

Donna Lynn Miller

## The Holistic Power of Young Adult Books

*The author explores the empathy- and character-building nature of young adult literature, and the way that books can potentially inspire healing and growth.*

Based on the premise that knowing more about oneself as a learner is a foundational experience for learning about teaching, I invited students attending a university in North Central Montana and enrolled in a course called *The Adolescent Reader* to look back on their memories of reading during their tween and teen years (grades 5-12) and to identify and analyze some of the pivotal events that shaped this period, whether positive or painful. Whatever the effect, I told them, these experiences have contributed to your development as a learner.

Once these education majors had a collection of autobiographical details, I asked them to reflect upon their personal literacy development with young adult books and to contemplate how these experiences might impact their teaching lives. Many of their responses (See Figure 1 for a partial list) revealed that today's young adult literature (YAL) is complex and rich in feelings, beliefs, and values; it gives young people a place to turn to for assistance with their everyday difficulties or during more serious crisis situations. They identified YAL as an important source to help them understand human interactions, increase their sensitivity, and enhance their empathy. They mentioned the role that pleasure plays in growing readers and how reading develops imaginative and creative thinking. They most often alluded to the escape and "travel" qualities that books provide and to literature's role in promoting growth and

change. One student wrote: "Reading will always be my favorite mini vacation."

Their responses brought to mind what is considered to be the oldest known library motto in the world, ψυχῆσ Ιατρειον, which translated from Greek means "the house of healing for the soul" (Lutz, 1978). Books—not only those mentioned in Figure 1 but young adult titles like *The Art of Starving* by Sam J. Miller—particularly carry a healing power when readers experience their pause and ponder moments. These moments carry promise for enriching how we read the world, how we respond to others, and how we live our lives. Pause and Ponder Moments reinforce reading as a deliberate and patient process, because they impose reflection time. Imposing time to pause and think through points and concepts enables readers to truly grapple with content in meaningful ways. Pause and Ponder Moments also inspire attributional retraining and option awareness, an alternative to simply accepting the status quo.

### **Bibliotherapy**

While none of my students used the term "bibliotherapy," they certainly knew from experience about the art of using books to aid people in solving the issues they are facing. First used in the United States in 1916 by Samuel Crothers, the term bibliotherapy has been the subject of considerable research since that time. Researchers (Rasinki & Padak, 1990; Becker, Pehrsson, & McMillen, 2008; Shechtman, 2009)

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have shown that literary fiction enhances our ability to empathize with others, to put ourselves into another's shoes, to become more intuitive about other people's feelings (as well as our own), and to self-reflect on our problems as we read about and empathize with fictional characters who are facing similar problems.

Halsted (1994), who describes bibliotherapy as progressing through three phases: identification, catharsis, and insight, recommends that leaders accompany readers on their inference-making journeys. Teachers, school counsellors, and librarians are positioned to serve as these leaders, not only to make a book recommendation that might dispense healing but to ask questions that encourage adolescents to investigate, clarify, and validate their feelings.

Educators should also be aware that although literature has powers to heal, it also has limitations. For example, it cannot cure someone's emotional illness, it cannot guarantee that readers will behave in socially appropriate ways, and it cannot directly solve problems. Situations like these require intervention by skilled therapists. However, my EDUC 345 students described how reading provides solace, allays loneliness, gives comfort, keeps the mind and imagination busy, and engages emotions like hope, peace, happiness, and inspiration. They also discussed the power of books to transport readers to diverse places where they can vicariously experience adventure, and they described how reading quality literature can enhance our lives.

### Using a Novel as an Intervention Tool

Besides the titles named in Figure 1, a book with these powers is *The Art of Starving* by Sam J. Miller. It not only serves as bibliotherapy for those experiencing conflicts similar to those of the novel's protagonist but it also has potential to act as a self-acceptance intervention tool. Some critics might suggest that Miller tries to do too much with his debut novel; that he takes on too many of the "big" young adult issues—bullying, identity definition, suicide, absent parents, sexual

orientation, body image, and eating disorders—without any real focus. Nevertheless, *The Art of Starving* transports readers to a place so familiar we wonder whether we haven't been there before, a place where we know the people and can relate to their challenges, where we share their hunger for fulfillment, their starvation for affection, attention, and validation, and their yearning for justice. Although the book will likely resonate with all readers, it especially targets teens struggling with identity and self-acceptance issues—those who feel lost, lonely, and isolated, those with suicidal ideation who need to know they're not alone and that they should reach out and ask for help.

The story's protagonist, sixteen-year-old Matt who has been identified by therapists as an at-risk youth with suicidal ideation, believes he is a source of shame and embarrassment, that he is an "enormous fat greasy disgusting creature" (p. 12). Matt fixates on what makes him different—his flaming red hair, his sexual preference, his poverty, his absent father, and his alcoholic mother—mostly unaware that these differences which make him miserable might also make him a stronger, improved version of humanity.

### Pause and Ponder Moments

Several occasions in this text make for good Pause and Ponder Moments. Moments like Matt's fixation on difference, for example, invite interrogation. Readers might ask questions about the caustic effects of shame and how shame and guilt can erode one's self-esteem and produce devastating results. When shame results in self-attack or self-harm, it negatively colors how we view ourselves and how we assess the prospect of recovering our self-esteems. Talking about shame, its triggers and its effects, not only sheds light on this often-taboo topic but potentially lessens the power it has over our lives. Another strategy for esteem building is to separate what we do from our sense of self-worth.

Psychologist Gershen Kaufman (1996) writes about regrowing one's identity with self-

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affirmation and through active imagery, which involves “the process of reowning and reparenting a part of yourself previously shamed and disowned” (p. 216). Because our insecurities frequently give rise to shame, an exercise I’ve used to assist in the reowning and reparenting process invites students to name something about themselves that they would change if they could. Then, they write statements of homage, praising and celebrating that previously criticized or despised trait or condition. As a model, I read Lucille Clifton’s poem “homage to my hips,” which defies the popular European conception that big-hipped women are less appealing than those who are slender-hipped.

This activity often gives rise to a conversation about how opinion gets recycled and restated until it is popularized, so we discuss how human beings construct meanings that are influenced by who we are and what we are culturally, socially, historically, and psychologically. Our different backgrounds and orientations will produce different interpretations of life encounters because these personal experiences provide the lenses that color our reading of a text—whether that be a billboard, a television episode or commercial, a film, a newspaper, a magazine, a novel, a facial expression, or one’s body image. We can adjust our vision and sharpen our sight by remembering that socioeconomic status/class, language, ethnicity, age, religion, gender, race, exceptionality, and geography all shape our cultural identities and can potentially enrich how we read the world, how we respond to others, and how we live our lives.

Deconstruction, what educational researcher Deborah Appleman (2009) calls “a particular kind of unbuilding” (p. 99), inspires scrutiny and questions; it helps adolescents see the limits of binary thinking, like fat—thin. Taking into account all the elements that compose a constructed message requires the rigor of close reading. Another benefit of this multiple-perspective approach is that such viewing enables students to exercise mental flexibility; it informs

reading by giving a sociocultural context. According to Moroccan activist, Fatema Mernissi, a woman with wide hips and a few extra pounds has always been the essence of beauty in Morocco. Performing such research and analysis not only boosts knowledge construction and illustrates the power of multiple perspectives; it supplies a framework to critique and resist prevailing ideologies and to find more agreeable definitions and understandings.

Matt’s focus on his body image is rooted in his desire to be attractive. Because muscle mass plays a dominant role in gay men’s perceptions of masculinity, attractiveness, self-esteem, and ability to attract a potential partner, social scientist Mitchell J. Wood (2004) theorizes that gay men might conform to masculine norms in response to their perceived inadequacy and gender nonconformity by putting greater importance on their body shape. Wood further explains how muscular bodies are typically perceived as healthy and HIV-free.

A Pause and Ponder Moment might invite questions like What does attractive mean? How did that definition come to be popular/prevalent? Who does that definition include and who does it leave out? The idea is to see exceptions to behavioral rules or social norms and to recognize other ways of knowing, even if this new thinking defies “popular opinion.” Rather than fixating on butts, boobs, or being “fat and greasy,” which actually objectify and dehumanize us, we can encourage young people to be the best versions of themselves by reowning their identities with self-affirmation while reminding them that suicide is a permanent solution to a temporary problem. Although staying silent may seem like the politically correct choice—minding your own business—putting your own need to be comfortable above the needs of someone in crisis may be a dangerous and irresponsible choice. The basic intention of political correctness is to encourage tact, respect for diversity, and sensitivity to others’ feelings around issues such as gender identity, religion, ethnicity and race,

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economic class/socioeconomic status, name/family, age, place (national territory or geography), perception of belonging, and exceptionality—whether gifted or challenged. Yet, the effect of political correctness has virtually made these topics taboo. Rather than constraining any meaningful discussion on diversity issues, we need to open the dialogue, not only to enlighten and to build knowledge but to interrupt the hate that results in oppression, racism, and other discriminatory attitudes and actions. Silence is not an effective strategy; it is actually hindering our ability to develop comfort in living and working with those who are different from us—we need to talk about diversity issues so that we can cross lines of difference. Unfortunately, tolerance and political correctness have become problematic when they were initially intended to address social injustice.

When students read, they often jump to conclusions about characters, events, or places. So, before reading a passage or a text in which this conclusion jumping may occur, I remind students to develop an attitude like that described by John Dewey (1910), one of “suspended conclusion.” This willingness to be uncertain for a while as they navigate unfamiliar territory guards them against inaccurate evaluation. In making an inference or forming a judgment—especially a first impression—we typically rely on past experiences or encounters to help us name behavior: right—wrong, good—bad, normal—abnormal, proper—improper.

Many of these snap judgments carry a moral or psychological shortcut that is laden with cognitive bias. With these mental shortcuts, we have to be cautious and remember the exceptions. Just as with medicine, not all bodies respond to the same treatment; what is sometimes true is not always true. In fact, we should spend a lifetime refining broad categories like these because such binaries virtually limit thinking. After all, first impressions can change and exceptions to parochial thinking do exist.

Teachers can open such textual moments with a simple Pause and Ponder exercise by asking students: What term would you use to describe this character? And what causes you to choose that term? With that data collected, readers can hold a discussion, challenging one another to explain as clearly as they can why characters behave as they do and whether any conventions, cultural codes, or personal behavior patterns are guiding their behavior. This exercise enables readers to determine whether they have fairly and accurately assessed an individual.

Through the novel’s protagonist, Miller urges readers to think about labels, like girl or boy, and the names we assign to people, places, and things. In a Pause and Ponder Moment, readers stop to think about these labels and their potentially inaccurate or even insidious results about which we may otherwise be oblivious. When we categorize people, for example, these labels put them into boxes, and no matter what they do or say, our psychological schemata won’t let them out of that box. The label defines them. Instead of seeking to understand any differences, we might use the differences to put a wall around the person. We don’t objectively look at their behavior or their value set and try to understand it; we just make our summary statement and place that person in their box. Interrogation of our labels and our labelling practices, as well as exposure to increase awareness, might open our minds so that we can also open the boxes in which we’ve trapped ourselves or others. Through Matt, Miller teaches readers how leaping out of our boxes and chewing up our labels leads to discovery.

Being a victim of these social conventions and constructs, Miller’s protagonist is searching for control. Wanting some share of the power in the pecking order at Hudson High in New York, Matt controls his eating habits by counting calories and establishing rules. Under the influence of food deprivation, Matt discovers powers of concentration and focus. Led by his hunger, his senses on high alert, Matt sees, hears, and smells things others cannot. For example, he trains

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himself to disentangle the threads of detail present in smells, which carry a plethora of information in diverse pieces, and he believes he can tune out all distractions and focus on what his senses tell him, on what his hunger is helping him to smell, see, hear, and feel. Once he makes this discovery, Matt feels invincible and doesn't want to lose his Peter Parker powers. Like an aphrodisiac, this power fuels the vicious cycle of Matt's eating disorder. Although Matt knows that starving himself is bad, it feels so good. When he's ultra-aware, Matt can confront "Hudson High's soccer stars; the shrewd-eyed roosters at the top of [the high school] pecking order" (p. 5): Ott, Bastien, and Tariq—revelers in athletic stardom, parties, and privilege. Self-harm gives Matt power to set right a world gone rotten and to bring the scales of justice back into balance. Only after many negative experiences and considerable time does Matt realize that when he focuses on what he wants to see and learn and smell and feel, he can miss reality.

To assist students in appreciating the limitations of sight, we engage in a Pause and Ponder exercise that involves viewing game with a paper cup. Using a sharp object to make a hole no bigger than a dime in the bottom of a paper cup and then positioning the drinking end over one's eye will limit what the viewer can see. We take a couple of "snapshots" and describe in detail what is within our view, realizing how such limitations enable us to sharpen our focus, to really see something when the distractions are removed. Then, we talk about what is just out of our vision and what we don't see when we hone in on something or when we "see what we want to see."

As Anaïs Nin insightfully observed, "We don't see things as they are; we see them as we are." Based on past experiences, we think something should look a certain way, so we "see" it that way. Delpit also noted:

We do not really see through our eyes or hear through our ears, but through our beliefs. To put our beliefs on hold is to cease to exist as ourselves for a moment. . . . It means turning yourself inside out, giving up your own sense of

who you are, and being willing to see yourself in the unflattering light of another's angry gaze. It is not easy, but it is the only way to learn what it might feel like to be someone else and the only way to start the dialogue. (p. 46–47)

Nin and Delpit both observe how experience clouds our vision of reality, that what we see is filtered through cognitive bias. Every truth is refracted and discolored by the light of personal perception. Sir Francis Bacon called these idols—false images that defy scientific reasoning (Hall, nd). These obstructions include the human tendency to follow preconceived ideas about things, to harbor preferences, and to accept social conventions or the media as truth. Such tendencies lead to the type of blindness that Nin and Delpit describe. Although our impressions are real to us, we must remember that not everyone shares our reality; other realities exist. Delpit proposes that classroom teachers lead the way in correcting our vision by offering diverse groups the opportunity to learn about each other. Such learning will involve confronting issues of power and privilege that dominate current social practices, asking questions about our world, seeing beyond stereotypes, and welcoming alternate ways of knowing and being. Preconceived notions about such subjects as gender, ability, and beauty affect not only how we react to others but also how we see them.

Through his soccer trinity—Ott, Bastien, and Tariq—Miller defines three bullying styles: 1) "Big and dumb and broad-shouldered" (p. 15), Ott embodies the physical style of abuse. 2) A slim-hipped, smiling psychopath, Bastien excels at emotional abuse; his brutality is all verbal, as he strings together snatches of hate speech. 3) Tariq plays the by-stander role, a watcher who witnesses—without intervention—what his friends say and do. "He is their audience. The one they perform for" (p. 16), essentially validating them with laughter or silent approval. This scene provides another appropriate Pause and Ponder Moment. Readers can discuss not only the bullying

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styles proposed by Miller but the actions a bystander might take in a bullying situation.

Teachers might lead this discussion by introducing the Action Continuum. With its eight stages of response from Actively Participating to Initiating Change and Advocating Prevention, the Action Continuum designed by Adams, Bell, and Griffin (1997) builds awareness about actions for inclusion and social justice. To use the Continuum, I might pose a tough topic to complement Miller's book, such as: How do you respond when people refer to gender fluid people in derogatory ways, make jokes or generalized statements about gender identity, or perpetuate caricatures about sexual orientation? Before conversation begins, group members would locate themselves on the Continuum. This process allows for a barometer test of the room while also showing the range of reactions to a given topic. Besides indicating where everyone initially stands, the Continuum suggests there is room to move.

More than a boy with an eating disorder, more than a gay person, and more than a person who wonders whether "having no dad or having an asshole dad" (p. 147) unhinges a person more, Matt emerges from his abyss, damaged but strong enough to realize that when bad things happen, it doesn't help to rage, to place blame, or to wish for alternate outcomes. In his newly discovered strength, he not only realizes that he cannot bend the fabric of space and time and reality to get what he wants but also learns to accept that when bad things happen, he can choose whether to allow them to cause hurt. From both Matt and their metacognitive moments, readers gain knowledge about deriving emotional fulfillment from more than physical desire or physical appearance or physical pleasure. We also learn the true connection between physical appearance and happiness; that in our desperation for guidance, "rulebooks are bullshit;" that our "bodies are clumsy machines full of strange parts that need expensive maintenance—and we do things to them that have consequences we can't anticipate" (p. 333); that "life is a miserable shit-show for lots of

very good people" (p. 343); and that people only have the power over us that we give them—a lesson which reminded me of Eleanor Roosevelt's famous quote, "No one can make you feel inferior without your consent." Matt ultimately realizes that power deriving from anger, hate, fear, and shame leads to destruction; instead, "the greatest power comes from love, from knowing who you are and standing proudly in [that knowledge, claiming and accepting that identity]" (p. 365). As Matt navigates life's difficult circumstances, he discovers that he is not alone, that he belongs.

### Attributional Retraining

These topics, too, invite further discussion and exploration. In another Pause and Ponder Moment, I invite students to complete this sentence: I feel most powerful when \_\_\_\_\_. Next, we compose a list of personal assets, titling it *My Assets* so that the next time students feel disempowered, they can read the list as a form of attributional retraining. We close that with a session of the Gratitude Game. As we go around the room and through the alphabet, each student in turn names something for which he/she is grateful, with each letter in the alphabet providing the prompt.

Despite its heart-rending moments that plunge a reader to the depths of despair, Miller's debut novel invites us to ask important psychological questions, like: How do you fill your hole? We all occasionally experience feelings of emptiness, and how we choose to fill that hole and where we look to find fulfillment has immense importance for emotional, physical, and mental health. We can't look outside ourselves to find approval. From another of Miller's characters, Maya and her punk music, readers see the value in channeling addictive or obsessive traits into creating, rather than in destroying.

Young adult books like Miller's hold potential to perform what psychologists call "attributional retraining." Attributional retraining is a process by which a person is led to reflect on his/her own attributions for a situation and to

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consider alternative explanations. For example, instead of thinking, “I’m not worth loving” or “Nobody loves me,” attributional retraining replaces unhelpful explanations about self-worth with explanations that will sustain self-esteem.

Furthermore, reading about and discussing crisis situations helps people shift blame for negative events from “It’s just me” to “I’m not alone; others share my struggles and find a way to survive.” Such attributional retraining performs as acceptance intervention, which has the potential to downgrade uncontrollable stress by allowing people to put a narrative around their traumatic experiences. After reading and discussion, I invite students to reflect upon their own crises and then to write about those experiences with a beginning, a middle, and a hopeful end. This nonthreatening framework provides a template for interpreting daily challenges—they can be boxed, scrutinized, and managed. This process can facilitate healing of the mind, body, and spirit.

During times of confusion, frustration, and difficulty, we need a how-to manual. We can find this operational knowledge by reading about others who have lived challenging lives and found ways to survive. In the time of the ancient Greeks, Plato (qtd in Kalkavage, 2001) claimed that the Muses gave us the arts in order that we might retune, rebalance, reorder, and reharmonize our souls. Whether music, painting, sculpting, writing, or some other form of creative expression, art plays a crucial role in helping humans cope with and heal from pain because it provides a channel for communication.

When life takes us down an unsteady road and short-circuits the soul, writing can give voice to our emotion. Just as writing can be therapeutic, a type of talking cure, books also serve as a prescription to pain. I value books because they enlighten, explain, entertain, distract, and console. Books essentially serve as how-to manuals; they teach us how to be in the world: how to cope with loss, how to influence people, how to survive our demons, how to love and laugh and live with

greater tolerance, respect, and acceptance for difference and for self. Books remind us that we are not alone in the world.

## Figure 1. YA Books that Left an Impression

- *Thirteen Reasons Why* by Jay Asher encouraged me to work on being a more helpful, and caring person.
- The *Twilight* novel series by Stephanie Meyers was an escape for me during a really hard time in my life when I was going through major depression and considering suicide. . . . I imagined myself in the books and it was like I was in a different place where I was happy. . . . If I had a student struggling with a life event, it could be helpful to share my story and show them how to deal with their emotions and feelings via reading.
- *Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* by Ann Brashares—the whole darn series—got me through the lonely days when I had no friends to spend time with and kept my mind and imagination busy with the thing I sought out most. It also gave me comfort in the fact that, no matter how far apart those four friends were or how lonely they got or how hard life was, they all stuck together. They gave me a hope to find friends such as that.
- *The Hatchet* series by Gary Paulsen and other outdoor books taught me not only about self-discovery but important lessons about survival, life, and respecting nature.
- Psychological thrillers and murder mysteries by Tami Hoag and Mary Higgins Clark were my escape to an alternate reality when my mother and father divorced.
- Reading Nicholas Sparks and Sarah Dessen was one of the constants in my life, and no matter what was going on or what was out of my control, I could find comfort in these books. When I yearned for adventure during those summer days stuck at home without a license, I could pick up a book and be transported to wherever the storyline took me. When I was feeling down or left out or enduring one of the numerous days of being grounded, I could

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always find peace and happiness in reading.

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