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Young Adult Literature in the English Classroom: "The Lit that Fits"

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"It's library day!" Such enthusiastic exclamations from my junior high and high school English teachers were quite common during my early school days. Every two weeks or so, we would go to the school library and were gently urged to find a book to read “just for fun.” Being a self-proclaimed bookworm, library days were always a joy, but not unusual, for I went to the library on my own at least once a week. For some students, however, the opportunity to choose a “fun” book was unusual.

I never really have understood the intentions behind “library days.” If my teachers wanted to encourage us to read and to enjoy reading, why did they unconsciously distinguish between what we read in class and the “just for fun” books we chose for ourselves? Now that I am at the university and so much "older and wiser," I can guess that many of my high school teachers were still engaged in the mental battle over teaching "the classics" or "that popular stuff." I'm certain that in many of their minds, the books we students chose for ourselves certainly weren't of the same caliber as the classics assigned in class.

To my relief and joy, today's teachers are including a greater variety of reading material in their classes—even some of "that popular stuff." But in case there are still some who wonder why or how young adult literature can be used in a traditional English junior high/high school classroom, I've hit upon my own Dave Letterman-style Top Ten List of "Why YA Lit Is What Fits (in the Classroom)."

#10. "Elementary, my dear Watson, elementary." Logic should hint to us that when teaching young adults, literature written for and about them might be useful. We use picture books and easy readers for younger children, cookbooks for chefs-in-training, and court briefs for law students—why not use young adult literature to teach young adults?

#9. It's Called What? Who can help but wonder what lurks within the pages of books with titles like The Cat Ate My Gymbal; A Hero Ain't Nothin' But a Sandwich; Teenage Romance, or How to Die of Embarrassment; or My Name is Susan Smith, The 5 is Silent? Although we've been taught not to judge a book by its cover, a catchy title does much to encourage readers to pick up a book, and YA literature seems to have a talent for producing eye-catching titles. Teenagers are probably more likely to reach for A Semester in the Life of a Garbage Bag before taking For Whom the Bell Tolls off of the shelf. Using YA literature's zany titles to our advantage, we can motivate students to read, and read, and read.

#8. Tickle the Funny Bone, Slap the Knee. A distinguishing feature of young adult literature is its characteristic humor, whether it is through corny jokes or subtle comments on the absurdities of life. Significantly, YA novels use humor that high school students can relate to: dating humor, embarrassing moments, coping with the surprises of teenage life. Such books help students learn to laugh at themselves and at the unexpected events of life—a vital capability in today's changing world. A good laugh may do more to put things in perspective than hours of explanation. For instance, Kate in Louise Plummer's The Unlikely Romance of Kate Bjorkman helps readers realize the humorous aspects of falling in love as she contrasts the awkwardness and misunderstandings of first love with the flowery, dreamy visions of love in romance novels. Although readers can't help giggling at Kate's blunders and adventures, they also can't help realizing that life and falling in love are not as melodramatic as we might sometimes think.

#7. Hey, that's Me! Yet another advantage of using young adult literature in the classroom is that the students can more easily relate to the
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characters of such works. The YA protagonist is always youthful and close in age to the reader. Understandably, it is easier for a teenager to connect with someone like Andrew in Richard Peck's *Those Summer Girls I Never Met* who reluctantly spends the summer with his grandmother, than it is to relate to an old man who battles a single fish for hours on end. Also, reading about characters with whom they feel a kinship, teenagers can "test out" ways of solving the problems of life as they place themselves in the shoes of their fictional counterpart.

**#6. A Bridge from Here to There.** One of the most effective ways of using young adult literature in the classroom is as a bridge to another more complicated, complex work. YA books serve as some of the best tools to take students from where they are, over the bridge to the "classics" that are so often required in high school. Beginning with a YA novel that has similar characters, plot, setting, or conflict prepares readers for what they can experience or expect in the more difficult novel. When students realize that the classic work is similar to a novel that they have already grasped and analyzed, they will have more confidence in analyzing the more complex literature. For example, the isolation and despair Jerry feels in Robert Cormier's *The Chocolate War* can prepare students for the plight of Hester Prynne in *The Scarlet Letter.* Or, the young girl's point of view in Ann Rinaldi's *A Break With Charity: A Story About the Salem Witch Trials* prepares readers for understanding the adult perspective in Arthur Miller's *The Crucible.*

**#5. Reflect in the Mirror; Gaze out the Window.** The best young adult literature mirrors the teenage world, while providing a window to new worlds. Though the classics also act as windows, they rarely are able to connect with teenagers' lives like YA literature can, and thus they lose their full capabilities in teaching of other cultures, times, and people. YA novels have the ability to hook the reader through familiarity and then open new windows through novelty. Although not every teenager leads a life similar to Ponyboy's in S.E. Hinton's *The Outsiders,* many can understand the need to belong to a group. Because of this understanding, readers are drawn into the novel, where they can then gain new insights on gangs or family relationships.

**#4. Practice Makes Perfect.** In connection with using YA books as bridges to other works, YA literature can also serve as a working model of the classics. Particularly, through experience with YA literature, students can practice reading and analytic skills necessary for other reading assignments. Young adult literature is exactly that—literature; and thus, it can teach students about literary conventions. Many students will feel more comfortable analyzing literature written for their reading levels, language, and interest. Practicing such analysis with YA novels prepares students to do the same with the classics. In Gary Paulsen's *The Haymeadow,* for instance, students easily recognize the significance of setting (the haymeadow) in relation to the coming-of-age story of the protagonist. With a solid understanding of how setting can affect a character's growth, students can then move on to an analysis of the role of the river in Huck's growth in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn.*

**#3. Something to Care About.** Young adult literature is also effective in the classroom because it deals with issues that young adults are concerned with and that affect their young lives: peer pressure, friendships, teenage pregnancy, first love, making decisions about the future, suicide, drugs and alcohol, college, and many more. Although we as older readers and teachers think we are pretty good at discovering how classics written years ago still apply to modern day life, teenagers might not be as easily convinced. *War and Peace* and *A Tale of Two Cities* do deal with themes all students should be exposed to someday; yet, YA novels more effectively deal with the problems young adults face right now. And, in YA novels, it is teenagers who face these issues, rather than adults. In Zubby O'Neal's *A Formal Feeling,* young readers can read and talk about how to deal with the death of a parent. In *The Chocolate War,* students read of peer pressure and the consequences of standing alone.

**#2. Hope.** Quite simply, young adult literature very often (though not always) instills hope in its readers. Plots show teenagers surviving in the world, conquering fears, and treading into new waters. With such fictional
examples to follow, teenage readers can gain a sense of empowerment and the feeling that they too can succeed—that there is hope for them in this world. The young adult writer Avi best summarizes this idea: "... one of the key means of offering young people hope for the future is to allow them to read, and to provide the freedom of choice for them to read the widest possible range of books." As educators, we should work both to encourage our students to read and to give them hope.

#1. The Forbidden Classroom Phrase . . "It's Fun!" Although students like to think that nothing in the classroom can ever be fun, when it comes to young adult literature, fun will most likely be a part of the curriculum. YA literature breaks down the English classroom barriers of "boring books," for it is fun for both the teacher and the teenager. And, perhaps one of the best reasons for using YA literature in the classroom—it can get students reading in the first place. Augustine Birrell's words of the past say it best, "Reading is not a duty, and has consequently no business to be made disagreeable." We have a much better chance of convincing our students that reading is not disagreeable when we use young adult literature as an integral part of the classroom.

I realize that my Top Ten list will never make it to Dave Letterman's show—but, I hope that it does increase or reaffirm educators', librarians', and parents' regard for young adult literature. This growing genre is exciting, fun, and quite useful in the English classroom. If we give it a chance, we'll see that it is indeed the "lit that fits."

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