



THE HAZEL TREE

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Kiddie Lit

“Sometimes, you read a book and it fills you with this weird evangelical zeal, and you become convinced that the shattered world will never be put back together unless and until all living humans read the book.”

It's when you come across books like this that reading becomes more than chore or pleasure: it becomes a need; it is all you want to do. This sounds horribly hyperbolic until you yourself have the good fortune of reading a book that makes you feel this way, and suddenly you know it's true.

I can count on one hand the number of books that are “need-reads”, that stop time. Almost all of these books are (say it quietly) part of the genre pejoratively known as “YA fiction”, “t(w)een lit”, or (more dignified face) “children's literature”.

Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials*. John Green's *The Fault in our Stars* (which gives us the beginning quote). RJ Palacios' *Wonder*. These books are glorious, and comprise neither what I teach, nor what you study, nor what your Government want you to study, nor what you may study at Oxbridge. Yet these are the books that intoxicate: these are the books that change your world.

We relegate them to summer holiday reading piles. We buy the versions with adult covers or load them furtively on our Kindles to avoid the judgemental stares of others. We sneer at the *Twilight*-loving hippies and submit ourselves to James Joyce or Henry James, eschewing the emotionally fuzzy for the complex and canonical to mark us as intelligent, mature – an “adult”. We denigrate YA fiction, yet a new study shows that 55% of YA book buyers are over 18, and 28% are over 30.

Misanthropes take pot shots from all angles, from the snobbish (“It's not really *proper, serious literature*, is it? You don't study it”) to the intellectually pretentious (“they have no *technical value*”) to the patronising (“all those Harry Potter adults are *escaping* their adult lives and responsibilities”) to the “simplifiers” (“It's just a nice *story*. I'll be done with it in an hour. I'll read it and rest my brain.”) I could go on.

But they're wrong. YA lit is well-written, well-structured and intellectually demanding. *Wonder* has a brilliant, constantly shifting 1st-personal narratorial structure; *The Fault in Our Stars* has some of the most evocative figurative language I have had the pleasure to read (“As he read, I fell in love the way you fall asleep: slowly, and then all at once”); the daemon in *His Dark Materials* is a psychoanalytical evocation of Jung's theory of the animus and anima. The fact we don't necessarily notice is testament to the *presence* of their skills, not their absence.

Author Patricia McCormick speaks of a greater awareness of YA authors to write better in order to nail their audience. “We're competing with Facebook and smartphones, DVDs and iPods, exams and extracurriculars. We have to capture and hold our readers' (limited) attention on Page 1 and sustain it until the end. Young adults will not tolerate anything extraneous or self indulgent.”

If Kiddie Lit is all about kiddie issues, then where does Dickens' *Great Expectations* or *Oliver Twist* come into it? How about *Jane Eyre* or *Treasure Island*, or later, *Catcher in the Rye* or *To Kill a Mockingbird*? All classic novels by canonical standards; all focused on the child's view. Dickens and Bronte wrote for a readership that they knew included children. Professor Suzanne Keen notes that “Dickens especially wrote with his read-aloud audience in mind. Children and illiterates heard his stories read aloud by literate friends or parents.”

There was little adult-child distinction.

And what's wrong with escapism?

Sociologists like Neil Postman argue that children are being robbed of their childhood, that the difference between adults and children is growing ever smaller: just look at the TV, fashion trends, song lyrics. At a time of financial, social, cultural uncertainty, what's wrong with a brief moment of escape back to simplicity?

And what could be wrong with a story? We know ourselves as *Homo Sapiens*, literally the “wise”, “rational” man, but critical theorists like Johann

Huizinga believes otherwise: we are more suited to the term *Homo ludens*, “the playing man”, a being that operates in both the rational sphere and a world of play, freedom, distinct from “ordinary” life. Louis Fischer, in his “Narrative Paradigm” theory, believes that all human beings experience life as “story”, as a series of different storylines and plots. Surely it is understandable to seek something similar in our reading of choice.

For me, it's all about “the moment”. YA Lit often crash-zooms into the precise moment of transition, when worlds collide and children become adults. These moments are not the preserve of teens. Love, loss, betrayal, death, illness, choice: these things follow you around all your days, and at 31, you are arguably no wiser as to how you deal with them than you were at 14. I recognise these moments; I learn from them; they're relevant to me. I like that.

But the major point is this. Who cares? The best thing about this all is that – amid the myriad of different things that we could do with our time – we read; we choose to read; and if we're lucky and we find the right book, we are *compelled* to read. It's not Young Adult Literature, or Teen Lit, or Kiddie Lit. It's just good Literature. Go read some. AB

