Growing Beyond Circumstance: Have We Overemphasized Hopelessness in Young Adult Literature?

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Citation: Pilot Scholars Version (Modified MLA Style)
Thacker, Peter, "Growing Beyond Circumstance: Have We Overemphasized Hopelessness in Young Adult Literature?" (2007). Education Faculty Publications and Presentations. 3.
http://pilotscholars.up.edu/edu_facpubs/3
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My wife, Lynn, approached me recently and asked me to reexamine my long-held belief in the efficacy of contemporary fiction. A young high school graduate and friend had lived with personal demons throughout her adolescence. She wondered to Lynn why it was that books in high school were so depressing. I'm not sure which books she had read, but I am guessing that in her ninth-grade year she would be speaking of at least Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak*, Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street*, and Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. These were the foundation of my younger son's language arts curriculum last year. I find myself in the awkward position of wondering aloud about books that I have loved and pushed to be taught in our schools. It is not anyone of these that I would say no to; it is the composite. Add to this Elie Wiesel's *Night*, Ernest J. Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying*, and Shakespeare's *Macbeth* in the tenth-grade year, and we have a recipe for possible despair.

Recently I turned in *American Educator* to Barbara Feinberg's "Reflections on the 'Problem Novel.'" It is a treatise on the lack of possibility in so many recent novels for teens and preteens. I know problem novels. They are the ones where young people are abused, abandoned, drunk, or pregnant. I don't want to scrub these books. In a reading class, I have had a nonreader tell a friend in a stage whisper that she spent all night lying in her bathtub reading *Go Ask Alice* (ostensibly by "Anonymous"). Sometimes these books speak to the truths in students' lives in a way that nothing else has. On the other hand, social realism has taken on a measure of hopelessness that often leaves readers wondering if there is any possibility of redemption.

Several years ago, a book moved through our North Portland high school like hotcakes: Connie Porter's *Imani All Mine*, a story narrated by an African American girl barely into adolescence who was raped at a party and had the child who was a result of that rape. The voice is a realistic rendering of a young teen. She is angry and scared and wants to care for her child, but she is also unreflective. She sleeps with another young boy and doesn't understand how to parent her child; she just doesn't get it. There is no outside or inside voice commenting on her choices. There is only a plot that leads inextricably to disaster. I could not finish the book. While I would keep this book in my classroom library, I would never teach it. The message is too clear or, more to the point, too murky.

Feinberg writes that she watches her twelve-year-old son devour Harry Potter books and biographies of comedians during the summer, only to return to Sharon Creech during the school year. He is uncommunicative yet distraught as he finishes *Chasing Redbird*. She finds her son resigned to his fate: "he always wanted his door open when he read, didn't like to be alone with these books. 'Everyone dies in them,' he told me wearily. He'd recited the litany: a story about a town besieged by radioactive poisoning; one in which a girl searches for her mother, only to find her mother has committed suicide; children being abused in foster care, never told why their mothers weren't coming back" (10).

David Elkind in *The Hurried Child: Growing Up Too Fast Too Soon and All Grown Up and No Place to Go: Teenagers in Crisis* has excoriated American culture for forcing sophistication on children and adolescents when they are developmentally unready
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for a harsh world. Feinberg’s description of pre- and early-adolescent development rings true to me:

For all children . . . there is to a greater or lesser degree a corresponding magical, imaginative counterpart to experience. . . . The world vibrates with connections, and within these connections the world is more dangerous (than for adults), since shadows can be alive, and menacing, but the world is more providential also, since allies can be found in rocks, in the hopeful sunlight, and the like. Within this universe, the child is the nexus, but while he might be hindered or aided by the natural world, he is never alone. . . . [T]he universe is animate, or at least potentially animate, with an unseen presence. (14–15)

She goes on to note that the problem novel ignores this truth of childhood, even young adulthood. Certainly this is true for the voice of Imani’s young mother.

It doesn’t have to be like this. Ninth graders can read A Midsummer Night’s Dream rather than Romeo and Juliet. The magic is palpable; the tomfoolery is intrinsic. For a contemporary novel, students can—and sometimes do—read Barbara Kingsolver’s The Bean Trees, a mixture of humor, social commentary, and good old-fashioned making it as a young woman on your own. Sherman Alexie’s The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven mirrors Cisneros’s story pastiche and certainly deals realistically with serious issues, yet it combines humor, ironic self-reflection, and a sense of possibility that I find lacking on Mango Street.

I have just finished reading Jonathan Safran Foer’s Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close, a book set in New York right after 9/11. The novel is filled with pathos yet speaks in the voice of a young boy whose precocious inventiveness is mixed brilliantly with the emotions and experiences of the nine-year-old he is. The boy grows through his grief, finding some unexpected adults walking into his life along the way. You, too, probably know of books—contemporary, accessible ones—that have touched you or your children or your students because readers leave with a sense of hope. Let us as teachers find these stories and recommend them to our colleagues to enrich our curriculum.

Having read Great Expectations with my son last year, I recognize in Pip a sense of magic. The world is peopled with unseen potentials even when life gets hard. There is redemptive possibility around every corner. Egocentric Pip finds it even when we know he is heading for a fall. Maybe this is the optimism we need to celebrate in students. Perhaps we need to take a hard look at the range of books we teach. What is their collective persona? Can we find a mixture of realism and fantasy, the heroic and the antiheroic? Can we be true to our age, in both senses of the word? Problem novels have brought many students to the literacy circle. But can we help them grow beyond their circumstances?

Works Cited


Peter Thacker teaches at the University of Portland. He spent over thirty years as a language arts/reading teacher in high schools in Portland.