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Dealing With Racism, Prejudice through YA Fantasy Novels

Books are magic. They are the pathways that take us into new worlds, realities and dimensions. They not only give us the opportunity to explore, but to find as well. In a book, the characters, setting, and events of a story often move readers. Fantasy novels are no exception to this, but the do suffer a unique set of struggles. Due to many fantasy novels being set in unrealistic worlds many adults often choose to accept it as a real form of literature. In *Literature For Today’s Young Adults* Ursula K. Le Guin is quoted as saying “For fantasy is true, of course. It isn't factual, but it is true. Children know that. Adults know it too, and that is precisely why many of them are afraid of fantasy. They know that its truth challenges, even threatens, all that is false, phony, unnecessary, and trivial in the life they have let themselves be forced into living.” (cite) The fantasy genre isn’t only for entertainment, but it is also for exploring barriers beyond the normal. When dealing with especially painful situations or scenarios in life realistic fiction might hit too close to home for readers. Through Fantasy fiction many readers can experience the distance, but connection with real world issues. Through the books I’ve chosen in my unit of study, there are many true and real world issues that can be analyzed. One of the main problems that Young Adults face today is the issue of racism and prejudice. This is also one of the hardest things to face because many children grow up internalizing what their parents teach them is right or wrong, or how to view people of other races. The beautiful thing about fantasy is how it can address this problem and distance itself from the extremely heated issues that might take away from the topic. Each of the characters in these books develop due to being different. This makes them stand out in some way where they societies they lie in choose to mark and label them. It’s up to them to decide what they do with the labels and choices that they are presented with. And even though it is set in a fantasy world, their choice still have real effects on the people around them, that play out in real scenarios. When dealing with race and prejudice in Fantasy stories such as these bring out the best and the worst in people and show Young Adult readers the true consequences of how much Racism can hurt not just a singular person, but the country and the world as well.

Jordan, Robert. *The Great Hunt*. T. Doherty Associates, 1990.

*The Great Hunt* is the second book in Robert Jordan’s *The Wheel of Time* series. It continues to follow the three boys, Rand, Perrin, and Matt as they try to embrace their destiny’s and their roles the wheel is spinning for them. It also follows the lives of Egweyne and Nyneve as they become entangled in the ways of the mysterious Aes Sedai. This book is pretty important in the series and to Young adults because it doesn’t only just show each characters struggle, but also highlights the effects of prejudice against things these characters can’t control, such as being able to use magic. Young Adults often feel like their lives are not within their control to influence, and in this novel there are very relatable circumstances to which Young Adults can associate and identify with.

Lewis, C. S., and Pauline Baynes. *The Horse and His Boy*. HarperCollins Childrens Books, 2014.

In this novel by C.S. Lewis, Shasta is a young boy that is set on a journey when he meets Bree, a talking horse. The two are eager to escape the bondage that they were sold into. Bree is from Narnia and dreams of returning home and over the course of the novel their destination is fixed on Narnia and freedom. This book is not simply about a horse and his boy, but goes so much deeper into the political issues of slavery, sexism, and political corruptness. The country Shasta and Bree are from, Calormen, is full of corrupt doings. When the two worlds collide and the rulers of Narnia are seen visiting, there is a clear contrast between the morals of the two countries. This book points out clear issues in today’s world through a fantasy setting. Corrupt men, and evil rulers often are combated against, and this novel shows the resilience of what a young person can do in the face of so much persecution and racism.

Nielsen, Jennifer A. *The False Prince.* Scholastic Inc., 2012.

In the *The False Prince* by Jennifer Nielson, the plot follows a young man named sage along with three other boys who have been chosen for a secret task based on their looks and relative age. Sage isn’t tough or compliant like the other boys, but he does have a brain that is out matched by any of his peers. Through this story Sage struggles between his true identity and the one that will keep him alive for the rest of his life. In the false prince there are subtle hints towards the discrimination against the country that Sage is actually from. The other boys look down on him for this as well as for his lack of manors and propriety. Throughout the novel Sage is constantly trying to impress as well as uncover the plot against the kingdom he was not born, but raised in.

Paolini, Christopher*. Eragon.* New York :Alfred A. Knopf : Distributed by Random House, 2003. Print.

In this story there is a young Man named Eragon who has his life turned upside down by finding one dragon egg deep within the mountains of the spine of the word. Once the dragon hatches for him he finds himself being hunted by the governments dark forces and agents. After they burn his house and kill off most of his family, Eragon, must run and train with an old storyteller named Brom, who teaches him what it truly means to be chosen by a dragon in these dark time. This story focuses mainly on Eragon, a young boy who is looked down upon in life due to his station, race and profession. While he is supposed to be the savior and beacon of hope for a rebellion he is looked upon with rebuke by the elves and other races of the world that deem him as ordinary. Eragon must continually try to prove himself worth as so many Young Adults feel, and strive to show just how worthy he is of his dragon’s choice.

Riordan, Rick. *The mark of Athena*. Disney Hyperion Books, 2014.

In Rick Rordan’s *The Mark of Athena* years of prejudice between the Roman and the Greek societies come to a head through their demigod descendants. The course of the novel is dependent upon if these two opposing sides can overcome their differences to stop the earth mother Gia in her quest to destroy the gods. In this book Riordan relates to his Young Adult audience and taps into many problems with Identity and sexuality. But he also taps into the ancient conflict between Greeks and Romans which causes so much tension between the main characters and their camps. In this series it isn’t quite clear which is the bigger threat, Gia or the years of bloodthirsty prejudice between the demigod camps.

Rowell, Rainbow. *Carry On*. St. Martin's Press, 2015.

This novel is about a young man named Simon snow who is destined to stop the insidious Humdrum from destroying the world of Mages, or so he has been told. With the help of his best friend Penny and Mortal enemy Baz, Simon must uncover the truth about who he is and the mystery that is his identity. Through Simon’s quest to beat the Humdrum he also struggles with his own identity and how he fits into this magic society that doesn’t seem to want to accept him. Though this story is straightforward and an easy read, the world of Simon Snow is far from lacking. Rainbow Rowell uses this book as a platform to talk about human rights through magical and fictional creatures. In this book Rowell creates two seemingly black and white sides on the topic of Racism, but over the course of the story blurs them into the grey area that most of the main characters seem to live in. Through valuable characters and Storytelling Rowell provides the opportunity for Young Adult readers to see that not everything is black and white when it comes to deciding who is and who isn’t deserving of basic rights.

Rowling, J. K. *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*. Bloomsbury, 2014.

In this 4th book of the Harry Potter series by J.K. Rowling, Harry is in the midst of change, but luckily for him the distraction of the Tri-Wizard tournament is just around the corner. But as soon as Harry’s name is drawn he is faced with the challenges of not only competing against the other schools for the trophy, but his own school and all the rumors against him. In this novel Harry’s struggle is significant, but the struggles of the minor characters stand out just as much. Dobby’s role in this novel plays a significant role in how Rowling shows the oppression of minorities. Dobby’s role throughout the novel and the appearance of house elves brings to light the effects of what happens when you take away basic human rights.

Stevenson, Noelle. *Nimona*. HarperTeen, 2015.

In the Graphic Novel *Nimona* by Noelle Stevenson, the plot focuses around the evil villain Ballistar Blackheart and his newly hired shape shifter side-kick Nimona. Though Nimona doesn’t seem to have a respect for humanity at the beginning of the book, her boss follows a strict set of rules and moral codes. Blackheart’s goal is to take down the Agency, the official government of the kingdom. What started out as a personal vendetta against the Agency soon turns into exploiting its harmful and dangerous policies. This graphic novel says very little about race and prejudice, but what little is said speaks volumes. Nimona’s struggle to see humanity comes full circle when she time and time again risks her own life to save Blackheart, a broken and beaten outcast that most everyone agrees to be the evil villain of society. This novel continually turns stereotypes on their heads and is a great read for Young adults to see how everything in the world is not always what it appears to be.

Stiefvater, Maggie. *The Raven Boys*. Scholastic Inc., 2013.

This novel was one I didn’t read, but was recommended to. According to BookRags, It’s plot revolves a girl named Blue who is the daughter of a clairvoyant. “She is the only one in her family that is not a clairvoyant. While Blue is not clairvoyant, she does possess so much energy that her energy magnifies the psychic abilities of her mother, Maura Sargent, her mother's best friends” (BookRags) Blue teams up with the Raven boys in order to find the ancient Welsh King Glendower before Barrington Whelk who is a desperate murderer looking to restore his social status. The main reason why I think this book relates so well the topic is because of the theme of society and class. The boys in this group are all close, but one is attending the fancy school on scholarship. This creates problems for him, but also creates opportunities

Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Hobbit*. I Can See Books, 2003.

In this Novel by J.R.R. Tolkien, Bilbo Baggins sets off with a company of dwarves to retake their home. Through perilous adventures Bilbo encounters many beautiful and intriguing things. He also meets new races and people that continue to shape his view on the world and himself as their company ventures to slay the evil dragon Smaug. In this book Tokien doesn’t seem to offer the different races any great variability, and Bilbo often sees the races in this novel as black and white. Throughout the novel the different races such as elves and dwarves are identified by characteristics that aren’t ever really broken. But because of this pattern important questions can be asked such as weather of not these races are too proud or stubborn? What conflicts arise between the races that refuse to change or acknowledge each other? These questions are important for Young Adults to consider while they are continually exploring and developing their opinions on the world.

Works Cited

“The Raven Boys Summary & Study Guide.” *BookRags*, BookRags Inc., www.bookrags.com/studyguide-the-raven-boys/#gsc.tab=0.