

The Outsiders

Ever since the September 11 bombings, there's been much written, spoken, and implied about victims and perpetrators: "us" and "them." At first, "us" was anyone on American shores during that horrific day and "them" was the 15, then 19, identified terrorists.

Internationally, the "them" ranks quickly expanded to include Osama bin Laden and his associates. On the domestic front, a segment of the American public elected to profile their own "thems"—individuals with religious and cultural markers they associated with the terrorists. These scapegoaters vandalized mosques and ridiculed, harassed, and attacked anyone, American citizens and visitors to this country alike, with Middle Eastern backgrounds. With each act, they not only harmed individuals but also threatened America's greatest strength: its citizens who dramatically come together at times of crisis while steadfastly holding on to their own identities.

Labels of "us" and "them" only create provincial excuses for ignoring the complexities of today's society. As a country, we reject such attitudes and instead ask how we as a nation can stand united yet retain our strength in diversity. Teenagers, grappling with the same issue, must participate in this national conversation. For some, books may provide the springboards for that dialogue.

In many ways, the issues facing the larger population mirror young adults as they "struggle with their often conflicting needs for identity and community" (Rochman, 1993, p. 69). This conflict characterizes every coming-of-age story in which protagonists must leave familiar surround-

ings; confront their own obstacles to living in those surroundings; and then return, armed with new knowledge and insight about themselves and the adults who populate their immediate communities. Novels such as *I Will Call It Georgie's Blues*, *Julie of the Wolves*, *Running Loose*, and *Blood and Chocolate* bring adolescents into the microcosmic world of individuals satisfying their balance between conformity and individuality.

Besides story structure, what each of these characters has in common is that they are outsiders. Neil, Julie, Louis, and Vivian, respectively, are also heroes, but ones far removed from the tragic outsider figures of Jerry Renault in *The Chocolate War* or Cynthia Ann Parker in *Where the Broken Heart Still Beats*. Still, outsiders are victims as well as heroes; their stories must also be told, for all too often their real life counterparts quickly become a "them" to some group's "us." As Hazel Rochman reminds us: "Outsider stories move us to see our own fears and strengths in those that appear to be different—and to see what connects characters who live in different centuries, who come from different ethnic backgrounds, whose lives seem totally unrelated" (p. 69).

Outsider themes exist in many genres from fiction to biography to poetry. The best of these allow readers, who may identify with the protagonist as either an insider or an outsider or both, to consider the world of one book, and even perhaps the larger world, without the stereotyping labels of "them" and "us."

The books mentioned above and listed below will not "teach" tolerance. They will not provide a quick bibliotherapeutic fix for those engaging in acts of jingoism or bigotry. They will not end racism or terrorism and they will not engage every

child. But they will provide many readers, and the adults who work with them, numerous opportunities to put faces on characters and individuals, sometimes finding familiar identities, sometimes not; sometimes encountering friends, sometimes not; sometimes provoking thought, sometimes not.

Adaline Falling Star. Mary Pope Osborne. Scholastic, 2000. 170 pp. Kit Carson, off to lead one of John C. Freemont's expeditions, leaves his daughter with pious cousins, none of whom welcome Adaline and her Apache ways.

After the First Death. Robert Cormier. Pantheon, 1979. 233 pp. Before the terrorists hijacked a school bus, Ben thought his father was a heroic insider, privy to the ways of the military and its power. He soon discovers that his father has become the ultimate outsider, the kind of person he so desperately wants to destroy.

Aria of the Sea. Dia Calhoun. Winslow, 2000. 264 pp. Cerinth feels out of place both at the School of the Royal Dancers, where she's given a chance to fulfill a lifetime dream as a dancer, and in her potential to become a folk healer, a vocation for which she also shows promise.

Drummers of Jericho. Carolyn Meyer. Gulliver/Harcourt, 1995. 308 pp. When Paz, the only Jewish girl in her high school's marching band, refuses to play Christian hymns and participate in the formation of the cross, she unwittingly instigates a wave of bigotry and hatred from the town's inhabitants.

Heart of a Jaguar. Marc Talbot. Simon & Schuster, 1995. 197 pp. Balam, a young boy isolated from his community, is prepared as a sacrifice in order to end the drought threatening his village. This strong, violent novel convincingly recreates the setting and values of the late Mayan period.

I Hadn't Meant to Tell You This. Jacqueline Woodson. Delacorte, 1994. 115 pp. Lena's friend tells of the break in their friendship when Lena

tries to hide her father's abuse and thus isolates herself from those who can help her.

Joey Pigza Swallowed the Key. Jack Gantos. Farrar, 1998. 154 pp. Joey's wired behavior sets him apart from his classmates, disappoints his mother, angers his grandmother, but his indomitable spirit and "good heart," and the appropriate meds, help him overcome his own feelings of being an outsider. Follow with *Joey Pigza Loses Control* (2000).

Keeper of the Isis Light. Monica Hughes. Atheneum, 1981. 170 pp. Sixteen-year-old Olwen, orphaned and living on the planet Isis with only a robot companion, discovers just how different she is when an Earth ship visits Isis with plans to colonize the area. *The Guardian of Isis* (1982) and *The Isis Peddler* (1983) complete the trilogy.

The Land. Mildred D. Taylor. Fogelman, 2001. 373 pp. Born in the south during Reconstruction to a black mother and a white father, Paul Logan is uneasy with both communities until he decides to make his own way as a landowner and farmer. Prequel to *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (1976).

Long Way from Chicago. Richard Peck. Dial, 1998. 148 pp. Grandma Dowdel is an outsider and proud of it: she totes a gun, trespasses on others' property, and generally connives to get her way, abandoning all the conventions of society in the early part of the twentieth century. Followed by *A Year Down Yonder* (2000) and *Fair Weather* (2001).

Man from the Other Side. Uri Orlev. Houghton, 1991. 186 pp. When Marek smuggles a Jew into the Warsaw Ghetto, he learns his father may be one of the most secret outsiders in the Underground.

Monster. Walter Dean Myers. HarperCollins, 1999. 281 pp. Steve doesn't know who he is: a murderer or a victim caught in a terrible crime. As if filming a movie of his life, Steve reveals both his public and private selves, sometimes an insider, sometimes an outsider.

Night Flying. Rita Murphy. Delacorte, 2000. 130 pp. Even though Georgia shares her gift of flight with all the women in her family, she can neither conform to their rules nor understand the secrets they share concerning her “Aunt” Carmen.

The Outsiders. S. E. Hinton. Viking, 1967. 188 pp. Ponyboy had always thought that social class defined insiders and outsiders until he looks closer at the individuals in his own gang, the Greasers, and their wealthy counterparts, the Socs.

Peter. Kate Walker. Houghton, 1993. 170 pp. Fifteen-year-old Peter is inexplicably attracted to his older brother’s gay friend, David. Afraid to seem different to his Australian pals, Peter asks David to help him analyze his feelings and sort out his own sexual identity.

Pierced by a Ray of Sun: Poems about the Times We Feel Alone. Selected by Ruth Gordon. HarperCollins, 1995. 105 pp. “We are lonely. . . / Until we find ourselves” reads one proverb in this anthology that highlights the works of modern poets, historical poets, and poets from other lands.

Samir and Yonatan. Daniella Carmi. Scholastic/ Arthur A. Levine, 2000. 183 pp. Truly an outsider, Samir, a Palestinian boy, is confined to an Israeli hospital. There, crippled by his hate as much as by his broken leg, he meets, and makes friends with, Yonatan, a young Israeli.

Shabanu: Daughter of the Wind. Suzanne Staples. Farrar, 1989. 240 pp. Shabanu has always lived happily in the Pakistani desert with her family, but as she approaches young adulthood, she finds herself torn between her father’s strict code and her own yearnings.

Sitting Bull and His World. Albert Marrin. Dutton, 2000. 246 pp. Respected by his people, Sitting Bull, by challenging the demands of the United States government, became an outsider to the white society and remained so for years as only the victors left written accounts of his life and deeds.

A Step from Heaven. Front Street, 2001. 156 pp. Ju tells of her relocation from Korea to America, showing a growing strength of purpose as she breaks away from a domineering and cruel father who tries to keep Ju imprisoned in his home.

Through My Eyes. Ruby Bridges. Scholastic, 1999. 64 pp. As the first and only black child to attend elementary school in New Orleans in 1960, Ruby Bridges spends first grade alone in a classroom with only her teacher to keep her company.

Tulku. Peter Dickinson. Dutton, 1979. 286 pp. When his family is killed in China, Theodore realizes that in order to survive he must travel with Daisy Jones and her small troupe, all of whom challenge his provincial values and, for the first time in his life, place him outside his comfortable, missionary society.

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Betty Carter is professor emerita in The School of Library and Information Studies at Texas Woman’s University. She can be reached at ECarter@TWU.edu.