not only skews data regarding religion in the region, it leaves the impression that these small churches, though they are abundant, are not as important as the large churches present in urban centers.

In her Masters Thesis for the University of Tennessee, Amy Jordan examines how the prominence of religion affects queer youth living in rural East Tennessee and can make them feel unwelcome or unsafe. She writes that in her interviews with LGBTQ youth from East Tennessee, religion was often cited as a major reason they felt isolated: “The very conservative type of

religion particular to the geographic area acted as a barrier...instilling shame, undermining feelings of self-worth, and causing friction among family members” (vi). Jordan also points out that although acceptance of same-sex marriage has increased over time, white evangelical Protestants, who are heavily represented in rural Appalachia, still have the lowest rates of support at only 23% (9). With such a striking majority identifying as against homosexuality, it is not surprising that LGBTQ youth often describe the region as unwelcome or unaccepting. In Tennessee schools alone, “over 90% [of students] regularly heard anti-gay slurs... [and] these remarks were not exclusively from other students—around a third of students reported hearing homo- and trans-phobic language from school staff” (Jordan 5).

The National Education Association (NEA) corroborates these trends at the national level in its report “Strengthening the Learning Environment,” in which they reference the high rates of bullying and harassment of LGBTQ youth and the depression and suicide that often occur as a result (7-8). The NEA also notes the importance of teacher response, writing that “[LGBTQ] students who can identify supportive adults at school do more than 10 percent better academically than those who cannot” (9). However, they clarify that school personnel performed poorly in this aspect at the time of writing, with 83% of LGBTQ students responding that their educators “never or only sometimes” intervened when they were present for homophobic remarks (8).

To complicate matters even further, Appalachia is often overlooked by national movements for LGBTQ rights, which typically emerge in large cities on either coast; as a result, these national movements have limited perspective on queer issues in rural areas of the country. As one young gay man described the situation in Pam McMichael’s “The Power of Conversation,” “Look, I’m Appalachian and I’m gay and I don’t want to move to the city to have a gay culture” (143). Because of this urban-centered progress, LGBTQ teens in Appalachia can

feel doubly ignored—by their local communities as well as the national movements meant to support them.

As these three issues demonstrate, Appalachia remains a largely homogeneous region, particularly in rural areas; although there is diversity as with any group, Appalachians are largely white, Christian, and against homosexuality. In addition, much of the region is still isolated from major cultural centers. As a result, the average Appalachian teen has few opportunities to encounter diverse opinions, art, or perspectives. Further compounding this geographic isolation is the prevalence of poverty in Appalachia, particularly in Central and South Central Appalachia; these two regions account for nearly two thirds of the 84 Appalachian counties considered economically distressed by the Appalachian Regional Commission (“County Economic Status in Appalachia, FY 2017”). Poverty levels in the region have certainly improved since Lyndon B. Johnson’s “War on Poverty” in the 1960s; between 2008 and 2012, Appalachia’s poverty rate was 16.6 percent, not much higher than the national average of 14.9 percent. However, certain states like West Virginia, Kentucky, Virginia, and Tennessee had higher rates of poverty than the region as a whole (Schumann 5). The prominence of poverty in Central and South Central Appalachia means that even if a young adult in this region wanted to attend a lecture or visit an art exhibit in the nearest urban center, they likely would not have the means to do so.

In a more data-driven sense, this geographic remoteness and lack of access is evident in healthcare disparities in Appalachia. As Konrad et al. write for the ARC, the states within Appalachia do not seem to have high healthcare disparities, but when separated by counties, the lack of access is indisputable (xvii). They write that this unequal access to healthcare and the high costs it often entails can have deadly consequences in Appalachia, made clear by the fact that “residents of Appalachian counties die younger from preventable causes” (xvii). Although

healthcare is largely unrelated to the development of empathy, access to this service highlights the limited accessibility and lack of resources in Appalachia.

These disparities are also corroborated in the ARC's 2017 report on the state of healthcare in Appalachia as a whole, "Key Findings: Appalachian Region." This report confirms that disparities exist across a wide spectrum of health issues: Appalachia has a lower supply of primary care physicians, mental health providers, and dentists per 100,000 residents than the national average (8); rates of suicide are 17% higher than the national average, and they are 31% higher than the national average in Central Appalachia (4); and Years of Potential Life Lost, a measure of premature mortality in general, is 25% higher in Appalachia than the national average and 69% higher in Central Appalachia specifically (2). These statistics represent a brief selection of the troubling data surrounding healthcare disparities in Appalachia—for a more thorough analysis, see "Key Findings" or the ARC's full 2017 report, "Health Disparities in Appalachia."

It is also worth pointing out here that LGBTQ Appalachians may experience even greater health disparities than those present in the region as a whole. According to a 2014 study by Hatzenbuehler et al., LGBTQ people living in communities with strong stigmas against sexual minorities have a life expectancy twelve years shorter than those living in accepting communities (38).

Central and South Central Appalachia also have relatively low rates of educational attainment when compared with the rest of the nation. According to the Appalachian Regional Commission's "High School Completion Rates in Appalachia, 2009-2013," counties in Central and South Central Appalachia have lower rates of high school completion with many reporting between 55.2 and 71.2% completion rate; the national average of high school completion is 86%. Central and South Central Appalachia's low educational attainment is even more stark when we

consider college degrees; according to the ARC's "College Completion Rates in Appalachia, 2009-2013," the vast majority of counties in these two subregions have completion rates between 5.6 and 13.6%, as compared to the national average of 28.8%. These low rates of educational attainment are relevant to this discussion because in a geographically remote region, relocating to attend university often provides a central opportunity to interact with a more diverse population.

With its racial and religious homogeneity, disapproval of LGBTQ issues, geographical remoteness, and low educational attainment, Appalachia is an ideal focal region for fostering an understanding of others through literature. Fortunately, despite the disheartening statistics regarding tolerance in Appalachia, anti-diversity is far from universal throughout the region, as highlighted in Dan Barry's "Sewers, Curfew and a Ban on Gay Bias." In this article for the *New York Times*, Barry describes a small coal town in rural Kentucky called Vicco and its recent decision to pass a ban on discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity. In describing the town's decision, Barry also addresses how it comes as a surprise to many readers that still hold mistaken assumptions regarding acceptance in Appalachia. In this way, the story emphasizes the tolerance that has always existed in Appalachia, as well as how it is expanding today, despite negative stereotypes surrounding the region as a whole.

Acceptance of difference is also growing thanks to the many groups involved in promoting tolerance and diversity in Appalachia. The STAY Project, founded in 2008, is a youth-led organization that aims to provide support to young adults living in Appalachia, both to improve their lives and increase their opportunities, and to prevent them from leaving the region as so many young people have. In their core beliefs, STAY specifically addresses diversity in Appalachia, saying, "everyone deserves basic human rights no matter where they live, their economic background, race, language, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, presentation or cultural background. We are stronger when we bring together and support diverse voices in

our region.” STAY also recently partnered with the Appalachian Community Fund to host a series of public gatherings as part of the “Out in the South Initiative” designed to give LGBTQ Appalachians of all ages the opportunity to meet and discuss their experiences.

There are also organizations and events that focus on increasing media representation of the LGBTQ community in Appalachia. For example, each October Lewisburg, West Virginia hosts the Appalachian Queer Film Festival, which includes a panel with the filmmakers and a question and answer session in addition to the films themselves (Holdren). Likewise, according to Alex Hannaford’s “Growing Up Gay and Transgendered in Appalachia,” a nonprofit called StoryCorps has been collecting the accounts of LGBTQ Appalachians, offering them the opportunity to share their experiences with harassment and acceptance in the region. These narratives, which will be preserved in the Library of Congress American Folklife Center, afford LGBTQ Appalachians the opportunity to connect with one another and also offer a glimpse into their experience for those outside the region.

Finally, the Southern Poverty Law Center collects research and advocates for acceptance and diversity with regards to race, religion, sexuality, and gender identity. By monitoring the activities of hate groups—the number of which has steadily increased since the turn of the century, from 457 nationwide in 1999 to 917 in 2016—the Southern Poverty Law Center acts as an indicator of hatred and bigotry in the region as well as the country. By collecting data such as these, the SPLC is able to provide educational lectures and materials to foster greater tolerance and acceptance throughout the region.

With groups like STAY, the Appalachian Community Fund, the Southern Poverty Law Center, and StoryCorps laying groundwork for increased inclusion and representation in the region, we have a greater opportunity to foster the development of empathy in Appalachian adolescents.

## CHAPTER 4

### LITERATURE AND EMPATHY

*“He, also, had a mother.”<sup>1</sup>*

While there has long been anecdotal evidence of a link between reading fiction and a stronger sense of empathy, this correlation has also recently gone under the lens of academic research. An array of recent studies have supported the idea that frequent exposure to literary fiction can increase our understanding of other people and their needs or goals; writing for *Psychology Today*, Christopher Bergland writes that when you read fiction, “your brain is literally living vicariously through the characters at a neurobiological level” (“Can Reading a Fictional Story”).

Bergland likens this mental process to the “mental rehearsal” in which an athlete might engage, arguing that “reading fiction can... flex the imagination in a way that is very similar to the visualization that an athlete would use to activate the motor cortex and muscle memory.” In other words, when we read about the emotional responses and internal conflicts of fictional characters, it can act as “practice” for understanding interactions with real people.

Raymond Mar, who has investigated the connection between literature and empathy in several studies over the last decade, wrote that reading engages our sense of empathy because “narratives are fundamentally social in nature in that almost all stories concern relationships between people; understanding stories thus entails an understanding of people, and how their goals, beliefs, and emotions interact with their behaviours” (“Bookworms Versus Nerds,” 696). Some critics responded to Mar’s work by saying that individual differences between people were actually responsible for heightened empathy—to which Mar responded with more research. In

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<sup>1</sup> See Joe Fassler’s “How Literature Inspires Empathy” for an exploration of this quote from Egyptian author Alaa Al Aswany.

his 2009 work “Exploring the Link between Reading Fiction and Empathy,” Mar controlled for more individual differences such as reading preferences and personality traits, but his findings remained the same: “fiction print-exposure predicts performance on an empathy task, even after gender, age, English fluency, trait Openness, and trait Fantasy are statistically controlled” (420).

Study after study, each using different measures of empathy and varying populations of readers, has supported this connection (Owens; Blunt; Mar, “Exploring the Link”). Although some may quibble over just how much literature may affect our sense of empathy, it is clear that there is a relationship between the two.

In the complex interplay of literature and empathy, multicultural literature in particular has an important role to play. The term “multicultural literature” is used in many ways in different scenarios, but most definitions agree on a few characteristics: multicultural literature represents the stories of those with underrepresented backgrounds and is typically written by a member of the community being portrayed. In their book *Multicultural Children’s Literature: A Critical Issues Approach*, Ambika Gopalakrishnan and Kimberly Persiani-Becker define multicultural literature as follows:

Multicultural children’s literature is about the sociocultural experiences of previously underrepresented groups. It validates these groups’ experiences, including those occurring because of differences in language, race, gender, class, ethnicity, identity, and sexual orientation (5).

Although many definitions of multicultural literature are posited, we will use Gopalakrishnan and Persiani-Becker’s for its coherence and simplicity.

In terms of encouraging the development of empathy, multicultural literature can have a greater impact than other types of fiction. In “Developing Social Consciousness through Multicultural Young Adult Literature,” Megan R. Abbate contends that multicultural books impact young readers because they “promote tolerance, establish more supportive environments,



and break down systemic social barriers.” She further writes that the global understanding that typically results from reading multicultural YA helps students “establish that diverse cultural identities are combinable rather than mutually exclusive.” In other words, because young adults are at an ideal age to expand their perceptions of other people (see Chapter 2), multicultural literature can help them view cultural differences in a positive light.

Belinda Louie, a long-term educator and scholar of young adult literature, conducted classroom research on this topic in 2005 by teaching a unit on multicultural literature with her high school English class. When she conducted interviews with her students after the unit’s conclusion, she found that not only did they consider the unit beneficial, some were upset that the concept was being introduced to them so late in their high school careers (most of them were only a few months from graduation). The student responses Louie recorded encourage the idea that young readers do not only benefit from reading multicultural literature, they are invested in doing so.

Finally, Donna L. Miller, an educator and teacher trainer, supports the inclusion of multicultural literature by arguing that it can act as the “bridge” between students and people with different backgrounds. She writes that just as the “pontifex” (or “bridge builders”) of Ancient Rome used stories to relate complex religious guidelines to the common people, so may educators employ fiction to introduce cultural differences to their students. In her words, “until we hear such stories, it often doesn’t occur to us that others have a story of their own, that they are anything but the thieves or losers or infidels that we perceive them to be. Hearing another’s story has the potential to deflate our self-importance, making room for other perspectives.”

Miller also addresses a chief concern in utilizing multicultural literature in the classroom: the potential for it to “distract” from statewide standards that must be met. She examines how a

unit on multicultural literature may be used to address two existing common core standards, and thus act as an integral part of the course, rather than a distraction.

Although multicultural literature is inarguably important, there are three main concerns surrounding its inclusion in English and Language Arts courses. First, because multicultural texts can be accused of depicting “tokenism,” it is extremely important that educators select multicultural texts that accurately reflect the experience of the culture portrayed and display a sense of literary authenticity. In her article, “Multicultural Literature and Young Adolescents: A Kaleidoscope of Opportunity,” Susan M. Landt proposes five criteria that indicate authenticity in multicultural texts: the portrayal of the culture is more than surface level, including more than physical differences like food and clothing; there is diversity within the culture; characters use speech patterns and vocabulary appropriate to their communities; social issues are relevant to the community and not oversimplified or reduced; and minority characters are depicted solving their own problems rather than relying on the power of majorities (695). Evaluating texts using criteria such as Landt’s allows educators to avoid the oversimplification of other cultures within their classrooms (see Gopalakrishnan and Persiani-Becker for more on the selection of appropriate multicultural texts).

In addition, when students have limited background knowledge about multicultural texts, they are apt to interpret events from the text through their own worldview. Thus, it is even more imperative than with other texts that students are given solid ground to walk on before reading. As Louie contends, students’ understanding increases when educators provide them with plenty of context for each work.

Finally, studying multicultural literature, particularly with a class that is less mature, may lead to an “us versus them” attitude among students, especially if they feel they are being attacked as members of a dominant group. Bhakti Shringarpure, professor and scholar of

multicultural literature, shares a complaint from one of her adult students following the use of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's "The Danger of a Single Story" in her classroom. The student sent a long letter in which he lamented, "you have to be really careful how ideas are presented... If one is not careful, a multicultural discussion can start to look a lot like an attack on white culture... and the whole thing rapidly disintegrates." Though the student seems to have misunderstood the message of Adichie's lecture, he makes a valid point in his response: multicultural literature can be divisive if readers believe they are being criticized. However, this does not mean that educators must handle their students with "kid gloves" and avoid challenging them; rather, as Shringarpure suggests in her summary of this exchange, educators must present ideas in a sensitive way and aim for inclusivity as opposed to exclusion. Thus, lessons on multicultural literature necessitate purposeful language from the instructor and ground rules for civil discussion in order to avoid alienating or dividing students into factions.

Despite these potential stumbling blocks, multicultural literature deserves inclusion because it can foster a greater sense of empathy. Reading is vital to our sense of understanding others because "fiction can put us in touch with cultures and experiences that one may never have a chance to experience" (Owens 17). Multicultural literature can continually introduce us to different people with unique worldviews, thus expanding our concept of others and their needs.

## CHAPTER 5

### UNLOADING THE CANON, OR HOW YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE CAN HELP

Teenagers are not reading—or, to be more accurate, they are not reading as much as they once did. In 2007, the National Endowment for the Arts published a report on the status of reading in the United States called “To Read or Not to Read: A Question of National Consequence.” Summarizing an array of research and census data, the report outlines pages and pages of statistics emphasizing one central point: Americans are reading less across all age groups, and young adults are declining the fastest. According to the NEA, roughly half of Americans aged eighteen to twenty-four say they do not read any books for pleasure (“To Read or Not to Read” 7). In the fifteen to twenty-four age range, respondents said they only spent seven to ten minutes a day on voluntary reading, while they spent approximately two and a half hours watching television (9-10); similarly, as internet use increased among ages eighteen to twenty-four, reading has decreased.

Not only are young adults reading less, particularly as they approach late adolescence, but the NEA also claims they are reading less proficiently. According to their research, only about 35% of high school seniors in the United States graduate reading at the expected level.

All of this data combines to proclaim a single message: our current methods of encouraging young adults to read are not effective. In most school systems, young adults are asked to leave behind age appropriate books and “graduate” to the classics, particularly once they are in high school. Rather than selecting works based on the reading level or interests of a given population, we expect sixteen year olds to digest and appreciate texts like *The Scarlet Letter* and *Jane Eyre*. While some students may be ready to delve into the classics at a young age, research suggests that this tactic is far from effective across the board.

In his 2009 book *Readicide: How Schools Are Killing Reading and What You Can Do About It*, Kelly

Gallagher examines this issue in depth by analyzing scholarly literature along with anecdotal evidence from educators. As the title suggests, Gallagher claims that schools are contributing to the decline of reading among young adults by focusing on standardized test preparation, failing to provide time for authentic reading, overteaching some books, and underteaching others (5). Gallagher claims that these four mistakes in education gradually influence students to hate reading.

As Jeffrey Kaplan writes in “Why Literacy (and Young Adult Literature) Matters,” when we ask young adults to read canonical texts, we may be forcing them to “read what they are not ready to read” (69) at an unknown cost to the reader. Classic texts were not written for young adults, so we cannot be surprised that young adults rarely enjoy them. As Donald Gallo explains, classic novels are “about adult issues... [and were] written for well-educated adults who had the leisure time to read them” (34). Not only do these classic texts often deal with subjects that are not engaging to young readers, they are often difficult to comprehend: Susan P. Santoli and Mary Elaine Wagner, experts in pedagogy and student testing, write that “the classics often contain difficult syntax and vocabulary, intricate plots and subplots, the use of multiple characters, unfamiliar geographical settings, and abstruse historical references that require more educational background than most high school students have” (71). In other words, we are asking young readers to work far outside of their experience and education.

Certainly, educators do not include classics in their curricula as a means of torturing their students—they teach them because they love them and want their students to enjoy them as well. Santoli and Wagner describe the phenomenon thusly:

Many English language arts teachers are determined to make their students read ‘real’ literature... They yearn for them to appreciate Austen’s satirical diction, Dickens’s poignant themes, Twain’s marvelous wit, and Cather’s remarkable imagery. They expect to turn their students, even the skeptical nonreaders, into lovers and admirers of novels such as *Pride and Prejudice*... (66).

Unfortunately, no matter how well meaning a teacher may be, many students do not appreciate the classics. As a scholar of young adult literature and curriculum design, Leila Christenbury contends “classic novels... often leave students frustrated, disengaged, and bored and... encourage them to turn to commercial plot summaries and literary analyses, [or] simplified versions of the original” (Santoli and Wagner 68). Rather than exposing our students to literary masterpieces, we are teaching them to slog through something they despise—and perhaps discouraging them from becoming lifelong, enthusiastic readers. In a sense, forcing young adults to read classic texts is a means of teaching them how *not* to read and impresses upon some of them that they simply are not readers (Gallagher).

Several recent studies have investigated the link between textual relevance, students’ engagement in a text, and their reading abilities (White; Clark; Pitcher et al.). In defense of selecting books that are relevant to young adults’ lives, J. Elaine White writes, “If we use works that reflect the ‘word universe’-the real world-of adolescents... [students] who are not fluent readers will not have to struggle with the process of mentally entering a world with which they are unfamiliar... Since they already understand the culture of the adolescent world, one barrier to literacy is eliminated for them.”

In “Assessing Adolescents’ Motivation to Read,” Pitcher et al. likewise conclude that relevance and enjoyment are critical to the reading success of young adults. Pitcher et al. write that “When some students judge reading and literacy activities to be unrewarding, too difficult, or not worth the effort because they are peripheral to their interests and needs, they can become nonreaders... or aliterate adolescents... who are capable of reading but choose not to do so” (379). By placing heavy emphasis on classical, canonical texts that students find inaccessible and ignoring the texts that they care about most, Pitcher et al. contend that educators may slowly encourage students to consider themselves “nonreaders.”

In “Reading for Pleasure: A Research Overview,” Christina Clark and Kate Rumbold examine the importance of reading enjoyment in the development of literacy in children and young adults. Clark and Rumbold cite research by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development that concluded that reading enjoyment is actually more important than socio-economic status when it comes to reading success in school (6). They also argue that reading enjoyment is vital to educational success because it is part of students’ intrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation—motivation that comes from the student herself—has a positive effect on reading comprehension, while extrinsic motivation—such as the threat of being graded or positive encouragement from the teacher—leads students to rely on “surface level” strategies like guessing or memorizing rather than developing more complex reading comprehension strategies (19).

As this research suggests, providing texts that students perceive as relevant, engaging, and accessible is vital in developing literacy among young adults. Fortunately, young adult literature can help by giving educators a vehicle for teaching important literary concepts while still engaging their students in the process. The term “young adult literature” is difficult to define concisely, since both “literature” and “young adult” vary by cultural background and change over time. As Michael Cart, president of the Young Adult Library Services Association, explains, “when the term first found common usage in the late 1960’s [sic], it referred to realistic fiction that was set in the real (as opposed to imagined), contemporary world and addressed problems, issues, and life circumstances of interest to young readers aged approximately 12-18” (“The Value of Young Adult Literature”). In modern terms, however, young adult literature now includes a much broader spectrum of texts. Many young adult books are set in imagined or future worlds rather than the real world, and the target demographic may now include readers as young as ten or as old as twenty-five. In addition, “young adult literature” now includes graphic

novels, nonfiction, poetry, and other genres, where it was once limited to traditional novels. In *Using Young Adult Literature in the English Classroom*, Bushman and Haas point out that despite the constant evolution of YA, most texts have a few characteristics in common; a young protagonist, problems that young adults frequently face, and language that is an appropriate level for young readers (2). Bushman and Haas also point out the centrality of the question, “Who Am I?” which recurs throughout YA texts (8).

In another piece, “Teens and the Future of Reading,” Cart elaborates on this expansion of young adult reading. As he points out, although teens may be reading less traditional literature, that does not mean they have stopped reading altogether; instead, Cart contends that teens are experiencing narratives through non-fiction, audiobooks, and graphic novels. He references the work of educators and researchers to argue that the more adults recognize nontraditional forms of storytelling like blogs, the more likely young adults will be to consider themselves readers.

“A Call to Action” by the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) pushes this line of thought even further, claiming that the texts students encounter every day include everything from “clothing logos to music to specialty magazines to Web sites to popular and classical literature” and that it is imperative for “teachers to recognize and value the multiple literacy resources students bring to the acquisition of school literacy” (1). Thus, like Michael Cart, the NCTE recognizes the value of diverse texts in the education of young adults.

Unfortunately, despite the varied support for diverse texts, instructors that utilize young adult literature are often looked down upon by their peers as specialists in a genre that many consider remedial or simplified; this largely springs from the mistaken assumption that using YA in the classroom is the equivalent of dumbing-down literature. This misguided belief is thoroughly challenged in Sharon Hoffman’s “Reading for Justice: Twelfth Grade Girls’ Talk



Around Young Adult Novels” as well as Santoli and Wagner’s “Promoting Young Adult Literature: The Other ‘Real’ Literature.” Researchers and educators agree that young adult literature is beneficial because it deals with similar themes, archetypes, and literary elements as canonical texts, with the added benefit of actually holding young readers’ attention and interest (Cart; Hoffman; Wolk; Santoli and Wagner; Abbate).

As one might imagine, one of the primary advantages of using young adult literature in the classroom is its accessibility for young readers. Unlike the complicated syntax and obscure allusions of classical literature, “young adult novels make very complex issues concrete and understandable, [so] students can connect them to their lives” (Santoli and Wagner 68). While many will scoff at this idea, the accessibility of a text is important—after all, the difficulty one encounters when reading often determines whether she will finish the book or toss it aside. As we discussed in chapter three, accessibility is a serious issue in Appalachia, as demonstrated by disparities in access to health care, which underscores the importance of readily available resources. Young adults read for many reasons, including for entertainment; while we do not want “fun” to be the only reason they read, it also cannot be completely ignored. In a time when teenagers are reading only seven minutes a day, we cannot afford to overlook a literary genre that captures their interest.

In addition to this accessibility, young adult literature portrays stories that are relatable to teenagers, rather than asking them to mentally travel back in time or try to understand the complexities of the coal industry in 19<sup>th</sup> century England. As Michael Cart explains, “to see oneself in the pages of a young adult book is to receive the reassurance that one is not alone after all, not other, not alien, but instead, a viable part of larger community of beings who share a common humanity” (“The Value of Young Adult Literature”). While mature young readers may reap this same benefit from classic texts, seeing themselves in the conflicted emotions of Jane

Eyre or the tangled identity of Dr. Jekyll, many teenagers need relatable stories in order to see themselves in the text.

While many educators acknowledge the usefulness of young adult literature, some still choose not to include it as a central part of their curricula, instead relegating these books to summer reading lists or other optional reading. While this is better than flatly insisting that YA is useless, it is not sufficient. In the course of his research on young adult literature and social responsibility, Steven Wolk asked high school students about their reading habits, specifically *why* they read in school, and found that the overwhelming majority of students gave some variant of “because I have to.” Knowing this, we cannot expect that these same students will experience personal growth from reading books without guidance or instruction. To complicate matters further, research suggests that independent reading may even have a gendered aspect. According to Howard 2010, cited in Kaplan’s “Why Literacy (and Young Adult Literature) Matters,” female students were more likely to read outside class requirements than their male peers. This is significant because research has shown that young men have lower rates of empathy than young women, particularly as they reach middle and late adolescence (Van der Graaf, et al.). Thus, if we decide to relegate YA books to independent reading, we are neglecting the population of students that may need them the most.

For those educators that remain unconvinced, there is one more compelling opportunity to utilize YA: pair young adult texts with canonical texts. This idea, endorsed by many authors in the past decade, combines the two supposedly incongruous sides; by pairing texts from each genre, we may offer our students the accessibility and relatability of YA without abandoning the tradition and cultural importance of the canon (see Hoffman; Santoli and Wagner). As previously mentioned, young adult books deal with the same major themes and utilize the same literary elements as classic literature, so they are easy to pair with canonical texts with similar themes or

formats. For example, we may approach the issues of inequality and the power of the government by pairing Scott Westerfeld's *Uglies* with Aldous Huxley's *A Brave New World*; or we might introduce star-crossed lovers using John Green's *The Fault in Our Stars* before reading *Romeo and Juliet*; or, we might read Walter Dean Myers' *Monster* in order to familiarize ourselves with both a screenplay format and themes surrounding a court trial before reading *The Crucible*. These pairings and others like them provide students with a new way of understanding classic texts. Once they have read and discussed a more accessible young adult text, students will be better prepared to examine similar themes and literary elements in the canon.

No matter how they decide to incorporate it into their classrooms, it is imperative that educators begin treating YA as a valid option to capture students' interest and instill in them a love of reading. Teenagers are reading less than ever before, and by forcing them to read unrelatable, difficult texts, we are likely quashing any desire to become lifelong readers. Instead, let us focus on texts that not only interest young readers but also bring them to examine both literature and their own lives in a new light.

## CHAPTER 6

### PEDAGOGICAL APPLICATIONS

As we have concluded thus far, fiction can help foster a greater sense of empathy in its readers. Adolescents, as a demographic whose empathy scores have declined in recent years, stand to experience significant improvement in the way they interpret the lives of others by reading and discussing multicultural fiction. This is particularly true among adolescents in Appalachia, some rural regions of which are still culturally homogenous and geographically isolated from large hubs. Finally, we have addressed the controversy over using young adult literature in classrooms restricted by educational standards and have concluded that books intended for young adult audiences more effectively engage young readers while still attending to important themes, literary genres, and learning outcomes available through canonical works. Given these conclusions, how might educators incorporate a focus on empathy into their curricula?

In this chapter, we will discuss three young adult novels: *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* by Sherman Alexie (2007), *Accidents of Nature* by Harriet McBryde Johnson (2006), and *The Porcupine of Truth* by Bill Konigsberg (2015). With each of these texts, we will discuss how the lives of the characters can be utilized to widen our students' perceptions of race (*Part-Time Indian*), ability (*Accidents of Nature*), and sexuality (*Porcupine*), thereby affecting the way they respond to similar differences in their daily lives.

The process of selecting texts for this project began with lists of diverse novels published by educators and young adult librarians; some of these source lists included those written by Jaqueline W. Glasgow, Belinda Louie, Jessica Singer and Ruth Shagoury, and Steven Wolk. In addition, numerous online young adult literature databases were consulted, including those from the Cooperative Children's Book Center (Schliesman) as well as several helpful pages from the

Young Adult Library Services Association website. Together with these sources, we also implemented the criteria proposed by Ambika Gopalakrishnan and Kimberly Persiani-Becker as well as Susan M. Landt to evaluate whether texts were appropriate representations of multicultural literature.

In addition, these novels were selected with regards to standards for this project in particular; for example, the three books ultimately chosen represent a variety of interpersonal differences (race, ability, and sexuality), they include both young men and young women as narrators, they do not include titles that might inspire parents' censorship, and they have engaging titles and cover artwork. Although these three novels are by no means the only appropriate texts for teaching empathy, they are meant to represent a sample of young adult literature that addresses three important interpersonal differences. If educators decide to include additional multicultural texts in their classrooms, they should consider using Susan M. Landt's criteria for evaluating the authenticity of cultural portrayal in books.

For each novel, we will offer a brief summary of its plot as well as sample classroom activities and assignments that highlight empathy through the text. A unit plan that summarizes the proposed activities and notes their relevant educational standards is included in Appendix A. The suggested unit plan includes all three texts so students have the opportunity to widen their concept of empathy relative to several individual differences; however, we recognize that not all educators will be able to receive approval for using all three texts in their classrooms. Thus, each text may be taught independently, although this may result in reduced effect overall. The proposed assignments and activities referenced here and included in Appendix A are free for use or adaptation in any classroom.

Before utilizing this unit in the classroom, teachers should consider the possibility of parental or community complaints. As many educators have experienced, any book has the

potential to be challenged by parents or other community members, typically due to inappropriate language, mature subject matter, or frowned-upon reading level. As these three texts represent multicultural, young adult fiction, they may be more likely to be challenged for their use in the classroom. In order to avoid such complaints detracting from their curricula, educators should follow some general guidelines in defending the texts chosen for their classroom.

First, educators should request that the book be ordered for the school library; that way, if the book is challenged at a later date, it will be evaluated as a text that has already been approved for exposure to the entire school population rather than a text that an individual teacher selected for her classroom. Once the book is available in the school library, instructors should write a justification or rationale for the text that addresses its educational merits and draws on scholarly research when necessary. This justification of the text should include a citation of the work, a brief summary, how the work will be used, and anticipated problems and how they will be handled; for more information on writing a rationale, see “How to Write a Rationale” from the National Council for Teachers of English (NCTE). Sample rationales for *Part-Time Indian*, *Accidents of Nature*, and *Porcupine of Truth*, which were composed by the author as part of this project, are provided in Appendix C. When the justification is complete, educators should schedule a meeting with the administrator to discuss the text and ask her to sign and keep a copy of the document in her file. As the NCTE writes in “The Students’ Right to Read,” these justifications send an important message to the community, as they “serve as impressive evidence to the administration and the community that English teachers have not chosen their books lightly or haphazardly.”

Following these steps leading up to the unit will help the school respond to any complaints about the text. If a parent or community member calls the school with a complaint or

concern after these precautions have been taken, the administrator already has a justification on file for the book's inclusion in the curriculum and can promptly respond to the concerns with clear language and data-driven support. If complaints continue after this point, the NCTE recommends that the teacher ask for the complaint to be made specific and put in writing so she can respond thoroughly ("The Students' Right to Read"). In this way, complainants must identify precisely why they disagree with the text, which also eliminates those who have expressed displeasure without actually reading the text. The NCTE also provides a form that can be distributed to complainants to guide them through formalizing their concerns for discussion. Though complaints will undoubtedly arise, these resources and procedures will help educators handle them appropriately without detracting from the intended learning objectives.

### Summary of the Unit

The unit proposed here uses three accessible, multicultural YA texts to encourage students' ability to take another person's perspective and demonstrate an understanding of their needs. As previously discussed, young adults are at an ideal age to develop a greater sense of empathy due to their neural plasticity and the ongoing social change associated with adolescence. Studying these three multicultural texts encourages them to widen their "circle of concern" (Weissbourd and Jones) to demonstrate empathy for those unlike themselves.

By the end of this unit, students will be able to: analyze passages through close reading, compose creative writing to explore major themes in the text, identify real-world problems using lessons from the text, and compare multiple texts to examine similar themes (see Appendix A for the full unit plan). By studying *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, *Accidents of Nature*, and *The Porcupine of Truth*, students may begin to understand the struggles and victories of others through literature.

### Examining Racism in *Part-Time Indian*

Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* follows Arnold Spirit, or "Junior," a fourteen-year-old living on the Spokane Indian Reservation in Washington. Frustrated at the lack of opportunities available at his school on "the rez," Junior decides to transfer to the "white" high school in nearby Reardan—which no one from his reservation has ever done before. As a result of his decision, Junior experiences an unusual mixture of pride from his family, ridicule from his new classmates at Reardan, and hatred from his former classmates on the reservation who consider him a traitor. In the midst of one tumultuous academic year, Junior learns how to respond to overt racism and how to reconcile his identity as an Indian with his drive for greater opportunities than those provided to minority groups.

*The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* is an ideal text for appealing to young adult readers because it deals with issues with which they are already familiar such as fitting in at a new school, dating, fighting with friends, and bullying. As previously discussed in Chapter Five, "Unloading the Canon," young adults enjoy reading more, are more motivated to read in the future, and increase their literacy skills when they are given texts that are accessible and relevant to their lives (White; Pitcher et al.; Clark and Rumbold; Kaplan; Santoli and Wagner).

In addition, *Part-Time Indian* appeals to young readers through its use of illustrations "drawn" by the protagonist, Junior. In *Building Literacy Connections with Graphic Novels*, James Bucky Carter espouses the importance of illustrated or art-enriched materials for adolescent readers. Carter argues that illustrated texts are beneficial in the classroom because they expand students' literacy, help students transcend apathy, engage reluctant readers—both those that are bored because they are high-achievers and those that are struggling to read effectively—and provide accessible approaches to important topics. Carter also cites work by Michelle Gorman, who contends that illustrated texts facilitate the transition from computer and television to print



media. Finally, Carter points out that art-enriched texts have a particular appeal for male readers, writing, “graphic novels are one of the few types of texts that consistently engage male readers. Edgy, engaging, and different... graphic novels satisfied boys’ overwhelmingly clear urge to explore visual texts” (10). Although *Part-Time Indian* is not a graphic novel, the illustrations corresponding to Junior’s story make the text more engaging and enriching for young adult readers.

As addressed in Chapter 3, “Empathy in Appalachia,” Appalachia is still a largely racially homogenous region outside of its urban centers; this is particularly the case in Central and South Central Appalachia. In Kelvin Pollard’s research for the Population Reference Bureau, more than half of the 410 counties included in his definition of Appalachia had less than 5% non-white population, meaning that many white adolescents in the region grow up only occasionally interacting with anyone that is not white. Thus, it is imperative that adolescents in Appalachia are given the opportunity to develop empathy with respect to race specifically. By approaching the issue through literature, teens may be more apt to empathize with the experiences of people of color in the real world.

Alexie, whose career spans several decades, has occasionally been criticized for his portrayal of Native Americans, particularly by other Native American authors. Most of this criticism relates to Alexie’s other works, while *Part-Time Indian* remains fairly well-loved. However, this criticism is still worth considering when selecting one of Alexie’s books for study. One fellow Native American writer, Heather Purser, offers her account of reading Alexie’s work as a member of the community involved; she describes how she spent years despising Alexie and his work before gradually coming to respect the brutal honesty in his writing. Purser writes that she, like many other Native American authors, had conflicted feelings about him as “one of the most controversial, arrogant, annoyingly honest, and successful Indian writers in history.”

Others have expressed their criticism of Alexie more explicitly; for example, Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, a well-known opponent of Alexie's work, claims that he focuses too much on the misery of reservation life, giving outsiders an unfairly negative view of "rez" life and reinforcing the stereotype of the poor, downtrodden Indian (Kertzer 54). Alexie responds to this criticism simply, by pointing out that rez life often *is* miserable, and thus his work is fair in that it is unflinchingly honest (E. Konigsberg). Cook-Lynn also criticizes Alexie for framing American individualism, not tribal sovereignty, as the solution to Native Americans' struggles (Kertzer 54)—this critique of Alexie is reminiscent of Purser's claims that Alexie's detractors consider him an "apple," red on the outside but white on the inside.

In the journal *Multi-Ethnic Literature of the U.S.*, Colleen Gleeson Eils argues that the backlash to Alexie's work in the Native American community has to do with the way he "studies" Native Americans. Eils points out that Alexie's fiction treats Native Americans as the subjects of ethnographic study, which understandably frustrates and offends those being observed. She clarifies that because their privacy is essentially disregarded, the group being observed typically detests ethnographic study; as Eils explains, it forces them to experience a form of "compulsory visibility" (30). This strong negative reaction to being observed may explain why some members of the Native American community detest Alexie's writing while others admire his candor in describing their lives.

Despite this various criticism, it seems that Alexie's work in general, and *Part-Time Indian* in particular, are considered important works within contemporary Native American literature. Thus, while one should consider these critiques before utilizing Alexie's work in the classroom, *Part-Time Indian* remains a book worth including a multicultural curriculum such as this one designed to foster empathy in young readers.

While Junior's entire narrative is ideal for inspiring empathy, there are two specific passages that lend themselves to closer examination and discussion (for a more exhaustive list of relevant passages, see Appendix B). First, early in the novel, is Junior's account of his first day at Reardan, where he says the only other Indian besides him is the school mascot (Alexie 54). This passage stands out from the rest because most middle adolescents have been the "new kid," which gives them a simple way to identify with Junior's timidity and confusion on his first day at Reardan. Second, in a much more troubling excerpt, Earl, the father of Penelope, a white girl Junior is dating, confronts him outside the high school and expresses outright racist attitudes toward his Junior dating his daughter (Alexie 109). This passage is significant in a discussion of racial empathy because Earl represents what becomes of a closed-minded person—he is the character with whom readers should *not* want to identify while reading. In addition, this excerpt exposes what more overt, direct racism looks like, as opposed to the institutionalized racism that runs throughout the rest of Junior's story. The entirety of *Part-Time Indian* portrays racism from the perspective of a young teenager, but these passages represent two of Junior's experiences that are ripe for discussions of empathy.

Most teenagers have experience being "new kids"; these memories of first days in new schools can be utilized in discussion to build empathy for Junior. In Chapter 2, "Empathy in Adolescents," we addressed methods of encouraging the development of empathy posited in Weissbourd and Jones's research for the *Making Caring Common Project* at Harvard's Graduate School for Education. Among several other suggestions, Weissbourd and Jones recommend modeling empathy for adolescents, both by extending it to the students themselves and to third parties, and giving them the opportunity to practice empathy by guiding them through conversations using scaffolding questions. By closely reading the passage describing Junior's first day (Alexie 54) and soliciting students' own memories of being the "new kid," educators may

address both of these tools for fostering empathy; they may show empathy for the students and their discomfort, while also allowing students to practice empathy for Junior. Gradually, using guiding questions, instructors may progressively narrow students' focus to how Junior's first day was affected by the added layer of representing a racial minority in the school.

In addition to this focused discussion, Junior's experiences in *Part-Time Indian* lend themselves to creative writing. In order to encourage even greater empathy with Junior's experiences on his first day at Reardan and highlight how they were affected by his racial identity, students may engage in a short, creative writing in which they imagine alternative first day narratives. The prompts for such writing may vary, asking students to imagine their own first day at Reardan, their first day at Junior's old school on the reservation, Penelope or Gordy's first day at the reservation school, and so on. Because a day at school is such a familiar experience, students are equipped to imagine many variations of it, highlighting how race can affect acceptance in a new environment.

Junior's comment about being the only Indian apart from the school mascot (Alexie 54) also lends itself to a creative, multimedia activity. Students can respond to this passage by drawing alternative mascots for Reardan High School that are more appropriate for the school population. In addition, students can discuss how their own local mascots reflect their community and how national sports teams have responded to backlash regarding their mascots. These activities in response to Reardan's mascot connect real-life experiences to the novel and encourage students to "step into" Junior's shoes. To further expand this activity, educators may also include a brief lesson on cultural appropriation using recent controversies surrounding Native American headdresses used as costumes at music festivals, bantu knots employed as a fashion statement, and similar trends of using cultural symbols as fashion statements.

Finally, the unit includes proposed social justice applications to conclude the discussion of *Part-Time Indian*. Because the activities all focus on prompting students to understand the needs of others, the social justice component allows them the opportunity to identify and address a problem in their own community relevant to the issues in the novel. For example, one of Junior's struggles throughout the text is his lack of access to reliable transportation, which often causes him to miss school, arrive late, or walk long distances alone to reach Reardan High School. This lack of transportation is also common in Appalachia, where some students live in extremely rural areas and may face difficulty attending school. As a social justice project, students could address the issue of transportation to school in their own communities. Some possible solutions students could offer to this problem: create a carpooling or ride-sharing program with other families; create a mobile app or online message board for students to ask for or offer rides to school; or petition for the reevaluation of school bus routes. Using what they learned from *Part-Time Indian* to address a problem in their own community gives students the opportunity to immediately practice empathy in a real-world scenario.

All of these proposed activities not only lead students to read closely, discuss in depth, and write creatively, they appeal to Weissbourd and Jones's recommendations for developing empathy over time by allowing the instructor to model empathy for others and offering students the opportunity to practice empathy in a relatable way. Weissbourd and Jones's suggestions are directed toward parents, but several of them are applicable in the classroom as well, most notably by giving students the chance to "try" empathy; as Weissbourd and Jones explain, "regularly considering other people's perspectives and circumstances helps make empathy a natural reflex and, through trial and error, helps children get better at tuning into others' feelings and perspectives" (2). Empathy, like many other behaviors, becomes easier with practice, which these activities provide. Because of the subject matter of the novel, these activities also align with

Weissbourd and Jones’s suggestion to “expand your child’s circle of concern,” or encourage empathy for a variety of people.

In addition, these activities satisfy educational standards regarding comprehension and discussion of major themes as well as the use of literary evidence in developing a written narrative. For more information on the activities described here, see Appendix A.

### Examining Ableism in *Accidents of Nature*

*Accidents of Nature* by Harriet McBryde Johnson chronicles a ten-day summer stay at the cross-disability Camp Courage in 1970s North Carolina. The novel is told from the perspective of Jean, a seventeen year old with cerebral palsy, as she encounters campers with learning disorders, autism, epilepsy, and vision impairment, among other physical and mental disabilities. In her brief stay at Camp Courage, Jean grapples with her various identities as she feels conflicted between “fitting right in” and recognizing her membership in the disabled community. She deals with well-meaning but tactless counselors, gawking visitors, and controlling camp directors, all of whom lead her to question her place in wider society as a differently-abled teenager.

*Accidents of Nature* is an excellent text with which to address disability as it deals with issues relevant to teenagers’ daily lives such as attending summer camp, fitting in with a new group of friends, and trying to find one’s identity separate from the family unit. In addition, the book is written in simple syntax that facilitates reading for students that may struggle with more traditional or canonical texts (Kaplan; Santoli and Wagner). Despite its accessible syntax, the novel challenges students to consider important questions regarding societal treatment of disability, disability rights within their own communities, and the psychological impact of name-calling among friends. Finally, *Accidents of Nature* is a carefully-selected text that meets several of

Susan M. Landt's criteria for appropriate multicultural texts: the book is written by a member of the community being portrayed, there is diversity within the community, and the characters are depicted as solving their own problems rather than relying on majority intervention.

*Accidents* is also valuable in that it introduces young readers to the concept of what Susan Wendell calls the "social construction of disability," although the phenomenon is never mentioned in such explicit terms in the novel. Through Jean's experiences at Camp Courage and her recollections of life at home, readers begin to see how society works to exclude people with disabilities. As Wendell writes, "Not only the architecture, but the entire physical and social organization of life tends to assume that we are either strong and healthy and able to do what the average young, non-disabled man can do or that we are completely unable to participate in public life" (94). This dichotomy between "able or not" forces those with disabilities to either try and "keep up" or stay home. This conflict is emphasized in *Accidents of Nature* as Jean oscillates between wanting to "fit right in" and recognizing the many ways in which society is built to exclude her. As the novel explores Jean's experiences with feeling left out or not planned for, readers may begin to better understand how the organization of public spaces as well as the cultural perceptions of disability—where many regard "the condition of the person, not the built environment or the social organization of activities, as the source of the problem" (Wendell 96)—contribute to increased inaccessibility for many disabled people.

According to Pollard and Jacobsen's analysis of the Appalachian population between 2008 and 2012, disability is more common in the region than in the nation as a whole, and rates of disability are particularly high in Central and South Central Appalachia. Of the 133 counties with a disability rate higher than 20%, approximately half are in Central Appalachia (Pollard and Jacobsen 55). Pollard and Jacobsen clarify that the prevalence of disability in Appalachia is likely related to the higher average age of the region as well as the types of employment available

in Appalachia; however, disability among children under the age of eighteen is also slightly higher than the national average (56).

Although ableism, or discrimination against physical and mental disabilities, has not been proven to be more prevalent in Appalachia than other regions of the United States, disabled people represent a culture that is often overlooked and sometimes difficult to relate to, particularly for young readers. Thus, exploring the impact of ability on adolescence through a young adult novel helps readers learn to exercise greater empathy for this group that is often ignored or mistreated.

In most school systems, there are few opportunities for able-bodied students and students with disabilities to interact as equals; students with disabilities are often kept separate from “normal” kids or only mainstreamed for brief portions of the school day. This separation firmly “others” those that are not part of an individual’s in-group, making it more difficult to include them within the “circle of concern,” Weissbourd and Jones’s term for those with whom we empathize most easily. Thus, emphasizing empathy rather than sympathy for this population is imperative.

Harriet McBryde Johnson herself has a lifelong disability and attended a cross-disability summer camp similar to Camp Courage in her youth; her membership in the community of people with disabilities adds a layer of authenticity to the novel and prevents her characters from becoming “token” representations. It is worth clarifying here that not all members of minority communities should be asked to speak as representatives for the group; not everyone is comfortable doing so, and not everyone could do so as articulately as Johnson. However, during her lifetime, Johnson acted as an advocate for disability rights both through her writing and through a widely publicized debate with Peter Singer at Princeton University regarding the right of disabled people to exist (Johnson, “Unspeakable Conversations”). This outspoken advocacy



from Johnson herself allows us to understand her portrayal of the disabled community in *Accidents of Nature* in a different light.

Johnson treats her characters as whole people, not caricatures, and effectively describes them as typical teenagers. Rather than being defined by or reduced to their disabilities, the campers have varied interests and personalities and encounter common adolescent issues like bullying, anxiety over fitting in, and unrequited crushes. As a member of the community she describes, Johnson represents differently-abled teens as individuals—which in turn allows readers to understand them as such.

*Accidents of Nature*, like *Part-Time Indian*, contains many passages that guide readers toward empathy; one could almost open the novel at random and find a selection suitable for in-depth discussion. However, there are three excerpts in particular that highlight the major themes of *Accidents* and direct students toward higher-level thinking and synthesis (for a more extensive list of relevant passages, see Appendix B).

The first of these passages describes an afternoon of swimming at Camp Courage where Jean watches her fellow campers divest themselves of various equipment, tools, and harnesses in order to enjoy the water:

We come to the lake in bathing suits and lay our towels on the strip of white sand... other things too are dropped there: seven or eight wheelchairs, assorted crutches and canes, chest harnesses for hearing aids, helmets, and arms like Captain Hook's... Here's a boy I've seen before. I took him for a walkie-talkie... now he sits on a towel, disconnects both legs, and drops them on the ground. At first glance, what's left of him looks like a half boy, literally truncated... But then I watch him cross the sand on his rump and two strong arms. Free of the weight of fake legs, he speeds into the water, a place where the lackings of legless creatures are unimportant... I'm not disgusted by the others, people with pieces missing or mangled. I count it a rare privilege to see them all without their coverings, their equipment, their attachments, their replacement parts, as they really are, in all their strange variety (Johnson 34-35).

This selection is important for several reasons, among them that it highlights the uniqueness and individuality of adolescents with disabilities; using Jean's observations, Johnson asserts that the

teens do not represent a monolithic group as they are often treated. Rather, they feel as different from one another as everyone else. In addition, Jean's comparison of her own body to the bodies of her peers relates to a common experience among young adults, that of self-consciousness regarding appearance. While students likely would not be open to sharing their concerns about their own bodies, familiarity with this issue would help them identify with Jean's experiences comparing herself to the others.

In the second passage, Jean discusses physical therapy with a few fellow campers. They recall how painful therapy could be and how frequently its goals were narrowly focused on learning to walk. After their conversation, Jean wonders, "Can a wheelchair be a choice, and not a failure? I'm not sure... surely for most people it makes sense to try to become as normal as possible. But what if normal isn't the only way to be?" (Johnson 41). This selection emphasizes the difficulty of finding one's place in relation to society at large, particularly with the intersection of adolescence and ability. During adolescence, there is often heavy emphasis on "growing out of" physical characteristics we dislike or getting to the other side of an "awkward stage"; but for teenagers with disabilities, physical characteristics are frequently less alterable, so they might feel their awkward stages are inescapable. In other words, able-bodied people have the illusion of control over their bodies—they believe that if they have enough will power and work hard enough, they can change themselves—while disabled people do not have the same opportunities to "control" their bodies. Recognizing this struggle is important because it is an issue everyone must grapple with while coming of age. Thus, it underscores an experience that is shared regardless of ability, yet made different by the intersection of ability and adolescence. This shared experience may lead readers to identify with the seemingly unfamiliar stories of Jean and her cabin-mates.

Finally, the third excerpt represents one of the central themes of the novel and may have the strongest personal impact on readers. In this selection, Jean, Sara, and Willie are conversing with one of their counselors, Carole. Carole admits that although she decided to work for Camp Courage out of a desire to help young adults with disabilities, she feels like she does not know how to actually be of service. She feels unprepared to counsel the campers on problems with which she has never struggled and cannot identify. Willie reassures Carole by saying, “Listen, if you come to Camp Courage and learn that you don’t know what you’re doing, you’re miles ahead of most people going into the helping professions. Doesn’t helping begin with admitting that you don’t know what to do?” (Johnson 147). Willie’s response to Carole has a key impact on adolescents wrestling with serious issues like physical and mental disabilities. In this excerpt, the characters reassure the reader along with Carole that simply being willing to help and admitting that you do not know everything about an unfamiliar population is a reasonable place to begin. In contrast, consider the way Jean describes the “surfer guy” who does not remember or recognize her from earlier that same day but considers her one of many “wheelchair girls” at Camp Courage (Johnson 136). Although both of these characters are trying to help disabled teenagers, Carole demonstrates how to actually be helpful, by recognizing them as individuals and having the humility to admit she does not understand their experience. In this sense, it is as if Johnson wrote Carole to represent the ideal able-bodied ally. Since teenagers can feel overwhelmed by how to interact with seemingly foreign groups, this reassurance serves as the encouragement they need to empathize even when they are not sure they are doing it well.

As with *Part-Time Indian*, the passages described above provide educators with ample opportunity to follow Weissbourd and Jones’s advice by both demonstrating empathy and allowing students the chance to practice it as well. Additionally, *Accidents of Nature*, perhaps even more so than *Part-Time Indian*, articulates complex interpersonal and ethical issues in ways that

young readers can understand. This does not suggest that *Accidents* is superior *Part-Time Indian*, but that the novels have different focuses and will appeal to readers at different stages of development. Jean, in her many conversations with Sara about the rights of disabled people in general and their treatment by society, explores a broader range of topics with regards to other people, while Arnold's narrative largely examines important questions only with regards to his own life; because Jean is seventeen while Arnold is only fourteen, this could be seen as a reflection of adolescent development. Thus, *Part-Time Indian* is more ideal for readers that still understand the world mainly through their own personal experiences, while *Accidents of Nature* encourages young adults that are beginning to examine the world itself to expand their views of other people's experiences.

Regardless of the reason, this wider focus on the experiences of many people, as opposed to only the narrator, makes *Accidents* an excellent novel for examining complex ethical issues with young adults. As we discussed in Chapter 5, "Unloading the Canon," the accessibility of a text is vital to its success with young readers. This is a primary reason for using young adult literature in place of the classics; as Santoli and Wagner explain, "young adult novels make very complex issues concrete and understandable, [so] students can connect them to their lives" (68). Johnson demonstrates this characteristic of YA texts; by avoiding medical jargon or philosophical language and using everyday language instead, she invites young readers to ruminate on highly complex, essential questions regarding the bodily autonomy of disabled persons and their inclusion in society at large.

*Accidents of Nature* lends itself to several relevant classroom activities, including meaningful discussions, reflective writing, and hands-on experiences. Because Johnson describes many of the campers in terms of their hobbies (Sara enjoys drawing, Yvette likes sports, and Dolly writes novellas), instructors can lead students in a discussion of either stereotypical summer camp

activities or favorite pastimes and how they might be affected by different abilities. For instance, if a student loves video games, would she continue to play them if she were vision impaired? Or if she loves experimenting with makeup to create memorable “looks” for school, how would she accomplish this task if she had Jean’s shaky and unreliable grip? A discussion along these lines would lead students to consider how much their identities are reliant on their abilities, as well as how many of their daily activities exclude differing abilities.

Similarly, instructors could ask students to consider what life would be like if they could not see, hear, smell, speak, or walk. This essential question could be explored through an assignment to spend one hour outside class time deprived of a single ability, followed by a reflective writing about the experience. This activity not only encourages variety in classroom activities by incorporating a hands-on dynamic, it allows students to step into the shoes of Johnson’s characters and more fully empathize with their interactions with the world.

Finally, instructors may craft numerous activities and assignments regarding language and labels in *Accidents of Nature*. A brief examination of the book’s cover reveals how central this issue is to Jean’s interactions at Camp Courage. Emblazoned across the front are phrases like “cripple’s code of conduct” and “everyone’s a winner” highlighting how problematic the language we use to refer to disabilities can be. Every teenager has experience with being called a name or a label with which she does not identify—whether it be “fatty,” “slut,” or another label, everyone has been called a mean name. Highlighting this shared experience not only encourages students to feel empathy for the characters in the novel, it leads them to reconsider the way they talk about people they know in real life. In addition, discussions over the impact of labels can be connected to non-fiction texts like Robin Lakoff’s “From Ancient Greece to Iraq: Words in Wartime,” historical topics like war propaganda, or even TED talks such as “To This Day: For the Bullied and Beautiful.” Relating the names used in *Accidents of Nature* to materials with similar

themes of labeling and name-calling engages students in higher-level thinking and promotes intertextual synthesis.

In a form-based activity, students may be asked to consider the final chapter of *Accidents of Nature*, which is written from the perspective of Sara rather than Jean. A discussion of this final chapter may include reader response aspects—as in, how did changing narrators at the last moment change the way you felt about the story—as well as more in-depth considerations of the form of novels. Through this chapter, students may be asked to reflect on the importance of the narrator, the function of “flash-forward” chapters, and the effect of unresolved storylines on the book (since we do not know what happened to Jean).

In addition to these activities, the unit plan in Appendix A includes possible social justice applications for *Accidents of Nature*. Concluding with a social justice application allows students to recognize and respond to an issue in their own community that is relevant to the issues addressed in *Accidents of Nature*. For instance, many of Jean’s difficulties in *Accidents* have to do with the way disabled people are represented in the media. She says that many “normal” people are only familiar with cerebral palsy and other disabilities through sensational, cheesy telethons, which gives them a reductive view of people with disabilities. Unfortunately, representation of disabilities has improved slowly since the 1970s, which means that many disabled teens still struggle with the narrow way they are portrayed in the media. Students can respond to this issue in a variety of ways: create a pamphlet or design a bulletin board addressing the representation of disabilities in the media; design and create a display of books with disabled protagonists in the school library; establish and operate a blog to highlight positive representations of disabilities that might otherwise be overlooked; work with the history department to research differently-abled historical figures; or construct a zine, podcast, or short video about disability rights and accessibility in their own communities. Responding to a real-world issue using the topics

addressed in *Accidents of Nature* lets students immediately apply what they have learned in the classroom.

As with *Part-Time Indian*, a unit plan is available in Appendix A to demonstrate how the themes and activities discussed here may be used in the classroom to encourage greater empathy for an unfamiliar group—in this case, differently-abled adolescents.

### Examining Sexuality in *The Porcupine of Truth*

In Bill Konigsberg's *The Porcupine of Truth*, seventeen-year-old Carson moves to Billings, Montana with his mother to help care for his estranged, dying father. On his first day in Montana, Carson meets Aisha at the zoo and thinks they have real chemistry—until he finds out she is gay. When he discovers Aisha was disowned for her sexuality and has been secretly sleeping at the zoo, he invites her to live with his family instead. While cleaning his father's basement, Carson and Aisha discover clues regarding his long-missing grandfather. They decide to strike out on a cross-country road trip in an attempt to find the disappearing man.

*The Porcupine of Truth* is an excellent text for young adults aged fourteen to eighteen primarily due to its relevance and accessibility. *Porcupine* addresses issues relevant to the lives of young adults like finding friends in a new place, gaining independence from parents, understanding the importance of family history, and dealing with grief over the death of a loved one. Because the novel focuses on issues that teenagers may have encountered themselves, it is more likely to hold their attention than a text that relies on an involved love story or complicated political plot. As discussed previously in Chapter 5, “Unloading the Canon,” the relevance of a text to the reader's life is an important factor in encouraging young adults to read (White; Clark; Pitcher et al.). In addition, *Porcupine* is written in accessible, modern language with syntax appropriate for young adult readers still developing their literary skills. Rather than using archaic

language and outdated cultural references, the characters use everyday speech that is familiar to readers and refer to familiar aspects of popular culture. This accessibility provides young adults, including those that are struggling readers, a greater opportunity to connect with and appreciate the text (Gallagher; Kaplan; Gallo; Santoli and Wagner).

As previously discussed in Chapter 3, “Empathy in Appalachia,” the region is still relatively homogenous in terms of sexuality—at least on the surface, as many teens do not openly identify as LGBTQ for fear of discrimination. In her Masters Thesis at the University of Tennessee, Amy Jordan found that in Tennessee schools, “over 90% [of students] regularly heard anti-gay slurs... [and] these remarks were not exclusively from other students—around a third of students reported hearing homo- and trans-phobic language from school staff” (5). These patterns also exist at the national level; according to the NEA’s “Strengthening the School Environment,” 84% of LGBTQ students reported being verbally harassed because of their sexual orientation (7).

Although harassment of LGBTQ youth in schools exists at both the regional and national levels, public opinion of homosexuality in Appalachia is more negative than in other regions of the country. When Flores and Barclay ranked each state by its rate of support for same-sex marriage, Tennessee, Kentucky, West Virginia, and North Carolina all fell within the bottom fifteen states, with only 32-38% in support (4). As mentioned in Chapter 3, this widespread disapproval of LGBTQ lifestyles may be closely tied to the religions represented in the region. Although acceptance of homosexuality has increased among all religious affiliations in the last decade, the Pew Research Center reports that only 30% of Southern Baptist Convention members accept homosexuality, compared to 54% of U.S. Christians as a whole, 76% of those of non-Christian faiths, and 83% of religiously unaffiliated people (Murphy).



Although this animosity towards homosexuality is not universal in Appalachia, its existence in schools and in the community means that many adolescents come of age that heterosexuality is the only “right” lifestyle. For this reason, encouraging empathy with respect to diverse sexual orientation and gender identity is a necessity in our high schools.

Addressing sexuality using *Porcupine of Truth* would benefit students in many ways. Because the novel focuses on the friendship of Carson, who is straight, and Aisha, who is gay<sup>2</sup>, its message of accepting the differences of others is more likely to reach hesitant audiences than a book that focuses more blatantly on sexuality. Similarly, the novel’s unusual, intriguing title, while inciting curiosity in readers, also prevents parents from taking umbrage with its contents right away, as they might with more obvious titles like David Levithan’s *Boy Meets Boy* or Michale Barakiva’s *One Man Guy*. Unfortunately, the immediate reactions of students and their parents must be taken into account when selecting texts that deal with topics some still consider sensitive.

Additionally, discussing sexuality with *Porcupine* benefits LGBTQ students themselves. Whether they are “out” or not, these students benefit from the representation of issues relevant to them, like Aisha’s struggles with reconciling her identity with the church’s stance on homosexuality. As Bushman and Haas write in *Using Young Adult Literature in the English Classroom*, “It is important to provide students with literature that features characters like them and familiar situations. But it is just as—and probably more—important to provide them with works that portray differences. We learn more about ourselves through exposure, comparison, and discussion with others” (194). By focusing on both a straight character and a gay one, Konigsberg

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<sup>2</sup> The terms “straight” and “gay” are used to refer to Carson and Aisha because those are the terms they use to identify themselves in *The Porcupine of Truth*. While other terms may be appropriate for common usage, this project uses the terms from the text itself to maintain accuracy.

appeals to both of these needs and gives readers the perfect opportunity to identify with Carson or Aisha and to understand what “the other side” may think about sexuality.

As indicated by Weissbourd and Jones, offering students the opportunity to observe others demonstrating empathy and to practice it themselves helps develop their sense of empathy over time. *The Porcupine of Truth* is more light-hearted than the previous two texts in that Carson communicates primarily through jokes, especially when he is uncomfortable. Thus, passages conducive to discussing and practicing empathy are more sporadic than in the previous two novels; however, despite their infrequency, these passages remain equally poignant for readers. This relative scarcity of relevant passages is made up for by the more humorous, relaxed tone of the novel, which will have more widespread appeal than the more weighty subject matter of *Accidents of Nature* and *Part-Time Indian*. Therefore, *Porcupine*, though it has fewer empathy-inducing excerpts overall, represents a different kind of opportunity for readers and educators.

Early in the novel, we learn that Carson has had a lonely childhood; he grew up with his mother and grandparents, has no siblings, and never made any close friends. Of his early years, he recalls that he used to sit on the radiator in their apartment in New York City, looking out at all the windows across the street, trying to imagine what the inhabitants’ lives might be like (B. Konigsberg 44). This passage is unique in the novel in that it both portrays the main character empathizing with others and also gives readers the opportunity to empathize with Carson’s isolation.

However, it is not until later in the novel that Carson realizes how little he understood the lives of others when he sat on the radiator. When he and Aisha are stranded in Salt Lake City, they must spend the night on benches in an unknown park, near a pants-less, unsettling homeless man and surrounded by enormous rats. It is not until this moment that Carson truly understands how lonely Aisha must have been sleeping at the Billings Zoo; unable to sleep because he is afraid

of the rats, Carson thinks, “All those times in my room, sitting on the radiator, fantasizing about leaving and the utter freedom of being on my own, rats never came to mind... the reality of Aisha’s life smashes me in the face... She was alone out there, no safety net. I knew it, but I didn’t know it” (B. Konigsberg 221). This quote emphasizes the development of empathy over time; when Carson was a complete outsider to Aisha’s situation, although he tried to understand her struggles, he never imagines the uglier aspects of her life. He imagined being isolated and feeling abandoned, but he never imagined there would be rats until he endures a similar experience himself. This growth in Carson can prompt a meaningful discussion with students; this admission that he “knew it, but... didn’t know it” can be explored to address how feeling empathy for a group after *not* doing so is an admirable pursuit.

But beyond either of these passages, the book’s most heartrending moment of empathy comes when Carson finally finds his grandfather—in a memorial tapestry in San Francisco. Having tracked his movements west all those years before, Aisha and Carson finally reach a man who knows what happened to Carson’s grandfather: he moved to San Francisco after hiding his homosexuality for decades and fell in love, but contracted and died of AIDS. When he sees his grandfather’s name and picture on the memorial tapestry, Carson weeps right there in the church, imagining the agony of his grandfather, the pain of his grandmother, and the devastation of his father. Then, seeing the rest of the names of the tapestry, Carson cries for “All these people...all their lights, snuffed out... It’s a tapestry of lives lost” (B. Konigsberg 257). This passage is not only full of evocative language that induces a strong empathetic response to the suffering of others. It truly blindsides the reader; all along, it seems Carson and Aisha really will find his grandfather, so the memorial tapestry catches both Carson and the reader completely unprepared. Carson’s tears at the tapestry prompt readers to try and understand the misery and

discrimination the gay community experienced in the 1980s as well as how they still experience it today.

There are many other excerpts in *Porcupine* that highlight and encourage empathy—for instance, when Carson’s father mistakes him for his own father and cries in his lap (105), or when Carson and Aisha discover that first impressions can be misleading in the dog park (293)—but these three passages exemplify the power of *Porcupine* in discussing empathy for LGBTQ communities (for an extended list of relevant passages, see Appendix B).

Like *Accidents of Nature* and *Part-Time Indian*, part of *Porcupine*’s appeal is its relatability for young readers: Konigsberg employs accessible, concise syntax and engaging characters experiencing problems that are relevant to teenagers like parental authority, desire to fit in, and unfixed identity. In addition, the complex issues addressed in *Porcupine* are neither sugar coated nor watered down, two trends in YA that often alienate teenagers. Instead, Konigsberg treats his young readers like he knows they can handle the real world.

Beyond this accessibility, *Porcupine* is also ripe for formal analysis and perhaps textual pairing. Carson and Aisha’s adventures are reminiscent of picaresque novels, which generally involve the first-person narrative of an adventurer on a journey, encountering various obstacles and experiencing episodes that are often humorous. As explained in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, “The picaro wanders about and has adventures among people from all social classes and professions, often just barely escaping punishment” (“Picaresque Novel”). Carson and Aisha fit this description, as they encounter diverse characters ranging from an old couple in a trailer park to an ultra-wealthy family in Salt Lake City, and they must avoid an array of obstacles. This similarity with picaresque novels means *Porcupine* could be easily paired with other texts from the subgenre (such as *Huckleberry Finn* or *Don Quixote*) as part of a larger unit or briefly compared to them in discussion. Like most young adult novels, *Porcupine* is also a Bildungsroman, or a coming

of age story, meaning it could also be paired with texts like *A Separate Peace* or *Little Women*.

Although young adult literature can stand alone in the classroom, instructors may wish to pair books at their discretion for more engaging, well-rounded units.

As for its uses in classroom activities, as with the other two texts, *Porcupine* lends itself to creative writing imagining the book's events from other perspectives; for example, students may be prompted to write Lauralai's side of meeting Carson and Aisha in the trailer park, or Carson's mom's perspective of his impromptu road trip, or the perspective of a hypothetical zoo employee that knows Aisha is sleeping there. Any of these could encourage students to imagine the experiences of others by providing them with a comfortable starting point.

In addition, *The Porcupine of Truth* lends itself to many multimedia and cross-curricular activities, which may serve to add variety to otherwise writing and discussion-heavy classrooms. The geographical and adventurous nature of the story encourages projects like creating maps of Carson and Aisha's journey, crafting porcupines of truth, and trying improvisational comedy (although this last one might be a hard sell for teenagers). Additionally, the historical aspect of *Porcupine*, particularly the story of Carson's grandfather in San Francisco, encourages cross-curricular research; for instance, students could be encouraged to research the AIDS epidemic, LGBTQ rights under President Reagan, or the history of predominantly gay neighborhoods in 1980s San Francisco. In literature classes, particularly those with restless teenagers, books that provide a variety of activities become invaluable.

*Porcupine* also lends itself to a related mini-lesson on intersectionality. Because Aisha is both gay and black, she represents how the intersection of two minority identities can affect her interactions with the world. Although high school students may not be ready to read complex theory surrounding intersectionality, *Porcupine* represents a simple way to introduce a concept that is vital today.

As with *Accidents* and *Part-Time Indian*, the unit includes possible social justice applications for *Porcupine*. The novel's culmination with a social justice project allows students to improve a problem in their own corner of the world in response to the issues highlighted in Carson and Aisha's tale. Aisha's struggles after being kicked out represent an important social issue to which students might respond; when she comes out to her parents, her father kicks her out of the house, forcing her to secretly sleep at the Billings Zoo. Unfortunately, homelessness is common among LGBTQ youth in the United States, often due to family rejection like Aisha. According to a report from The Williams Institute, LGBTQ youth are overrepresented in the homeless population, are more likely to be homeless longer, and more likely to suffer mental and physical abuse while homeless (Choi et al. 4-5; see also Suffredini and Frost). Students could address this problem in their own communities in a variety of ways: create an informational pamphlet regarding LGBTQ youth and homeless that includes advice for teens that have been rejected or kicked out; compile a resource list for medical needs, transportation, shelter, personal items, and education; collect donations for local homeless shelters after conducting research on the needs of homeless LGBTQ youth. Encouraging students to engage in a social justice project based on what they learned from *Porcupine of Truth* prompts them to apply what they have learned to problems in the real world.

As with *Accidents of Nature* and *Part-Time Indian*, a unit plan is provided in Appendix A to demonstrate how several class sessions might focus on empathy for the LGBTQ community using Bill Konigsberg's *The Porcupine of Truth*.

### Unit Assessment

Once the class completes the activities for each novel, students will complete a long-term research project with a presentation component. Building off of what they have discussed in class,

as well as the related social justice projects, students will conduct research on a real-world issue relevant to one of the novels discussed in this unit. The topic is the student's choice, but the teacher may offer recommendations such as: representation of disability in television shows for young adults; cultural appropriation in sports mascots; treatment of sexuality in different religions; homelessness among teenagers; accessibility in your school; and school zoning and unequal budgets. Following their research paper, students will present a short summary of what they learned to the class as a whole.

This culminating assessment not only encourages students to analyze important themes from the novels in the context of the real world, it also prompts them to conduct long-term research and communicate their findings verbally, both important skills in education and in life.

## CHAPTER 7

### CONCLUSION

In an era when national debate surrounds equal access to healthcare, the rights of minimum wage workers, acceptance of refugees, and pay gaps across sex and race, the ability to understand the needs and experiences of other people is critical. Unfortunately, research has shown that the ability to empathize has decreased in recent years, particularly among young adults. As Konrath et al. suggest in their meta-analysis of empathy among college students, this declining empathy could be related to increased narcissism, the restriction of interpersonal interactions to social media, or perpetually busy lifestyles among young adults—since, as Konrath et al. write, “people are substantially less likely to help when they are in a hurry” (189).

Whatever the reason, this decreasing empathy among young adults is cause for concern; empathy is not just the way we understand the lives of others, it is also what prompts us to engage in behaviors that most people *want* in society. According to Konrath et al., those with higher rates of empathy are more likely to return incorrect change, spend time volunteering, donate money to charity, carry a stranger’s bags for them, or look after a friend’s pet, among other prosocial behaviors (182). If we want to encourage cooperation and kindness for others, we should foster a greater sense of empathy. Young adults, because their brains are highly malleable during adolescence, are an ideal age to develop their ability to empathize with others (Steinberg).

The most effective way to encourage empathy is to expose young adults to a variety of people from different backgrounds and promote interactions between them; however, there are still areas of the United States where the population remains relatively homogenous and young adults typically meet only people similar to themselves. In these situations, introducing young adults to multicultural young adult literature may give them the opportunity to try and understand diverse perspectives in a way that is not possible in daily life.



In the rural parts of Central and South Central Appalachia, for instance, many young adults come of age without encountering many people of different races, religions, gender identities, or other important interpersonal differences. While racial diversity has increased since 1990, it has not been evenly distributed throughout Appalachia; as Kelvin Pollard points out, 215 of the 410 Appalachian counties have a less than 5% non-white population. Central and South Central Appalachia specifically, the focus of this project, have had little change in their population despite recent international immigration (Ludke and Obermiller).

Compounding this racial homogeneity, Appalachia is also characterized by notable influence from the protestant Christian community, which accounts for approximately 80% of Appalachians (Reynolds). Identifying as a Christian, and particularly a Southern Christian, may affect Appalachians' tolerance of LGBTQ communities; according to the Pew Research Center, only 30% of Southern Baptist Convention members approve of homosexuality, compared to 54% of U.S. Christians as a whole (Murphy).

Each of these issues—race, religion, and LGBTQ rights—is further affected by the comparative remoteness of Appalachia. The geographic isolation of small, rural communities, combined with the prevalence of poverty in Appalachia, means that many young adults cannot even travel to encounter diverse people, perspectives, art, or media, but instead remain restricted to their own, mostly homogenous, communities.

Thus, Appalachia is a region worth considering in terms of empathy and diversity. As Donna L. Miller writes, using multicultural literature to introduce the perspectives of diverse people can help bridge the gap between the experiences young adults currently have in real life and those they will encounter in the future as they try to understand the lives of others. As a region that is dominated by one race and one religion, and that is characterized by its frequently unfair treatment of LGBTQ communities, Appalachia represents one example among many

areas of the United States where approaching diverse perspectives through literature may be effective.

Research abounds suggesting literature may really be capable of changing the way we view other people in real life. As Joe Fassler writes in “How Literature Inspires Empathy”:

Literature gives us a broad spectrum of human possibilities. It teaches us how to feel other people suffering. When you read a good novel, you forget about the nationality of the character. You forget about his or her religion. You forget about his skin color or her skin color. You only understand the human. You understand that this is a human being, the same way we are. And so reading great novels absolutely can remake us as much better human beings.

Experiencing the life of another person, even a fictional one, can cause us to empathize more freely in real life.

The unit plan presented here uses three multicultural young adult novels—*The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* by Sherman Alexie, *Accidents of Nature* by Harriet McBryde Johnson, and *The Porcupine of Truth* by Bill Konigsberg—to introduce adolescent readers to diverse perspectives and encourage them to empathize with a greater variety of people as they emerge into adulthood. It is my hope that this project will provide educators the resources needed to utilize young adult literature in the classroom to develop empathy among their students and also provide them with scholarly research to defend their pedagogical decisions.

By teaching our students to step into the shoes of people unlike themselves and try to understand their experiences, we increase the chance of a more empathetic generation to come and, hopefully, improve the world one thoughtful person at a time.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A

#### Unit Plan: Multicultural Young Adult Literature and Empathy

**Subject:** 10<sup>th</sup> Grade Literature

**Unit Title:** Multicultural Young Adult Literature and Empathy

**Length:** 15 Weeks

#### **Unit Summary:**

Students will read three multicultural young adult novels—*The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, *Accidents of Nature*, and *The Porcupine of Truth*—and engage in close reading and textual analysis in order to both improve their literary skills and sense of empathy for other people.

#### **Purpose of Unit:**

Young adults are at an ideal age to develop a greater sense of empathy due to their neural plasticity and the ongoing social change associated with adolescence. There is a dramatic need for increased empathy among young adults as research shows their rates of empathy have fallen over time. Various research has concluded that fiction can increase empathy in readers. Thus, studying these three multicultural texts will encourage students to demonstrate empathy for those unlike themselves.

#### **Student Objectives:**

By the end of the unit, students will be able to:

- Analyze passages through close reading.
- Compose creative writing to explore major themes in the text.
- Evaluate the perspective and needs of fictional characters.
- Identify real-world problems using lessons from the text.
- Compare multiple texts to examine similar themes.

#### **Student Goals:**

- Read Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, Harriet McBryde Johnson's *Accidents of Nature*, and Bill Konigsberg's *The Porcupine of Truth*.
- Complete a series of activities and assignments demonstrating their ability to analyze a literary text and apply its themes to the real world.
- Demonstrate writing and research skills by writing a research-based paper regarding a topic relevant to the novels.

- Communicate findings and understanding through a brief presentation to the class.

### **Materials:**

- *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, Sherman Alexie
- *Accidents of Nature*, Harriet McBryde Johnson
- *The Porcupine of Truth*, Bill Konigsberg
- Projector or Smart Board for student presentations and watching videos
- “For the Bullied and the Beautiful,” TED Talk
- “Brené Brown on Empathy,” Animated YouTube Video

### **Tennessee State Standards:**

- Literature Standard 1: Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.
- Literature Standard 2: Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.
- Literature Standard 3: Analyze how complex characters (e.g., those with multiple or conflicting motivations) develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the theme.
- Literature Standard 4: Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone (e.g., how the language evokes a sense of time and place; how it sets a formal or informal tone).
- Literature Standard 5: Analyze how an author’s choices concerning how to structure a text, order events within it (e.g., parallel plots), and manipulate time (e.g., pacing, flashbacks) create such effects as mystery, tension, or surprise.
- Writing Standard 2: Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.
- Writing Standard 3: Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.
- Writing Standard 7: Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question) or solve a problem; narrow or broaden the inquiry when appropriate; synthesize multiple sources on the subject, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.
- Speaking and Listening Standard 4: Present information, findings, and supporting evidence clearly, concisely, and logically such that listeners can follow the line of

reasoning and the organization, development, substance, and style are appropriate to purpose, audience, and task.

### **Weeks 1-4: *Part-Time Indian***

1. Mini-Lesson: Show “Brené Brown on Empathy.” Introduce the idea of “empathy” and its difference from “sympathy.” Establishing this difference with students prepares them for taking the perspective of the various novels’ protagonists.

2. Responding to Reardan’s Mascot: Students examine the passage on page 54 where Junior discusses being the only Indian besides the school mascot. Then, they respond by creating new mascots for Reardan High School (LS 1, LS 2).

- This multi-media activity encourages creativity and humor to discuss an important issue.
- The activity connects real-life experiences to the novel because students can discuss their own school mascots and whether they accurately represent local culture or the student population.
- Optional Mini Lesson: Cultural Appropriation in Pop Culture.
  - Cultural appropriation, as defined by the *Oxford Living Dictionaries* online, is the “unacknowledged or inappropriate adoption of the customs, practices, ideas, etc. of one people or society by members of another and typically more dominant people or society.”
  - In an effort to understand this issue, students find examples of cultural appropriation by celebrities in magazines or via social media. Students then discuss whether the instances were insensitive, what could have improved the situation, as well as what kinds of cultural appropriation they have encountered in real life.
    - Note that if there are restrictions on which websites are accessible in the school building, students may not be able to find examples through social media sites like Instagram or Twitter. In this case, educators may want to compile and print their own examples before the lesson begins.
  - If the unit takes place mid-autumn, this activity could be modified to address cultural appropriation in Halloween costumes rather than among celebrities.

4. Close Reading: Junior’s First Day at Reardan (LS 1, LS 2).

- Connects real-life experience to the novel.
- Scaffolding questions from the teacher expand students’ “circle of concern” (Weissbourd and Jones) and guide them toward understanding the needs and struggles of others.

5. Narrative Writing: Students write an alternative first day at school. Some examples include Gordy’s first day at the reservation school, Buddy’s first day at Reardan, or Junior’s first day at your high school (WS 3).

6. Optional Social Justice Assignment: One of Junior’s struggles is his lack of access to reliable transportation, which often causes him to miss school, arrive late, or walk long distances alone to reach school. As a social justice project, students could address this problem in their own school as an extra credit assignment or in fulfillment of school community engagement requirements (LS 2, WS 7).

Some options for them to consider:

- Create a carpooling or ride-sharing program.
- Develop an app or establish an online message board for students to ask for or offer rides to school.
- Build, or petition for the construction of, an accessible and safe walking path to school.
- Formally request that the school board reevaluate current bus routes to ensure they are reaching as many students as possible.

### **Weeks 5-8: *Accidents of Nature***

1. Top Ten Favorite Hobbies: Students generate a list of their favorite hobbies. Then, they choose a specific character from the novel and consider how their free time might change if they had that character’s abilities (LS 1, LS 2, LS 3).

- Drawing direct connections between the student and a character in the text necessitates perspective taking and encourages empathy.
- This activity also cultivates textual analysis as students must choose a specific character and consider his or her experiences.

2. Close Reading: Nicknames and their relationship to bullying (LS 1, LS 2, LS 3, LS 4).

- Following close reading, students watch “For the Bullied and the Beautiful”
  - Invites students to use cross-textual analysis to examine the theme of name-calling in *Accidents of Nature* and a TED talk.

3. Discussion of Form: The flash-forward chapter is not from Jean’s perspective like the rest of the book, but from Sara’s. Examining this choice by the author allows students to consider how form and the manipulation of time affects readers’ understanding (LS 5).

4. Creative Writing or Class Discussion: Imagine how Jean’s experiences would have been different if *Accidents of Nature* took place today, rather than in the 1970s. (WS 3)

5. Optional Social Justice Assignment: Many of Jean’s difficulties in *Accidents* have to do with the way “people like her” are represented in the media. For example, she says that many people are only familiar with cerebral palsy and other disabilities through sensational, cheesy telethons, which gives them a reductive view of people with disabilities. As a social justice project, students could address this problem in their own

school as an extra credit assignment or in fulfillment of school community engagement requirements (LS 2, WS 7).

Some options for them to consider:

- Create a pamphlet or design a billboard addressing the representation of disabilities in the media.
- Design and create a display of books with disabled protagonists in the school's library.
- Establish a blog that highlights positive representations of people with disabilities.
- Construct a zine, podcast, or short video about disability rights and accessibility in their school or town.
- Work with the history department to research differently-abled historical figures that may have been overlooked in traditional history courses.

### **Weeks 9-12: *Porcupine of Truth***

1. Creative Writing: Imagine the perspective of a character we do *not* hear from in this story like Pastor John, Aisha's mother, Mrs. Bailey, or an employee that knows Aisha is sleeping at the zoo (WS 3).

2. Cultural and Historical Context Jigsaw Activity: Students break into small groups to research relevant topics like the AIDS epidemic, sexuality in the Mormon church, racial demographics and distribution in the United States, the San Francisco gay community in the 1980s, or civil rights champions for LGBTQ rights (WS 7, SLS 4).

- Following their research, students present what they learned to the other groups in the class.
- This activity could be separated across multiple class periods if they are short sessions.

3. Mini-Lesson: Intersectionality. Aisha, as a black and gay teenager, demonstrates the importance of intersectionality, or recognizing how the intersection of multiple identities affects a person's experiences.

4. *Porcupine* as a Picaresque Novel (LS 5).

- According to Harmon and Holman's *A Handbook to Literature*, a picaresque novel is one that is "typically autobiographical, presenting the life story of a rascal of low degree... making his living more through his wits than his industry"; they also clarify that picaresque novels are generally "episodic and structureless" (389).
- Carson and Aisha's episodic adventures in their trip across the Western United States represent a simple way to introduce the term "picaresque" to young readers as well as facilitate later discussions of canonical examples such as Cervantes's *Don Quixote*.

5. Optional Social Justice Assignment: When Aisha comes out to her parents, her father kicks her out of the house, forcing her to sleep at the Billings Zoo (12, 41). Unfortunately,

homelessness is a common problem among LGBTQ youth; according to a report from The Williams Institute, LGBTQ youth are overrepresented in the homeless population, are more likely to be homeless longer, and more likely to suffer mental and physical abuse while homeless (Choi et al. 4-5; see also Suffredini and Frost). As a social justice project, students could address this problem in their own community as an extra credit assignment or in fulfillment of school community engagement requirements (LS 2, WS 7).

Some options for them to consider:

- Create an informational, narrative-based pamphlet to be distributed at school educating parents and school personnel about the statistics and struggles surrounding LGBTQ youth and homelessness.
- Create an infographic or image-based pamphlet with advice for youth that have been rejected or kicked out. This pocket guide could include names, phone numbers, and links for resources that help homeless teens access medical care, shelter, food, emergency care, educational support, and personal needs such as tampons.
- Collect donations for local homeless shelters after conducting research on the needs of homeless LGBTQ youth.

### **Weeks 13-15: Summative Assessment**

To conclude this unit, students will complete a short-term research project with a presentation component. Drawing on what they have discussed in class, students will conduct research on a real-world issue relevant to one of the novels discussed in this unit.

- The topic is each student's choice. Some possible topics include:
  - Representation of disability in television shows for young adult audiences
  - Cultural appropriation in sports mascots
  - The treatment of sexuality in specific religions
  - Homelessness among teenagers
  - Handicap accessibility in your school or town
  - School zoning and funding allocations
- Following their research paper, students will present the problem or central question and a summary of what they learned to the class a whole.
  - Each student will have 5-7 minutes to share her findings with the class.
  - Multimedia components are optional.
- This culminating assessment:
  - Encourages students to analyze important themes in the novels.
  - Prompts them to conduct academic research.
  - Necessitates that they communicate their findings both verbally and in writing

## Appendix B

### Guide to Passages Regarding Empathy

The following page numbers correspond to passages that may be used for discussing or cultivating empathy. Although this is not an exhaustive list, it will help busy educators narrow their focus to relevant passages. Each excerpt is also labeled with a keyword(s) in order to assist educators arranging lessons based on themes like bullying or poverty.

*The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, Sherman Alexie:

- Bullying and Isolation: Arnold talks about how often he is bullied on the reservation.

And jeez, you're still fairly cute when you're a stuttering and lisping six-, seven-, and eight-year-old, but it's all over when you turn nine and ten. After that, your stutter and lisp turn you into a retard... Everybody on the rez calls me a retard about twice a day. They call me retard when they are pantsing me or stuffing my head in the toilet or just smacking me upside the head (4).

- Economics of Poverty: Oscar, Arnold's dog, is put down because they cannot afford to take him to the vet. He describes how helpless he feels because there are no jobs for young Indians.

'Junior, sweetheart... I'm sorry, but we don't have any money for Oscar.'... 'I'll pay back the doctor. I'll get a job.'... Jeez, how stupid was I? What kind of job can a reservation Indian boy get? I was too young to deal blackjack at the casino, there were only about fifteen green grass lawns on the reservation (and none of their owners outsourced the mowing jobs), and the only paper route was owned by a tribal elder named Wally.... There was nothing I could do to save Oscar (10).

- Family and Friends: Arnold describes the dreams his parents gave up when they were younger.

And it's not like my mother and father were born into wealth. It's not like they gambled away their family fortunes. My parents came from poor people who came from poor people who came from poor people, all the way back to the very first poor people... I know my mother and father had their dreams when they were kids. They dreamed about being something other than poor, but they never got the chance to be anything because nobody paid attention to their dreams (11).

- Representation and Societal Expectation: Arnold describes how poverty begins to feel deserved over time.

But we reservation Indians don't get to realize our dreams. We don't get those chances. Or choices. We're just poor. That's all we are. It sucks to be poor, and it sucks to feel that you somehow *deserve* to be poor. You start believing that you're poor because you're stupid and ugly.... And because you're Indian you start believing you're destined to be poor. It's an ugly circle and *there's nothing you can do about it* (13).



- Family and Friends: Mr. P., the teacher Arnold hit in the face with a geometry book, begs Arnold to leave the reservation.

The only thing you kids are being taught is how to give up... All these kids have given up... All your friends. All the bullies. And their mothers and fathers have given up, too. And their grandparents gave up and their grandparents before them. And me and every other teacher here. We're all defeated... you have to take your hope and go somewhere where other people have hope (42).

- Bullying and Isolation: After he goes trick-or-treating for spare change to donate to the homeless, Arnold is mugged.

About ten o'clock, as I was walking home, three guys jumped me. I couldn't tell who they were. They all wore Frankenstein masks. And they shoved me to the ground and kicked me a few times. And spit on me. I could handle the kicks. But the spit made me feel like an insect. Like a slug. Like a slug burning to death from salty spit" (79).

- Representation and Societal Expectation: When Arnold challenges a teacher and a white classmate corroborates his answer, the teacher responds favorably to his classmate but hatefully to him.

Dodge suddenly went all pale... If Gordy said it was true, then it was true... 'Well, isn't that interesting... Thank you for sharing that with us, Gordy.' Yeah, that's right. Mr. Dodge thanked Gordy, but didn't say another word to me. Yep, now even the teachers were treating me like an idiot. I shrank back into my chair and remembered when I used to be a human being (86).

- Representation and Societal Expectation: Penelope breaks down in the library because no one thinks she has any problems.

But Penelope starts crying, talking about how lonely she is, and how everybody thinks her life is perfect because she's pretty and smart and popular, but she's scared all the time, but nobody will let her be scared... (108).

- Bullying and Isolation: The Wellpinit crowd completely rejects Arnold at a basketball game.

My fellow tribal members saw me and they all stopped cheering, talking, and moving. I think they stopped breathing. And, then, as one, they all turned their backs on me. It was a fricking awesome display of contempt... I was mad. If these dang Indians had been this organized when I went to school here, maybe I would have had more reasons to stay (143-144).

- Economics of Poverty, Family: Arnold describes the disappointing Christmas tradition in his family and shows empathy for his depressed father.

When the holidays rolled around, we didn't have any money for presents, so Dad did what he always does when we don't have enough money. He took what little money we did have and ran away to get drunk. He left on Christmas Eve and came back on January 2.... 'I got you something... it's in my boot.' ... I picked up the other boot and dug inside. Man, that thing smelled like booze and fear and failure. I found a wrinkled and damp five dollar bill... Drunk for a week, my father must have really wanted to spend those last five dollars... But he saved it for me. It was a beautiful and ugly thing (150).

- Family and Friends: Grandmother Spirit is struck and killed by a drunk driver.

At the hospital, my mother wept and wailed. She'd lost her mother. When anybody, no matter how old they are, loses a parent, I think it hurts the same as if you were only five years old, you know? I think all of us are always five years old in the presence and absence of our parents (157).

- Economics of Poverty, Representation and Societal Expectation: After defeating Wellpinit in basketball, Arnold realizes how broken his opponents are.

We were David who'd thrown a stone into the brain of Goliath! And then I realized something. I realized that my team, the Reardan Indians, was Goliath... But I looked over at the Wellpinit Redskins, at Rowdy. I knew that two or three of those Indians might not have eaten breakfast that morning. No food in the house. I knew that seven or eight of those Indians lived with drunken mothers and fathers... I knew that none of them were going to college. Not one of them... I was suddenly ashamed that I'd wanted so badly to take revenge on them (195).

*Accidents of Nature*, Harriet McBryde Johnson:

- Dehumanization, Family: Jean describes the way able-bodied people interact with disabled people and how it makes her feel less human.

He rubs my head the same way he rubbed it this morning when he made the same joke, the same way he always rubs his best dog (7).

- Representation and Societal Expectation: Jean describes how she is treated as a poster child of disability in her hometown.

I'll do fine. I always do fine—better than fine. I'm the only crippled student, ever, in my school; I'm the only crippled person in my hometown. When I was four, I was a regional state poster child; of course, at age seventeen I'm no longer so adorable as to stop traffic, but I still have my blond hair and blue eyes and skin that tans just right (10).

- Stereotyping: Jean shows empathy for her camp counselors.

I consider the counselors, watch them at work... Like all the counselors I've seen, they're clean-cut but not square, in good shape but not jocks. Sara's description is

accurate as far as it goes, but it makes them seem like comic-strip characters when, really, they're just normal people (24).

- Representation and Societal Expectation: Jean talks about how different all the campers' bodies are when they swim together, and mentions that although she *could* be disgusted by them, she admires their variety.

My long legs don't work right, but I'm proud to have them, proud in fact of all my body parts. At the same time, I'm not disgusted by the others, people with pieces missing or mangled. I count it a rare privilege to see them all without their coverings, their equipment, their attachments, their replacement parts, as they really are, in all their strange variety (24).

- Dehumanization, Representation and Societal Expectation: Sara talks about when she first tried to understand how Willie felt being gawked at by strangers and friends alike.

...I knew him for three years, and then I realized I never looked at him. I'd talk to him by the hour, but I never looked at him. Well, this really upset me, because I thought, if I won't look at him, who on earth will? ... So then, I told myself, to hell with this! I'm gonna look at him, and he and I are both gonna like it! And eventually we did. Now I almost think he's beautiful, because he looks like Willie and no one else in the world (48).

- Dehumanization, Representation and Societal Expectation: Sara talks about how able-bodied people treat the dreams of disabled people, and Jean empathizes with her pain.

'Someone decided it was an appropriate song to inspire crippled folks, and I'm fed up with it... It's a put-down; it says we don't have a real life and certainly not a real future, so we're supposed to retreat into dreams, and not nice pleasant dreams but pathetic impossible dreams'... When she looks out again, it's like I can see pain flare from her face... (71).

- Representation and Societal Expectation: Jean thinks about how disability is portrayed in her favorite books.

In the fresh air of the Swiss Alps, the orphan girl Heidi tells her crippled cousin, Clara, 'You can do it; just try.' In the fresh air of a secret garden, another orphan girl, another crippled cousin: 'You can do it; just try.' As a child I loved these stories; they speak to the fundamental optimism of childhood. Part of me still believes them, or wants to. But now I yearn for a Bible story about a cripple who isn't cured (74).

- Dehumanization, Stereotyping: Sara and Jean discuss how the counselors treat the campers at the dance.

They think we're children, or puppies, or sexless beings from outer space. They don't realize that, whatever else is wrong with us, we all—even the quads and

paras and the Butner people who've been sterilized—all of us are capable of being aroused... (93).

- Representation and Societal Expectation: Jean feels left out in arts and crafts because the project is designed for people with fine motor skills.

I'm too busy studying all the things on the table: piles and piles of dried beans, buttons, beads, and macaroni. I could try all day and never pick up even one thing (107).

- Stereotyping, Representation and Societal Expectation: Sara talks about being stigmatized in the "normal" world.

It's all about stigma. This book lays it all out—how stigma marks you as different, takes away the things that give people 'normal' identity. You're never just a girl, but always a crippled girl, a crippled student, a crippled daughter, a crippled sister. Your stigma determines what you can do (112).

- Stereotyping, Dehumanization: Jean is embarrassed to encounter a counselor she accidentally hurt earlier, but she realizes he does not even recognize her.

It's that surfer guy...I don't want him to notice me and remember how hard I kicked him... 'Hello,' he says. I see no sign of recognition. Then it occurs to me: This morning, as he grappled with me, as he squeezed my legs hard enough to hurt, as I kicked him, he never looked at my face. Maybe he doesn't know me from any other wheelchair girl in this place (136).

- Representation and Societal Expectation: The girls discuss how disabled people are often employed as adults.

'The more disabled you are, the crappier job you get, if you get a job at all. Like, maybe stuffing envelopes, on a piece-rate'... 'You see, Norms give us drudge work and call it rehabilitation, never mind if we have executive ability. No telling what we could do if we had two or three Norms to boss!' (140).

- Representation and Societal Expectation: Carole, one of Jean's counselors, talks about wanting to help them but not knowing how.

We don't have a clue. I came here with no idea what I'd be getting into. I had a vague idea that I wanted to serve...But the idea of being a 'counselor' just seems ridiculous, you know? Y'all know, and I know, that I don't have a clue... (147).

- Representation and Societal Expectation: On the last day of camp, Jean realizes there are so many more people that she did not meet, whose stories are still mysteries to her.

The campers are recognized one by one, and I realize that most of them are still strangers to me. I wonder about the things they could tell me... I wonder about their families, where they live, how they live. In this place, so many little worlds

come together, but most have failed to touch me. Maybe I've missed something important, and now it's too late even to find out what (205).

*The Porcupine of Truth*, Bill Konigsberg:

- **Bullying and Isolation**: Carson recalls the way cities made him feel surrounded yet isolated. The ignorance of the man appearing to have a seizure highlights how easy it is to overlook the problems of others.

Fewer than twenty-four hours ago, I was standing in Gray's Papaya on Seventy-Second Street and Amsterdam Avenue in New York City, watching passersby ignore someone who was having what appeared to be an epileptic seizure while eating a chili dog (1).

- **Bullying and Isolation**: Aisha reveals to Carson that she has been sleeping at the zoo and recoils when he reacts negatively.

She looks into my eyes, and I look back, and in the slight crease of her forehead I see pain. Fear. It shocks me, and she sees me see it, and then a veil goes up. The whites of her eyes go cold (12).

- **Family and Friends**: Carson sees his father, who is ravaged by cirrhosis, for the first time in years and feels pain at his ragged appearance.

He opens his arms and I stand there, frozen. He looks so pathetic, a scrawny death triangle with his arms out to the side and slightly pointed down. A Christmas tree the following April (17).

- **Family and Friends**: Carson demonstrates perspective-taking by imagining how the pastor next door feels.

He nods and smiles. He probably gets a lot of crap from my dad, and now here I am, running off as soon as he invites me to church (32).

- **Representation and Societal Expectation**: Aisha talks about how few black people there are in Billings, Montana, and how that makes her feel like an outsider.

She nods. 'There are a hundred thousand people in this city and almost five hundred of us are black, so that's... something.'... 'Billings has a pro football team?' 'Had. The Billings Outlaws. Raised the black population of the city about ten percent' (38).

- **Family and Friends**: Aisha has an outburst when Carson says he's sorry, and he struggles with how to react to her pain.

I really don't know what to do. So I do something I don't do. I put my arms around her and gently hug... She walks over to a gray fence and sits down next to it on a patch of grass, so I sit down too. It feels a little homeless, actually, sitting

there. Like now that I know she's homeless, sitting in a parking lot by a fence takes on a different meaning (41).

- Bullying and Isolation: Carson tries taking the perspective of others.

I try to imagine being kicked out of my home. Thousands of times in New York I sat on the radiator in my room, looking out the window at the mostly closed blinds of strangers across the air shaft, thinking about what it would be like to live in one of those other apartments (44).

- Family and Friends: Carson empathizes with his father's feelings of abandonment.

He shakes his head, and I can hear the despair. All these years later, and he can say whatever he wants to, but it does still matter to him. Like, a ton (67).

- Family and Friends: After unintentionally upsetting his father, Carson loses his temper in front of Aisha and is embarrassed by his behavior. Aisha later shows she understands his pain.

My phone buzzes in my pocket, and I go to pull it out, but the case gets stuck against the fabric. I pull harder, and it won't come out, and then I'm tugging with all my might, and it just won't budge. When I give up and remove my hand, the phone slips out of my pocket and onto the floor. I stomp on it. I slam my foot down, again and again, and I keep slamming my foot down until my phone is in pieces, strewn across the basement carpet... She thinks I'm totally messed up, and she's going to walk away, out of my life, and I'll never see her again... (91).

- Representation and Societal Expectation, Family and Friends: Lauralei teaches Carson about the importance of allowing everyone to have their own truths.

'I'm saying that whatever it is that a person believes about God is totally, completely, irrevocably true – but only if you add two words.' 'For me' (141).

- Bullying and Isolation, Family and Friends: Carson thinks about his isolation and lack of family support in New York City.

I have never sat at a dinner table with both my parents that I can remember... I mostly dine in front of the TV. Mom and I rarely eat at the same time. And meals are important, aren't they? I have never really thought about that before (184).

- Stereotyping, Representation and Societal Expectation: Carson and Aisha make assumptions about Mr. and Mrs. Bailey but are proven wrong.

Well, in the Mormon church, men are charged with providing a righteous dominion over our families. Most Mormons are probably more like us, where Robert is the head of the household but we're all involved. But in other homes... We have a growing problem with unrighteous dominion. Men who use neglect, or

physical, emotional, or even sexual abuse to rule their families. I counsel women who have to deal with unrighteous dominion (185).

- Representation and Societal Expectation, Bullying and Isolation: Carson tries to understand what it is like for Aisha to be the only black person.

‘Do you know the last time I saw a person who wasn’t white-skinned?’ I laugh, because that wasn’t what I expected her to say. But then I think back. Wyoming? No, definitely not. Here in Utah? I scan my brain. No. Not that I can remember...I think about what that would be like. To be on this trip and not see another white person for three states. I can’t imagine. Not that I somehow, like, identify with all white people and not with black people, but there’s something to be said for... likeness? (203).

- Stereotyping, Representation and Societal Expectation: While sleeping on a park bench, Carson tries to imagine being homeless and wishes he could understand what other people think and need.

*So this is what it feels like to be homeless*, I think... I think about how we all share the stars. My grandfather must have his thoughts when he looks up at the sky, and so does Lauralei, and so do I, and we can never really know what other people are thinking, even when we all see the exact same thing. Sometimes I just want to be able to know what the stars look like from another set of eyes (218).

- Stereotyping, Family and Friends: Carson thinks about how little he understood Aisha’s homelessness until he slept in the park.

All those times in my room, sitting on the radiator, fantasizing about leaving and the utter freedom of being on my own, rats never came to mind. I think of all the things that make me feel unsafe, like, right at this very moment... The reality of Aisha’s life smashes me in the face. She was sleeping in the zoo. She was alone out there, no safety net. I knew it, but I didn’t know it (221).

- Family and Friends: Carson sees the memorial tapestry in San Francisco and imagines all the lives that were ended.

My focus widens from Grandpa’s panel to all the panels around his... All these people. I look farther and see panels for women too. Little babies. All their lights, snuffed out. All their families, like mine. Broken up too soon...I cry for generations of pain. Not just for my family, but for all the families (256).

- Family and Friends: Carson realizes he has been selfish and forgotten all about Aisha’s own problems in his quest to find his grandfather.

She has her own life, and all this time I was treating her thing with her dad like it was some side issue, when for her it’s *the* issue (279).

## Appendix C

### Sample Rationales

The rationales included in this appendix are intended as communications to educators that would like to use these texts in their classrooms. As such, potential problems with each text—or aspects that might incite parental complaints—are addressed candidly and frankly. This information is included openly so educators may be fully aware of possible objections before proceeding. Please note that educators submitting these rationales to their administrators may want to rephrase the sections titled “Addressing Potential Problems” to emphasize the merit of the text in spite of its challenges.

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### ***The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian***

**By Sherman Alexie**

#### Intended Audience

*Part-Time Indian* is an illustrated novel for young adults. It is an excellent text for ages twelve to fifteen because it deals with many issues relevant to adolescents’ daily lives such as fitting in at a new school, dating, fighting with friends, and bullying. In addition, the book’s use of illustrations “drawn” by the protagonist, Junior, appeals to many young readers in contrast with more traditional formats (Cart, “Teens and the Future of Reading”; Carter). Finally, the book’s accessible syntax makes it ideal for younger readers still developing their literary interpretation skills (Kaplan; Santoli and Wagner).

#### Plot Summary

Sherman Alexie’s *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* follows Arnold Spirit, or “Junior,” a fourteen-year-old living on the Spokane Indian Reservation. Frustrated at the lack of opportunities available at his school on “the rez,” Junior decides to transfer to the “white” high school in nearby Reardan—which no one from his reservation has ever done before. As a result of his decision, Junior experiences an unusual mixture of pride from his family, ridicule from his new classmates at Reardan, and hatred from his former classmates on the reservation who consider him a traitor. In the midst of one tumultuous academic year, Junior learns how to respond to overt racism and how to reconcile his identity as an Indian with his drive for greater opportunities than those provided to minority groups.

#### Redeeming Value

This novel follows a young, Native American protagonist, which allows students the opportunity to consider the experience of someone unlike the characters of many books they have read. Examining Junior’s experiences allows students to expand their “circle of concern” (Weissbourd and Jones).



Despite its accessibility as a young adult novel, *Part-Time Indian* still challenges students to consider important questions regarding poverty, cultural appropriation, interracial relationships, alcoholism, and bullying.

The novel is an appropriate multicultural text as it meets several of the criteria put forth by Susan M. Landt: the book is written by a member of the community being portrayed (the novel is loosely based on Alexie's own childhood); it depicts diversity within the minority community; the culture is more than surface level; and the characters' problems are relevant to the community.

### Literary Merit

*Part-Time Indian*, as it follows the growth and experience of Junior as a young adult, is a classic "bildungsroman" or coming of age story. According to Harmon and Holman's *A Handbook to Literature*, a bildungsroman is a novel that "deals with the development of a young person, usually from adolescence to maturity" (59) or one that recounts the "young adulthood of a sensitive protagonist who is attempting to learn the nature of the world, discover its meaning and pattern, and acquire a philosophy of life" (38). This aspect of the novel makes it appropriate for study and facilitates pairing with other well-known bildungsroman texts like Dickens' *Great Expectations* or John Knowles' *A Separate Peace*.

### Addressing Potential Problems

Because the novel is written as a series of entries in Junior's journal, some of the topics discussed are quite personal. At one point, Junior briefly discusses masturbation, claiming that it is one of the important reasons humans have opposable thumbs. While many students would find this comment humorous, it also has the potential to make other students uncomfortable. For this reason, educators may want to consider excluding this particular passage from class discussions.

In addition, there is some profanity in this book, particularly when Junior and his best friend get into an argument. While some students may find this language offensive, the redeeming value and literary merit outweigh any potential discomfort. As angry teenagers, the profanity used in the text acts to make their conversations more realistic. Without it, the portrayal of the characters would be inauthentic.

Finally, Junior's comments about Reardan's mascot could lead to disagreements among students. When he moves to his new high school, Junior mentions that he is the only Indian there except for the school mascot. Because many schools and professional sports teams are still represented by controversial mascots, Junior's comments could lead to disagreements over the appropriateness of specific mascots. However, as this issue could also lead to a rich discussion on cultural appropriation by majority groups, it holds more potential for valuable conversation than disruption.

### Further Reading

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## *Accidents of Nature*

By Harriet McBryde Johnson

### Intended Audience

*Accidents of Nature* is a short novel written for young adults. It is excellent for ages fourteen to sixteen as it deals with issues relevant to teenagers' daily lives such as attending summer camp, fitting in with a new group of friends, and trying to find your identity separate from your family. In addition, the book is written in simple syntax that facilitates reading for students that may struggle with more traditional or canonical texts (Kaplan; Santoli and Wagner).

### Plot Summary

*Accidents of Nature* by Harriet McBryde Johnson chronicles a ten-day summer stay at the cross-disability Camp Courage in 1970s North Carolina. The novel is told from the perspective of Jean, a seventeen year old with cerebral palsy, as she encounters campers with mental disabilities, autism, epilepsy, and vision impairment. In her brief stay at Camp Courage, Jean grapples with her various identities as she feels conflicted between "fitting right in" and recognizing her membership of the disabled community. She deals with well-meaning but tactless counselors, gawking visitors, and controlling camp directors, all of whom lead her to question her place in wider society as a differently-abled teenager.

### Redeeming Value

*Accidents of Nature* focuses on a young adult with cerebral palsy and also chronicles her interactions with characters with a variety of disabilities at Camp Courage. Thus, the book follows a protagonist that is unlike the majority of characters in traditional literature, which allows students to encounter a new perspective and expand their "circle of concern" (Weissbourd and Jones).

This complex portrayal of people with disabilities is also important when contrasted with their depiction in classical texts, where disabilities are often treated as horrible tragedies or punishments (for instance, Rochester's blindness in *Jane Eyre*), humorous stereotypes (like Mr. Sleary in *Hard Times*) or evidence of character flaws (like Mrs. Ablewhite in *The Moonstone*). *Accidents of Nature's* characters challenge students' perceptions of disability more thoroughly than most classical literature.

The complex portrayal of people with disabilities also responds to one of Jean's complaints in the novel itself, that disability is only described in canonical texts as something that must be overcome, offering *Heidi*, *The Secret Garden*, and even the Bible as examples. She says that she yearns for a "story about a cripple who isn't cured" (Johnson 74). As Jean's complaint makes clear, seeing oneself in books is important, particularly for young adults; as Michael Cart writes in "The Value of Young Adult Literature," "to see oneself in the pages of a young adult book is to receive the reassurance that one is not alone after all, not other, not alien but, instead, a viable part of a larger community of beings who share a common humanity." *Accident's* portrayal of those with disabilities as whole, complex people helps readers see themselves in the text.

Despite the novel's accessible syntax, it challenges students to consider important questions regarding societal treatment of disability, disability rights within our own school, and the psychological impact of name-calling among friends.

Finally, *Accidents of Nature* is a carefully-selected text that meets several of Susan M. Landt's criteria for appropriate multi-cultural texts: the book is written by a member of the community being portrayed, there is diversity within the community, and the characters are depicted as solving their own problems rather than relying on majority intervention.

### Literary Merit

*Accidents of Nature*, as it follows the growth and experience of Jean as she navigates adolescence, is a classic "bildungsroman" or coming of age story. According to Harmon and Holman's *A Handbook to Literature*, a bildungsroman is a novel that "deals with the development of a young person, usually from adolescence to maturity" (59) or one that recounts the "young adulthood of a sensitive protagonist who is attempting to learn the nature of the world, discover its meaning and pattern, and acquire a philosophy of life" (38). This aspect of the novel makes it appropriate for study and facilitates pairing with other well-known bildungsroman texts like Dickens' *Great Expectations* or John Knowles' *A Separate Peace*.

### Addressing Potential Problems

When Jean is waiting for assistance to get ready for bed, she describes another disabled girl being bathed by a camp counselor. Though this scene describes nudity, it is written in a way that makes it clearly non-sexual and instead focuses on Jean's attempts to conceptualize her place among able-bodied people.

There is also frequent name-calling in this novel, as those with disabilities refer to one another with nicknames such "walkie-talkie," "Aussie," "spaz," and many other terms that are not socially acceptable today. While the casual use of these nicknames may be difficult for students to read at times, the conversation they can prompt regarding name-calling and its relationship to bullying is invaluable.

### Further Reading

Cart, Michael. "The Value of Young Adult Literature." *Young Adult Library Services*

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## ***The Porcupine of Truth***

**By Bill Konigsberg**

### Intended Audience

*The Porcupine of Truth* is a novel written for young adults aged fourteen to eighteen. It is an excellent text for this age group because it addresses issues relevant to their lives like finding friends in a new place, gaining independence from parents, understanding the importance of family history, and dealing with grief over the death of a loved one. In addition, *Porcupine* does not rely on a traditional love story to advance the plot, nor does it use archaic language or outdated cultural references. Thus, the novel offers a welcome reprieve for students reading canonical texts like Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* or Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. The novel's relatable characters encourage students to connect to the text while its accessible syntax makes it ideal for young adult readers still developing their literary interpretation skills (Kaplan; Santoli and Wagner).

### Plot Summary

In Bill Konigsberg's *The Porcupine of Truth*, seventeen-year-old Carson moves to Billings, Montana with his mother to help care for his estranged, dying father. On his first day in Montana, Carson meets Aisha at the zoo and thinks they have real chemistry—until he finds out she is a lesbian. When he discovers Aisha was disowned because of her sexuality and has been secretly sleeping at the zoo, he invites her to live with his family instead. While cleaning his father's basement, Carson and Aisha discover clues regarding his long-missing grandfather. They decide to strike out on a cross-country road trip, armed with Carson's credit card and Aisha's Dodge Neon, in an attempt to find the disappearing man.

### Redeeming Value

*Porcupine*, despite its accessible writing style, invites young readers to consider important issues in society like the AIDS epidemic, marriage rights, alcoholism, homelessness, and the relationship between religion and gender.

The novel is also an appropriate multicultural text as it meets several of the criteria put forth by Susan M. Landt: there is diversity within the gay community, the book is written by a member of the minority community being portrayed, and minority characters are depicted solving their own problems.

Finally, although *Porcupine*'s protagonist is a straight white male, the novel's inclusion of a variety of LGBTQ characters as well as members of other racial and cultural minorities telling their own stories allows students the opportunity to consider the experience of someone unlike themselves—or like themselves. Examining the experiences of Aisha, Carson's grandfather, and Turk encourages students to expand their "circle of concern" (Weissbourd and Jones).

### Literary Merit

*Porcupine of Truth*, as it follows the growth and experience of Carson and Aisha, is a classic “bildungsroman” or coming of age story. According to Harmon and Holman’s *A Handbook to Literature*, a bildungsroman is a novel that “deals with the development of a young person, usually from adolescence to maturity” (59) or one that recounts the “young adulthood of a sensitive protagonist who is attempting to learn the nature of the world, discover its meaning and pattern, and acquire a philosophy of life” (38). This aspect of the novel makes it appropriate for study and facilitates pairing with other well-known bildungsroman texts like Dickens’ *Great Expectations* or John Knowles’ *A Separate Peace*.

In addition, *Porcupine* follows the tradition of picaresque novels, which are “typically autobiographical, presenting the life story of a rascal of low degree... making his living more through his wits than his industry” and are generally “episodic and structureless” (Harmon and Holman 389). Carson and Aisha’s episodic adventures in their trip across the Western United States represent a simple way to introduce the term “picaresque” as well as compare it to canonical examples such as Cervantes’s *Don Quixote*.

The novel’s incorporation of historical information also makes it ideal for cross-disciplinary projects or cross-curricular study. As students discuss Turk’s story, they could also study the history of the AIDS epidemic and the history of civil rights for the LGBTQ community.

### Addressing Potential Problems

The novel’s frequent profanity and occasional sexual references may bother some students. However, these aspects of the text help create an authentic portrayal of teenagers and represent greater relevance to young readers.

### Further Reading

Harmon, William and C. Hugh Holman. *A Handbook to Literature*. Prentice Hall, 7<sup>th</sup> ed., 1996.

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