 Levitating through Language: Telling the Tales about Adolescents and Families

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To seize a book translates to taking hold of the reader early on for a cultivated life filled with storytelling and discernment. Like the author, the reader must keep going and be sustained as the storytelling unfolds through plot and action. In the “Prologue” to Strange Pilgrims: Stories, Gabriel García Márquez describes the braiding of storytelling and writing as follows: “[T]he writing became so fluid that I sometimes felt as if I were writing for the sheer pleasure of telling a story, which may be the human condition that most resembles levitation” (xii). García Márquez’s description about the act of storytelling stayed with me over the years and captures the work of the author and reader. Ultimately, a narrative can provide force and strength that resembles a feeling of lightness for both the author and reader. At the same time, comfort and discomfort alike with joys and tribulations can appear in a literary work.

As a teacher educator and reader of young adult literature, I remain informed about the publication of literary works that can serve as mentor texts for both preservice and inservice teachers. Through a balance of classic texts and contemporary classics, middle grade and adolescent readers can connect with characters whose choices and dilemmas are timeless. The books reviewed here favor a mentor text approach as well as the inclusion of diverse characters for literature instruction. More specifically, the three novels written for youth that I review resemble the model of “teachers-as-writers,” which is at the heart of the National Writing Project. In fact, the authors Guadalupe Garcia McCall, Joe Jiménez, and Jeff Anderson grew up in Texas and are experienced language arts teachers and storytellers in the public schools.

**Shame the Stars by Guadalupe Garcia McCall**

This historical novel introduces us to characters who live in South Texas in 1915 and are in pursuit of justice. The adolescent protagonists Joaquín del Toro and Dulceña Villa are in love, but family drama, social tensions, and border rebellion interrupt their courtship. Their romance resembles Shakespeare’s tragedy *Romeo and Juliet*, which was first published in 1597, and the novel’s title comes from scene 2, act 2 of that play. Young readers interested in history and romance will be pleased by the layers of storytelling that include deception, secrets, and upheaval. The young lovers, Joaquín and Dulceña, are torn apart by their families and society, yet they are strengthened as communicated via the poems and letters that declare their mutual love.

Mexican-origin families must come together to protect their livelihoods and maintain order in the presence of the White authority of the Texas Rangers. As a native Texan of Mexican descent, I became engrossed in the novel, especially for its telling of the unspoken and rarely taught histories and politics about the dispossessed Tejanos—native Texas Mexicans—whose borderlands changed overnight through land theft, escalated
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visible. Admittedly, the reader is required to pay attention and look inward to comprehend the rising action and conflicts that levitate the heart. The narrative howls and rises with many voices, yet it takes a sudden turn with the following revelation from Abraham: “[T]he world is perfect, and the world is mine, the moon is watching, and the world is made of light” (131).

Zack Delacruz: Just My Luck, Book 2 by Jeff Anderson

Best known for guiding us through workshops and professional books on the teaching of grammar and writing, author Jeff Anderson gains more readership with the publication of his second volume in the Zack Delacruz series designed for the middle grades. As in Book 1, the adolescents in Just My Luck navigate the middle school years in a realistic comedy that has clever twists and witty humor. The novel begins with an epigraph by Tennessee Williams: “Life is partly what we make it, and partly what is made by the friends we choose.” This quote sets the stage for the dramas, friendships, and journeys that unfold in the novel.

Youth perspectives about the struggle between child and adult worlds are captured by Anderson in a humane, comedic manner. A middle-grade reader can relate to the coming-of-age dilemmas, acquaintances, and friendships described. Zack’s sense of self unfolds through his parents’ divorce as he navigates his friendships and schooling. For instance, the novel opens with feelings of isolation and how Zack, once a

Bloodline by Joe Jiménez

In the debut novel Bloodline, we meet Abraham who is 17 and lives with his grandmother, Gertrudis, in San Antonio, Texas. Jiménez constructs an emotional, poetic, and language-rich novel about maleness, masculinity, and adulthood. He challenges cultural perceptions about an adolescent male whose biological parents are absent. Stereotypes and myths about being and becoming a man are dispelled with new possibilities to define family and the familiar.

Each interconnected chapter-based vignette kept me on the edge, alert, and mindful of my feelings and thoughts. The novel opens with Gertrudis telling her girlfriend, Becky, “He needs a father” (1). This need and want for a grandson becomes more urgent as Abraham starts fights in and gets suspended from school. Gertrudis further adds, “I don’t want him to be lost” (1). The simplicity of the declaration made by Gertrudis becomes more complex when Tío Claudio is invited to the household to connect with his nephew, Abraham.

The story is told in the second-person point of view—which communicates all the junctures and seams of Abraham’s life—so the reader is more apt to see, feel, and understand the world through Abraham’s eyes, body, and mind. As in a coming-of-age novel, Abraham reveals that, “All the while, the brain is an organ as marvelous as the heart. We live and we forget and we learn and we see, and sometimes, we remember” (127). The reader follows Abraham as he makes his way in a world that is, at the same time, harsh and cruel, tender and loving, as demonstrated by those around him. However, Abraham’s girlfriend Ophelia is a balm of care and hope as they both attempt to interpret and translate their adolescent lives in the presence of adults who are either present or missing in varied forms.

Jiménez grabs the reader and refuses to let go even when the narrative comes to a harrowing, meditative close with Abraham’s parents’ presence made partly
Carpe Librum: Seize the (YA) Book

Davy Crockett Middle School in San Antonio, Texas.

Anderson is adept with figurative language as he favors linguistic innovation and crafty sentence making; he even tests the waters about how language is used to support communication and create confusion in a frenzy. Zack notices signage in the school cafeteria that reads: TABLES ARE FOR EATING STUDENTS ONLY (3). He recalls this as one of many “funny errors” that his language arts teacher, Mrs. Harrington, shares in class. Language limits communication as we read further how relationships are begun and maintained by middle graders who have their own codes and ways of acting, being, and communicating. Zack’s best friend, Marquis, remains loyal as they form a stronger bond of friendship. As a participant in the chaos that reigns in the “Fall Fiesta-val,” Zack’s luck continues, and he learns how to just become himself in the presence of his friends and classmates.

Works Cited


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I Am Ismene

I would rather be the brave sister,
The one found in the cave
Cold and silent as stone.
I would rather have been my brother Eteocles,
Defender of the city, bravely driven to
Extinguish the horror of his birth.
I would be Polynice, unable to accept the status
Of outsider, despite its familiarity,
And lie forsaken on the bloody dirt.
But I would rather not be
This other daughter of Oedipus,
Weaker, alone, full of regret,
Abandoned even by the poet
Who forgot to close my fate,
My story as open as indifference.

—Tracy Tensen
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