

# Dimensions of Young Adult Literature:

## Moving into “New Times”

“I think it is our job to help students be critical readers of issues. [Students] need to be exposed to current topics. I know that a lot of kids are on their own tackling this difficult stuff. Maybe it is our job as literacy teachers to take this on. And young adult literature might be a good way to do that.”

**A**bove, eighth-grade teacher Annette Collins expresses her desire to use young adult literature (YAL) as a way to assist students in understanding current, and sometimes challenging, topics. In her second year of teaching, Annette claims that we, as literacy teachers, should “take this on,” meaning that by addressing current topics in our classrooms, we may be able to shift our perspective on what is important in teaching literacy. What Annette speaks to can be characterized as making a move into “New Times.”

In this article, we explore what a move into New Times might entail with regard to the teaching of young adult literature. We first discuss this term as a way to describe social and technological shifts in perspective, and then point to how young adult literature may be conceptualized through such a perspective in 2012 and beyond.

Teachers of young adult literature have long witnessed the power that YA novels hold in meeting the reading interests of adolescents. In particular, Smith and Wilhelm (2006) have discussed how many students, as a result of their engagement with literature targeted for diverse teens, transform into engaged and enthused readers. These success stories reside as

salient examples of the power that YAL holds with young people. However, over our years interacting with YAL, we have seen that it has waged an “age-appropriate” battle throughout its history. By referring to age appropriateness, we reference the numerous controversies that have surrounded myriad YA “classics,” such as books by Judy Blume, and more recent YA books, such as Anderson’s *Speak*, for tackling issues such as teen sexuality and abuse.

The age-appropriate battle has emphasized educators’ quest to label YA novels according to how their content matches the developmental level of adolescents; we believe that such discussion about the age appropriateness of books written for adolescents has overshadowed other important considerations of YAL. While we recognize the need for an awareness of students’ development as adolescents with regard to what they read, we are increasingly curious as to whether other lenses in viewing YAL may be productive ways for educators to consider the power of books for young adults.

As a response, we propose a New Times framing of YAL as a way to move into the future. Such a perspective offers a contemporary lens for how educators might think about books geared for adolescents.

---

## Such discussion about the age appropriateness of books written for adolescents has overshadowed other important considerations of YAL.

---

Times has the potential to offer educators, researchers, and adolescents new considerations of young adult literature.

### What's New about New Times?

In considering the teaching of YAL, the overarching presence of New Times claims significance, for it demands that we identify how books intended for adolescent readers speak to tenets of literacy learning in our present era. As teachers of YAL, we are called upon to examine our book selections and ask the following questions:

- How does recent YAL respond to New Times?
- How might a framework of YAL for New Times yield new perspectives on the young adult novels we teach?

The term New Times, as used by scholars in literacy studies (Gee, 2000; Lankshear & Knobel, 2003; Luke & Elkins, 1998), is used to characterize the changing social, economic, and technological conditions of our current era. And, at the same time that New Times connotes the ways in which changing conditions have reshaped our society, such a lens also sets forth a reconceptualization of literacy itself (Street, 1995). Literacy moves away from its sole association with proficiency in reading and writing conventional, print-based texts to an association with reading and writing multiple forms of texts (New London Group, 2000). Further, New Times acknowledges a social practice vision of literacy, thereby stressing literacy's highly contextual and locally situated nature. These changes are significant, as they ask teachers to consider what literacy is beyond proficiency in reading and writing.

Second, New Times addresses how adolescents

While literacy research has increasingly embraced a changing perspective of literacy throughout the past decade, attending to technological and social changes (Gee, 1996; New London Group, 2000), we feel that the theoretical perspectives framing YAL must also shift in order to resonate with our current era. Moving YAL into New

are now immersed in a digital world. As Wilhelm (2009) has pointed out, our culture's most powerful tools now involve digital technologies, and adolescents are oftentimes natives to these technologies. Because of students' use of technologies outside the classroom, there is more demand that in-school learning support students' out-of-school learning. This has prompted educators to continuously consider how the integration of technology into language arts classrooms can work alongside the critical and powerful use of today's technologies. In a past era of YAL, educators may not have sought out connections with technology, or with students' out-of-school learning. However, in our current and future eras, educators must consider these facets of YAL as potential sites for reaching students. Figure 1 provides key points about the concept of New Times.

We now build from the New Times framework articulated above to project how YAL can adhere to such a perspective. In the following sections, we explore how specific book choices urge us to consider such a framing of YAL and discuss how teachers might seek other recently published books that respond to this framing.

### The Significance of Characters' Cultural and Social Worlds

An aspect of literacy, as conceptualized through a New Times perspective, emphasizes that an individual's literacy is a socially situated practice, evidenced

New Times represents *changing* times and the need for a broader focus in literacy teaching and learning. As such, New Times is characterized by:

- A move away from "age appropriate" toward a connotation with the changing social, economic, and technological conditions of our current era
- A reconceptualization of literacy as a socially situated practice (versus a neutral skill used only in reference to reading and writing proficiency)
- An awareness that the cultural and social context of one's life plays a significant role in one's literacy development
- An emphasis on our immersion in a digital world
- A recognition of new forms of texts (e.g., non-print and visual)

Figure 1. What's new about New Times?

not in one's skill set, but rather in one's behaviors, values, attitudes, feelings, and social relations that exist as patterns of belonging to a social group. In applying this idea to young adult novels, we consider how characters' literate processes are depicted in relationship to the context of their lives. Through recognizing the significance of characters' social and cultural worlds, we understand that literacy does not develop in a vacuum; rather, it is influenced by the social context in which characters live. Applying this perspective to YAL texts has been shown to offer transformative experiences for adolescent readers (Polleck, 2010). We now highlight one young adult novel that illustrates the significance of characters' cultural contexts, An Na's (2001) Printz Award winner *A Step from Heaven*.

*A Step from Heaven* is the story of Young Ju and her family's move from Korea to the United States. The book begins when Young Ju is just four years old and ends as Young Ju is about to start college. The language and prose used throughout the book develops as Young Ju grows and readers witness the ways that Young Ju's family resides in multiple cultural worlds—Korean immigrants living in the United States with financial hardship. It is these multiple positions—these multiple cultural contexts—that pose challenges for the family. However, readers are able to see how Young Ju's challenges may also be viewed as sponsors (Brandt, 2001), affording and offering her a greater perspective from which to live her life (as opposed to viewing these challenges as hindrances or deficits). Young Ju's negotiation of the multiple positions that she inhabits mirror the author An Na's experience of living what she has called "two sides" of life. In highlighting the cultural contexts of characters' lives, *A Step from Heaven* presents readers with the opportunity to view the cultural contexts in which one lives as deeply connected to one's literacy and one's position in the world.

Books that urge students to consider how one's social context affects one's literacy also adhere to a New Times framing of young adult literature. One example of a novel that highlights characters' social lives is *The First Part Last* (2003) by Angela Johnson, which won both Printz and Coretta Scott King awards. *The First Part Last* is the story of a single, teen father who chronicles his daily life before and after the birth of his daughter. Heidi was first introduced to this book

at her former research site, a school for pregnant and parenting teens (see Hallman, 2009). The students who attended Eastview School for Pregnant and Parenting Teens felt that many of the book's themes resonated with their lives.

In *The First Part Last*, school is seen primarily as a "backdrop," and the real "action" in the text that drives the storyline takes place outside of school. One scene from the novel features the character of teen father Bobby, exhausted from caring for his newborn daughter and struggling to stay awake in school. The out-of-school contexts featured within the book are quite detailed,

and it is in these out-of-school places that readers see the relationship between Bobby and Nia (the teen mother in the book). The times that Bobby and Nia are together, such as when they ride the subway or just hang out, are some of the most poignant parts of the novel. It is in these places of the book that readers see the "real" characters come through.

*The First Part Last* does not present a portrait of Bobby as an academically motivated student thriving in a school setting; yet, readers do see Bobby as a teen father who is motivated to become a responsible and good father. Bobby, as a character, brings us into his life-world and illustrates how he is successfully and constantly negotiating how to best use the abilities he possesses to advocate for both himself and his daughter.

Witnessing how cultural and social contexts play a significant role in the lives of characters assists young adult readers with undertaking the process that Langer (1995) calls *envisionment*. Envisioning literature incorporates all the stances readers must take in order to comprehend a text. The process of stepping into and moving through a book, essential parts of the envisioning process, rely on readers' ability to relate to many aspects of a text: the characters, the language, the setting. We believe that a heightened attention to characters' cultural and social lives will assist teachers

---

**Through recognizing the significance of characters' social and cultural worlds, we understand that literacy does not develop in a vacuum; rather, it is influenced by the social context in which characters live.**

---

in presenting their students with books that can lead to undertaking the process of envisionment, thus also leading to increased reading comprehension.

## Young Adult Literature for New Times: Moving Beyond Print

When considering the forms and formats of texts in New Times, the work of Dresang (1999) and Hassett & Schieble (see Hassett & Schieble, 2007) is helpful in characterizing textual shifts. The guidelines and questions they articulate can assist teachers of YAL in identifying books for the digital age that feature nontraditional forms and formats. These shifts in ways of representing are synonymous with adolescents' familiar visual and digital worlds.

For example, Dresang (1999) provides criteria for what she calls "radical change" in children's texts, the first criterion specifically addressing the format of texts. Dresang discusses the change in how information itself is exhibited on the page of a digital text and notes that graphics and text, instead of being linear

and traditional, are subject to new forms. Dresang notes that "radical change" books incorporate one or more of the following characteristics:

1. graphics in new forms and formats,
2. words and pictures reaching new levels of synergy
3. nonlinear organization and format
4. nonsequential organization and format,
5. multiple layers of meaning
6. interactive formats

Hassett & Schieble (2007) suggest that the characteristics Dresang denotes set up new sociocultural contexts for readers of these texts.

*Monster* (1999), by Walter Dean Myers, has been lauded for almost a decade, yet it fits the criteria of a New Times text. The format of *Monster*—a text written as both screenplay and journal entries—evidences how Steve, the main character, engages with multiple forms of literacy. Steve's journal entries grapple with his role in a crime scene, and this event drives the book's plotline. As readers, we view Steve as an actor who engages new forms of text to grapple with new contexts, witnessing how he writes his own screenplay and journal entries in response to his time in jail during the trial.

Finally, we turn to the rise of graphic novels within YAL. Carter (2007) argues for graphic novels' "transformative" power in the English classroom, citing an outcome of students' increased vocabulary, comprehension, and writing skills as a result of reading such texts. Yet, Carter also notes that despite graphic novels' popularity among middle and high school readers, a dearth of research still exists concerning how educators might include graphic novels in their curriculum. Schwarz (2010) and Botzakis (2010) have also highlighted the educational significance of graphic novels, and point out that these books are perhaps no longer "alternative" texts, instead fostering the kind of competencies students will need in current times.

Satrapi's *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* (2003) and Yang's *American Born Chinese* (2006) have become well-known graphic novels within a short period of time (due, in part, to the release of the film *Persepolis* in 2007). As the prevalence of graphic novels has exploded within the past decade, it is important that educators, especially those educators with little experience reading graphic novels on their own,

Here are a few examples of books that highlight characters' cultural worlds:

- Abdel-Fattah, R. (2007). *Does my head look big in this?* New York, NY: Orchard Books.
- Alexie, S. (2007). *The absolutely true diary of a part-time Indian*. New York, NY: Little, Brown.
- de la Peña, M. (2008). *Mexican whiteboy*. New York, NY: Delacorte Press.
- Jaramillo, A. (2006). *La linea*. New York, NY: Square Fish.
- Kadohata, C. (2006). *Kira Kira*. New York, NY: Atheneum Books.
- Resau, L. (2007). *Red glass*. New York, NY: Delacorte Press.

Figure 2. Young adult literature for New Times: Cultural context

These titles emphasize the importance of characters' social worlds:

- Anderson, M. T. (2004). *Feed*. Cambridge, MA: Candlewick Press.
- Asher, J. (2007). *Thirteen reasons why*. New York, NY: Razorbill.
- Collins, S. (2008). *The hunger games*. New York, NY: Scholastic.
- Peters, J. A. (2004). *Luna*. New York, NY: Little, Brown.
- Peters, J. A. (2005). *Keeping you a secret*. New York, NY: Little, Brown.
- Weber, L. (2009). *If you live like me*. Montreal: Lobster Press.

Figure 3. Young adult literature for New Times: Social context

are given opportunities to conceptualize these texts not only as “pleasurable” reads for students, but as books that offer complex themes such as freedom of religion, racial stereotyping, and gender inequality.

Because the visual plays a significant role in readers’ meaning making, understanding the value of nontraditional forms of text opens doors for educators to consider how these texts may assist their students with reading comprehension. Young adult novels that include materials where print becomes almost secondary, such as graphic novels or *The Invention of Hugo Cabret* (2007) by Brian Selznick—a Caldecott-winning book that chronicles the life of a turn of the century filmmaker—requires readers to attend to cues set forth by visuals for understanding plot, characters, and events. These cues, whether reading the “gutters” or white space between panels in graphic novels as clues to the pacing of the story, call on readers to make predictions and inferences in highly complex ways. Rather than viewing these texts from an age-appropriate perspective (as visual texts have historically been viewed as appropriate only in the elementary grades or for struggling readers), a New Times perspective pushes educators to view these young adult novels as engaging teens’ out-of-school visual lives and as curricular materials that offer rich contexts for learning.

## Becoming Teachers of Young Adult Literature in New Times

Young adult literature in New Times recognizes that, as technology continues to reshape society, new forms of text will become increasingly significant in the lives of students. Responding to these new forms of text is a critical part of being an educator in our current era. As Gee (2004) notes, one’s success in New Times depends on “the skills, achievements, and previous experiences that a person owns and that he or she can arrange and rearrange to sell him or herself for new opportunities in changed times” (p. 97). Educators are in a unique position to potentially influence the trajectory of a young person’s literacy learning. Though Gee’s portrait of the New Times individual is perhaps somewhat daunting, it also allows educators to acknowledge that one skill set may no longer be enough; instead, an individual’s success in New Times depends first on recognizing the constancy of change and then using one’s literacy as a tool to respond to change.

Beyond seeing New Times as an end within itself, we view such a framing of YAL as ultimately supporting students as readers. We know from research (Moje, 2000) that students’ comprehension is enhanced and supported when relevant texts are used in the classroom. Returning to Annette’s quotation that began this article, we see that many students are “on their own tackling this difficult stuff.” Annette’s observation reminds us that, as literacy teachers, we have a unique space to assist students, thereby easing the burden of knowing that students are often going it alone.

YAL has long embraced the idea that books written specifically for young adults can be productive springboards from which to reach adolescents. In New Times, we must continue to use this power of young adult literature. Through identifying the ways in which YAL responds to New Times, we can become more thoughtful and deliberate about how the identities and lives of the characters mirror contemporary society and the very real concerns that our students face today.

**Heidi L. Hallman** is assistant professor of English Education at the University of Kansas. Her research interests include the preparation of preservice English teachers for teaching in diverse classrooms and the literacy learning of “at risk” adolescents. She may be contacted at [hhallman@ku.edu](mailto:hhallman@ku.edu).

**Melissa B. Schieble** is assistant professor of English Education at Hunter College of the City University of New York. Her research examines critical and sociocultural

These books break out of traditional formats to engage readers on a visual level:

- Abadzis, N. (2007). *Laika*. New York, NY: First Second.
- Barry, L. (2008). *What it is*. Montreal: Drawn and Quarterly.
- Helfer, A. (2007). *Malcolm X: A graphic biography* (Randy DuBurke, Illus.). New York, NY: Hill & Wang.
- Scieszka, J. (2008). *Knucklehead: Tall tales and almost true stories of growing up Scieszka*. New York, NY: Viking.
- Sis, P. (2007). *The wall: Growing up behind the iron curtain*. New York, NY: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux.
- Tan, S. (2007). *The arrival*. New York, NY: Arthur A. Levine.

Figure 4. Young adult literature for New Times: Alternative formats

*theories of language and literacy in digital spaces as related to English teaching and teacher education. She may be contacted at mschiebl@hunter.cuny.edu.*

## References

- Botzakis, S. (2010). A book by any other name? Graphic novels in education. *The ALAN Review*, 37(3), 60–64.
- Brandt, D. (2001). *Literacy in American lives*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Carter, J. B. (2007). Transforming English with graphic novels: Moving toward our "optimus prime." *English Journal*, 97(2), 49–53.
- Dresang, E. (1999). *Radical change: Books for youth in a digital age*. New York, NY: Wilson.
- Gee, J. P. (1996). *Social linguistics and literacies: Ideology in discourses* (2nd ed.). London: Routledge/Taylor & Francis.
- Gee, J. P. (2000). The new literacy studies: From "socially situated" to the work of the social. In D. Barton, M. Hamilton, & R. Ivanic (Eds.), *Situated literacies: Reading and writing in context*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Gee, J. P. (2004). *Situated language and learning: A critique of traditional schooling*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Hallman, H. L. (2009). Novel roles for books: Promoting the use of young adult literature at a school for pregnant and parenting teens. *The ALAN Review*, 36(2), 18–26.
- Hassett, D., & Schieble, M. B. (2007). Finding space and time for the visual in K–12 literacy instruction. *English Journal*, 97(1), 62–68.
- Johnson, A. (2003). *The first part last*. New York, NY: Simon Pulse.
- Langer, J. (1995). *Envisioning literature: Literary understanding and literature instruction*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Lankshear, C., & Knobel, M. (2003). *New literacies: Changing knowledge and classroom learning*. Philadelphia, PA: Open University Press.
- Luke, A., & Elkins, J. (1998). Reinventing literacy in "New Times." *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 42, 4–7.
- Moje, E. B. (2000). "To be part of the story": The literacy practices of gangsta adolescents. *Teachers College Record*, 102, 651–690.
- Myers, W. D. (1999). *Monster*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.
- Na, A. (2001). *A step from heaven*. Honesdale, PA: Front Street Press.
- New London Group. (2000). A pedagogy of multiliteracies: Designing social futures. In B. Cope & M. Kalantzis (Eds.), *Multiliteracies: Literacy learning and the design of social futures* (pp. 9–37). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Polleck, J. (2010). Creating transformational spaces: High school book clubs with inner-city adolescent females. *The High School Journal*, 93(2), 50–68.
- Satrapi, M. (2003). *Persepolis: The story of a childhood*. New York, NY: Pantheon.
- Schwarz, G. (2010). Graphic novels, new literacies, and good old social justice. *The ALAN Review*, 37(3), 71–75.
- Selznick, B. (2007). *The invention of Hugo Cabret*. New York, NY: Scholastic.
- Smith, M., & Wilhelm, J. (2006). *Going with the flow: How to engage boys (and girls) in their literacy learning*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Street, B. (1995). *Social literacies: Critical approaches to literacy in development, ethnography, and education*. London: Longman.
- Wilhelm, J. (2009). Technology in our schools: A call for a cost/benefit analysis. *Voices from the Middle* 17(3), 44–46.
- Yang, G. L. (2006). *American born Chinese*. New York, NY: First Second.

---

## NCTE Literacy Education Advocacy Day 2012: April 19

Join NCTE members from across the nation for NCTE's Literacy Education Advocacy Day on Thursday, April 19, 2012. NCTE members attending Advocacy Day will learn the latest about literacy education issues at the federal level and have a chance to interact with people highly involved with those issues. See <http://www.ncte.org/action/advocacyday> for details.

---