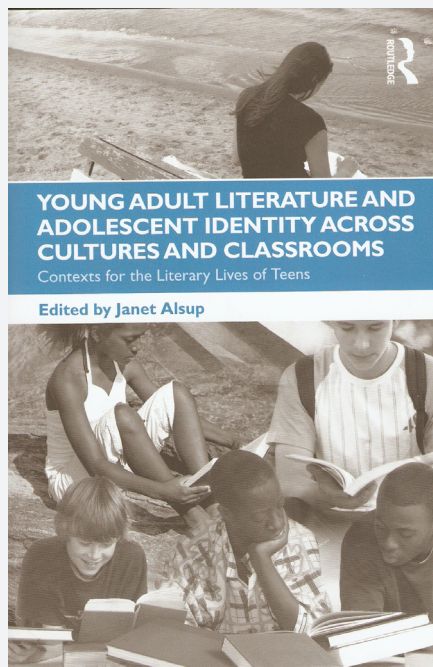


## Young Adult Literature: Pedagogy and Social Justice

Alsup, Janet, ed. *Young Adult Literature and Adolescent Identity Across Cultures and Classrooms: Contexts for the Literary Lives of Teens*. New York: Routledge, 2010.

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Janet Alsup has edited a new volume that explores diverse dimensions of young adult literature for high school and teacher preparation classrooms. *Young Adult Literature and Adolescent Identity Across Cultures and Classrooms* strives to be a “systematic and scholarly examination of the literary and pedagogical effectiveness of the genre” (2)—and with the exception of only one or two essays in the volume, the work succeeds beautifully. Alsup identifies four topics around which the book is structured: teenage identity growth; reader response approaches to teaching and reading; psychological and educational theories of identification; and literacy and social justice. This collection of essays is especially successful in its work on identity growth and social justice. In many ways, this is the book I have been waiting for years to read.

Among the strongest work in this volume are those essays that address Alsup's goal of examining pedagogical implications and the effectiveness of teaching young adult literature. One of the most resonant essays here includes Alsup's advocacy for complicating the standard reader response practice of teaching students to "identify with"—or, in the vernacular, to "relate to"—a character. In the "Introduction," Alsup argues that "it is important to work with students to recognize both the similarities and the differences between the text and their own experiences" (11). The research she presents in "One Female Reader reading YAL: Understanding Norman Holland's Identity Themes Thirty Years Later" demonstrates a reading bias in female readers who describe "relatability" as one of their greatest motivations to read young adult novels—whether they are in college or are in eighth grade. Alsup analyzes differences in what motivates males and females to read, and she questions why teens rely so heavily on such words as "relating" and "connecting" with a text: "Is it because English teachers are using them so much in class when we lead literary discussions? Are they symptomatic of that self-absorbed, but not necessarily self-assured, 'me' generation . . .? Do they result from Oprah Winfrey pseudo-psychological culture in which everyone should self-analyze and determine how one responds to social stimuli of all kinds?" (210) I personally suspect that the first reason is the major factor in students' desire to "relate to" characters—because we teach them from their earliest years in elementary schools to think in terms of how they are "like" characters, rather than how they are "unlike" characters. In failing to simultaneously ask how we enjoy characters who are unlike us, we tacitly fail to encourage students to read for difference. As Alsup puts it:

if a teacher is teaching YA literature in the classroom, he or she not only must think about how to tap into the identity theme of the student reader in order to understand his/her reading behavior and response, but must figure out how to help the student reader extend his or her identity theme into a new realm—into a new and deeper level of response that enriches the literary experience and stretches the reader's cognitive and emotional response to it. (211)

Alsup is concerned that too many classrooms substitute "cognitive/emotional growth for superficial student engagement," and she urges teachers to provide students with "a larger repertoire of critical lenses" (212). Gail Zdilla does similar work in "The Appeal of Young Adult Literature in Late Adolescence: College Freshman Read YAL." Not only does Zdilla demonstrate how adolescence has been increasingly prolonged by current cultural forces, but she also replicates Alsup's findings: late adolescents have been trained to value books with which they can identify.

Other essays in this volume also encourage teacher-scholars to think about classroom praxis that might initially seem to empower students but could eventually limit their

ability to think critically. In "Perspective Giving and Taking in the Secondary English Class," Jeanne Smith Muzzillo gives an impassioned plea for the responsible use of perspective giving and taking, problematizing the complexity of using perspective taking effectively. Lisa Schade Eckert demonstrates the negative results of calcified curricula in her examination of the graphic novel, "Beyond the Comics Page: Pedagogical Opportunities and Challenges in Teaching Graphic Novels," arguing that the graphic narrative encourages readers' "interactive interpretation of the text" (147). Both of these essays—like Alsup's and Zdilla's—invite scholars to think about the effects of how and what we are teaching in the high school and college English classroom.

Equally compelling is this volume's collection of essays on adolescence and identity politics. Joy Dangora's "African American Young Adult Literature and Black Adolescent Identity: Developing a Sense of Self and Society through Narrative" is an elegant synthesis of pertinent African American literary theories that demonstrates how this genre can participate in positive identity development. Nai-Hua Kuo's "Depictions of Chinese Americans in Young Adult Literature: *American Born Chinese* and Beyond" provides useful suggestions for teaching Chinese American young adult literature; the themes, images, and challenges Kuo identifies are clear and helpful. James R. Gilligan uses Queer Theory to good effect in "Composing Themselves: The Discursive (De)Construction of Queer Identity in Six Young Adult Novels," in which he focuses on GLBTQ literature and its discursivity. Nisreen M. Kamel Anati has one of the most sensitive readings of literature about the Middle East that I have ever read. In "Teaching through the Conflict: Examining the Value of Culturally Authentic Arabic Young Adult Literature," she demonstrates both the paucity of available texts about Arabic adolescents written in English and analyzes significant themes that emerge from those novels, which number "fewer than a hundred" (64). Two companion chapters on Mexican American young adult literature provide different perspectives on identity issues in novels about Mexican American teenagers. William J. Broz uses Luis Moll and Norma Gonzalez's concept of "funds of knowledge" to analyze Mexican American young adult literature in its cultural context. In a complementary essay, René Saldaña, Jr., analyzes how the language "Mestizaje," a blended language of Spanish and English, builds cultural identity when readers experience it in texts. Saldaña demonstrates how writers who employ Mestizaje "have helped to document the construction and the ongoing development of the Mexican American identity" (107).

The volume does have some scholarly weaknesses, particularly in terms of undertheorization in some places. In "Engaging and Enchanting the Heart: Developing Moral Identity through Young Adult Fantasy Literature," Aliel Cunningham falls into some Romanticization of the genre that she could have avoided had she consulted some of the standard theorists of fantasy, including C. W. Sullivan III and Farah Mendlesohn. Lisa Schade Eckert misses opportunities to include Perry Nodelman's early work on semiotics in children's books and Hillary Chute's more recent work on the graphic novel. Gail Zdilla writes about Sylvia

Engdahl's 1975 comments on reading young adult literature as if the essay were relatively recent. These, however, are minor concerns given the overall strength of these essays.

One essay, however, stands out for its failure to fully engage the field of young adult literary theory. The inclusion of Jeff Spanke's "Pedagogues and Demigods: Captivity, Pedagogy and Young Adult Literature in an Age of Diminished Expectations" threatens to undercut the values and goals of the volume. Spanke draws a Procrustean analogy between Indian captivity narratives and young adult literature: "the savagery of adolescence becomes the new protagonist, with adulthood/mainstream society assuming the role of Other" (150). "Technology, the Internet and pop culture" replace the Bible as the "refuge" or "escape" from adult captors; teachers are cast, confusingly, in "the roles of both the Puritan minister . . . and the savage Other" (emphasis in the original, 156-57), but they are also "mediators" and "feed students grades so that they may survive academically"—just as one Puritan captive was fed dog meat by her captors (158). Ignoring the many (better) definitions of young adult literature that abound—including those on which Dzilla relies (194-95)—Spanke defines what he insists on calling "YAL" as: 1. literature with characters with whom adolescents can identify; 2. plots that parallel teenagers' actual lives; and 3. language that is "accessible" to teenagers (150). He fails to consider poetry, drama, creative nonfiction, or most speculative fiction as "YAL"; moreover, he has clearly never read novels that defy or question the formula of the adolescent being captive to his/her environment. I am thinking here of novels by Robert Cormier (*Tenderness*), Chris Crutcher (*Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes*), Jacqueline Woodson (*From the Notebooks of Melanin Sun*), Louise Rennison (*Angus, Thongs, and Full Frontal Snogging*), Margaret Mahy (*Memory*), Marilyn Nelson (*Carver*), Markus Zusak (*The Book Thief*), or Robin McKinley (*The Hero and the Crown*), all of which problematize adulthood, empower adolescent characters, and resist the temptation to—as Spanke claims all young adult literature does—"[perpetuate] adolescents' anxieties over adulthood" and "[offer] little incentive to overcome" adolescent angst (156). Ultimately, Spanke questions "the practicality and overall value of *teaching* YAL in the secondary classroom as a replacement for texts that traditionally either have gone unnoticed due to their perceived inaccessibility to students or occupy the literary canon" (emphasis in the original, 160). He insists: "Teaching YAL in the secondary English classroom, therefore, risks pigeon-holing adolescents into a contrived existence predicated on despair, trauma, and mortification that YAL, by its very nature, offers little incentive to overcome" (156).

Certainly, Spanke has a point that many young adult novels (but not all young adult literature!) thrive on an *Us vs. Them* mentality in which adolescents are effectively captives and adults are captors. Spanke could even find strong theoretical justification to support his arguments about this subset of fiction in the work of theorists who have already studied power and repression in adolescent literature, such as Maria Nikolajeva, Robyn McCaul-

lum, Karen Coats, and Perry Nodelman. But Spanke's jeremiad about how ill-suited young adult literature is to the English classroom seems problematic—even disturbing—in a volume that otherwise advocates eloquently for the inclusion of adolescent literature in the English classroom.

Ultimately, with the exception of Spanke, Alsup et al. argue for young adult literature's potential to increase readers' critical thinking skills, to help them complicate how they think about the world, and to create tolerance for diversity. "Perhaps literary study can change the way adolescents relate to others and approach their life experiences," Alsup argues in her conclusion (213). After reading this volume, I am inclined to think that she and most of her colleagues are right about the many possibilities that young adult literature offers to adolescent readers.

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