11-2016

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Cara Anderson

Brooke Goldsworthy

Leah MacQueen

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Recommended Citation

Anderson, Cara; Goldsworthy, Brooke; and MacQueen, Leah (2016) "Finding Community in Young Adult Literature," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 32: Iss. 1, Article 12.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.2154>

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Review

Finding Community in Young Adult Literature

CARA ANDERSON, BROOKE GOLDSWORTHY, AND LEAH MACQUEEN

Ship Breaker by Paolo Bacigalupi, Little, Brown and Company, 2010.

Ella Minnow Pea by Mark Dunn, MacAdam/Cage, 2001.

The Graveyard Book by Neil Gaiman, Harper, 2008.

I am Malala by Malala Yousafzai, Orion Publishing Group, 2013.

Young adult literature often tells the story of teens' transitions from being seen as children to becoming part of the adult world. Critical to this is the idea of where young people will fit into society. What niche will they fill? Will they be left to fight for themselves? Who can they look to for support? What responsibilities do they have to the people around them? As young people's thoughts shift to focusing beyond themselves, they may question how their identity relates to the community around them. Quality young adult literature can provide a vehicle for facilitating the exploration of community, its role in young people's lives, and adolescents' place within it.

Four well-written novels that have strong themes relating to community are Paolo Bacigalupi's *Ship Breaker*, Mark Dunn's *Ella Minnow Pea*, Neil Gaiman's *The Graveyard Book*, and Malala Yousafzai's *I am Malala*. Spanning genres from science fiction to nonfiction and with protagonists of varying ages and backgrounds, the stories center on a young person's battle to look beyond themselves and help those around them. The teens' communities and how the young people define them play a central role in each of the following books.

Set in a futuristic version of America's Gulf Coast region, Paolo Bacigalupi's *Ship Breaker* (2010) tells the story of Nailer, a teenage boy who works hard as a ship breaker scavenging for copper wiring. This dystopian novel takes place in a world

dealing with the effects of global warming. Oil is a scarcity, the sea level has risen, and extreme weather is commonplace. In addition to the threats of nature, the young boy has to face his drug-addicted and alcoholic father, Richard Lopez, who constantly mistreats and abuses his son. Nailer relies on the support of his ship breaking crew to survive the harsh environmental and corrupt social conditions of their dilapidated beach community.

When a hurricane wipes out the village and stops work, Nailer and another member of his crew, Pima, set out on their own to look for scraps to sell for food and supplies. Hoping for a "Lucky Strike," Pima and Nailer spot a wrecked clipper ship and decide to explore. Amongst the treasures and goods, they find a young girl trapped within the ship. Little do they realize, this girl, Nita, is about to drastically change their lives. The two are torn between letting the girl die and rescuing her. Nailer pities the girl and reminds Pima that because the girl is rich, she may be worth more money rescued than what they could get for taking her possessions. Luckily for Nita, Pima's allegiance to Nailer convinces her to go along with his wishes.

Loyalty is an issue that confronts Nailer and several other characters throughout the novel. Much like Nailer's conflict of letting Nita live or following Pima's desire to let her die, many loyalties are tested. Throughout the novel, Nailer grapples with determining where his allegiances should lie with particular focus on the true meaning of family. Greed also plays an important role in the motivations of many characters and often shows itself in direct conflict with characters' loyalties. Men and women scavenge for materials, desperately hoping for a big break or stroke of luck. Greed leads characters to do reprehensible things such as stealing loot, abandoning crew in need of help, and even ruthless murder.

Ship Breaker deftly explores social class differences and tensions using the extreme difference in Nailer's and Nita's backgrounds. Nailer often feels twinges of hatred toward Nita because as a "swank," she hasn't experienced much of the trouble he sees as everyday life. Nailer comes to find that Nita

has problems of her own. Through his strength and perseverance to do right in his world, Nailer makes a final decision to save his life and the life of his new friend, even if it means heartache and a sense of emptiness when it is all over. Ship Breaker is sure to bring out the best and the worst of emotions in oneself, wholeheartedly encompassing adventure and thrill in an intense, dystopian manner.

Ella Minnow Pea (2001) by Mark Dunn tells the story of its namesake, an eighteen-year-old resident of the fictitious island nation of Nollop. The country was named for one of its prestigious former citizens, Nevin Nollop. Nevin is the author of the famous sentence, "The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog," which contains every letter of the alphabet. Scholarship is of high importance in Nollop, and language is considered a national art form. Its citizens speak and write formally and modern technologies are not permitted in the country.

The novel begins when a letter tile falls off of the monument commemorating Nevin Nollop and his sentence in center of town. The Council governing their country interprets this as a message from Nollop himself that the letter should be banned from use. The letter Z is banned with severe punishments for those who use it including banishment from the island. What happens when a single letter is lost?

Citizens are dismayed by the ripple effects of the new law and the infringement upon rights they assumed were indisputable. As they grapple with the consequences, more letters fall and are banned. More and more people are being forced to leave, and the Council is becoming increasingly unreasonable. What will happen when all the let-

ters are gone?

As the task of communicating becomes more arduous, Ella and the other residents strike a deal with the Council. If they can create a sentence containing each letter of the alphabet that is shorter in length than Nollop's, the Council will rescind its irrational decrees. Can they succeed? What will happen if they cannot?

Ella Minnow Pea will enchant readers with a love for wordplay. Dunn's masterfully crafted sentences are rich in diverse and beautiful vocabulary, which becomes increasingly impressive as the allowable letters dwindle.

In *The Graveyard Book* (2008), the author Neil Gaiman tells a suspenseful and fantastical story of a boy named Nobody Owens. Nobody, or Bod for short, is raised by the ghosts and spirits of the graveyard after his mother, father, and older sister are murdered by a man named Jack. Bod, who was only around the age of one at the time, managed to escape his death and found his way into the nearby graveyard. Two ghosts, Mr. and Mrs. Owens encounter him on their evening walk and decide to raise him as their own child. Silas, a spirit who can leave and return at will, volunteers to be the boy's guardian. When the majority of spirits agree, Bod is granted the "Freedom of the Graveyard," which allows him to have many of the supernatural abilities that the spirits possess as well as being able to call the graveyard his home.

As he ages, Bod encounters many interesting ghosts and learns about their lives and stories. He also has encounters with ghouls, night-gaunts, a witch, and an ancient sleer. One of the most memorable interactions is with a young girl named Scarlett when he is five. When Scarlett is no longer allowed to visit the graveyard as a child, Bod misses interacting with the living. Through sneaking out, attending school, and other interactions with the living, the older Bod gets, the more he craves communication and time with those who are not dead. Bod and his identity seem to be continually caught somewhere between the living and the dead.

Under the protection of Silas, Mr. and Mrs. Owens and other residents of the graveyard, Bod seems to have little worry about. However, the man named Jack has never forgotten the young boy who had escaped his knife and continues to search for him therefore posing a constant threat to Bod's safety. With the community of the graveyard to help him through, Bod will discover ways to grow, learn and persevere even through the direst of circumstances. Through his writing, Gaiman throws the reader into a mystical, magical place that comes alive through words and images. The characters that become a part of the story come alive, rising from their final resting places and create an entrancing world of ghosts, ghouls, and the supernatural.

Overall, *The Graveyard Book* is filled with adventure, mystery and suspense. Gaiman's words are poetic, taking an

erie and frightening setting such as a graveyard and bringing a sense of beauty through his use of imagery. Throughout the book, illustrations by Dave McKean occasionally fill the page or compliment the words to help paint a picture for the reader. Readers will find this captivating version of a modern day ghost story to be a suspenseful page turner with many interesting characters to meet along the way.

I Am Malala is the memoir of recent Nobel Peace Prize recipient Malala Youzafzai. When Malala and her town, Swat Valley, Pakistan, are faced with the trials of the terror group, the Taliban, she takes a stand against their beliefs and ideologies to portray what is right for the Muslim community. From just a young girl, Malala had the idea that change needed to happen within women's rights for education. With the Taliban infiltrating the education system, women's rights suffered.

Malala saw her father, Ziauddin, as a hero figure, one who worked his entire life supporting women's equality. He was the son of a preacher, a teacher who opened a school where children were taught to reach their full potential. He saw something in his daughter when she was born and knew she could make a difference. She was praised and presented with gifts as a baby girl, an exercise usually saved for boys. Throughout primary school, Malala achieved what her father saw within her. She rose to the top of her class, becoming a wonderful speaker and writer. Malala and her father traveled throughout Pakistan, speaking at conferences and over the radio encouraging others to stand up for the true beliefs of Islam, without falling to the Taliban.

On October 9, 2012, a young Malala, just fifteen years old, endured the ultimate trial for standing up for herself and women like her. That morning she traveled to school via rickshaw, crammed with five or six girls. She was happy to be arriving a bit later that day due to exam week. Just before an army checkpoint on the way to her destination, Malala's life quickly changed. A young bearded man in light colored clothing stopped the van and marched inside to talk to the busdriver. Another man walked around the back of the van and yelled, "Who is Malala?" While no one answered, amongst blank stares, three shots were fired.

Fifteen year old Malala lives to tell her story of how even one person can be a voice in a hurting community. Visiting countries across continents and speaking to political leaders, Malala has been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. Presenting at conferences for the United Nation, Malala and her family reside in England, the place she was brought after the shooting. Although heartache, shootings, and bombings continue

in her country, she hopes to someday return to continue her fight for women's rights.

The process of finding one's role within a community is an essential part of growing up. Teenagers must endure the process of finding where they fit in and what roles they can play within their own communities. Young adults will enjoy reading *Ship Breaker*, *Ella Minnow Pea*, *The Graveyard Book*, and *I am Malala* while reflecting upon how community influences life and life choices. Much like our main characters, Nailer, Ella, Bod, and Malala, who struggled to find their role within their own community, teenagers will eventually be faced with the same dilemma. All four of these books will help teens work through these dilemmas in order to find themselves and their importance within their own lives.

Cara Anderson is a 7th and 8th grade Language Arts teacher at Aspen Ridge Middle School in Ishpeming, Michigan. She is currently enrolled as a graduate student at Northern Michigan University. As an avid reader, she enjoys reading a multitude of YA novels in hopes that she can share her love of reading with her students.

Leah MacQueen lives in Marquette, Michigan and teaches eighth grade at Bothwell Middle School. She is currently pursuing her Master of Arts in Education Degree in Reading at Northern Michigan University.