

Moral Choices:

Building a Bridge between YA Literature and Life

“There’s one more thing- a thing that *nobody* don’t know but me. And that is, there’s a n[-----] here that I’m a-trying to steal out of slavery [. . .] .I know what you’ll say. You’ll say it’s a dirty, low-down business; but what if it is? *I’m* low down; and I’m a-going to steal him”

—*Twain, 218*

“I ask him, ‘Why’d you guys do this robbery? Why’d you need money so bad?’

Alan looks at me a second before he answers. ‘Our mom has cancer. We don’t have any medical insurance because mom had to quit her job. She’s really sick from the chemotherapy and radiation treatments, and her medicine costs a fortune. We’re down to nothing. We had to get some money, so I came up with this idiotic idea’”

—*Trueman, 71*

“With great power also comes great responsibility.”

—*Spiderman, David Koepp*

In 2004, in light of world events, the fact that modern societies greatly prize freedom of choice is starkly evident. But, as Peter Parker’s (Spiderman) dying uncle Ben told him, “with great power also comes great responsibility,” a fact any thirteen-year-old can tell you created Peter’s alter-ego, a super-powered adolescent whose life’s work was to fight for good. In the world outside of comic books, too, freedom to choose one’s actions truly does come with “great responsibility.” The good of society rests on the individual’s ability to make choices that benefit not only him/herself, but also society as a whole.

Morally correct decisions prevent individuals or groups from violating the rights of others, sometimes others who can not stand up for their own rights. It would be nice if our society rewarded morally correct decisions, especially among adolescents whose moral values are being formed and tested, but often the

moral position is difficult to identify, let alone follow through on. It’s just not that simple.

From Mark Twain’s 1885 classic *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, to Terry Trueman’s 2003 novel *Inside Out*, young adult novels reveal the truth about the complexities that people face when they are confronted with moral dilemmas. While certain decisions may seem to have a clearly moral, or clearly immoral bent, these novels demonstrate that society cannot always be counted on to properly define morality. Huck Finn acts immorally, his intellect tells him, when he breaks the law to help a slave escape. According to society this is an immoral act; it is, in fact, theft of property, but Huck looks within himself and intuits that society’s acceptance of slavery is grossly at odds with a higher morality.

Similarly, Trueman’s teenage characters are committing armed robbery, which society correctly

deems immoral. However, they are motivated to do so by a higher moral call, the desire to save their dying mother. In this case Trueman forces his readers to consider the role society plays when it denies medical care to the poor, leading the boys to a desperate decision to commit a crime.

Apparently, society cannot always be counted on to establish a reliable moral map and may actually send adolescents down the wrong path as a result. While rather frightening at first, ultimately this demonstrates the important role that individuals must play in monitoring and shaping society's ideals. In an apathetic nation, encouraging adults to make their voices heard on the issues is difficult; even the freedom and privilege (should we call it a responsibility?) to vote is not accepted by the majority, as demonstrated by the decreasing number of eligible voters who visit the polls each election. If the goal is to hear multiple perspectives and discussion of pro's and cons, right and wrong, the local football rivalry will probably initiate a more spirited debate than election issues that will affect moral choices for decades.

The strength of young adult novels, however, both classic and contemporary, to challenge students to discuss, contemplate, and develop their own moral standards cannot be overlooked by today's language arts and reading teachers. As these young adults develop their own moral standards, through engaged, critical examinations of moral dilemmas, they can also begin to explore how their own engagement can be incorporated into participation in the improvement of their society.

Young adult novels provide a positive avenue for the introduction of thought-provoking explorations of mature issues that encourage students to examine critical societal and individual situations from a variety of perspectives. The novels allow students to vicariously experience challenging, sometimes dangerous situations, in a non-threatening fictional arena. Through these explorations of moral dilemmas in young adult novels students will develop critical thinking abilities that will allow them to examine moral dilemmas in their own communities and make their own moral decisions from a more balanced and solidified moral stance. Their explorations can also help them to identify societal weaknesses, and provide them with opportunities to develop ideas to help

combat some of the pressures that contribute to morally unacceptable choices.

Adolescence is a period of continual change and exploration. Young adults begin to examine their identities, their relationships with family and peers, and their career interests. The decisions that they make regarding these different areas of their lives are ultimately shaped by their personal value systems. Like Huck and his dilemma over abolition, today's students often experience confusion and/or meet obstacles as they develop these personal value systems and have difficulty making moral decisions which support their future well-being and the well-being of society in general. With today's increases in violence, alienation, emotional dependence, and lack of social responsibility it seems crucial that the educational community assist adolescents with the formation of personal value systems in order to foster their abilities to make positive decisions. Thus, it is the challenge of instructors to lead young adults to young adult literature that helps them through the gauntlet of moral development.

The modern language arts classroom is one arena that can foster this value system development. Rita Manning, in her 1992 work *Speaking from the Heart: A Feminist on Ethics*, says that fiction "can help the young reader determine and understand his or her own ideas about morality and can help the young reader work through moral confusions" (28). Additionally, Sharon Stringer, in her study of adolescent psychological problems, suggests "Exploring adolescent psychology through young adult literature provides another constructive avenue for individuals to develop 'problem-focused' coping techniques" (xiii).

Reading young adult novels that feature realistic moral dilemmas and their consequences provides adolescents with a safe venue in which they can explore a variety of solutions to modern problems. Examining these characters and their choices can often present readers with alternative methods to understand their own moral dilemmas and positively resolve conflicts in their own lives.

We are offering here specific examples of young adult novels that examine four main areas of adolescent moral reasoning: identity exploration, relationships with adults, relationships with peers, and the idea of social responsibility. Reading, discussing, and

reflecting upon these ideas can stimulate adolescent moral development.

Identity

Young adults, in life and in literature alike, struggle to develop identities that will allow them to become independent of their family and friends. Often as children mature, they must discover that a person's identity is comprised of a variety of personal qualities and abilities. In her 2003 Coretta Scott King and Printz winning novel, *The First Part Last*, (prequel to *Heaven*) Angela Johnson chronicles a very fast set of choices that lead her protagonist, Bobby, to choose the identity of responsible father at age 16. When Bobby and his girlfriend Nia discover they are about to become parents, a moral dilemma certainly follows about what to do with the baby, keep it or adopt it out (or other?). When Nia goes into a permanent coma during childbirth, however, Bobby is faced with choices he had not at all anticipated. He chooses to become a single parent and eventually forsakes his native Brooklyn for Heaven, Ohio, which he thinks will make family life better for him and his infant daughter, Feather. In between the birth and his departure, however, he is confronted by other identities that demand his attention or denial. Is he a tag artist who spray-paints buildings? Is he a carefree teenage boy who "hangs" with his buddies all night, buddies who are not particularly responsible even for teenage boys? Or is he a young parent who has made a commitment to Nia's parents, to his own, to himself and, most importantly to the baby, Feather? Ultimately, Bobby's moral fiber is much stronger than the reader might first estimate. Obviously, many teenagers face the moral choices that surround teen pregnancy every day, and experiencing these choices vicariously through Bobby can only help.

In the 1987 novel *Crazy Horse Electric Game*, by Chris Crutcher, a teen named Willie defines his identity by his physical capabilities. After a water skiing accident leaves him paralyzed, he struggles to gain a new sense of identity based on the strengths he still possesses. Jeff, in *When Jeff Comes Home*, (Atkins, 1999) also struggles to prevent one aspect of his life from controlling his identity completely. After being kidnapped and sexually abused, Jeff must learn how to regain a sense of normalcy. He finally does so

after realizing that his identity may always be affected by his experiences, but that there are ways for him to begin to make choices that have a more positive impact on his sense of identity.

Like Jeff, Cole in *Touching Spirit Bear* (Mikaelson, 2001) is an angry young adult who must work toward acceptance of his past, its affect on his identity, and ways in which he can develop a more positive sense of self. After enduring emotional neglect from his parents, and fighting and stealing for years Cole is banned to a remote Alaskan island as part of a juvenile rehabilitation program known as Circle Justice. On the island he learns that in order to survive he must stop blaming others for his mistakes and take responsibility for his actions and their effects on his life and the lives of others. He realizes that by making amends for past actions, and resolving to make positive decisions in the future, he can begin to re-shape his identity from being violent and uncontrolled to working hard and accepting compromises.

Destiny, a troubled 12-year-old (*Destiny*, Grove, 2000) also struggles to accept responsibility for her actions in spite of a less than desirable home life. She eventually begins to come to terms with her family and herself as she enters the world of Mrs. Peck, an elderly woman to whom she reads. Over the course of their relationship, Destiny must make moral decisions which conflict with her unscrupulous family members' beliefs. She learns that her priority must focus on remaining true to her own values, and that her identity need not be shaped by her family members' identities.

Destiny's realization that identity can be shaped by an individual, and need not be defined by birth, is echoed in Ann Rinaldi's 1991 historical fiction novel *Wolf by the Ears*, in which the main character questions whether her identity is defined by her biracial heritage. This theme also reappears in Meg Cabot's *The Princess Diaries* in which 14-year-old Mia must decide if her identity is the result of her noble birth, or her middle-class New York City upbringing.

Jerry Spinelli looks at identity development from a different perspective in his novel *Stargirl* (2000). In this novel he focuses on how society can affect a person's identity development. Stargirl, from her first days at Mica High School, struggles with who she is and who she wants to be. Unfortunately, the way she dresses begins to turn the student body—and even her

own boyfriend—against her. Stargirl questions whether her identity is controlled by her image, or if her image controls her identity. She must decide whether her need for an independent identity requires her to conform to gain acceptance from her peers.

Reading about these teenage characters' struggles with identity can act as a catalyst for young adult readers to consider how one defines one's own identity, the role which peers and society play in that defining process, and how the repercussions of moral decisions can affect identity development.

Relationships with adults

During adolescence parent-child conflicts become fairly normal. However, Nancy Cobb, in her 1995 book *Adolescence*, suggests that these conflicts must be resolved, and reconnections formed based on respect and cooperation. This resolution becomes more problematic when young adults are missing the positive parental role models with which this reconnection can occur. Several of Chris Crutcher's novels, including *Stotan* (1986), *Running Loose* (1983), *Ironman* (1995) and *Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes* (1993) feature parents who are either absent, or physically or emotionally abusive. In order to find support, and make connections with positive adult role models these adolescents must seek out other adult role models in their lives. In *Stotan*, *Chinese Handcuffs*, (1989) and *Whale Talk* (2001) the abused characters are able to find physical and emotional help from their sports coaches. *Ironman* features Mr. Nak, a community adult who leads an anger management group for troubled teenagers. The positive adult role model is presented in the form of a high school English teacher in *Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes*. All of these books suggest to readers that they can find the caring role models in their communities that they lack in their own homes.

Norma Fox Mazer reminds readers in her 2001 novel, *Girlhearts*, that sometimes a teenager's separation from his or her parents is not a matter of neglect, or of choice. When 13-year-old Sarabeth loses her mother to a heart attack she loses the only home she has ever known, and the adult she would usually turn to for support during traumatic times. In her initial grief Sarabeth considers running away from two close friends of her mother who are caring for her. As she moves through the grieving process, she begins to

develop new support networks with her new caretakers, and realizes why she must stay with them. Additionally, she reaches out to distant family members to heal deep family wounds. Although Sarabeth has lost her mother, she moves through anger and grief and forms lasting connections with new adults who help to support her.

The topic of parental loss due to divorce, and the complex relationships children have with their step-families is explored by Ann Brashares in the novel *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* (2001), and its sequel, *The Second Summer of the Sisterhood* (2003). These two novels feature four teenage friends who are learning to adapt to changing family situations. In the first novel Carmen must discover where her place is in her father's home which now includes a new wife and stepchildren. In the sequel Carmen struggles to accept the realities of her mother's return to dating, and the personality changes it causes her to undergo. Although Carmen takes her mother's approval of Carmen's boyfriend for granted, the reverse is not true. When her mother goes so far as to wear the traveling pants out on a date as if she were one of the teenage Septembers (all four girls were born in September), Carmen throws a tantrum. In both of these novels the characters are able to rediscover the bonds that have always existed between themselves and their parents. The teenage and adult characters demonstrate that honesty and understanding on both sides can help even the most strained relationships become more harmonious.

These novels demonstrate that adolescents need positive adult role models for support during the many challenges that they face. These novels demonstrate that honesty, caring, compromise, and understanding from both sides will allow these relationships to flourish, whether the teen is forming the relationship with a parent, a blood relative, or another support adult. The novels illustrate to readers that the world is full of caring individuals who are available to help encourage adolescents to make positive decisions.

Peer Groups

Adolescents often feel a tremendous amount of pressure from their peer groups to modify their behavior in a way that is consistent with the expectations of the group. These group expectations can either demonstrate caring for each other and other

members of society, or they can be more negative, requiring members to act in ways that they know are not morally correct providing the individual with an opportunity to choose.

Walter Dean Myers's 2003 novel, *The Beast*, for example, provides the reader with a portrait of a young man who never turns his back on his peers but doesn't let them influence him into a losing lifestyle, either. Anthony "Spoon" Witherspoon returns periodically to his old neighborhood in Harlem from the prestigious and exclusive prep boarding school he attends, where he is a star basketball player and a good student. Tragically, he finds that "the Beast," as Myers has named it, claims more and more of his old friends and acquaintances every time he returns. Drugs, poverty, and a life without much promise for improvement destroy or harm the people he has known and loved during his seventeen years. Friends and especially his former, and still sort-of, girlfriend, Gabi, would draw him back into the quagmire of their existence. Meanwhile, his new friends unintentionally pressure him to leave that world behind and join their world of privilege and promise. Spoon navigates the two worlds without abandoning his friends in either; in fact, he makes choices that permit him to create win-win situations for everyone involved, despite "the Beast."

Many additional young adult novels contain negative peer influences but have main characters who resist, or overcome, the negative pressure and ultimately make morally correct decisions. In Chris Crutcher's *Running Loose* Louis Banks has the bravery to resist going along with the rest of the football team's plan to use cheating tactics during a game. Dan, in Lois Ruby's *Skindeep* (1994) realizes that the neo-Nazi group he has become involved with might provide him with the sense of acceptance he craves, but that the acceptance would come at the price of the violation of his own moral beliefs. He is strong enough to choose to remain an outsider rather than sacrifice his true convictions. *Night Hoops* (Deuker, 2000) and *Death at Devil's Bridge* (DeFelice, 2000) also show main characters that struggle with negative peer pressure but ultimately make decisions that reflect their own beliefs about the importance of ensuring other people's happiness and well-being.

On the other hand, examples of how negative peer pressure can coerce adolescents into performing

immoral acts are numerous. In Lois Duncan's classic novel *Killing Mr. Griffin* (1978) Susan's desire for peer acceptance is so great that she agrees to become involved in the plot to kidnap and persecute an English teacher. Carla in *The Drowning of Stephan Jones* (Green, 1991) also struggles with her boyfriend's expectation that she support him in his persecution of a homosexual couple in their town. Again, negative peer influence is evident in Robert Cormier's novel *We All Fall Down* (1991) as several young men pressure Buddy into a self-destructive cycle of alcoholism and vandalism. All three of these novels demonstrate the horrendous results that can accompany adolescents' decisions to allow themselves to be controlled by the negative influences of their peers.

Young adult novels can also demonstrate the positive effects that supportive peer groups can have on adolescents. *Speak* (Anderson, 1999) is a vivid demonstration of the power of both negative and positive peer pressure. When Melinda breaks up an end-of-summer party by calling the police, her friends abandon her and she becomes the high school social outcast. Eventually, she becomes so traumatized that she retreats into silence. Near the end of the school year she finally begins to receive support from some students at her school. It is their support, which defies the unspoken rule to ignore Melinda, that finally allows her to validate her experiences of the previous summer. Through their support Melinda is able to begin to learn to express herself and become empowered again. With her empowerment she is able to finally explain the truth about the events of the previous summer and begin the process of obtaining justice by holding others responsible for their decisions.

These novels demonstrate that peer influence can either stunt or encourage positive moral development. Through reading and comparing the consequences of both negative and positive peer influence, young adults can begin to identify the type of peer influence that is present in their own lives. They can also begin to understand the importance of eliminating the damaging peer influences before they suffer unintended negative consequences themselves.

Developing social responsibility

As teenagers continue to mature they begin to seek out their places in society. They must grapple

with society's expectations for them, and the responsibilities that these expectations carry. These social responsibilities generally include protection of society members and the overall improvement of life for all society members. Adolescents must discover how their personal sense of self relates to society, and how their personal identity is shaped by the identity of society. Occasionally, a society may have expectations which teenagers deem unreasonable, such as when American society expected African Americans to accept segregation. In these cases teenagers must decide the degree to which they will conform and how they can work to peacefully achieve necessary societal changes. Several young adult novels explore how societal standards, expectations, and responsibilities affect members' decisions and actions.

Negative, controlling, societal expectations are clear in *Sisters* (Paulsen, 1993). Two young women are trapped and destroyed by society's expectations, which include adherence to distorted views of beauty and success. As each woman attempts to fulfill societal expectations, her pursuits of true happiness are thwarted. This book is a moving example of how negative societal expectation can destroy promising lives. It also provides a warning to readers that societal expectations must constantly be evaluated and revised to ensure that the needs of all members are being met.

This process of developing, evaluating, and revising societal expectations is demonstrated by *Downriver* (Hobbs, 1991) and its sequel *River Thunder* (Hobbs, 1997). In these novels a group of teenagers form a small society of their own as they face challenges on a swift and raging whitewater river. Initially each person dismisses the need for unity, authority, and group responsibility. However, after several mishaps they evaluate their situation and realize that survival necessitates the need for societal roles that stress organization and teamwork. By basing the rest of their task assignments on the needs of the entire group, and stressing that members have a responsibility to each other, the adolescents survive their ordeal. Their revised expectations allow each member personal freedom, but stress that those freedoms cannot endanger others.

Each of these novels asks readers to re-evaluate the role of societal expectations in their own lives. Through careful examination of these expectations

adolescents gain a deeper understanding of their own role in society, and the important impact that their individual decisions play in the formation and maintenance of a coherent, cooperative, successful society.

Most of the young adult novels in this article feature young protagonists who meet with some degree of success and feel good about what they have done. The characters often learn to become independent, think for themselves, and become more considerate of others' rights. Not all characters meet with immediate success, and some are still struggling with their moral development at the end of the novel. However, these struggles are realistic, and help to reinforce the idea to teenagers that growing up is never easy, that the struggles they are facing in their own lives are natural, and that progress toward becoming a successful adult can be achieved if one is willing to work hard and make tough decisions. Readers may not always agree with each of the characters' decisions, but at least they are exposed to possibilities of resolving ethical issues they may not have previously considered. They are provided with choices, and these choices prompt reflections about their personal beliefs, thereby stimulating their moral development.

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