CONCLUSION

YA AND THE “EMERGING SELF”

Looking Ahead at the Genre and Our Classrooms

If there is one major trend across the various chapters in this book it is the illustration that the young adult book genre is in a period of flux. As a genre that more or less emerged in the middle of the 1900s, YA is a relatively young component of western literatures. Like the readers it caters to, it is stretching uncomfortably in its current adolescence.

From a view of capitalism, YA only found a strong footing in the last two decades. Identifying its leverage in larger markets of film and merchandising, the necessity to sell books has driven YA increasingly into the realm of serialization and incessant spin-offs. That’s not to say that the precedent wasn’t there before Harry Potter and the regimes of serials that followed, but the Hardy Boys and Sweet Valley Highs of yesteryear put up pitiable sales numbers in comparison to the behemoths that help drive large sectors of the book and film markets today.

Likewise, depictions of race in YA shifted significantly over time. Paradoxically, it is an area that has become both more dominant and invisible. The outcry around the “whitest” list of top YA novels that NPR published in 2012 sends a clear message that representations of youth of color continue to remain absent from the critically acclaimed lists that help drive school and teacher book-buying decisions.

And though for females in YA texts frailty continues to frequently be thy name, strong female voices have dominated recent titles. Beyond the sultry allure of the Gossip Girl leads, Katniss Everdeen in The Hunger Games and Tally Youngblood in the Uglies series indicate that they are beyond the need to be saved by men in power. At the same time, problematically, men continue to act as sources of folly for female leads; strong women like Karou in Daughter of Smoke and Bone and Beatrice in Divergent illustrate that women that tend to lead continue to still be portrayed as making irrational decisions based on the sexual appeal of men.

Of course this reliance on men continues to underscore the ever present emphasis on heterosexual relationships. That there is a niche market of LGBTQI novels available for readers is growth in and of itself. Is it enough growth? Absolutely not. Perhaps more than any other area of exploration, the significant absence of strong LGBTQI characters as anything other than ancillary to a central plot continues to illustrate how much additional growing the YA genre has to go. Like issues of gender, race, class, and capitalism, the books within YA are driven largely by dominant cultural hegemony. The beliefs and values of a dominant class are not
only reinforced through these popular texts but they highlight that this is a symbiotic process: these texts are popular because they reinforce hegemony.

As in flux as I see the YA genre presently, I also see the unifying theme of teenagehood. That may sounds obvious, but it is also something I was blind to as a young and critical educator. Even when I strongly disagree with depictions in *Go Ask Alice* or *I Am Number Four*, the books speak to growing up, looking at the world from changing eyes, and dealing with western notions of adolescence. And I worry that this is sometimes something critical educators lose sight of.

Grams (1980) calls this aspect of adolescence the “emerging self” (p. 18), explaining that “the adolescent rediscovers his world” (p. 18). The issue of gendered pronouns aside, Gram’s explanation helps locate young adult literature as an illuminative guide not only for individual self discovery but for understanding along communal, societal lines. That is, while Grams discusses this growth in terms of an individual self, I would add that what emerges is not simply one’s unique identity but an understanding of how youth, as part of a westernized society, adapt beyond adolescence.

While this book maintains a critical stance on depictions of race, class, and gender in literature, I have a real problem with the thrust of articles along the lines of Vizzini’s (2011) “The End of the White Outsider,” which argues: “Teachers and writers who venerate *Catcher In The Rye* have to ask themselves: How relevant is Holden in a world where he is an actual minority?” While I agree with the author’s call for inclusion of much-needed non-White heroes, I also think simply tearing down what we have is also problematic. When I was still in the high school classroom, I did ask myself if Holden was relevant for my class of all black and Latino youth. I did this during my first year as a teacher. At that time, I specifically felt that the whiny voice of a rich, white east-coast male would be completely alien to my students. It would be patronizing to force them to spend their time with such a literary character.

But what I forgot was that Holden is the apotheosis of being a teenager and growing up. I’ve had few texts that have quite the near-universal positive response as *Catcher* gets in my 11th grade classroom.

While I ask students to think about the critical nature of the text and its politics of representation, I also recognize that students need to look at the world from myriad viewpoints – especially when those of privileged folks like Holden end up looking a whole lot like their own. Each time I taught this book, I had students ask to buy a copy when they are finished. I had students each year admit it’s the first book they’ve finished reading. Ever. I had impassioned and emotional reflections from students that discuss their fears, uncertainties, and desires about growing up. The fact that Holden is white or male doesn’t get in the way of this pathos or this ability of students to engage meaningfully with an aging text.

Ultimately, I think there is a danger in taking an effective and proven piece of literature like *The Catcher In The Rye* and allowing it to function as an effigy to burn in tribute to large and significant questions about racial diversity, representation, and media. These are important questions—questions we’ve spent nearly an entire book focusing on. But the approach is misguided and uninformed.