

Eastern Michigan University
DigitalCommons@EMU

Senior Honors Theses

Honors College

2003

Relating to Students Through Young Adult Literature

Joshua K. Lynch

Follow this and additional works at: <http://commons.emich.edu/honors>

 Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Lynch, Joshua K., "Relating to Students Through Young Adult Literature" (2003). *Senior Honors Theses*. 111.
<http://commons.emich.edu/honors/111>

This Open Access Senior Honors Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Honors College at DigitalCommons@EMU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Senior Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@EMU. For more information, please contact lib-ir@emich.edu.

Relating to Students Through Young Adult Literature

Abstract

No passionate reader, or lifetime reader, goes around reading books that they hate. They are what they enjoy. No single book can meet the individual likes and dislikes of each student. So why can students not read what they choose, and still learn? Based on the works of Donald Gallo, an interview with Jennifer Bueler, and the writers own personal experience with children and literacy, strictly as giving students choice in what they read.

Choosing and evaluating books is part of reading, and it is part of teaching reading. Young Adult Literature (YAL) should not be excluded from student choice, it should encourage, especially among students who are struggling with reading, or finding enjoyment in reading.

YAL is a great way to teach students many important aspects of reading, including character development, imagery, poetic language, citing text, plot development, irony, philosophical issues and much more. YAL deals with issues as relevant as rape, race, The Holocaust, justice, coming of age, personal growth and more. With YAL teachers are able to teach both important English concepts and instill genuine appreciation for literature.

Degree Type

Open Access Senior Honors Thesis

Department

English Language and Literature

First Advisor

Dr. Douglas Baker

Keywords

Young adult fiction, English Study and teaching (Secondary), Young adult fiction, American Study and teaching (Secondary), Youth in literature, Young adults Books and reading

Subject Categories

English Language and Literature

Relating to Students
Through
Young Adult Literature

By: Joshua K. Lynch

Eastern Michigan University
Undergraduate Honor's Thesis

RELATING TO STUDENTS THROUGH YOUNG
ADULT LITERATURE

by

Joshua K. Lynch

A Senior Thesis Submitted to the
Eastern Michigan University

Honors Program

IN Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for Graduation

With Honors in Literature, Language and Writing for Secondary Education

Approved at Ypsilanti, Michigan on this date, November 18th, 2003

Senior Honor's Thesis

Abstract

Author: Joshua K. Lynch

Department: English

Area: English Education

Supervising Instructor: Dr. Douglas Baker

Honor's Advisor to Students Through Young Adult Literature

Length: 29pp.

Completion Date: 6 – 26 – 2003

Special Features: (Sample Test, Interview with Jennifer Bueler, Donald Gall's Five Stages of Reading)

No passionate reader, or lifetime reader, goes around reading books that they hate. They are what they enjoy. No single book can meet the individual likes and dislikes of each student. So why can students not read what they choose, and still learn? Based on the works of Donald Gallo, an interview with Jennifer Bueler, and the writers own personal experience with children and literacy, strictly as giving students choice in what they read.

Choosing and evaluating books is part of reading, and it is part of teaching reading. Young Adult Literature (YAL) should not be excluded from student choice, it should encourage, especially among students who are struggling with reading, or finding enjoyment in reading.

YAL is a great way to teach students many important aspects of reading, including character development, imagery, poetic language, citing text, plot development, irony, philosophical issues and much more. YAL deals with issues as relevant as rape, race, The Holocaust, justice, coming of age, personal growth and more. With YAL teachers are able to teach both important English concepts and instill genuine appreciation for literature.

Introduction

It's summer, and the scramble for a job begins. Every summer thousands of college students look for work at the same time, and they all have to deal with the same question: How low will I go to get paid? I think the individuals answer depends completely on how badly they need money, and how good their opportunities look. The economy being poor and myself preparing for student teaching, I was prepared to go low, real low. Fortunately, I received summer work at a day care, so I will not have to spend the rest of the summer dreading waking up for work every day.

Working with the after-school program, we generally just let the kids play for the two hours that they are there, at least until they are out of school. What is interesting is that there are several of them, not a majority, not even a large minority, but several choose to spend much of this time reading. They do not read the typical books we see in schools. No Lord of the Flies here, but they do read. What is more, they enjoy reading still, because they spend their free time doing it. There are many children that I have not witnessed reading anything, but they have talked to me about books, and once again, these are not the typical books that teachers make students read, but they are of a variety known as Young Adult Literature (YAL).

Andrew and Gabe are two students who have talked to me about books. Andrew is seven years old, Gabe is a year older. Both of them mentioned the same books. Andrew asked me if I read Harry Potter. The first Harry Potter is 385 pages long. Did I mention that Andrew is seven? Andrew went on to describe what he liked about the book, and he also told me that he thinks that I should read it, which are two things that mature readers do: Describe what they liked and why, and then recommend it, if they

found the experience of reading it satisfying, or enjoyable. Gabe did the same thing. And it does not stop there. These two boys have read every Harry Potter book released, and they were really excited when a new one was coming out (It is almost 900 pages long). What is more, they described the book interestingly enough to make a 23-year-old, soon to be teacher go out and buy the book and begin to read it.

The Rationale.

So this is where I explain why I decided to do a project on Young Adult Literature. I think it is important that I explain what I mean by Young Adult Literature in this conversation. I do not wish to make an argument for canonized YAL such as the Lord of the Flies, A Separate Peace, or The Giver, instead I want to argue more for contemporary YAL. This is not because these “canonized” texts do not have merit, but rather because of the very fact that they are canonized that I do not feel that it is necessary to make an argument for them. Teachers are already using them in their classes, they have already earned merit for being great texts and very few people would question using them. I however, want to make arguments for the use of literature that is more contemporary. As English teachers we often get caught up in our own love for literature and fail to see things from the students perspectives. As literature lovers, we expect that students will love Shakespeare by default, because it is great literature and it connects to the universal themes that humans have.

Every time I work with English teachers I here complaints about students who do not read, and they appear to walk the halls of schools in droves. Apparently, there are

hundreds of non-readers tramping through the halls of schools, not reading. A lot of these teachers seem to take the same side. That students just do not want to read. That, however, does not do it for me. If I choose to follow the path of blaming the students, I enter a safe zone where it is not my fault when students fall through the cracks. This is similar to washing my hands. I continue to do the same things that I have always done, never thinking that maybe I can do it better.

Go ahead, say it, think it, I am a student teacher, and therefore I am idealistic. I do not know the real world of teaching I only know what professor's have told me. Say it if you want, think it if you want, but do not use it as a reason to ignore me. At least give my ideas a chance. I realize where I am at, that I have not had a class under my control yet. That is why the reader will find me to take a tone that is not strictly, I am right and you are wrong, but I feel that I have put together a convincing enough case that it is at least worth pondering.

What happens between kindergarten and high school? The first few weeks of working at the day care I drifted around between the pre-school room and the pre-kindergarten room during the day, because the school kids were still in school. Here, I saw something that I knew all along. These kids loved to learn and they loved to show me what they could do. They wanted to show me that they could read a little and that they knew how to write their names, and addresses. A lot of the school aged children still really liked to learn things and show me what they could do, but the older these kids were, the less that desire existed. For a few days I was with the kindergarten room. I taught them a little and I discovered that there were a few who were not highly receptive to learning here, but when I sat down with these students individually, and approached

them in the right manner, they would let me know where they were at, and from there I could try to show them something new. This only strengthened my belief in student structured learning. The beauracracy of school leads to a structured system that says a student should know x when they leave y grade, but it fails to answer the question: What happens when a student enters y grade already behind everyone else?

At this point teachers have one of two choices. They teach the student assuming that all of them should enter their class at z, and that by teaching them x they will leave there class at y, the grade level they should be at. $z+x=y$. Simple as that. The only problem is that students are not math problems. They do not all enter the class at z, and therefore may not be ready to learn x, and will henceforth leave the class not having achieved y.

The second choice involves a lot more work for the teacher, but treats each student as an individual. If a teacher attempts to learn where a student is, then they can start from there. This is not tracking, because all students have individual strengths and weaknesses and so I am not asking to label students as gifted or underachieving and I am not saying that any student that enters a class cannot achieve y, rather that the path to y is not always $z+x$.

So where does YAL fit in all of this? Strictly as giving students choice. What I will argue is that YAL does have merit and may be used in a classroom to achieve certain goals. I also believe that structured units that require students to read certain books in certain grades just because they are classics, are not realistic. No single book can meet the individual likes and dislikes of each student. Nor, can it be argued to fit into individualized instruction. It will either be above, below or at the reading level of the

individual students. YAL used in the right way has merit. It meets individual student preference. It works into individualized instruction and we can teach students using it.

If someone were to ask English teachers what their ultimate goal for their students was they would more than likely receive a majority of answers that sounded like: I want them to enjoy reading. I want to create lifetime readers. I want them to have a passion for reading, etc. No passionate reader, or lifetime reader, goes around reading books that they hate. They read what they enjoy. So why can students not read what they choose, and still learn? Furthermore, choosing and evaluating books is part of reading, and it is part of teaching reading. Allowing students to choose YAL serves an instructional purpose and therefore meets English Standards.

Why Young Adult Literature?

Robert G. Carlsen, a leading thinker in the area of English Education, suggests that there are five stages of reading that people go through. This is how Jennifer Beuhler summed up these five stages:

- **“Stage One** *“The reader finds himself unconsciously absorbed in the book...”*

The first stage generally occurs between third and seventh grades, where the reader’s satisfaction comes from slipping into the world of the book. If readers don’t experience this kind of immersion, it is likely that nothing else in literature will ever mean very much.

- **Stage Two** *“Read for vicarious experience...”*

Around seventh grade, students who have had plenty of opportunity to read for enjoyment begin to read with a different purpose—they read to vicariously live the character’s life, learning about the world as the character learns about the world.

- **Stage Three** “*Read about someone who represents oneself...*”

Typically 14 and 15-year-old ninth graders are thinking mostly about themselves, and so they look for books with characters who resemble them. Reading literature at this stage is about encountering characters like themselves and situations similar to their own.

- **Stage Four** “*Grapple with philosophical issues...*”

If students are experienced readers, then around the junior year of high school they begin to read with a new purpose. Their focus shifts from the plot to the issues raised by the plot—matters of right and wrong, dilemmas involving ethics and values, and philosophical questions about life and the world we live in.

- **Stage Five** “*Have an aesthetic experience with the text...*”

The most experienced readers ultimately read to experience a well-crafted piece of literature. This phase, which most readers don’t reach until mid-college years, represents the most mature stage of literary appreciation. At this point the reader has a conscious appreciation of the beauty of words and the richness of language.

Carlsen emphasizes that these stages are not separate and discrete units, but *overlapping satisfactions* in which one satisfaction from reading is more prevalent at a certain age than the others.”

Carlsen suggests that these are the five stages that a reader moves through.

Throughout their life a reader goes from becoming thrilled with the text to the point of being able to be absorbed by it, to aesthetically involved in reading. Moreover, Carlsen insists that these stages must also follow each other in sequence. In other words,

although the stages are capable of overlapping they may not be skipped. The important thing to realize here is that readers in high school can be expected to be at level three and are able to “read about someone who represents oneself.” These readers should also be able to handle level four “(grappling) with philosophical issues” but most are probably not quite ready to have an aesthetic experience with the text just yet.

The stages that I want to focus on are stages three through five. At ninth grade students are generally around stage three. At this age reader’s look for characters that resemble them in some way and are in situations that are similar to their own, and that they can relate too. Generally, we tend to start pushing students at this age to read the required classroom texts which tend to be classics. Now, one can easily argue that some students do find relevance with classic literature and connection to their own life, but most of the students probably do not.

It seems that this is the age when many students begin to be turned away from reading. I speculate that this occurs, because at the exact time that students reach a point where they are looking for characters that resemble themselves, we start presenting them books with characters that do not. I have noticed lately, that many classics seem to even skip over the age that the students are in, and the main characters are rarely at this age. In Great Expectations we move from Pip being young almost directly to him being 20 years of age. The same occurrence happens in Jane Eyre and many other classics. Very few of these books address the teenage coming of age in the way that Catcher in the Rye does, if they even address the time of the protagonists life. The issue here, is that at a time when students are naturally searching for characters that they will relate to, we are forcing them to read books that few of them will relate to. What I am suggesting, is not only allowing

students to read YAL, but giving students choice as well. Some students may desire to read the classics and that is fine. Some students may not prefer them, and that is fine.

Young Adult Literature fits nicely into the stage at which we will encounter most secondary students. They are able, willing and even enthusiastic to read about someone they can relate to, but they are at a level where they need help dealing with philosophical ideas through a text. This does not mean that they are not capable of it, but that they may need some nudging to look at a text in this manner. The case that I hope to present is that Young Adult Literature is capable of appealing to students in a way that a lot of classical texts may not be, and that YAL is much more deep, artistic and able to deal with philosophical issues than many teachers may think that it is.

Many people from the camp of disbelievers in the usefulness of contemporary YAL fail to see merit in it, because they often do not have knowledge of the wealth of YAL. These teachers seem to think that YAL refers to series books such as The Babysitters Club, and The Hardy Boys. These texts provide a very slim example of the literature that exists in YAL and they do not represent it fairly. There are many texts out there that in the field address complex issues with complex characters.

Interviewing John Grossier, The Head of the English Department at Chelsea High School in Chelsea Michigan, one of his complaints with the students in his class was that they could not comprehend the themes of texts, or if they got them on a basic level they could not explain them deeply. When talking to me he used the example of where in the climax of the story a soldier, gets caught doing a mercy killing of his friend by the commanding officer, who had him killed for murder. The students could not explain why it was ironic that he was arrested and killed for performing the Cou de Trois on his friend.

With all due respect to my esteemed colleague, I absolutely refuse to believe that students cannot see this type of irony, and can not deeply about literature, rather that is the literature that we select that is the problem. We, as English teachers, pick literature that students can not connect to. Dr. Marty Schictman, Professor of English at Eastern Michigan University, said that he is careful to choose literature that will connect with his student and he shared his thoughts with me on choosing texts for college freshman. When I asked him if he would choose to use a text such as Great Expectations, with a class of freshman, his response was “no way, for one thing it’s just too long.” He went to point out that Great Expectations is a great text and addresses many of the universals, but added “many of the students can identify with the themes, especially with a young character such as Pip, but it just moves too slow...I try to pick texts that address the contemporary reader.” And I think it is important that we as high school English teachers should do the same thing, and also take into account that we are teaching students form 14-18 as well, and that many of these students, or most of them will not be English majors in college. A friend of mine, Cory Harris said that he remembered reading an excerpt form Great Expectations in high school, and here we have a college professor that would not attempt to use it with freshman. We have to ask if the students are at the maturity level to read these texts, and to take the time with a book that moves so slow. We also need to ask if we can teach our students more by giving them texts that they will read. It is more important that are students read, and learn to advance their reading then it is for them to be exposed students to the classics, especially when a lot of them will not even read them.

English teachers want their students to love literature. What more could an English teacher wish for? If their students enjoyed reading as a teacher does, than they might read all the literature we gave them, but unfortunately most of them do not. We could, as teachers, make the conclusion that our students do not enjoy reading, but what kind of conclusion would that be? If only English teachers enjoyed reading their would not be such a wealth of literature available to such a variety of interests.

A problem emerges when we expect students to have the same experience that we do. We expect they will fall in love with the same books we did. The underlying assumption is that students will learn to appreciate and interpret literature by reading difficult texts that challenge them. And so we set texts in front of students that are so difficult that most of them do not read the texts because they can barely comprehend them. By trying to push students to a reading level that is so far above their capacity many of the students do not even attempt to read past a few pages and many of those that do the reading fail to comprehend the reading.

Donald Gallo, in his chapter, "Listening to Readers," quotes one of his university students who wrote,

"When I was in junior high school...I couldn't relate to most of the books that I had to read in school. The Scarlet Letter, for example, confused me and bored me. I didn't understand why Hester Prynne, the protagonist, stayed in a town where she was treated worse than a criminal simply because she committed adultery."

This writer, and students of Gallo, hits many of the points about using only classic literature in a classroom. She hits at a point that shows clearly that she could not

understand the situation that the protagonist was in, and as a result she could not connect with the character. Most of us understand literature with a protagonist that we can connect to, and this student could not connect to Hester because she did not have the background knowledge to understand her. This probably remains true of many protagonists in classic or contemporary literature. Some people would argue that The Scarlet Letter represents many universal themes that everyone should be able to relate to, but if we can not understand the struggle in the first place, then how can we identify with the person that is struggling. The student raises a question that many English teachers would quickly realize the answer to; Why didn't Hester just leave the town? We know that the answer is not that easy for Hester, but the student fails to comprehend it because she lives in a completely different world with an incredibly different perspective, and without the background knowledge or the maturity to understand Hester's situation.

This same student goes on to say,

“Instead, I read about other teenagers who had problems that I could identify with. I turned to books about drugs and street life such as Go Ask Alice, Kathleen, Please Come Home, and Run, Shelly, Run to help me come to terms with my own experience as a teenager and to solidify my understanding of myself.”

The issues that this student was dealing with in her reading are both complex and important. She was dealing with important societal and philosophical issues about drugs and street life, yet many of us fail to look to young adult literature for these kinds of issues. What she was dealing with is even more of a relevant problem, because they are current and they are issues that many students have to relate with in their lives. And they are things that all of us should be thinking about politically.

Many teachers argue against using YAL in the classroom because it is “not quality literature” or because it is “too easy of a read.” These educators anticipate that these books will consist of stereotypical adolescent characters who are dealing with problems that are juvenile such as “who is going to take me to the prom?” Jennifer Beuhler argues that these arguments dodge the issue. According to Beuhler teachers blow off a text as being an easy read, and fail to address what the purpose of teaching literature is in the first place.

Suggesting that Young Adult Literature should not be read in class because it is “an easy read” is, somewhat untrue, and also, suggests that the only reason we are teaching literature in English classrooms is to get students to be able to read a difficult text and learn how to plow through texts with long sentences and hard vocabulary. As Beuhler said, there has been “an explosion of quality YAL with artful language in recent years (the last ten or eleven).” These texts use many complicated literary techniques that we use classic pieces to teach, and it would be so much more effective to teach these literary techniques if the students have actually read the texts and have some knowledge to base a lesson on something like a motif.

Donald Gallo addresses the suggestion that YAL is not quality literature by pointing to a study of the members of the Massachusetts Council of Teachers of English conducted in the late 70’s. Patricia Aubin reported a “despicably poor attitude that most teachers had toward the young adult novel” finding that they were “unaware of the range or quality of books being produced for teenage readers...and did not have a clear image of what a young adult novel is; nor [were] they aware of the taste of their students...In

addition most teachers did not read professional journals or attend conferences where books for teenagers were discussed.” (Gallo, 22).

Many of the teachers that do not want to believe in using YAL, are not even aware what they are arguing against. They seem to think that it can be boiled down to shallow series novels, such as The Hardy Boys, The Babysitters Club, and Sweet Valley High that deal with uncomplicated issues such as “teenage romances, mass produced mysteries, or sensational thrillers.” There is so much more to YAL than this. There are texts that deal with deep and relevant issues, issues that are much more relevant to our students and our world today, and many of them hit on universal issues and societal problems such as class, race, the abuse of power, the Holocaust, life changes, and many more issues. As Professor of Literature at Eastern Michigan University Dr. Marty Schictman explains “all readers read to get a certain satisfaction, but the way we read, the themes and intents that we read for, depends on our levels [of reading].” Our focus as English teachers, then, should be to push students to a higher level of reading where they turn to texts to understand certain human issues.

As English teachers we have a responsibility to expose our students to the classics, and that means using the classics in our class in a way that will expose all of our students to the classics, but this statement is problematic for two reasons. What does exposing to the classics mean, and how do we go about doing it? This forces us to make a decision about which ones to expose them to and which ones we will not, and to make decisions about why we are choosing these certain texts. It should not be solely because we loved them. This suggests that are students should appreciate the exact same thing that we do. Dr. Schictman suggests that we should “look for texts that ask people to think about the

world around them...it is imperative that the students get a sense of relevance from the text.” If the students do not find the text relevant, then they will not read it, and relevance does not come solely from their teachers enjoyment.

By asking that the students get a sense of relevance from the text, Schictman is pushing his students to move into Gallo’s fourth stage of reading where readers begin to grapple with philosophical issues. This is where students begin to see the issues raised by the plot, they begin to understand the implications of class struggle, racism, sexism, etc, and they can begin to do this through YAL texts. We can use YAL to get students to grapple with these issues, and presents them with things that may also begin them on the path to “having an aesthetic experience with the text” at the same time. Instead of attempting to push students out of stage three, blaze them past stage four and into stage five, we can let them enjoy reading literature that relates to them, edge them to grapple with philosophical issues, and show them the aesthetic qualities of a text that they can begin to enjoy. And we can do this all by using YAL, which does grapple with philosophical issues and has aesthetic qualities that are worthy.

Exposing to the classics, then, should not mean that we are forcing students to plow through every page of The Great Gatsby. We can expose students without them reading every page, or without using solely classics in our classroom.

We must also consider what are objectives for using YAL or classics are. When I here arguments against YAL they often skate around objectives for reading in the classroom. Instead, anti-YAL arguments tend to attack YAL, and often they do it unfairly. Complaints suggest that YAL is not quality, as Jennifer says they, “anticipate clichés” and texts that have “stereotypical adolescent characters going through

stereotypical adolescent problems such as “who is going to take me to the prom?” They complain that they are easy reads, and that they are fine for entertainment but not to be used in the classroom.

An Interview With Jennifer Buehler about Young Adult Literature.

I had a telephone interview with Jennifer Buehler a few months ago about YAL. Jennifer is a ninth grade English teacher who swears by the usefulness of YAL, and over a sixty-eight minute interview I learned a lot about her classroom, as well as how she has made YAL successful in it.

Jennifer was the first to suggest to me the theories of Robert G. Carlsen, whose five stages I discussed earlier. She insisted that there was more to reading instruction than many teachers, and standards notice, and said that much of what students are asked to do in school was “deadening to their curiosity.” So how does YAL literature go about awakening these students’ curiosities?

Jennifer explained to me a project that she used in her class, which asked the students to come up with a theme for themselves. A general philosophical question, or something that they wanted to explore in a meaningful way. The students then expanded their theme by composing a list of ten questions that they wanted to attempt to answer. She then worked individually with the students to compose a reading list of three books, chosen from the classroom library of YAL books, that fit into the overarching theme that they wanted to focus on. Students self-chose deep themes such as sexuality, religion and the sort.

Jennifer chose this approach because it made the students “more effective meaning makers and thinkers, because the reading of these texts has a lot more to do with activity and energy in their brain,” and because “they are not just answering ten multiple choice questions on The Great Gatsby.”

At the end of the unit the students wrote essay answers based on their own list of ten questions. The following is an example of the test they had to write.

Book Test #3

Ms. Buehler

Background

Personal interest reading topic-

Title and author of book you wrote about on first book test

Title,

Author

Title and author of book you wrote about on second book test

Title.

Author

Title and author of book you will write about today

Title-

Author

Inquiry Questions (30 points each)

Choose 3 *inquiry questions* to answer today from the list you have developed.

Provide *detailed information* from your book to answer each question with depth, understanding, and insight.

To make your answers thorough and to provide a range of information from your book,

discuss the following three things in each answer:

An incident or event in the book, something that happens to a character

Something a character realizes, thinks about, or comes to understand in the course of the book

A quote from the book that sheds some light on the issues involved in your topic

Write the inquiry question you'll be answering before you begin writing the answer itself.

Comparison (10 points)

How do the three books you've written about so far this marking period give you *different ways of thinking* about your inquiry topic? What differences do you notice in the characters' experiences, in the ways the books are written, or in the messages the books provide?

If you find more *similarities* among your three books than differences, then write about those common themes, traits, patterns, or ideas in the books instead. When you put them together, how do they help you to *better understand* your inquiry topic?

In short these students chose their own themes, questions, books and essay questions to answer with the help of their teacher. The students then explained how their book selections helped them to answer, or at least think about their question. Students were expected to give examples from the books, including quotes, events, and character development. Students then compared the books by explaining the different, or similar approaches they had to dealing with the student's chosen topic. Students were asked to compare, "themes, traits, patterns, or ideas" and tell how this made them better understand their topic.

What all this boils down to is student choice. It is something we have heard tossed around over and over again, but I believe, as Jennifer does, that it works. By giving the students the freedom to choose their themes, questions and books we are helping to ensure student engagement. This way the students are not all forced to gobble down the same book. They are not being asked to answer multiple choice questions on a book that less than half of them actually read, and they are not skating by regurgitating what the teacher has told them the book is about. They are doing real learning. They are meeting state standards, school standards and doing it all by using YAL.

Some may argue that all of this could be done without YAL, and students could answer the same questions with classical literature. The difference, however, would be that the teacher then would be taking away one of their choices, the book choice, and if YAL is their choice, and if it can be used to learn substantial things, than why should the

students not be given that choice? Students finding a reason, usefulness and enjoyment for reading through YAL will eventually have a desire to tackle the classics.

What is most important about this method of teaching the students is that they are not only learning a lot about how to read, how to cite, how to write essays, what theme is, etc., but they are learning the true usefulness and the very point behind the art of writing, and the enjoyment of reading: To make the reader and the writer think deeply about the theme, the universal questions, as some might call it.

Jennifer does not believe that using the classics in her class can get quite the same response from her students as using a YAL novel that touches so close to home for them. Much of the reading instruction she sees done with books classic novels, such as To Kill a Mockingbird, Of Mice and Men, The Great Gatsby and the like “consists of the students learning the plot and themes central to the story, listening to the teacher discuss the big issues and then they send it back (and) half the kids never read it.” It is not the novels she insists are not right, but the instruction and the lack of student engagement that she sees compared to instruction with YAL. Instead of explaining what a novel is about she chooses to ask her students and let them tell her what the novel is about, what the main themes are and the like. In this way the students are truly learning more. It is no new idea in education that active learning sticks with students much more, and so identifying themes and debating them, would then teach the students much more about theme than being told about theme.

The YAL novel, according to Jennifer, is capable of the same important themes such as activism, race, character change, and they have “much complex material.”

Through them many students will be able to gain, as Jennifer puts it, a “greater insight into the usefulness of the novel.”

In a way these students performed a research project on their inquiry questions, but they were researching in a way that they had never done before. These students would be reading from fiction and non-fiction YAL selections that contained characters and issues that interested and engaged them. Furthermore, this topic gave them a way to select their own texts to read, instead of being asked to read something like The Great Gatsby, just because it has been hailed as a classic. In this way students begin to act as real mature readers; selecting texts by themselves for specific reasons and interests that belong to the reader, in this case the student reader.

Some Book Reviews

Holes, by Louis Sachar

Holes is a book that deals with the issue of crime and punishment and the often unfair results. Stanley Yelnats is sent to Camp Green Lake, a detention center for juveniles, for a crime that he did not commit. His time here takes him on a wild adventure that results in him lifting an old family curse that was put on his Great-Great Grandfather. An interwoven story full of literary techniques such as foreshadowing, imagery, combining multiple settings, direct and indirect character relationships and multiple events and their effects on each other, motifs, metaphors, similes imagery and other poetic techniques. More recently a movie version of Holes was released that could

be a useful and interesting way for students to explore the differences and commonalities among literary and movie forms of a story.

Stargirl, by Jerry Spinelli

Stargirl is so different that she immediately begins to attract all the attention of the students and the teachers at Meca High School, and is sure to catch the attention of its readers. She represents everything that is nonconformity from her first day at Meca High, and everyone loves that about her until the greatest basketball team that Meca High has ever seen loses and the school needs to blame someone else in order to feel better about their team. This is a book that I just could not put down. A captivating character and story combined with a struggle to fit in for Leo Borlock, the boy who has stolen her heart, make this book one that will be a success. Despite her failed attempt to conform to being popular, brought on only by her love for Leo, the school still hates her, and Leo fails to realize what he has until she is gone. At the end Leo is left with a very important lesson about love, conformity and life.

The Language of Goldfish, by Zibby Oneal

This book deals with the problem of depression and a family that is unwilling to admit their daughter Carrie's problem out of embarrassment. The family refuses to talk about it, even after Carrie attempts suicide, and talking is what she really needs. This book gets us inside the head of a character who is not sure what is wrong with her, but desperately needs to know that she is loved and accepted. An important successful book about the need to fit in, this book will touch many of its readers.

Speak, Laurie Halse Anderson

An amazingly touching novel that deals with the complex issues of rape, popularity, peer pressure, relationships, love, depression and much more. This book tells the story of Melinda Sordino in a year at Merryweather High School. Over the summer she sneaks out of the house and goes to a party where she is raped. She bust the party by calling the cops, but no one knows why and so her friends feel betrayed.

In this touching novel we feel Melinda's pain as she struggles with her rape. Afraid of telling her parents that she snuck out, and afraid that her friends will not believe her, Melinda is left to deal with her feelings all alone. Through art, and the endearment for strong females like Maya Angelou she will struggle to find her own inner strength and face the horror of her rape. This is truly an inspiring and eye-opening book that will reach out to many young adult readers.

Harry Potter, by J. K. Rowling. "Why are children around the world so eager for the next installment of a story about a boy wizard? Maybe it's because they see themselves in him" (Time).

Any book that interests as many children in reading as Harry Potter does deserves some time from a dedicated teacher. Harry Potter is "conducted in 200 countries, 55 languages, in Braille, in 200 million volumes. Children buy (Rowling's) books with their own money. They wear out flashlights reading them after lights-out. Kids fear of fat books and dyslexic children who have never finished a book read Harry Potter not once or twice, but a dozen times. Parents report reading levels jumping four grades in two

years” (Gibbs). The last sentence should give us something to think about when we consider the English Standards.

So what is it about Harry Potter that is so spectacular to children, and is it something that teachers should consider relevant. Rowling finds a way to relate to the millions of children, across the globe, that read her books. In Harry, and many of the other characters, children and young adults see someone who goes through many of the things they must face each day. Rowlings characters face bullies, exams, poverty, friendship, loyalty, death, fear, enemies and so many other things.

Students learn about character development, plot, imagery and other literary techniques as well as well as lessons about life and growing up. Zack Ferleger (12) says Harry “gets into trouble. If he didn’t you wouldn’t have all those pages to read. (Gibbs) Students like Zack talk about the book in their own way, but within it you can hear a discussion about literature.

- Rowling “mixes real-life struggles in with the imaginary, magic struggles” Casey Brewer (15)
- “It showed how Harry Potter’s mom sacrificed her life for Harry, as God sacrificed his life for us” Andrew Copeland (9).
- “What happened (at Harry’s schpp;) happens to us. Some of us are popular. Some of us are not. Some of us get bullied. Some of us are bullies” Ligia Mizhquiri (12).
- “Hermione ignores a lot. Ignoring while people are teasing is very, very important, because if you don’t ignore them, they’ll get on your nerves more, and it will be worse” Ellis O’Connor (10).

Rowling portrays children, adults, school, friends, bravery (all could be summed up in life) accurately and she does so in a captivating magical world. Her characters at

Hogwarts School show “that learning still takes time and patience” (Gibbs). Even the adult wizards have things to learn, and some of them are hundreds of years old.

There are so many things for children to learn from Harry Potter, but for some adults we might need to open our minds before we can learn from Harry Potter or the children that read these books. And the same is true of much of Young Adult Literature, but do not take my word for it. Read and decide for yourself, I only hope that I can convince teachers to begin to approach Young Adult Literature with a more open mind and with teaching children in their perspective. Forget the standards for a moment, forget how much you love Shakespeare and browse through the Children’s Literature section at a book store.

A Word of Advice.

In my time researching Young Adult Literature I found many helpful ways to find books. When I started this I had not read a book that could be classified as YAL since I had been a Young Adult, but there are so many helpful resources.

- Go to a bookstore large enough to have a YAL section, with staff specifically for this area and you will find people with a wealth of knowledge. They will let you know what they like, what the kids like, what you might find interesting for your classroom, etc. The same goes for many librarians.

- Fellow teachers who use YAL in their classroom will also be helpful in the same way. This includes elementary, secondary and college teachers.
- The internet has a lot of information and YAL, including many web pages with summaries of books.
- YAL is a hot topic at English Teacher conferences these days as well. Again, you can find helpful information and often summaries on many books.
- Take a few hours and browse. Read, look at and skim books.

Bibliography

- 1.) Anderson, Laurie Halse. Speak. New York: The Penguin Group, 1999.
- 2.) Beuhler, Jennifer. Interview. February 18th, 2003.
- 3.) Gallo, Donald, R. "How Classics Create an Aliteratre Society." *English Journal*, v. 90.(3), pp.33-39.
- 4.) Gallo, Donald, R. "Listening to Readers: Attitudes Toward the Young Adult Novel." Reading Their World: The Young Adult Novel in the Classroom.
- 5.) Gibbs, Nancy. "The Real Magic of Harry Potter." Time. New York: Jun 23, 2003. Vol. 161, Iss. 25; pg. 61
- 6.) Groisser, John. Interview. March 10th, 2003.
- 7.) Oneal, Zibby. The Language of Goldfish. New York: Puffin Books, 1980.
- 8.) Rowling, J. K. Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone. New York: Scholastic Inc., 1997.
- 9.) Sachar, Louis. Holes. New York: Dell Laurel Leaf, 1998.
- 10.) Spinelli, Jerry. Stargirl. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000.

