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Ten Young Adult Novels Every Middle School Student Should Know

by Dr. Jacqueline Tilles

The middle school years (grades 6-8) are years which are fraught with a multitude of problems for young teens. These are the years in which young people become upset over pimples; worry over weight problems; become depressed over the opposite sex; and agonize over the fact that someone will consider them to be "ugly" or "out-of-it" or "nerd-like." These are the years in which parents "never understand" - the years in which adults, in general, are "stupid" - the years in which teachers, in particular, are arch enemies deserving of slow torture (torture which middle school students mete out regularly and happily.)

During these difficult years, young adult novels can be of tremendous help to teens as they struggle with real and imagined adolescent pain. Young adult novels attempt to mirror life as the teen or young adult sees it. These novels depict feelings, situations, behaviors and motivations as they are seen by young adults. In these novels, acne; being stood up; not being a part of the in-crowd; being dateless; being flat-chested; and being embarrassed before one's peers are treated as major disasters, simply because they are **seen** as major disasters by young people. Life is presented as the teen or young adult **sees** life - and this is surely one reason for the appeal and the helpfulness of the young adult novel. Young people feel that the young adult novel is sympathetic to them - to their points of view - to their feelings - and to their pain.

Young adult novels are also appealing and helpful because they assist young people in fulfilling basic societal expectations. Society expects that teens will eventually learn and fulfill the various roles which are required of them as adults. Society expects that teens will learn to relate to members of the opposite sex in new ways. Society expects that teens will learn to achieve a growing independence from their parents. Society expects that teens will learn to handle with maturity the many clashes in values which regularly occur as a part of daily life. Such expectations are constantly presented in young adult novels. As teens and young adults read these novels and see how fictitious young people handle such matters, they gain insight into how they may eventually deal with similar matters.

In addition to these two rather utilitarian values, young adult novels are also helpful to young people because they provide students with touches of beauty in an all-too-ugly world. While many young adult novels are not literary masterpieces, many of them contain **touches** of beauty - touches which can make young people feel, cry, laugh, be inspired, crave justice, dream and know a momentary peace.

There are many young adult novels which do an especially good job of mirroring adolescent life, pointing up societal expectations and adding touches of beauty to the young adult's world. These novels, in the view

of this writer, should be read by every middle school student.

One such novel is **The Lemming Condition** by Alan Arkin. The novel deals with the rodent-like animals known as lemmings who, at a given point in time, congregate with all other lemmings, rush westward to the edge of a cliff and drown themselves in the ocean. For some unknown reason, lemmings have been doing this since there have been lemmings. Lemmings never consider the fact that they cannot swim; and they never consider the fact that they will die in the ocean. Tradition has dictated that they must destroy themselves and all lemmings have always followed this tradition.

The Lemming Condition centers on a young lemming name Bubber who thinks that jumping into the ocean is very foolish --- especially since lemmings cannot swim. Bubber questions his father, his uncle and a very old lemming about the strange tradition. Each older lemming is amazed that Bubber would dare to question their ages-long practice.

When the time comes for the lemmings to rush westward into the ocean, Bubber hides in a small crevice between two rocks and falls asleep.

When Bubber awakens the next morning every other adult lemming is gone - dead -drowned in the ocean. Only a few baby lemmings remain. The baby lemmings try to convince Bubber to remain with them - but Bubber informs them that he is no longer a lemming. He will live his life more sensibly and never again be controlled by foolish traditions.

Teens are so peer-oriented that they will often conform to foolish and even life-destroying practices simply because other teens conform. **The Lemming Condition** may set them to thinking about the possibility and value of bucking tradition and being happily individualistic. The book also has much to say about conformity, survival, tradition and standing alone. These are certainly issues with which most teens struggle, and though **The Lemming Condition**

deals with the struggle of animals and not people, there are certainly rich insights for teens to gain.

A second novel which all teens should know is **Go Ask Alice** by Anonymous. **Go Ask Alice** is based on the actual diary of a fifteen year old female drug user. The book is presented as a series of diary entries in which the young girl describes struggles with weight, friendship, school, the opposite sex and parental pressure. her opening diary entries are bright and breezy and filled with the typical concerns of teenage life. Eventually, though, the protagonist describes her initial encounter with LSD at a party and her gradual addiction not only to LSD but also to sleeping pills, tranquilizers, pennies, dexies, marijuana, and eventually heroin.

As her addiction to the various drugs grows, her sweetness, her strong values, and her concern for others gradually disappears and her life becomes one constant search for a better drug high.

Eventually the protagonist ends up in jail; in the state mental hospital and at various drug rehabilitation settings. However, it is the keeping of her diary that seems to enable the protagonist to maintain some kind of sanity and some sense of reality.

Through the constant encouragement and support of her parents, the protagonist begins (so we believe) to pull away from the drug scene and from her desire to center her life on drugs. However, the book ends abruptly as the epilogue reports that the protagonist's parents come home from a movie and find her dead of a drug overdose.

One of the most intense pressures faced by teens in our day is the pressure which comes from the drug scene. Drug use is made to appear glamorous, adult, "cool" and joy-inducing. Perhaps the reading of a book like **Go Ask Alice** will help young people to see that drug use, in reality, digs an ever-deeper hole from which some never emerge.

It is certainly true that some of the language and many of the episodes in **Go Ask Alice** are more profane and more sophisticated than would normally appear in books recommended for middle school use.

Yet it is also probably true that the severity of the drug problem among teens warrants unusual, tough and even shocking treatment. **Go Ask Alice** certainly provides that type of treatment.

Still another book which middle school students should know is **One Fat Summer** by Robert Lipsyte. This fast-paced first person narrative deals with a summer in the life of Robert Marks, a 200 pound fourteen year old who spends the summer with his parents on Rumson Lake.

Robert despises the summer because he is unable to wear enough clothing to hide his excessive fat. Robert spends considerable time locking the bathroom door and checking his biceps to see if they are developed. He avoids going to camp for fear that he'll have to appear before others in swimming trunks. Yet, even though Robert hates being fat, he still goes to the refrigerator and eats constantly whenever he becomes depressed. Because Robert is so typically adolescent in his approach to his obesity, middle school readers will surely empathize with him as they relate Robert's actions to their own actions in dealing with problems which plague them.

During the summer around which the book centers, Robert gets a job as a lawnboy and caretaker. An older teen named Willie believes that Robert has stolen the job from him; thus Willie decides to get revenge. Willie and his friends begin to torment Robert and eventually blindfold him; take his clothes; row him to a remote island in the middle of the lake and leave him there alone.

At first Robert cries and resolves to die -but eventually he finds an old cabin and a sheet in which he wraps himself. The next morning, Robert is rescued only to discover that Willie has temporarily left the Rumson Lake area. During this time, Robert begins to lose weight as a result of working on the strenuous lawn job. He even begins to develop the muscles that he has been searching for behind closed bathroom doors.

Willie soon returns to the lake area with a gun and is bent upon shooting Robert. A fight ensues and Robert emerges as the winner.

The "underdog makes good" theme will definitely appeal to middle school youngsters - especially those who are always longing for that one special miracle which will make their problems disappear. Perhaps **One Fat Summer** will help them to see that time and resolve and a little inner courage worked miracles in Robert's life and can also do the same in theirs.

Teacup Full of Roses by Sharon Bell Mathis is a powerful little novel about black family life. It is a must for middle school students because it provides rich insights into a less-than-perfect family situation - the sort of family situation with which so many teens must wrestle. The family depicted in **Teacup Full of Roses** lives in Washington, D.C. and consists of three brothers: seventeen year old Joey who works full-time and who is about to graduate from night school; twenty-three year old Paul who has just been released from a rehabilitation center for heroin addiction; and highly intelligent fifteen year old Davey who attends high school. The brothers live with their aunt; their mother who is so wrapped up in Paul that she virtually ignores the rest of the family; and the father who spends his days passively retreating behind the daily newspaper.

Joey, the most mature member of the family, dreams of one day marrying his girlfriend, Ellie, and living with her in a teacup full of roses. To this end, Joey works hard, saves his money, and regularly attends his night school classes. When he realizes that his mother is so wrapped up in Paul that she is never going to help Davey get the scholarships which would enable him to attend college, Joey withdraws his savings from the bank and gives the money to Davey. Joey then enlists in the armed forces and plans to leave town shortly after his night school graduation. Paul, however, steals the money from Davey on the day of Joey's graduation.

When Joey and Davey find Paul, the money has already been spent on heroin. A fight ensues and, in the confusion, Davey, the brightest member of the family - the one with so much promise - is shot and killed.

Teacup Full of Roses depicts a problem-ridden family life which leads to tragedy for

many. Yet in the midst of the tragedies, the reader is given the hope that somehow Joey will endure and achieve. Perhaps Joey will inspire middle school youngsters to rise above seemingly hopeless family situations and like him, endure and achieve.

In order that middle school students might be able to appreciate life in another era and still see the changelessness of human qualities, emotions, hopes and motivations, every middle school student should know the book **Friedrich** by Hans Peter Richter.

Friedrich chronicles the life of a Jewish boy and his family living in Germany from 1925-1942. Herr and Frau Schneider give Friedrich a happy and secure childhood. In 1933, however, when Friedrich is eight years old, Adolph Hitler begins his rise to power and the family's entire life begins to change.

Herr Schneider, though only thirty-three years old, is forced to retire from his job. Friedrich is forced to leave the state school and is persecuted on a number of occasions for being Jewish. Eventually the Nazis break into the Schneider's apartment, beat Mrs. Schneider to death and destroy the family's possessions. Soon, Herr Schneider is sent away to a concentration camp and Friedrich is left to wander the streets dirty and starving.

During an air raid, Friedrich is refused entry into an air raid shelter simply because he is Jewish. Later, he is found dead outside the shelter.

The book is an excellent account of the very subtle way in which the persecution of the Jews began, escalated and was eventually accepted by vast numbers of the German people. Hopefully, middle school students will be incensed by Friedrich's plight and will be alert to the cruelty and ugliness of prejudice and inhumanity in all its forms. Perhaps middle school students will also begin to realize that when assessed in the light of Friedrich's problems, their own problems do not loom very large.

A Figure of Speech by Norma Fox Mazer is yet another book which middle school students should know. The book has an emotional power with which middle school students need to be touched. Often young

teens give the impression that they cannot be touched and do not care about the things that disturb normal people. In reality, though, teens are capable of great feeling and even greater caring. Perhaps a book like **A Figure of Speech** will help them to see that it is all right to feel and to care.

A Figure of Speech deals with thirteen year old Jenny Pennoyer and her eighty-three year old paternal grandfather Carl Pennoyer, who is referred to as Grandpa.

Grandpa has lived with the Pennoyers since Jenny was three years old, and a deep bond exists between the two. For ten years Grandpa has lived in the Pennoyer's basement apartment and considers that small place to be "his space" in the home. When the oldest Pennoyer son returns home with a bride, the apartment is taken away from Grandpa and given to the newlyweds.

Each member of the Pennoyer family, except Jenny, treats Grandpa like a non-person. He is either ignored or treated rudely or barely tolerated. Jenny constantly seeks to "protect" and love Grandpa but she only succeeds in encountering the ire of other family members.

Soon, Mr. and Mrs. Pennoyer begin to look for a nursing home in which to place Grandpa. When Jenny hears the news she is heartbroken. When Grandpa hears, he decides that he will return to his boyhood farm. Jenny, unknown to her parents, plans to go with Grandpa. Grandpa does not want Jenny to go - but she is determined.

Jenny and Grandpa board a bus for the farm. Once they arrive in the area, they walk eight miles to the farm itself. They find the farm filthy and in ruins. Jenny and Grandpa work hard to get the farm in a livable condition - but, one morning, Jenny awakens to find Grandpa dead under the old apple tree.

Because middle school students often feel so powerless, they will surely identify with Jenny's powerlessness as she attempts to help Grandpa.

Because middle school students tend to have a strong sense of justice, they will

certainly despise the Pennoyers; love Grandpa; root for Jenny and cry when Grandpa dies.

Because middle school students need to be more open in their caring, perhaps **A Figure of Speech** will help them to have a more open concern for the helpless, the powerless and the elderly.

Another must-read book for middle school students is **Roll of Thunder Hear My Cry** by Mildred Taylor. **Roll of Thunder** will do for teens what Alex Haley's **Roots** did for adults. It will give blacks a heightened sense of identity and a pride which inspires and challenges. The book will also give whites a richer understanding of blacks and an appreciation of the forces which motivate them.

Roll of Thunder deals with a black family of eight people living in Spokane County, Mississippi in 1933. The story is told by Cassie Logan, the eleven year old daughter in the family. Cassie's family is one of the few black families owning land in the area. Because of this favored position, the whites persecute Cassie's family and demonstrate horrible prejudice and intense hatred toward them. Cassie and other black children are run off the road by the for-whites-only school bus. The homes of Cassie's neighbors are set afire because of a trivial disagreement with neighboring whites. Mrs. Logan, Cassie's mother, is fired from her teaching job; Cassie's father is shot and barely escapes with his life and the bank demands that the Logans pay the balance of the mortgage on their farm. Mr. Logan's brother is eventually able to raise the money needed to save the family and the family is temporarily rescued from their most critical problem.

Later, however, a racist mob brutally lashes out at the Logan family; but Mr. Logan sets his land, as well as that of a rich white landowner, on fire. The mob must now direct its energies toward a more positive effort - saving the land of the rich landowner, and the Logan family is once again spared.

Because **Roll of Thunder** is a long, slow-paced book; and because it is full of detailed descriptions, it will be difficult-going for some

teens. The themes of courage, survival, injustice, prejudice and identity, however, are so strongly presented that many young people will be willing to stick with the book despite its difficulty. Those who persevere will certainly be moved by the power of the book and by the tenacity and strength of the Logan family.

A Day No Pigs Would Die by Robert Newton Peck should also be read by every middle school student. The book deals with a Shaker family that lives on a Vermont farm in the 1930's. The Shakers believe in living simply and without frills. They espouse strong faith in God and hard work. The Shaker family of this book consists of the father, Haven Peck, who earns his living by farming and slaughtering pigs; the mother; an aunt; and Robert Peck, the twelve year old son and narrator of the story.

Robert saves the life of a neighbor's cow, and the neighbor, out of gratitude, gives Robert a piglet as a gift. At first, the father is reluctant to let Robert keep the piglet, since the family is so poor and the piglet would just be one more mouth to feed. Mr. Peck relents, though, and Robert gets to keep the piglet whom he names Pinky. The father feels that at least Pinky can grow up and bear little piglets who can be sold and help "pay Pinky's way."

Throughout the entire book the father teaches Robert by word and deed that a man is a person who "does what he has to do."

Eventually, Pinky reaches adulthood and though she is mated with many hogs, she never has any piglets. She is barren. Because the family is so poor, Mr. Peck explains that he will have to slaughter Pinky since she "can't pay her own way." Robert sees this as another example of his father's "doing what a man has to do," and though he is devastated over the loss of Pinky, his love for his father deepens and grows.

Soon Haven Peck discovers that he is terminally ill, and he spends the last year of his life teaching Robert to manage the farm and to be the man of the family.

On the day of Haven Peck's funeral, men who slaughter pigs from miles around come

to pay their last respects to a man's man and thus the day of Peck's funeral becomes "a day no pigs would die."

Middle school students may well have difficulty with the Shaker dialect in the book; but they will surely have no difficulty with the strong, positive values; with the deep love between the boy and the father; or with the warm happiness experienced by the Peck family despite the lack of material possessions. The book also has many humorous episodes that will tickle the ribs of teens and relieve the sadness of Mr. Peck's impending death and his final demise. In a day when so many teens and parents are at each other's throats, middle school students might find a pleasant delight in reading about a stable and happy father-son relationship.

A Light In The Forest by Conrad Richter is a kind of classic for young adults. Yet it is one which will not bore as do so many classics. Instead, it should challenge middle school students and promote considerable thought.

A Light In The Forest is the story of True Son, a white boy who was captured by the Indians when only a baby. When the book opens, True Son is fifteen years old and is thoroughly Indian in his thinking and lifestyle. He loathes whites as only an unjustly treated Indian can.

Soon, however, the Indians and whites sign a treaty in which it is agreed that all white captives will be returned by the Indians to their white families.

True Son, like all other captives, is returned to his white family and becomes John Butler. In his heart and thinking, however, True Son finds it impossible to adapt to white culture and eventually runs away from the Butlers and returns to his Indian family.

One of the Indians, Little Crane, enlists the aid of True Son in avenging the murder of his brother at the hands of the whites. True Son agrees to help, but in the midst of the plot to lure the whites into an ambush, True Son warns the whites and they escape harm. True Son realizes that during his brief stay

with his white family, he has come to see them as human beings and not merely as the enemy.

The Indians now see True Son as a traitor and banish him. Now he is, in a sense, neither white nor Indian and the book concludes with the reader wondering precisely what fate will eventually claim True Son.

The book is well-written, fast moving, and heart-rending. The universal statements regarding alienation and rejection, ambivalence and culture conflict will definitely speak to the middle school student who so often feels torn between worlds.

A final book which middle school students must know is **The Children's Story** by James Clavell. Clavell wrote this slim volume when he discovered that his young daughter could rattle off the Pledge of Allegiance to the flag and yet, when questioned about the meaning of the pledge, had no answers which demonstrated understanding. Clavell became concerned as he thought that perhaps many adult Americans lack understanding of the values which undergird the Pledge of Allegiance. Clavell became frightened when he realized that if we do not understand basic American values, then we will not treasure them enough to cling to them or fight for them in the face of tough opposition. **The Children's Story** was written as a response to Clavell's thinking, and it is a pointed response indeed.

The book is set in a classroom of seven year old children. An unnamed group of people has taken over the country and plans to send a new teacher to instruct the children. The old teacher appears to be terrified as she says good-bye to the children. Soon, the new teacher appears. She is young, pretty and is dressed in a green uniform. All the children are quite accepting of her - all except Johnny who vows that he will have nothing to do with her.

The teacher wins the children to her by knowing their names, by knowing a given child's birthday and by being warmer, kinder and friendlier than the old teacher.

Soon it is time for the children to say the Pledge of Allegiance to the flag. The teacher

begins to question the children about the pledge. Eventually she convinces them that the pledge is meaningless and that there is no need to say it. After a time, she has the children cutting the flag up into little pieces and throwing it away. Soon she has them believing that prayer is meaningless and, by implication, that God does not exist. Even Johnny, who at the beginning was skeptical and determined to hold on to his beliefs, is won over by the new teacher. This entire "conversion" took approximately twenty-five minutes.

Helping middle school students to grasp the power of this book may require intense instruction on the part of the teacher and fully valuing the book may require a rereading during senior high days - but an exposure to the book during the early teen years is really a must. Middle school students are so often caught up in the personal problems involved with growing up that they fail to consider larger life issues. Clavell's book will encourage them to thoughtfully consider some issues which are basic to our existence as Americans.

Many of the ten books which every middle school student should know are designed to assist them in handling the growing up process with strength and grace. Many of the books are designed to help young teens meet the demands which society will eventually impose upon them. All of the books are designed to add touches of beauty to their lives.

The Lemming Condition is designed to help young people see the beauty of standing alone. **Go Ask Alice** is designed, by contrast, to help them see the beauty of living a clean and wholesome life. **One Fat Summer** is designed to help teens see the beauty of persevering and waiting until desired changes occur. **Teacup Full of Roses** attempts to help them see the beauty of giving oneself to others despite the end results. **A Figure of Speech** attempts to help young people see the beauty of love and loyalty particularly when you are the only person who demonstrates such qualities. **Friedrich** and **Roll of Thunder Hear My Cry** are designed to help teens see the beauty of struggle in the face of persecution and injustice. **A Day No Pigs Would Die** describes the values underlying a stable, positive father-son relationship. **A Light In The Forest** presents the beauty of a humanness which transcends race and culture; while **The Children's Story** presents, by contrast, the beauty of understanding the underpinnings of the values which we claim to hold. Hopefully, the reading of these books will enrich the lives of middle school students in both practical and aesthetic ways.

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Recommended Young Adult Novels

- The Lemming Condition** by Alan Arkin
Go Ask Alice by Anonymous
One Fat Summer by Robert Lipsyte
Teacup Full of Roses by Sharon Bell Mathis
Friedrich by Hans Peter Richter
A Figure of Speech by Norma Fox Mazer
Roll of Thunder Hear My Cry by Mildred Taylor
A Day No Pigs Would Die by Robert Newton Peck
A Light in the Forest by Conrad Richter
The Children's Story by James Clavell