Diversity in YA: Representing Real American Teenagers

As this piece is being composed, there is a movement in the YA world called “We Need Diverse Books.” Started by Ellen Oh and firmly planted in social media via Tumblr, Facebook, and Twitter, this movement seeks to fill a gap that exists in children’s and YA literature. That gap absorbs diverse authors, diverse characters, and various topics that appeal to all types of readers. Powerhouse publisher Scholastic even went so far as to release a statement titled “We Have Diverse Books,” listing everything they considered diverse that had been published in 2014. While I was busy following newsfeeds and Twitter feeds, two extraordinary reviews were submitted to me. I share them now with you in the hope that you will examine your reading lists through the lens of diversity.

To find out more, please visit www.weneeddiversebooks.org for information.

Let’s Get Lost by Adi Alsaid
Reviewed by Robert M. Babirad

After losing her parents in a tragic car accident, 17-year-old Leila embarks on a road trip from Louisiana to Alaska to witness the Northern Lights and to create her own definition of the meaning of life.

In this realistic, character-driven novel, the author’s plot structure centers around the lives of four teenagers, Hudson, Bree, Elliot, and Sonia, whose lives Leila “accidentally” enters in the course of her own northern road trip. The encounters occur during a time when the individual characters are experiencing their own personal crises and need help from someone to move on. The author’s choice of structuring each chapter around the character who Leila meets, and whose life she is influencing, is particularly effective and strengthens the impact of the novel.

An interesting aspect of this work is that Leila is equally and mutually influenced by each individual whom she helps. In the process of these interactions, she learns more about herself while overcoming difficulties from her own past. Leila subsequently emerges as a strong protagonist. The book is also populated with entertaining supporting characters such as “Stoner Timmy,” who assures Leila that doughnuts hold the answers to life’s questions and fears Time Lords and individuals wearing recording devices.

Leila is a rich and complex protagonist who continually evolves throughout the course of the novel. Leila’s story is presented to the reader in the final chapter, when Leila arrives at her self-realization. It is this realization that enables readers to see Leila’s complexity and growth as a character from the beginning of the novel until its final and dramatic conclusion.

This novel is particularly appropriate for the secondary classroom; it employs themes such as loss, death, rejection, love, heartbreak, and the urge to follow one’s instincts rather than adhere to traditional societal conventions.

Yaqui Delgado Wants to Kick Your Ass by Meg Medina
Reviewed by Tracey Flores

My own life resonates with Medina’s story: one person can, indeed, turn a world upside down in...
Lila explains to Piddy: “[T]here’s always a Yaqui in every school, in every place in the world. I met a few malditas along the way myself” (219). Many thanks to Meg Medina for writing down the truth and for putting a familiar face on the bully that is common to us all.

I understand the importance of a book like *Y aqui Delgado—how it helps young readers realize that they are not alone in this experience, how it heightens awareness of bullying, and how it can support teachers, parents, and administrators to recognize the importance of addressing the issue and the tragedy of failing to do so.

The novel *Y aqui Delgado W ants to Kick Your Ass* reminds readers that they are not alone and that they can act in responsible ways to protect themselves from harm. It demonstrates the need to speak up, to be heard and valued as human beings, and to confront bullying and harassing behaviors that can cause unimaginable harm to young people.

**Works Cited**


Robert M. Babirad is a secondary English teacher and attorney. He is particularly interested in the use of diverse young adult and world literature in the classroom and innovative instructional approaches to teaching English language arts and literacy for English language learners. He joined NCTE in 2015. Email: rmbabirad@gmail.com. Tracey Flores is a doctoral student in English education at Arizona State University. She is the co-director of ASU’s El Dia de Los Niños/Dia de Los Libros literacy event that honors youth voices, cultures, languages, and literacies. Prior to entering her doctoral studies, she taught for eight years in schools throughout Phoenix and Glendale. She has been a member of NCTE since 2009. Email: ttflore@asu.edu.