One Among Many: Isolation and Uncertainty in Today’s YA Literature

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Young adult literature often places great emphasis on the power of harmony and participation in community. Though the protagonists of such novels continue to face their own perils and personal conflicts, such matters are typically assuaged (to a great degree) by the mere presence of companions and friends. The grim destiny that burdens Harry Potter in J. K. Rowling’s award-winning series, for instance, is unquestionably a terrible crisis; but from the onset of his first adventure, Harry is bolstered by the steadfastness and intimacy of his friendships with Hermione and Ron, bonds that begin to take root from their first encounter. Heroes such as Harry are often marked as special and different, but whatever distance this creates between him and others is closer to awkward discomfit rather than true, encumbering isolation.

The knowledge of existing apart from others has a profound influence on any mind, let alone that of a developing teenager. The need to belong and find a place within reality is a powerful motivation, yet in such endeavors, the turmoil of youth often creates more challenges than it does solutions. Those who feel detached from their surroundings, be it the hometown, the country, or perhaps even the world, often find themselves drawn to accounts of similar isolation. Isolation might yet yield opportunity for personal cultivation; to stand apart and be distinct may itself bring contentment to some, where to others it would bring only dismay. Regardless, the psyche is forced to change, and the individual must stave off the ill to progress in life.

Cases of isolation, of turbulent adjustment to life’s setbacks and the need to overcome the strife of the past, are increasingly visible in YA literature. As authors delve into the impact of such emotional distances, readers grow close to the ranks of pariahs, standouts, and outcasts. Here are a few examples of YA novels that highlight the diverse experiences of the disconnected.

The Good Braider
by Terry Farish

Reviewed by Elizabeth Knowlton Sullivan
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Terry Farish’s The Good Braider should not be missed. Based on years of research and interviews, Farish writes an inspiring tale about an immigrant girl, Viola. The story starts in war-torn Sudan, and our narrator is right in the middle of the conflict. It will not be difficult for students to find something with which to connect. Viola is likeable, yet flawed. She has trouble finding her way in the United States, and while this may not be everyone’s story, most adolescents can relate to feeling like they do not know where they belong in their own lives.

Told entirely in verse, each chapter is a new poem that propels the reader through the story. The quick, direct nature of the poetry
The novel has many themes: Knowing the difference between a migrant and a refugee is just one lesson that students could learn, but the novel goes much deeper than that. There are scenes of war, hunger, and rape. While these themes go beyond those of many young adult novels, they are used to create a realistic situation for Viola and her family. Though not unnecessarily graphic, the scenes will most likely induce empathy for Viola and, even if only for a moment, students will see beyond their lives.

The themes of gender roles and women’s rights within different cultures are another great way to read this novel and would connect well to other texts dealing with these issues. The ideas of family life, death, loss of innocence, the complexities of mother/daughter relationships, and coming-of-age (extremely complicated for Viola) are all wonderfully represented. Almost miraculously, readers find hope within Viola as she lives in fear and uncertainty, revealing the resiliency of human nature.

Viola’s character and her connection to family, country, and, finally, the United States will inspire many students to want to finish this book. It would be difficult to read about desperate attempts at survival, gunfire, and a chance at freedom and not want to find out how Viola’s story ends.

Jackaby by William Ritter
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“I think you might be a bit confused . . . . But don’t feel sad, it’s a common state—most people are.” This cheeky piece of wit comes from Jackaby, a new pre-noir novel placed in New England around the turn of the 19th century. The novel presents as a story steeped in the tradition of Sherlock Holmes, and there are many similarities between the two sleuths, elegantly delivered throughout the text. For instance, Jackaby’s disheveled appearance, his pockets full of knick-knacks, and his obsession with the esoteric all serve as allusions to Doyle’s famous neurotic detective. Add the archetypal bemused curiosity and personal arrogance, and it is hard not to fall in love with Jackaby. The genre’s typical anti-heroes are expressed in the way of bumbling police commissioners who are always a step behind the investigation. Jackaby’s home is itself a curiosity, filled with magical flatulent frogs and giant alligator skeletons. However, despite its Sherlockian roots, Jackaby still finds its own voice through its well-crafted idiosyncrasies and its fearless creativity.

Every Sherlock must have a Watson. Meet Abigail Rook, fresh off the boat from England and full of feminist flair that would make Jane Austen proud. Her character, like Watson’s, adds depth and credibility to an otherwise fantastical story. While
most of the male figures in the story are guilty of blatant chauvinism, Jackaby immediately takes Rook for “quite sharp”—shattering her once-promised fate of a secluded parlor life. Though Rook’s no-budge attitude toward female subjugation is clearly conveyed by her internal and external dialogue, she doesn’t let this hinder her detective work—even if it means swooning to distract policemen. In the male-centric atmosphere of many Victorian novels—especially the Sherlock Holmes series, whose central female characters are seemingly always mysterious, would-be harlots—this book comes as a breath of fresh air.

The book is touted as a cross between Sherlock Holmes and Buffy the Vampire Slayer in part because of its affinity for the magical, supernatural, or, as Rook puts it, “occult.” Jackaby’s eccentricities recapitulate those of Sherlock Holmes, pushing the envelope of fantasy within fiction and suspending the reader’s expectations of what’s coming next. With its allusions to fairies, “redhats,” auras, and a slew of other lesser-known folklore elements, Jackaby is a well-researched curiosity, asking readers to believe in things they have never heard of, and leaving them just satisﬁed enough to follow some of their own literary “detective work.”

Jackaby questions the nature of monstrosity and humanity, as did much of Doyle’s work, and while those with virtuous aims end up misunderstood or relocated, the real villains get lauded for their bravery. This ironic yet traditional trajectory gives us a hunger for tangible justice, a need for closure and the recognition of heroism—all of which the novel seems to make impossible. While it does adhere to lopsided sensibilities about virtue and justice, the book offers a more cathartic expression with respect to adolescent themes.

For example, Rook’s recalcitrance toward her family and her past, as well as the search for her own voice, may strike a familiar chord with adolescent students. In the same vein, Jackaby’s bravado and moments of clever repartee with Rook may inspire otherwise unmotivated readers to persevere through the text.

Jackaby is the perfect companion to Sherlock Holmes, especially for female students who feel underrepresented or misrepresented in canonical literature. The latent sexism among most of the book’s male characters is seen from the vantage point of a female protagonist with nothing to lose—a fact that is never lost in the text. Rook is searching for an identity and, quite literally, a place to be; her downfalls invest the reader in the text, while her triumphs leave them affected by her cunning. The novel is deﬁnitely a page-turner, and it will surely be well-received in the coming months.

More Happy Than Not

by Adam Silvera

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Follow teenager Aaron Soto through many trials and tribulations as he struggles to forge an identity growing up in the Bronx in Adam Silvera’s debut novel, More Happy Than Not. Aaron’s voice is captivating and he narrates the story from his own perspective in an engaging, straightforward manner, like a modern Holden Caulfield. However, unlike Holden, Aaron hails from New York City’s housing projects. As far as he is concerned, fate has dealt him a crappy hand.

Despite his age, Aaron already has many skeletons in his closet. The novel takes place in the aftermath of his father’s suicide and Aaron’s own suicide attempt. Aaron struggles to cope with the overwhelming guilt he feels toward his late father, as well as his mother and older brother—the only family he has left. His overworked mother juggles two jobs to put food on the table, his brother is detached from reality—favoring his video game worlds over the real world—and Aaron’s childhood friends are unable to provide the comfort and empathy he seeks. Aaron’s only emotional outlet is his girlfriend, yet even she can’t help him as he grapples with his most secret skeleton: his self-loathing attraction to other boys. He can’t seem to ﬁnd emotional validation until a chance encounter brings Thomas into his life. Aaron’s friendship with Thomas quickly manifests into something more for Aaron, and when his feelings are unexpectedly rejected, Aaron ﬁnds himself...
Once more thinking of suicide as the only way out, the only way to free himself from the feelings and urges he wishes he didn’t have. Then, Aaron learns that the seemingly impossible solace he seeks is, in fact, possible with the Leteo procedure. Though highly controversial, the Leteo Institute promises to effectively “erase” traumatic memories with its revolutionary procedure. Aaron begins to think that the Leteo procedure may be the only route to happiness, one that will be able to “turn” him straight once and for all.

This novel specializes in the role traumatic memories play within the human psyche, particularly in the developing adolescent brain. It suggests that the possibility of being able to scientifically repress traumatic memories is both feasible and imminent. Yet the text causes us to ask ourselves that if such a procedure were indeed possible, is it morally permissible to use science to “forget” one’s past, to literally alter one’s brain chemistry with machines and bury dark memories to earn a “fresh start”? If our memories, no matter how painful they may be, exist for a reason—to allow us to learn and grow—what would the consequences of eradicating these memories be for the individual, as well as for society as a whole?

The text encompasses myriad relevant social issues. Class politics, race, and sexuality are all examined from Aaron’s unique, refreshing perspective as he makes astute as well as naive observations and offers profound commentary from an unexpected source. This text could be an effective tool for teaching about self-acceptance and the role trauma and traumatic memories play in the fragmentation of the individual’s identity and sense of self. The novel could also explain the painful necessity of having access to one’s memories, both good and bad, for memory recall plays a pivotal role in developing and validating an individual’s identity. Removing select “painful” memories essentially removes an integral part of one’s own identity. More Happy Than Not could easily be taught in conjunction with any text dealing with themes of self-acceptance and identity and with any other text dealing with the nature of memory.

All the Rage by Courtney Summers
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In All the Rage, 17-year-old Romy Grey becomes a pariah in her small town after she is raped by the sheriff’s son. When another girl with a connection to the wealthy Turner family goes missing, Romy must weigh the true cost of the silence into which she’s been shamed. Summers tackles heavy subjects such as violence, alcoholism, and poverty, all while calling into question the culture of victim-blaming that permeates conversations surrounding sexual assault. Students may have already read media reports of rape cases involving teenagers out of Steubenville, Ohio, and Concord, New Hampshire. All the Rage provides a springboard for discussion about consent in a way that few contemporary young adult novels do.

The text lends itself to these discussions. For example, when Sheriff Turner, the father of Romy’s rapist, suggests that Romy wanted the rape to happen, she thinks, “And it’s not that she tells him it didn’t happen, it’s that by the time he asks, she no longer has a language of her own.” Summers’s novel is highly feminist, calling into question all of the ways in which society shames and silences women. Teachers might encourage students to read All the Rage through a feminist or social class lens, examining who in the novel holds power and why. The Turner family, because they are wealthy and influential, are viewed opposite Romy, a young woman from the wrong side of town. When Romy and her former friend Penny, the girlfriend of the Turners’s younger son, go missing after a party, Summers contrasts how the town of Grebe responds to each girl’s disappearance; when Romy turns up on the side of the road, drugged and alt-clothed, she is blamed for distracting the search for the wealthy and beautiful Penny.

I would suggest pairing All the Rage with another novel about sexual assault that has become required reading in many high schools: Laurie Halse Anderson’s Speak. Students could compare and contrast Romy’s anger with Melinda’s silence, examining how each girl negotiates a new
language to describe her trauma. While it takes Melinda longer to confide in someone she trusts about her rape, in both novels, the girls are accused of fabricating their stories. Putting *Speak* in conversation with *All the Rage* provides a springboard for discussion about why so many women do not speak up in the aftermath of sexual violence.

**Works Cited**


Summers, Courtney. *All the Rage*. St. Martin’s, 2015.

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