

On teaching YA lit

Goals for today:

- ❖ Explore the potential in teaching YA lit
- ❖ Critically consider “the text complexity staircase” (Connors, 2015, p. 95).
- ❖ Trouble the inclination of using “the hypothetical adolescent reader as a tool for evaluating YAL” (Sulzer & Thein, 2016, p. 169).



We're going to spend a bit of time critically considering how teens see themselves and are seen

THE NEW YORKER

We're going to take a look at a piece from The New Yorker that explores "what teenage girls seen when they look in the mirror" - photos of girls staring at themselves in the mirror. Let's use this as an entrypoint into thinking about assumptions we might make about what texts we think teenagers will "see" themselves in - or not.

WHAT TEEN-AGE GIRLS SEE WHEN THEY LOOK IN THE MIRROR



By Alexandra Schwartz May 7, 2017

“**W**hen you’re a skinny child of fifteen, with braces from ear to ear, you doubt that you will ever be appealing,” Ann-Margret sings as Kim MacAfee, the teen-age heroine of “Bye Bye Birdie.” She’s in her childhood bedroom, with its pink bed and pink curtains, gazing at herself in the mirror of her pink vanity as she gets ready to go on a date. “Then hallelujah! You are sixteen, and the braces disappear, and your skin is smooth and clear, and you have that happy, grownup, *female_ _*feeling!”

If only it were that simple. Unequivocally rejoicing at the sight of one’s own reflection is a tough prospect for a girl at any stage of life, and never more so than during adolescence, when the face staring back may look startlingly alien. But look we do.

In her series “Spitting Image,” which is on display at Crush Curatorial through May 13th, Eva O’Leary photographs teen-age girls examining their own reflections. The mirror they use is a two-way; O’Leary positioned her camera behind it, so that we see the girls caught in the act of looking. The photos are alarmingly intimate, unguarded, and open. Think of them as the anti-selfie, that punishingly idealized form. Here, each sitter’s individuality constitutes her beauty. There are pimples and oily skin, plucked eyebrows and lip fuzz, lipstick and mascara as well as bare faces. Some of O’Leary’s subjects seem intrigued, even excited, by what they see. Others seem distressed, disgusted, perplexed. Childhood has been shed; these are new faces, but they won’t be theirs for long. The photos are shot against a deep-blue backdrop, like that of a yearbook photo, as if to remind the sitters that adolescence, too, is something they’ll graduate from. Get a good look while it lasts.



Alexandra Schwartz is a staff writer at The New Yorker. [Read more »](#)

Hannah



Millie



Robin



Ava



Lauren



Korell



Cherry



Elena



Emma



Hayden



Olivia



Maddie



Let's examine some of our beliefs about adolescents. Finish any of the following (Sulzer & Thein, 2016):

- Adolescents are...
- Adolescents think...
- Adolescents cannot...
- Adolescents always...
- Adolescents hope...
- Adolescents need...
- Adolescents want...

Great advice from Sulzer & Thein (2016)

Rather than asking questions such as, Would adolescents choose to read this book, and would they see the issues as relevant? to evaluate the quality of YAL with our students, we have shifted to the following:

- To what extent do portrayals of adolescence/ts in the story align with common understandings about adolescents' needs, desires, and abilities? To what extent do the portrayals of adolescence/ts raise questions about what is "normal" in adolescence?
- In what ways do young people's intersectional identities inform the progression of the story? How do these intersectional identities complicate common understandings about how youths fit into society?
- What situations, actions, or pieces of dialogue does the author use to mark a character as being an adolescent? How is adolescence as a social construct leveraged in these textual elements?
- In what ways does the narrative voice evoke ideas of adolescence/ts? How is this voice in conversation with various beliefs about the place of youths in society?

Let's pause here; do we all know what intersectionality is?

Intersectionality is a major concept, and it is being used (and misused) a lot right now, including within educational contexts. There are many definitions of and debates about intersectionality, but let's start with Dr. Crenshaw, who coined the term:

Please note: This is a video made by the NAIS that is helpful for our purposes, and not a call for independent schools.



Let's pause here; do we all know what intersectionality is?

This is a helpful, humorous resource for beginning a discussion with students on intersectionality.



Let's get a teen's perspective on what's tired in YAL



Great advice from Sulzer & Thein (2016)

Our findings also articulate the need for classroom teachers not only to select texts that provide complex and unexpected depictions of youth experiences but also to approach YAL instruction in a manner that leverages the expertise that students have about the intersectional identities and experiences of contemporary youths and about the depiction of such identities and experiences in YAL. Rather than planning YAL instruction based on the text's ostensible lessons, we recommend that teachers should begin with activities that allow students to name common beliefs about youths and to provide counternarratives based on their own lived experiences and knowledge of youth cultures. Teachers might ask their students to brainstorm a list of key beliefs about youths, using sentence starters such as these:

- Adolescents are...
- Adolescents think...
- Adolescents cannot...
- Adolescents always...
- Adolescents hope...
- Adolescents need...
- Adolescents want...

Explore YA text resources

Take a few moments to explore the YAL resources listed in the *Recommended Resources* section of the syllabus (all link on the class blog). Come up with at least 3 YA books that you would be interesting in reading and/or teaching. Be prepared to say something about why you're interested in these texts.



Concentric circles activity: Recommending YAL

CONCENTRIC CIRCLES >

a.k.a. Speed Dating

Basic Structure: Students form two circles, one inside circle and one outside circle. Each student on the inside is paired with a student on the outside; they face each other. The teacher poses a question to the whole group and pairs discuss their responses with each other. Then the teacher signals students to rotate: Students on the outside circle move one space to the right so they are standing in front of a new person (or sitting, as they are in the video). Now the teacher poses a new question, and the process is repeated.

Check out this resource on facilitating classroom discussions:

<https://www.cultofpedagogy.com/speaking-listening-techniques/>



Reflecting on Ebarvia, Parker, & Schmidt (2018)

Any reactions to this article?

Pauline Skowron Schmidt, Column Editor

Carpe Librum: Seize the (YA) Book

#BlackLivesMatter: When Real Life and YA Fiction Converge

Tricia Ebarvia
Conestoga High School
Berwyn, Pennsylvania
ebarviat@tesd.net

Kimberly Parker
Shady Hill School
Cambridge, Massachusetts
kimpossible97@gmail.com

Pauline Skowron Schmidt
West Chester University
West Chester, Pennsylvania
pschmidt@wcupa.edu

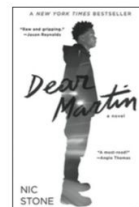
Column Editor's Note: Some books emerge and take the YA world by storm. Sometimes, it's luck. Sometimes, it's timing. *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas was written in response to horrific events (the deaths of Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Florida; Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri; Eric Garner

in New York City; and many others). The site of these deaths varied, but the fact that each victim was an unarmed Black man shot by police sparked the #BlackLivesMatter movement in 2012 (BlackLivesMatter.com). In the last year, trending news stories still echo racial tensions in our country: a Princeton professor, Keeanga-Yamahatta Taylor, received death threats after she delivered a graduation speech (Parent); basketball superstar LeBron James had his home vandalized with the N-word (Buckley); and a noose was found in the segregation section of the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, DC (Williams and McGlone). Clearly, we are not living in a post-racial society, and our young people need books that will help them navigate this world.

Our conversations about this book started informally—over coffee, texting, and emails—but we knew we wanted to share our thoughts with a larger community. Our conversations took shape within the context of a Twitter chat framed in questions found at www.heinemann.com/blog/taking-a-closer-look-at-the-hate-u-give/ and archived on Storify at storify.com/triciaebarvia/teachhateugive. This column is a collaborative effort between two teachers of color (Kim

and Tricia) who teach students from a variety of backgrounds and a white teacher educator (Pauline) who hopes to encourage her preservice teachers to think deeply about the issues represented in *The Hate U Give* and similar YA texts, such as *All American Boys*, *Piecing Me Together*, and *Dear Martin*.

Angie Thomas's *The Hate U Give* starts off like any YA text: with a high school party complete with music, dancing, and drinking. Tensions among teenagers are present; but, about 20 pages in, the main character Starr and her old friend Khalil leave the party and the story becomes anything but ordinary. Khalil is murdered by a White police officer and Starr is the only witness. As events unfold, Starr finds herself having to defend Khalil's humanity while also having to decide if speaking the truth is worth her own safety.



McGlone). Clearly, we are not living in a postracial society, and our young people need books that will help them navigate this world.

Tricia: When people ask me about *The Hate U Give*, I often don't know where to start. As a Filipina American, I could especially relate to the moments when Starr had to negotiate her multiple identities between her school and neighborhood. I was one of only a handful of students of color in my parochial school. I spent more time celebrating St. Patrick's Day than any other holiday. Growing up, I longed to fit in and, like Starr, I could never fully be in one world or the other. It wasn't until I was in college that I started to come to terms with some of these issues. Looking back, I know that a book like *The Hate U Give* would have been a gift to me.

Tricia: For further study, there are also many wonderful multimedia and multi-genre texts that would be helpful to both teachers and students. A collaborative effort to teach *The Hate U Give* in the classroom can be found at bit.ly/TeachHateUGive. In addition, NPR has two podcasts, *Code Switch* and *Other: Mixed Race in America*, that examine the intersections of race, culture, and language with current events.

Reflecting on Roberts (2013)

Any reactions to this article?

Mike Roberts, Editor

Teaching Young Adult Literature

YA Literature Belongs in the Classroom Because . . .

Over the past three years, I have had the pleasure of writing and editing this column about the benefits of teaching young adult literature (YAL). In that time, we have mentioned more than 50 novels and discussed regarding the value they hold within the English curriculum.

As this column comes to a close, rather than try to cram in a few "last minute" suggestions, I decided I would instead let some YAL authors share their thoughts on why YAL belongs in the classroom. After all, my goal in offering these suggestions was not to have you teach *only* the novels I recommended, but rather to help everyone understand why YAL deserves a place alongside Bradbury, Morrison, and Twain.

So I flipped through some of the YA novels that pack my shelf at school, and I wrote an email to a handful of authors titled, "YAL belongs in the classroom because . . ." As you will find out, these authors, like the books they write, took a wide range of approaches in answering my question.

Terry Trueman (*Stuck in Neutral*): "I think great literature expands the humanity of

the reader, creating a 'literacy' of humanity beyond the simple literacy of deciphering words/sentences/paragraphs etc. I've never considered my works YA, or at least not specifically and narrowly YA because YA is a market targeting concept. I try to write literature that will touch the hearts, spirits and minds of readers of any and all ages. I don't write for teens; I write for smart readers."

Janet Tashjian (*The Gospel According to Larry*): "YA Literature belongs in the classroom because a good YA book can introduce students to parts of themselves they didn't know existed. We all need stories—they're how civilizations move forward. Stories are how we learn to be human, to have empathy, to forgive ourselves."

S. A. Bodeen (*The Compound*): "Young adult literature belongs in the classroom because it is about the human condition known as adolescence. And young adults, who are in the utter midst of the adolescent chaos, need to know that it is survivable. YA does that."

David Lubar (*Hidden Talents*): "Please use contemporary YA books in your classroom, because dead authors don't have mortgages."

Chris Crowe (*Mississippi Trial, 1955*): "YA books (fiction and nonfiction) belong in the class-

room because students benefit from reading books that are relevant to their needs, lives, and interests just as they benefit from reading adult classics. There are all kinds of students and, fortunately, there are all kinds of books. Having YA books available in classrooms helps students find books that speak to them, and when they encounter those books, students are much more likely to look for another one. If we want to help students become readers, we need to provide access to all sorts of reading material—including, of course, YA books."

Susan Beth Pfeffer (*Life as We Knew It*): "Students need to learn that not everything they have to read will be masterpieces. YA literature, even those books selected for classrooms, aren't necessarily going to be perfect, or going to strike the fancy of every reader. But it's okay to rip YA to shreds. Unlike Shakespeare and Dickens, etc., YA novels aren't worshipped for their perfection."

Gordon Korman (*Son of the Mob*): "YAL belongs in the classroom because sometimes you have to see the whole forest, not just individual trees. I think we can get so hung up on a certain classic novel, literature unit, or language arts skill set that we can forget the much larger educational

A quick plug for a great alternative or complementary text to
Pride & Prejudice

