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REVIEW

Finding Their Place: Location and Identity in Young Adult Fiction

SIERRA HOLMES

Anywhere But Here by Tanya Lloyd Kyi. Simon Pulse, 2013.

The Impossible Knife of Memory by Laurie Halse Anderson. Viking, 2014.

The Language Inside by Holly Thompson. Delacorte Press, 2013.

If I Ever Get Out of Here by Eric Gansworth. Arthur A. Levine Books, 2013.

English teachers know that location matters. A quick search through the archives of both the *Language Arts Journal of Michigan* and *English Journal* reveals scores of articles about the importance of setting and the promise of place-based writing. As someone who teaches in her hometown, I appreciate the power of location to connect me to my students. I have been a teenager in the place where they are now teenagers, and that helps us understand each other. We all know the unwritten rules and unofficial names of our beaches. We understand the near-religious significance of the local Dairy Queen's opening day each spring. We tell time by listening for the S.S. Badger's horn as it sails through the channel and the ten o'clock whistle's high-pitched call reminding the town's under eighteen population that it's time to be home for the night if not accompanied by a responsible adult. We speak this town's language. It is a part of us.

Like me as a teenager, my students have felt what it means to love this place. Also like me as a teenager, they have felt the burning desire to get as far away from it as possible. Like my students, and I suspect yours too, the four characters who serve as narrators of the texts included in this article understand the power of place. Although they are in very different locations, what they all have in common is that the places in which they find themselves have a profound impact

on both their identities in the present and their hopes for the future.

Still reeling from his mother's recent death, Cole, the teenage narrator of Tanya Lloyd Kyi's *Anywhere But Here* (2013), wants nothing more than to get out of his hometown. Webster, which he nicknames the Web, is the kind of place where everybody knows everybody else, or at least Cole thinks so. From the nurse who cared for his mother during her illness to his ex-girlfriend, Lauren, who was there for Cole as he watched his mother slowly slip away, the people of Webster know Cole much better than he'd like. They know what he has been through, and no matter how hard he tries

to pretend differently, they know he is still going through it. With an increasingly distant and often intoxicated father who, much to his embarrassment, has recently begun dating an exotic dancer, and with a school counselor who just won't leave him alone no matter how hard he tries to avoid her, Cole wants nothing more

than to escape the Web once and for all. He hinges all his hopes for the future on his application to film school in Vancouver. He aches for the chance to go to college in a place where he can indulge his passion for documentaries and leave his past behind. As part of his application, Cole is required to produce an original film, and he knows right away that it has to be a documentary. The problem is, he has no idea what to document. Finally, Cole settles on what he knows best: the Web. By interviewing his friends and family, he hopes to reveal how his tiny hometown catches and traps its residents, limiting their possibilities by preventing them from moving forward.

Cole knows his documentary could make or break his chances at a new life in film school, so imagine his panic when his interviews do not go as planned. He expects his friends to feel the same way he does, but they don't. And Hannah, the

new girl in town and in Cole's romantic life, helps him understand that Webster looks very different through their eyes of an outsider. He discovers some of what he thought was true about his hometown might not be true after all, at least not for everyone. As he learns to see the same old place in a new way, he begins to see his role in it differently too. And when mistakes in his past come back to haunt him, Cole also begins to understand that the Web in which he feels trapped might be his safety net in disguise. Cole's voice feels true, and his experiences are ones that will be familiar to many teenage readers. His story will resonate with those who long to go someplace new, or who feel like the place they live won't allow them to become the kind of person they want to be.

In *The Impossible Knife of Memory* (2014), Laurie Halse Anderson tells a story that readers will not soon forget. Unlike Cole, who can't seem to get out of Webster, Hayley Kincaid, the novel's narrator, has spent the past several years of her life running away, riding beside her father as he uses his job as a truck driver to keep

his memories of war safely in the rearview mirror. Hayley's father, Andy, suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder as a result of the time he spent in combat in Iraq. At the outset of the novel, Hayley and her dad have settled down for the first time in years. Returning to his hometown after years of absence, they move into the house their mother and grandmother left behind, and a place where Haley lived as a young child, where her mother is buried, and where people have memories of her that she has long since forgotten.

From the outside looking in, it appears that all the chaos in Hayley's life has come to an end since she moved back to her father's hometown, but those who have the time and opportunity to look beyond the surface see quite quickly that for Hayley, every day is unpredictable at best, downright terrifying at worst. Her attempts to take care of her father sometimes put her in dangerous situations, but her loyalty to him prevents her from telling anyone just how bad things have become.

Her life now firmly rooted in one place, Hayley is regularly confronted by the concern of her school guidance counselor, her new friends and boyfriend, and the other people from her past who try to reach out to her. Even her father's recovering alcoholic ex-girlfriend, the woman who raised Haley during her father's deployment and then abandoned her later, comes back into both their lives, and with nowhere

else to go, Hayley is forced to tolerate her presence. Hayley turns away, over and over again, all their offers of help, all their inquiries into what she is experiencing at home. But when her father's episodes escalate beyond her control, Hayley quickly learns that while becoming part of a community might mean facing her family's past, it also means that she won't have to face it alone. She begins to let people back into her life after years of keeping them at a distance. Slowly she accepts the fact that she really is home, and that her days of running away are behind her. Halse Anderson addresses the real and serious issue of post-traumatic stress disorder in a story that is at once heartbreaking and hopeful, revealing the hurtful and healing qualities of place and memory.

Emma, the narrator of Holly Thompson's novel in verse entitled *The Language Inside* (2013), would give anything to go home. Raised in Japan since infancy, Emma feels lost and voiceless when her family is forced to return unexpectedly to the United States after her mother's diagnosis of breast cancer. Her grandmother's house in Lowell, Massachusetts, feels

like anything but home as she longs for the familiar sights, sounds, and smells of the country she left behind. Emma mourns the loss of not only her house, her school, her cat, and her friends, but also of the Japanese language, which she considers to be her own. Written English seems empty compared to kanji, in which meanings are heaped on top of meanings to form each character. Adding to Emma's deep sense of homesickness is the fact that Japan is still recovering from the devastating earthquake and tsunami that swept the island nation in 2011. Emma's best friend, Madoka, and her family lost a great deal, including an aunt whose body still has not been recovered. Emma was right beside her friend's family in the aftermath, sifting through the rubble, pick up the pieces, and working to help heal the emotional wounds everyone knows will last long after the physical ones have healed. Although she understands why her mother chose to come to the United States to be near her family for the duration of her treatment, Emma can't help but feel that she has let so many people down by leaving Japan so suddenly. She knows she has no choice but to bide her time until January, when her family plans to return to Japan.

Emma's relief is palpable when she meets Samnang, the son of a Cambodian woman who lost much of her family to the genocide carried out by Pol Pot's regime before escap-

ing to the United States. Samnang introduces her to the local Cambodian community, including his Cambodian dance troupe and two elderly Cambodian refugees who live at the nursing home where she and Samnang volunteer. Emma also develops a close bond with Zena, a nursing home resident whose stroke left her with locked-in syndrome, unable to move, but still very able to compose, letter by letter, the poems that Emma transcribes for her. As she develops relationships with the new people in her American life, Emma finds herself questioning her desire to return to Japan so soon.

Emma is pulled in two very different directions, unsure of what her growing sense of belonging in Massachusetts means for her Japanese identity. She slowly learns, with the help of her new community, that she doesn't have to choose, that it is possible to belong in two places, and that maybe there is room for two languages inside her after all. The novel in verse format is powerful in this piece, blank space combining with the verse on each page to reflect both the emptiness Emma feels and the new voice and identity she is forming. Thompson's writing is eloquent and engaging, leaving readers feeling as though Emma's struggles are their own.

In his first young adult novel, Eric Gansworth also explores the relationship between place and identity. *If I Ever Get Out of Here* (2013) is about a middle school student named Lewis Blake, who lives on the Tuscarora Indian reservation in New York during the 1970s. Lewis is placed in the smart class at school, which shouldn't be a bad

thing. The problem is that none of the other kids from the reservation are with him. As the only Native American in a class full of white students, Lewis spends his school days as an outcast, painfully aware of the racism and stereotypes that cause the other kids to steer clear of him day after day and year after year. Lewis knows that the border between the reservation and the rest of the world doesn't disappear when he crosses it on his school bus each day. Instead, it follows him, an invisible barrier that keeps him trapped inside the res and prevents him from becoming a part of the world outside.

Fortunately for Lewis, George Haddonfield doesn't seem to know about the invisible divide between the reservation kids and the white kids. George lives on the local Air Force base with his soldier father and German mother. For his entire life, he has been following his father's career from one place to another, so George knows there is no sense in wasting time when it comes to making friends. Lewis is nice

to him, and that's all that matters—or so he thinks. The two bond over their mutual love of the Beatles, even crossing the border into Canada with George's father to see Paul McCartney perform with the group Wings. George invites Lewis to a sleepover at his house on the base, and Lewis invites George to a game of fireball on the reservation. But nothing in Lewis's experience has prepared him for a friend who is white and doesn't care that he isn't, so despite their growing familiarity, there are rifts in Lewis and George's friendship. George very much wants to see where Lewis lives, but Lewis's family is poor, and his house is falling apart. He feels guilty for the lie he tells to prevent George from coming over, but not guilty enough to come clean and invite his friend to his home. And when Evan Reiniger begins pummeling Lewis every day in the school hallway, although George stands up for his friend verbally, he refuses to break his father's no fighting rule to step in and physically stop the blows. When the school staff and administrators turn a blind eye to Evan's crimes, Lewis is reminded once again that where he is from will always determine how others treat him. The real questions he must face are whether or not his friendship with George can survive if he lets George see his home, and whether or not he can maintain his identity as a kid from the reservation even as his life branches out beyond its borders. Gansworth skillfully weaves issues of place, race, and class into a story that shows how they each impact the relationships people form and the lives they lead. Readers will walk away with a deeper understanding of just how much place matters. They will also be left wondering if it should.

The teenagers in our classrooms are on the verge of making major life decisions about the lives they will lead and the kind of people they will become. Like Cole, Hayley, Emma, and Lewis, they will confront issues of place as they work to build their identities both now and in the future. All four of the books discussed here will help them think about not only where they wish to end up, but also what it will mean for them when they get there.

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