Recent Adolescent Novels Teachers Should Know

English teachers are busy people. During the school year, they are busy teaching, grading, organizing, and managing student conduct and clubs. More often than not, their days are too hectic and tiring to find the time to read, let alone keep up with the latest young adult novels. Often, they rely on tried and true favorites to introduce their young readers to young adult reads that capture the heart and imagination of their adolescent angst. Works by S.E. Hinton (The Outsiders, Rumblefish), Judy Blume (Are You There God? It’s Me, Margaret? Deenie, Blubber), Robert Cormier (The Chocolate War) and others equally familiar often permeate the collections of middle and secondary teachers eager to share with their students the very best in young adult literature.

Nevertheless, the world of young adult literature is ever-evolving. Classics young adult literature is replaced by new classics, each one complementing and augmenting the work that came before. Young adult authors become even more daring and provocative, pushing the envelope of what is and what is not acceptable in young adult novels. The limit, of course, is defined by teacher taste and community standards. Each teacher and student decides for themselves what is and what is not appropriate to read.

Thus, teachers need to know what is current in young adult literature. They need to know what is available for adolescents to read so 1) they can be better informed about the availability of good reads for young adults and 2) they can better direct their students to appropriate reads geared to age and interest. Hence, the annotations that follow provide a quick and handy synopsis of the latest young adult novels available in bookstores and on-line for classroom conversation and personal edification. Enjoy.

**The Ghost in Allie’s Pool** by Sari Bodi (Brown Barn Books, 2007)

Looking for a good book for reluctant middle school readers? Try *The Ghost in Allie’s Pool*. Eighth grader Allie Toth has no interest in history. Things change, though, when Allie meets a ghost - yes, a ghost - one Dorothy Mae Bradford, a true-life person who in 1620, along with her husband, William, the future governor of Plymouth colony, sailed on the Mayflower. Turns out this ghostly historical figure – the very one her eighth grade teacher wants her to research – is just the person to help her cope with the daily ups and downs of a confused and lonely eighth grader.

**The Middle of Somewhere** by J. B. Cheaney (Alfred A. Knopf, 2007)

Twelve-year-old Ronnie ‘Veronica’ Sparks is getting more than she bargained for. Her mother has had knee-surgery and now, she must become her seven-year-old brother’s keeper. The task sounds daunting in and unto itself until you throw into the mix a cantankerous grandfather (her mother’s father) who reluctantly takes his two grandchildren on a road trip, searching, for of all things, wind-power-generating sites in the middle of Kansas. Acting as the buffer between an eccentric grandfather and a rambunctious little brother, Veronica tries to keep a lid on everything and still have a good time. Appropriate for reluctant middle school readers.

**Open Court** by Carol Clippinger (Knopf Book for Young Readers, 2007)
Regular teenager Holloway Braxton is no regular teenager. This thirteen-year-old is nationally ranked on the junior tennis court circuit and is itching to move her beyond local Colorado competition. Eager for their child to become a ‘star,’ Holloway’s parents urge her to attend a tennis academy in Florida where they regularly churn out professional players, yet she is not so sure she is ready for entire life to tennis – especially after her training partner has a nervous breakdown at a tennis tournament. The question – can she be both a ‘kid’ and a ‘star?’ Holloway thinks not. Appropriate for middle and high school students.

Leaving Paradise by Simone Elkeles (Flux, 2007)

Leaving Paradise is the sad story of seventeen-year-old boy, Caleb, who has just left nine months in prison for a drunken driving accident that left his neighbor, high school senior Maggie, psychologically and physically damaged. Irresponsibly, Caleb had left a party drunk and drove into Maggie, leaving this aspiring young tennis pro leg’s shattered. Even after months of intense therapy, Maggie still walks with limp, feeling that all her dreams have vanished. With no social life and her scholarship to study abroad cancelled, Maggie must now face Caleb, the cause of her suffering, and together, begin to reconcile their painful differences and sorrow. Told in alternating chapters from both Caleb and Maggie’s point of view, this is good read for high school students.

Girl Overboard (S.A.S.S.) by Aimee Ferris (Puffin, 2007)

Have students interested in science, especially marine life? You might want to direct them to Girl Overboard, a book in the popular teen series Students Across the Seven Seas (S.A.S.S.). Propelling it above an ordinary teen romance, this good read excels in its vivid descriptions of life beneath the sea. Studying aboard a luxury yacht in the Caribbean, seventeen-year-old Marina revels in the chance to get up close and personal with the sea creatures that she has only read about or seen on video. Now, she luxuriates in getting hands-on marine biology experience swimming alongside dolphins in the Bahamas, sharks in the bay islands, and sea turtles in the Dominican Republic. This fun summer adventure, a mixture of romance and real science, is good for middle and high school students eager to know more about life on the high seas.

Right Behind You by Gail Giles (Little, Brown, 2007)

This is a haunting read. When Kip was nine-years-old, he murdered another boy by setting him on fire. As the story begins, Kip has just finished spending years in a juvenile ward and is returning to home to Alaska to live with his father. His father and stepmother have other plans. They decide to move to Indiana and then, Texas, so Kip can assume a new identity, Wade, and hopefully, a new life. And as a high school freshman, Wade (Kip) does. Soon, he becomes a popular student and athlete. Yet, he learns that he cannot escape his past and now, he must face his demons. This book is particularly good for high school students who like intense reads.

Red Spikes by Margo Lanagan (Knopf, 2007)

Do you have students who enjoy dark fantasy? They might enjoy this recent collection of ten short stories from award winning Australian fantasy writer Margo Lanagan. In her third collection, Lanagan has included a strong young adult perspective...
whereby teenage protagonists encounter human and non-human characters and challenges. Her stories are definitely dark in nature as they simultaneously, surprise, touch, and scare the reader senseless. Before assigning students to read these works, teachers are best to familiarize themselves with these unsettling tales.

**True Talents by David Lubar (Tor, 2007)**

Ever read a David Lubar book? His stories are action-packed supernatural adventures laced with snappy dialogue. Perfect for middle school reluctant readers, this fun read alternates between straight story telling interspersed with memos, illustrations, e-mails, and notes that enhance the plot of a fifteen-year-old boy who is kidnapped by a evil former military operative. The boy, Eddie “Trash” Thalmayer possesses the power of telekinesis – the ability to move objects by simply thinking about them – and his hidden talents are envied by both good and bad like. Told quickly and amusingly, this delightful read will pique the interest of young readers who like action-packed adventures.

**Harmless by Dana Reinhardt (Wendy Lamb Books/Random Books, 2007)**

Ever since the third grade, Anna and Emma have been best friends. Now, freshman in high school, these two partners in crime realize how their splendidly idyllic life can turn suddenly upside-down by the telling of a lie. Secretly, Anna and Emma spend the night with their new-found friend, Mariah, her boyfriend and his friends. When their parents question their whereabouts, they make-up a story and then, are quickly, caught in the truth – they were sleeping with guys. Ashamed of their behavior, they lie and tell their parents of a story of a foiled rape, thinking that will end the matter. Naturally, their problems only escalate as her parents contact the police and the community rallies to their support. This is perfect for adolescents who are just coming into their own and discovering the “whys and wherefores” of living in a very adult world.

**Sammy Keyes and The Wild Things by Wendelin Van Draanen (Knopf, 2007)**

Middles school students will love this eleventh book in a popular misadventures series about seventh-soon-to-be-eighth-grader Sammy Keyes, a suburban girl scout who ventures off to a summer camping trip. Seeking the serenity of home and hearth, Sammy takes off for scout camp thinking she will be walking by quiet lakes and petting fawning deer. To her dismay, she finds a world filled with jagged shrubs, scorching temperatures, and assorted creatures, great and small, including an endangered condor. Intrigued, she tries to rescue the condor, only to end up lost with three other girls, two boys, no cell phone, and six billion biting flies. Happy endings ensue – but not without much fuss and foil. Good read for younger students.

**A Field Guide to High School by Marissa Walsh (Delacorte, 2007)**

Lots of kids know what is like to grow up in the shadow of a popular (or not so popular) older brother and/or sister. This good read tackles this subject head-on as graduating eighth grader Andie is about to enter the high school where her older sister, Claire, has just graduated as valedictorian. With Clare gone, Andie can strike out on her own – but, not too far, from her sister’s smart and loving advice. Knowing she will be “clueless,” Claire has written for her sister a ‘how to guide’ for surviving high school. Rife with popular culture references – “Gilmore Girls,” “Veronica Mars,” – this fun read
shows kids how their once-in-a-lifetime high school experience is ripe for both biting satire and hard truths.

Kat Got Your Tongue by Lee Weatherly (David Fickling Books, 2007)
What a fascinating read! After a terrible car accident, thirteen-year-old Kathryn Tyler wakes up with no idea of who she is. Suffering from a terrible case of amnesia, Kat, as she is best known to family and friends, remembers nothing and most disappointingly, does not even recognize her mother. Not until does she find her diary does Kat begin to piece the puzzle of her life together. Told in two voices, - Kat, now and Kat, in her diary – this superbly crafted young adult novel will leave a lump in the throat of sensitive readers of all ages.

Gemini Summer by Iain Lawrence (Delacorte Press, 2006)
What happens when your teenage brother dies and you are only eight-years-old? Such is the question in this sensitively told story of a young Danny who in the summer of 1964 watches as his brother Beau falls accidentally into a steep hole that their father has dug in their backyard and perishes. When a stray dog enters the picture, Danny adopts him, thinking that Beau has been reincarnated. He calls the stray dog Rocket, and together, they set off for Cape Canaveral, Florida, where Danny hopes to realize Beau’s dream of becoming an astronaut. Although the ending is far-fetched, - Danny meets former astronaut Gus Grissom and rides in a T-38, - the story is told in loving and realistic terms.

Tripping Over the Lunch Lady edited by Nancy Mercado (Puffin, 2006)
Eager to have your middle school students read amusing and meaningful short stories? Try these ten found in this thoughtful anthology of fun reads about children’s lives in school. Told in first-person narratives, these delightful tales of school mishaps are told with the wit and wisdom of authors who are reliving painful mishaps and playful adventures in straightforward, simple to read narratives. Each short story ends with the author answering questions about their own personal school experiences – favorite subject, cafeteria meal, and school prank. Middle school students will delight in this entertaining roundup of popular young adult novelists (Avi, David Lubar, Angela Johnson) writing in short, easy to read form.

Under the Baseball Moon by John H. Ritter (Philomel, 2006)
Can you mix jazz and baseball? The question does not seem as far-fetched as seen through the eyes of aspiring musician, San Diego teen Andy Ramos whose mean trumpet playing meets its match with the return of a childhood friend, one lovely Glory Martinez, a talented softball pitcher with Olympian dreams. Together, romantic sparks fly until Glory is seen as an outside threat by Andy’s strange and off-beat musical mentors. They believe that their budding romance will hinder his professional musical success. The setting is Ocean Beach, California, whose cool laid back style provides stark contrast to the heavy commercialized world towards which Andy aspires. This is a smart and lyrical read for high school students who love both sports and music.

Thick by Colin Neenan (Brown Barn Books, 2006)
Reluctant high school readers will find this book a quick, easy to read story about the life of a hardened and tormented seventeen-year-old who is facing trial for murder. Short chapters (some only a paragraph in length) tell the tale of special education senior Nick who lives in fear of an alcoholic father, a school bully, and a friend with an abusive boyfriend. As the story quickly evolves, Nick soon finds himself face to face with his enemy – holding a gun. Who Nick murdered is not revealed until the end of the story, but the events leading up to this unfortunate ending are told simply, quickly, and engagingly.


Acclaimed adventure novelist Gary Paulsen has done it again – but this time with a twist. The adventure he is writing about is ‘puberty.’ The young adult author known for such highly acclaimed novels as Hatchet, Brian’s Winter, and My Life in Dog Years, has penned an amusing coming of age novel about twelve-year-old Duane Homer Leech, better known, unfortunately, as Doo Doo. His face is breaking out in pimples, his limbs have taken on a life of their own, and the sight of girls makes his mouth and mind go numb. Meanwhile, outside his window, he watches a baby chick come to life under the nurturing care of his mother bird. Is there a connection? You bet and Paulsen tells it well in his own whimsical and straightforward style. Good for middle school students with lots of life-affirming questions.

A Room on Lorelei Street by Mary E. Pearson (Holt, 2006)

Do you know a teenager who is making all the wrong decisions? Hanging out with the wrong crowd? Digesting the wrong things? This novel is for them. Seventeen-year-old Zoe feels neglected and abandoned by her deceased father, alcoholic mother and overbearing teachers, so in a desperate rage, she walks out on everyone and takes a room on her own on Lorelei Street. There, she seems to find momentary solace in a charming landlady and a steady job as a waitress. Soon, though, money becomes an issue and she resorts to self-destructive behavior – numerous sexual relationships, smoking and drinking incessantly, - until she has had enough and comes to her senses. Young adults who have troubles of their own will recognize this teenager bent on her own survival.

Twisted by Laurie Halse Anderson (Viking, 2007)

High school senior Tyler Miller was the class nerd until a graffiti prank propels him to the top of the social pecking order and to the attraction of super popular Bethany Milbury. Bethany’s interest is piqued by Tyler’s new found muscular physique, the result of his summer of physical labor as punishment for his misdeed, but in time, Bethany only spells trouble as his involvement with her leads to a wild party, a drunken melee, and implication in a resulting crime. The combined pressures of school, probation, and a head over heals with Bethany crush, (who just happens to be his father’s boss’s daughter) leads to withering complications and deep emotional anguish. Once again, the author of the popular teen novel Speak provides her readers with a tightly written novel that will linger long after you put the novel down.