

Contemporary Role Models in Young Adult and Children's Literature: Empathy and Identification through Books

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The books in this issue share the theme of inspiration; they all have protagonists who have become role models either to those around them or to those who have read about them. These narrative role models respond to various challenges and hardships in their lives, including racism, disability, misogyny, and poverty, but they have one thing in common—their stories inspire literary identification and empathy among those who read or hear them.

So what does it mean to identify? Literary identification—identification with characters in books—is often misunderstood as an excuse for young people to dismiss diverse texts (i.e., this book isn't about someone like me, so I don't like it). However, in its true form, literary identification is a very complex act, or in Gary Woodward's language, "a type of 'projection and introjection' during which readers take on different qualities but also inject their own beliefs into those of the characters" (qtd. in Alsup 23). Through such identification, as it ebbs and flows during an experience with a text, young readers learn more about themselves through experiencing vicarious, narrative worlds (Gerrig 7).

Empathy is closely connected to identification, and as you read the reviews that follow in this issue, you will see the word "empathy" crop up regularly. Empathy is defined as a visceral, and often spontaneous, expression of emotion in response to witnessing, or even reading about, another's emotions (Alsup 37). While there are different types of empathy, ranging from raw emotional responses to more critical perspective taking, it's the concept of "narrative empathy" that is of interest to me here. Narrative empathy, explored by theorists such as Suzanne Keen and Lisa Zunshine, happens when truly experiencing a narrative world, such as when reading fiction or narrative-rich literary nonfiction like a memoir. These theorists argue that when reading, a reader may improve his or her "theory of mind," defined as "mind reading, empathy, creative imagination of another's perspective" (Leverage, Mancing, Schweickert, and William 1). Therefore, while reading, the reader may actually hone his or her ability to understand others, or empathize with their experiences, because of quality time spent with a text.

While I have explored a growing body of empirical research supporting the ways literary reading can foster such human understandings, the reviewers in this issue seem intuitively to understand how reading books can influence young readers—both from their own memories of being young readers and their experiences interacting with young readers in classrooms. The stories they write about are strong and passionate narratives describing human experiences and emotions deeply, and often painfully, felt. By reading and interacting with such texts through discussion, writing, and presenting, students may not only enrich their theory of mind,

but also, resultantly, treat those around them with increased kindness and understanding. This might seem like a romanticized notion of the effect of reading books, but I, for one, believe it.

Works Cited

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