

Issues in Youth Literature

Young people are on their pathway towards adulthood with the multitude of choices offered by a democratic society. On this pathway they are continually testing, developing, challenging the central question of youth "Who Am I?" This question has become the blueprint today for youth literature with its insatiable exploration of search for identity.

Youth is a time of enormous change - physical, sexual, intellectual. It is that transitional period where a young person seeks independence from family, adjusts to sexual maturation, establishes peer relationships, is faced with vocational decisions, develops a philosophy of life, spiritual and moral beliefs, searches for individuality and a place in their community. The renowned psychoanalyst Erik Erikson highlighted that it is a time of intense egocentricity as young people seek to find who they are. Youth can move into dangerous pathways, experiment with cultural, ethical, populist issues, and enter into adult decisions during this time.

The journey from childhood to adulthood can be perilous, challenging and exciting, filled with experimentation and questioning. It is a time when young people develop who they are, their sense of social justice and their place in a democratic society. At a time when young people face the Twin Towers and world terrorism, their faith in the world is challenged. At a time when 50% of marriages end in divorce, their faith in relationships is challenged. At a time when pressures for financially successful and vocational choices are intense, their value systems are challenged. At a time when technological communication is expedientially growing, many find communication hard. Young people are searching for meaning in our democratic world.

The search for identity is recognized in powerful youth literature. R.D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* (1951) is a landmark novel spearheading the growth of YA literature which tackles the issues of identity and facilitates young people in finding their place in the democratic process. Examples of this style of YA literature include *So Much to Tell You* by John Marsden dealing with social isolation and family breakdown; Christobel Mattingley's *No Guns for Asmir*, a moving story of a refugee family in Bosnia; Colin Thiele's revelation of heroism of a young girl with rheumatoid arthritis in *Jodie's Journey*; *Peeling The Onion* by Wendy Orr, which poignantly explores a teenager's struggles with severe injuries from a car accident; *Dogs* by Bill Condon revealing male friendship amidst family breakdown. The works of British authors such as Jacqueline Wilson, Gillian Cross, David Almond; Australian authors such as Libby Hathorn, Gary Disher, Gary Crew, Maureen McCarthy; USA authors such as Dean Walter Meyers, Judy Blume, Robert Cormier, Lois Lowry are part of this growth in powerful and relevant youth literature tackling issues.

Well written issue based literature is honest and confronting as it explores the gamut of human emotions and responses. The issues are brave ranging from family break-up, AIDS, relationships, war, dislocation, abuse, love, sexuality, racism.

As an author I deal with serious issues from bullying and step parenting in my junior fictions I Am Jack and Super Jack, to exploring adolescent identity in Butterflies and The Cave.

As a sole parent of two children, author, specialist in child growth & development, I combine personal experience, creativity, research and commitment in my writing. My books are set in real social settings, with real kids, families and schools. The challenges are real - bullying, blending families, making friends, aging grandparents, peer group pressures, coping with a world in crisis. The kids are real - loving and fighting siblings, making jokes, adventuring, experimenting, having mates, wanting love, rejection - the stuff of life. I create a safe place for young readers and their parents, to work out issues in their own way and seek insight into difficult areas.

The Cave is a YA novel which was researched extensively as I sought to reveal youth male culture today. The narrative drive is a survival camp. The culture is youth with everything from dance parties, sexuality, peer group influence to drugs and tattooing. The male adolescent life is exposed with all its humour, football socks, late night drinking, mateship, leadership, relationships, violence, grief. The challenge is thrown to young people - Who are they? Where are they going in our democratic society?

Carole Kayrooz PhD, MAPS, Director of Postgraduate Studies, Communication and Education, University of Canberra has written:-

The Cave is a gritty story of courage and hope for those in the passage between youth and adulthood. Both compassionate and confronting, Susanne Gervay takes us on a journey, eight days' camping with the hero Knox and his mates including Fat George, Bennie and Jones, and the evil Watts.

This journey was eight days of descending into fear, exhaustion, ravines and rivers, each in their own way carving out a sense of self-knowing and mateship; eight days of reverie where past and present ghosts comfort and perplex. Ultimately, in the cave, Knox comes to a sense of responsibility and authenticity that is more powerful than the mystery of the Rave Party or Watts metal tip leather boots.

As a psychologist, I recognize the private maelstrom engulfing many young

adults, in-transit between powerlessness and independence. As an educationalist, I appreciate the groups' ambivalence towards their two guides, Seaton and Sarah, and towards a society that alienates and fragments. As a reader, Susanne Gervay compels us, like the river that is part of her story, towards the rancid murky Cave, the final place of initiation.

This is an epic story beautifully written with clear spare prose and the ability to go right to the heart of young males in modern society.

Butterflies is also a confronting YA novel which explores the issue of burns on a child, family and community. Dr Hugh Martin Head of the Burn Unit at The Children's Hospital Westmead has endorsed Butterflies:-

Every survivor has a story. Often the story is of interest, and even more often instructive. "Butterflies" is the story of a burn survivor, and is both interesting and instructive. It explores the complex areas of the emotional impact of a burn on the individual and family while giving insight into the world of hospitals, patients and doctors. It traces the development of the personality from insecurity and relative isolation to a healthier level of self esteem that enables the individual to form balanced relationships with family and friends. It shows how the inner person can triumph over a preoccupation with surface scars and know that basic values of commitment, caring and trust are more important than the texture of the skin.

"Butterflies" has relevance outside the narrow circle of burn survivors and their families. It shows the ebb and flow of emotions that affect us all, particularly in the transition between childhood and adulthood, and how parenting and family life make these bearable.

Those of us who are involved in the world of burns know how survivors need help from time to time, but slowly develop a depth of character and an inner strength which is rarely seen in others. Like tempering steel, the process of passing through the fire helps make a person of exceptional quality. "Butterflies" captures these subtleties for the reader, and gives a stunning insight into a difficult topic.

Powerful youth literature can tackle issues in a significant way, opening youth to a story journey where they can test and participate in choices and decision-making. It can facilitate them in discovering the essential question - Who Am I?