



## Teaching Resources for the Apocalypse

—Richard Gooding

Cadden, Mike, Karen Coats, and Roberta Seelinger Trites, editors. *Teaching Young Adult Literature*. Modern Language Association, 2020. 358 pp. \$34.00 USD pb. ISBN 9781603294553.

A challenge facing faculty who teach post-secondary courses on young adult literature is that pedagogical resources can be hard to find, dispersed as they are through journals that engage more in educational than literary theory. This wide-ranging volume, published in MLA's Options for Teaching series, redresses that problem in thirty-three readable and timely essays that retain an allegiance to literary studies. The essays comprising *Teaching Young Adult Literature* detail the classroom experiences and pedagogical practices of instructors in English departments and education faculties throughout North America, with modest representation from the UK, Europe, and India. Written mostly by research faculty who teach undergraduate students, preservice, and practicing teachers, this collection is an invaluable resource for instructors whose classes have moved beyond general introductions to YA literature.

The essays are bracketed by an incisive introduction and an extensive list of resources. Taking a cue from publishers of books for youth, Mike Cadden, Karen Coats, and Roberta Seelinger Trites define YA literature as “texts written and produced for adolescents and marketed directly to teens” (3), thereby excluding crossover texts originally aimed at an adult readership and books marketed to middle-grade and younger readers. The editors’ definition work is followed by a brief history of YA literature, from its roots in Enlightenment educational theory and the Romantic-era bildungsroman through to its twentieth-century developments, with an emphasis on its trajectory in North America. There is also an all-too-brief survey of major attempts at theorizing YA literature that began in the late 1990s, a section that would have

benefited from being double or even triple its current length of four pages. The introduction ends, as most introductions do, with brief summaries of upcoming chapters. The volume is rounded out by twenty-five pages of resources, compiled by Mike Cadden, including bibliographies of scholarly work on the genres and themes covered by the collection, as well as lists of relevant organizations and journals, awards, and online resources.

The collection is divided into three parts. The first, “Theories, Themes, and Issues,” comprising nearly half the book, reflects current concerns in the field: representations of gender and sexuality, with particular attention to LGBTQ+ experiences; critical race theory and literatures of diversity; and radical and controversial texts, along with the challenges of censorship. Some chapters take a broad approach, emphasizing applications of literary theory or making the case for the inclusion of YA texts in the wider university curriculum. These include one of only two contributions emerging from a European academic context, Justyna Deszcz-Tryhubczak’s “The Pleasures and Impasses of Teaching Young Adult Literature to Polish Graduates in English Studies,” and S. Patrice Jones’s “The Case for Teaching Young Adult Literature Everywhere.” Other chapters, such as Carey Applegate’s “Say Their Names: Complicating the Single-Story Narrative of City Kids” and Ebony Elizabeth Thomas’s “Embracing Discomfort and Difference in the Teaching of Young Adult Literature: Notes toward an Unfinished Project,” describe specific projects of activist faculty striving to help preservice teachers embrace practices that will allow their classrooms to become places dedicated, in Thomas’s words, to “the work of equity and justice in our time” (65). Still other chapters provide overviews of innovative and, I imagine, very successful courses. One contribution likely to find wide application is Angel Daniel Matos’s discussion of using LGBTQ+ texts to interrogate the conservative agenda of traditional YA literature, a chapter that encourages instructors to move beyond glib readings of works that are ostensibly emancipatory, but in reality old-fashioned, and equally glib generalizations about YA fiction’s single-minded commitment to promoting straight, cis-gendered subject positions. In a similar vein, Lee A. Talley’s application of Susan Rubin Suleiman’s concept of the 1.5 generation to Elie Wiesel’s *Night* problematizes the genre of the bildungsroman while deftly demonstrating how careful attention to paratextual elements and nuances in translation can be marshalled

to sharpen students' understanding of "the ideological construction and changing history of childhood" (36).

While the first section addresses the cultural and pedagogical concerns that are uppermost in the minds of many teaching faculty, "Genres and Forms" extends attention to genres that are often overlooked, including non-fiction, film, historical fiction, and graphic narratives. Among the highlights of this section is Karen Coats's "Teaching the Young Adult Verse Narrative," notable for its practical advice on choosing verse novels and its recognition of the challenges of teaching poetry for instructors accustomed to assigning only prose. Farah Mendlesohn's "Teaching Young Adult Science Fiction" brings a fresh perspective to familiar territory by inviting instructors to consider Csicsery-Ronay's seven "beauties" of science fiction (187) as the organizing principle for a course and introducing readers to a range of seldom-taught texts, including tie-in novels and non-Western science fiction. Another highlight of this section—indeed, of the entire volume—is Mary Adler's "The Story behind the Story: A Cross-Textual, New Historicist Approach to Historical Fiction," a chapter that begins with a concise definition of New Historicism before proceeding to a detailed account of discussion-based activities that apply the theory to historical war fiction. This section also contains helpful approaches to elements of literary form that cross genres, including Cathryn M. Mercier's chapter on first-person narration and Don Latham and Melissa Gross's discussion of the ways peritext—author biographies and prefatory notes, citation practices, and suggested readings—can be used to strengthen students' critical thinking on the reliability of non-fiction.

The last section, "Assignments," is the also the shortest. The first two chapters—Melissa Sara Smith's argument for training students to apply reader-response theory to their own narratives of adolescence and Roxanne Harde's discussion of team-based learning—are more broadly about classroom practice than assignments. Subsequent chapters, however, detail alternatives to traditional term papers. Jan C. Susina has his students make mix tapes and playlists to explore the role of music in novels like Stephen Chbosky's *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, while Katherine Bell breaks her classes into seminar groups whose members take turns presenting papers linked to a "cultural artifact" chosen by the presenter (307). While this segment specifically engages assignments, the volume as a whole does not lack attention to

assessment tools: distributed throughout the first section are a number of recommendations for classroom activities and group projects. Nonetheless, if the volume had more chapters, this is where most readers would likely want them to be.

Like virtually any collection this size, *Teaching Young Adult Literature* has its unevennesses. Some essays in the first section emphasize interpretation of course texts to the point of leaving little room to discuss pedagogy. A more significant limitation of the collection is the heavy emphasis on teaching in the US and Canada, with only five papers coming from outside North America. The result is a predictable emphasis on the interests and concerns of American faculty. Given the current interest in the experiences of minority communities, the lack of attention to refugee and immigrant literatures is a shortcoming that might have been redressed by including more contributions from Europe and the developing world. These are, however, minor reservations. For the most part, readers are likely to set down the collection energized and with a renewed sense of the possibilities of course design and classroom practice.

*Teaching Young Adult Literature* was published in April 2020, within weeks of North American colleges and universities going online due to the global pandemic, and to read these essays is to experience nostalgia for in-person teaching. The “Walk the Line” activities used by Wendy J. Glenn in her course on school censorship (144) and the collaborative posters through which Jon M. Wargo and Laura Apol’s students explore “risky/risqué YA literature” (130) are reminders of how embodied post-secondary learning, particularly in faculties of education, used to be. While there are no papers dedicated to designing or teaching online courses, the reality of pandemic teaching lends a particular appeal to descriptions of activities and assignments whose proximity to digital humanities opens possibilities for distant learning, most notably Camille Buffington, Beverly Lyon Clark, and Eric Esten’s “On Curating Online Anthologies: Not the Traditional Term Paper” and Virginia Zimmerman’s “The Young Adult Critical Edition Project.” Eventually, we’ll no doubt return to more sociable in-person teaching, but until then the essays in *Teaching Young Adult Literature* offer instructors something to look forward to, some fresh ideas for next term’s online and blended classes, and plenty of new books to explore.

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