

Text Complexity and Young Adult Literature

ESTABLISHING ITS PLACE

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How do you choose textually complex literature in English language arts? This article takes a 21st-century look at text complexity and young adult literature.

Plenty of English and literacy educators doubt that students are reading books assigned to them. Kittle (2013) suggested that the English teachers she works with across the United States and Canada believe that 20 percent or less of their students read assigned books (p. 15). Broz (2011) referred to this phenomenon as the “800-pound mockingbird in the classroom” (p. 15). These same canonical books may be considered the most rigorous, best preparing students for college and career readiness. Unfortunately, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) list of exemplars of complex texts reinforces this notion. For example, Appendix A (National Governor’s Association Center for Best Practices [NGA Center] & Council of Chief State School Officers [CCSSO], 2010b) established many of same canonical books that students are not reading as textually complex exemplars for English language arts (ELA) teachers to consider while transitioning to



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CCSS. When Shanahan, Fisher, and Frey (2012) described the use of complex texts in the classroom, they included descriptors of texts beyond the most commonly used readability formulas. Today, we know that text complexity is more broadly defined to include readability formulas as well as structure, organization, background knowledge, and motivation.

Our challenge is to prepare all students for college and career readiness in the 21st century through meaningful encounters with interesting and complex texts, but an English curriculum centered primarily on canonical texts holds little promise, particularly for those who find reading challenging. We know that students who have negative feelings associated with reading, such as those experienced with difficult texts they perceive as having little relevance to their lives, “tend to be inattentive, disengaged, and uncommitted” (Henk, Marinak, & Melnick, 2013). The question is, can we establish reading that both engages students and provides them with opportunities to grapple with diverse, sophisticated texts? In this article, I suggest that we can, and I propose that contemporary young adult (YA) literature will allow us to do so. Although no recently published young adult

books are included in the CCSS text exemplar list (NGA Center & CCSSO, 2010b) the wide expanse of current YA literature can help meet these challenges.

Defining Young Adult Literature

There are myriad definitions of *young adult literature* (see, e.g., Bomer, 2011; Cart, 2008; Hayn & Nolen, 2012; Lesesne, 2007). The problem in settling on one definition is that the term *young adult* can include adolescents from ages 10 to 19 (Cart, 2008). Choosing one definition among such a span is difficult; therefore, I use Herz and Gallo’s (2005) list of characteristics for good young adult fiction to encapsulate a big picture definition. YA literature can be described as texts in which teenagers are the main characters dealing with issues to which teens can relate, outcomes usually depend on the decisions and choices of main characters, and oftentimes “all traditional literary elements typical of classical literature” can be found (Herz and Gallo, 2005, pp. 10–11). These characteristics establish young adult literature as relevant to teenagers and different from many canonical texts not written specifically for adolescents. Gallo (2001) explained that many teenagers are not ready for classical literature because many such books do not deal with teenage concerns, and they were written primarily for educated adults (p. 34). Because so many works of young adult literature contain the same literary elements of more traditional canonical texts, bridging young adult literature with some canonical works continues to be an appropriate method for building levels of text complexity in ELA classrooms. This is particularly important for students who, by high school, read less, and “are less motivated, less engaged, and less likely to read in the future” (Fisher & Ivey, 2007, p. 495).

Text Complexity and the Common Core State Standards

I know that my 8-year-old niece is an exceptional reader, but I would not recommend that she read Sherman Alexie’s 2007 novel *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. I do not expect her to understand themes of racism, poverty, and the main character’s struggle with identity. However, this book falls within her Lexile range under the CCSS-adjusted Lexile ranges for her grade level. Although this numerical classification is highly popular for fitting students with books, the CCSS establish text complexity as

varied, challenging the idea that the complexities of a book may be reduced to a single number. As Shanahan, Fisher, and Frey (2012) state, “Gone are the days when text was judged as difficult solely on the basis of sentence length and syllable count. We now know that many factors affect text complexity” (p. 62). The problem with evaluating texts based solely on a number is that it has been popular for so long that many educators are either unaware of qualitative evaluation of texts or the systems established in some schools continue to consider only quantitative evaluations. Today, complexity means many things, creating space for new and exciting conversations about texts.

Paying attention to form as well as content is necessary when fitting students with works of literary fiction in ELA classrooms. The opportunity for this work in the CCSS lies within the triangle of text complexity (see Table 1). Here, the commonly used quantitative measurement (e.g., Lexile Framework, Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level test, and others) is just one method for evaluating texts. A second section of the triangle highlights qualitative evaluations of text complexity, which can be measured only by an attentive reader. Authors of the CCSS define qualitative measurements of text complexity as levels of meaning, language conventionality and clarity, structure, and knowledge demands (NGA Center & CCSSO, 2010a). Finally, the base of the triangle establishes the importance of reader and task. Teachers can use this portion of the triangle for individual students based on motivation, experiences, and caliber of tasks associated with the text. This portion is important for understanding that not all students will progress at steady, grade-level pace, and some will need careful consideration while working toward higher levels of text complexity.

TABLE 1 The Triangle of Text Complexity



<p>Qualitative evaluation of the text Levels of meaning, structure, language conventionality and clarity, and knowledge demands</p>
<p>Quantitative evaluation of the text Readability measures and other scores of text complexity</p>
<p>Matching reader to text and task Reader variables (such as motivation, knowledge, and experiences) and task variables (such as purpose and the complexity generated by the task assigned and the questions posed)</p>

Quantitative Measures of Text Complexity

Quantitative text-complexity measurements place texts on a numerical range among grade levels through the use of computer software. The Lexile formula is considered better at accounting for variation in comprehension (Fisher, Frey, & Lapp, 2012, p. 32). Current Lexile levels have been adjusted to reflect new college- and career-readiness standards under the CCSS (see Table 2). Many other quantitative measures of text complexity focus on sentence length and word frequency, which can underestimate the difficulty of narrative fiction that might use common language but expresses themes appropriate for adolescent and adult readers (NGA Center & CCSSO, 2010b, p. 7). Quantitative measurements of text complexity do not and cannot consider varied levels of meaning, text structures, and sophisticated themes. For this reason, authors of the CCSS issued a statement advancing the idea that more weight should be given to qualitative measures of text complexity for narrative fiction (NGA Center & CCSSO, 2010b). We now have a new way to approach print texts, using all sides of the triangle of text complexity for more meaningful assessments of texts for students.

Qualitative Measures of Text Complexity

Definitions for qualitative levels of text complexity include four features best measured by an attentive educator. Appendix A in the CCSS provides brief descriptions of the qualitative elements of text (NGA Center & CCSSO, 2010b). The first is levels of meaning. This feature considers single or multiple levels of meaning and explicitly stated or hidden purposes. The second feature, structure, focuses on chronology, traits of genres, or unconventional forms. The third, language conventionality and clarity, focuses on figurative or ambiguous language, contemporary or archaic language, and domain-specific language. Finally, knowledge demands deal with familiarity

of cultural knowledge, background knowledge, and degree of intertextuality (NGA Center & CCSSO, 2010b, p. 6). Because they are brief, these definitions provide only a basis for measuring text complexity qualitatively. At the same time, authors of the CCSS call for “more accurate, and easier-to-use tools” for teachers in order to fully include and understand the qualitative evaluations of texts. Some states have created rubrics for analyzing literary fiction, allowing teachers to qualitatively assess texts on a continuum. Table 3 is an example of a rubric created by the Council of Chief State School Officers (2013). This rubric provides further detail for teachers to work with while evaluating qualitative measurements of literary fiction, showcasing the analysis of a text’s qualitative complexity as a practice in professional judgment and common sense (Hank, 2012, p. 3).

Reader and task. The reasons I would not recommend *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* to my young niece are the same reasons that I would recommend it for many students in eighth grade or beyond. Junior, the main character, copes with deaths in his family, alcoholism, racism, poverty, and the difficulty of figuring out who he is as he straddles identities between life on his reservation and in a predominately white high school off the reservation. The complex themes and conflicts in this book beg for authentic discussion and speak to Miller’s (2012) assertion that English teachers do not just assign novels but also provide spaces for critical thinking, engagement, and exposure “to multiple perspectives, to situations that encourage a critical stance.” This can be done with relevant young adult literature (p. 31). These same ideas are reflected in the Reader and Task portion of the triangle of text complexity.

The works of fiction listed as text exemplars in Appendix B of the CCSS for grades 6–10 establish little change during this time of standards reform emphasizing college and career readiness for the 21st century. Yet, in the same paragraph, the authors also state that the text exemplars “expressly do not represent a partial or complete reading list” (NGA Center & CCSSO, 2010c, p. 2). Considerations for reader and task establish that “highly motivated readers are often willing to put in the extra effort required to read harder texts that tell a story or contain information in which they are deeply interested. Complex tasks may require the kind of information contained only in similarly complex texts” (NGA Center & CCSSO, 2010b, p. 7). Qualitative consideration is an important

TABLE 2 Revised Lexile Grade Bands

Grade Bands in the Standards	Old Lexile Levels	Common Core Lexile Levels
K-1	NA	NA
2-3	450-725	450-790
4-5	645-845	770-980
6-8	860-1010	995-1115
9-10	960-1115	1080-1305
11-CCR	1070-1220	1215-1355

(Credits: Common Core Appendix A)

TABLE 3 Qualitative Text Complexity Rubric

TEXT COMPLEXITY: QUALITATIVE MEASURES RUBRIC LITERARY TEXT			
Text Title: _____		Text Author: _____	
MEANING			
High Multiple levels/layers of complex meaning	Middle High Multiple levels/layers of meaning	Middle Low Single level/layer of complex meaning	Low Single level/layer of simple meaning
STRUCTURE			
High Narrative Structure: complex, implicit, and unconventional Narration: many shifts in point of view Order of Events: frequent manipulations of time and sequence (not in chronological order)	Middle High Narrative Structure: some complexities, more implicit than explicit, some unconventionality Narration: occasional shifts in point of view Order of Events: several major shifts in time, use of flashback	Middle Low Narrative Structure: largely simple structure, more explicit than implicit, largely conventional Narration: few, if any, shifts in point of view Order of Events: occasional use of flashback, no major shifts in time	Low Narrative Structure: simple, explicit, conventional Narration: no shifts in point of view Order of Events: chronological
LANGUAGE			
High Conventionality: heavy use of abstract and/or figurative language or irony Clarity: generally unfamiliar, archaic, domain-specific, and/or academic language; dense and complex; may be ambiguous or purposefully misleading	Middle High Conventionality: contains abstract and/or figurative language or irony Clarity: somewhat complex language that is occasionally unfamiliar, archaic, domain-specific, or overly academic	Middle Low Conventionality: subtle use of figurative language or irony Clarity: largely contemporary, familiar, conversational language that is explicit and literal; rarely unfamiliar, archaic, domain-specific, or overly academic	Low Conventionality: little or no use of figurative language or irony Clarity: contemporary, familiar, conversational language that is explicit and literal; easy-to-understand
KNOWLEDGE DEMANDS			
High Life Experiences: explores multiple complex, sophisticated themes; multiple perspectives presented; experiences portrayed are not fantasy but are distinctly different to the common reader Cultural/Literary Knowledge: requires an extensive depth of literary/cultural knowledge; many references/allusions to other texts and/or cultural elements	Middle High Life Experiences: explores multiple themes of varying levels of complexity; experiences portrayed are not fantasy but are uncommon to most readers Cultural/Literary Knowledge: requires moderate levels of cultural/literary knowledge; some references/allusions to other texts and/or cultural elements	Middle Low Life Experiences: explores a single complex theme; experiences portrayed are common to many readers or are clearly fantasy Cultural/Literary Knowledge: requires some cultural/literary knowledge; few references/allusions to other texts and/or cultural elements	Low Life Experiences: explores a single theme; single perspective presented and everyday experiences are portrayed that are common to most readers or experiences are clearly fantasy Cultural/Literary Knowledge: requires only common, everyday cultural/literary knowledge; no references/allusions to other texts and/or cultural elements

part of what teachers can use to get students reading. With the inclusion of young adult literature, there is a broader range of texts to choose from, beyond the text exemplar list.

Text Complexity and Young Adult Literature

With instruction, adolescent readers can navigate books that speak to their “emerging identity, their need to explore alternative roles, the complexity and variability of their developing cognitive ability, and their shifting reader roles” (Crumpler & Wedwick, 2011, p. 65). The engagement found through high-interest, textually complex YA literature can serve this purpose. The International Reading Association (IRA) publishes “Top Choices Reading Lists” of books written for young adults chosen by young adults. They also publish a list of books chosen by teachers (IRA, 2013). These lists provide current, detailed glimpses into the reading lives of young adults and teachers of young adults. Titles range widely in topics and structure, from *October Mourning: A Song for*

Matthew Shepard (Newman, 2012), a book written in verse that recounts the murder of Matthew Shepard, to *Cracked* (Walton, 2012), a book with alternating narrators, all of whom are victims of abuse. However, popular young adult literature is often thought of as less culturally valuable than canonical texts (Coats, 2011). This belief is reflected among the CCSS example texts for literature, stories, and poetry for grades 6–8 (NGA Center & CCSSO, 2012):

Little Women by Louisa May Alcott (1869)

The Adventures of Tom Sawyer by Mark Twain (1876)

“The Road Not Taken” by Robert Frost (1915)

The Dark Is Rising by Susan Cooper (1973)

Dragonwings by Laurence Yep (1975)

Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry by Mildred Taylor (1976)

The median publication year for these texts is 1915. Coats (2011) argued that young adult literature is up-to-date and speaks to the shifting “cultural

dialogue regarding what we value and how our lives might be lived both responsibly and responsively in the face of increasing globalization, perspective-altering technologies, and ideological challenge and change” (p. 320). These same goals are stated among the introductory pages of the Common Core describing students who are college and career ready (NGA Center & CCSSO, 2010a). The mismatch between this rhetoric and the text exemplar choices for literature potentially complicates the choices that educators must make as they transition to the CCSS.

With high-interest, textually complex young adult literature, content can be matched with complexity for readers, which calls attention to adolescent development and identity (Lewis & Dockter, 2011), including many of the same literary elements found in canonical literature (Santoli & Wagner, 2004). Textually complex YA literature also speaks to Rosenblatt’s (1995) description of the “human experience” found in stories and the engagement and creative activity that can take place only between reader and text. With such engagement, the answer to the question “why do we have to do this?” is answered for students because of the connections and exploration that take place during and after reading. As Ivey and Johnston (2013) found, the eighth-grade students they followed chose edgy YA literature that is “intellectually tricky.” This allows the exploration of different meanings and perspectives. The engagement with the books has led to improved test scores but, equally important, provides space for social and moral development while strengthening students’ identities as readers.

Examples of Textually Complex Young Adult Literature

I turn to three books published within the past five years as examples of textually complex YA literature. *Glimpse* (Lynch Williams, 2010), *If I Stay* (Forman, 2009), and *If I Grow Up* (Strasser, 2009) fit Herz and Gallo’s (2005) definition of young adult literature described above. They are showcased as top choices or reviews by teens on various websites (IRA, 2013; Piehl, 2012; Teenreads, 2010). They also provide examples of qualitatively complex characteristics identified in the CCSS as unconventional structures, varying levels of meaning, and varying levels of clarity for readers. Although we cannot expect that all texts meet high levels of each component of qualitative evaluation of text complexity, each of these books does. However, in an attempt to establish a

clear picture of the complexities surrounding structure, levels of meaning, and language conventionality and clarity, I examine one qualitative evaluation from the CCSS triangle of text complexity for each book. I analyze the structure of *Glimpse* (2010) as complex and varied. *If I Stay* (2009) has more than one level of meaning for readers to navigate, and *If I Grow Up* (2009) makes use of various classifications of language conventionality and clarity among different uses of genres throughout the text. Knowledge demands are also considered for each text.

Analysis

I analyzed each text based on the qualitative measurement rubric for literary texts from Table 3. While reading each text, I created memos outlining examples of textually complex characteristics, described above. Then I compared the memos to the language used to define each area of text complexity in order to establish the most appropriate positioning of each text in the specified categories. Using my professional judgment, I placed each text on the continuum from the rubric. This process is similar to the CCSS Appendix A “Model in Action” (2010, p. 11), although I provide much more detail in analysis of each text below.

Glimpse (2010) by Carol Lynch Williams. *Glimpse* is a 485-page verse novel written from Hope’s point of view. Hope is a white 12-year-old girl who, in the opening pages, finds her 13-year-old sister Lizzie holding a shotgun, prepared to commit suicide. By page 5, the reader experiences the first of many random flashbacks that serve to build the story as Hope comes to understand how her sister fell to this level of despair. However, Hope learns of the injustices of her world through her innocent youthful perspective, a perspective less mature than the reader’s, experiencing life in ways that she is not ready to fully understand.

Structure. The structure of this text is unconventional. It is a verse novel with frequent “manipulations of time and sequence” (NGA Center & CCSSO, 2010b). Use of the verse novel portrays the “angst of adolescence” through “spoken text and oral rhythms” (Alexander, 2005, p. 271). Flashbacks occur randomly, often without any warning, leaving the reader to decipher if the action is occurring in the present or the past:

I worry
that maybe
Liz will follow
those kittens

on outta here
and leave me
alone
for good.

36.

Lizzie,
I think,
Are you okay?

When
are you coming back
home?

37.

Once,
Me and Lizzie,
we fought

so loud
and so hard
that

Momma put us
in the front
yard
and said,
you two wild
things
hit it out
out here.

The abrupt change in time to the sisters' fight displays Hope's confusion and burgeoning feelings of fear and anger that she slowly comes to understand as the story unfolds.

Shifts in time, lack of quotation marks for dialogue, and change in text structure also represent textually complex characteristics:

Then she says,
Your daddy and me
used to drive
this old road on his bike.

You did?
I say.
I never knew.

In Glimpse, students must navigate verse structure without conventional use of punctuation.

There's lots you don't know,
Momma says.

And she is right about
that.

She is right
about
that.

24.

Momma:

1. Applies for welfare.
2. Hollers at my absent daddy.
3. Settles down for a few drinks.

I:

1. Sneak out of the house.
2. Grab my bike from the falling-down garage.
3. Pedal on over to Mari's. (pp. 58–59)

Hope's conversation with her mother in the car abruptly changes to a description of another day presented in list form. Buehl (2011) described such "literary texts that adopt less straightforward methods of storytelling" as textually complex (p. 40). In *Glimpse*, students must navigate verse structure without conventional use of punctuation to make sense of the story and avoid getting lost between the past and the present. This complex structure, "distorting time and sequence in a deliberate effort to delay readers' full understanding of the plot" (Fisher, Frey, & Lapp, 2012), continues throughout the book as Hope grapples with the changes taking place in her life. Mature issues and themes most likely different from those of the common reader also establish a higher knowledge demand. Because this text displays a complex narrative structure, mature issues, limited use of more traditional text features, and shifts in chronology, I place it on the "high" level of qualitative text complexity for structure.

If I Stay (2009) by Gayle Forman. This book is about a young white girl named Mia who, in the opening pages, loses her entire immediate family in a car crash. She survives the accident but finds herself in an in-between state of life and death, observing events as they unfold as an outsider while friends and extended family visit her in the Intensive Care Unit. As she understands her present reality, she reveals memories from the distant and near past about her family, allowing readers to realize the enormity of what she has lost as well as her struggle between life and death.

Levels of Meaning. The first level of meaning plays out in the present, as Mia, detached from her physical self, observes her friends and extended family surrounding her hospital bed:

I think about what the nurse said. *She's running the show.* And suddenly I understand what Gramps was really asking Gran. He had listened to that nurse too. He got it before I did.
If I stay. If I live. It's up to me. (p. 88)

The author places the character in a state of limbo as she contemplates the meaning of death with no understanding of why or how to make such a decision. Fisher, Frey, and Lapp (2012) described this level of meaning as complex or abstract, one that is left to readers to identify (p. 47). This level of meaning is vastly different from Mia's past as a member of a loving, musically gifted family taking a drive to visit friends. From the opening pages, Mia navigates between these perspectives through memories of her life with family and friends and a space in between life and death.

The second level of meaning is the past. The author provides readers with information about Mia's family and her life as a teenager:

"What are you singing, Mia?" Dad asked me, catching me serenading Teddy as I pushed him around the kitchen in his stroller in a vain attempt to get him to nap.
"Your song," I said sheepishly, feeling like I'd maybe illegally trespassed into Dad's private territory (p. 190).

Readers must pay close attention to time and sequence between Mia's memories and her present condition. Because these events are related out of chronological order, the reader must not only put together Mia's memories as she tells them but contemplate with her in the present as she weighs the consequences of choosing life or death. Eventually, she rationalizes her departure: "I know that Kim is telling me this to try to keep me alive....I know it will be awful for Kim when I die, but I also think about what she said, about not being scared" (p. 218). To readers, it seems as if she has made the decision to leave this world. However, shortly after a final visit from her boyfriend Adam, Mia's perspective combines with everything readers have learned about her family, and her thoughts transform into one, present reality. The sophisticated themes surrounding sacrifice, grief, and the meaning

of death force readers to make sense of Mia's two realities, requiring higher knowledge demands. For these reasons, I place *If I Stay* on a "high" level of text complexity for levels of meaning.

If I Grow Up (2009) by Todd Strasser. In Strasser's book, readers follow DeShawn, a young black man living in the Frederick Douglass Housing Project from age 12 to 28. During his earliest years, others view DeShawn as a boy who will make it out of the projects. Leaders of the Disciples, a gang affiliated with his housing project, do not solicit him for membership because of this. However, the conditions in which he lives create a story of gang life and hardship and relate what happens when the most basic opportunities and privileges as U.S. citizens are denied. This narrative makes readers piece together multiple genres of text situated within the narrative during each year DeShawn ages.

Language conventionality and clarity. Domain-specific language (NGA Center & CCSSO, 2010, p. 4) is used at various points in the narrative, including song lyrics, statistics, and social commentary on legislation and the state of poor, predominately black neighborhoods. Brief interludes among the first several years of DeShawn's life highlight different aspects of what events take place.

Fourteen Years Old

When President Bush signed the No Child Left Behind Act in January of 2002, he promised that by 2014 the quality of inner-city school education would catch up to that of suburban schools. By 2007 the gap between black and white eighth graders was worse than ever.

"Struggle is my address, where pain and crack lives, . . . born on the black list, told I'm below average." From "A Dream" by Common (p. 85)

This text appears in transition from DeShawn as a 13-year-old boy to a 14-year-old young man after witnessing his best friend join the Disciples. DeShawn is able to avoid the same initiation for two more years, until devastating losses force him into gang life as a way for his family to survive. By the time he is 16, the dangers he lives among each day increase to levels no adult should face. This is exemplified in the book with statistics and song lyrics, making the reader think through not only DeShawn's story, but the societal inequities that produced his circumstances as well:

Sixteen Years Old

Young, unemployed black men murder one another at nine times the rate of white youths. In 1965, 24 per-cent of black infants were born to single mothers. By 1990 the rate had risen to 64 percent. In 2005 it was just under 70 percent.

“Still I’m sayin’ why do we reside in the ghetto with a million ways to die?”

—From “Every Ghetto” by Nas (p. 155)

Each of these genres represents transitions in DeShawn’s life and reflects similar circumstances. The author situates DeShawn’s story in a larger context for readers to think about as they engage with different genres and language conventions. The difference in language from DeShawn’s story with the various statistics, commentaries, and lyrics interspersed throughout the book is an example of what the complex texts Buehl (2011) described as placing a greater load on readers to make inferences and build meaning that is not directly stated. It is not explicitly clear to young readers how to integrate these various genres and transitions into DeShawn’s narrative. Knowledge demands for this text are high, reflecting several sophisticated themes. Change in register and use of multiple styles of the English language (Fisher, Frey, & Lapp, 2012) position this text on a “high” level of text complexity for language conventionality and clarity.

Discussion

Beach, Haertling Thein, and Webb (2012) reminded educators to move beyond the CCSS text-exemplar list for texts that “will be engaging to your students based on their particular cultural backgrounds and interests” (p. 24). Rather than divvying up a few books deemed most worthy chapter by chapter, which students probably will not read (Kittle, 2013), a cornucopia of literature is available for students that speak to them. The concept is to examine complex young adult literature worthy of its place in ELA classrooms. Meanwhile, YA literature does not have to be seen as competition with the classics; rather, it is an important tool for establishing reading lives of students and creating an appreciation for literature (Knickerbocker & Rycik, 2002). When students are reading and building their literate identities, they continue to read and work into other complex texts and genres (Ivey & Johnston, 2013).

I do not wish to hold up the three books examined here as the only models of textually complex YA literature. Many other recently published young adult books have earned their places on the ladder of text complexity. They are texts that we can make available for students to foster an interest in learning new information (Ivey, 2010, p. 19). The intention here is not to diminish the importance of American literature, but the point is that when publishing a reading list of text exemplars amid national standards reform that touts college and career readiness for the 21st century, further examination is needed when considering what we use and make available for students to read in our classrooms and why we use those texts for learning purposes. Publishing a list of text exemplars with few new titles potentially promotes practices where some students “learn that unless they offer the predetermined meanings of a traditional literary analysis or go along with the prevailing valences of power and popularity in classroom interaction, they really have nothing to add to a discussion of literature” (Wolf, Coats, Enciso, & Jenkins, 2011, p. 2). If the goal for college and career readiness is to have students “read complex texts with substantially greater independence” (NGA Center & CCSSO, 2010a), then young adult literature clearly has its place as an appropriate, engaging, and sophisticated route to such independence. To get there, students must actually be reading. Assigning books that students do not know or care about will not foster independence (Ivey & Fisher, 2005). The fact is that students who will be the most successful in college are those who know how to read and have read abundantly, not those who have successfully learned how not to read (Broz, 2011).

The National Council for Teachers of English (2010) published a resolution on teachers’ and students’ rights to choose texts outside the text exemplar list. With the wide expansion of young adult literature today, it is possible to meet the Common Core State Standards with books that are sophisticated and complex while having new conversations about text complexity and its various forms. Textually complex young adult literature is a vast and growing resource for cultivating student readers, but only if we recognize it in this manner.

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Take Action

STEPS FOR IMMEDIATE IMPLEMENTATION

- ✓ Read young adult literature with students in mind. Oftentimes as adults we react to some YA literature without thinking about how students might react or the discussion many works of YA literature can generate.
- ✓ Practice evaluation of literature with the qualitative levels of text complexity defined by the triangle of text complexity in Appendix A of the Common Core State Standards.
- ✓ Several states have created a “text complexity placemat” for evaluation of texts and further discussion. Try out New Hampshire’s: www.education.nh.gov/spotlight/ccss/documents/analysis-template.pdf. Kansas, Maine, and Wisconsin also have variations of the text complexity placemat.
- ✓ The Cooperative Children’s Book Center of the University of Wisconsin–Madison provides ample information about new books each year. Continue the conversation about text choice in your department and share the engaging, textually complex young adult books that you read.

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More to Explore

CONNECTED CONTENT-BASED RESOURCES

- Explore Young Adult Books Central, a site with descriptions of the latest YA fiction and editor reviews of writing, plot, and characters: www.yabookscentral.com
- -Compare popular lists from adult-selected works of YA literature to secondary school students' choices of the best YA literature. Notice the differences and similarities in choices and where text complexity can fit in.
- -NPR list of favorite teen novels: www.npr.org/2012/08/07/157795366/your-favorites-100-best-ever-teen-novels
- -Young Adult Library Services Association Best Books for Young Adults list: www.ala.org/yalsa/booklists/bbya
- -International Reading Association Young Adults' Choice Reading list: www.reading.org/resources/booklists/youngadultschoices.aspx
- -More textually complex YA literature to consider:
- *Hate List* by Jennifer Brown
- *Tyrell* by Coe Booth
- *Elijah of Buxton* by Christopher Paul Curtis
- *What Happened to Cass McBride?* By Gail Giles
- *Liar* by Justine Larbalestier
- *Bruiser* by Neal Shusterman
- *Deogratias: A Tale of Rwanda* by Jean-Philippe Stassen
- *Leftovers* by Laure Weiss
- *How I Made It to 18: A Mostly True Story* by Tracy White
- *Beneath a Meth Moon* by Jacqueline Woodson

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