Reading Ladders
Leading Students from Where They Are to Where We’d Like Them to Be
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Meeting Students Where They Are

Why Use YA Literature in the First Place?

Recently, the person who was applying color to my gray hair tried to strike up a conversation by asking what I do for a living. When I replied that I taught children’s and young adult literature to teachers and librarians, this young woman paused thoughtfully and asked me, “You mean you have to go to school to do that?” My initial reaction in such circumstances is to be indignant. However, when I pause to look at this innocent question from a different perspective, I know it is a legitimate question, one I need to answer in order to show those outside of education what we do and how tough our job can be. And those of us who work in the field of juvenile literature are often asked about how simple it must be to use “easy” books with our students. We need to be able to communicate to the naysayers in our communities and even in our schools that literature for teens is not some sort of dumbed-down version of real literature.

Recent articles in the field have talked about the need for literature to be rigorous. Of course, this term is often code for the work of classic authors who have been a part of the literary canon for decades. The works of Hawthorne and Hemingway, of Faulkner and Fitzgerald, of Cooper and Dickens possess sufficient rigor to make them worthwhile for study in the English classroom. YA literature, some purists argue, does
not possess the rigor of the classics. Therefore, it is deemed acceptable for recreational reading but not for classroom study. Indeed, the research does indicate that YA literature has made little if any progress in terms of being studied in the English curriculum, especially past middle school. Applebee’s 1991 study examined the most frequently studied anthologies used in English classrooms and concluded that 86 percent of the selections were written by white authors, fewer than 25 percent of the authors were female, and almost 70 percent of the authors were from North America. The only contemporary (i.e., twenty-first-century) author was Maya Angelou, with excerpts from *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Shawn Bird, who replicated Applebee’s work in 2005, found similar results. Literature anthologies, by and large, contained few selections from twenty-first-century books. This finding suggests another characteristic that is largely missing from the canon: relevance.

How relevant are the authors whose works are included in the literature anthologies used in so many classrooms? Poems such as “The Highwayman” and “Snowbound” and “Red Wheelbarrow” are often not relevant to today’s readers. Longer works by Dickens and Twain and Cooper may also be out of reach in terms of their contemporary relevance. It is important to note that these authors were once contemporary authors writing about the trials and tribulations of their time. Sometimes those trials and tribulations do not transfer readily to students who are plugged in, online, and texting. How important is relevance and how can we connect students to contemporary books and eventually to the classics? These are questions I address in this book as I introduce the concept of reading ladders. Reading ladders can, among other things, help us take students from one level of reading to the next logical level.

I have mentioned two essential characteristics of literature thus far: rigor and relevance. To this short list I would add two other characteristics: relationships and response. Relationships and response are rather intertwined. Students often develop a relationship with an author or a genre. I recall Peter, who read the works of S. E. Hinton over and over again. He simply felt that this author “understood guys.” The popularity of the vampire series by Stephenie Meyer is certainly proof of this relationship building. Tweens and teens stood in line for subsequent volumes in the Twilight series—*New Moon* (2006), *Eclipse* (2008b), and *Breaking Dawn* (2008a). New series such as The 39 Clues and The Hunger Games are also creating legions of fans who eagerly anticipate the next book. Sometimes the relationship is not about one author but a particular genre. One look at the American Library Association’s “Best Books for Young Adults” lists from the past several years reveals a plethora of dystopic, futuristic novels. Vampire books abound, riding the coattails of the Meyer books, certainly. Look at the *New York Times* best-seller lists from week to week and notice the trends and fads that emerge.
Response is closely related to this forming of relationships. It may, in fact, be the reason why we form a close bond with an author, a series, or a genre or format. Somehow, this author or book or form or group of characters in a series strikes a resonant chord in us as readers. There have been so many books that have struck that chord for me. *Rosemary’s Baby* scared the spit out of me and showed me that books could indeed make me shiver and even put my hands up in front of my face to somehow protect me from the evil emanating from the story. On the other hand, *Charles and Emma* (Heiligman 2009), *Hitler Youth* (Bartoletti 2005), and *King of the Mild Frontier* (Crutcher 2003) demonstrated that nonfiction could be as moving as fiction. Some books make readers question the motivation and actions of the characters, another form of response. Most readers of *Twilight* (Meyer 2005) and its sequels have remarked to me that, if they were Bella, they would have forced Edward’s hand sooner.

Response also includes talking about the relative merits of the books we read. Is this a good book or a great book? What is the distinction between the two? After serving on several committees charged with selecting the most distinguished contribution to literature, this response has become almost second nature for me as a reader. We can develop this in our students as well by providing reading experiences that promote evaluative and critical responses.

Back in the “good” old days, we referred to the three Rs as reading, writing, and arithmetic. Today, I am proposing that we focus on the Four Rs: rigor, relevance, relationships, and response. Not only can young adult literature promote each and every one of these Rs, but reading ladders can help us help kids continue to grow and move forward as readers—and ultimately become independent. If students like certain types of books, certain genres, or certain qualities in a book, we can help them stretch by showing them books that mirror what they already like but that perhaps are *a little longer, a bit more abstract, or challenge them more*.

Perhaps some brief examples are in order before we progress further. You will note that I begin Chapter 2 with a metaphor about Lincoln Logs because of their simple and enduring nature. This book, like the long-beloved building toys and reading itself, begins with the basics, moves to the reimagined, and continues on to the ingenious. So, let’s take a look at the basics right now: the Four Rs.

**The Rigors of YA Literature**

From its earliest incarnations, YA literature has suffered from a misconception that it is somehow less literary than *real* literature. Junior novel, teen lit, adolescent book: even these early terms for the literature carry negative connotations. I am willing to bet that you have encountered this apparent prejudice against using contemporary
literature in the classroom, particularly for classroom study. I think those folks who would denigrate using YA literature fail to see that it has structure, style, and substance. It is worthy of scrutiny in the classroom. Let’s begin with a handful of examples that illustrate the incredible depth of YA literature. These are the first of many examples that demonstrate the rigor present in contemporary books.

**The Chocolate War by Robert Cormier**

One of the earliest novels in the field of YA literature is still one of the touchstone books in the genre. Cormier’s mastery of language and his incredible sense of style present readers with a novel that is Hemingway-esque in its sentence structure. Moreover, *The Chocolate War* (2004) offers wonderful examples of figurative language: symbolism, metaphor, simile, and the like. Jerry Renault, a student at Trinity High School, decides not to participate in the annual chocolate sale for the school. At first he does not sell the candy at the direction of Archie, the leader of a group called the Vigils at the school. Ultimately, though, Jerry defies Archie and the Vigils and even Brother Leon, the head of the school. When he takes this stance, Jerry puts himself squarely opposite those in power. He dares to disturb the universe and, in doing so, places his own life at risk. Cormier explores the themes of power that corrupts and peer pressure that causes individuals to go along with the crowd. Moreover, in novel after novel, Cormier deftly creates characters that readers will come to despise; he creates plots that are as far from predictable as can be; and he creates literature worthy of exploration in middle and high school classrooms.

**Second Sight by Gary Blackwood**

My husband reads a series of books by an adult author named Harry Turtledove. Turtledove’s books take a historic event and turn it upside down, posing questions such as: What would have happened if Hitler had won World War II? My response to these books is less than enthusiastic. “But he didn’t,” I protest. However, it is this exploration of what if that is at the heart of all literature. So, when I read *Second Sight*, by Gary Blackwood (2005), I came to understand my husband’s interest in this type of story. Blackwood presents two children who claim to be able to see into the future. One is doing so as part of a vaudeville act; the other truly possesses powers of ESP. She sees something terrible happening to President Lincoln at the theatre. How can two children get to the president and warn him of the danger? Further, how will their warning, once heeded, change the course of history? I would argue that in addition to mirroring some of the types of stories in adult literature, books such as this one also offer more questions than answers to readers. That is one of the hallmarks of a great story.
The Book Thief by Markus Zusak

Winner of a Printz Honor Medal (the Printz Award is given each year for distinguished contribution to literature for young adults by the Young Adult Library Services Association of the American Library Association; think of this as the Newbery equivalent for young adult literature), *The Book Thief* (Zusak 2007) is set in Germany during World War II. That suggests yet another Holocaust novel, and surely we already have enough novels set in this time period. However, there is more to this story than the time period in which it is set. Part of what makes this book extraordinary is that the narrator is not the protagonist. The narrator is Death. This harrowing voice is at turns serious, ironic, sarcastic, and even humorous. Death observes our protagonist, a young girl named Leisel who is the book thief referred to in the novel’s title. For Leisel, remaining alive and sane during the crazy times of Nazism requires relying on the power of books and reading. This novel pushes the envelope in what we have come to expect in Holocaust literature. Published as an adult novel in Zusak’s native Australia, it was published as YA literature in the United States. It found readers in the YA market, too. Books that can appeal to adults and adolescents and that are accessible to both audiences are rare. This rarity is demonstrative of the rigors of some YA books.

A Soldier’s Heart by Gary Paulsen

Soldier’s Heart (Paulsen 1998), a Civil War novel, is reminiscent of *The Old Man and the Sea* and other classic works. In under a hundred pages, Paulsen is able to re-create for readers the range of emotions felt by our young protagonist, Charlie, as he signs up to play an instrument for one of the regiments from his home town. Charlie begins his duties during the war, excited at the prospect of what he envisions the battles to be. However, soon after being pressed into service as a soldier, Charlie reflects outrage at the carnage he witnesses and, ultimately, resignation at the true horrors of war. What continually confounds me is how Paulsen is able to pack so much into so few pages. By the end of the novel, Charlie possesses a soldier’s heart, the condition that today we call posttraumatic stress disorder. Through Charlie’s eyes, readers will see the reality and horror of war and bloodshed and death. Reviewers called this novel spare, and it is, indeed, a prime example of making each and every word count.

You Don’t Know Me by David Klass and Speak by Laurie Halse Anderson

Whether you select *You Don’t Know Me* (Klass 2002) or *Speak* (Anderson 2000b) does not truly matter. Each delivers the same punch. *You Don’t Know Me* is the story of John, a young man who is being secretly abused by his soon-to-be stepfather.
Speak deals with rape. Both of these books deal with incredibly serious topics and yet both novels contain not insubstantial humorous observations as well. This counterpoint of gravity and humor, which sets up almost a cognitive dissonance, is genius on the part of both Klass and Anderson. What they manage to capture is real life, which is neither constantly hopeless nor constantly a picnic. Instead, life comes at you in waves. Some days are upbeat and wonderful and can turn on a dime and become traumatic. So few books and even fewer authors get that balance right. Klass and Anderson are two who do.

* * *

I could just as easily have provided a different handful of books to demonstrate the power and richness and wonder that is present in contemporary literature. What I cannot do is talk about reading levels and Lexile levels and how much higher they are. It is true that many YA novels have relatively low reading levels. Lest those who love the canon feel complacent, Huckleberry Finn is at the fifth-grade readability level, and Where the Wild Things Are is at the fourth-grade level. Reading levels and Lexiles are not the way to determine the rigor of a text. Instead, rigor should be determined by sophistication of thought, depth of character development, stylistic choices, and mastery of language on the part of the author. These are present in the best of YA literature. If they are not present in books your students currently read and enjoy, you can use reading ladders to move them in that direction.

YA’s Relevance to Today’s Teens

My youngest granddaughter is a junior in high school. One night, she came to me with a question concerning her graphing calculator. Sadly, I told her I could not assist her, as I had never used a graphing calculator (nor a calculator of any kind) when I took math classes. She was, quite frankly, stunned. Her life has always included items such as graphing calculators, iPods, CDs, cell phones, printers, laptop computers, and so much more. I think she sometimes sees me as a sort of dinosaur. All this calls to mind a poem from Mel Glenn’s Class Dismissed! (1982) in which the narrator, a male teen, asks, Who cares if Willy Loman finds happiness or Moby Dick is ever captured or killed? What do these things have to do with my life? The poem ends with the plaintive query: Got any books that deal with real life?

Dealing with real life: that, in a nutshell, is relevance. Books need to speak to today’s readers or they will reject them as not worth reading. Is this something new? Not at all. I recall wondering what some books I was required to read had to do
with real life, too, back when I was a teen. When I considered a book to be relevant, it received my full and devoted attention. The same is true for our own students. How did a book become relevant for me? Generally, it was because a teacher or a librarian demonstrated the connection between the book and my life. The goal of this entire book, building reading ladders, is slowly to move students from where they are to where we would like them to be. Sometimes I think we forget that beginning with where students are is essential. How do we make those connections visible to our students?

First, we can make connections between the themes and topics of books and the lives of our students. Power corrupts; love conquers all; sometimes bad things happen to good people; you can’t judge a book by its cover. All of these themes can have connections to students in our classrooms. Finding one’s place in the family, getting along with peers, deciding on a career, dealing with parents—these are just a few of the topics that can connect our students to books. YA literature makes the process of connecting books and readers easier because it deals with the challenges and joys of being a teen. *Wintergirls*, by Laurie Halse Anderson (2009), deals with body image and eating disorders. Almost one-third of teen girls deal with some sort of eating disorder during adolescence, according to the latest statistics. *Burn*, by Suzanne Phillips (2008), deals with bullying, specifically what happens when bullies go unchecked. The statistics on bullying are positively stunning. Countless students report being bullied at school with no adult stepping in to assist them. Joan Bauer’s *Peeled* (2008) examines what it takes to be a reliable journalist, one that reports rather than invents the news.

Not only are the themes and topics of YA literature relevant, but YA literature has extended the form and format of literature to mirror our students’ experience with computers and cell phones and other technology. Text written as IMs and text messages is the form adopted by Lauren Myracle in her novels *Tryl* (2004), *L8r, G8r* (2007), and *Ttfn* (2006), for instance. Manga appeals to teens who have grown up with Japanese anime as part of their visual world. The increasing presence of graphic novels, including graphic novel (GN) adaptations of classic works, such as *Beowulf* (Hinds 2007) and *The Merchant of Venice* (Hinds 2008), pays heed to the fact that today’s teens are prepared for stories in unusual formats.

Making literature relevant does not mean totally dismissing the classics, however. Just as Poe and Hawthorne and Dickens and other authors of what we consider classic literature wrote about the issues and concerns of their own time period, contemporary authors write about the societal issues of today’s teens. Dickens wrote about poverty from his own perspective in history; Sharon Flake, likewise, sets some of her
stories in impoverished neighborhoods and talks about the serious circumstances facing kids living in poverty. Poe’s horror and mystery stories set the standard for much of what was to follow in those genres. How pleased might he be to read contemporary authors such as Joan Lowery Nixon, whose mysteries made her a four-time winner of the award named for Poe. Or how about Poe reading some of the horror stories collected by Don Gallo in Short Circuits (1992)? Hawthorne’s Scarlett Letter (2009) and Chris Lynch’s Sins of the Fathers (2006) both rip the veil away from corruption in the church, though the two tackle different sets of circumstances. Making connections between books that our students know and the ones we wish them to read is one way to make reading more relevant.

How can we know which books connect the contemporary to the classic? Certainly, that is one of the thrusts of this book. However, my ultimate goal is to grow and support readers. Sometimes that does not include using literary classics. Other resources are available, though, if you who wish to learn more about contemporary-to-classic connections. Herz and Gallo’s From Hinton to Hamlet (2005) and Kaywell’s Adolescent Literature as a Complement to the Classics (2008) are both invaluable resources.

Relevance is not just about connecting contemporary and classic books or about connecting themes and topic or form and format, however. Relevance also means finding books that have other entry points for or connections to readers. If there is no connection between a text and readers, how can we expect them to enter fully into the story? If the setting is foreign, either because it is in the past or because it is in another country or state or type of neighborhood, then the characters need to have contact points with readers. Thus, we can enter into Kenny and Byron Watson’s world in The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963 (Curtis 1995), because Kenny and Byron are characters that still resonate with contemporary readers who were not even alive in 1963. Like Kenny and Byron, many readers will connect with the fact that there is sibling rivalry between the younger and older brothers. They will recognize how Byron occasionally takes advantage of his brother and how sweet Kenny’s revenge is when Byron does something boneheaded. Some will recognize the embarrassment a family can sometimes cause.

If instead the characters do not resonate with contemporary readers because they are from a different culture, religion, ethnic group, or gender, there can still be touch points between other aspects of the story and readers. For instance, I can read and enjoy The Outsiders, by S. E. Hinton (1967), even though I am female. I connect because, like many of the characters, I have felt like an outsider. I did not grow up in Oklahoma (setting), did not belong to a group like the Greasers (character element). But I did long for escape from my neighborhood from time to time. I sus-
pect that I dislike some stories because there are no connection points for me, there is no relevance to me and to my world. Students need a road into the story. So, as you sift through books to be included in your curriculum, ask yourself if there is some route students can take that will permit them access to the book or story.

Some would have us ignore relevance. After all, literature is not about relevance, not about connections to text, not even about the reader. Literature is about meaning, they will argue. Meaning resides within the text, not the reader. As someone who has served on several book selection committees, I have participated in animated discussions about meaning, about character, about theme, about symbolism and much more with colleagues who had all read the same text and yet somehow managed to view it with slightly different lenses. In college courses, it was not unusual to find readings that were required for more than one class. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* was defined by one professor as just a simple story of two people floating down the river on a raft. As you might imagine, another professor saw the book as an important comment on the life and times of Twain, a classic that has stood the test of time, a story that possesses deeper meaning. Literature, it seems, is about more than meaning: it is about what we bring to the reading and how the text connects to us as readers. Perhaps the discussion on the nature of response will be one answer to those who would dismiss relevance so easily.

The Relationships YA Can Build and Sustain

Teens seek relationships. Recall that during this time, few teens elect to be on their own. Instead, they travel in packs, cliques, groups. They reach beyond their communities to those they can find online—MySpace, Facebook, Second Life, Twitter, and others. Books can also build and sustain relationships.

Recently, my husband found me sobbing over a book. “What’s wrong? Why are you crying?” He was truly concerned that someone had phoned with bad news or I was somehow hurt. Once I could gather myself together, I told him that my crying was a result of the book I was reading. *Deadline* (2007), by Chris Crutcher, caused me to sob aloud at several different points. How did this happen? I think it is because YA literature can create empathy. Empathy, stronger than sympathy, connects to the reader at a deep emotional level. Something in the book has happened to the reader as well; thus, a relationship is made, one that can be sustained book by book. When I listen to Jack Gantos narrate his Joey Pigza books, the same sort of relationship is made. Here, in essence, is Jack reading his book aloud to me personally. The next time a Gantos book comes my way, I am more likely to pick it up and read it because he has become part of my social network through that first connection.
Lifetime readers have developed relationships with books and authors. We prowl the bookstores seeking the latest offerings from favorites we have come to know. A quick glance at the best-seller list certainly reinforces this concept; week after week, the list contains familiar names: King, Clancy, Baldacci, Higgins Clark, and Picoult, to list a few. Turn to the list of children's best sellers and the names are just as familiar: Prelutsky, Silverstein, Willems, Scieszka, and Selznick, among others. (And now it is easy to see names cross from the adult list to the one for younger readers: James Patterson and Sherman Alexie are just two of the authors who publish works in both adult and children's venues.) So, if we are to be about the business of creating lifetime readers and not just readers who can utilize phonological awareness and context clues to bubble in answers on a state test, then we need to help our students form those relationships with books and authors and genres and formats.

How we can connect kids to book after book after book is at the heart of this book. It is not a simple task. It is, though, one of the most rewarding tasks we can perform with our students. Reading ladders can help us do this well.

The Neglected R: Response

As soon as I say “neglected,” I immediately wonder if that is really the correct adjective here. What has masqueraded as response, especially in the era of high-stakes testing, bears little resemblance to the meaning of the word as intimated by scholars such as Louise Rosenblatt and Robert Probst. In many classrooms, response has been reduced to multiple-choice questions answered on a computer or the five-paragraph essay replete with theses sentences that state not what students think about their reading but rather what someone else has told them to think. Neglected, then, might indicate that students are not being asked to respond to text. That’s not entirely true; what I mean to say is that many of these programmed responses are not in the least concerned with authenticity.

Rosenblatt and Probst would define authentic response differently. For them, response can take many forms. It can be our first gut reaction to what we read—a personal and emotional response. Response could also take the form of a more measured response, one that we arrive at after some reflection and perhaps some guiding questions. Authentic response also demands that, as teachers, we do not possess a correct answer or the interpretation of a piece of literature. Rather, with students, we should arrive at a negotiated answer or interpretation. And, more important, we should help students become independent so that they can navigate texts and produce responses even when we are not there to assist them. Therefore, helping students become more independent is also one of the chief aims of reading ladders as described in this book.
As I completed the initial draft of this chapter, I was looking out at the city of Atlanta spread below me. I was there for the International Reading Association’s conference of 2008. The night before, two colleagues sat in that hotel room, and we pored over the convention program. We dog-eared pages with the sessions we most wanted to attend. Many of them had authors as speakers; some focused on the role of books to motivate readers. For almost an entire week, thousands of my friends and colleagues celebrated books and reading. Later, as I revised this book, I was freshly returned from the National Council of Teachers of English conference in San Antonio. I watched a room that would hold more than eight hundred people fill and then overflow as participants flooded in to listen to Greg Mortenson. I saw a record crowd come to the ALAN (Assembly on Literature for Adolescents of NCTE) two-day workshop after the conference to listen to more than fifty YA authors talk about books and reading and writing.

I know many of us are searching continually for that just-right book for each and every one of our students. It is my sincere hope that this book will assist you in finding the right books for your students. More importantly, I hope that this book will also help you guide your students to the next great book and the one after that and so on. That is the purpose of reading ladders. It is not sufficient to find just one book for each reader; we need to be able to guide that reader toward other books. It is time now to venture forward into the wide and wonderful world of books. We need to discover how we can, in turn, set our students’ feet upon the path we will tread first: the path that leads to lifetime reading and lifelong learning.
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