

A Note from the Editors: The Contemporary “Problem Novel” and Adolescent Identity

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This second issue of *First Opinions, Second Reactions: Reviews of Recent Children’s and Young Adult Literature* focuses on social realism in books for children, adolescents, and young adults. Social realism refers to authors’ attempts to write and illustrate books that represent or reflect the real lives of children and adolescents. Authors often write these books to help young readers learn about and consequently better cope with real life events, problems, and challenges. Not surprisingly, therefore, when teachers share such books with students they often adopt bibliotherapeutic rationales for doing so. Literature becomes not only a means to delight in language and experience unfamiliar people and places, but also a pathway to viewing a true reflection of oneself, allowing increased self-knowledge and insight.

Since its initial rise to popularity in the late 1960s, young adult literature in particular has been known for its attempt to mimic or recreate the real lives of teens in narrative form. In the 70s and 80s the teen novel was commonly called the “problem novel” because of its focus on the traumas experienced by teen protagonists, which included such life-changing events as drug and alcohol addiction, teen-on-teen violence, parental divorce, depression, suicide, and first sexual experiences. Books such as *The Outsiders* by S. E. Hinton, *Mr. and Mrs. Bo Jo Jones* by Ann Head, *Go Ask Alice* by Anonymous, and *The Chocolate War* by Robert Cormier are all classics of the problem novel genre, as they all confront the problems and challenges of adolescence head on—both to the delight and the dismay of adults.

Today’s young adult and children’s books tackle social realism in a much broader way. It is no longer appropriate to label young adult books “problem novels,” as they don’t all fit into this category, and not all books for children and young people seek to teach a moral lesson or depict youth trauma. Some of them still have these literary goals; however, socially and culturally realistic children’s and young adult books also explore historical topics, describe teenage life with humor and wit, and depict the experiences of immigrant and minority teens. The books reviewed in this issue exemplify the wide range of texts that fall into the category of social realism.

We welcome you to read the issue that follows, beginning with the think pieces reflecting on the issue theme by Paula Connolly of the University of North Carolina at Char-

lotte and Jill P. May of Purdue University, and Christopher Cheng, an Australian children's book author. Following their thoughtful reflections are the reviews of six contemporary children's and young adult books, including those written by Eve Bunting, Sherman Alexie, and Frank Portman.