

WHY ARE REALISTIC YOUNG ADULT NOVELS SO BLEAK?: AN ANALYSIS OF BLEAK REALISM IN A STEP FROM HEAVEN

by Lisa Habegger



Contemporary realistic young adult novels are, now more than ever, pushing and expanding the boundaries of young adult literature. According to *Radical Reads: 101 YA Novels on the Edge*, by Joni Richards Bodart, “radical young adult fiction deals with incest, teenage pregnancy, substance abuse, sexual and physical abuse, mental and physical illness, dysfunctional families, homosexuality, gangs, homelessness, manipulation, prejudice, suicide, peer pressure, violence, and murder” (xi). These contemporary realistic novels have been called dark, harsh, gritty and difficult to read. Many feel that they have gone beyond the range of reality that is appropriate for young adult readers. Yet many of these books have been highly regarded by critics and have won awards in the field of young adult literature. The authors of these young adult books feel that they are providing a valuable reading experience for their readers. Many young adults have applauded this genre of books as an improvement to the field. The debates and controversies surrounding this topic offer an interesting venue for surveying the field of young adult literature at large.

With this in mind, this paper will offer a look at the genre of “bleak” realism in young adult literature. After an introduction to the history of the YA novel, characteristics that are uniquely defined in “bleak” books, such as, characterization, setting, language, structure and theme, will be thoroughly examined by analyzing one typical example of a “bleak” novel, *A Step from Heaven*. Several issues that have been at the center of controversy regarding this genre, such as possible lack of morality, a sense of hope, happy endings and the concept of reality, will be addressed. In order to better understand the popularity of these books, it will be important to look at young adult reading preferences and impacting issues, such as the influence of contemporary culture and media. A conclusion can be made that “bleak” novels will continue to offer an avenue for exploring unsettling themes and controversial issues in unconventional ways.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF THE YA NOVEL

In order to gain a better understanding of the current status of realistic young adult literature, it is important to examine its origins and development. Literature written for young adults developed in the United States in the years following World War II. During this time, the change in the economy offered many teens an increase in economic resources and social autonomy. This set the stage for the growth of a young adult market in the book publishing industry (Trites 9).

The evolution of young adult novels can be based on the historical concept of the *Bildungsroman* (Trites 10). *Bildungsroman*, a term of German origin, defines a genre of novels in which an adolescent character matures to adulthood. *Entwicklungsroman*, a related term, refers to a broader category of novels involving an adolescent character that develops and grows. The *Bildungsroman* is, by nature, a romantic genre with its optimistic ending of adulthood for the main character (Trites 11). These coming of age novels form the foundation of young adult literature as we recognize it today.

Many historians and critics in the field, including Michael Cart and Margaret Edwards, believe that the field of writing for teenagers was established with the publication of Maureen Daly’s book, *Seventeenth Summer*, in 1942 (Campbell). This book heralded the beginning of romance literature for teenage girls with its theme of first love as a rite-of-passage experience. Several other authors who followed this path included Betty Cavanna, Rosamund DuJardin, and Anne Emery (Cart, *Trends* 25). During the 1950’s there was a variety of more boy-oriented books that were published including themes such as car stories, sports stories, career novels, science fiction and adventure stories (Cart, *Trends* 25). The “squeaky-clean” stories of the 1950’s dealt mostly with a narrow range of adolescent feelings, values and experiences (Carter 9). One major work that was also published during this time period was J.D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye*, published in

1951. With loss of innocence as its theme, its publication has been cited as one of the turning points in young adult literature. Still, it was the liberating changes and social unrest of the 1960's that would bring about major developments in the field of young adult literature.

The 1960's brought about the rise of what has been called "new realism." Writers turned to more serious coming-of-age stories, liberating young adult literature. These books were classified as "new realism," "as opposed to the romanticized stories that had been considered appropriate for children" (Donelson and Nilsen 113). According to Michael Cart, the 1960's would be "the decade when literature for adolescents could be said to come into its own" (*Romance* 43). The novel that marked this change, written in 1967 by S. E. Hinton, was *The Outsiders*. Its great success could be attributed to its introduction of new "real" characters and the groundbreaking introduction of violence as a theme in the everyday lives of young adults (Cart, *Romance* 47). Two other books of great importance during this time period include Robert Lipsyte's *The Contender*, published in 1967, and Paul Zindel's first young adult novel, *The Pigman*, published in 1968. Authors writing during this time period continued to expand the range of subject matter addressed in young adult books, until a particularly strong stylistic emphasis began to develop in the 1970's.

As the range of subject matter grew to include just about every possible personal, social and political young adult problem, the novels began to take on a more didactic emphasis (Carter 9). Michael Cart stated, "the subject matter too often became the tail that wagged the dog of the novel – the result being the appearance and swift ascendancy of what has come to be called the 'problem novel'" (*Romance* 64). The "problem novel" has been recognized as a sub-genre of young adult realism (Brown 349). Shelia Egoff has described novels in this sub-genre as being "very strongly subject-oriented with the interest primarily residing in the topic rather than in the telling. The topics – all adult-oriented – sound like chapter titles from a textbook on social pathology: divorce, drugs, disappearing parents, desertion, and death" (quoted in Ross 175). Each "problem novel" centers on one particular problem and often offers the reader a model or method for coping, and even possibly a list of groups to contact for help (Aronson, *Coming of Age*). Marc Aronson made an interesting comparison when he stated, "They were very much like the booming adult industry of self-help and coping books, but generally in the form of a first-person novel" (*Coming of Age*). Even though "problem novels" have been widely criticized, they can be credited with at least one important attribute that has laid the foundation for other forms of realistic young adult novels. "Problem novels" have

given young adult readers the voice to say, "Hey, I am not alone, other people have felt what I feel", which is "the heart of YA fiction" (Aronson, *Exploding the Myths* 8).

In the 1980's, the focus for young adult novels spread into broader dimensions and more in depth analysis of characters, plots and themes. This focus continued in the 1990's, with novels that featured young adult characters that are portrayed as escaping the shadowy world of stereotypes, being portrayed with some dimension, having their own problems, sometimes succeeding, sometimes not" (Carter 9).

The most recent trend in young adult literature is the focus on "bleak" novels. These books tend to focus on topics that can be unsettling and uncomfortable, such as rape, murder, sexual and physical abuse. Some of today's top young adult authors are writing these "sophisticated, edgy books about issues that reflect today's more complex society and culture" (Carter 9).

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE "BLEAK" YA NOVEL

A look at some of the characteristics of these "bleak" novels might help to explain why these books have been perceived as being "bleak" and why they have been at the center of controversy. Some of these characteristics are recognized as unique approaches to typical literary elements, such as, characterization, setting, language, structure and theme. In order to have a better understanding of how these various characteristics are utilized in a "bleak" book, it might be helpful to examine one book from this genre as an example. A *Step from Heaven*, written by An Na and published in 2001, is a good example of a "bleak" book due to its gritty themes of emotional and physical abuse, alcoholism and alienation. The author's approach to characterization, setting, language and structure also establish it as belonging to this "bleak" genre.

In 1985, Catherine Sheldrick Ross examined the "formula" of young adult realism, which she described in terms of "culture-specific situations, figures, and settings" (117). Much of what she wrote can be applied to describe today's "bleak" young adult novels, even though many of these books seek to break the mold in certain respects. She suggests that realistic young adult novels have a narrative point of view that is often in the first person, and these narrators are characters with whom readers can identify and find to be reliable. Pat Lowery Collins, in her June 2001 article presenting tips for writers of young adult literature, suggests that readers want:

characters to touch and surprise them, to point out possibilities, to explore what they want to understand or to confirm what they know to be true. Characters need to be well drawn and show the conflicting sides of their personalities.

They must be sympathetic while remaining complex and strong in a way that allows for human weakness (Collins).

The main character from the novel, *A Step from Heaven*, exhibits conflicting sides of her personality that are brought together by her strength while facing adversity. Young Ju was four-years-old when her family immigrated to the United States from Korea. The novel follows the difficulties that she and her family, face as she grows from a child to an adult in her new country. Young Ju's character is very well developed, even though the language in this book is very sparse. The reader shares in her anger, fear and frustration as she lives through the abuse that occurs within her family. We sympathize with her as she finally takes a stand against her abusive father and then is ignored by her mother as punishment for breaking up the family. The other primary characters, members of this troubled family, are developed to a lesser degree.

The typical settings for "bleak" books are usually realistic and contemporary. Donelson and Nilsen suggest these settings are often in lower-class environments that are harsh and difficult places to live (113). After moving to California, Young Ju's family lived in a small, clean, but threadbare house in a lower-income neighborhood. This sparse, confined space serves as a backdrop that amplifies the horrible nature of the abuse, which takes place throughout the book. Harsh and difficult places can help make the often tragic themes of these "bleak" novels seem more realistic. The characters are, in a very real sense, trapped within their environments, so it is difficult for them to ignore dealing with their life circumstances. This sense of entrapment offers authors a suitable setting for the pursuit of unsettling themes, which are the driving force behind "bleak" novels. Young Ju unfortunately felt trapped within both her harsh physical environment and within her restricted social environment as someone who is from a foreign culture.

Colloquial language is another characteristic that is typical in "bleak" books. In *A Step from Heaven*, the language is especially inventive as the book begins with Young Ju's narration as a young child learning a new language and progresses through the novel with the development of her mature voice. The utilization of colloquial language can serve to reinforce a sense of realism for the reader. Early in the book, An Na describes how Young Ju's father, Apa, introduces Young Ju to her teacher during her first day in an American school. "Apa bows just when the lady puts out her hand and he hits it with his forehead. She laughs. Apa shakes his head...He pushes me forward and says, Greet your teacher, Young Ju...The witch teacher says, 'Ho ha do, Yung'" (Na 30-31). In Young Ju's situation, the development of her language as someone from a different

culture offers the reader a first-hand way to better understand her feelings of alienation, one of the primary themes in the novel.

"Bleak" books often incorporate radical, or boundary-breaking, styles of format, perspective, layering, etc. Many utilize nonlinear organization, multiple perspectives, multiple layers of meaning, forbidden groups and unresolved endings. This novel's boundary-breaking structural emphasis is based on simplified, stylish language that is organized into short, lyrical chapters. An Na has the ability to effectively use sparse language in such a manner as to create visually and emotionally powerful, complete chapters. These short chapters function as structural building blocks that move the reader from one life experience to the next as they reveal Young Ju's life in a poetic manner. The beauty of the language and structure provide a striking contrast to the harsh, violent nature of the narrative.

One of the primary reasons that "bleak" books are considered to be so bleak is due to their themes or subject matter. These books are about teens that face serious problems, such as, violence, alcoholism, suicide and the "Big Ds: death, divorce, disease and drugs" (Hampton and Hunt 44). Themes such as these have been the cause of much debate. Julia Rosen, a tenth-grade student who wrote an article in defense of "bleak" books, stated, "The idea that reading disturbing books will make teenagers 'prematurely gray, shouldering burdens far beyond their years' is ridiculous" (Rosen 347). Kristen Downey Randle, in her essay published in Chris Crowe's *English Journal* column, had the following strong opposing viewpoint about these dark themes, "I heard and read about rape and abuse and cruelty and heartlessness, and the stuff I heard and read hit me in the face and the body like a beating" (126).

The theme of beating, of physical and mental abuse, and of conflict, also serves as one of the primary themes in *A Step from Heaven*. Young Ju, her brother and mother find ways to endure the abuse that they receive from Young Ju's father. Young Ju describes, "The rain of blows on my face, shoulders, and head forces my body to the ground...I pretend I am drowning, letting the sea take me under. I close my eyes and the world cannot touch me" (Na 139). In her mind, Young Ju often tries to escape her situation by creating a safe, alternative environment, an environment that is opposite of conflict. Young adult author Chris Lynch elaborates upon some other opposites that occur in *A Step from Heaven*, "from the foreign to familiar, from seaside idyll to cramped domestic nightmare, from innocence to unfortunate wisdom" (qtd. on Na book cover). This range of opposites, of conflicts, helps to draw the reader into the story of Young Ju's life.

ISSUES OF CONTROVERSY – MORALITY, HOPE, HAPPY ENDINGS AND REALITY

Perhaps the very heart of the controversies surrounding “bleak” novels relates to the characteristic that Donelson and Nilsen call change of “attitude” or “mode” (114). Early young adult realistic fiction was written in the comic and romantic mode with upbeat, happy endings. The development of the “problem novel” spurred a change in “mode” based on a different philosophy. This new philosophy embraced the idea that young adults are more likely “to be happy if they have realistic expectations and if they know both the bad and the good about the society in which they live” (Donelson and Nilsen 115). This philosophy moves young adult realistic literature into the postmodern era with this relationship, bad and good, between society and an individual (Trites 20).

The end result of this change opens the door for writers to expand into the realm of potential unhappy endings, lack of morality and loss of the sense of hope. Controversies have developed when critics have denigrated a “novel whose ‘realism’ is too stark; they may find a novel’s story line too grim, its issues too shocking, its ending too bleak. Surely, they argue, the world is not that hopeless” (Brown 350). At least two critics have stated their thoughts that writers depict their “own meaningless world” when they “...delight in depravity, snicker at morality, and throw bits of pornography into the story line that appeal to baser values” (Hampton and Hunt 44). These two writers continue on by saying “All of us need hope; people can’t live without it” (47). Roberta Seelinger Trites believes that romantic literature is the heart of adolescent literature “because so many of us — authors, critics, teachers, teenagers — need to believe in the possibility of adolescent growth — the hope of the future (15).

How important is it for books to end “happily ever after”? Or should it be asked, Who would like young adult books to end with a positive message? The young adult readers? Or more likely, the parents of these young adult readers? Regarding the first question, Gladys Hunt and Barbara Hampton have remarked, “Good stories have hope, but it may not look like the happy endings of fairy stories” (46). Margaret Edwards noted that many adults who are concerned about young adult literature have preconceived notions that may not be in the best interest of young adults. She stated that adults become outraged when their beliefs about what teenagers should or should not read are violated (52). She further stated that adults do not want adolescents to “see the seamy side of life” and would like to “prolong the age of innocence indefinitely” (53). If this could occur, it would “rob our young people of the opportunity to build strength of character...” and the opportunity to “read of life as it is” (53). Marc

Aronson pondered a similar question when he asked, “What message do they [‘realistic’ novels] have for our impressionable, at-risk, in-need-of-role-models, in-need-of-self-esteem teenagers?” (*Exploring the Myths* 83). After examining the issues of morality and realism, he offered the choice of “predigested morals and fake realities that readers will soon see through or books that take readers to discover new realities in themselves and derive their moral quality from their unpredictable depths” (*Exploring the Myths* 83). Most young adult readers will find this to be an easy choice.

There is another important issue deserving attention that is closely related to the concept of morality and the sense of hope (or lack of it) within the realm of young adult realistic fiction. This is the actual concept of “reality” or “realness.” A “bleak” book will lose its impact if the reader does not perceive it as being “real”. As noted before, Marc Aronson has already considered the issue of “fake realities.” He made the following comment regarding his ideas about “realism,” “The ‘realism’ of moral messages and happy endings is precisely what artists [authors] have told us is unreal, a saccharine coating meant to disguise these unsettling truths [of our subconscious realities and divided societies]” (*Exploring the Myths* 81). Hampton and Hunt believe that “A good story *should* represent what is real and true, but *real* means something a reader can build on....real stories don’t hide what is wrong, but focus on greater truths” (45). “Real” stories appear to be real only if they are recognized as real by the reader. A book may be evaluated as “unrealistic” if the situations and character’s behavior are outside the reader’s experience (Brown 347). Joanne Brown also offered her own interesting definition of “realism;” fiction of the “possible” (346).

The question has often been raised, shouldn’t young adult realistic novels feature characters that serve as models for proper behavior? “Bleak” books have been criticized for offering as a model society’s problems and bad behaviors. Some supporters are quick to suggest comparisons with other classic works that can also be viewed as “bleak” models. Marc Aronson pointed out *Romeo and Juliet*, with its teenage suicide pact and the ballet *Giselle*, another tale of a girl jilted by a jerky prince, who kills herself (or dies of a broken heart)” (*Exploring the Myths* 83). It could be noted that many believe these classics, as well as today’s “bleak” novels, will most likely not cause any negative effects. Margaret Edwards stated in her text, “Young people are not devastated by reading about unpleasantness” (53). Sophomore student Julia Rosen has written, “Books about disturbing subjects cannot single-handedly spoil our innocence” (347). Author Shelley Stoehr offered her personal opinion about this issue when she wrote “I didn’t drink vodka through a straw from a watermelon until I was about twenty-three, but I enjoyed

reading about it when I was fourteen...I didn't have time to get into too much trouble, because, after all, I still had another eight books I wanted to read that week" (Stoehr).

A Step from Heaven does embrace these issues of morality, a sense of hope and reality. Though it deals with a very grim topic, its realistic portrayal of the issues gives it a strong impact. One review notes, "Although her circumstances are grim and even bleak at times, hope and courage frame Young's days. You'll feel both the family's despair and hope and wonder if God, to whom they sometimes pray, has indeed answered their prayers" (Hampton and Hunt 153). This book has been widely recognized for its literary excellence and was given the Michael L. Printz Award in 2002.

YOUNG ADULT READING OF BLEAK NOVELS

Many of the reasons that young adults prefer to read "bleak" novels can be directly associated with the special characteristics of this particular style of realistic fiction. One of the most easily recognized characteristics describes the literary element of theme, which is of major importance for this genre. The sometimes radical and even extreme subject matter addressed within these books might be appealing to young adults for several reasons. Reading a book about a particular topic, such as teenage pregnancy or homosexuality, offers an avenue through which the reader can dabble or experiment to learn more about the topic without personally experiencing it in real life. By trying out the topic, the reader is able to learn more about it in an informal manner rather than through other nonfiction sources or through direct interactions with others. It is a safe, convenient, and private way to experiment. Some teens read as a "means of escaping the pressures of their daily lives" and because it "provides real 'food for thought' in developing their own unique perspective on the world" (Vaillancourt 36-37).

To gain a better understanding of what types of themes or genre books some groups of teens are reading, it might be helpful to consult several teen reading preference surveys. Constance A. Mellon reported the results of a three-year survey that was conducted with students, grades seven through twelve, from 1987 to 1989. She reported that girls were most interested in reading romance, adventure and more personal stories. The boys expressed the most interest in reading about cars, sports, violence, science fiction and war (226). A survey inquiring about the reading preferences of 55 eighth graders was conducted in the Midwest in 1993. Its results revealed that in first place 79% of the books read were in the Teen Issues category. In second place, 72% of the books read were in the Romance category (qtd. in Jones 102-103). One additional survey was conducted in 1993, gathering the opinions of 538 students from a suburban public

library in Medina County, Ohio. The results of this survey were broken down into two categories by grade levels, and by genre. The top winner in grades six through nine was the Realistic genre category. The top scorer in the tenth and eleventh grades was the Mystery genre category. Not surprisingly, 44% of the girls voted for the Realistic category, while boys voted highest for Mystery and Nonfiction (qtd. in Jones 104).

One last survey of interest was conducted online during Teen Read Week in October of 1999. Conducted by SmartGirl.com in conjunction with YALSA, over three thousand teens, from ages eleven to nineteen, were surveyed. The number one type of book that was chosen to read for fun was Mystery at 61%. It should be noted that there were no categories listed for Realistic or Teen Issues books (Chance). It can be concluded that, with the exception of the SmartGirl.com survey, the young adults who were surveyed were most interested in Realistic Teen Issues books.

There are, of course, young adults who do not like to read "bleak" books. One such person, a sixteen-year-old girl whose comments were printed in an article written by her mother, stated, " 'Those bleak books,' my sixteen-year-old daughter sneers. 'Just a bunch of adults who think they know how we feel—like all we do is sit around indulging in angst. How lame'" (Crowe 127).

Characterization is an equally important aspect in every "bleak" book. Whether there is one or there are several main characters, the reader needs to become engaged with these characters and drawn into the story. Complex characters that explore multiple layers of their personalities and show a range of emotions will most likely grab the attention of teen readers. They will also be best suited to explore the complex subject matter of a "bleak" book. Teen readers should feel that they could put themselves in the main character's shoes and ask, "What would I do if this happened to me?" Participants in the SmartGirl.com survey voted upon which characters or types of people that they preferred to read about. They voted the most for characters most like themselves and sixth most for characters their age wrestling with tough issues (Chance). "Bleak books can offer "an uncompromising depiction of how human nature confronts the challenges and tragedies of life—and survives. Young adults read them not only for their truthfulness, but for their inspiration" (Macrae).

There are other reasons that could be noted to explain why young adults read "bleak" books. They are often written in a language and speech patterns that young adults can understand. They let "youth speak for themselves...giving voice to those who were previously unheard" (Bodart). Also in an effort to be heard, young adults might actually read one of these controversial books just because it is so controversial. Just the fact

that some adults might object to the book might inspire some young adult readers to pick up the book, in opposition. This controversy might also have the effect of exciting friends about the book, which might entice some readers to pick up the book. "Bleak" books might also serve as great starting points for inspiring conversations between teenagers and young adults (Stoehr 5). Difficult issues that are explored in books can be approached in a non-threatening manner.

One other important aspect as to why young adults like to read "bleak" novels is the fact that they are true to life, they are a reflection of young adult culture. Adolescents are caught in "inbetweenness," a liminal state in which they are changing from children to adults (Gauthier 75). In this state of limbo, they can become a threat to themselves and to the group (Gauthier 75). Indeed, as early as 1989, *Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the Twenty-first Century*, the groundbreaking report released by the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, warned that "half of all America's adolescents are at some risk for serious problems like substance abuse; early, unprotected sexual intercourse; dangerous accident-prone lifestyles; delinquent behavior, and dropping out of school" (Hersch 12). Adolescents are also at great risk for all other problems that face society at large. For example, "in 2000, Child Protective Services (CPS) responded to three million reports of child abuse, involving five million children and teens" (Pledge 10). It is not surprising that young adult realistic literature has become more cutting edge in the form of "bleak" books in response to culture and society.

In 1997, author Shelley Stoehr proposed the idea that issues for today's young adults are very much the same as issues that faced young adults in the past. The main concerns are still "sex, drugs, and rock and roll," and what has changed has been the media (3). In light of newer statistics and information that is now being published, this theory could be a cause for debate. At any rate, it opens the door for consideration of young adults and media. Marc Aronson stated:

Between the spate of school shootings that culminated in Littleton, the panic over how to raise girls (and then boys), and the success of adolescent-oriented movies and TV shows, teenagers have erupted into the national consciousness...young people are almost a different species, bred to flourish in a multimedia environment (*Exploding the Myths* 123).

Young adults do need to find a way to deal with all the media exposure. Susie, a fifteen-year-old, proposed "The media does not portray teens in the proper light. It is one extreme or the other. We are either viewed as drug-abusing, alcoholic, suicidal rebels or as hormone-driven airheads who don't know the difference between

reality and fiction" (qtd in Weill 1). Possibility this increase in media exposure has had an influence on the creation and publication of "bleak" books.

THE PROGRESSIVE GROWTH OF "BLEAK" YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

The first realistic books published in the 40's and 50's have been have been molded and evolved by many of the elements discussed above to become what has been recognized today as cutting edge "bleak" books. Writer Chris Crowe, while thinking about the bleak turn in young adult books, has offered another theory explaining this phenomenon. He states, "one explanation may be the desire of publishers and writers to emulate the classics, the Teflon-coated traditional works of literature that, with few exceptions, epitomize the 'dark is deep' philosophy" (125). All signs point to the continuation of this dark, controversial style of young adult literature. The power of these books to create controversy can also be emblematic of their power to create change and to have an impact on adolescent lives. Looking to the future Michael Cart, envisions a young adult literature that, "risks taking the gloves off to tackle dangerous subjects and to deal with them unflinchingly and honestly" (*Romance* 270). Marc Aronson expands this vision with his description of a young adult fiction that "uses the forms and challenges of life in the multichanneled, disjunctive, digital world as its base" (*Exploding the Myths* 82). He explains further, "For teenagers self, text, and voice have all gone multimedia wild...The best new YA novels are finding how to bring the explosion of media narratives within the borders of bound books, giving young readers a space to recognize their imperiled and empowered selves" (*Exploding the Myths* 124).

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