

“I loved this book, even though . . .”:

Reading International Young Adult Literature

For as long as I can remember, I have been interested in places, people, and cultures other than my own. As a young reader with working class parents who only traveled across one state line to visit grandparents, books provided my never-ending travels. Reading was a *serious* pleasure that let me “escape from myself into someone else’s world. To find myself in someone else’s words. To exercise my critical capacities” (Lesser, 2014, p. 3). It gave me “a sense of connection to life” (p. 6) across time, types of people, situations, cultures, and places.

Machado (2011) tells us that, ideally, we could all go abroad, get to know different people and landscapes, listen to other languages as a way to get “in touch with the beautiful diversity of cultures” (p. 397). Since the ideal remains a rarity, literary travel can take readers beyond their day-to-day existence, let them imagine life as different selves, and maybe give “shape and sense to some deep, blurred and unexpressed perceptions that begged to come to the surface” (p. 398). Literature expands readers’ “life spaces through inquiries that take them outside the boundaries of their lives” (Short, 2012, p. 12), exposing them to alternative ways to think about the world. Reading the word and the world (Freire & Macedo, 1987) challenges internalized habits of thinking about practices and beliefs, attitudes and assumptions, and creates inroads to empathy, understanding, and respect for diversity.

By the fall of 2011, having read and collected about 70 young adult books set in countries other than the US, I decided to add some of these titles to my

young adult literature course primarily for prospective teachers. I was curious to find how my students might respond to the unfamiliar settings, cultural practices, and daily lives of the characters. I especially wanted to find out how they would think about teaching these books to their future students.

Classification: Multicultural, International, or Global Literature?

Even after decades of using the term *multicultural* to specifically identify young adult literature about diverse cultures and ethnicities, scholars continue to hold varying views on what to include under the multicultural umbrella. Campbell (Cole, 2009) notes that a “multicultural awareness” began to develop in the seventies, making African American presence more visible in the “all-white mostly middle-class world” (p. 67) of young adult fiction. As more books about underrepresented people of color became available, the term *multicultural literature* came into being. Although stories about people around the world are included on many lists of multicultural literature, most are set in the United States (Louie, 2005).

Willis (1997) defines multicultural literature as literature that focuses on people of color, religious minorities, regional cultures, the disabled, and the aged, noting that such a broad definition encompasses race, gender, and class. For Hadaway (2007), the term refers to literature published in the US that “portrays diverse American cultures” (p. 4). Some (Louie, 2005; Lesesne, 2007) make no distinction between

settings in the US and countries outside of the US when discussing books about diverse cultures. Others (Bean, Dunkerly-Bean, & Harper, 2014; Bishop, 2007; Lehman, Freeman & Scharer, 2010) use alternative terms and identifying differences.

Bean, Dunkerly-Bean, and Harper (2014) argue that “in the past” (p. 241), local, national, and international young adult literature about cultural difference and diversity was called *multicultural*. They prefer “the more inclusive term *global* literature. Like multicultural literature, this category includes minority, indigenous, and other literature that highlights local or national culture” (p. 241), but unlike multicultural literature, it also includes “historical and contemporary works from the international community” (p. 241). The term *global* also “avoids isolating national from international” (p. 242), an isolation that tends to give students a Western vs. non-Western or “other” stance rather than seeing the world in all of us.

Bishop (2007) suggests using *multicultural* as an umbrella terms that includes at least three sub-groupings: world literature from non-Western countries, cross-cultural literature about relations between cultural groups, and books by authors writing about a cultural group other than their own. In 2000, Freeman and Lehman defined *international children’s literature*

according to where books were written and published in addition to the author’s native, immigrant, or citizenry status. By 2010, Lehman, Freeman, and Scharer simplified that definition as books that focus on international topics or are authored or published outside of the US. They recognize a close connection with multicultural literature but distinguish international literature from “books that portray parallel cultures *within* the United States” (p. 17).

Since definitive definitions and terms remain under discussion, I chose to name this literature *international* young adult literature (IYAL) in my course. I am not opposed to the *global* notion of inclusion, but I believe YA multicultural literature merits a separate emphasis for my students; there are so many books that show the rich diversity within the US and allow issues of social justice to remain a focus.

Why Read International Young Adult Literature (IYAL)?

Reading and class discussion about multicultural literature often center on democracy and the protection of certain rights and freedoms. I wanted to draw attention to the recent growth in the number of young adult books for upper middle grade and high school readers set in countries other than the United States that often have different systems of government and practices concerning human rights. I also wanted to focus attention on the diversity of cultures and people beyond US borders about which many students (and teachers) openly claim to know little or nothing. I believe, with others, that such literature “is not a priority nor is it a well-known area of study for many teachers” (Bean et al., 2014, p. 248) but is “a way of knowing the world” (Short, 2012, p. 11). Hadaway (2007) states that “the events of September 11, 2001, underscored the need for the country to re-see our nation’s place in a larger world” (p. 3). Making international literature separate from multicultural literature seems to emphasize these messages. Table 1 lists additional differences I find that distinguish multicultural literature from international literature.

The goals for reading international literature remain the same as those for reading multicultural literature: understanding the Other, finding points of connection, diffusing prejudices or ignorance, expanding horizons, and practicing social justice

Table 1. Common differences between US multicultural literature and international young adult literature

US Young Adult Multicultural Literature	International Young Adult Literature
1. Schooling available and expected for all; required/protected by law	1. Schooling often unavailable, forbidden, or achieved at great sacrifice
2. Emphasis on relationships	2. Emphasis on relationships but conditions or political climate often disrupt them
3. Geographical setting familiar enough	3. Unfamiliar geographical setting
4. Familiar clothing and foods	4. Unfamiliar clothing and foods
5. Familiar language	5. New language; new vocabulary
6. Possible economic poverty	6. Frequent economic poverty, sometimes extreme
7. No homeland war (unless gang-related)	7. Homeland war conditions or political unrest
8. Religion may be present, rarely dominant	8. Less familiar religious practices more visible

(Banks, 2009; Bean et al., 2014; Nieto, 2009; Nieto & Bode, 2012; Sleeter & McClaren, 1995). Short (2012) reminds us that readers, by immersing themselves in story worlds, gain insights into how people feel, live, and think in a global culture and come to see themselves as connected through common humanity to young people around the world. I agree with Bean et al. (2014) that the term *international* does set up a Western vs. Other dichotomy. However, a temporary separation can isolate the literature for initial exposure and analysis and open a way to discuss with students the Western propensity to think of “us and them,” thus working to a teacher’s advantage.

From “Experiment” to Study

In my 2011 fall semester Young Adult Literature course of 24 predominantly secondary English education majors, I dedicated one week to IYAL—both fiction and nonfiction. After nine weeks of class, having discussed much of two core texts (Cole, 2009; Rosenblatt, 1995) and having read 10 young adult books (such as Crutcher’s *Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes* [2003], Anderson’s *Speak* [2011], Myers’s *Monster* [2004], and Lynch’s *Inexcusable* [2007]), I thought students had a fair sense of young adult literature and enough practice with assessing books for teen readers.

About two weeks before “International YA Literature Week,” I gave students a brief introduction about the expanding body of YA literature into the international realm and handed out the assignment (see Fig. 1) along with a bibliography of the books in my collection. I explained that the paper would let them reflect upon and assess a book individually; short presentations would give everyone previews of all the books and provide the class with a collaborative assessment process. I distributed the books around the room and let students peruse and choose.

When presentation time arrived, students struggled to condense their book’s essence and an assessment into a concise summary that fit the time limit (number of students divided by available class time). Finally a male presenter looked at me with a saddened face and asked in a sincere yet obviously disappointed tone, “But there is so much more to say! Can’t I have more time?” We laughed and made a democratic decision to allow a bit more time, continue the presentations for another day, and collapse an upcoming assignment.

With a strong success, I began this study, repeating the process in three subsequent courses: Middle Grade Literature, fall 2012; Young Adult Literature, spring 2013 and Middle Grade Literature, fall 2013. Comparable data with four different groups over a two-year period provided a larger data sample of first-time responses to reading IYAL. To collect comparable data, I did not attempt to improve anything, with one exception. The first group complained when a book had no glossary or map and displayed low tolerance for unfamiliar words describing clothing, scenery, and so on. I told subsequent classes to *expect* unfamiliar language—an experience similar to reading fantasy and science fiction.

The study had three research questions:

1. How do students respond and/or relate to reading and hearing about people, cultures, conflicts, and religions as found in IYAL?
2. Do responses indicate reader empathy, open-mindedness, and/or understanding?
3. How do students compare young adult literature set in the United States with international young adult literature in terms of teen reader interest?

Address the following after reading your selected book:

1. What did you learn about another culture/country?
2. What similarities would let teen readers connect to characters, plot or events, and setting?
3. What differences might cause difficulty in understanding this text?
4. Discuss the vocabulary: contextualized? difficult? Is there a glossary provided?
5. What might be needed to facilitate the reading and/or understanding of this text?
6. Rate the interest level and appropriate reader age for this work and explain why.

Presentations for International Young Adult Book

Prepare a ___-minute (determined by class size) talk to include:

- a brief plot description
- a look at character/characterization (assess development of)
- a discussion of how the book presents another culture (minimally? richly? reader feels like s/he has been there? outstanding? not so good?)
- an analysis of what might/might not interest a US teen reader
- speculation about what a US teen reader might learn
- examples of what you learned about another culture/country
- an assessment of new vocabulary—glossary provided? needed?

Figure 1. Prompts for a brief paper focused on international young adult books

Data Collection and Analysis

Recognizing that the culture of a classroom shapes reader responses (Van Maanen, 1988), I drew primarily on written responses from students for this analysis. After the last course ended, I coded the assigned papers (as described in Fig. 1) from the 101 students across all four courses as one data set for emerging categories (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). With repeated coding, these categories clustered into dominant themes. Tallying the coded categories to find themes, 6 of a total of 14 clearly dominated: Similarities That Connect, Differences, Reading Interest, Ease of Reading, Empathy, and Broadened Perspectives. Because the theme Broadened Perspectives garnered the most student commentary, and because it represented major goals for reading international literature, I conducted a semantic relationship domain analysis (Spradley, 1979) to find a more specific breakdown of this key theme. Results clustered into four areas: 1) Increased Knowledge Base, 2) Raised Awareness/Consciousness, 3) Open-Mindedness, and 4) Understanding.

Although the assigned paper directly asked students to notice two of the dominant themes—Similarities that would help readers connect and Differences that might hinder understanding—I approached coding as if the papers were undirected responses for four reasons: 1) to recognize the presence of a strategy already practiced by my students in this course of identifying similarities and differences between protagonists and readers that could foster or deter connections and reader interest; 2) to remain open to response variations beyond students simply naming similarities or differences; 3) to see if my students were able to find similarities with a protagonist even when the culture, settings, and events in the story were unfamiliar; and 4) to see if my students interpreted similarities and differences as they had with books read earlier in the course or if the international context made similarities or differences less visible.

I found that Perry's (1998) research on college students' intellectual and ethical development provides a useful analytical tool to present how my students read, wrote, and discussed IYAL to facilitate an "unfolding view of the world" (p. xiii). Perry identified a recursive process with four main "positions" (p. 51); through engagement with this process, students attempt to make sense of incoming infor-

mation that conflicts with earlier assumptions and experiences. *Duality* represents a student's current view, with a right and wrong, us/them, or normal/alien authority in place. *Multiplicity* occurs when a plurality of viewpoints or differences meets duality and challenges earlier thinking, causing "a temporary fuzziness in Authority's domain" (p. 107). As students reject or assimilate new information, *relativism* allows for recognition of other ways of thinking, even though one's dualistic view may not change right away. Last, *commitment* refers to a realization of, reasons for, or a coming-to-terms with the new.

Findings: Student Responses to IYAL

The following sections present the six themes, data examples from students' papers, and analysis through Perry's positions to provide evidence of how reading IYAL can initiate reflective thinking about unfamiliar worlds of diversity and nurture movement toward empathy, open-mindedness, and understanding.

Theme #1: Similarities That Connect initiate the necessary bond between reader and protagonist, a bond that grabs and sustains reader interest and begins to move a reader beyond facts to touch "emotions, feelings, personal identification, longing for closeness, mutual sympathy or compassion" (Machado, 2011, p. 398). Across texts, students identified innumerable similarities, including "a search for identity," "sibling rivalry," "romance," "family," and "struggling against some type of oppression."

Theme #2: Differences generally cause disruptions that a plot will work through to some resolution. The differences in IYAL, however, are integral to characters' lives, settings, and plot. A student who read *Keeping Corner* (Sheth, 2007), for example, listed similarities of "romance" and "dreams about the future" when considering young Leela in India. She at first imagines that Leela's arranged marriage will be happy, with opportunity for education to become a doctor, but then notes how her dreams morphed into "engaged at two, married at nine, and widowed by twelve." This shift implies the idea that, while all teens have dreams and hope for romance (Similarity), teens like Leela too often have dreams interrupted or destroyed due to cultural practices (Difference).

Although students named what they deemed to be differences, I began to notice that many of the named

differences seemed less a distinct difference and more a similarity that was different by degree, in the frequency of occurrence, the limitation of a behavior considered a human right in the US, or the extensiveness in denying the freedom to choose or to act. For instance, several students identified “learning to make grown-up decisions” as a Similarity That Connects, but under Differences they noted that while US teens have rights (cultural or legal) and some modicum of control, teens in IYAL too frequently had “no voice” or “no choice.” Many “don’t have the freedoms,” a lot of “girls can’t get an education,” others are “forced to be in a war and fight at age eleven,” and some are “hiding in fear of the government.” Yet, within any of the differences noted, the protagonists were still making grown-up decisions (Similarity).

For example, in *The Story of My Life* (Ahmedi, 2005), Farah’s life in Kabul changed when the Taliban took control, pushing her family to journey to Pakistan as refugees. A student reading this book claimed that finding similarities “was tough because Farah has been through so much in her short life, from losing a leg in a land mine to the death of [multiple family members] to war.” For this student, the differences of Farah’s situation appeared to crowd out any recognition of similarities across cultures and situations, such as emotions involved in coping or personal stamina and courage in the face of adversity. Using Perry’s (1998) theory, noting what Farah “has been through” does move this reader beyond duality-oriented thinking to find multiple viewpoints about Farah’s life (“tough”; “in her short life”; “war”) and suggests movement toward relativism in providing reasons (“war”) from which to think about Farah’s life as different from the reader’s own (“losing a leg in a land mine”; “death of” multiple family members).

In a way, the explicit direction in the assignment to identify differences imposed duality-oriented thinking. However, the inability of students to recognize grown-up decision making in IYAL story settings suggests evidence of Perry’s (1998) multiplicity fuzziness—a recursive grappling between the “us vs. them” mindset and new information as a plurality of viewpoints. Students’ awareness of any emotional and psychological similarities may have faded in response to the shock related to learning of a protagonist’s trauma from war or a particular cultural practice. Soter (1997) concurs, saying that a contemporary

work may have “a greater degree of directness, bluntness, perhaps even shock-effect” (p. 217).

Theme #3: Reading Interest was high for all but four of the 101 students, and several expressed surprise at how much they enjoyed these books despite their initial concerns that many IYAL book covers were not as appealing as familiar YA books and that they expected them to read “like a dry, social studies textbook.” A student reading *A Bottle in the Gaza Sea* (Zenatti, 2008), the story of a young girl witnessing a bombing in Tel Aviv and putting a letter of hope for peace in a bottle, states, “I didn’t

expect to relate to the book or even necessarily like it because I expected it to be opposite of what I’m used to, but it wasn’t, and I very much enjoyed my book.” A student who chose *I Am Nujood* (Ali, 2010) writes, “I dreaded this assignment because I didn’t think any of the options looked like my usual choice, but I was pleasantly surprised. It is unusual for me to find an assigned book that I can’t put down, but this one had my full attention.” A true story of a 10-year-old girl brave enough to resist and leave an abusive arranged marriage, to file for divorce in Yemen, and to gain international attention does surprise!

Only four students stated they “did not like” their book but learned from it. A student reading *Journey to Jo’burg* (Naidoo, 1986) claimed, “It lacked detail and strong characters” yet “did a great job of painting the environment and telling a good story with limited pages.” Another claimed that *A Stone in My Hand* (Clinton, 2002), about a young girl’s ability to cope with her father’s disappearance in Israel from Gaza City by taming and talking to birds on her rooftop, was “not a personal preference as I prefer action.” Later in the paper she wrote, “It made me realize how much Americans take for granted on a daily basis. I never knew much about the violence between Israel and Palestine. To be honest, I feel selfish after reading this book.” In later discussions, students said these books may be for younger readers.

A third “enjoyed” *Thunder over Kandahar* (McK-

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ay, 2010), a story of two girls who are friends, whose school is destroyed by the Taliban, and who suffer serious injuries while traveling to escape, but the reader took issue with the author's depiction of US soldiers; the reader's husband was currently in the military.

The combination of reading interest and ease of reading seemed to create the bridge that allowed readers to gradually adjust to the unfamiliar, to push past duality into recognizing the multiplicity.

Any of these comments could provide examples of readers in Perry's (1998) duality phase, as evidenced by their initial resistance to new information, but reading preferences and expectations seem to be consistent factors as well.

The fourth student first stated that his book, *The Echoes of the Lost Boys of Sudan* (Disco & Clark, 2011), "was pretty monotonous, somebody shooting at them or bombing them every other page." I was concerned that I had an unusually insensitive reader until I read a later paragraph in his paper. The bracketed terms show Perry's (1998) recursive process at work:

For starters, the Arab army wipes out a whole village because they want them out. Something you won't find in our society [duality]. They live in a village in Southern Sudan from 1989 to the present, so it is weird to think that people still live like this today [duality], in huts and making fires, struggling for food and water, all while fighting the harsh Southern Sudan elements [multiplicity]. All four boys were six when the first shootings occurred. Most of them were working. At the age of six and working [multiplicity moving toward relativism]!

Because the dualities are stated so definitively as "you won't find" and "weird" when comparing the reader's culture to that of the boys in Sudan, the subsequent listing of differences plus the repetition of age "six" show the reader moving from a "weird" duality to a realization that the culture and/or conditions have fuzzied-up his initial thinking, letting him recognize that a new way to think about it is needed. He seems on the edge of coming to terms with a boy's life at age six in Sudan as an alternative life created by facts stated in his first sentence rather than just "weird."

Theme #4: Ease of Reading appeared to be one of the students' greatest pleasures, even as it amazed

them given their assumptions that a book considered easy typically equates with boring. With the often unfamiliar context inherent in IYAL titles, students repeatedly claimed that readers could appreciate these books because the unfamiliar is made more accessible through an easy style of writing. As long as readers bonded with a protagonist, the plot needed enough action and just enough embedded historical or political context to hold interest but not overwhelm. The combination of reading interest and ease of reading seemed to create the bridge that allowed readers to gradually adjust to the unfamiliar, to push past duality into recognizing the multiplicity. One student who read *The Flame Tree* (Lewis, 2004), the story of Isaac, a US doctor's son and a Christian who is taken hostage by Islamic terrorists in Indonesia, attempted to explain the process (Perry's [1998] terms in brackets):

The book was easy, but readers must have an open mind to put aside their own beliefs and understand from another point of view [multiplicity]. It was difficult for me to understand someone else's culture and religious belief without my own interfering [duality], but I allowed myself to think that not everyone grows up in a society with the same belief system [multiplicity]. I put myself in their shoes [student's strategy to move toward relativism].

Another student who read *Thura's Diary* (al-Windawi, 2004) wrote, "Easy to read but difficult to understand fully what Thura and her family are going through [recursive duality and multiplicity]" on a daily basis as war begins in Iraq.

Many students claimed they would have given up reading a book with so much new information if the reading had been difficult. *Child of Dandelions* (Nanji, 2008) tells the story of two girls in Uganda who are friends, one whose people are hated by Idi Amin, the other a dancer planning to marry Idi Amin. In response, a student wrote, "I would not read a history text on this Idi President, but I would read this true account that happened through a fictional character." Since no one described what "easy to read" meant, I asked the class the following week. For them, easy means quick reading, short paragraphs and descriptions, but strong imagery, fairly easy vocabulary, enough dialogue, and brief insertions of history or background that allow a reader to follow the plot and absorb new information.

Theme #5: Empathy happens when a reader connects with, feels for, and temporarily "becomes" a

protagonist while reading. Empathy allows the mind to become more open to differences and increases the possibility for changing old notions of *what is* to a broader worldview. The reader of *Beneath My Mother's Feet* (Qamar, 2011) felt an intense empathy, even though her ability to consider alternative cultural values or a broader perspective remained unclear: "I wanted to climb inside the book and shake Leela's very traditional family members and tell them Leela is only a child and does not deserve to have a miserable life simply because her husband passed away."

With nearly all students writing statements like, "I felt myself crying with her" or "I was caught . . . to see how he feels, things that he sees, how he interacts," the evidence in this study suggests that IYAL offers strong opportunities to develop empathy. Yet, as Louie (2005) describes, several types of empathy occur for students when reading literature across cultures, ranging from cognitive ("to see how he feels") to reactive emotional ("shake Leela's" family) to cross-cultural recognition or respect.

Theme #6: The four areas of the Broadened Perspectives theme (see Table 2) demonstrate a reader's movement from exposure to new information to experiencing disruption in one's prior knowledge. Once the disrupting information settles a bit, a reader's judgment of "abnormal" or "inferior" can shift to "different." At this point, the mind is temporarily open to alternative ways of thinking.

A few students who wrote about their reading processes help to illustrate this grappling toward understanding. In the following two examples, the four Broadened Perspective areas and Perry's (1998) positions are identified in parenthesis. In the first book, *My Name Is Not Easy* (Edwardson, 2011), Inupiaq and his brothers are sent far from the Arctic Circle to a strict Catholic boarding school in Alaska where his language and nearly everything familiar is forbidden. A student writes:

I was so ignorant about the Eskimo culture that I am almost ashamed [raised awareness/multiplicity]. To have a rivalry between Eskimos and Indians [increased knowledge] never occurred to me [raised awareness/multiplicity]. I have learned about multiculturalism [increased knowledge] but have never personally experienced it [suggests understanding/relativism]. This book put me in the place of a multicultural student forced into a mainstream position [raised awareness/multiplicity]. It opened my eyes [raised

awareness; open-mindedness/multiplicity; commitment]. Books like this can help make me more open-minded [open-mindedness/relativism].

A different reader of *Beneath My Mother's Feet* (Qamar, 2011) tells us that

[I]n Pakistan, to be without a husband is shameful [increased knowledge/duality]; I equate it to being unemployed in our society [understanding/multiplicity; relativism]. When Abbu is banned from Seema's house, my American mind automatically thought they were headed for divorce [duality]. But when Abbu shows up, Amma immediately forgives him. I realized this just must show how it is in their culture [raised awareness to open-mindedness/multiplicity to relativism]. Even though Abbu's actions forced the family

Table 2. Domain analysis results of "broadened perspectives" theme

Broadened Perspectives: Four Areas	Definition of Areas	Data as Evidence
Increased Knowledge	New information learned	1. "I learned how Palestinian people react to Israeli soldiers and their rules and how the soldiers react to the Palestinians." 2. "Every day in Sudan kids have to fight to survive, dodging bullets and wild animals." 3. "Didn't know people in villages in Yemen didn't have cars."
Raised Awareness/ Consciousness	Showing a growing interest or concern; a desire to do what is right	1. "Seems to be more of a communal element in poverty-stricken countries." 2. "I gained insight into how innocent people, not just our troops, are being placed in dangerous situations." 3. "I was in shock that this horrible environment [sweat shop] is a harsh reality millions of children face." 4. "We are so insulated and inured to our culture."
Open-Mindedness	Willing to consider new ideas; unprejudiced	1. "I was enlightened about the Taliban. I usually see Arabs as terrorists, but now I know they suffer from terrorism in their everyday life."
Understanding	Sympathetic or empathetic awareness or tolerance	1. "It gave me poignant insight into how a young man could be convinced to kill himself for a cause."

out of their home to become house servants, Amma has no choice but to forgive him [open-mindedness/commitment]. Without him, she will be stuck as a house servant forever [understanding/commitment].

Responses across all 101 papers in the four areas of the Broadened Perspectives theme provide evidence that students were experiencing the learning goals desired when reading multicultural or international literature (Banks, 2009; Bean et al., 2014; Machado, 2011; Nieto, 2009; Short, 2012; Sleeter & McClaren, 1995). Many students named their prejudices or ignorance and noted their need to expand both knowledge and ways of thinking about cultures and countries around the world. Nearly all made an attempt to find points of connection in order to better understand “the Other.”

Some Challenges with Teaching and Reading International Young Adult Literature

Teaching unfamiliar literature requires feeling comfortable as a co-learner rather than as the expert. Internet resources relieve basic background information concerns and vocabulary difficulties, and the use of online images has the potential to promote reader interest and make story settings easier to envision.

Researching and discussing both IYAL literature and the larger cultural issues it raises require time. For book selection, I prefer authors native to the country about which they write but accept others who integrate enough cultural, historical, or political detail. I prefer recent time frames over historical so that current events further enhance reader interest and story relevance.

For teen readers, venturing into new geographical and cultural territory with IYAL may result in resistance. To help students grapple successfully with the very concept of *culture*, teachers might draw upon Hofstede’s (1991) work in psychology. Reminding us that culture is learned, not inherited, he conceptualizes culture as mental programming or “software of the mind” (p. 4). Every person holds cultural patterns of thinking, feeling, and acting that are primarily acquired in childhood but learned throughout a lifetime. Beneath one’s learned culture lays a foundation of human nature, containing both universal and inherited qualities. A third layer, the individual personality, is both inherited and learned. Calling it a moral issue, Hofstede notes the importance of teaching that one’s cultural home is not *normal* but specific to one’s group. He believes having an understanding of one’s own culture to be a basic skill, a skill needed to understand the values of others and communicate

Table 3. Challenges with teaching and reading about unfamiliar cultures

For Teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teaching comfort • Book selection 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bean et al. (2014) state some are not comfortable teaching about unfamiliar places, populations, or cultures. Rosenblatt (2005) challenges teachers to acquaint youth with literature about all people to eliminate provincialism and foster sound international understanding. • Consider amount of cultural and sociopolitical information included, time period, setting, intensity of description for age appropriateness.
For Teen Readers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unfamiliar geographic and cultural territory • Conceptualizing <i>culture</i> • Ethnocentric thinking • Experiencing “Insider” and “Outsider” values as a basic skill 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Utilize Hofstede (1991) approach with students. • Use multiple definitions prior to reading. Excerpts from Geertz (1973) may suffice: a psychological structure that guides the behavior of individuals or groups (p. 11), a context, not a power (p. 14), and “a historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols” (p. 89). • Define and discuss a definition: the dual judgment of one’s own culture as normal and other cultures as different or abnormal, thus inferior, which results in uncritically accepting one’s own culture while remaining biased or intolerant of other cultures (Schopmeyer & Fisher, 1993). • Schopmeyer & Fisher (1993) offer exercises of heightened sensitivity; stopping to question why certain practices may have been developed; looking from both sides.

or cooperate with people in a global society. Thus, the reader's challenge: to read about unfamiliar cultures before making a concerted effort to examine one's own layered culture.

Soter (1997) notes that the reader's "starting point for engagement *and* interpretation will be different from that of cultural 'insiders'" (p. 215). For instance, a student reading *Climbing the Stairs* (Venkatraman, 2010) finds Vidya at 15 with a vibrant personality in a culture of patriarchy and arranged marriages, in a time of impending war, and in separate living areas from males in her grandfather's traditional household. A student writes, "There is no such thing as an independent woman here" and "no education option unless the man of the house decides it is appropriate." The tone suggests a "shock-effect" (Soter, p. 217) or "reactive emotional empathy" (Louie, 2005, p. 571)—two understandable responses as the reader begins to connect with Vidya's character and discovers major cultural practice differences.

Ethnocentric thinking among readers presents another challenge. The student finding Vidya without independence or with no options for education adds, "This made me compare Vidya's life to mine." The student's challenge here becomes consciously considering her own culture (Hofstede's basic skill) as well as considering cultural differences for Vidya without deeming Vidya inferior. Schopmeyer and Fisher (1993) suggest helping students develop an appreciation of their own and other cultures by becoming both insiders and outsiders through exercises of heightened sensitivity and by stopping to question and examine from both sides in order to disrupt thinking that "my culture is normal; others are not."

Discussion and Closing Comments

The study aimed to explore how students respond and/or relate to reading and hearing about people, cultures, conflicts, and religions as found in IYAL; whether responses indicate reader empathy, open-mindedness, and/or understanding; and how students compare young adult literature set in the United States with international young adult literature in terms of teen reader interest. Relative to the first aim, I did discover how my students responded and related to IYAL. All were surprised to have learned so much about other countries, cultures, and sociopolitical is-

ues from easy-to-read young adult literature. All but a few expressed surprise or guilt for being so uninformed about countries and cultures outside of the US.

Nearly all students expressed that they now have a more open mind and attitude toward recognizing differences rather than a "normal/abnormal" duality. However, as Robertson and Martin (2000) note, "[R]ecognition does not necessarily constitute tolerance," and "tolerance does not necessarily imply understanding. Understanding does not guarantee acceptance" (p. 502). Changing attitudes may take years of outside influences, but repeated and varied approaches over time do make an impact (Gardner, 2006). IYAL appears to be one powerful influence.

Relative to the second research question, students did transition from early "us/them," shocked, or anger-related responses toward empathy and/or understanding.

Empathy with characters came easily, but understanding cultures and conditions different from their own presented greater challenges. The development of Hofstede's (1991) basic skill of understanding one's own culture to be able to understand or communicate with people of another culture remained weak but could be strengthened with specific assignments to foster this skill. Yet, students' early emotional reactions of not wanting to "get close to a world that ignored individuals' rights" (Louie, 2005, p. 575) seemed to soften, letting them "shorten the distances between characters and themselves" (p. 575) enough to experience a connection of common humanity around the world (Short, 2012). Reader empathy thus presents the opportunity to extend discussions about the significance of one's culture.

Regardless of a reader's age, portrayals on television, in movies, and over the Internet give us superficial understandings, often grounded in fear and stereotypes, about the people of countries other than the United States. These depictions can lead to "ethnocen-

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trism, a lack of understanding about global cultures, and a stance of pity and superiority over the ‘poor and unfortunate’ in the world” (Short, 2012, p. 13). We all need to have our assumptions and perspectives challenged if we want to “gain insights into how people feel, live, and think in global cultures” (p. 13).

In response to research question three, students in this study agreed that IYAL presents “more serious issues” and “more intense poverty, racial injustice, and death”; that “[teen] concerns are overwhelmed and shaped by regional conflicts”; and that these storied lives can be “inspiring” as we “see what hardships a teenager can overcome.” A repeated student response, “I loved this book, even though . . . ,” reveals students’ enjoyment in entering another’s culture and life in another country even as they struggle with stark contrasts to their own lives in which privilege looms large.

Yes, these titles explore issues more serious and more intense, but they also offer realities one cannot ignore if we are to be aware and educated about the world in which we live. “It is absolutely critical and absolutely necessary” (Bean et al., 2014, p. 251) for today’s youth to understand themselves in relation to the world. I agree with my students who say, “We take so much of our daily lives for granted,” “International books are essential to the classroom,” “I wish I could have read international books when I was in middle school,” and “Stories like these need to be read, shared, studied, and remembered.”

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(Use of * indicates the book is for a mature reader. The country of a book’s setting is in parentheses.)

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