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Assignment #3

Evaluation Criteria for Contemporary Realistic Fiction

Bridge to Terabithia: Setting, Gender & Culture

Paterson, K. (1972). *Bridge to Terabithia*. NY: Crown.

Bridge to Terabithia takes place in a rural, economically depressed area during the 1970s. The people of this town are hard-working, God-fearing types, and the free-spirited Leslie doesn't fit in. At the beginning of the book, Jess has spent his summer training himself to run. He hopes to be the fastest of all the fifth grade boys. Leslie, the newcomer, races alongside the boys and wins. She doesn't seem to understand that only boys should be running; girls should be on the other field playing hopscotch. Jess finds himself drawn to this stereotype-breaking girl, and they become fast friends. Their friendship leads to the second, and probably most important, setting in the book, the make-believe land of Terabithia. Within their imaginary land, Jess and Leslie can be what they want to be—kings and queens in their own right who make their own rules.

Dear Mr. Henshaw: Style, Plot

Cleary, B. (1983). *Dear Mr. Henshaw*. NY: Morrow.

Dear Mr. Henshaw is cleverly written as a combination of letters and diary entries from a boy to his favorite author, Mr. Henshaw. The story follows Leigh Botts from the second grade to sixth, and readers get to see changes in his life as his parents divorce and Leigh moves to a different town and school. Early conflicts deal with a thief stealing food out of Leigh's lunch bag, and later turmoil comes from a dad who doesn't keep his promises. The resolutions to these conflicts are shared with readers through diary entries Leigh addresses to "Dear Mr. Pretend Henshaw." The book concludes with a visit from his dad and some understanding on Leigh's part. The unusual style of letter-writing and diary entries over the course of years, combined with gritty, realistic details from a young boy's life, make this a book readers won't easily forget.

Out of my Mind: Characters, Gender & Culture

Draper, S. (2010). *Out of my mind*. NY: Atheneum.

Most main characters in a book have a voice and carry on spoken dialogue with others. Melody, the main character in *Out of My Mind*, is almost eleven, and she has never spoken. Melody remembers every word that has ever been spoken to her, but her genius goes largely unnoticed because she also has cerebral palsy. Melody can't communicate with those around her, and she cannot take care of her own basic needs. An angelic caregiver and a school aide help Melody find ways to communicate, and her life changes dramatically. While Melody's life changes, readers also get to see how people's attitude

toward those with special needs doesn't necessarily change. The students around her, especially the members of the Whiz Kids team, even as they get to know Melody better, find it easier to try and forget she is a part of them.

Rules: Theme, Characters

Lord, C. (2008). *Rules*. NY: Scholastic.

Catherine's life revolves around her brother with autism and a set of rules she has created for him. Her attempts to make their life seem normal often clash with reality, and these rules lead to many of the themes in this book. One such rule is, "Some people think they know who you are, when really they don't." Catherine knows what this means as far as her brother is concerned, but she has to learn this for herself as she befriends a young man in a wheelchair whose only means of communication is a book of word cards. Her friendship with Jason is challenged when Catherine realizes she is afraid to introduce him to her "normal" friends because of what they will think. Catherine realizes she is going to have to stop worrying about other people's perceptions and give people a chance to show who they really are.

A Crooked Kind of Perfect: Theme, Setting

Urban, Linda. (2007). *A Crooked Kind of Perfect*. Orlando: Harcourt.

Zoe has big dreams, and if she had a piano instead of a Perfectone D-60 organ, she could make those dreams come true. Both the organ and Zoe's struggle with her imperfect life are central to the theme of this book. Zoe wants the perfect life she thinks everyone but her has already. She comes to realize that life isn't about perfection; it is about being surrounded by people who love and care for you in their own, imperfect way. The main setting of the story, Zoe's house—the place she feels trapped in because her mother works long hours and her father can't leave due to severe anxiety—is key to showing the growth and change this family goes through together. What Zoe sees as a trap earlier on becomes her place of happiness later.

Timmy Failure: Style, Character

Pastis, Stephan. (2013) *Timmy Failure*. Somerville, Mass. : Candlewick.

When the prologue of a book begins with the main character talking about the difficulties of driving a polar bear into someone's living room, you know you are in for an unusual treat. Timmy Failure, the narrator of our story, is a young boy with a great imagination and an even higher self-esteem. Timmy and his polar bear friend, Total, run Total Failure, Inc., a detective agency. The first person narrative style combined with simple illustrations on nearly every page keep readers entertained from the prologue clear to the finish. Timmy's unreliable narration makes his character and this book memorable as he goes from one detective case to another, avoiding the simple explanations in lieu of the much more fun, elaborate solutions.