

The Top 10 Reasons Why I Can't Stop Reading Children's & Young Adult Literature by Emily Meixner

For the past ten years, I have been teaching college courses on children's and young adult literature. Even after a decade, it's still a thrill, and every semester I look forward to new books and new students. Occasionally, usually around mid-semester, a student will ask why I love *these* texts so much:

"Don't you want to read something else?" he or she will say. I'll pretend to think for a moment. "What's not to love?" I'll then respond, adding, "Why would anyone want to read anything else?"

I'll say the same thing to curious colleagues and friends and to anyone else who might inquire.

But lately (can I blame this on the Polar Vortex, too?), I've felt the need to be more precise, more honest about my affection for – no, my obsession with – children's and young adult literature. So, to all of my students, colleagues, friends, and Nerdy Book Club kin, here goes. Here are the top ten reasons why I love children's and young adult literature and why I can't stop reading it.

10: Because it cultivates curiosity. Last November, while trolling the exhibit hall at NCTE (the annual convention of the National Council of Teachers of English), I was handed a copy of Madeline Miller's *The Song of Achilles*. I wasn't particularly taken with the golden helmet on the cover and I was a little dubious about all of the Greek names (Peleus? Patroclus? Chiron? Thetis?), but the "Winner of the Orange Prize" sticker was promising, so I gave it a go. It was **fascinating**. I had no idea I was interested in the Trojan War, but apparently I am because I sought out additional information on events and characters every time I stopped reading. I even found myself sitting on the floor at the local Barnes & Noble, digging into several children's books on Greek Mythology with my son because he asked me what I was reading and became curious, too. Right now we're both making our way through every single "Who was...?" series book. As a result, we're listening to Elvis on the drive to school, lingering over a Monet at the local art museum, and excitedly recognizing almost all of the historical figures in both *The Lego Movie* and *Mr. Peabody and Sherman*. Reading children's and young adult literature reminds me that learning is fun, and makes me more curious about everything: sitting-on-the-floor surrounded by books curious.

9: Because it compels me to seek out new authors – literally. Another NCTE story: The year before I was handed *The Song of Achilles*, I was given a copy of Benjamin Alire Saenz's *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* by another NCTE bookseller. "He'll be speaking later this afternoon, if you're interested," I was told. I was interested. That afternoon, as I listened to Saenz discuss his writing – how it saved his life and how he writes for young men because he "wants them to understand that we see them," I was reminded how important it is to read beyond authors whose work I already love. Had I not attended that session, I would have missed Saenz's powerful message, and the heads up that Bill Konigsberg (another author I hadn't met) would be previewing his newest book, *Openly Straight*, the following day. I now teach both books in two different classes.

8: Because I usually learn something unexpected and valuable. Sometimes what I learn is poignant, yet whimsical, and appeals to my inner-child: that flamingos can be selfless and make excellent friends (Peter Brown's *You WILL Be My Friend*), for example, or that befriending a poetry-writing squirrel would be **awesome** (Kate DiCamillo's *Flora & Ulysses: The Illuminated Adventures*). Other times, such as when I finish reading Laurie Halse Anderson's *The Impossible Knife of Memory*, what I learn about veterans and children of veterans who both struggle with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, I carry with me in my heart and it reconfigures my understanding of the world in powerful ways. Books such as

Brown's and DiCamillo's make my heart sing. Anderson's work makes me wiser and more empathetic.

7:Because it makes for excellent mentor texts. So far this semester in the writing methods course I teach, I have used work by Walter Dean Myers, William Steig, E.L. Konigsberg, Jennifer Lou, and Jenny Han to examine characterization, voice, punctuation, pacing, and diction. Without Steig's *Amos & Boris*, my students wouldn't be playing constantly with the word phosphorescent. Without Konigsberg's *The View From Saturday*, they wouldn't be considering how listing and semicolons can characterize. Just last week, the copy of Naomi Shihab Nye's *There Is No Long Distance Now: Very Short Stories* I ordered arrived and I can't wait to share several stories from the collection with my class when we get to our week on fiction. My current college-aged writers connect immediately with these texts as do the high school and middle school students with whom I've worked, and, perhaps bolstered by the accessibility of the writing, they become interested in what authors of children's and young adult literature are doing. One short concrete poem from Karen Hesse's *Out of the Dust*, can keep us not only talking about author's craft (diction, voice, imagery, use of dialogue, placement, length, sound, pacing), but also **writing** for a remarkably long time.

6:Because I am constantly blown away by the writing I encounter. This may seem obvious, given the previous paragraph, but it bears repeating. Some of the most risky, innovative, affecting writing available to readers of all ages can be found in children's and young adult literature. When I finished Rebecca Stead's *When You Reach Me*, I was astonished by the sophistication of the storytelling and the depth of her characterization of Miranda, the 6th grade protagonist. I feel the same astonished appreciation every time I read Sherman Alexie's *Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Indian* and whenever I open up any of Jacqueline Woodson's books. These authors, like most children's and young adult authors, refuse to condescend to their readers; they understand that children and teens experience the world in complex ways – they feel passionately, they question constantly, they understand inequity, and they are, thankfully, astonishingly and creatively resilient. The proof is in the writing. (Still don't believe me, check out Eric Gansworth's *If I Ever Get Out of Here*.)

5:Because it connects me to other readers. Passionate readers of children's and young adult literature talk about what they're reading all the time. They can't help it. I can't help it. As a result, I've found myself deep in conversation in bookstores, of course, and at conventions like NCTE and ALAN (the Assembly for Literature on Adolescents), where such people are everywhere and are drawn to each other like powerful magnets. But I also regularly have unexpected and similar conversations in line at the grocery store, the salon, in Starbucks, food courts, and parking lots, and, now, on Facebook, Goodreads, and Twitter. Just last week I had a brief, but delightful discussion of Rainbow Rowell's *Eleanor and Park* and *Fangirl* with a colleague's Facebook friends, none of whom I know personally. We all agreed that both books are excellent. And as I type this, I'm waiting for another friend to post to her Goodreads account that she's finished Katie Cotugno's *How to Love* and is ready to exchange notes. Readers of children's and young adult literature are all about community.

4:Because it forces me to ask myself hard teacher questions. Like: what should I be doing in my courses to make sure the future teachers with whom I work are able to put the right picture and young adult books into the hands of kids who need them? Particularly when it comes to LGBTQ-themed texts, which many of my students have never encountered (!), what can I be doing to make them more aware of the amazing children's and young adult literature available to them? Is it enough to read aloud Marcus Ewert's *10,000 Dresses* or Linda de Hann & Stern Nijlan's *King & King*? Should I be assigning Emily Danforth's *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*, James Howe's *The Misfits*, and/or Lauren Myracle's *Shine*? Or maybe I could do one more book pass and include Ken Setterington's *Branded by the Pink Triangle*, Malinda Lo's *Ash*, AND David Levithan's *Two Boys Kissing*. Perhaps I should just offer a course entirely on LGBTQ Young Adult literature. (Which I did. I wish I could offer it every

semester.)

3: Because it brings me closer to the students I teach. Every semester I marvel at the power of this literature to build bridges between me and my students – students like the young man who disregarded everything I said except for my suggestion that he read *Ender's Game*. That book saved our semester. Or, the young woman who stopped by my office last week and, with a conspiratorial gleam in her eye, asked to borrow my copy of Marissa Meyer's *Cinder*. I can't wait to talk with her about it. She's so smart, but so shy in class. Or, the young man who wasn't even my student, but approached me during a summer advising session to tell me that "we shared a favorite book": David Levithan's *Boy Meets Boy*. The conversations I have with my students about the books we read are meaningful and on-going. We learn about each other through this literature, and as a teacher (as well as a teacher of teachers), this reciprocal knowledge is invaluable; it allows me and my students to communicate with each other across our many (sometimes seemingly insurmountable) differences. And, the good feelings we share, even as we argue about whether or not the ending of Robert Cormier's *The Chocolate War* was inevitable, last.

2: Because it wears its heart on its sleeve. Whether a story about an African boy's feelings of displacement (Katherine Applegate's *Home of the Brave*) or three friends trying to save their friendship by burying a spooky bone china doll (Holly Black's *Doll Bones*), there's an **earnestness** to children's and young adult literature that is fundamentally unique and, for me at least, essential. Powerful emotional experiences, often powerful firsts (friendships, relationships, loss) are the gravitational center around which these stories are told and, because of this, they resonate. They don't get old, and they remind me, as an adult reader, how momentous first experiences can be – how triumphant and how devastating. These are the moments that shape us into the people we become. These are moments we continue to learn from throughout our lives.

1: Because children's and young adult literature is for everyone. I know there may be readers out there who will disagree with me about this, but, well...I'll just say it: I think they're wrong. These stories, real or fictional, are **our stories**, and as such they are for all of us. I return to children's and young adult literature because I am constantly surprised and challenged by it. The hilariously clever *Goldilocks and The Three Dinosaurs* by Mo Willems, I want to read to anyone who will listen. The terrifying first chapter of Neil Gaiman's *The Graveyard Book*, I want to share with anyone brave enough to face it. The magic and longing of David Almond's *Skellig*, I want to savor and contemplate as I consider what grief and hope feel like to a child. And the fantastic world of Laini Taylor's *Daughter of Smoke and Bone*, I want to visit (well, not really – there's a war going on, but if it ends...).

Children's and young adult literature moves me.

And that's why I can't stop reading it. *Emily Meixner is an Associate Professor of English at The College of New Jersey in Ewing, NJ, where she coordinates the secondary English education program and teaches secondary reading/writing methods and young adult literature courses. Currently, the stack of unread children's and young adult books on her nightstand is almost as tall as she is. You can follow her and hear more about what's she's reading and teaching on Twitter @EsMteach.*