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Writing with Weetzie: Using Young Adult Literature in the Composition Classroom

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"Everything's an illusion; that's the whole thing about it—illusion, imitation, a mirage. Pagodas and palaces and skies, blondes and stars. It makes me too sad" (73).

Charlie (in Block's *Weetzie Bat*) could have been talking about his freshman composition class. Somewhere along the line while we are giving our budding writers explicit step-by-step instructions on how they should construct their essays and models of great writing from works of classic literature, we forget that good writing can be engaging, authentic, and (gasp!) even fun to read.

Much of the writing that composition students are asked to do is personal in some way in essays such as the personal memoir, reflective response, literacy autobiography, or in a multi-genre piece. The personal writing they do can positively foster developing authorial voices and emergent identities and can be some of the most authentic and engaged writing students produce.

The writers reap the lasting effects of developing voice, confidence, and cognitive skills, which are not only applicable to the telling of personal stories but are transferable to other genres. Instead of using stiff and unrelatable texts as models, we need to encourage our students by presenting and discussing other authentic and engaging texts in the classroom.

Best Practice talks about the connection between reading and writing, and here is one way to build that connection. Young adult literature may be just the thing that inspires young writers (and readers), wipes away some of the illusion, and replaces it with something real.

Finding Freedom and Throwing Away the Recipes for Writing

Often in the freshman composition classroom, students are asked to write about themselves and their own experiences—subjects they know very well. This kind of personal writing can be extremely engaging and persuasive. For its ability to connect with a reader, it can be viewed as transactional rather than purely expressive. Leigh Howard Holmes notes that "A personal essay is not an autobiography; it makes a point" (2). Young adult literature manages to seamlessly do both at the same time—to engage the reader's interest and to make a strong point or tell a powerful story. While captivating the students' attention, it serves as a model for the engaging writing we'd like them to do as well. Likewise, in "Why I Teach, Promote, and Love Adolescent Literature: Confessions of a College English Professor," Jim Cope admits that "Adolescent literature moves me more consistently than any other genre . . . Too often, the literature we teach in school only deals with the 'transference of ideas' and seldom engages our students' emotions" (7).

Young adult novels, like *Breathing Underwater*, *Whale Talk*, and *The Chocolate War* to name just a few, are conducive to a classroom discussion on writing because they engage the readers' emotions from the very beginning. The writing is extremely expressive, and the stories told are captivating. Barbara Moss adds that "students are interested in limits and extremes because such exotica provide the context within which their daily lives and experiences are meaningful" (97). As a teen, I loved extreme stories (and still do). They gave me a way of measuring my life against the lives of others. Whenever I felt like I wasn't measuring up, I could compare myself to someone else and then

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could say “well at least . . .” and gain some perspective on the situation.

Likewise, if I felt my life was too boring, I could live vicariously through a character’s extreme experience. These stories illustrate powerful writing, and in the composition classroom we can direct students’ attention to the choices the authors make and discuss why we (the students and teachers) believe certain passages to be more powerful than others.

For instance, one writing technique that students could examine is the use of interesting opening lines in the young adult novels. Because the authors of young adult novels must grab their sometimes impatient or even resistant readers’ attention from the first sentence, the openers tend to be irresistibly alluring. In “How Classics Create an Aliterate Society,” Donald R. Gallo places the opening lines of *Silas Marner* next to those of Walter Dean Myers’ *Monster*, which states, “The best time to cry is at night, when the lights are out and someone is being beaten up and screaming for help. That way even if you sniffle a little they won’t hear you. If anybody knows that you are crying, they’ll start talking about it and soon it’ll be your turn to get beat up when the lights go out” (1).

The introduction is terribly engaging, and this is a practice we’d like to help our young writers develop as well. The first lines from many young adult novels elicit strong emotional responses from the start. The students could read opening lines such as those from Cormier’s *The Chocolate War* (“They murdered him”), Chris Crutcher’s “A Brief Moment in the Life of Angus Bethune” (“Sometimes, when I stand back and take a good look, I think my parents are ambassadors from hell. Two of them, at least, the biological ones, the big ones”), or Walter Dean Myers’ *Hoops* (“One of the things my father used to say was how his days were piling up on him. When I told him I didn’t know what that meant, he said one day I would”). Then as a class, the students could discuss why they prefer certain lines over others, what particularly draws them in or turns them off to reading further, and what they would have done differently had they written the stories.

Students no longer, for the most part, have the same level of freedom with their writing in the freshman composition classroom as they did in the 60s and 70s when expressivist truth-seeking was revered and was thought to emerge naturally as the writer freely wrote about whatever was on his mind—its validation being its principled earnestness. Of this kind of authorial freedom, Ken Macrorie states, “Rhythm, rhythm the best writing depends so much upon it. But as in dancing, you can’t get rhythm by giving yourself directions. You must feel the music and let your body take its instructions” (qtd in Clark 289). This intriguing metaphor reflects the belief that the writing would naturally come into being through a felt-sense within the writer. The freewriting popularized by Macrorie is still often used in the classroom today but is often thought of as ancillary writing akin to the journal write rather than as a formal assignment. The personal writing students do in their compositions can still be freeing in a deeper sense to the writer who gets to decide what to include, but many times teachers take away students’ opportunity to explore by being too prescriptive.

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Often it seems that we say we want students to develop their own voices in writing but then are very directive about everything we expect to see in that writing. I’m sure this is why I’ve seen so many English 101 essays that begin with mundane opening statements; the students have been directed to begin with a very general statement before moving to the specific. Instead of exploring their thinking through writing in a more aesthetic way, students are writing in a more efferent manner—to carry out the prescribed guidelines.

Using young adult literature in the classroom might help students break from what they’ve been used to doing and urge them to try something unique.

Young writers often need to “unlearn” some of the guidelines for writing they were taught early on in school and have come to perceive as unbreakable rules. Young adult literature is the perennial rebel—it loves to go against the grain and stir up a little trouble! Students could take a look at *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson, which is written in vignettes and *Keesha’s House* by Helen Frost, which is written in sonnet form. Exposure to these different forms would help prepare students for the various new assignments they may encounter such as a photo-captioning essay, a segmented essay, or a multi-genre piece. And no one could ever accuse our girl Weetzie of not breaking the rules! She could convince the most ardent rule-followers to “choose to plug into the love current instead” (Block 88) or at least to stray from the five-paragraph essay.

I’m Okay, You’re a Nut: Negotiating a Relationship Between Reader and Writer

Typically in young adult literature, the narrator effectively negotiates the relationship to the reader through the act of storytelling. This is an element of writing that we help our students to develop as well. Especially in personal writing, the relationship between reader and writer is not only negotiated, but created through the act of storytelling. In “Storytelling: Reclaiming an Age-Old Wisdom for the Composition Classroom,” Cindy Wallace states that

The phenomenon of storytelling actually becomes a common language that facilitates meaningful communication; we can hear and understand each other’s stories because we can usually recognize ourselves in the stories of others—no matter how varied our cultural backgrounds”(436).

Each story is told through the unique perspective of the individual. Through the telling of the story (in any form depending on the assignment), the student will be both separating himself and binding himself to others at the same time. Young adult novel narrators are typically strong characters who share their stories with the readers, which students can use as models for their own personal stories. In Jeffrey

Wilhelm’s *You Gotta BE the Book*, he promotes the power of stories noting that “Storying defines humanity, makes us human, empowers us in being who we are, and makes it possible for us to conceive of being more than we are” (38). The personal storytelling transaction seems to move both ways as well. When we read the stories of others, we use our own lives as background knowledge with which to understand the new stories. At the same time, the stories inform the people we may become.

For example T.J. Jones, of Chris Crutcher’s *Whale Talk*, is a realistic hero who sticks up for what he believes in and defends those who are unable to defend themselves. He is not afraid or unwilling to get involved, to show his passion, or to fight for a cause although it takes some time for T.J. to realize just how crucial the fight has become. At the start, he says, “I’d better be a little careful, or this could get too important” (43). He realizes just how important seemingly trivial things like a swim team or a letter jacket can be in the whole scheme of things. There are plenty of gems of wisdom lighting up the pages, and any reader could learn from the telling of T.J.’s story—especially those who feel alone, disconnected, misunderstood, or who lack perspective into the lives of others. The tragedies and triumphs experienced by T.J. (and the others) whether dramatic or small are relatable on some level. For the one character involved at that time, it’s just another “day in the life.”

As a student uses the stories of his favorite young adult characters to help him, his own personal story will illuminate a point, and his vantage point as an author will be strengthened. He learns a little bit more about where he’s coming from and why he holds certain beliefs or perspectives, while at the same time his stories may resonate with a larger audience. Wallace agrees saying, “We, as human beings, are more alike than we are different, and storytelling has always essentially served to bind people together—not separate them” (436).

In small groups or in a whole class discussion, students can discuss the stories of different young adult characters in relation to their own stories and will likely find universals even

among seemingly dissimilar narratives. The stories reveal commonalities, and the novice writer will likely be encouraged by this effect.

The stories told by narrators in young adult literature typically speak to young readers about issues they care about. YA literature can be extremely inspirational to budding writers because, as Alleen Pace Nilsen points out, “the problems in the books are likely to be ones that readers or their friends have experienced or thought about. A variety of ethnic backgrounds and settings enlarges the chances of students finding stories they can identify with” (81). Likewise, she notes that the language is more on the level with the way that students really talk, so they can use what they read as a model for their writing. For instance, students can appreciate the beauty of Shakespeare’s language, but they cannot easily view it as a model for their own compositions. The more casual tone of Rodman Philbrick’s *Freak the Mighty* speaks to students on their level, Max states that “By the time we got here, which I guess should be the end, I’m feeling okay about remembering things. And now that I’ve written a book who knows I might even read a few. No big deal” (160).

Other texts such as *Sixteen: Short Stories by Outstanding Writers for Young Adults* can lead to effective classroom discussions and creative inspiration. For some reason, many students believe that for writing to be considered good, it must also be boring, elevated, and formulaic. Any essay, no matter the genre, would benefit from a little creative inspiration that comes from reading engaging young adult literature.

Authentic Writing Students Care About Besides *US Weekly*

The young adult narrators are explicitly honest about the events in their lives, which makes their stories sound authentic. When our students write from personal experience, authenticity is necessary. As an advocate of authenticity, it is a contextualized concept at least for me. As I see it, “authentic writing” has a high level of truth value

relative to the student writer’s own perception of that truth.

Authentic writing has an affective dimension in that if there is an audience, or an imagined audience, the audience should be taken into account and respected. This means that being truthful does not mean bulldozing the audience with harshness for the sake of honesty. Authentic writing is owned by the writer who takes responsibility for the words that he writes. The author of *Speak*, Laurie Halse Anderson, achieves this balance with her narrator Melinda, who is scathingly honest yet witty and respectful of the reader’s intellect at the same time. For instance, she berates the cheerleaders saying,

Our cheerleaders are working on annoying chants that end in lots of buzzing. I think this is a mistake. I have visions of opposing teams making enormous flyswatters and giant cans of insecticide out of papier-mâché to humiliate us during half-time programs (95).

Melinda’s straightforward sarcasm strikes a chord with many readers because it seems so real. They are more likely to care about what happens to Melinda because she could be someone they know (or themselves), and the composition teacher could lead students in a discussion of stylistic ways they believe Halse Anderson achieves this verisimilitude. Holmes likewise praises “the directness and sense of honesty that comes with a single voice telling things as they are seen by that person” (64). Because the students are writing on topics that matter to them, they are likely to become much more invested in the writing, and because they are invested in their work, they will be more likely to work to make it the best it can be. Using young adult novels as models will help them work toward being as honest as they can with the reader and may inspire them to tell their own stories in an authentic way.

Developing Voice and Understanding the Self (Without Dr. Phil)

Personal writing requires a high level of engagement in order to be persuasive, amusing, angry, or a combination of these. The students are

given an arena in which to speak their minds, and the use of young adult literature can help as it may inspire a high level of truth value and the development of an individual voice. Since they can relate to the language and experiences of the young adult characters, they will be prompted to see their own language and experiences as significant.

Creative Writing teacher Jack Gantos hands his writing students YA novels “not for comprehension or analysis, but for inspiration” so that they will “revel in the juicy details of life that will help them value their own experiences with family and friends, in their own communities, observing or participating in the human dramas of the moment” (qtd in Pace Nilsen 1). Learning to value themselves and their experiences will help them gain confidence in making authorial choices, which will lead to the development of a voice. The narrators of young adult literature typically have very strong voices, and these voices are so diverse that students will likely identify more with some than with others.

Speak uses sarcasm and directness to create a powerful voice. Furthermore, the events that happen around or to Melinda encourage the development of an individual voice and the speaking out against injustice. Students can analyze the details used and the rhythm in passages such as “I’m on a roll. I’m rocking. I don’t know what it is; standing up to Heather, planting marigold seeds, or maybe the look on Mom’s face when I asked if she would let me redecorate my room. The time has come to arm-wrestle some demons. Too much sun after a Syracuse winter does strange things to your head, makes you feel strong, even if you aren’t” (180).

Students could analyze the way in which Jerry Spinelli creates suspense and urgency through the voice of Leo Borlock in *Stargirl* when he says, “The jurors laughed. They were a mob. Hands grabbed at the mike. Kevin looked anxiously at me. I could do nothing. With all the buttons and switches at my command, I was helpless to change anything on the other side of the glass” (67). Furthermore, students can examine the ways in which authors relay insights and wisdom which contribute to voice.

In *Whale Talk*, narrator T.J. Jones is honest with the reader about his learning and seems to take the reader right along with him as he gains new insight. He says, “I love the way life can put things in perspective for you. I’m worried about pulling it together enough to qualify for State in swimming . . . and here’s a guy who spends more than sixteen hours a day working . . .so his son can escape the same fate” (45). And lastly, students can discuss this passage alongside of one from Block’s *Weetzie Bat* to note differences in detail, rhythm, and realism. Weetzie also gains many insights but reveals them in a much different voice from T.J. Jones. Hers is less realistic, less conversational, and jam-packed with imagery. She explains the meaning of grief:

Grief is not something you know if you grow up wearing feathers with a Charlie Chaplin boyfriend, a love-child papoose, a witch baby, a Dirk and a Duck, a Slinkster Dog, and a movie to dance in. You can feel sad and worse when your dad moves to another city . . . but grief is different. Weetzie’s heart cringed in her like a dying animal. (75)

Beyond the examples presented here, students should be encouraged to bring in other examples of what they believe to be effective writing for class discussion. Since we want students to develop their own voices, we do not want to limit the YA literature discussed in class to our own preferences alone but should give the students autonomy in finding their own sample texts. In “Enhancing Your Writing Through the Masters or What Makes a Good Work Good,” Joan F. Kaywell notes that “By allowing students to find their own examples of effective writing—written in language that is within their grasp—and by having students articulate the reasons behind their selections, we will help students define for themselves ‘what makes a good work good’” (5). It is not enough to hand students a stack of novels and say “here, this is good writing.” They must come to understand and define good writing for themselves.

Learning to Love Reading the *Stargirl* Way

While there are always students who hold positive opinions about reading books like Freak who says, “I also read tons of books so I can figure out what’s true and what’s fake, which isn’t always easy,” (Philbrick 19) many are closer to Max who states that “reading books is the last thing I want to do, right after trimming my toenails with a lawn mower, gargling nails, and eating worms for breakfast” (19).

Not only will the YA literature help students with their writing abilities, but it will likely prompt them to pick up a book or two outside of class. When the class reads engaging samples from the texts, they will serve as teasers for students who’ll want to find out what happens next. It was Robert Cormier who said that we must expose our students to literature that will “engage the beholder’s emotions, to make him or her laugh and cry and suffer and triumph and—one thing more—understand” (qtd in Cope 9). Engaging young adult literature can do all these things in a relatable way on the level of most students, which will often bring them back for more. I know that I’ve felt pleasure in saying I’ve read Eliot’s *Middlemarch* or Dickens’ *Hard Times*, but it’s the same kind of pleasure I’ve felt when I’ve finished doing painful or strenuous work, and unfortunately the literature did not have me coming back for more. Reading literature is not something that should be painful but should be enjoyable and satisfying. What’s more, Douglas Downs asserts in his article “Rethinking Dogma: Teaching Critical Thinking in Freshman Composition,” that “Extensive research on the mechanics of reading reveals that reading is in fact a writing process in all but the act of inscribing words on a page. Numerous studies and theory explaining reading as a constructive act demonstrate that writing and reading are inextricable, and are best taught as such” (4). Young adult literature may prove to be the ultimate fix to prompt our young writers to become avid readers.

Conclusion—But Really It’s Just the Beginning

I agree with Downs who says, “It only makes sense, really, to privilege student writing

while focusing on reading” (9). They are complimentary meaning making activities and should not be compartmentalized even in a composition based class. Our students will benefit greatly when we make a welcome space for young adult literature, which grabs and holds onto the reader’s attention, creates an emotional response, and stays respectful of the reader’s intelligence. Because of positive aspects like these, we should not hesitate to welcome individuals like Weetzie Bat, Melinda, Freak, Max, or T.J. Jones into our classrooms. Through riveting texts we might clear away some of the earlier illusions “ ‘and then—ah—we open our eyes and the day is before us, and’—he snapped his fingers—‘we become ourselves’” (Spinelli 103).

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