You Are What You Read: Young Adult Literacy and Identity in Rural America

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You Are What You Read: Young Adult Literacy and Identity in Rural America

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Abstract

The purpose of this empirical research study is to understand the reading habits and preferences of rural U.S. high school students as well as if and how they see their current and future lives depicted in media marketed to young adults. Using an inductive approach, we surveyed tenth-grade students in rural counties in one southeastern American state about their reading interests and habits and their self-perceptions and aspirations. This study provides insights into a large but invisible subculture of youth in the United States. The practical implications of this research include an increased understanding of rural teens' relationship with identity and media that can be used by the school and library communities as they try to improve the offerings—in terms of collections, programming, and services—that they provide for teen audiences.

Introduction

A recent research brief published by the Institute of Museum and Library Services, an agency of the U.S. government, identified that small and rural libraries constitute the majority (80%) of public library systems in the United States.[1] Considering this significant figure, there is a surprising dearth of research about small and rural libraries in America. This scarcity of research on one facet of rural American life is indicative of a larger trend, that of America's focus on larger, urban areas, which are perceived as having more diverse and progressive economic and

lifestyle opportunities. Indeed, the U.S. Census Bureau's definition of "rural" is dependent on what it is not: urban. The geographic designation of "rural" is defined as that which "encompasses all population, housing, and territory not included within an urban area."[2] Jacqueline Edmonson aptly describes America's perception of rural life today by naming it the "rural American ghetto."[3]

Having had professional experience working with young adults in libraries, we were intrigued by the notion that so much is unknown about the communities served by the largest type of public library system in the United States. Similarly, as Elizabeth Birr Moje noted in writing about adolescents and their technology use, research about this topic is a reflection of the participants most often studied—middle- and upper-class teens who have ready access to technology. Essentially, "who gets studied and in what numbers matters a great deal to what we know about who young people are as readers."[4] Particularly, we wondered if and how rural young adults in America saw themselves reflected in reading materials marketed to their age group. These reading materials could be digital or paper, visual or textual, fiction or nonfiction.

As researchers, we live and work in the state of North Carolina, which the United States Census Bureau (USCB) classifies as being "more rural than U.S. average" with 45% of the state's population residing in rural areas. Nationally, North Carolina ranks twenty-first in having the most rural population of the fifty states.[5] Eighty-five of the state's one hundred counties are classified by the USCB as being rural.[6] Approximately 36% of public libraries in the state of North Carolina are classified as rural libraries.[7] Given the significant population of rural communities in the state of North Carolina, we wondered if and how North Carolina teens are seeing reflections of their current and possible lives in the media with which they engage.

Our research was theoretically grounded in Louise Rosenblatt's theory of individual reading as a product of transaction.[8] Rosenblatt challenges the traditional notion of the reader-text relationship, where the reader and the text are both viewed as fixed subjects that interact with each other. Rather, Rosenblatt suggests that each individual comes to each text with a particular frame of reference, or context. She explains:

> The reader approaches the text with a certain purpose, certain expectations or hypotheses that guide his choices from the residue of past experience. Meaning emerges as the reader carries on a give-and-take with the signs on the page. As the text unrolls before the reader's eyes, the meaning made of the early words influences what comes to mind and is selected for the succeeding signs. But if these do not fit in with the meaning developed thus far, the reader may revise it to assimilate the new words or may start all over again with different expectations. . . . [M]uch of this goes on subconsciously, but the two-way, reciprocal relation explains why meaning is not "in" the text or "in" the reader. Both reader and text are essential to the transaction process of meaning making.[9]

To Rosenblatt, rural young adults come to the texts they read with a frame of reference influenced by their sociocultural experiences to create a recursive reading at a particular time and place. As Paul W. Richardson and Jacquelynne S. Eccles note, by engaging in literacy practices, "we directly and vicariously contemplate who we are at any one point in time, who we might hope to be in the future, who we fear being, and who we expect to be."[10]

Reading and Youth Identity

Several researchers have described various ways in which teens create, imagine, and play with identities through the readings that they choose.[11] Studies have also shown that teens enjoy reading about characters like themselves and situations similar to their own.[12]

Research on adolescents and their reading practices has shown that the amount of

voluntary reading done by teens decreases with age and that females generally read more often than males.[13] Additionally, many studies report that teens' voluntary reading choices are influenced by their social connections, a finding that may suggest the extent to which teens wish to craft their current social identity.[14] Several researchers who have examined the material that adolescents choose to read have found overwhelming preferences for magazines and web content, potentially indicative of the appeal that visual representations of information have for teens.[15]

Although there is much consensus about what and how adolescents read, there is no overwhelming agreement as to where teens get their reading materials. Reports suggest that teens get their voluntary reading materials from home or chain bookstores[16] and from the school library, public library, and classroom.[17]

Rural Teens and Identity

Recent studies suggest that there is no single rural youth identity to be discovered and described, but instead many possibilities; in fact, the identity of each individual rural teen is dynamic, constantly evolving, and contingent upon a host of factors.[18] One consistency in many of the rural identities constructed by the teens surveyed and interviewed here is a recognition of both the much-lauded benefits of rural living—including connection to the natural world and tightly knit communities—and the negative aspects of rural teen life, such as a lack of engaging activities, of appropriate spaces to gather with peers, and of transportation and necessary services.[19] Notable to our research is Howard's finding that rural teens were more likely to identify themselves as non-readers compared to their urban counterparts.[20]

Rural Teens and Reading

Few studies have been conducted about rural reading and literacy practices in North America. Of these, research of rural readers has challenged the prevailing notion that teens do not read, showing that when the definition of reading is broadened beyond the novel, a surprising number of teens can be counted as regular readers. Further, while teens may reject or resent reading material assigned for school projects, they respond much more positively to materials they have a personal interest in and have selected themselves.[21] Robin Boltz's study of rural male readers identified several other factors that positively influenced young men's reading: having a male role model who reads, feeling confident in their reading skills, and the freedom to read material in digital format.[22]

Paulette M. Rothbauer, in a study of older Canadian teens from rural areas, reported that though the teens enjoyed reading and read daily, there was no vital reading culture to connect with in their community.[23] Teens lacked a place to go to select books—most just happened upon their reading material in their homes or on the Internet—and a community of readers to share recommendations and ideas. This situation resulted in what Rothbauer termed the "nonactive teen reader" and a phenomenon she called the "placelessness of reading."[24] In a subsequent piece, Rothbauer found that these teens described the role of reading in their lives in four different ways: autonomy and independence; habit and comfort; experience (including learning about possibilities for themselves); and knowledge.[25]

Rothbauer's findings suggest that teens seem to be acquiring their reading material by "accident," simply picking up whatever happens to be handy at home.[26] Many of them live in communities that do not prioritize literacy, reading, and education. The offerings in the school and public libraries are slim and unappealing, making teens feel that they have no one who can help them seek out material that they might find appealing and useful. In fact, many of the teens

who enjoy reading keep this habit private, afraid of the social repercussions of being identified as a reader.

Based on the findings of these studies, the following questions were developed to guide our research:

1. What are the reading habits and preferences of rural high school students?

2. What issues do rural teens want to read about and in what formats?

3. Do rural teens consider themselves to belong to the culture of youth represented in the books that they choose to read, and how does their reading help to shape their ideas of their possible future selves?

Research Design

The design of our study was rooted in the belief that talking directly to youth about what they think and want would provide us with reliable and trustworthy results. Rather than relying on assumptions about what media is popular and using library circulation data to determine what teens are reading, we must engage in discussion with young adults to understand the intricacies of this issue.

Data collection for this study took the form of a twenty-question multiple-choice/open-ended question survey, modeled on a reading interest inventory.[27] We took an inductive approach to the use of this survey as a data-collection instrument, understanding that the open-ended question format would provide us with the opportunity to identify themes prevalent throughout our participants' responses. This survey was distributed in electronic form to rural North Carolina public schools that served students ages 14–18, the average ages of high school students in the United States, grades 9–12. We acknowledged that, with the state's geographic

diversity, there are probably more rural experiences than one; therefore, we sought to administer the survey to at least one rural high school in each of the three geographic regions of North Carolina: the mountains, the piedmont, and the coastal plains. Using a statewide school librarian Listserv, we asked for help from school librarians to assist us in administering this survey. Once school librarians responded to our call, we analyzed the population and geographic orientation of the school that librarian served. We compared this information with the U.S. Census's definition of "urbanized areas" and "urban clusters," and were able to determine if each individual school fit its definition of "rural." We did not limit the number of schools we would include in the sample; however, the number of schools included was dependent on the number of school librarians who volunteered to assist us and whether or not they worked at a school in a rural area. Ultimately, four school librarians from four schools agreed to assist in the collection of this data. From those schools, 118 students participated in this study.

The school librarian at each high school was asked to distribute the survey to tenth-grade students; this age group was chosen as our focus in part to help us formulate questions to ask future focus groups of teens that would consist of broader age ranges, with both younger and older participants. Targeting tenth-grade students also allowed for a more manageable collection of data. The school librarians each worked with sophomore English teachers, who allowed classes of tenth-grade students to take the survey on computers during the school day.

Upon receipt of the completed surveys, we performed a basic statistical analysis of the multiple-choice question responses; we individually sorted the open-ended question responses into categories that we later compared, refined, and tested. This method allowed us to draw out patterns and trends in the data.

Results

Four high school librarians agreed to help distribute the survey to their school's sophomore students. Our participants were 118 young men and women who were between the ages of 15–17 (table 1). From the survey data, we found that these participants preferred to engage with magazines, books, and online content as their favorite formats for reading (table 2) and accessed most of their reading material from home (table 3). Examples of "other" places they accessed reading material included Walmart, thrift stores, and friends.

Table 1: Gender and age distribution of respondents

	Percentage of All (N = 118)	Percentage of Female (N = 67)	Percentage of Male (N = 51)
15-year-olds	33	37	27
16-year-olds	60	57	65
17-year-olds	7	6	8

Table 2: What types of formats do you like to read? (Multiple items may be chosen.)

	Percentage of All (N = 118)	Percentage of Female (N = 67)	Percentage of Male (N = 51)
Books	64	75	49
Magazines	56	60	51
Comics or graphic novels	25	18	33
Online content	44	45	43
Newspapers	14	18	10
Prefer not to answer	3	1	6
Other	9	9	10

Table 3: Where do you get or access your reading material? (Multiple items may be chosen.)

	Percentage of All (N = 118)	Percentage of Female (N = 67)	Percentage of Male (N = 51)
Home	74	79	67
School library	44	51	35
Public library	31	35	22
Bookstore (physical or online)	40	55	20
Prefer not to answer	3	0	6
Other	11	12	10

The participants in total most enjoyed reading adventure and humorous stories, but there was a significant difference between the females' and males' preferences of romance (60% vs. 8%) and mystery/detective stories (54% vs. 24%) (table 4). Other genres that the participants mentioned reading were sports, general fiction, news, and war. When asked to list the subjects and issues they liked to read about, the participants indicated many of the genres that they had chosen in the previous question, but many added biography, history, military history, science, mythology, video games, celebrities, current events, fan fiction, realistic fiction, outdoor, TV shows, and teens. In correlation with the results of a previous question, the participants indicated that they mostly read books (46%), magazines (28%), and online content (37%) on a regular basis (table 5). Several also indicated that they read text messages. The highest percentage (36%) of the participants indicated that they read for enjoyment fewer than thirty minutes a week, with the next highest (29%) reading thirty minutes to an hour each week (table 6).

Table 4: What genres do you enjoy reading? (Multiple items may be chosen.)

	Percentage of All (N = 118)	Percentage of Female (N = 67)	Percentage of Male (N = 51)
Adventure	56	49	65
Horror	47	49	43
Fantasy	39	42	33
Science fiction	32	21	47
Romance	37	60	8
Humor	46	46	45
Historical fiction	21	21	22
Mystery/detective fiction	41	54	24
True crime	19	25	10
Nonfiction	25	30	18
Short story collections	13	13	12
Poetry collections	15	24	4
Prefer not to answer	2	0	4
Other	11	7	16

Table 5: Which of the following do you read on a regular basis? (Multiple items may be chosen.)

	Percentage of All (N = 118)	Percentage of Female (N = 67)	Percentage of Male (N = 51)
Books	46	54	35
Magazines	28	31	24
Comics or graphic novels	9	10	8
Online content	37	42	31
Newspapers	10	13	6
Prefer not to answer	6	1	12
Other	11	12	10

Table 6: How much time do you spend reading for enjoyment (not school-assigned reading) in a typical week?

	Percentage of All (N = 118)	Percentage of Female (N = 67)	Percentage of Male (N = 51)
Fewer than 30 minutes	36	33	35
30 minutes to an hour	29	31	29
1 to 2 hours	15	15	16
2 to 4 hours	4	3	6
4 or more hours	12	18	4
Prefer not to answer	4	0	10

As a follow-up question, we asked the participants why they spent as much or as little time reading as they indicated. Of those who spent little time reading, their responses suggested that they didn't enjoy reading or found it boring, or that they chose to do other things instead. Those who spent more time reading indicated that they did so because they thought reading was fun, or they were bored and had nothing else to do. We also asked when and where the participants read for fun; few participants answered the "when" part of this question, but those who did indicated that they read any time they could or late at night. As for the "where" portion of this question, most participants noted that they read at home.

When asked what they wanted to do after high school, many of the respondents indicated more than one choice. The participants' responses included "pursue post-secondary education" (63%); "pursue a specific career" (60%); and "military/National Guard" (12%). Examples of the

careers that the students wanted to pursue included truck driver/mechanic, electrical engineer, teacher, game designer/tester, and traveling nurse. To broaden their thinking, we next asked the participants what they thought their life would be like in five years, and again many of the respondents offered more than one choice. The overwhelming response (48%) was "pursuing a post-secondary education," followed by "pursuing a career/profession of choice" (23%) and "have a job" (17%). We differentiated the notion of "career" and "job" by the participants' choice of words. For example, many participants (23%) indicated that they wanted to be pursuing their career and/or mentioned their desired career by name, such as forensic scientist, professional skateboarder, or Navy SEAL.

We next asked participants if any of the items that they read included characters, fictional or real, who are like them or people they know. Over half of the participants (58%) indicated "yes" (table 7). When asked to give specific examples of these characters, the participants mentioned characters from books, such as Katniss Everdeen and Peeta Mellark from the Hunger Games trilogy and Jake from the Animorphs series. Participants also mentioned books such as *A Walk to Remember*, the Harry Potter series, the Mortal Instruments series, and the Bleach series. Some participants gave specific examples of the ways in which characters they read were like themselves or people they know, such as the following:

"Their attitudes, what their hobbies are, etc."

"They have gone through hard times, depression, other mental illnesses."

"My sister is very opinionated and like [*sic*] to make it know [*sic*] what she thinks. In many of the books I read the characters are like that."

In response to this same question, participants also described types of people or figures whom they read about that they felt were like them or people they knew, such as mountain bikers, celebrities, and people they read about in the newspaper.

Table 7: Do any of the items that you read include characters (fictional or real) that are like you or people you know?

	Percentage of All (N = 118)	Percentage of Female (N = 67)	Percentage of Male (N = 51)
Yes	58	64	51
No	34	30	39
Prefer not to answer	8	6	10

Similarly, we asked participants if any of the items they read included characters, fictional or real, that were similar to whom they wanted to be one day. By a slim majority (49%), their response as an overlarge group was "yes" (table 8); however, many more females (60%) than males (35%) identified with characters and made connections to their future selves. When asked for specific examples of these characters, only 39% of the respondents provided an answer. The majority (58%) of those responding participants described the disposition or personality traits of characters that they wanted to emulate, such as "high expectations and morals," "strong heroines," and "people who overcome serious issues and live happily." Many of the responding participants (43%) also gave examples of career or professional goals they aspired to: "well educated and making lots of money"; "scientists and such"; and "I read a lot about trucks, different engines, and things about cars which is what I would like to do."

Table 8: Do any of the items that you read include characters (fictional or real) that are similar to whom you would like to be one day?

	Percentage of All (N = 118)	Percentage of Female (N = 67)	Percentage of Male (N = 51)
Yes	49	60	35
No	45	36	57
Prefer not to answer	6	4	8

We next asked our participants if any of the items they read included situations that they, their friends, or their family might realistically find themselves in today. Exactly half (50%) of the respondents indicated that they do read about these types of situations (table 9). When asked to give specific examples of these situations, the participants described family issues such as taking care of an elderly relative, death, and dealing with a brother who took drugs. They also mentioned non-familial relationships and the conflict associated with them, including breakups with romantic interests, bullying, and helping friends deal with poverty.

Table 9: Do any of the items that you read include situations that you, your friends, or your family might realistically find yourselves in today?

	Percentage of All (N = 118)	Percentage of Female (N = 67)	Percentage of Male (N = 51)
Yes	50	57	41
No	40	36	45
Prefer not to answer	10	7	14

Prompting our participants to look toward their future, we asked them if any of the items they read gave them ideas or inspiration for what their future might hold. The majority (54%) of respondents indicated "yes" (table 10). When asked for specific examples, participants again described career or professional goals to which they aspired:

"Doing art as a profession, therapy, etc."

"Being a high ranked military leader."

"When Cassie's parents are scientists or vets that [*sic*] is why I want to be one[;] also because I love animals."

Participants also noted examples of self-discovery/character/fulfillment, including the following:

"Make me want to be a better person."

"Finding out things you didn't know about yourself."

"Just reading the things that the people been [*sic*] through and being able to be successful gives me hope."

Respondents made connections to their education as well:

"Going to college."

"In some books I read about how people are so educated and that motivates me to be more educated."

"For example I might not be going to college [because] money and not having papers."

Table 10: Do any of the items that you read give you ideas or inspiration for what your future might hold?

	Percentage of All (N = 118)	Percentage of Female (N = 67)	Percentage of Male (N = 51)
Yes	54	60	47
No	37	33	41
Prefer not to answer	9	7	12

In order to better understand their interests and how those interests were reflective of those held by characters in contemporary young adult fiction, we asked the participants what they did in their free time. The majority of the responses (37%) indicated some sort of physical or outdoor activity, such as participating in sports, hunting, working out, and playing with pets. The next most shared interest among the participants was "reading," which was listed by 33% of the 118 participants surveyed, a finding that does not mirror the larger group's response to our earlier question about time spent reading each week. After having asked several questions related to reading, this response was likely artificially high due to reactivity. Many (32%) of the participants also mentioned that they engaged with people and communities in their free time, by way of spending time/talking with family, friends, and/or romantic interests; going to church; and volunteering.

Our last question to the participants asked, "If you were meeting someone for the first time, what would you tell them about yourself and your life?" We asked this question to better understand how their identity did or did not reflect the youth culture represented in young adult fiction. The majority of responses indicated that the participants would tell someone about their hobbies or interests such as sports, music, technology, and being outdoors. Along with basic information such as their name, age, and family structure, respondents also said that they would share their personality traits, such as being shy, expressive, weird, or honest. Several participants also described themselves in relation to others; for example, they would tell people upon meeting about their friends and family, their relationship with God, whether they were or were not a people person, and their various stages of comfort based on familiarity. Finally, several respondents noted that they would tell someone about their place or "rurality" upon meeting; we used both the terms "place" and "rurality" in tandem because we could not be certain if the participants were referring to geographical location or referring to a culture based on living in a rural area. Examples of these responses included the following:

"I am country and live on a farm."

"I'm just about as country as a country girl comes."

"I'm from a county that only has one stop light."

"I'm from Cleveland, OH."

"I would tell them that I love where I live and I love how nice and kind people are to everyone. It means a lot to have some stranger basically come up and tell you to have a good day."

"I don't want to stay in the town that I grew up in because I think that there is nothing for me here. That being said, I will always love where I grew up."

The way in which the participants used the term "country" to describe themselves led us to understand that this term meant something more than their geographic designation; perhaps it suggests a lifestyle that someone from a rural area might choose to live.

Discussion and Conclusions

We acknowledge that our focus on tenth-graders is a limitation of this study and that the results of this research speak mainly to the tenth-grade population we surveyed, and may or may not be generalizable to the broader "teen" demographic. Overall, our analysis of the data suggests that teens do consider themselves as belonging to the youth culture represented in materials currently marketed to their age level. Exactly half (50%) of the respondents admitted to seeing themselves in the characters and situations that they read about, and many provided specific examples from young adult materials that illustrate this. The situations that they have read about with which they identified included topics found in literature for teens today, such as family issues and conflicts within relationships. Interestingly, two of the examples that teens provided most often, *The Hunger Games* and Nicholas Sparks's books, have connections to North Carolina in that *The Hunger Games* movies are filmed in the rural mountainous region of the state and Sparks's books are most often set in small towns in North Carolina. It is important to note that while the majority of the participants indicated that they do see themselves in the materials they read, this was not a strong consensus; many of the teens we surveyed, especially male teens, did not see themselves in what they read.

Gender Differences in Conceptualizing Self and Future

Five of the survey questions asked students to consider whether they see themselves, people they know, and possibilities for the future in the materials they read. In general, females tended to see

these types of connections more than males. A majority of young women saw themselves or people they knew in their reading (64%), saw characters that resembled the people they'd like to be in the future (60%), recognized familiar situations (57%), and gained inspiration for the future from their reading choices (60%). On the other hand, fewer young men saw themselves or people they knew in their reading (59%), saw characters that resembled the people they'd like to be in the future (35%), recognized familiar situations (41%), and gained inspiration for the future (47%).

The students' responses when prompted to give examples might help to explain the large disparity in male and female answers to the question of whether or not they saw characters they would like to be in the future in their reading material. These responses suggest that males interpreted this question to fundamentally concern a future profession or career. Nine of the 10 males who offer specific examples referenced a character in the profession that he plans to pursue; the tenth referenced a leisure activity he is passionate about. By contrast, just 6 of the 30 responses written by females discuss or name a profession. Other responses deal with character—one respondent, for example, admired characters who are "strong, outspoken and [fight] for what they love and believe in," and others mentioned some version of "finding true love."

In a related finding, when asked what they want to do after high school, most male respondents (50 of 51) and most female respondents (63 of 67) answered by naming a specific career or profession or by making a more general statement about going to college; however, when asked the broader question "What do you think your life will be like in five years?," the responses begin to diverge along gender lines. Male respondents tended to describe one element of life only, either school or work: 25% of the responses focused exclusively on college, while

23% mentioned only a job or career. Only 10%, (5 respondents) offered a multidimensional response, referencing both school and work (3) or school and/or work in combination with relationships or family status (2). In contrast, female respondents seemed naturally to consider more than one aspect of life when asked this same question. While 33% of responses focused solely on college and 10% focused on work or career, 25% (17) blended multiple elements, such as school, work, and/or a place to live (10) or school/work with relationships or family status (7). Both sets of data also included unsure/uncertain responses and a few that focused on general success, money, or providing descriptive adjectives such as "amazing," "cool," and "awesome." These results suggest that while both female and male teens prioritize education and career when conceptualizing their futures, females are more likely to consider multiple factors, including money, living arrangements, and relationships, as well as the interplay among these elements, when describing their future lives and when looking for connections between themselves and the characters they encounter in their reading material.

Rurality and Cultures of Reading

When asked about which format they like to read and do read most often, the most popular answer (46%) was "books." This finding was particularly intriguing, given that much of the current dialogue about teens and reading focuses on elements of new media as a way to better engage youth in reading. These teens may actually prefer reading traditional books, or they may have associated the act of reading with reading a book, something that they undoubtedly encounter in their school work in some fashion every day. Alternately, these participants may not have access to high-speed Internet services, which would make accessing reading materials on electronic devices more difficult.

The participants' reading and personal leisure time preferences reflected the variety of young adult materials on the market in the United States today. The largest percentage (36%) of these participants indicated that they read less than 30 minutes per week and that this reading was done at home. Additionally, home was the place that these teens accessed their reading materials. These findings evoke those of Rothbauer's,[28] in that rural teens may have a difficult time finding suggestions for reading and tend to stumble upon materials at home. Also, the overwhelming participant response that students read for small amounts of time at home is suggestive of Rothbauer's assertion that some communities in rural areas are not supportive of the practice of reading and, because of this, some teens keep their reading practices private. The participants' practice of reading the majority of the time at home may also suggest that there are not many places to go to read or that those places do exist but would require transportation, money, and time to travel to there.

From their responses, the reading in which these teens partake does provide them, to a certain extent, with ideas of what is possible for their futures. These teens indicated that their reading provided them with ideas about future professions, education, self-discovery, personality traits, and personal fulfillment. Inherent in their responses was a sense of independence, in that they wanted to live on their own, support themselves and possibly others, and engage in relationships they chose to initiate. Additionally, most (95%) of the participants inadvertently indicated that their future plans would take them outside of their present community by attending a college or university, military training camp, or acquiring specific career training. Perhaps this represented a point of tension for those who felt that their reading did not give them ideas for possible future selves. There was a definite sense of geographic culture in how the participants

described themselves; for those who identified proudly as being "country," there is not much reading material that portrays rural careers or staying in one's hometown after high school.

A question that arose from this study that would be well served for future research is "How does the contemporary young adult literature canon portray rural life and spaces?" As we indicated earlier, some within this group of teens seemed to gravitate to literature that had a rural North Carolina connection. Understanding how these texts represent rural experiences would be a very important step in comprehending rural teens' relationship with young adult literature. Another offshoot of this research that would be worth exploring further is understanding from rural teens what it means to be "country," how they identify with that concept, and how this facet of their life does or doesn't extend to their reading preferences and practices.

Notes

[1] Institute of Museum and Library Services, *The State of Small and Rural Libraries in the United States*, Brief No. 5, by Deanne W. Swan, Justin Grimes, and Timothy Owens (Washington, DC: Institute of Museum and Library Services, 2013), http://www.imls.gov/assets/1/AssetManager/Brief2013_05.pdf.

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[3] Jacqueline Edmondson, *Prairie Town: Redefining Rural Life in the Age of Globalization* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), 23.

[4] Elizabeth Birr Moje, "Responsive Literacy Teaching in Secondary School Content Areas," in *Meeting the Challenge of Adolescent Literacy: Research We Have, Research We Need*, ed. Mark W. Conley, Joseph R. Freidhoff, Michael B. Sherry, and Steven Forbes Tuckey (New York: Guilford Press, 2008), 63.

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[6] "Urban/Rural Counties in North Carolina," *The Rural Center*, North Carolina Rural Resource Center,

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[7] Institute of Museum and Library Services, *The State*.

[8] Louise Rosenblatt, *Literature as Exploration* (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1995), 17–30.

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The Real Deal: Teen Characters with Autism in YA Novels

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The Real Deal: Teen Characters with Autism in YA Novels

By Marilyn Irwin, Annette Y. Goldsmith, and Rachel Applegate

Abstract

Between 2012 and 2014, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control revised their estimate of the prevalence of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) from one in eighty-eight children[1] in the United States to one in sixty-eight children.[2] With this large number of youth with ASD in our communities, it is critical that accurate information be presented in YA literature, fiction as well as nonfiction, to increase understanding of the disorder. What is real in the depiction of autism in YA novels? Based on analysis of fifty-eight YA novels that include a young adult character with ASD, a portrait has been drawn of how they are treated, who their friends are, and where they go to school. The data from the novels were contrasted with current research involving actual youth with ASD to assess the accuracy of the fictional portrayals. Findings indicate that the depiction of educational placement and the behavior of others toward the characters in the books was a reasonable reflection of real life as shown in the research; however, fewer friendships were found in the novels than studies of actual adolescents with ASD indicate.

Introduction

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) considers "ASD [autism spectrum disorder] an important public health concern" and reports that "more people than ever before are being diagnosed with an ASD."[3] Although the reason for the increase is unclear, research published in 2012 estimated the prevalence of ASD to be one in eighty-eight children in the

United States.[4] In 2014 that rate was increased to one in sixty-eight.[5] The CDC provides the following definition of autism spectrum disorder:

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a developmental disability that can cause significant social, communication and behavioral challenges. There is often nothing about how people with ASD look that sets them apart from other people, but people with ASD may communicate, interact, behave, and learn in ways that are different from most other people. The learning, thinking, and problem-solving abilities of people with ASD can range from gifted to severely challenged. Some people with ASD need a lot of help in their daily lives; others need less.

A diagnosis of ASD now includes several conditions that used to be diagnosed separately: autistic disorder, pervasive developmental disorder not otherwise specified (PDD-NOS), and Asperger syndrome. These conditions are now all called autism spectrum disorder.[6]

The American Psychiatric Association publishes the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, the tool most commonly used by professionals to define the criteria for diagnosing a psychosocial disorder. An updated version, commonly referred to as *DSM-5*, was published in 2013. The new edition combines the different types of ASD under the heading 299.00 Autism Spectrum Disorder.[7] The full *DSM-5* criteria may be found at the CDC website: http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/hcp-dsm.html.[8]

Individually, together, and in collaboration with others, Mary Anne Prater and Tina Taylor Dyches have written extensively in the area of children's literature and developmental disabilities, an umbrella term that includes autism spectrum disorder.[9] Their work covers the full age range of youth literature, including young adult materials, and focuses on the objective

coverage of the disabilities and potential educational usefulness of the materials, as well as listing the titles of the works identified. How the fictional teens compare to actual youth with disabilities is not in their purview.

Much has also been written about the role of fiction for youth that includes people with disabilities.[10] Ayala provides four cogent reasons for making the materials available for students:

1. Because of the issues raised, the materials can help children "understand and cope with difficult decisions they must face in an increasingly complex society."

2. The "relevant, authentic publications" can be used to draw students to reading.

3. The books can portray people with disabilities "who are increasingly reflected in our society."

4. People with disabilities can be provided with an entertaining reflection of self.[11]

In 2003 the award-winning and best-selling book *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* by Mark Haddon was published.[12] Told in the first-person voice of fifteen-year-old Christopher, the reader learns that the narrator is very smart but has some behavior issues. It is also revealed that he attends a special school, has no friends, and is often called names. Although this is just one fictional representation of a teen with ASD, the portrayal of Christopher received so much attention that readers without previous knowledge of autism might consider it normative of all individuals on the spectrum. This raises the question of how teens with ASD are portrayed in other young adult novels and how that compares with what research tells us about real life.

What the Research Says

In 1986 Madeleine Will—then the Assistant Secretary for the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services in the U.S. Department of Education—called for increased placement of

students with mild and moderate disabilities into regular education classrooms.[13] This began the Regular Education Initiative, which has resulted in a growing number of special education students spending at least part of their day in classrooms with their non-disabled peers. Ann Christy Dybvik reports that during the 2000–2001 school year, approximately 40% of children with autism spent at least 40% of their school day in a regular classroom, and this increased dramatically since the beginning of separately recorded autism data in 1992–93.[14]

A 2014 report from the U.S. Department of Education states that 39% of students with autism spent 80% or more of the day in a regular class, over 18% stayed 40–79% of the day, and nearly 34% were included less than 40%. Slightly over 9% were listed as having educational placements in other environments defined to include a "separate school, residential facility, homebound/hospital environment, correctional facilities, and parentally placed in private schools."[15] The report also states that over 6% of students with autism ages fourteen through twenty-one dropped out of school for the 2010–11 school year.[16]

Because a deficit in social skills is one of the characteristics of ASD,[17] individuals with the disability have difficulty making peer friends; however, research indicates that friendships are present.[18] For example, an average of two best friends was found for all participants with ASD in the research by Bauminger and Kasari.[19] Most of the research has been conducted with samples of high-functioning young adults with ASD.[20]

Inappropriate behaviors and bullying are a concern of many educators and parents. A study of mothers of children with Asperger syndrome found the following:

> The overall prevalence rate reported by mothers of peer victimization was 94%. Mothers reported that almost three-quarters of their children had been hit by peers or siblings in the past year and 75% had been emotionally bullied. On the more severe end of peer

victimization, 10% of the children were attacked by a gang in the past year and 15% were victims of nonsexual assaults to the genitals.[21]

This research raises the following questions about how characters with ASD are handled in young adult novels compared to what is present in real life. Specifically, where are the teens educated, do they have any friends, how are they treated by their peers, and how does this relate to the reality found in the research on adolescents with ASD?

Methodology

One hundred young adult novels published between 1968 and 2013 were identified where an individual of any age was labeled as having ASD. Each of the novels included in the study was independently read, coded, and analyzed by two of the three researchers. Using a form that was developed for the study, manifest coding of pertinent content was independently recorded by each of two readers for every title. Manifest coding was utilized in an effort to minimize subjectivity of the coding. For example, when ethnicity was not explicitly stated, it was coded as "unknown." Some interpretation was required when the information was not stated unambiguously, such as whether a character was to be coded as having mild, moderate, or severe functional abilities. After each reader completed the coding, the individual coding sheets were compared to ensure the quality of the coding and reach agreement on how the data should be entered, particularly when distinct wording was not provided. Final coding represented the consensus of both readers.

This research includes quantified summaries of the situations depicted in the books and represented by the coding. For example, males represented 57% of protagonists with autism. Also, three-quarters of characters with autism were described as having a splinter-savant ability

such as excelling in mathematics, memory, or art. This quantification guided the narrative

sections of the research analysis. Filtering by codes identified specific portrayals that illustrate

particular dynamics such as educational placement, while the researchers' extensive narrative

notes provide rich contextual information. The unit of analysis is the portrayal of each character

with ASD in a book. When a character appears in more than one book, the portrayals are counted

separately; hence there are more portrayals than books.

Results and Discussion

Fifty-eight out of the one hundred novels contain a young adult ages eleven to nineteen with

ASD, and two identified individuals are present in two of the books; therefore, there are sixty

character portrayals. The character with ASD in the other forty-two books was either younger

than eleven or older than nineteen. Of the sixty portrayals, thirty-four who are able to interact

independently with few ASD-related limitations were coded as mild. Sixteen, coded as moderate,

have a few functional issues requiring some assistance. The ten coded as severe exhibit

numerous ASD-related characteristics and intellectual disabilities requiring full-time assistance.

Schooling

Table 1 compares the educational placements of the characters in the books with data from the

U.S. Department of Education about students served by the Individuals with Disabilities

Education Act (IDEA). Although many of the characters are shown to have multiple types of

educational placements, twenty-two of the young adult characters in the novels studied are

included full-time in regular education classrooms, and three of that group are supported by an

aide for most of the story. An additional five are pulled out for some special education, totaling

45% of the characters spending all or some of their day in regular classrooms with their non-

disabled peers. Colin Fischer, in the novel of the same name,[22] is an example of a character who at various times is in regular classes with and without an aide, and is pulled out for special classes. Additionally, three of the characters attend or have graduated from college. Though it is unusual for a teen to have graduated from college, Nathaniel from *Mindblind* is an unusual character.[23] He is a genius who completes his BA at age fourteen and is taking a gap year during the timeframe of the novel. In thirteen cases, insufficient information is provided to determine where they are being educated, and six are not attending school.

Table 1: Educational Placement

	U.S. Department of Education (percent of students served under IDEA)	Characters with Autism (percent of 60 characters)
Regular education at least 40% of day	57.2	45
Separate environments	9.1	13
Dropped out/Not attending school	6.3	1
Full time special education	N.A.	.5
University	N.A.	.5

Three of the characters are homeschooled, three are placed in special education full-time, and five attend a special school for students with disabilities. These eleven individuals have limited opportunities to interact with their non-disabled peers in educational settings. For

example, Kiara Thornton-Delgado in Lyn Miller-Lachmann's *Rogue*, is being homeschooled because she has been expelled for assaulting a student who mistreated her at her regular school.[24]

There is more opportunity for the characters with autism to interact with peers when they are together at school, but fewer such opportunities are offered in the books than in real life. Surprisingly, more characters with autism are sequestered in separate environments than are their real-life counterparts.

Friends

Most of the friendship research on actual teens with ASD has focused on high-functioning individuals. This closely matches the functional level of the majority of characters in the novels; however, it means that few comparisons between reality and portrayals can be made with those with moderate and severe ASD-related limitations.

According to Bauminger and Kasari, teens with autism have at least two best friends,[25] but fewer friends were common in the books analyzed. Table 2 summarizes the types of friends present—or not—for the characters with ASD. Forty-two of the characters in the novels have at least one peer friend who does not also have a disability. Though some of the character portrayals in the books do have multiple friends—Nathaniel in Jennifer Roy's *Mindblind* has a number of friends including the neighbor he has known since they were both four years old[26]—that is not the norm. In sixteen books the characters begin as friendless, and friendships develop throughout the story. *Here's How I See It—Here's How It Is*, by Heather Henson, provides a good illustration of this type of relationship: Junebug is at first annoyed by the friendless Trace and his ASD behaviors but eventually finds him to be a steadfast friend.[27] The friendships that characters with autism make are primarily with neurotypical people (those not on the autism spectrum), and these friendships are mostly initiated during the timeframe of the novel. Since the

need for the character with autism to be able to function "in the real world" is a frequent theme in the books, like Marcelo in Francisco X. Stork's *Marcelo in the Real World*,[28] the overall picture drawn of these friendships is quite hopeful. Many characters had no previous friends prior to those that are newly established. It is more rare for the character with autism to have a friend with a disability. Friends who also have disabilities are present in eleven books; they are the singular friend in only one book, Justin R. Smith's *Eye of a Fly*, in which Ernest gets to know a young woman with a brain injury.[29]

Table 2: Friendships (N=60)

Types of friends	Frequency
Friend without disability	42
Friend with disability	11[a]
Adult friends	18[b]
No friends	8
Began as friendless, but developed	16

[a]one is only friend

[b]four are only friends

The character with ASD has friends who are adults in eighteen books, in one case being another individual with ASD. The presence of so many neurotypical adult friends suggests that high-functioning teens with ASD in these books are well-equipped to relate to adults on their own level. Teen sleuth Verity from the Duchess and Bones series by Alexandra Eden is in fact acknowledged to be considerably brighter than her adult partner, the retired policeman, Bones, which is a running joke in the books.[30] On the other hand, it is problematic when the teens' only

friends are the adults who are paid to support them. Four of the adult companions are the only friends the character has. Eight characters appear to have no friends. In three cases, there was insufficient information provided to determine whether friendships are present.

Most young adults, whether in real life or in young adult fiction, demonstrate some type of romantic interest in members of the same or opposite sex. This interest is rarely found in the novels studied. In *Mindblind*, Nathaniel is one of the exceptions.[31] He would like to have a relationship with Jessa, but is unclear how to go about establishing one. Marcelo does end up involved with a young woman in *Marcelo in the Real World*, but he is clueless about her affection for him.[32] More often, as in *Orange Clouds Blue Sky* by J. Hale Turner,[33] there is no mention of any interest in establishing a relationship. When Starr attends the prom with her older sister, she dances with her female friend and is more interested in the food being served than in the young men who are also in attendance.

Negative Behaviors of Peers toward Individuals with ASD

The research that describes how high-functioning teens are bullied by their peers indicates that these behaviors are very common.[34] Since the figures in table 3 are frequency counts, they could not be quantified as a percentage. Though the frequency of negative behaviors by peers could not be compared directly with the very high percentage of victimization reported by mothers of actual high-functioning children with autism (94%), almost every character portrayal was subjected to such behaviors to a greater or lesser degree. It is therefore safe to say that in this regard, art does reflect life.

Table 3: Behavior of Peers Toward Characters with Autism (N=60)

_____

Behavior	Number
Looked down on	8
Objects of ridicule	43
Bullied or shoved	16
Abused	5
No negative behaviors	12
Treated as equals	47

In the study, forty-three of the characters with ASD are objects of ridicule by their peers. The characters are frequently laughed at or called names such as freak, retard, and geek. For example, in *The Half-Life of Planets* by Emily Franklin and Brendan Halpin, Hank reports that some fellow students "are given to calling me a number of creative variations on 'homosexual.'"[35]

Sixteen of the characters were coded as being bullied or shoved by their peers. In *Unlocked* by Karen Kingsbury, Holden is kicked in the shins by members of his school's football team.[36] Typical of the treatment often meted out to "nerds," the resident bully shoves Colin's head into the toilet on his first day of high school.[37] In *Game as Ned* by Tim Pegler, Ned is punched on a couple of occasions by a classmate,[38] one of five abused individuals in the study whose injuries result in severe physical or emotional harm.

The behaviors toward eight of the characters indicate that they are looked down on. One of the self-important teen girls in *Orange Clouds Blue Sky* makes it clear that she does not think it is appropriate for Starr to attend the prom.[39] No negative behaviors by peers are present in twelve of the sixty character portrayals. Indeed, forty-seven of the portrayals show others

treating those with autism as equals. Yet even these relationships are at times accompanied by behaviors that are negative.

It quickly became apparent in these books that teen characters with ASD could expect poor treatment from many quarters: family, acquaintances, teachers, and even bystanders on the street. The twelve novels that do not show these behaviors may not be realistic, but can give readers hope that more positive interactions are possible. So, too, can those novels in which the characters with ASD are treated as equals by friends and family. Examples include friends Amber and Ricky in Matthew Quick's *Sorta Like a Rock Star*, and cousins Ted and Salim in *The London Eye Mystery* by Siobhan Dowd.[40]

Conclusions

The young adult novels in this content analysis largely reflect the true picture of what life is like for teens with ASD. By comparing the character portrayals of high-functioning individuals with the research documenting the lives of real teens, it is possible to discern similarities in two areas: how the teens are educated and how they are treated by others. In other words, what appears in these books seems to be consistent with reality: there are primarily mainstreamed educational placements, and teens with ASD face many instances of poor treatment. On the other hand, friendships for these teens overall are less common in the books than in real life.

What do these findings mean for actual young adults and the librarians who serve them? Ayala's four reasons for the importance of fiction that includes characters with disabilities[41] provide a point of departure:

1. *Understanding and coping with difficult decisions.* Many of the books provide nuanced depictions of how peers with autism are/should be treated. Though there is a great deal of

name-calling and poor treatment in the books, there are also true friends and even strangers who intervene. Young adults have to grapple with issues such as bullying, and the various scenarios in the books can be a catalyst for discussion or private reflection. YA librarians can include titles in anti-bullying displays, discussions, and pathfinders. Examples: Beth Goobie's *The Lottery*, Tim Pegler's *Game as Ned*, and Ashley Edward Miller and Zack Stentz's *Colin Fischer*.[42]

2. *Relevant and authentic.* Almost all of these books depict autism in an accurate way. In addition to doing the background research, often the author has some kind of personal connection with ASD, whether as a parent, sibling, teacher, therapist, or person with autism. Many of the books go on to make autism real through strong characterization. How to negotiate friendships and romantic relationships is of keen interest to teens whether or not a disability is concerned, and raising the discussion with these books provides an opportunity to think of peers with autism as people they would want as friends . . . or perhaps more. Examples: Emily Franklin and Brenda Halpin's *The Half-Life of Planets*, Nora Raleigh Baskin's *Anything but Typical*, and Francisco X. Stork's *Marcelo in the Real World*.[43]

3. *Presence of people with disabilities in our society.* With rates as high as one in sixty-eight children, teens can meet peers with ASD in books as well as in life. Since high-functioning characters with autism are predominantly mainstreamed, they appear at school and have classmates who can get to know them; if homeschooled, they have neighbors. Characters with autism belong in YA novels, as elsewhere. Examples: Deirdre Sullivan's *Prim Improper,* Siobhan Dowd's *The London Eye Mystery*, and Lyn Miller-Lachmann's *Rogue*.[44]

4. *An entertaining reflection of self.* The portraits of characters with ASD can be very compelling and make for rich reading; many of the books are award winners. Of course, it is important to have both mirrors and windows; that is, to see oneself reflected in the literature (mirrors) and learn about the lives of others too (windows). YA librarians who facilitate a writing group could consider writing fan fiction in the voice of a favorite character with ASD. Examples: Jennifer Roy's *Mindblind*, Sarah Dooley's *Livvie Owen Lived Here*, and Beverley Brenna's Wild Orchid trilogy (*Wild Orchid*, *Waiting for No One*, and *The White Bicycle*).[45]

Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*[46] brought international attention to a single teen character with ASD, but there are many more characters in YA literature. The books studied offer the real deal: teen characters with diverse experiences across the full range of ASD, largely reflecting the research on actual teens.

Notes

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