

## BOOK REVIEW / CRITIQUE DE LIVRE

JANET ALSUP (ED.). *Young adult literature and adolescent identity across cultures and classrooms: Contexts for the literary lives of teens*. New York, NY: Routledge. (2010). 225 pp. Paper: \$40.95. (ISBN 978-0-415-87699-5).

Education researchers who specialize in literacy often debate over the definitions and limitations of the polemical genre that is young adult literature (YAL). For some scholars, it is clear that its target audience extends from 12- to 20-year-olds, and that the genre ranges from romance and historical fiction to fantasy and horror. Other experts in the field, however, argue over how the subject should be broached in classrooms involving multicultural students. That is, what are the socio-cultural and pedagogical implications of teaching narratives that represent the daily lives of some teens as opposed to others? In cases where students cannot identify with the texts, how can we address YAL so that these students feel compelled, regardless of their ethnic background? *Young Adult Literature and Adolescent Identity across Cultures and Classrooms* addresses these topics, all the while promoting the use of YAL in English language arts (ELA) classrooms, especially in meeting the literacy needs of students from diverse ethnic backgrounds. This collective work is designed for educators, as it provides them with greater insight on processing the pluralities of young adult narratives. It is also targeted at scholars in the field of education, as it informs them on current pedagogical approaches on teaching YAL and the debates surrounding the use of this genre in high school curricula.

Janet Alsup, Professor of English Education at Purdue University and Chair of the Conference on English Education, assembled articles covering theories and reflections on teaching and reading young adult literature in high school and arranged them in three parts. The book's first section covers the multiple perspectives of teenagers reading YAL. The pros and cons of teaching YAL are detailed in the second section of the book. The final section explains the reasons why adolescents are drawn to YAL and covers the educational potential of young adult narratives as explored in socio-cultural and pedagogical contexts.

The relationship between literature and reader-response theory was first introduced by Louise Rosenblatt in *Literature as Exploration* (1938/1976), which was

itself inspired by the works of John Dewey. In the tradition of Rosenblatt's followers (such as Robert Probst, Ronald Moore, Marcia Muelder Eaton, and Jeanne Connell, to name a few), Alsup concentrates on the applications of reader-response theory in pedagogies involving YAL. Reminding us of the well-rounded benefits of reading – or “a combination of direct experience and distanced analysis; a merging of emotional, personal response and socio-cultural criticism” (p. 12) – she stresses that ELA teachers should make an effort to choose effective young adult texts and teach them in a way that allows students to reflect on the subject matter.

*Young Adult Literature and Adolescent Identity across Cultures and Classrooms* upholds the reputation of both a comprehensive and accessible book that contextualizes the links between teenage identity, growth, and reading skills. For instance, William J. Broz' chapter, which details the intricacies related to teaching young adult texts about the Mexican American experience to youth of that culture, raises the question of considering students' understanding of their own culture. Asking them to respond to the culturally-oriented narratives leads to improved interpretation capacities: “the reader-response paradigm calls for students to use their own background knowledge and life experiences as a foundation for interpreting text” (p. 84). This experiment serves as a thorough example of a pragmatic application of Rosenblatt's reader-response theory. This concreteness ties in with, amongst others, the field work of Janine Certo and Wayne Brinda (2011), who investigate the ways in which urban middle school students could use their life experiences to interpret and respond to theatrical adaptations of literature.

Expanding on Rosenblatt's model, Alsup concludes her book with suggestions to increase students' interest in literature and addresses the role self-identification plays in teenagers' reading habits. From there, educators will be able to guide the reading abilities and critical thinking of their students: “the goal is more than just to get students to respond to the text about teens as teen readers; the goal is to first get the response, then to encourage students to grapple with it, wonder about it, and ask questions about it” (p. 211).

Despite the book's diversity in situations addressing response-based teaching of literature, it lacks concrete step-by-step ways educators can modify their curriculum to integrate these methods. The collected articles are meant for new teachers, who would benefit more from explanations of contemporary issues as related to response-based teaching than from a series of cases studies that imply theoretical guidelines. The latter is addressed in books such as Robert E. Probst's manual (2004), which provides the foundations for understanding a wider frame of applied reader-response methods. That being said, scholars and graduate students seeking to increase their knowledge of ways to increase adolescents' interest in reading will be pleased with this work.

AMÉLIE LEMIEUX, *McGill University*

REFERENCES

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