

Doctoral Dissertations (2008–2009): A Review of Research on Young Adult Literature

Despite the onslaught of young adult novels in the last fifty years and the abundance of teachers and scholars interested in young adult books, there still remain few academic papers that deal directly with young adult works—either fiction or non. In fact, a quick review of recent entries in Dissertation Abstracts (2007–2009) reveals few doctoral dissertations that deal directly with the study of books for young adults. Those that do exist, though, are substantial, informative, and remarkable for their depth and understanding in revealing how the study of books intended for young adults—works designed to appeal to adolescents—contributes directly to developing lifelong readers, critical thinkers, and book lovers everywhere.

Curious as this may be, young adult literature scholars, though few in number, do stand alone for their unique perspective that recognizes the critical element in all good instruction—the ability to persuade teenagers to see the world through different eyes. What these dissertations have in common is their concentration on the remarkable insight that literature intended for young adults brings to the conversation about what matters most to young people. It is not *Hamlet*. It is not *Huck Finn*. And it is not *David Copperfield*. Instead, it is a contemporary recognition that books for young adults speak with a voice that is honest, open, and real about what it means to be a “kid in the modern world.”

What follows are reviews of only 11 doctoral dissertations from 2008 and 2009 that concentrate solely on the purview of the study of books intended for young adults. No attempt has been made to as-

sess their quality, but simply to underscore their importance in contributing to the depth and breadth of understanding the significance of books intended for young adults. Let us hope that these good papers inspire others to do the same.

Dissertations: 2009

In “**Chatting about Books: Online Discussions about Young Adult Multicultural Literature in a Course for Pre-Service and Practicing Teachers**,” Jacqueline Arnold (University of Minnesota, 2009) presents a qualitative case study of an online young adult multicultural literature course for pre-service and practicing teachers. Findings revealed that online discussion proved to be just as effective and in-depth as face-to-face instruction, providing another indication that technology is transforming the instruction of young adult books.

Using ethnographic methods to analyze course transcripts, Arnold (2009) found that elements of effective face-to-face discussion were evident in online discussions. Critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2003) and features associated with curricular conversations (Langer, 1995; Applebee, 1996; Nystrand, 1997) were engaged to demonstrate how readers interact in discussions about multicultural literature for young adults. Arnold learned that two types of discussion, asynchronous and synchronous, offered students many opportunities to examine multiple reader perspectives and peer understandings. Moreover, Arnold noted that online interaction provided more instances for open discussion than were typical

in known face-to-face classrooms. Finally, some study participants indicated a better appreciation for the act of reading overall as a result of online discussions in the course.

“**Cutting to the Heart of Things: A Novel of Adolescent Self-Injury**” is a unique dissertation (Alliant International University, 2009), as Courtney de Blicke documented the preparation and writing of a young adult novel dealing with self-injury (cutting oneself) from an adolescent female perspective, including the social ramifications of this stultifying crime against oneself. Self-injury, as de Blicke underscores, has become in the past two decades (1980–2000) a significant problem among adolescent and young adult women. Despite this pressing problem, little attention has been addressed as to why teen girls are practicing self-mutilation. Thus, the primary objective of this dissertation was to write a book for young adult women that both explores the notion of self-injury and creates a compelling fictional narrative for teen readers.

Semistructured interviews were conducted with 6 women, ages 23 to 31, who had engaged in self-injury beginning in adolescence. The interviews were conducted to gain a fuller understanding of self-injury and why adolescent girls are predominantly affected. The results were incorporated into a fictional book for young adults (written by the researcher) that explored issues of body dissatisfaction, victimization, and powerlessness, incidents associated with a feminist perspective. By using a novel to explore the reasons for a teenage girl’s self-cutting, the author was able to make sense of self-injury and the steps required to save young girls from their self-destructive behavior.

Dissertations: 2008

Maria Dulce Perez Castillo (University of San Francisco, 2008) has written a most interesting dissertation, “**African Heritage in Cuban Literature for Children and Young Adults: A Participatory Study with Nersys Felipe and Teresa Cardenas.**” Her study explores the voices and reflections of two female Cuban authors who represent two different generations—those who came of age at the beginning of the Cuban revolution and those who are still working today. This provocative paper analyzes how both of these Cuban female authors addressed coming of age issues during and after the Cuban revolution—through the lens of Cuban children and young adult literature.

Using a qualitative study design, Castillo’s research consisted of two processes. First, she interviewed the young adult authors, Nersys Felipe and Teresa Cardenas, about their lives and their young adult books on Cuban life. Second, she analyzed their young adult novels. The process of methodology, dialogic retrospection (her author interviews), and text analysis (critical interpretation of their young adult novels), were combined to explore how the literary works of the authors highlight significant issues central to Afro-Cuban voices and the African heritage in Cuban literature for children and young adults.

Castillo’s work focuses on an often-neglected minority of adolescents—adolescents of both Cuban and African American heritage. Her findings suggest that these authors are raising awareness by portraying adolescent Afro-Cuban characters as protagonists in their own stories for young people. Their literary works for children and young adults emphasize the many affinities among children of different races and strive to illuminate their unique natures while maintaining the universality of their experiences.

In “**A Literary Analysis of Young Adults with Multiple Narrative Perspectives Using a Sociocultural Lens**” (University of Illinois at Chicago, 2008), Melanie Koss systematically categorizes the types of multiple narrative perspectives existing in current young adult literature. Her purpose for this categorization was to ask these three questions:

- How can multiple narrative perspective books best be defined?
- Why are there so many contemporary young adult novels told from multiple perspectives?
- What are the challenges faced by editors and publishers who produce young adult novels told from multiple perspectives?

A literary analysis of 205 young adult novels was undertaken. Each novel was examined for its distinct

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features and for its use of multiple perspective narration. In addition, students and teachers were studied to gauge their understanding of young adult novels told from multiple perspectives and to record their hypotheses for its increasing popularity and use. Data were collected through teen literature discussion groups, questionnaires, and interviews.

Results indicated that the prevalence of contemporary young adult novels told from multiple perspectives is a direct reflection of the changing dynamics of adolescent life.

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their level of sophistication rises—in their personal and academic lives, their face-to-face and technological worlds, and their implicit and explicit exposure to world events and social phenomena—all of which only reinforces the notion that contemporary young adult novels reflect the inherent complexity and multiplicity of their lives. Simply, young adult books will always reflect what is.

Finally, Koss's dissertation includes not only vivid characterizations and descriptions of young adult literature told from multiple perspectives, but it also provides useful and practical suggestions for using these novels in the classroom. Koss underlines the significance of using multiple perspective young adult books in teaching and clarifies its presence as a direct corollary to our fast-paced, highly technical and ever-changing world.

In "Archetypal Images in Young Adult Baseball Fiction, 1988–2007," David Pegram (Arizona State University, 2008) examined twenty-one contemporary young adult novels published between 1988 and 2007 with baseball-related plots. His purpose was to identify common archetypal images that are generic to young adult novels and are appealing to primarily male readers.

Pegram's study followed a three-step process. First, Pegram defined the common archetypes that he would expect to find in young adult novels. Sample

archetypes included the Seeker, the Warrior, the Sage, and the Trickster. Second, he sampled all twenty-one young adult novels, selected for age appropriateness and quality, and analyzed these works for the existence of the sample archetypes. Finally, he drew conclusions as to what archetypes existed in each of the twenty-one young adult novels.

Results of the study revealed that at least one archetype image could be found within each young adult novel and that these archetypal images contained attributes that were most germane to stories involving baseball. Such knowledge, Pegram asserts, will prove most useful in helping educators make sound choices in helping struggling readers find connections between their interests in sports, particularly baseball, and high-interest books involving baseball.

Robin Moeller's dissertation "No Thanks, Those Are Boy Books: A Feminist Cultural Analysis of Graphic Novels as Curricular Materials" (Indiana University, 2008) examined how a group of mid-western high school students read gender into three graphic novels. The graphic novels came with the Young Adult Library Services Association recommendation and were shared with the students in a classroom setting.

Using a qualitative framework, Moeller spent four months observing and interacting with high school students and teachers in a particular high school setting. She and a male research assistant conducted unstructured focus group interviews and individual interviews with eight female and seven male participants who had read each graphic novel selected for this study. Analysis of the data included a coding process on the transcribed interviews and on the researcher's fieldnotes.

Participants revealed that they 1) enjoyed the graphic novels they read, and 2) did not feel they were "boy books." Still, the students, both male and female, did respond that they felt that their teachers and their peers did not consider graphic novels to be legitimate pieces of literature. Graphic novels were not regarded as "real books" (as compared to chapter books) or as viable curricular material. In addition, the male readers had a different reaction to the graphic novels than the female readers. Male participants found graphic novel reading to be a very rewarding experience, whereas female participants felt that graphic novels did not sufficiently challenge their

imaginative and analytical skills. The author concludes her dissertation with suggestions for legitimizing graphic novels within the context of the school curriculum.

Thomas Bryan Crisp's dissertation "Rainbow Boys': Romance, Repression and Representation," (Michigan State University, 2008) analyzes the popular series about gay youth, Alex Sanchez's *Rainbow Boys*. Sanchez contends that the contributions made by this series are overshadowed by its portrayal of stereotypes, both heterosexual and homosexual, that may actually perpetuate homophobic attitudes toward gay sexuality.

Drawing primarily on critical reading and feminist and queer theory, Crisp identifies the three protagonists of the *Rainbow Boy* series as characters that only reinforce conventional homosexual stereotypes. Moreover, Crisp describes how the world in which these characters live is equally problematic. These homosexual male figures are tormented deviants who find solace only when isolated from the abusive heterosexual "mainstream." Crisp maintains that this vivid depiction of abuse and discrimination—though valid in and of itself—is probably a gross exaggeration of what is. Crisp argues that future authors of young adult literature depicting both straight and gay teens should strive for more fully developed and rounded presentations.

In **"Teaching Young Adult Literature to ESL Students: An Experiment,"** Yongan Wu (University of Oklahoma, 2008) explores the teaching of young adult literature to advanced English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESL) students. Wu analyzes how teaching young adult literature to ESL students can help develop literacy skills, foster critical thinking, and cultivate student learning.

Using a multiple case study approach, Wu studied the participants enrolled in an intensive English training center at a midwestern university. After much observation and analysis, Wu learned that the ESL learners favored young adult novels, specifically those that were short, had short chapters, were written plainly, discussed current topics, and were nonfiction. Wu also found much good can be gained from employing reader-response theory and scaffolding when instructing ESL learners using young adult books.

"Within, Among and Outside of the Texts: Pre-service Teachers Reading Young Adult Literature,"

by Kelly Byrne Bull (University of Virginia, 2008) is a qualitative inquiry investigation into the ways a sampling of preservice teachers related to two young adult novels, Robert Cormier's *The Chocolate War* and Chris Crutcher's *The Ironman*. Using the instructional strategy Think Aloud, Bull examined the impact of reader response and reflection on how they perceived the two selected young adult novels.

Analysis of Bull's qualitative inquiry revealed that the preservice teachers experienced a multidimensional response to the novels in question. More important, the study demonstrated how valuable using Think Alouds was in producing this complex and interactive approach to the participants' reading experience. Describing in great detail, Bull examines the responses made by four preservice teacher-participants. Her findings reveal both how involved the readers became in their respective reads and how their involvement, in turn, influenced their perceptions of their fellow preservice teachers. Clearly, Bull concludes, the inquiry had great meaning for all who participated.

Linda Rosanne Rabinowitz's dissertation (Fordham University, 2008), **"Adolescent Dyadic Talk around a Young Adult Novel: Developing Understandings and Relationships,"** reveals the findings of a qualitative case study that involved six adolescents discussing Walter Dean Myers's *Monster*. Transcripts of the conversations were analyzed to examine participant's perceptions and use of language.

Findings indicated a multiplicity of levels and interactions among the six adolescents participating in the book talks during in-school discussions. Rabinowitz's analysis revealed that the participating students related to the text from a primarily personal point of view. Moreover, frequent conversational meetings about the novel resulted in a more purposeful, yet casual flow of conversation. Finally, the teacher proved to be a supportive player, helping to structure and scaffold conversations about the text and its relationship to her students' lives.

Finally, Stephanie K. Hopkins's dissertation, **"The Reading Writer: Reinventing the Language of Fiction,"** analyzes her own writing of a young adult novel using her close analysis of two popular young adult novels, Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak* and Cecily von Ziegesar's *Gossip Girl*, as guides. Her thesis demonstrates how a writer might draw on other works to help develop a more reflective and experimental

writing process.

Hopkins demonstrates in her thesis how writing a novel, particularly a young adult novel, involves self-examination of one's perceptions and developing one's own language to express the sense of investigation and curiosity involved in writing for young adults. In her dissertation, she models ways of looking closely at other texts and one's own text-in-progress to demonstrate personal writing goals and voice.

Conclusion

The dissertations discussed in this review are significant, critical, and vital to the scholarship of young adult literature. These papers contribute to a growing realization that the study of young adult literature merits its own level of understanding, one that supersedes book reviews and papers on instructional strategies.

A quick review of these dissertations reveals that much still needs to be written about the use of young adult literature with adolescents in real classrooms in real time. Much can be said about the importance of young adult books, their contribution to the general welfare of young people and classroom practice, and their significance as a leading proponent in underlying and augmenting social change. This is all well and good.

What is needed, though, are papers and research studies that examine the use of young adult books, both fiction and nonfiction, in actual classrooms, so that teachers and teacher educators alike can appreciate the breadth and depth of understanding that adolescents bring to young adult books. With this, the study of young adult literature will gain an even greater foothold in the minds of classroom teachers, school administrators, and curriculum theorists. Indeed, these papers will inspire others to write the same.

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