

Seeking the Light: Orphans and Survivors in Children’s Literature

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Welcome to the Fall 2011 issue of *First Opinions, Second Reactions*. The theme of this issue is orphans and survivors in children’s and young adult books. Why would we choose such a seemingly dismal, even depressing, theme? One reason could be the ubiquitous presence of the theme in literature for youth. In some ways, all children’s and young adult books feature characters that are literal or metaphorical “orphans” or “survivors.” Putting characters in situations and contexts that require them to be independent is a common trope to provide young protagonists the space and opportunity to make decisions, overcome adversity, and, eventually, mature. A second reason for our theme might have something to do with the season itself—at least in our home state of Indiana. As days become shorter and leaves fall from the trees, we may feel the need to find life-affirming fictional messages amid an increasingly barren reality. We might be looking for a bright light in an otherwise dark landscape.

The books chosen for this issue highlight the outsider status of the main characters, even more than many books for young readers do. Their protagonists are separated from a parent (*Moon Over Manifest*, *Turtle in Paradise*, *One Crazy Summer*), displaced by war (*How I Learned Geography*), or alienated by a domineering father (*The Dreamer*). All of these protagonists, while in radically different places, times, and situations, share one thing: They find themselves living in a world they have difficulty accepting or even recognizing, and yet they flourish within it. While the settings of the books often provide challenges that seem overwhelmingly bleak—the Great Depression, rejection by parents, violence, and social injustice—the main characters find ways to survive, and even thrive, despite these hardships. They are able to find joy in an otherwise joyless existence, often through art, imagination, and storytelling.

By reading these stories, perhaps we can vicariously experience the tenacity, curiosity, and optimism exemplified by the characters that populate them. We hope you enjoy the “first opinions” and “second reactions” that follow and are inspired to share these inspirational stories with young readers you know.

Works Cited

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