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Examining Family Relationships in Contemporary Realistic Fiction for Young Adults

Young Adult Literature is often misconstrued as teen fiction that is lacking in depth or thematic quality. However, good YA literature is replete with the same kinds of themes and levels of literary complexity that characterize adult novels. What makes literature on the young adult spectrum so special is its degree of influence. The lives of young adults rest heavily in the hands of authors of YA literature, due to the scope of influence their writing has. Teens and young adults face many of the same interpersonal issues that adults face, but at the most transitional periods of their lives; their hardships are weighted by the added vulnerability of their youth. Authors of young adult literature have the responsibility of writing meaningful works of literature that deal with real world issues and making them accessible to the understanding of young adults. Teenagers are the most impressionable age group of people to write for, as many of them are experiencing for the first time the overwhelming, and often isolating, coming of age experiences. This kind of social responsibility directly translates into well-written pieces of literature that outline the kinds of human experiences that young adults might have trouble confronting.

Young Adult Literature is a genre that contains several subgenres, used by authors to guide the structure of their work. Contemporary realistic fiction, commonly referred to as “realism”, is a subgenre of YA literature that focuses on plots that are believable to readers and that take place in modern time periods and settings. Plotlines of contemporary realistic novels mirror the real experiences of young adults, making them believable to audiences and readers. Contemporary realistic fiction is characterized by “writing about young adult fiction with real-world settings in historical periods not far-removed from our own,” according to *Literature for Today’s Young Adults* in Chapter 4. Contemporary realistic fiction excludes magic or supernatural elements but maintains the young protagonist that dominates the novel. Protagonists of these books solve problems and come to realizations about themselves and the world around them that teens in real life would be easily be able to recognize.

The contemporary realistic fiction genre has the ability to encompass a wide array of themes, topics, or issues to be explored through various plotlines and stories. Realistic literature can address issues of discrimination, race, bullying, suicide, sexuality, religious controversy, identity struggles, and many more; this expansiveness is what makes the genre so well-favored and easy for readers to connect to. For my annotated bibliography I am examining the structure of family relationships in contemporary realistic fiction, and the role they play in contributing to the development of major themes and lessons throughout young adult literature. In young adult literature the family unit is often portrayed as either the cause of, or the solution to, many of the issues faced by the protagonist. In some instances, the family serves as a fractured structure that contributes to several of the major issues of the novel; other times, it acts as a strong support system for those same issues. As a centerpiece work for my focus, I chose Chris Crutcher’s Whale Talk because of its diversity in the types of family dynamics seen throughout the book, and the influence those relationships have on many of the book’s major characters.

The success of contemporary realistic fiction in the scope of young adult literature stems from its “level of intimacy,” according to Marc Aronson in Chapter 4 of *Literature for Today’s Young Adults.* Contemporary realistic fiction allows young readers to connect to the story and struggles of characters that might parallel their own lives, without them having to reveal their own personal struggles; or, it might depict characters that are suffering hardships a young adult has never gone through and wants to become familiar with. Aronson begs the question, “Does a book have the potential to touch readers deeply so that, in the struggle with it, they begin to see and to shape themselves?” Contemporary realistic fiction creates the possibility that teen readers might uncover parts of themselves and of others that were waiting to be revealed. At the core of contemporary realistic fiction, a level of empathy that can be reached by readers is what makes the success of a novel possible. My choice in focusing on contemporary realistic fiction within the genre of young adult literature came from my tendencies toward realistic fiction as a child. When I was a teen, I didn’t have much interest in books that incorporated elements of fantasy, or that perverted the setting into something unrecognizable. I was more interested in novels that portrayed real life experiences from the perspectives of realistic characters that I could either connect to or learn about. In addition, my focus on the role of the family relationships in young adult literature comes from my interest in family dynamics; I grew up with a single mother and have a younger sister, so family relationships and interactions between different family members and the roles they play have always peaked my interest. What I have come to find most interesting about the theme of family structure is that family isn’t always something you are born into, but can include those who you choose to surround yourself with. Family relationships that are portrayed in contemporary realistic fiction in young adult literature often draw on the Junex vs. Senex archetype outlined in Chapter 10 of *Literature for Today’s Young Adults.* Though family relationships take on several different meanings and interpretations in YA literature, one commonality remains: the family unit functions either to support the protagonist or to contribute to his or her individual struggles.

Annotated Bibliography: Family Relationships in Contemporary Realistic Fiction

1. ***I’ll Give You the Sun*** by Jandy Nelson

Nelson, Jandy. *I’ll Give You the Sun*. Penguin Young Readers Group, 2015. Print.

Jude and Noah are two twins who are inseparable. They are polar opposites of each other, but complement one another perfectly. Noah is artistic and Jude is an outgoing daredevil. Years pass and Noah and Jude barely speak to each other anymore. Something has happened that has caused the twins to change in different yet equally as devastating ways. When Jude meets a new mentor, she starts to turn her life back around and finds the opportunity to repair her relationship with Noah. The novel is divided between the perspective of Noah during the early years, and of Jude during the later years.

The primary relationship explored through this novel, is the brother-sister relationship shared by Jude and her twin brother Noah. Jandy Nelson uses Jude and Noah’s relationship to demonstrate both the strength and fragility of the bonds of siblings. The relationship between a pair of twins is particularly interesting to examine, because they can be thought of as two halves to a whole person. In Jude and Noah’s case, this is exactly what they are. Their two personalities complement each other perfectly and the twins experience an exchange of character traits during the middle of the book, creating an element of empathy that exists between them. The conflict that arises between the two stems from a place of jealousy and misunderstanding. Theses are common feelings for young adults to have as they grow, especially with siblings. Nelson also briefly touches on issues between parents and children, and parents with each other, to demonstrate the reality of complications in relationships.

1. ***The Outsiders*** by S.E. Hinton

Hinton, S.E. *The Outsiders*. Viking Press, 1967. Print.

According to Ponyboy, there are two kinds of people in the world: greasers and socs. A soc (short for "social") has money, can get away with just about anything, and has an attitude longer than a limousine. A greaser, on the other hand, always lives on the outside and needs to watch his back. Ponyboy is a greaser, and he's always been proud of it, even willing to rumble against a gang of socs for the sake of his fellow greasers--until one terrible night when his friend Johnny kills a soc. The murder gets under Ponyboy's skin, causing his bifurcated world to crumble and teaching him that pain feels the same whether a soc or a greaser.

(<https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/231804.The_Outsiders>)

*The Outsiders* is a novel that examines the family unit from a unique perspective. Ponyboy’s parents’ death has led to his oldest brother having to be the caretaker. For the Curtis boys, their brotherhood is the strongest family unit they have. The three of them have the responsibility of looking out for each other. The gang is another family of its own. The gang of boys all serve as a kind of family to each other. They engage in all of their struggles against the socs together, and support each other the way a family does. The Outsiders addresses feelings of isolation and distance that is often felt by teens. It also approaches topics of injustice and discrimination. The interpretation of the family unit and its importance as a support system serve as positive reinforcement to teens who find solace in their groups of friends as their family. This book is also one that young adults can relate to if they have experienced the loss of a parent or adult figure.

1. ***Of Mice and Men*** by John Steinbeck

Steinbeck, John. *Of Mice and Men*. Covici, Friede, Inc., 1937. Print.

George and his simple-minded friend, Lennie are two drifters looking for work in 1930’s California. With their American Dream in mind, they search for work until eventually they find a job on a Salinas Ranch; but it doesn’t last long. Lennie, a victim of his own strength, and subject to misunderstanding, destroys any prospects for peace for himself and George. One of John Steinbeck’s most well-recognized and influential pieces of work, Of Mice and Men tackles themes of friendship and the American Dream, while giving a voice to the misunderstood.

*Of Mice and Men* is one of John Steinbeck’s most well-known novels for several reasons. Though it isn’t exactly fall under the category of young adult literature, it does discuss themes and topics that young adults are familiar with, and it is often taught during middle school and again in high school. What makes Steinbeck’s work so powerful is its accessibility. It can be taught at the middle school level focusing on the elements of the story closest to the surface, or it can be examined in depth from an adult perspective. *Of Mice and Men* presents a distorted perspective of family. The two men are each other’s family, and eventually find a kind of family in the friends they make at the ranch. In this book Steinbeck demonstrates the way sibling-like characters look out for each other, and the sacrifices that sometimes have to be made for family, which is something young adults should be introduced to at an early age. George and Lennie don’t express their love for each other so outwardly, but the reader is still able to understand the level of care they have for one another based on their actions.

1. ***Whale Talk*** by Chris Crutcher

Crutcher, Chris. *Whale Talk*. Greenwillow Books, 2001. Print.

There's bad news and good news about the Cutter High School swim team. The bad news is that they don't have a pool. The good news is that only one of them can swim anyway. A group of misfits brought together by T. J. Jones (the J is redundant), the Cutter All Night Mermen struggle to find their places in a school that has no place for them. T.J. is convinced that a varsity letter jacket exclusive, revered, the symbol (as far as T.J. is concerned) of all that is screwed up at Cutter High will also be an effective tool. He's right. He's also wrong. Still, it's always the quest that counts. And the bus on which the Mermen travel to swim meets soon becomes the space where they gradually allow themselves to talk, to fit, to grow. Together they'll fight for dignity in a world where tragedy and comedy dance side by side, where a moment's inattention can bring lifelong heartache, and where true acceptance is the only prescription for what ails us.

(<https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/49746.Whale_Talk>)

*Whale Talk* is a young adult novel that contains almost every major topic or issue examined through literature. The topic of family relationships is examined on several different spectrums in this book, making it accessible to a wide array of audiences. Crutcher uses the models of different family relationships to expand on other topics or issues that he develops throughout the book. Even though T.J. was adopted, his family unit is the strongest in the story. His entire family maintains strong relationships and his parents serve as guardian figures for Heidi. Heidi’s family dynamic contains some of the most negative relationships in the book and can be understood by young adults who have suffered through experiences of abuse, racism, neglect, or alcoholism. In a third example, the Cutter swim team becomes a family of its own for the boys. They find comfort in their shared experience of isolation and their participation in the sport becomes a vessel for them to open up to each other the way some of them have never opened up to anyone. In a way, Mr. Simet serves as a father figure for some of the boys on the team, and as a second father figure for T.J. *Whale Talk* presents several different types of family structures and evaluates the individual experiences of each one of them. Young adults are able to find comfort in seeing the swim team as a family and connecting to several of the themes illustrated through family relationships in this book.

1. ***The Catcher in the Rye*** by J.D. Salinger

Salinger, J.D. *The Catcher in the Rye*. Little, Brown and Company,1951. Print.

The hero-narrator of The Catcher in the Rye is an ancient child of sixteen, a native New Yorker named Holden Caulfield. Through circumstances that tend to preclude adult, secondhand description, he leaves his prep school in Pennsylvania and goes underground in New York City for three days. The boy himself is at once too simple and too complex for us to make any final comment about him or his story. Perhaps the safest thing we can say about Holden is that he was born in the world not just strongly attracted to beauty but, almost, hopelessly impaled on it. There are many voices in this novel: children's voices, adult voices, underground voices-but Holden's voice is the most eloquent of all. Transcending his own vernacular, yet remaining marvelously faithful to it, he issues a perfectly articulated cry of mixed pain and pleasure. However, like most lovers and clowns and poets of the higher orders, he keeps most of the pain to, and for, himself. The pleasure he gives away, or sets aside, with all his heart. It is there for the reader who can handle it to keep.

(<https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/5107.The_Catcher_in_the_Rye>)

J.D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* is one of the most popular American novels. It is often read during high school and can be looked at from the young adult literature perspective. Family relationships in *The Catcher in the Rye* are evaluated subtly and not always completely. One of the major factors for the development of Holden’s character is the fact that his younger brother, Allie, died at the age of 11. Allie’s death remains with Holden and Allie becomes an angelic presence to him. This unique presentation of a relationship between brothers can be understood by any young adult who has suffered through losing a family member, specifically a sibling. The only living person Holden has a strong connection with is his younger sister, Phoebe. Holden reveals the most about himself to Phoebe and she knows him better than anyone else. The strength of their relationship lies in an unspoken understanding they have about one another. Holden’s role in his relationship with Phoebe is determined primarily by his desire to preserve her innocence and to protect her the way he wasn’t able to protect Allie. For young adults struggling with feelings of helplessness, *The Catcher in the Rye* provides the comforting reassurance that they aren’t alone. Phoebe’s character exists to highlight Holden’s weaknesses and insecurities for the reader. Holden’s distant relationship with his parents is a point that several young adults can connect to, as teens are at an age where they feel like their parents don’t understand them.

1. ***The Last True Love Story*** by Brendan Kiely

Kiely, Brendan. *The Last True Love Story*. Margaret K. McElderry Books, 2017. Print.

Hendrix and Corinna are both seventeen and alike in their lonliness. Corinna’s adoptive parents are overbearing, trying to mold her into acceptable and predictable like them. She’s a musician, though, itching for a chance to break free and be herself (whoever that may be). Hendrix is cool. He’s a poet and he’s a little lost. His dad is dead and his mom is a workaholic. His grandpa is dying of Alzheimer’s, but Hendrix makes the impossible promise that he’ll take him to the hill where he first kissed his wife back east, before his memory goes completely. One hot July night Hendrix and Corinna steal a car, break Gpa out of his assisted living home, and make a run for a cross country mission from LA to NY.

The examination of family relationships comes from two major perspectives in Brendan Kiely’s *The Last True Love Story*. Hendrix and Corinna have very different home lives, but each comes with its own set of issues. For Corinna, her relationship with her parents is one of misunderstanding. Due to the fact that she is adopted, her connection with her parents doesn’t trace back to biology, which is why she is nothing like them. This leads to a divide between she and her parents, based on the fact that her deep-rooted interests are different from what her parents want for her. Young adults who feel like they can’t relate to their parents, or that their parents can’t relate to them would easily be able to connect with Corinna’s experience as a character. Hendrix, on the other hand, has no real relationship with his parents. With his father dead and his mom always working, Hendrix’s family relationship is characterized by distance. His strongest relationship is with his Gpa, who he respects and loves as his truest idea of family. Young adults who have experienced the loss of a parent or watching a grandparent slip away would be able to empathize with Hendrix, making his character one they can connect with.

1. ***Mosquitoland*** by David Arnold

Arnold, David. *Mosquitoland*. Penguin Young Readers Group, 2016. Print.

` After the sudden collapse of her family, Mim Malone is dragged from her home in northern Ohio to the "wastelands" of Mississippi, where she lives in a medicated milieu with her dad and new stepmom. Before the dust has a chance to settle, she learns her mother is sick back in Cleveland.So she ditches her new life and hops aboard a northbound Greyhound bus to her real home and her real mother, meeting a quirky cast of fellow travelers along the way. But when her thousand-mile journey takes a few turns she could never see coming, Mim must confront her own demons, redefining her notions of love, loyalty, and what it means to be sane.

(<https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/18718848-mosquitoland>)

Mim is a character who is in a difficult family situation. Mim’s realization that her mother was in rehab and not terminally ill, creates levels of distrust between herself and the world around her. Her relationship with her father and stepmother is of little value compared to the relationship she cherishes with her mother in Cleveland. However, when Mim is presented with the truth, she comes to the realization that she doesn’t know as much as she thought she did about life and the world. This realization is part of the experience that most young adults encounter at some point in their coming of age journey: the clarity and confusion that is felt when a teen realizes not everything their parents tell them is always true. Though Mim recognizes why she was lied to, it is still something that is hard for her to come to grips with in the beginning. This occurrence in a family relationship is commonly experienced but not often discussed, which makes *Mosquitoland* a valuable book for young adults to read and connect to.

1. ***The Perks of Being a Wallflower*** by Stephen Chbosky

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

Perks follows observant “wallflower” Charlie as he charts a course through the strange world between adolescence and adulthood. First dates, family drama, and new friends. Sex, drugs, and The Rocky Horror Picture Show. Devastating loss, young love, and life on the fringes. Caught between trying to live his life and trying to run from it, Charlie must learn to navigate those wild and poignant roller-coaster days known as growing up.

One of the most important developments in the plot of The Perks of Being a Wallflower is the revelation that Charlie was sexually molested by his aunt. As a reader, you don’t become aware of this until the very end of the book, which makes it a point of realization in which parts of Charlie’s experiences and reactions come together and make sense. This is a powerful occurrence in the scope of examining family relationships. Throughout the entirety of the book, Charlie’s aunt is someone he looks up to and remembers fondly. He feels guilty for her death, which leads to several of his episodes. His realization at the end of the book changes what kinds of feelings he associates with his aunt.

1. ***The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*** by Sherman Alexie

Alexie, Sherman. *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. Little, Brown Books for Young Readers, 2007. Print.

Bestselling author Sherman Alexie tells the story of Junior, a budding cartoonist growing up on the Spokane Indian Reservation. Determined to take his future into his own hands, Junior leaves his troubled school on the rez to attend an all-white farm town high school where the only other Indian is the school mascot.

As a member of an Indian tribe and a resident on one of the reservations, Junior maintains an idea about family that reflects his tribe as a whole. The obligation and responsibility he feels toward his community affects how he makes decisions and how he feels about the decisions he makes. His decision to attend high school off the reservation is part of his individual search for identity, and makes it hard for him to relate back to his Spokane community. However, leaving is family is what allows him to uncover his deep-rooted history at home. Junior finds comfort in his life as a nomad, the way his ancestors did before him. Junior realizes that he belongs to several smaller “tribes” like his high school basketball team, where he creates a family for himself. This book equates family with community, establishing the ability to decide for yourself who you consider your family. For young adults struggling with where to find a sense of community due to feelings of not belonging, this book exists to show that you can find family outside of your only accessible community.

1. ***Running Full Tilt*** by Michael Currinder

Currinder, Michael. *Running Full Tilt*. Charlesbridge Teen, 2017. Print.

Like most siblings, Leo and Caleb have a complicated relationship. But Caleb's violent outbursts literally send Leo running. When the family is forced to relocate due to Caleb's uncontrollable behavior, Leo tries to settle into a new school, joining the cross-country team and discovering his talent for racing and endurance for distance. Things even begin to look up for Leo when he befriends Curtis, a potential state champion who teaches Leo strategy and introduces him to would-be girlfriend, Mary. But Leo's stability is short-lived as Caleb escalates his attacks on his brother, resentful of his sport successes and new friendships. Leo can't keep running away from his problems. But, with a little help from Curtis and Mary, he can appreciate his worth as a brother and his own capacity for growth, both on and off the field.

(<https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/36184379-running-full-tilt>)

Michael Currinder’s *Running Full Tilt* depicts the relationship between two brothers. Sibling relationships have been some of the most interesting to examine because each one is so unique in its development. The details of each sibling relationship are dictated by influences from within the immediate family, and shared and individual experiences outside of the family. Conditions of life affect Leo and Caleb’s relationship the most, as Caleb’s disability places Leo in a position of unwanted responsibility. However, he eventually learns to trade in resentment for appreciation of his role as an older brother and what that means to Caleb. For young adults who have siblings with mental disabilities, or who are struggling with the pressures of being a responsible older sibling, *Running Full Tilt* showcases the beauties of siblinghood and what can be taken away from that kind of family relationship.