

Examining Adolescence and Agency in the Midst of International Crisis: Pandemics, Pandemonium, and Zombie Young Adult Literature

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ABSTRACT:

The COVID-19 pandemic of 2020-22 brought an abundance of changes to secondary education as students transitioned across the country to virtual and hybrid learning contexts. Teachers flexed quickly and frequently to support the learning that students acquired in these new, digital spaces even as school, district, and state demands on teaching increased. The English/Language Arts classroom pivoted along with others as teachers sought out digital reading and writing resources for students to engage in. In the midst of a national crisis, a metaphorical monster that sought to destroy, much like Beowulf's dragon did, adolescent readers, despite the discourses of learning loss, turned to the monsters of zombie young adult literature (ZYAL) to cope with fear and tragedy around them. They did so because of a common genre feature where adolescent protagonists, much like their adult counterparts, deal with the horrors of their real world through literature when given a sense of power and agency both in the classroom and outside of it. Thus, popular culture becomes a tool for teachers and students to grapple with the great difficulties of life while examining it through high interest literature.

Keywords: zombie literature, young adult literature, english education, zombies, adolescent reading, adolescent literacy.

INTRODUCTION

While the zombie phenomenon has unashamedly transformed popular culture in the United States in the last twenty years through television and movies, zombie literature has also risen as an unmistakable fixture of the off-screen reading lives of adolescents and adults (Strickland 2019). Zombie young adult literature (ZYAL), while shuffling and staggering along behind the explosiveness of *The Walking Dead* comics and television show, has steadily grown in popularity as well with many blockbuster franchises coming onto the scene.

Meanwhile, secondary English teachers and teacher educators can and have brought ZYAL into public school English classrooms to help foster a love of reading and writing in adolescent students' learning (Strickland 2021). The great benefit of using ZYAL in the classroom, in particular, is not just high-interest-level-reading, although that is important, but how secondary students engage with the portrayal of teenage protagonists and their authentic struggles and personalities even while facing the reanimated corpses of those adults once in authoritative positions over them.

The COVID-19 pandemic, oddly enough, made these stories even more relevant as rampaging viruses changing the landscape of modern America have become much more personal and too realistic to engage with as a concept. This is not meant to trivialize the danger and horror that the pandemic has caused for many Americans by comparing it to horror fiction, but to show how adolescent protagonists facing unimaginable horrors can become mirrors for American students to deal with their own fears (Strickland 2019). For young readers, ZYAL creates an opportunity to unpack the concept(s) of adolescence(ts), and for readers to grapple with the socially constructed views of who adolescents really are as individuals and their ability to handle adult realities (Sarigianides 2012).

This article will argue that teachers can and should seek out and recommend such genre reading for their students because, not only are they interest driven, but they also feature adolescent protagonists that have the agency and power to deal with a very real adult horror even at a young age. It is important for teachers to remember that «Teaching about power is the fundamental aspect of teaching for critical literacy: who has power and who is denied it; how is power used and how is it abused» (Wolk, 2009, 668). Zombie YAL, in particular, provides a way for students to grapple with the real emotions they feel in the safe space and within the safe distance of fiction. This provides them with an ownership of power over their own lives and the agency to see themselves as being capable of dealing with difficulty.

ZYAL has shown teenage protagonists as capable, functioning individuals that have the power to affect change in their communities. These protagonists break the common social stereotypes of adolescents as fueled by hormones and lacking control, and show the power of teamwork and individual growth in a time that is representative of the growing up process. Students reading ZYAL have the opportunity of seeing themselves reflected in the mirror of these teenage characters struggling to survive an undead nightmare and can see through the windows of diversity to understand their classmates' identities and points of view (Sims Bishop 1990).

Understanding Adolescence(ts) in Teaching English

In order to grasp the potential of adolescent readers reading ZYAL to cope with a national pandemic, an understanding of the social stereotypes about adolescence should be examined. In English teacher education, the value in "Exploring adolescence as a cultural construct presents teacher candidates with a nondominant view of youth" (Sarigianides 226). This nondominant view allows veteran and new teachers alike to see more potential in their students than society would have them, and this allows for teaching to be based upon a foundation of positive rather than deficit views of youth within the English classroom.

When teaching in the English classroom begins with that positive foundation, a whole new opportunity for student growth becomes available. The hope for this positive view of students is due to the fact that "We

strive to encourage young people to share their stories from their lived experiences, and we acknowledge the value of their voices. We want them to realize the power of their stories and their perspectives; we want to challenge and create a new discourse about youth” (Flores, et al. 78). In many ways, English classrooms seek this potential in their students more than other subjects do. It is not just that English teachers wish for their students to read and write better after finishing a course, but they want them to have a chance to grow as individuals operating in a world that seeks to contain them.

Furthermore, teachers and teacher candidates have to take an active stance on dismantling harmful stereotypes of the youth they work with. In particular, “literacy teacher education might benefit by reconsidering how learning about the power of discourses to name and position adolescents in problematic ways affects preservice teachers’ reasoning about pedagogy” (Lewis & Petrone 407). This deconstruction of the power within discourses about adolescence(ts) sets the tone for student learning in English classrooms and affects the teaching and learning that goes on in the classroom as well. If the goal of English instruction is to have students engage in the world around them as active participants, then the focus of power needs to be more concentrated on students’ own agency for change and less on that of the teacher.

Conceptual Lens

The effect of stereotypes about youth on pedagogy has been widely explored. The foundation for the work found in this article comes from an understanding that once these stereotypes have been addressed by both teacher and student, real change can occur. In teacher education, when “Exploring changes in the ways that youths have historically been conceptualized in work, school, and social settings sometimes allow teacher candidates to begin to unfix their expectations of adolescents and to consider how this category of experience is more socially constructed than biologically inevitable” (Sarigianides 225). Understanding their views of students and their abilities as framed by social construction rather than by nature breaks apart the tension between students as innocents and students as a powerful force unto themselves.

This breaking of stereotypes can also allow teachers and teacher candidates to better serve diverse identities by viewing literature with the youth lens (YL). Exploring and analyzing literature used in classrooms with “a YL carries within it the potential to consider representations of youth in texts as they reflect assumptions tied to age as well as how those representations might intersect with conceptions of class, sexuality, race, gender, ability, and other social categories” (Petrone, et al., 508). Furthermore, a YL asks, “How does the text represent adolescence/ts?” and “What role does the text play in reinforcing and/or subverting dominant ideas about adolescence?” (511). When using a YL while considering texts to employ with students, teachers can begin to see a greater potential for more when teaching students English.

Zombie Young Adult Literature Provides the Space

Why study ZYAL or even consider using monster fiction with youth in English classrooms? First, there is a “surging popularity of YA dystopia alongside similar trends: post-apocalyptic narratives (be they in the form of print fiction, film, television, or video games) that share similar characteristics; zombie and vampire storylines with their fear-based ‘us versus them’ binaries; and horror films that encompass the above subcategories” (Ames 6-7). Second, these popular and interest-driven stories have the potential to both awaken students’ attention immediately and show them an understanding of their whole identity as capable adults.

The use of ZYAL during the COVID-19 pandemic could push students to see both intertextual and cross-subject potential to their studies and reading. However, “While intertextuality commonly refers to allusions or references in one text to that of another, interdiscursivity suggests important associations between a given text and its prevailing genre or discourse” (Wickens, 2011, 152). Thus, as students make the intertextual connections between the ZYAL they are reading and the real-life text of the pandemic taking place before their eyes, they can also begin to understand the connections between the texts and the discourses surrounding

youth in school and society simultaneously. It is through this association that students can begin to dismantle negative stereotypes about themselves in mainstream media, in schools, and from their parents, which gives them the agency and power to confront it.

When considering ZYAL as an avenue of study for adolescent students, teachers must consider why they should use monster and horror fiction as reading material in their classrooms. They wouldn't have to look far for such material, though, as zombie literature has been pervasive in American popular culture for decades. In reality, "The fact that the grim apocalyptic imagery present in mainstream texts has filtered down into young adult literature is quite telling" (Ames 7). It shows that "Connecting popular YAL to a tradition of dystopian narratives can help students to better understand the characteristics and history of the genre and how it is often used as social commentary" (Rybakova & Roccanti 38). This connection has immediate impact in English classrooms as students see, read, and write social commentaries attached to their reading, which enables them to enact change in their communities.

Finding ZYAL That Feature Adolescents with Power

One Example

There are many fantastic zombie young adult novels that feature teenage protagonists with agency in the face of overwhelming and horrific odds. One great example of this genre is the *Rot & Ruin* series by Jonathan Maberry. *Rot & Ruin* is the story of Benny Imura, a Japanese American 15-year-old boy and his friends as they survive in their small community in Northern California called Mountainside. Benny's world came crashing down as the zombie apocalypse raged across the world when he was only an infant. Rescued and now raised by his older brother, Tom, Benny resents his older brother for abandoning his parents on First Night, the zombie outbreak, and for his being left to attend school and live a sheltered life within the safe confines of Mountainside. Maberry narrates, "Tom and Benny never talked about zombies. They had every reason to, but they never did. Benny couldn't understand it. He hated zoms. Everyone hated them, though with Benny it was a white-hot consuming hatred that went back to his very first memory. Because it was his first memory—a nightmare image that was there every night when he closed his eyes" (Maberry 5).

When Benny's love interest, Nix's mother is murdered at the hands of a pair of evil bounty hunters, Benny and his friends look past their distaste for Tom and allow him to begin training them to become samurai with the requisite combat and survival skills to leave the safety of their community, search through the zombie infested rot and ruin to bring the evil bounty hunters to justice. These protagonists break their own social stereotypes against Tom and the other adults in Mountainside, and step into their future as capable and powerful warriors seeking justice in an unjust world.

Using the Youth Lens to Understand Adolescence in Rot & Ruin

In the first few chapters of this book, it is easy for readers to claim that Benny and his friends Chong and Morgie are every bit the stereotypical adolescent boys. They hate authority, they cut up and make jokes constantly, and they talk about girls. However, interwoven into an introduction of characters and contexts, teenagers that have to deal with the harsh realities of adult life are revealed, and they feel powerless to control their own lives.

Through their samurai training, Benny and his friends learn much about how to deal with massive issues as well as their own emotions of fear and helplessness. During one training session, Tom explains that in the face of fear, "People need something to blame...If they can't find something rational to blame, then they'll very happily blame something irrational. Back when people didn't know about viruses and bacteria, they blamed plagues on witches and vampires" (Maberry 17). The potential in using such deductions with modern students engaging in a study of current events and fear mongering is palpable.

There are many examples of the juxtaposition of adult discourses about youth, and the youth countering such discourses. Tom says at one point, “People are scared, Benny. They’re in denial. You’re only fifteen, so you and your friends don’t really understand what it was like during First Night” (Maberry 42). Such conversation happens frequently in the early part of the story, before Tom begins to see Benny and his friends as capable adults dealing with the same hardships that he does. He later says, “It’s okay to be scared... Scared means you’re smart. Just don’t panic. That’ll get you killed” (Maberry 97). Tom realizes that adolescents and adults face the same hardships and deal with the same emotions, and that it is this which should allow a greater understanding to grow between them. It is in this understanding whereby students can begin to see their own agency in traditionally adult spaces.

Adolescent Agency Leads to Hope

Breaking down the stereotypes of youth is a great benefit of studying YAL at large, but one of the most important reasons for studying ZYAL during the time of the national pandemic is the overwhelming message of hope amidst struggle that so many adolescent (and adult) readers long for. Once teachers, teacher candidates, and students understand the social construction of adolescence(ts) in the greater American discourse, they can begin to unpack the great potential, accomplishment, and vision of young people in English and English education classrooms. Benny and his friends are no strangers to this hope.

Throughout the story of *Rot & Ruin*, facing death, hunger, and deep emotions related to depression, loss, and grief, the camaraderie of this group of teenagers allows for an exploration of adolescent spirit. Even in the darkest of moments in the story, they support each other. In conversation about the loss of the world as they once knew it, Benny’s friend explains “And yet’ said Chong, ‘we’ll find a way to pick up the pieces of our shattered lives and struggle on” (Maberry 116). The message here relates to so many readers who have faced being within the midst of over two years of pandemic. Loss, while devastating in many ways, does not mean that there is no hope. Adolescents, like adults, must merely continue on.

While at Mountainside, still early in the story, Benny apprentices to an artist, Sacchetto, who sees the dark times they are living in as the end of times. He explains, “It happened. The dead rose, we fell. We lost the war and we lost the world. End of story. How it happened doesn’t matter much to anyone anymore. We’re living next door to the apocalypse, kid” (Maberry 137). However, we see much in how Benny responds to this discourse of doom and gloom that adolescent readers now would be so used to. He explains, “It’s just that I’m fifteen, and I have this crazy idea I might actually have a life in front of me. I don’t see how it’s going to do me much good to believe that the world is over and this is just an epilogue” (Maberry 137-38). It shows, even before the major character growth that Benny experiences over the rest of the story, that Benny sees the world for what it is, and does not let that ruin his spirit of hope.

The book also speaks directly to the concept of fear, which is so often why modern readers turn to horror and monster fiction. It provides a cathartic experience by dealing with fear with the distance provided through fiction (Strickland 2019). In a long speech, Tom shares with his younger brother:

We let fear rule us and guide us, and that’s never the way to win. A long time ago a great man once said that we have nothing to fear but fear itself. That was never truer than during First Night. It was fear that caused people to panic and abandon defenses. It was fear that made them squabble instead of working together. It was fear that inspired them to take actions they would have never taken if they’d given it a minute’s more cool thought (Maberry 188-89)

However, hitting the road into the rot and ruin with Benny and his friends shows Tom that there is so much more to this group of young people than his stereotyping of them earlier allowed. He later updates his thoughts by sharing:

There are some people who don't let fear rule their actions, and I suspect it'll be your generation that turns things around. Most of the people my age or older are lost in fear, and they'll never find their way back. But you and your friends, especially those young enough to not remember First Night... You're the ones who will choose whether to live in fear or not. (Maberry 189-190)

There is a realization here that young people like Benny and his friends do have a future separate from the adults in their lives, and they will have the agency to change and pursue that future as they see fit.

Finally, there is a sense of hope among Benny and his friends as they think about the impact of their apocalyptic world on why they should even try to survive. He says, later in the story, "That's just it, Nix. I can't let myself believe that nothing matters. You matter. We matter. We both need to believe that we'll get past this. That we'll be able to laugh again. That we'll want to" (Maberry 391). This realization gives these young protagonists the zeal for life they need to continue to struggle on and seek good things for themselves. The story concludes with this same hope when "Each of them stared into the storm with huge eyes that were filled with tears and hope" (Maberry 409).

Other Great ZYAL that Represents the Same Hope to Adolescents

This article used one novel, *Rot & Ruin* as an example of the power of ZYAL to be so much more than just interesting stories for a small group of readers to pursue. There are many other great examples of ZYAL that could have this same function and represent various diversities within adolescence as well.

Dread Nation by Justina Ireland (2018)

Dread Nation tells an alternate history of the American Civil War as the dead of the Battle of Gettysburg rise again and destroy America and any hope of a normal future. The story follows Jane McKeene, a Black teenager attending Mrs. Duncan's combat school where she will be trained to fight the dead and protect the homes of America's white elite as an attendant. This novel addresses the historical realities of residential schools, slavery and racism, as well as the discrimination and abuse of African and Native Americans.

Z by Michael Thomas Ford (2010)

Z is a middle grades or young-adolescent YAL text that provides an interesting fusion of ZYAL and video game culture. Josh and his friends are masters of their open-world zombie video game based on the historical zombie apocalypse that occurred before they were born. After receiving an invitation to play the game in an underground league by Charlie, a secretly female video game master, Josh realizes that the game is becoming too real as blood begins to flow. This story provides an interesting take on video game culture and the reality of gaming as a sport that so many adolescents subscribe to today.

Other Great Books to Check Out

1. *The Forest of Hands and Teeth* by Carrie Ryan (2009)
2. *Feed* by Mira Grant (2010)
3. *Quarantine: The Loners* by Lex Thomas (2012)

CONCLUSION

The potential of using ZYAL in classrooms for both independent and whole class reads has yet to be explored at length. Often, zombie and other monster fiction are brought up with their connection to often taught canonical works like Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. The reality is that monster fiction has fascinated audiences for centuries, and world-wide catastrophe needs to be addressed in the classroom through distantly safe stories. The potential to deal with real-world issues, an obvious use of

monsters for the purpose of satire, and an examination of adolescent stereotypes all provide rigorous use in the English classroom.

Additionally, the reading of ZYAL and the study of monsters in general provide a great potential for both creative and academic writing in the classroom. First, students can use monster literature like ZYAL as mentor texts to create their own stories where they practice craft such as character creation, plot outlining, revision, and peer review. All these skills explored through the writing of interest-based stories (Strickland 2022) can be transferred to academic writing and the meeting of standards.

Lastly, students can grapple with local and school level issues related to the stereotyping of adolescence, have a platform and agency to create change in their community, and use reading and writing as avenues for an exploration of their own voices. By examining the hope and strength of adolescent protagonists in ZYAL, students can relate and further the discourses of such strength in their English classroom and with authentic audiences as well.

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