

Curation of Children's Literature

Who

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## Curation of Children's Literature: "Who"

Developmentally, childhood is the precipitating event in each person's life. For some, the people, "who", are merely characters in the weaving of the story. At times, they appear and disappear, other times they are merely a memory, other times completely forgotten. The curation question, then, asks "who" might be a part of a child's life that they might experience appearing, disappearing, remembering or forgetting. This curation, while not a canon (as it flexes, breathes, and morphs constantly), is a culmination of texts to demonstrate that our experiences with the people in our lives, while vastly different, can harness sympathy for ourselves and empathy for others. Our own baggage is the combination of every "who" in our lives.

The concept of "who" to a child is limited – "who" is mom or dad, grandma or grandpa. Later on, when children are able to play with siblings, "who" becomes siblings, cousins, aunts and uncles. Upon entering school, "who" becomes the teacher and the classmates, perhaps even the principal, custodian, or cafeteria workers. "Who" becomes friends, girl or boy friends, bosses, and mentors. "Who" becomes everyone else, but "who" never ends up being the protagonist as you can never escape yourself.

This curation of "who" is a collection of catalysts, a nod to those who help us and therefore influence our lives. The people who, at one time, made such an impact that their presence changed and paved the way for adulthood, although, as Wetta writes, "Just as there isn't a firm line between childhood and adulthood, the differences and appeal of young adult fiction vs. books published for adult audiences exist on more of a continuum, in my view, especially as many adults continue to be avid readers of YA" (Categories Blur as Teen Lit Comes of Age, 2016). This collection leaves out the early years as the central figures in the early years remain as

parents, and a focus on reading for understanding and vocabulary is expertly dealt with in other types of books.

### “Who”: The Middle Years

Our students see injustice occurring in the middle years, and often play the role of an upstander, ensuring that others are treated fairly, with kindness, and respect. Given that the middle years shapes students with a sense of justice and empowerment, texts demonstrating why and how others are picked on or disadvantaged allows our students to develop empathy and identify characteristics of good upstanders. *Fatty Legs* by Christy Jordan-Fenton and Margaret

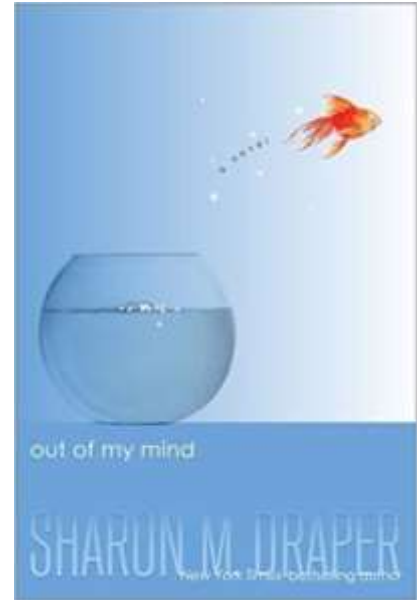


Pokiak-Fenton tells the story of an Inuit girl who attends a residential school and outlines her experiences in standing up for herself and confronting a negative authority figure. Students will be moved by this text upon understanding the memoir genre and as they begin learning about residential schools in Social Studies.

They will see how sometimes authority figures are not right, kind, or respectful. By using illustrations, this book comes to life and

students are able to physically see the pain on the protagonist’s face. Standing up for yourself and what is right is also addressed in *The Bully Book* by Eric Kahn Gale, where the protagonist, Eric, must stand up for himself and deal with the ramifications of bullying on one’s self esteem after the bullying ends. *The Bully Book* also addresses those who stand by and do nothing, which provides an excellent opportunity in class to discuss alternatives to what could be done to prevent the bullying behaviour in the first place.

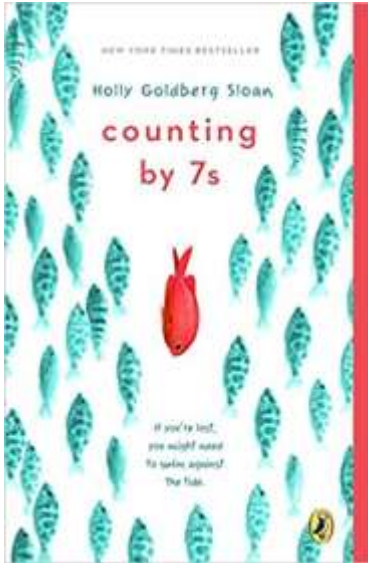
Using our words to express our thoughts and feelings comes with a lot of practice in the middle years, which is very well described in Sharon M. Draper's *Out of My Mind*, the story of a girl named Melody who is unable to walk or talk due to having cerebral palsy. Students will root for Melody as the underdog and empathize with her, even if they do not know someone in their own lives with cerebral palsy. This book provides students the opportunity to connect with someone they may not easily identify with if they were to meet them in real life. Developing commonalities and making connections is incredibly important when reading literature, and learning to appreciate the perspective of others is easy with this text.



Friendship seems to be the single most important concern for students in the middle years, as they struggle with their complex emotions, home lives, and balancing school. Jerry Spinelli's *Stargirl* examines how friendship can form in the most unusual places and how to be unapologetically ourselves. The main character in the text, Stargirl, provides an escape into a magical world where nearly everything is exciting and shows that a positive attitude can be contagious. Students will be excited to read about someone who can have a positive influence and a bubbly personality. However, the text is embedded in reality in that Stargirl must have struggles of her very own. Students may pick up this book hoping for a story of friendship, romance, self-acceptance, or to support those who do not conform.

Inevitably, death occurs throughout one's life, but a full understanding and explanation of what exactly death entails is often left by parents to the middle years. The people who pass away in our lives, the funerals we attend when we are little, the smells, sounds, and emotions we feel

are all enhanced in the middle years. Students seeking to understand death and dying and the mess death can leave on a family and community is imperative to support in the classroom. *The Only Game*, by Mike Lupica addresses the death of a sibling in such a way that our students are



able to see in themselves and others how grief can change an individual, how to be a friend in someone's time of grief, and how patience and time can support healing. Conversely, students may also be drawn to Holly Goldberg Sloan's *Counting by 7s*, to develop empathy toward someone whose parents have passed away, amid other physical and developmental challenges the protagonist must face. Providing a glimpse into how someone may experience the loss of one or both parents is integral, as many of our students have not yet experienced such extreme loss.

Another type of loss some students may experience may not be a loss in terms of death or dying, but a physical loss, such as the disappearance of a mother in Greg Howard's *The Whispers*. The innocence of the protagonist, a magical element, and the ease in which LGBTTQ identification is apparent is refreshing. The plot itself is multi-layered and allows students to easily identify with the thoughts and feelings of the protagonist.



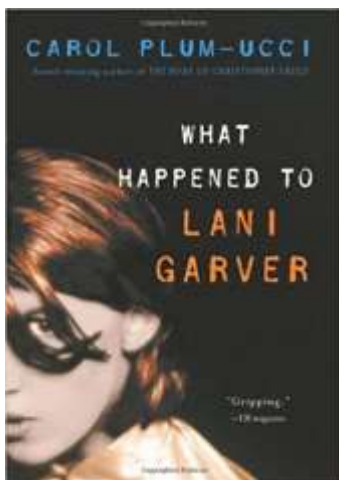
Another text with physical loss is Leslie Connor's *All Rise for the Honorable Perry T. Cook*. This text, about a boy who is raised by his mother in a correctional facility and ultimately placed in foster care significantly disconnects from many students' own experiences. The text is a wonderful piece of escapist literature which allows students to put

themselves in the shoes of the protagonist – which is easily accomplished with this book.

Students will develop empathy and compassion for those in and affected by the criminal justice system. Another text which includes the element of complexities in dealing with a government system is *One for the Murphys* by Lynda Mullaly Hunt, which is a story about a girl who is forced into foster care because of her mother’s choices. While I wish I could find more books with a protagonist whose father is absent, I could not find any that I could connect to, likely due to my own gender. Students reading this book will likely be frustrated with the lack of advocacy for the protagonist, but will likely connect with the loss she experiences as she is removed from her home and forced to live with the Murphy family. Readers of this book will seek out commonalities with the protagonist as she is relatable and witty, and they will likely empathize with her easily.

#### “Who”: The Later Years

Students in the later years of schooling may find other types of books interesting, which is why this curation has a focus on two different groups. In the later years, personalities in classrooms become more diverse and exposure to different depths of text is easier. *What*

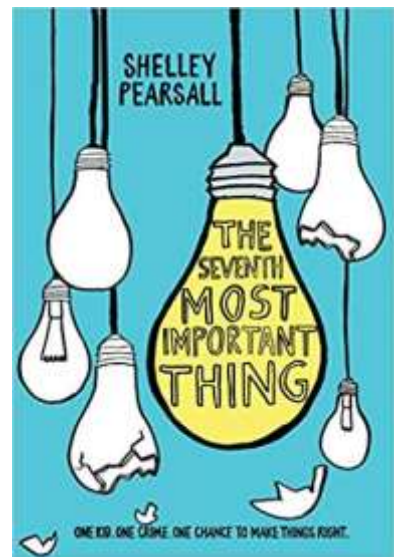


*Happened to Lani Garver?* by Carol Plum-Ucci is a text about a non-conforming individual who does not identify by a gender, which causes others at Lani’s school to be frustrated with them. Including this type of text, with these ideas, is important to this curation because it changed a lot of my own perceptions growing up of the people around me. Alternative lifestyles and viewpoints are important to expose students to if they choose to pick up the text. By making a

text like this available, students may find their own thoughts and ideas affirmed or challenged,

but does not serve as a kind of text to be followed due to Lani's ultimate circumstance (which results in death). The gravity of the situation Lani was put in certainly promotes empathy. Another text which promotes empathy in the reader is *The House You Pass on the Way* by Jacqueline Woodson as it deals with race and interracial marriage in the historical Southern states, which requires the reader to have that historical contextual understanding. The universality of overcoming obstacles and questioning oneself is certainly apparent in this novel, which indicates that students will easily connect with the text.

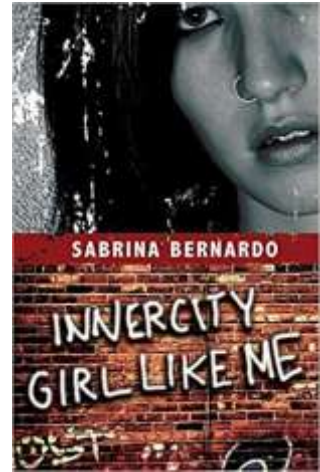
For an older audience, *The Seventh Most Important Thing* by Shelley Pearsall appeals to students who have participated in, witnessed, or been tempted to break the law. The plot of the story centers around how a boy commits a crime and must serve community service in the form of helping his victim. The story also covers larger themes such as redemption, loss, guilt, and friendship. It is important for older readers to understand that there are consequences to actions, often called natural



consequences. In day-to-day life in school, natural consequences do not seem quite as natural: if you call someone a name you are told to apologize to the victim and go about your day, maybe serve detention or stay in for a recess. Outside of the school walls, often there is no one policing our students by having them serve a detention for name calling unless they are caught or another parent complains to that student's parent. Books which address natural consequences through a story of someone who is separate enough from themselves allow our students to connect without feeling threatened or singled out. In Walter Dean Myers' *Monster*, the protagonist is on trial for murder and writes the book as if it were a script for a movie. The removal of the main character

from the crime (in this case by the protagonist himself detaching himself from the crime he committed) makes the ideas in the book easier to tackle for this age level. It is my hope that students reading this book would also be able to detach themselves from the crime in this book, but allow themselves to understand simply why the protagonist had to write the book the way he did. Our students today need to read from a variety of perspectives and about a variety of topics, even those they cannot closely relate to. This allows our students to escape, as mentioned earlier.

*Innercity Girl Like Me* by Sabrina Bernardo, is another piece of escapist literature. In my previous work in a high school, this book was the most circulated text in the library, and the single title most often replaced as it often “developed legs”. This text, about a girl joining an inner-city gang in Winnipeg, is honest, graphic, and riddled with mistakes. However, the way in which the book is written allows so many students (primarily girls) to identify with the protagonist it is a



book many “non-readers” come back to read. It also opens the door to conversations about gang life and culture within a classroom or counselling setting. In this case, the reader is meant to develop empathy for the various characters “stuck” in the life they have led due to being in a gang. The way the text is written allows for the reader to develop empathy and with the twists and turns, the reader rides a roller coaster of emotions.



Often, when consuming literature, we point students to novels, forgetting about short story anthologies. Thomas King’s *One Good Story, That One* is an anthology that summarizes this curation with ease. King’s Indigenous culture makes him an excellent storyteller, and this particular anthology provides depth from parodies (A Seat in the Garden) to heart



breaking family ordeals (Borders). Students of non-indigenous heritage will appreciate these stories because through reading they will understand the depth of the tradition of storytelling and how humour can be used to heal. King allows students to understand the importance of each character in each story through the nature of his writing. The question “who” can be answered quickly, easily, and with depth after finishing each story.

In conclusion, the basis for the answer to the question “who” is highly dependent upon the age of the learner, the complexity of the text, and the culmination of experiences of the reader. The interpretation of any text will be based entirely upon the uniqueness of the reader. However, the reader must first want to read. Ultimately, this curation of literature is my own and may not appeal to students in my school or community. However, the purpose of this exercise is not to convince others to read the books I would choose. The purpose is to develop a set of titles to recommend if given the opportunity. In a study conducted with middle years students, the question was posed “what makes you want to read in class?” to which the students overwhelmingly replied, “finding good materials . . . the freedom to read what you want” (Ivey and Broaddus, “Just Plain Reading”, 2001). In my own experience, these particular texts I have included in my curation have shaped, to a varying degree, myself as an educator and my relationships with students. They have allowed me to form empathy for those in situations I cannot comprehend, and they have allowed me to work through some of my own grief and misunderstandings. It is my hope that this curation of “who” allows our students to shed light and understanding on those important to them, as well as develop a greater sense of self.

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