# Using Young Adult Literature to Enhance Reading Skills

# Controversy

 Reading instruction in the United States is as diverse and controversial as its political history. The debates between professionals in education can be seen as early as 1847 when Horace Mann, a lawyer and Secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Education, presented his adoption of a “new method” that used memorization of whole words and was soundly refuted by thirty-one Boston School Masters. In 1844, Samuel Stillwell Green, the principal of the Philips Grammar School in Boston spoke for his group saying, “Education is a great concern; it has often been tampered with by vain theorists; it has suffered much from the stupid folly and the delusive wisdom of its treacherous friends” (Sweet, 1996, p. 4). Green’s words have been restated in some form or another through the decades by those concerned with reading instruction in America’s school system as the debate continues between educators, parents, and politicians on how to best teach children how to read.

 In this decade, government standards were set through *No Child Left Behind* where “Reading First” requires that all school districts use research based instructional practices using the following components in their reading curriculum: phonemic awareness; phonics; vocabulary development, including those used in listening, speaking, reading, and writing; reading fluency, including oral reading skills; and reading comprehension strategies (*NCLB,* 2001). Although the Springfield R-12 School District has aligned its major instructional goals and objectives to include all of these components for reading instruction, one of the most difficult tasks a teacher can face in a classroom is that of engaging and motivating students. Because the intrinsic motivation for learning “generally declines from early elementary through secondary school” (Slavin, 2009, p. 313), it is up to teachers to provide material that motivates students for learning that is of interest to them and that they can connect to real-life situations. English teachers would love to have their students find the reading of classic literature interesting; however, particularly for those students who confess that they hate to read, finding ways to get them to read is challenging. It is through young adult literature that non-readers are becoming readers because it offers characters, topics, and experiences in which they can relate and find interest.

# Student Interest in Young Adult Literature

 It was in the 1970’s, through the realization of teachers, that there was a market for young adult literature because these were the books students would actually read opposed to prescribed classics. Some of the earlier young adult authors and titles that are still popular among teachers and readers today include works by Robert Cromier, *Now and at the Hour* (1960)*,* Chaim Potok, *The Chosen* (1967), and Paul Zindel, *The Pigman* (1968). There were, and still is, mixed feelings that educators and parents have towards young adult literature, even though it has grown to include many award-winning authors because it has become a lucrative money-making market. Young adult literature focuses on readers between the ages of twelve and eighteen opposed to what is referred to as children’s literature that is intended for students from prekindergarten to sixth grade (Donelson & Nilsen, 2005). Today’s wide selection of young adult literature offers choices of reading for every student’s interest and reading level. Young adult literature includes the genres of contemporary realistic fiction, historical fiction, fantasy, mysteries, science fiction, romance, adventure, poetry, and informational books. As shown by the series written by Stephenie Meyer’s beginning with *Twilight,* and J.K. Rowling’s Harry Potter, educators and parents alike have learned that young adults will read when the text is of their choice and particular interest. There are four guidelines that teachers may find helpful when implementing high quality young adult literature for use in their classrooms: 1) Evaluating Young Adult Literature; 2) Assessing Student Interest and Reading Habits; 3) Developmental Characteristics of Young Adults; and 4) Assessing Student Learning. Included are best practices for teaching with young adult literature with an added focus on struggling readers, plus ways teachers can secure the books needed for their classrooms.

# Guidelines for Implementing Young Adult Literature

# Evaluating Young Adult Literature

 As teachers and librarians add to their classroom and school libraries from the wide selection of young adult literature, they become knowledgeable of all types of genres and are able to recommend and find examples of each to share with students. Donelson and Nilsen state that “everyone working with young readers and books needs to be skilled in suggesting the right book for the right student or at least pointing someone in the right direction” (2005, p. 285). When evaluating young adult literature, the books should:

* be written from the viewpoints of young adults
* contain characters that find solutions to their problems without the help of adults
* be fast-paced
* include a variety of genres and topics
* contain characters and topics concerning different ethnic and cultural groups
* end on an optimistic tone
* deal successfully with the emotions of young adults

(Donelson & Nilsen, 2005)

After using these elements in selecting high quality literature for young adults, teachers then must match the individual student to a particular book. However, it is imperative that teachers first know the interests and reading habits of each student.

**Assessing Student Interest and Reading Habits**

 Teachers must know their students, and they can accomplish this by designing a reading inventory and/or interest survey that is both teacher and student friendly. Example inquiries for a reading inventory and interest survey may include:

 1. What classes does the student enjoy most in school?

 2. What hobbies does the student enjoy?

 3. What kind of books does the student prefer to read? Fiction or Nonfiction?

 4. What topic does the student prefer to read about?

 5. List the title of books that the student has read recently.

 6. Where does the student do his or her best reading?

 7. What environmental conditions are ideal for student reading?

 8. Estimate how much time the student uses for independent reading.

 9. Where does the student find his or her books?

 10. What book would the student like to read for this class?

No matter what type of survey or inventory a teacher selects, these assessments are an easy way of evaluating student interest and reading habits that can be invaluable when selecting high quality young adult literature.

**Developmental Characteristics of a Reader**

 Another important consideration when teachers select or suggest books for their readers is the developmental characteristics of students based on their cognitive, linguistic, social, and personality traits that enables teachers to match students with books according to their development and readiness for a topic or genre. Understanding the research on how children learn to read and applying this knowledge in the classroom through brain-based instructional strategies is clearly beneficial for all students. Through classroom reading assessments, teachers can determine students’ reading levels so that books are chosen that will not frustrate the readers but move them to their next levels of learning.

 After identifying the factors that contribute to a child's development in cognitive, linguistic, social, and personality traits, a checklist can be made that can aid teachers in evaluating and selecting high quality books that are appropriate for a student’s readiness and development level. The following is a checklist developed for ninth grade studentsbased on developmental factors to aid in evaluating and selecting high quality young adult literature:

* 1. Does the selection reinforce the development of the basic operations of thinking, including opportunities to observe, compare, classify, hypothesize, organize, apply and respond, and criticize elements found in the work though either discussion or written response?
* 2. Does the selection provide challenge and the interest level needed for students to stay on task for a longer period of time?
* 3. Can students integrate prior knowledge and make connections to form and understand relationships between the content of the selection and other sources of information?
* 4. Does the selection use figurative language so students can make connections with the text?
* 5. Can the selection be used to expand vocabulary that can be related to other academic disciplines?
* 6. How can the selection be used to understand and discuss the writing process?
* 7. Can the selection provide students with different points of view that demonstrate conflicting emotions and purposes within its characters?
* 8. Does the selection demonstrate rules that the students will recognize as governing society and themselves?
* 9. Does the selection demonstrate ways to deal with conflicts with authority figures?
* 10. Are there conflicts in the selection that students may recognize as those that cause turmoil with their own peers?
* 11. Can the selection be used as an example for students dealing with stressful situations?
* 12. Does the selection provide examples of characters dealing with emotions caused by puberty that students can relate to and learn to control?

By using the above checklist based on the development factors of ninth grade students, a teacher can review recommended book lists and determine which books will meet the criteria for his or her students. Examples of how this type of checklist can be used in evaluating books can be viewed in Appendix A displaying that a teacher can cull through the many deserving titles offered to students to find those that will meet their students' development needs as well as leading them to develop positive attitudes toward reading that will extend throughout their adult lives.

# Assessing Student Learning

With giving students the freedom of choosing what books they want to read, comes the task of assessing their learning and holding them responsible for displaying their understanding of what they read. The task for teachers is to assess student understanding through activities that do not dampen a student’s enjoyment of reading, which is the goal of teaching using young adult literature. Assessments must align with the expectations of a district’s major instructional goals and be both student and teacher-friendly. Suggested assessment can include:

1. Reading Logs: Students keep a log of their daily reading by recording the book title, author, pages read, reading strategy used, and a short summary of their reading.
2. Journals: Students keep a journal of their daily reading by writing summaries, connections, inferences, questions, predictions, or conclusions.
3. Book Talks: Book talks assess the student’s understanding of a book as it is shared with his or her classmates.
4. Reading Walls: Reading Walls offer students a way to record their reading choices, share their comments, assess their own reading, and can be used as friendly competition between students to see who can read the most titles.
5. Reading Blogs: A reading blog offers students a way to discuss book titles using technology.
6. Literature Circles: Literature Circles give students choices of books that interest them, and also allows them to discuss with others while practicing accepted social behaviors. By including norms for discussions and examples of roles, students can participate equally in sharing their ideas while also becoming responsible for their own learning.

**Writing with Young Adult Literature**

 The use of writing with young adult literature is imperative as students construct their thoughts and makes sense of their reading. **To find a relationship between reading and writing, a teacher only has to look as far as the students in her classroom as they read texts and are asked to show their understanding of a lesson. A teacher who combines writing with reading gives her students a powerful tool where they can explore and clarify their understanding of a text (Vacca & Vacca, 2008). As students approach a text, the opportunity for responding to the author’s ideas and information presented in the text through writing activities leads them to deeper understanding as they organize their own thinking into their knowledge base. Both reading and writing share common cognitive and sociocultural characteristics where students are involved in a “purpose, commitment, schema activation, planning, working with ideas, revision and rethinking, and monitoring” (Vacca & Vacca, 2008, p. 246). Teachers who focus their lessons on the relationship between reading and writing will aid students in activating prior knowledge while adding new learning to their schema.** Examples of writing activities include: 1) reflections

 2) journals

 3) books reviews 4) annotated bibliographies 5) research projects 6) personal narratives 7) creative writing, including short stories, children’s books, and poetry.

Students should also be encouraged to publish their pieces to share with others such as Author’s Chair, literary magazines, and contests.The needs of students when learning to read and express themselves through written language should be addressed to ensure every student graduates proficient in literacy. As with reading, students should be given the opportunity to write frequently.

# Best Practices for Teaching with Young Adult Literature

 To begin using young adult literature in the classroom, teachers must reflect on what goals they want to accomplish and align them with their district’s curriculum. Teachers can use young adult literature to teach literacy by:

1. Setting expectations for the students that include discussion protocols, guidelines for reading requirements, and assessments.
2. Modeling expectations, reading strategies, and providing examples or assessments.
3. Providing reading strategies where students practice and use connections, inferences, predictions, questions, or synthesis to improve their comprehension.
4. Emphasizing vocabulary development through the use of context clues that aid in increasing reading fluency.
5. Developing an awareness of the elements of literature by asking students to use critical thinking skills to analyze the plot, setting, characterization, theme, and mood.
6. Showing how students can identify or question an author’s purpose and style.
7. Showcasing multicultural texts that identify negative and positive stereotypes from different cultures by analyzing characters of a novel with its historical background, comparing and contrasting historical perspectives, and connecting characters in a book to other texts, to the reader, or to today’s world.

**Integration of Multicultural Literature**

 Because of the diversity of today’s classrooms, teachers must carefully evaluate literature that contains multicultural characters and subjects so that the literature will inform students of other cultures without stereotyping the characters. Norton says that the goals of multicultural materials is to “restore cultural rights by emphasizing cultural equality and respect, enhancing the self-concepts of students and teaching respect for various cultures while teaching basic skills” (2007, p. 77). Students can learn about other cultures through their reading choices while also learning respect for those whose cultures may be very different from their own. If a student’s readiness, learning style, interests, and cultural background are considered, literature can be used as the foundation for teaching literacy.

**The Struggling Reader**

 After a teacher considers a student’s developmental stage, and then his or her interests and reading habits, reading strategies can be implemented to help the struggling reader with the content of a book. Research shows that struggling readers become better readers by reading frequently, and by giving students the choice of what they want to read based on their own particular interest offers each student the opportunity to move to a higher level of reading. Also, by giving students choices of what books they want to read aids teachers in differentiating instruction based on the commonalities of the reading activity while also focusing on the essential differences that make each student an individual.

 Strategies to aide struggling readers include before, during, and after reading activities. Specific examples of before reading activities include Think-Alouds, anticipation guides, book boxes, K-W-L charts, semantic maps, vocabulary development, predicting, making connections, and drawing on previous experiences. During reading activities can be drawn from strategies such as questioning an author, making inferences, reading guides, guided reading, and discussion. After reading strategies that aid in comprehension may include summarizing, compare/contrast, and Question-Answer Relationships. Writing activities, such as quick writes, journals, and speed writing are invaluable ways to aide students with reading comprehension as they reflect on the content of the text they have read. After students learn to implement these reading strategies on their own, coupled with reading a book of their choice, students will progress to their next level or reading.

**Promoting and Supplying Books for Young Adult Readers**

 Classroom libraries are fundamental in developing students as life-long readers as teachers find funding for books through grants, book fairs, donations, and support from exceptionally dedicated administration and parents. Teachers use specific titles from many genres and interest levels from their classroom libraries to use as building blocks to guide students in developing interest and selecting their own reading materials. Where checklists are invaluable when evaluating and critiquing young adult literature, modeling book talks and creating book displays are a great way for teachers to promote books and pique student interest. (see Appendix B) Also, teachers who create an environment conducive to reading by making their classrooms visually enticing to students through the use of stimulating colors and posters that promote book titles and reading strategies, who provide comfortable areas for reading, and who offer specific times for individual and group reading activities, enhance the focus of the importance of reading in their classrooms. Fischer states in *A History of Reading*, “For, in truth, there has always been only one ‘end’ to reading: Knowledge” (p. 342), and it is this knowledge that students gain from reading that lets them compete and be successful throughout their lives that becomes the sole purpose of every teacher who provides the best reading instruction possible for their students.

 Another important source for finding young adult literature are school libraries, along with the aid from their knowledgeable librarians who can offer resources for teachers in finding books that are currently on best seller lists. Librarians can provide students with high interest reading material for any reading level. The Missouri Association of School Librarians (MASL) sponsors the Gateway Readers Award where it asks students, grades nine through twelve, to read from a list of newly published young adult literature and then vote for their favorite selections. The Gateway selections meet the criteria Donelson & Nilsen (2005) set when evaluating and selecting high quality literature. Students clamor to read about characters their own age who often struggle with the same problems and situations as the readers. Although librarians and teachers attempt to read the many different titles and authors recommended from reading lists offered by professional sources, parents also need to participate in their children’s reading choices because some young adult literature may include sensitive real-life content.

 Within the community, the support for literacy can be furthered through programs that will tempt students to read. Programs that bring guest speakers and authors into the classroom, film viewing, poetry readings, writing workshops, and student publications can support literacy throughout an entire community. Students must see that literacy is important to the adults who shape their education. It is each adult’s responsibility to “help children become aware of the enchantment in books” (Norton, 2007, p. 2), which includes providing students with literature that enhances their understanding of the world, lets them see how human struggles are universal, and gives them a connection with their own cultures and those of others.

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Appendix A

The following are five books selected as examples of meeting the criteria of the checklist for ninth grade readers.

1. Cary, K. (2005). *Bloodline.* New York: Razorbill.

 This book meets the criteria of reinforcing and developing basic operations of thinking because it provides opportunities for the reader to observe, compare, classify, hypothesize, organize, apply, respond, and criticize using literary elements, character development, and figurative language through either discussion or written response. The selection is challenging offering vocabulary and an historical perspective from the era of World War I, and the interest level will keep readers reading longer because the plot has surprising twists and is based as a sequel for Bram Stoker's *Dracula.* Readers can use their prior knowledge and make connections to form and understand the relationships between this novel and the subject matter of *Dracula* and that of World War I. This novel can also provide research opportunities into the subject of vampires, the novel *Dracula*, and the occurrences during World War I. Because the novel is written in the form of letters, journal entries, notes, newspaper clippings and ship logs, it can be used as a way to understand and discuss the process of writing. The novel also provides the reader with different points of view concerning warfare and the evil deeds of Captain Quincey Harker, that of the main character, John Shaw, and a nurse, Mary Seward, all in which demonstrate conflicting emotions and purposes for their actions. Imbedded in the novel is the conflict between those who recognize the rules that govern society and themselves and those who do not, with the added conflict that John Shaw has with his commanding officer Captain Quincey Harker. Even after John Shaw returns home from the horrors of war, conflicts continue that readers will recognize between themselves and their own family members and peers. How John deals with his conflicts can be an example for readers who are dealing with their own stressful situations, including isolation and loneliness. Even though this selection is a highly imaginative work, it provide examples of characters dealing with their emotions, such as found in John's younger sister, Lily, who falls madly in love with the evil Quincey Harker, and in John himself who must control his hatred of Harker and save his sister’s life.

2. Flinn, A. (2005). *Fade to black.* New York: HarperTeen.

 This book meets the criteria of reinforcing and developing basic operations of thinking because it provides opportunities for the reader to observe, compare, classify, hypothesize, organize, apply, respond, and criticize using literary elements, character development, and figurative language through either discussion or written response. The novel is a mystery and provides challenge and interest to readers by letting them discover what is the truth. Readers can make connections to this book because everyone has, or has seen someone else, bullied or harassed. Because this book is about a HIV-Positive student, Alex Crusan, who is attacked by an assailant who shattered the windows of his car with a baseball bat, the reader can expand his or her knowledge and research Alex's disease. There is also a character that has Down's Syndrome that can provide further interest for the reader to research. The novel can be used to expand readers' vocabularies because of the topic it deals with and can cross over to other academic disciplines. The story is told through three voices: the victim, the witness, and the accused. The victim, Alex, Clinton Cole, who is seen riding his bike in the vicinity and has already harassed Alex at school and home, and the witness, Daria Bickell, who says she sees Clinton hurt Alex, or is she just confused? Readers will recognize that the rules of society have been breached, and conflicts with authority figures will follow, because Alex knows what he sees as his windshield is being broken and he must decide if he wants to tell. Daria Bickell, who is a student the student with special learning needs, is caught between what she witnesses and wanting to please her mother; however, she is always concerned with doing the right thing. Readers will recognize the conflicts in this selection because they can happen with their own peers; Clinton sees himself as a jock who can push others around, and Alex, who makes the acquaintance of Jennifer finds out that she wants to be his friend for all the wrong reasons. The characters of this novel deal with stressful situations, like telling the truth and taking responsibility for one's actions even if the consequences may be harsh. Learning to control one's emotions are seen through Alex's character who is tired of his family treating him like an innocent victim, and his decision to tell the truth about two major secrets in his life. Clinton also must face his emotions and learn to control them as his faces trouble at home as well as at school. This selection can be used to understand and discuss the writing process because it explores one incident from three different perspectives, and from each point of view the truth is revealed to the reader.

3. Funke, C. (2005). *Inkspell.* Somerset, UK: Chicken House.

 *Inkspell* is the second book, *Inkheart* being the first, in what is destined to be a trilogy of pure fantasy. It is a great book to use as a discussion for the writing process, because with an omniscient narrator who helps the characters jump from one world to another through the books they are reading, the characters themselves try to rewrite parts of the story but find that the characters in the fantasy world have a life of their own and will not be controlled. Inkspell also has special features, such as at the beginning of each chapter there is a relevant literary excerpt and line illustration by the author herself, a hand-drawn map of Inkworld, and a reference for readers that contains all of the characters. The criteria of reinforcing and developing basic operations of thinking can also be used in this book, because it provides opportunities for the reader to observe, compare, classify, hypothesize, organize, apply, respond, and criticize using literary elements, character development, and figurative language through either discussion or written response. Research opportunities for readers can be fulfilled through discovering the history of the fantasy genre and that of the medieval world. It is a page turner filled with action, romance, tragedy, villainy and emotion with the promise for a sequel using a cliffhanger ending. The novel will challenge readers with its sophisticated writing and vocabulary, and it will keep the interest level needed for students to stay reading for longer periods of time. Readers can integrate prior knowledge of other pieces of fantasy, such as *The Lord of the Rings,* to make connections and form an understanding between the content of this selection and other sources of information. Different points of view are demonstrated by the conflicting emotions and purposes of the novel's characters, as Fenoglio tries to interfere with the characters of Inkworld and find they have entirely different perspectives on how events should proceed. The rules that govern society and the characters in the fantasy world are different from the real world, and the character Meggie must help save her parents who have followed her into Inkworld. Because it is Meggie who must save her father, the novel offers a different take on the usual conflicts a teen has with an authority figure. *Inkspell* offers turmoil within the characters and with their peers displaying examples of how they deal with these stressful situations and emotions they must control, as seen in blossoming romance between Farid and Meggie, and Dustfinger's complicated relationship with Meggie's mother. This is a books that readers can pick up without having read the first, *Inkheart*, and dive into with the help of the author's character list and the omniscient narration; however, it does provide an ending that will challenge the reader to want to read the soon to be published third installment.

4. Patterson, J. (2005). *Maximum ride: The angel experiment.* New York: Little, Brown.

 This novel is science fiction and offers a look into James Patterson's easy writing style that never confuses the reader and provides excellent entertainment and interest that will keep the reader on task until the final page is read. It hooks the reader in the first chapter, and the bird-like characters become highly plausible because they are genetically engineered orphans who have special talents, thus fitting into the science fiction genre. Readers can integrate prior knowledge, make connections, and expand their vocabulary by using science fiction as a research base into genetics, history, and other content disciples. The criteria of reinforcing and developing basic operations of thinking can also be used in this book, because it provides opportunities for the reader to observe, compare, classify, hypothesize, organize, apply, respond, and criticize using literary elements, character development, and figurative language through either discussion or written response. Different points of view that demonstrate conflicting emotions and purposes within its characters can also be explored because the main character, Maximum, who is called Max for short, is the leader of other winged kids-Fang, Angel, Nudge, Izzy and Gasman, and she has takes care of them because they have escaped from those who used them as experiments and desperately want them back. The rules that govern society and the characters of this book are skewed, because the children are being chased by Erasers that are out to destroy them so the experiments will remain a secret to the outside world. The children must make decisions on their own just to survive and the only trusted authority figure in the novel is Max herself. There are conflicts in the selection that the readers may recognize as each of the children must trust and protect each other and deal with stress and emotions that only they can control because of their special powers that are the result of their being different and on the run. *Maximum Ride: The Angel Experiment* deals with important subjects from the modern world, such as the moral decision concerning DNA experimentation, but it also manages to deal with the issues and experiences that every teenager and child goes through by questioning the reader's heart in a way that is entertaining, and at times, even funny.

5. White, A. (2005). *Surviving antarctica: Reality tv2083.* Seattle WA: Eos.This novel is written in the genre of historical science fiction. The author provides page-turning adventure that holds the interest of the reader, while using accurate and informative details in her writing process that will have readers learning history while having an adventurous journey through their own imaginations. Readers can integrate prior knowledge and make connections to the format of the novel, where in the year 2083, reality television rules the world. Children until they are fourteen do not go to school, but stay at home and watch EduTV for their education. This concept can offer a great research base for readers to discover other futuristic pieces of work, and the topic and vocabulary can be related to other academic disciplines, such as science, history, and social sciences. The novel offers extensive content that can reinforce and develop the basic operations of thinking, because it provides opportunities for the reader to observe, compare, classify, hypothesize, organize, apply, respond, and criticize using literary elements, character development, and figurative language through either discussion or written response. *Surviving Antarctica: Reality TV 2083* also offers readers with different points of view that demonstrate conflicting emotions and purposes within its characters, because those students who come from poor backgrounds only have the opportunity to go to college if they win a lottery, opposed to the rich who are given an education as a birthright. The novel demonstrates rules that the students will recognize as governing society and themselves, because even in their own lives they see the imbalance of the rich verses poor. In the novel, those who are poor live in crowded shacks and eat processed food chips that are flavored like broccoli and chicken. Life for these children has few comforts, and the only chance for them is finding a job or winning a scholarship through the lottery. The characters see authority figures as those who might give them a chance at a better life, and the main conflict that the reader might connect with is the competition between the characters to win scholarships for a better education. Dealing with the stress of this competition is greater than just winning, it is a life and death situation. Thousands of fourteen year olds jump at the chance to win big money and apply to the reality program, "Historical Survivor." The children must recreate historical situations, like the Civil War or The Alamo, down to each dangerous detail, as seen in the one portrayed in this scenario where five teenagers go to Antarctica and remake Robert Scott's race to the South Pole in 1912, an event that members of Scott's expedition did not survive. Emotions that readers might relate to that they can control is that in this novel the poor children find that true happiness only comes from within themselves; however, it does show if someone works hard and is diligent, he or she might succeed in his or her goal.

Appendix B

Book Talk

An example of a book talk in this section follows:

Anderson, L. H. (2000). *Fever 1783.* New York: Simon and Schuster.

 *Fever 1793, by Laurie Halse Anderson is a piece of historical fiction written for young adults. It is set in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in the summer of 1793, when Yellow Fever swept through the city killing ten percent of its population, five thousand people, before the first frost of winter. The book is ideal for ages twelve and up.*

 *The heroine is a fourteen-year-old girl, Matilda, who lives with her mother,*

 *grandfather, and Eliza, the cook who is a member of the local Free African Society, above the family’s coffee shop. The story begins as Mattie, as she is called by her family and friends, spends her time dreaming of turning her family’s business into one of the finest in the city, avoiding her chores, and eyeing the painter’s apprentice, Nathaniel Benson. Her friend Polly, who is employed in the coffee shop as a serving girl, does not show up for work and Mattie has to do all her chores. Mattie’s anger at Polly turns to grief when she learns that her friend has died suddenly in the night. Rumors concerning the spreading sickness reach the ears of Mattie’s family, and although they do not worry about it at first, a panic begins when the mayor of Philadelphia quarantines the city because of Yellow Fever. Mattie’s mother falls ill, and she ask her father to take Mattie out of the city to safety from the disease. Mattie and her grandfather try to leave the city, but they are turned back and are stranded without food or water. When Mattie falls victim to the fever, her grandfather finds help for her and she slowly recovers. However, when they return to the coffee shop, her mother and Eliza are gone. They barricade themselves inside their home, but thieves who are plundering the homes of those who have escaped and those who have died, kill her grandfather. Mattie is alone in a city filled with death and fear, and she must learn to survive on her own. She goes out into the city and comes upon a little girl named Nell, who is sitting with the body of her mother who has died of the fever. She takes Nell with her, and they find Eliza on the way back to the coffee shop. Mattie and Eliza care for Nell, others who are sick, and those who have survived the disease and are alone. With the help of Nathaniel, Mattie, begins to set up the coffee shop again for business. However, Mattie’s mother has not returned, and Mattie fears she has died.*

 *This novel is fast-paced and has many details about the history of this event. Readers learn about the everyday lives of Americans not long after the Civil War, freed slaves, and the hopelessness felt when a contagious disease that has no cure sweeps over a city. Readers also learn about a young girl who finds the value of family and friends, and how she overcomes her own loneliness and fear to help others. It is a book that fuses both reading enjoyment with learning of a period from America’s past.*