

Throw Me A Lifeline: How Friendship Transforms the Outsider in Young Adult Literature

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The world is getting smaller. Global communication has put modern teens more in touch with the world than ever before. Cell phones and instant messaging connect youth to friends at the push of a button. The latest in health, news, and fashion is a mere click away on the Internet. But for this massive download of information, are teens truly more in touch with *themselves*? Has technology forever altered the “teenage condition” and turned every adolescent into a social insider? Arguably not. “Teenage angst is still alive and well,” education specialist Michele Gorman writes in her February 2006 article, “Connecting with Today’s Teens.” “Today’s kids still feel despised and ignored” (School Library Journal Online, 1). Perhaps the definition of a teenager is one who is in transition, somewhere between childhood and adulthood, and thus inherently alienated and angst-ridden in a way that not even modern technology can remedy. Not surprising then, that young adult literature revels in the plight of the outsider. Even novels about insiders – popular teens, that is, such as in Jerry Spinelli’s *Stargirl* or Lauren Myracle’s *TTYL* – deal with moments in which those very characters feel alienated and outside the norm. Otherwise, how would conflict and teenage drama ensue?

That said, even the modern, hip, high-tech teen can still identify with stories about outsiders, especially those that also deal with friendship. “Friendship is a theme of universal interest to young people,” author and editor Hazel Rochman explains in her Horn Book article, “Against Borders.” “There is no more natural way to see across cultures than to recognize in stories from everywhere your own yearning for a friend you can trust or a group you can belong to [...and] those friendship stories are also about outsiders” (7). Who are outsiders? Who are true friends? How does a friend, like a lifeline between adolescent transitions, transform an outsider?

forever left her thumbprint on Leo's mind and heart, and that perhaps one day, he will have courage to rise above the masses – an ideal to which nearly every young adult secretly aspires.

Technology gives today's adolescents an edge in every arena from popular culture to politics. But despite the influx of communication devices that keep teens in touch with the world, they still need to read stories that span the gamut of what it means to be an adolescent, what it feels like to be the outcast in a time of transition and growth. Teens will always identify and appreciate stories about outsiders, especially when they are presented alongside the theme of friendship as in Freak the Mighty, Fat Kid Rules the World, and The Outsiders because true friends are able to look beyond the outsider stereotype and view a person as unique and capable of change. Often the friends that have the greatest impact on one another have contrasting personalities such as Max and Freak, Troy and Curt, and Stargirl and Leo. But even novels about the insiders as in Stargirl and TTYL, popular teens feel moments of alienation and angst, confusion and longing. Outsiders in young adult literature like Max, Troy, and Ponyboy will not be magically transformed into insiders overnight, but what is crucial to recognize is their greater appreciation of themselves, their acceptance from within. It is vital that teens connect with others their age emotionally in order to learn empathy and understanding. "We don't want a homogenized culture," Hazel Rochman explains. "Reading about someone different involves some effort, some imagination, some opening up of who you are [...] If one doesn't know anything outside his circle, he doesn't know what can he can be" ("Against Borders" 6-9). That said, the transformative power of friendship between outsiders and insiders will and must continue to endure in young adult literature.

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