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The Power of Cultural and Diverse Voices in Young Adult Literature

One of the many delights of young adult literature is that it offers a unique opportunity to explore complex themes and issues that resonate with adolescents, including cultural and generational expectations, LGBTQIA+ representation, individual identity, and navigating friendships. While young adult literature is often thought to be exclusively for younger audiences, it frequently addresses authentic and relatable life experiences and issues that resonate with a broader and older audience. Notably, the works I featured in this annotated bibliography predominantly belong to the subgenre of contemporary realistic fiction, told from multicultural, diverse, and unique perspectives.

As I considered what literary works I would include in my research, I thought about how this project could align with my interest in teaching multicultural and multilingual students. I believe engaging with texts exploring cultural, generational expectations, and individual identity is important to encourage students to critically examine their assumptions and biases. I think that all representation matters. Including diverse voices and experiences in English Language Arts (ELA) curricula is crucial, fostering a sense of being seen, heard, and understanding among all readers. I hope that by immersing themselves in stories about characters from diverse backgrounds and unique experiences, students can cultivate empathy and understanding towards their peers and all people around them.

With that said, the narrators in this annotated bibliography share a common concern with the complexities of human experience. They explore the intricacies of family relationships and the challenges of navigating life's choices. These characters also struggle to explore their

identities, particularly concerning gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and cultural background. Despite their difficulties, the protagonists in these stories demonstrate resilience, often finding strength in the support of loved ones, friends, and their own forms of self-expression. Many of these characters also write to process their emotions and make sense of their experiences. Which I found important to include as it might encourage students to write and think for themselves!

On another note, I hope these works will not only build students' critical thinking skills but also foster their self-reflection. By exploring the experiences of others, students can develop a deeper understanding of their own identities and how cultural and societal expectations shape them. I believe these texts offered an emotional connection, and they inspired me to share them because that is all I could do. After all, I am confident that with any one of these texts, I could tell my students, "You might like this one."

Annotated Bibliography

1. Acevedo, Elizabeth. *The Poet X*. HarperTeen, 2018.

Read in 2024.

- *The Poet X* is written in verse, through poetry, and is told from the perspective of Xiomara (X) and her experiences at home, church, and school. Raised in a Dominican-American household, X faces many religious and gender expectations from her mother. X feels overwhelming pressures and emotions, but poetry becomes her means of resistance, self-expression, and a way to process and articulate the struggles that her family and community often suppress. Throughout the story, she discovers more about herself and becomes self-empowered to navigate through her adolescence.
- This novel presents a lot of common themes seen in young adult literature, such as difficulty making decisions and finding one's identity, family, friendship problems, and courage and survival. Xiomara faces a challenging relationship with her mother and is expected to do a lot around the house as the oldest daughter. X was terrified to confront her mother because she never felt safe expressing her personal beliefs and was afraid of the consequences. However, with the use of her journal and with the help of supportive peers like her English teacher and boyfriend, X is able to find and project her voice out loud. This courage and self-empowerment were necessary for X's personal growth. Overall, *The Poet X* suggests readers to find the courage to stand up for themselves in the face of opposition. X's realistic experiences make an honest and raw story about breaking free from oppressive structures (family, religion, society) to embrace personal freedom. The novel's messages might resonate with young readers navigating their journeys and encourage them to think critically about what they are taught and follow their own ideas and beliefs.

2. Torres, Justin. *We the Animals*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011.

Read in 2024.

- *We the Animals* follows the adolescence of an unnamed narrator and his two older brothers. The three brothers witness their parents' relationship profoundly and like to mimic them, not knowing they are living in an unsafe, abusive environment and engaging in toxic masculinity. As the brothers age, they portray their father's behavior, resulting in them becoming more and more violent and often rude to women. The boys think this is what it means to be a man. At the same time, the narrator feels alienated from his brothers and slowly comes to terms with his own sexuality and identity.
- Torres' semi-autobiographical novel is significantly valuable because it presents challenging gender, generational, and cultural expectations in young men. In particular, it challenges the idea and complexities of masculinity, trauma, family, and belonging in Latino communities. The narrator is caught between the innocence of childhood and the inevitable transition to adulthood, making his narrative full of raw, vivid, and intense experiences. Readers can look deeply into the narrator's life, which is full of messy emotions and fractured relationships often overlooked as taboo but critical issues to discuss and they can empathize with the narrator's honest experiences. This coming-of-age novel ultimately captures the narrator's emotional and personal growth as he learns to break free from what he witnessed growing up. I hope this novel will also encourage young readers, especially boys, to think critically about the pressures they face to conform to stereotypical ideas of masculinity and the importance of emotional expression.

3. Winterson, Jeanette. *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*. Pandora Press, 1985.

Read in 2024.

- *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* is a semi-autobiographical fiction novel that follows Winterson's own coming-of-age story, coming to terms with her identity and sexuality growing up in a Pentecostal community. Jeannette¹ navigates through a challenging relationship with her religious mother and tries to escape her mother's house, rules, and religious expectations. To do this, Jeanette seeks to find answers about herself and builds relationships and friendships of her own in her neighborhood. Disapproved by her mother, she is constantly and proudly trailblazing her way through her childhood and teenage years.
- I find *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* particularly significant in YA literature because it was one of the first contemporary LGBTQIA+ books that offers queer representation and intersectionality. The novel explores intersections of sexuality, class, religion, and personal beliefs/ personal freedom. Jeanette's story is unique, but she struggles with her identity and begins questioning the problematic conventions around her. I think this is a thought-provoking text that will allow students to think critically about what is being presented and how it affects the protagonists' actions and inactions within her limiting community. Similar to Xiomara in *The Poet X*, Jeanette's struggle for independence—emotionally, spiritually, and sexually—speaks to the universal theme of growing up and carving out one's own path. Considering its timeless themes and the brutal honesty of strict and religious households, this is a novel that many readers might resonate with today or be aware of those who grow up in such environments.

¹ The author named the protagonist after herself.

4. Chbosky, Stephen. *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*. MTV Books, 2012.

I have not read this novel—summary paraphrased from GoodReads.

- This novel follows the protagonist, Charlie, a sensitive and introspective teenager, as he navigates the highs and lows of high school. Told through letters to an anonymous recipient, the novel explores Charlie's experiences with friendship, first love, family struggles, and the challenges of growing up. When Charlie meets Patrick and Sam, he is introduced to a world of parties, music, and self-discovery while also confronting past trauma and mental health issues. ([GoodReads](#))
 - This novel deeply fits this paper's themes and research interests about characters struggling to find community: Charlie's experiences relate to common themes in young adult literature, such as navigating friendship and self-discovery and exploring identity and a sense of belonging. However, unlike the previous texts mentioned, this novel emphasizes the importance of mental health in teens and young adults. The text invites students to think critically about their life experiences and how to cope and/or overcome certain events. While the book presents a realistic depiction of the high school experience, it also captures the genuine aspects of growing up and the vulnerability of teenagers. The novel's themes are necessary for understanding one another and being considerate of those who are often dismissed or silent.
5. Orange, Tommy. *There There*. Alfred A. Knopf, 2018.
Read in 2024.
- *There There* is an anthology of twelve Native American characters living in Oakland, California. In its multi-narrative structure, the speakers touch on their native American culture, loss of identity, and what it means to carry heritage throughout generations. The stories of each character tell the horrific effects of colonization, systemic injustice, and

the ongoing search for belonging. Also, through its vibrant characters and unique storytelling, the novel ultimately provides hope and celebrates the resilience and community of Native Americans.

- This novel is particularly thought-provoking as it explores themes of cultural displacement, systemic oppression, generational trauma, and the search for identity. These are realistic elements that recur throughout the novel based on actual historical events and ongoing experiences of Native American tribes/descendants. Orange presents challenging stereotypes and offers a nuanced perspective of those characters impacted in the novel and those who were affected in real life. I also found this important to include because I am a teacher candidate concerned with ethnic studies and multiethnic literature in America. This is one work I anticipate to teach. Though the topics and themes can be heavy due to violence, the novel is essential in understanding the struggles and resilience of Indigenous people.

6. Anderson, Laurie Halse. *Speak*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999.
Read in 2024.

- *Speak* follows narrator Melinda and her emotional journey recovering from a traumatic event. As Melinda silently grapples with the trauma and her isolation, she struggles to maintain friendships and does not have the courage to talk to her parents about her assault. In fact, she finds it nearly impossible to find and reclaim her voice again. By the end of the novel, she reclaims herself and ultimately speaks out.
- Of particular note, this novel is one that is so deeply necessary in cultivating empathy and understanding of Melinda's situation and the trauma that followed after. The descriptions and events in the novel are so vivid and raw that it makes one put themselves in Melinda's shoes and try to understand where she is coming from. As Melinda deals with her mental

health and losing friends, she also discovers she is talented in her art class. By picking up her talents and hobbies again, Melinda slowly builds up her courage. She begins to confront her pain and issues through art, self-reflection, and small acts of defiance. The novel sends out a positive message: Melinda's truth, courage, and bravery, like all survivors, capture the strength and resilience it takes to reclaim one's power.

7. Cabot, Meg. *The Princess Diaries*. 1st ed., HarperTrophy, 2000.

Read in 2024.

- Protagonist Mia is a high school freshman struggling to keep up with her grades. Mia considers herself an outcast and is not noticed by any of her classmates. Mia's life becomes more complicated for her when she finds out she is a princess and the only heir of a small European country called Genovia. This life-changing news causes Mia to question her identity as she faces many familial and societal pressures while trying to maintain her new proper, classy, and royal persona.
- Though it is not a "realistic" real-life experience to find out one is the only heir of a European country, *The Princess Diaries* contains relevant themes and issues pertinent to adolescents, such as navigating identity, family and friendship conflicts, and societal pressures. Mia's transparency and compelling narrative make the novel engaging while providing a sense of normality. Like Mia, students may be struggling to make decisions based on what others expect from them. Often, these expectations from family and friends make one put others before themselves. In Mia's case, she becomes more confident, which causes her to break out of her shy shell. Mia's character transformation from a shy, uncertain teenager to someone who takes pride in her heritage and responsibility is encouraging. Her character development by the end of the novel gives a

positive message to readers to embrace their uniqueness and feel comfortable about themselves.

8. Lee, Mackenzi. *The Lady's Guide to Petticoats and Piracy*. HarperTeen, 2018.

I have not read this book. Kim Evans' book talk inspired its inclusion.

- This novel follows Felicity Montague, who is determined to attend medical school despite the barriers posed by her gender. When a chance to meet a renowned doctor in Germany arises, Felicity agrees to travel with a mysterious young woman who offers to fund her journey, provided she is allowed to act as Felicity's maid. As the trip unfolds, Felicity discovers the woman has hidden motives, and the two become embroiled in a dangerous adventure across Europe. (My summary is paraphrased from [GoodReads](#))
 - This novel challenges traditional gender roles and presents a strong, adventurous female protagonist, Felicity, as she defies 18th-century gender and societal expectations. Though it is set long ago, the novel's relevant topics invite conversations about what it means to be a woman with greater aspirations and determination to get there despite societal limitations. I think this is an excellent read for students as they might think critically about gender equality and representations in literature, fiction, and the real world. The novel ultimately promotes themes of empowerment, independence, and self-discovery, encouraging young readers—especially girls—to pursue their ambitions despite patriarchal environments or circumstances.
9. Crutcher, Chris. *Whale Talk*. Greenwillow Books, 2001.
- Read in 2024.
- TJ Jones is a talented and introspective high school senior who is determined to form an inclusive swim team at his school. Despite facing resistance from the administration and his peers, TJ is able to assemble a group of misfit athletes—each with their own troubled

backgrounds and personal struggles. As the group works together, they feel community and belonging among each other. Friendships grow, and individual characters experience personal growth, too.

- Like many young adult novels set in high school, *Whale Talk* tackles relevant issues such as identity, bullying, racism, and the struggles of fitting in. Through each character's personal life and friendship with one another, the novel invites conversations about troubled teens, inclusivity, and friendships. The novel might also encourage readers to confront complex topics like self-worth, social exclusion, and personal growth and make room for self-reflection and resilience. Overall, I think this is a significant read because it emphasizes the importance of empathy, teamwork, and acceptance of others' differences, offering a message of resilience and empowerment in youth.

10. De La Pena, Matt. *We Were Here*. Random House Inc., 2009.

Read in 2024.

- After committing a violent crime, protagonist Miguel is sent to a group home where he forms unexpected friendships with other residents and troubled teens. As Miguel struggles with guilt and emotional turmoil, he uses his journal to express all of his emotions and experiences with all of the people he meets. Through a lot of self-reflection and resilience, Miguel gradually learns to be kind to himself and knows that he can move forward without being held back from the crime he's committed.
- Through Miguel's entries, readers put themselves in Miguel's shoes, taking in the complexities of loneliness, friendship, and finding a path to healing. Miguel experiences the challenges of growing up in what he believes is a harsh world and does not think he is deserving of a second chance. However, his emotional growth leads to his healing from the event and highlights the importance of self-forgiveness and personal development. I

think this novel will not only appeal to readers but will also make them think about themselves as they navigate their own struggles with identity, mistakes, and personal growth. The novel gives a hopeful message to all readers that the past does not define them and helps readers understand that healing and redemption are possible, even in the most challenging and difficult circumstances. Like Miguel, every young adult is capable of overcoming any and all issues that hold them back.