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The Young Adult in Literature -- Feeling It!

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M. Jerry Weiss

The Young Adult in Literature—Feeling It!

Teachers today realize that reading is more than a decoding process. Yes, skills have to be taught, mastered, and transferred to all subject areas, but there is something else happening which greatly affects the reader. Reading is such a personal experience. Something moves him, causes him to laugh and/or cry, lets the emotional elements rule him for awhile. He shares experiences with writers who bring new characters and events into his life. He realizes he is not alone in the world. Others have had similar thoughts.

This active, creative, personal experience of reading is, to many, the real reason for learning how to read and finding joy in the result. Leland Jacobs, a distinguished scholar at Teachers College, Columbia University, once said, "Reading is that process where you bring something to the printed page and take something away concurrently."

Other writers have shown their feelings about reading in speeches and essays:

Aldous Huxley: Every man who knows how to read has it in his power to magnify himself, to multiply the ways in which he exists, to make his life full, significant, and interesting.

Norman Cousins: A library is the delivery room for the birth of ideas; a place where history comes to life.

Lord Byron: But words are things,
and a small drop of ink,
Falling like dew, upon a
thought, produces
That which, makes
thousands, perhaps millions think.

Lin Yutang: The wise man reads both books and life itself.

No matter the time or the season, reading, as seen through such eyes as listed above, is an emotional experience. Students can soon

find the personal pleasures and/or pains of words arranged in such an order to bring out feelings, hopes, ideas, and actions—all of which are rewarding for the efforts involved.

In the past few months, I've continued to be a "feeling" reader. I've met so many wonderful and interesting characters, in books for young adults, who have made me react to their ideas, their problems, their attitudes, their actions. I didn't intend to react this way. Something happened: **The writers got to me. They helped me become a reader with feelings—something I'm grateful for, and enjoy.**

John Green: *The Fault is In Our Stars*. Dutton, 2012. (pp.3-4):

Late in the summer of my seventeenth year, my mother decided I was depressed, presumably because I rarely left the house, spent quite a lot of time in bed, read the same book over and over, ate infrequently, and devoted quite a bit of my abundant free time to thinking about death.

Whenever you read a cancer booklet or website or whatever, they always list depression among the side effects of cancer.

But, in fact, depression is not a side effect of dying. (Cancer is also a side effect of dying. Almost everything is, really.) But my mom believed I required treatment, so she took me to see my Regular Doctor Jim, who agreed that I was veritably swimming in paralyzing and totally clinical depression, and that therefore my meds should be adjusted and also I should attend a weekly Support Group.

The Support Group featured a rotating cast of characters in various states of tumor-driven unwellness. Why did the cast rotate? A side effect of dying.

Ryan G. Van Cleave. *Unlocked*. Walker, 2011.(p.8):

HONESTY

I try to be
someone
who believes

in honesty,

but the truth
is that I can't
tell when
the world's really
out to flatten me,
or if it's just me
somehow
self-sabotaging
my own damn life.

Paula Danziger. *The Cat Ate My Gymsuit*. Penguin, 1998. (pp. 1-2):

All my life I've thought that I looked like a baby blimp with wire-framed glasses and mousy brown hair. Everyone always said that I'd grow out of it, but I was convinced that I'd become an adolescent blimp with wire-framed glasses, mousy brown hair, and acne. My life is not easy. I know I'm not poor. Nobody beats me. I have clothes to wear, my own room, a stereo, a TV, and a push-button phone. Sometimes I feel guilty being so miserable, but middle-class kids have their problems too.

Sol Stein. *The Magician*. Laurel-Leaf, 1980. (p. 57):

STUDENT MAGICIAN BEATEN UNCONSCIOUS BY CLASSMATES. *The New York Times's* story was picked up by many other newspapers in the country. *The Washington Post* angled its story differently: HIGH-SCHOOL HOOLIGANS ATTACK STUDENT, WRECK TEACHER'S CAR AFTER TERM-END PROM. SITUATION IN NEW YORK SCHOOLS WORSENS.

In the Post story, one learned that racial tension was not the cause of the incident inasmuch as the attackers were all white. "The student who was severely beaten had just performed a magic show at a school dance. He was attacked after refusing to explain how his magic tricks were done."

Take a look at these young people revealing their feelings about their lives! So much to talk about. So much to care about. So much to wonder about. Why are young adult readers drawn to these types of books?

Why do so many teachers feel these aren't as noteworthy as the classics and why don't they adopt them as texts? Are they afraid of change?

Are they afraid of what might come up in discussions?

Or, as several students told me in a young adult literature class, (which they were required to take for a Master's In Teaching degree to get certified,) "If these books were important, we would have had to read them in our undergraduate classes as English majors. You can't take this as serious literature, can you?"

Can't I?

Jay Asher's book, *Thirteen Reasons Why*, Razorbill, 2007, has hit *The New York Times* list of best sellers for young adults for many weeks. It is the story of why Hannah Baker commits suicide. She sends thirteen tapes to fellow peers to let them know what their bullying and lying has done to her. This is a powerful story that young people and adults need to read. Suicide is a major problem today.

Andrew Smith's *Stick*. Feiwel and Friends, 2011, is the story of two teen brothers who care for one another in a brutal family situation. Stick is the younger of the two and is tall and thin, Bosten is the older and is a protector of Stick. But there are other relationships involved that keep the boys on guard.

Joan Bauer's *Almost Home*. Viking, 2012, is the story of Sugar Mae Cole and her mama, two homeless individuals who have to be separated. Moving to Chicago in the hopes of having a better life proves to be futile when Reba, the mother, has a breakdown. After this, Sugar Mae is taken into a foster home.

Terry Trueman's book, *Stuck in Neutral*, Harper, 2000, hit me hard. It is the story of Shawn McDaniel, who is stuck in a wheelchair and can't move any muscles at all, can't speak, and can't even blink an eyelid to respond to what anyone is saying to, or about, him. Although he understands all that is said to him, there is no way he can communicate. Shawn's father is so distraught, thinking that, for all practical purposes, Shawn is as good as dead, and starts to talk about the possibility of having him killed.

Walter Dean Myers, the National Ambassador for Young People's Literature, has

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written one of the most gripping novels, in which seventeen year-old Richie Perry, who, after graduating from high school, enlists in the army and is sent to Vietnam. *Fallen Angels*, Scholastic, 1988. Richie, who can't afford college and wants to escape the harshness of the city streets, thinks life in the army might be a better choice. This novel is spellbinding in depicting what Richie and his companions discover about war, life, and death.

Amber M. Simmons, a teacher in Gwinnett County, Georgia, wrote a stimulating article in the September 2012 issue of *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literature*, expressing her motive behind teaching the three very popular books by Suzanne Collins: *The Hunger Games*, Scholastic, 2008, *Catching Fire*, Scholastic, 2009, and *Mockingjay*, Scholastic, 2010. "There are many reasons to love the series, but one reason I find it so compelling is that Katniss Everdeen is the most accurate depiction of a teenager that I have ever encountered in adolescent literature" (22). "Forcing children into violent situations that require them to kill or be killed is the major theme of the Hunger Games series" (29). Over twenty-six million copies of these books have been sold, making the series one of the most popular young adult series of all times. The youthful characters are strategic and heroic, but challenged, and the reader can't predict how the series will end.

Extremely well written, these books share with readers what is happening in many places of the world today. The young adult readers are able to connect with the main characters because of similarities in age, thought reflection, and actions.

Dr. Ken Robinson, in his book, *The Element*, Penguin, 2009, speaks eloquently about the need to move from the mechanistic age of one book for all, and recognize the differences students bring with their aptitudes and passions. Here is what he wrote about Sir Paul McCartney, a student in the Liverpool Institute:

Paul spent most of his time at the Liverpool Institute fooling around. Rather than studying intently when he got home, he devoted the majority of his hours

out of school to listening to rock music and learning the guitar. . . (Speaking with Sir Paul in the 1980s) He (Sir Paul) told me he went throughout his entire education without anyone noticing that he had any musical talent at all. He even applied to join the choir of Liverpool Cathedral and was turned down. They said he wasn't a good enough singer. Really? How good was that choir? How good can a choir be? Ironically, the very choir that rejected the young McCartney ultimately staged two of his classical pieces. (pp. 10-11.)

When I speak to teachers about the need to provide for the interests, needs, abilities and experiences of students, many teachers say, "It's too hard. Do you know how many students I have in each class?"

My answer is always the same: "YES." But each one of these "many students" is a special person, who needs to be encouraged to read, write, speak, and listen well for the rest of his life.. These students are involved in a technical, texting world. A standardized test score is the panacea? Can they discriminate? Can they form their own valid opinions when they have one book, one source?

Students need to think, to discuss, to see variety. They need to hear what others have to say, need to draw their own conclusions.

I am a fan of Frank McCourt's *Teacher Man* (Scribner, 2005). In this book, McCourt describes his various experiences as a student and as a teacher. Through his point of view as a teacher, when he meets Roger Goodman, head of the English Department at Stuyvesant High School in New York City, his teaching life lights up:

He trusted me. He seemed to think I could teach on any of the four levels of high school: freshman, sophomore, junior, senior. He even asked what I'd like to teach and took me to the room where books were organized by grade. There were

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dictionaries, collections of poetry, short stories, plays, textbooks on journalism and grammar.

Take whatever you want, said Roger, and if there's anything else you'd like we can order it. Take your time. Think about it tonight. In my years of teaching this was the first time I felt free in the classroom. I could teach whatever I liked.

They [the students] moaned when I announced we were going to read *A Tale of Two Cities*. Why couldn't they read *The Lord of the Rings*, *Dune*, science fiction in general? Why couldn't they? (185-191).

I have listened to thousands of reactions to books, given by students, in my fifty-plus years as a teacher. I have heard all kinds of reasons as to why students don't, or won't, read. I even know many teachers who are the same way. There are teachers who have taught the same books, and used the same lessons, for twenty years. And then there are those who have *really* taught for twenty years, bringing new and enlightening ideas to each lesson. There are teachers who have several sections of the same subject in a single day. They admit they have to do different things in order to

stay sane. They use different activities; they use different books; they have different plans. They know their students' feelings, abilities, and passions so well that they can adjust the curriculum accordingly.

They divide their classes into small groups and have a discussion about the book, in which themes such as fantasy, family, and friendships are discussed. Students are allowed to choose a book that appeals to them, and those who read the same book are grouped together. Then, each group makes a wonderful presentation about the ideas attained from that particular book, and, believe it or not, other students then want to read one or more books from the presentations.

And that's real literacy—with feelings!

In conclusion, here are a few more titles worth exploring:

- Backes, M. Molly. *The Princesses of Iowa*. Candlewick, 2012.
- Coulombis, Audrey. *Not Exactly a Love Story*. Random House, 2012.
- Doller, Trish. *Something Like Normal*. Bloomsbury, 2012.
- Klauss, Lucas. *Everything You Need to Survive the Apocalypse*. Simon Pulse, 2012.
- McCormick, Patricia. *Never Fall Down*. Balzer and Bray, 2012.
- Newman, Leslea. *October Mourning: A Song for Matthew Shepard*. Candlewick, 2012.

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