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## Resilience in Young Adult Literature

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## REVIEW

# Resilience in Young Adult Literature

MARGARET SAELENS AND BRIAN LARSEN

Pfeffer, S. B. (2006). *Life as we knew it: The last survivors, Book 1*. Harcourt.

Acevedo, E. (2018). *The poet X: A novel*. HarperTeen.

Draper, S. M. (2020). *Copper Sun*. Simon & Schuster.

Shusterman, N. (2007). *Unwind*. Simon & Schuster.

**Y**oung adult literature focuses on teenage protagonists, telling the stories of their relationships, situations, challenges, and beliefs as they transition from childhood to adulthood. One main component in young adult literature is resilience. Resilience is the ability to adapt to difficult or challenging life experiences. Teenagers have difficult lives, and often find themselves adapting to external or internal demands, or a combination of both types of demands. The characters in young adult literature come from diverse backgrounds, and are all engaged in different dilemmas. They often must fight stereotypes with little to no power to influence or change the dilemmas they face. Resilience is the quality these characters possess and develop that helps them navigate and overcome the obstacles they encounter.

Four award-winning novels that have main characters with strong resilience are Susan Beth Pfeffer's *Life As We Knew It*, Elizabeth Acevedo's *The Poet X*, Sharon Draper's *Copper Sun*, and Neal Shusterman's *Unwind*. These books span multiple genres, from poetry, to historical fiction, to science fiction and dystopia. The stories center around a teenager main character who is facing major challenges. While the characters in each book all come from different backgrounds, the dilemmas they face are all extremely challenging. The stories focus on the resilience the characters need in order to find resources to help the others around them, as well as find a way to take control of the situation in order to help themselves. Resilience plays a key role in how the main characters are able to find the power to influence or change the situation presented to them in order to survive.

Set in modern day America, Susan Beth Pfeffer's *Life As We Knew It* (2006) tells the story of Miranda Evans, a 16-year-old girl living in rural Pennsylvania with her mother, two

brothers, close family friend Mrs. Nesbitt, and the family cat Horton. Miranda's parents are divorced, and her father lives with his new wife in another town in Pennsylvania. Miranda is a typical teenager, who worries about her grades, her peer relationships, and what sports she wants to join in the future. Miranda becomes conflicted when she learns her stepmother is pregnant, and her father wants Miranda to be the godmother. Not knowing how she feels about becoming a godmother to her future sibling, Miranda instead turns her attention to the news the world is buzzing about. An asteroid is going to hit the moon, and it will be able to be seen from Earth. People arrange viewing parties to see the event, including Miranda's family. Things take a strange turn when the asteroid is denser than what scientists had predicted, causing the moon to be pushed closer to Earth. At first, the family did not know what was happening, knowing only the phone lines were going out, and that some television networks were not broadcasting. Soon however, Miranda's family learns of widespread tsunamis, earthquakes, and floods. Whole cities, such as New York, Boston, San Francisco, and Los Angeles have been wiped out. The family and community try to carry on with life as usual, but it is soon apparent to Miranda that life as they knew it will never be the same. The family rushes to the grocery store to stock up on food. Volcanos erupt, throwing ash into the sky. Daylight turns into darkness, and soon temperatures plummet. Schools close, and people begin to move away as starvation begins to take a toll. Miranda's family begins to stock up on firewood, and reduce the number of meals they are eating in an effort to survive the harsh winter conditions. With food supplies running low, and no end to the winter in sight, the family does whatever they can to try to survive, with little hope for the future. Miranda faces many extreme challenges which cause her to look introspectively and wonder if life will ever be the same again.

Resilience is a key theme for Miranda throughout the novel. Miranda's life was turned upside down in an instant when the asteroid hit the moon. She lost the ability to control many aspects of her life, and her confidence wavered. Miranda also began to lose purpose in her life, and the connections she

had up until this point of her life became broken. She needed to adapt to the difficult and challenging experiences both externally and internally. Throughout the novel, Miranda's resilience is tested as her family's lives are threatened through starvation and illness. She loses friends and people important to her to death, while others she knows move away. Miranda and her family have no electricity, little heat, and no plan for the future beyond survival. In addition to those external demands, Miranda struggles internally with her relationship with her mother and wonders if she is strong enough to survive. However, it is Miranda's resilience that leads to her finding more food for her family when they all thought the end had come.

*Life As We Knew It* delves into the importance of resilience when faced with not only one, but several life-altering situations. Miranda was able to find coping strategies such as journaling and exercise to help her adapt to her changing environment. Miranda also often felt insecurities, especially when fighting with her mother. While conflicts between mothers and teenage daughters are a normal part of growing up, in Miranda's apocalyptic world, it made her feel like she was not a good daughter, and in some cases, not a good person. Miranda often felt powerless, as if she wasn't doing enough to help her family survive, and that she may even be a burden to them. Miranda makes a final decision at the end of the novel in order to spare her mother some grief, as well as to possibly give her younger brother the best chance to live. Miranda questioned her strength to follow through with her decision, but ultimately, her resilience came through. *Life As We Knew It* speaks to the reader through emotion and relatability, as we all have questioned our resilience in difficult times of our lives, and wondered if we would be able to have what it takes to come through for ourselves or our loved ones.

*The Poet X* (2018) by Elizabeth Acevedo tells, through poetry, the life of Xiomara Batista, a high school sophomore growing up in Harlem with her twin brother and her two parents. She has many internal and external struggles as she navigates her emotions. Xiomara tries to figure out what direction her life is going in, and how to make sense of her teenage self. She turns to poetry as an outlet to express herself, keeping a private notebook full of poems about her everyday life. From the beginning, it was clear Xiomara has resilience, as she often must defend herself in difficult situations using her fists. While using her fists may not be the most effective way to deal with conflict, it shows Xiomara is not afraid to take action or control when necessary. She feels she has the power to influ-

ence or change the outcome when faced with difficult or challenging life experiences.

Xiomara's family is Dominican American, with her mother growing up in the Dominican Republic, and coming to the United States to marry Xiomara's father. Her parents' marriage was not traditional, with her father being a womanizer. That all changed once he found out Xiomara and her brother were on the way, and while he gave up his philandering ways, still, he does not interact or have much to do with his children. Xiomara's mother is a devout Catholic who wanted to be a nun before entering into an arranged marriage with her husband. The mother attempts to raise her twins with the same devout faith in which she has lived her life. Even though Xiomara does not have a great relationship with her parents, they too are resilient, being from diverse backgrounds. They have both faced many hardships but have persevered through them. Both parents have seemed to pass their resilience down to their daughter, even if Xiomara does not always realize it.

Xiomara struggles with accepting her mother's devout Catholic faith. She has many questions, with little answers, and begins to rebel against her mother and the confirmation classes in which she has been attending. Xiomara's mother also has rules against Xiomara dating, or even befriending any boys other than her twin brother. This leads to strife and fighting between Xiomara and her mother, as Xiomara begins to develop feelings and a relationship with a boy in her class. Xiomara turns to a poetry club and slam poetry as a coping strategy to help her adapt and overcome some of the greatest conflicts she has with not only her family and peers, but also within herself. Engaged in multiple human dilemmas, and feeling like she had little resources to turn to, Xiomara uses her resilience to take control of some aspects of her life. She is able to find a way to change her parents' perspective on her life, and make a positive connection with her parents for the first time in a long time.

*The Poet X* gives a window into the mind of a teenage girl growing up in Harlem, and the resilience needed to survive as a teenage woman of color. The feelings, thoughts and conflicts conveyed in the poetry allow the reader to transport themselves into Xiomara's shoes, and show the conflicts around faith, race, sexuality, family life, peer relationships, and body image she faces each day. Xiomara is constantly faced with difficult life experiences in which she must persevere through. *The Poet X* is a candid glimpse into the life of a teenager that pulls at the feelings of the reader through raw emotion and real-life situations of resilience.

Susan Draper's historical fiction novel *Copper Sun* (2006) tells the story of fifteen-year-old Amari, who lives a contented life with her parents and energetic younger brother among the Ewe people in Ghana. She is looking forward to her upcoming marriage to Besa and longs to learn to weave Kente cloth, like her father. Everything changes when her home is invaded by enslavers from the American colonies. Her parents and younger brother are brutally and swiftly murdered by the invaders and Ashanti warriors. She is forced to spend weeks aboard a ship bound for South Carolina, witnessing disease, death, and violence on a daily basis. Separated from Besa and the few remaining members of her community, Amari finds herself alone. Afi, an older woman, befriends Amari. Afi makes sure that Amari eats to keep up her strength, protects her from the others aboard the ship as much as she can, and advises Amari on how to best avoid the attention of the men on the ship. Amari is able to see from Afi that it is possible to survive, and though Amari questions how her wonderful world so suddenly turned horrific, Afi encourages Amari not to give up on her life.

After surviving the journey across the Atlantic, Amari's freedom continues to be assaulted when she must face loss again. Amari is separated from Afi and faces the unknown of the American south. She is sold to be enslaved by the tyrannical Mr. Percival Derby, owner of a rice plantation, who has selected Amari as a gift for his son Clay for his birthday. She is not even permitted to keep her name, but is called Myna, a name Clay chooses to show his perceived ownership over her. Polly, a white indentured servant, is also brought to the Derby's plantation. Although Polly does not particularly care for Black enslaved people, she does not understand why the Derbys continue to repeatedly dehumanize the Black captives.

Amari grows to care for Teenie, the enslaved cook, and her young son Tidbit. Amari knows that she cannot stay on the Derby's plantation long-term. Her nights are spent being terrorized by Clay and she is worried that she will be worked to death if she is sent to labor in the rice fields. Unexpectedly, Amari and Polly find themselves protecting Mrs. Derby, Mr. Derby's young, pregnant second wife, who has shown kindness to the enslaved people and is keeping secrets from her husband. When Amari and Polly are caught lying to protect Mrs. Derby, the pair realize that they must do their best to escape the wrath and control of the Derbys and that they must take care of one another.

Author of *Copper Sun*, Susan Draper's grandfather was enslaved during the final years of chattel slavery in the United

States. Though brutal in its depiction of the Middle Passage and the enslavement of Africans, *Copper Sun* is also a hopeful story of strength and resiliency. Through her relationships with Teenie, Polly, and Tidbit, Amari finds empathy in the face of cruelty and racism. In addition to finding the strength to continue to survive for her own sake, Amari takes on the role of caretaker of young Tidbit. A significant source of inspiration for Amari comes from the kindness of her new friends and family, as well as the kindness of strangers who risk their own wellbeing to help her survive the Derbys and the system of oppression that has been built at the expense of Amari and other enslaved people. Amari shows bravery and leadership in the face of adversity and courage beyond her years.

*Unwind* by Neal Shusterman tells the story of teenagers Connor, Risa, and Lev, whose lives have been interrupted since their unwinding orders have been signed. Set in the United States after the fictional Heartland War, America has a policy of preserving the life of any pregnancy and child until the age of 13. From 13 until 18, children's bodies can be retroactively aborted. Although this policy has transformed the medical treatments available to many who would otherwise be on the years' long list for organ transplants, the lives of American teenagers are more uncertain than ever. Connor's parents no longer want to put up with his temper, Risa lives in a state home that is facing budget cuts, and Lev's family believe that they are doing a service to God by donating their son's body. The three of them feel as if they have no control over their lives, and in order to improve their lives, they will need to have strong will and resilience.

Connor's sense of betrayal from his parents and his inability to regulate his emotions cause him to struggle with his own impulsivity and wondering whether he could have prevented his unwinding order. Then he meets Risa, a classical pianist who thinks that had she been more talented, she would not have been chosen to be removed from the state home to provide more room for other unwanted children. Connor sees Risa as an ally who also understands what it is like to be given up on, and the two of them develop ways to have the courage to survive.

Lev has always known that he will be unwound after he turns 13. Living life as a tithe, Lev has been taught that it is God's will for him to be unwound, and that his purpose is noble and special. When Connor intervenes and rescues Lev from being sent to be harvested, Lev feels betrayed and calls Connor his kidnapper. Lev does not want to adapt or change his situation; he feels he needs to fulfill his life's purpose as a

tithe. However, after Lev attempts to betray Connor and Risa, Lev finds out that he has made a grave mistake turning them all in and becomes separated from Connor and Risa. Lev also begins his journey of resilience, where he will do whatever he can to take control of his life and do what he feels he needs to do to survive, even when faced with extremely tough decisions. The three of them will unite again in the underground system of resistance that protects children who have been sentenced to be unwound. By chance, the three are brought together upon the eve of their arrival at the Harvest Camps, where they are scheduled to be unwound and will live the rest of their lives in a “divided state.” However, their choices, circumstances, and resilience will lead the three of them to a turning point in their lives that will forever link them together.

Written in third person form through the eyes of the three main characters, Neal Shusterman creates a powerful tale of three young teenagers who are in the fight not only of their lives, but for their lives. The focus is on survival, in a world where saving a life does not always mean what we think it does. Connor, Risa, and Lev are constantly having to adjust to external and internal demands to stay alive. Their ability to adapt to unseen challenges in a world that is not kind to Unwinds is a cautionary work of fiction about what can happen when a society’s morality and ethics becomes skewed in its definition of a right to life, and a right to choose. Connor, Risa, and Lev discover who they are throughout the novel, and are able to withstand adversity each time they are face with it. Even though they are faced with daunting stress, emotional upheaval, and suffering, the three of them are able to make it through difficult life events and change the world around them.

Resilience, the ability to adapt to difficult or challenging life experiences, is an essential theme in young adult literature. Teenagers are resilient, not only in their everyday lives, but also in times of extreme life changes and catastrophic events. Young Adults will enjoy reading *Life As We Knew It*, *The Poet X*, *Copper Sun*, and *Unwind*, which all include characters who show their resilience in many different ways. The characters, Miranda, Xiomara, Amari, Connor, Risa, and Lev, all struggled with their ability to change, but each of them found a way to adjust to the demands being placed upon them, and each persevered. Instead of letting traumatic life events define them, these characters were able to overcome their adversities, and were able to change the course of their lives for the better. All four of these books showcase the importance resiliency has in everyone’s daily lives, and how being resilient can help someone change the course of their lives for the better.



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