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## Just What You're Looking For

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# Just What You're Looking For

## Abstract

**Overview:** Death is inevitable. It's something that we are all going to experience at some point in our lives, and it's all just a matter of when. Many people find death to be too abstract and frightening to contemplate, so it becomes an idea that is displaced to back of their minds to deal with later. For some people that later time comes before they know it. It comes before they are able to grasp the idea of what death is and therefore cannot understand it. Or it can come unexpectedly and without planning. Feeling alone, sad, angry, and miserable, the person left is without any ways to deal with the incident. That person could be twelve years old. According to the website, Grief Watch, "... around one in ten adolescents between the ages of ten and eighteen [have] experienced the loss of a close loved one" (n.p.). These children and young adults may have lost a grandparent, parent, aunt, uncle, or a friend. How do children specifically deal with a loss? One tool is young adult literature, also known as YAL. YAL is geared towards adolescents and intended to relate to their young lives. It includes many obstacles that young adults are facing today such as death. One young adult novel that teens can relate to is, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part Time Indian* by Sherman Alexie. The main character, Junior, experiences several challenges of living on a reservation while going to a nearby white public school. He overcomes the death of his honorable grandmother, close family friend, and beloved sister. In another novel, *Looking for Alaska* by John Green, a group of students at a boarding school look for answers for the death of a close friend. Both novels include relatable characters that adolescents can look to for ways to cope with their own loss. By looking at these two novels, we can see that coping with death is a challenge for adolescents, which most people don't see; this is important because adolescents can use young adult literature to grieve in a positive way. Young adult literature is written for the interest of adolescents by relating to their lives through the characters, their hardships, interests, and culture. Dr. Jonathon Ostenson, a proponent of YAL claims, "Young adult literature is most succinctly defined by Bucher and Hinton (2010) as a work of any genre that, 'provides a unique adolescent point of view, and reflects the concerns, interests, and challenges of young adults'" (n.p.). Thus, YAL is written to reflect the lives of young adults. Accordingly, when children can relate to what they are reading, then the novel and story becomes of interest to them. This is imperative for teens who dislike reading. Yet, when they read YAL, it becomes a tool that can be used for development. In Lorna Collier's article, "YA Literature-Where Teens Find Themselves" she writes, "YA lit is an invaluable resource in today's English classrooms, engaging students with relevant topics, relatable characters, and accessible language" (6). This is because young adult literature is a relatively new category of literature that reflects the lives of children today more than the classics that are required of many students to read. Specifically, it is more suitable in their lives than reading about challenges that young adults faced in a time that is irrelevant to the 21st century. Thus, adolescents can learn as much, if not more, from YAL than other resources available to them.

## Keywords

Writing

## **Keilan Maynard**

### **Just What You're Looking For**

Death is inevitable. It's something that we are all going to experience at some point in our lives, and it's all just a matter of when. Many people find death to be too abstract and frightening to contemplate, so it becomes an idea that is displaced to back of their minds to deal with later. For some people that later time comes before they know it. It comes before they are able to grasp the idea of what death is and therefore cannot understand it. Or it can come unexpectedly and without planning. Feeling alone, sad, angry, and miserable, the person left is without any ways to deal with the incident. That person could be twelve years old. According to the website, Grief Watch, "...around one in ten adolescents between the ages of ten and eighteen [have] experienced the loss of a close loved one" (n.p.). These children and young adults may have lost a grandparent, parent, aunt, uncle, or a friend.

How do children specifically deal with a loss? One tool is young adult literature, also known as YAL. YAL is geared towards adolescents and intended to relate to their young lives. It includes many obstacles that young adults are facing today such as death. One young adult novel that teens can relate to is, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part Time Indian* by Sherman Alexie. The main character, Junior, experiences several challenges of living on a reservation while going to a nearby white public school. He overcomes the death of his honorable grandmother, close family friend, and beloved sister. In another novel, *Looking for Alaska* by John Green, a group of students at a boarding school look for answers for the death of a close friend. Both novels include relatable characters that adolescents can look to for ways to cope with their own loss. By looking at these two novels, we can see that coping with death is a challenge for adolescents, which most people don't see; this is important because adolescents can use young adult literature to grieve in a positive way.

Young adult literature is written for the interest of adolescents by relating to their lives through the characters, their hardships, interests, and culture. Dr. Jonathon Ostenson, a proponent of YAL claims, "Young adult literature is most succinctly defined by Bucher and Hinton (2010) as a work of any genre that, 'provides a unique adolescent point of view, and reflects the concerns, interests, and challenges of young adults'" (n.p.). Thus, YAL is written to reflect the lives of young adults. Accordingly, when children can relate to what they are reading, then the novel and story becomes of interest to them. This is imperative for teens who dislike reading. Yet, when

they read YAL, it becomes a tool that can be used for development. In Lorna Collier's article, "YA Literature-Where Teens Find Themselves" she writes, " YA lit is an invaluable resource in today's English classrooms, engaging students with relevant topics, relatable characters, and accessible language" (6). This is because young adult literature is a relatively new category of literature that reflects the lives of children today more than the classics that are required of many students to read. Specifically, it is more suitable in their lives than reading about challenges that young adults faced in a time that is irrelevant to the 21st century. Thus, adolescents can learn as much, if not more, from YAL than other resources available to them.

One significant aspect of young adult literature is that it includes challenges that these young adults experience. The thought of death and dying can be immensely complex as well as difficult to grasp. Many questions go unanswered while teens wonder what has happened to their loved one. They do reach a point in which they are able to contemplate the end of life, but they do not express their feelings and emotions. According to Sandra DeMinco in the article "Young Adult Reactions To Death In Literature And Life" children reach an age when they think about death. She writes, "From about the age of ten, children understand the permanence and universality of death, and that it is governed by certain laws of nature. Children twelve years of age and over are also able to ponder life and death's more enduring and complex repercussions" (n.p.). They can think about death and dying, but they can't communicate it and are "...often reluctant to express themselves." (n.p.). That is, these children don't express their thoughts and feelings on death because they don't know how to; children don't know what the normal way to cope is. Before 10 years old, children can experience a loss of a loved one and have a very slight, if any, idea of what death is. When children don't know what death is, it is typical of them to imagine what it is like, and this imagining can be detrimental to their health. "Grief Watch," a website devoted to the understanding and dealing with the loss of loved one, explains, "Imagination is often far worse than reality" (n.p.). In other words, they create their own understanding of what death is, which can be very frightening to children. Although adolescents can think about death, it remains a complex idea for them as well as young children.

Through story telling in young adult literature, the complexity of death can be understood. Young adult literature presents stories that travel through experiences and challenges that adolescents face. When the characters experience a death, the reader does as well. Likewise, as the character develops after the death, the reader does too. Furthermore, just as people can learn from others experiences and mistakes, adolescents can learn from the characters in the novels. In Danielle Lowe's article, "Helping Children Cope Through Literature" she writes, "Real life does

indeed call for real books: books that provide information, comfort, and models for coping with life's difficult times" (2). Ultimately, adolescents can get information, comfort, and models from reading young adult literature. Even Junior from, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part Time Indian*, wants books to help him understand and feel better. When describing the death of his grandmother and family friend he says, " And I hoped I could find stories that would help me" (172). When an adolescent reads this novel, he/she will learn from Junior's experience that literature can help them cope. By becoming involved with the story, young adults can understand death. To illustrate, Lowe explains that, "...the exposure of life crisis literature helps them to gain a greater understanding of the world and to empathize with others in our society" (12). By reading, teens can discover other real life experiences and learn from them. Therefore, young adult literature is a guiding resource that provides knowledge that can only be learned through experience.

Along with providing knowledge, YAL also gives support to its readers. Sometimes parents of adolescents don't know that a child may be lacking support or simply may be unaware of how to help them. According to Dr. Alan D. Wolfelt, " Sometimes we assume that teenagers will find comfort from their peers, but when it comes to death, this may not be true" (n.p.). Thus, the support that these young adults need can be found in YAL. It is a good resource that parents can easily provide to their children. Moreover, for adolescents, YAL can be less frightening than talking to adults about their feelings and they can find the answers to their questions. Danielle Lowe writes, "In American society, it is taboo to discuss death with children" (4). Children are not able to understand and learn much about death because nobody is talking to them about it. Instead, they can learn about death from reading YAL, and reading will in turn create an avenue of discussion between the teen and parent. Unfortunately, teens are often not receiving the support and answers from adults so they must look to another source, which can be young adult literature.

When the characters and their experiences in young adult novels are relatable, the story becomes more intriguing to the readers. Specifically, the characters are teenagers that experience the same challenges as adolescents face. The readers can form a connection between themselves and the characters in the books. Consequently, the connection sucks the young reader into the story line, which enables them to experience the same emotions as the characters. Jeff Grabmeier writes for Ohio State University communications and claims, "Researchers at Ohio State University examined what happened to people who, while reading a fictional story, found themselves feeling the emotions, thoughts, beliefs and internal responses of one of the characters as if they

were their own—a phenomenon the researchers call ‘experience-taking’” (n.p.). This means, as people read they become involved in the story and experience the same emotions and reactions as the characters themselves. This is crucial for young readers who need someone or something to relate to in their time of need. When in need of support, it is often a challenge for adolescents to feel comfort from those who express that they know what they are going through, when in fact they do not. Every person, young or old, has different factors to account for when dealing with a challenging situation. So, when a teen can read about a situation that “hits home” for them it can feel very comforting. Lowe writes, “Often the reader is looking for a solution to his/her own personal life situation and feel more at ease when learning that he/she is not the ‘only one’ dealing with a life crisis” (2). With relatable characters and experiences, adolescents can feel comfort from reading young adult literature.

There are many different reactions teens may experience when learning about the death of a loved one. This includes but is not limited to sorrow, depression, anxiety, guilt, blame, anger, and denial. To represent how they feel about death, these emotions are expressed by characters in young adult novels. Sherman Alexie includes multiple reactions to death that a single character must deal with in his novel, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part Time Indian*. The main character, Junior, faces the loss of his grandmother, a family friend, and his sister. After the death of his grandmother and family friend Junior says, “I felt helpless and stupid” (171). Junior also faces a struggle with happiness and strength. He explains to the reader his lack of motivation to get out of bed each morning to go to school and that he considered dropping out. Readers who have experienced a death can relate to his feelings and his new view on life. Through this connection, the reader discovers that Junior continues to go to school and finds support from his classmates. This gives the reader a sense of hope, which is important for those who are experiencing a similar pain.

Pain from a loss isn’t portrayed the same way in every young adult book, which is important because not all children experience the same types of losses nor do they react the same. In *Looking for Alaska* by John Green, a group of friends at a boarding school must come to terms with the death of a very close friend, Alaska. When hearing the news of a car accident that resulted in her death, one of the main characters, Pudge, feels guilty and says, “I thought: its all my fault” (139). He blames himself for letting her go. He also experiences denial and believes, “Alaska is hiding in the woods and she’s not dead, she’s just hiding” (140). It takes time for him to come to terms with the incident. Many adolescents experience guilt after a death. Often they wonder if they could have done something differently to prevent the tragedy. Guilt can be

followed by harmful emotions such as anger and madness towards themselves. However, teens as well as characters show different reactions to the same experiences. Colonel, another main character, reacts with fury and resentment towards Alaska. He spends much time crying out how stupid he thinks she is for bringing this on herself and leaving them in such an awful way. Although they were best friends, he expresses his hatred for her. These reactions are unfavorable because he is showing the person he once loved in a negative light. Granted these emotions are not favorable, but young adults experience them. By the end of the story, both Pudge and Colonel learn how to handle their reactions. Consequently, if the readers can relate to these characters, then they can also learn from the reactions. They not only learn how to manage their feelings but also that there is a bright side. Pudge and Colonel's reactions display the differences in responses and emotions young adults might have on death. It is important to recognize that these differences exist between novels because they show a variety of perspectives on death. Therefore, adolescents may relate to some characters more than others or relate to each in differing ways. An example of this can be seen when considering children who lost a best friend and feels as if they had something to do with it. They may be asking themselves questions such as: What could I have done differently? Why didn't I stop her? If you know of an adolescent who is experiencing these emotions, they may be able to relate to Pudge. Likewise, if you know a teen who is full of anger and resentment, they may be able to relate to Colonel. When recognizing these differences, adolescents can learn the most from the characters they are reading about. Just as young adults relate to characters in different ways, they also cope with death in different ways. When dealing with a loss, individuals will have their own way of managing it based on factors such as, who it happened to, what happened, and how it happened. Lowe explains, "It is essential for children to learn the coping skills needed to successfully handle the distress, frustration, and anger that is a part of their daily life and to emerge with a sense of self-control, hope, and resilience" (2). Distress, frustration, and anger are reactions that adolescents have to death. When dealing with these, it is important for them to find strategies to manage their feelings. These strategies can be found in many young adult novels that incorporate death and dying as a main theme. In *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part Time Indian*, Junior makes a list of everything that gives him joy in life. When speaking of his list he says, "That's the only way I managed to make it through all of that death and change" (176). His list is a constructive resource that can be developed by young readers looking for something to make them feel happy. Also, Junior feels happy when he reminisces about his grandmother's greatness. He explains, "...my grandmother was smart and kind and had traveled to about 100 different Indian

reservations, but that had nothing to do with her greatness. My grandmother's greatest gift was tolerance" (155). Therefore, reminiscing is another resourceful tool that can be used by young readers. Rather than dwelling on the unfortunate events that have occurred, Junior is thinking positively to make him feel better.

On the other hand in *Looking for Alaska*, Pudge and Colonel cope with Alaska's death in an entirely different way. They try to uncover the mystery of how she died so they can understand why it occurred. Rather than sitting around playing video games and moping, they use what little energy they have to find answers. After all, knowing answers can help a person have closure with the loss. Unfortunately, they are unable to find complete answers; although they reach a point in which they understand that there is nothing more they can do. Pudge says, "...the not knowing would not keep me from caring, and I would always love Alaska Young, my crooked neighbor, with all my crooked heart" (218). Pudge, along with Colonel move on without forgetting her. This example is important for adolescents who also can't find all the answers. Yet from reading this novel, they can learn that the answers are not always available, but that does not mean that they should not continue on with their life. This story shows the importance of living without forgetting. Each young adult novel presents death and reactions to it in various ways, which gives many options to young readers looking for the one that best relates to their experience.

Experiences In *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part Time Indian*, help Junior develop and learn about forgiveness. The death of his sister, his grandmother, and family friend are very taxing on Junior mentally. At first, he lacks understanding for why he is losing so many important people in his life. As a result to the deaths, he blames himself because he can find no other explanation. When thinking about his sister's death, Junior claims, "she had burned to death because [he] had decided that [he] wanted to spend [his] life with white people" (211). It can be a challenge to recognize that not every loss is from other's actions. It can rather be a mistake or something that simply happens to everyone at a point in their lives. Along with blame and guilt, Junior explains, "I felt helpless and stupid" (171). He doesn't know what to do, how to feel, or how to react to the situation that has been handed to him. Fortunately, Junior later discovers forgiveness. He says, "I hoped and prayed that they would someday forgive me for leaving them" (229). Junior knows that he can no longer blame himself for the deaths, and rather he looks for forgiveness. He also realizes that life will go on. Junior mentions, "I felt hopeful and silly about the future" (227). He has dreams for himself indicating that he is moving ahead. This is similar to adolescents who may blame the world for their losses, but later discover ways to present their emotions in a

positive way. They learn to live in a way that would make whomever they lost, proud and happy. For teens who are unable to do this on their own, they can learn from Junior about forgiveness and moving on with their life.

Much about death and dying is discovered by the characters in YAL, with forgiveness being a common theme. In *Looking for Alaska*, Pudge struggles with acknowledging that he lost his friend and he learns that things happen that we don't always have control over. Upon hearing the news that his best friend Alaska died in a car accident, Pudge comes to the conclusion that she is just in hiding. He expresses his feelings when saying, "...I felt better, because she had not died at all" (140). He refuses to believe that she is really gone. Furthermore, Pudge feels guilty and tells his friend, Colonel, "We should have stopped her" (145). He is convinced that there is something he could have done to prevent her death. Pudge does, however, learn as time progresses and comes to accept that he will never see her again. He reveals, "But ultimately I do not believe that she was only matter" (220). In using past tense this exhibits his recognition that she was once a person with a life to live but she is no longer living in the world. In addition, Pudge learns forgiveness. He states, "So I know she forgives me, just as I forgive her" (221). Forgiveness plays a major role in this novel as it helps Pudge deal with the guilt that he has built up. He also forgives her for leaving him so suddenly. In short, teens can travel along side the characters as they grow and develop through one of life's toughest challenges: losing a loved one.

*Looking for Alaska* depicts teen life very well which can be important for helping them learn about losing a loved one; however parents are opposed to this novel and deem it too inappropriate for their children. Some concern is that it includes sexuality and profanity. One parent tells "The Knoxville Journal," "...she objected not only to her child being required to read this book, but that it is not listed with a warning" (n.p.). She amongst other parents may feel that young adult literature should warn its readers and parents of anything that could be questionable. By doing this, the parents can have more control over what their children are reading. Parents don't want their children reading about sex, which this novel does include. Many parents find the sex scene between Alaska and Pudge not only inappropriate but also condoning teen sex and sex before marriage. Jen Lamoureux, a special education teacher, explains what she has heard as parent criticisms to this book and writes, "The parent complained that the book doesn't warn against sexually transmitted diseases or the risk of pregnancy." A problem for parents is that Green, the author, does not include why teen sex is wrong and possibly harmful. Furthermore, parents often wonder what children get out of reading young adult literature, and especially books with sexuality and profanity. In the journal the parent also asks, "What literary benefit

would my son gain from reading this book?" She questions why the book is beneficial in a literary sense for school and education. Some young adult literature, like *Looking for Alaska*, includes information that goes against what parents feel their children should be reading about. Thus, children are banned from reading YAL that could help them cope with the troubles of losing a loved one.

Just as *Looking for Alaska* includes sexuality and profanity, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part Time Indian* also faces backlash by parents for the same reasons. R. Wolfe Baldassarro writes for Banned Books Awareness and explains, "In June, 2009, a parent group at Antioch High School in Chicago demanded its removal from a summer reading program calling it 'racist,' and 'vulgar' for its language, descriptions of masturbation, sexually-themed jokes, and subjects such as alcoholism and violence" (n.p.). Racism, vulgar language, sex, alcoholism, and violence are all touchy topics that parents tend to avoid their children being exposed to. They find that exposure promotes these behaviors in their children. Ruth Fuller writes for the *Chicago Tribune* and claims, "[A parent] said she understands kids use profanity, but if it is part of the curriculum, the students will believe the school condones it" (n.p.). It is believed that because the children are being exposed to these issues in school that they will learn that the school is not against things like alcoholism, sex, vulgar language, and violence. Due to these issues being included in young adult literature, parents are claiming it to be too inappropriate for their children to read. Yet, what parents consider "inappropriate" is preventing teens from receiving the assistance they need to deal with their loss.

When parents determine that young adult literature is too inappropriate for their children, they fail to consider other sources that are easily available to their teens that include sexuality and profanity. The parents against *Looking for Alaska* and *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part Time Indian* don't realize that the children are being exposed to what they consider to be inappropriate in other areas of their lives. Books help them to understand these things and themselves. The Parents Television Council reports that children spend an average of four hours a day watching television. Some of the favorite shows are *Desperate Housewives*, *One Tree Hill*, and *The Simpsons* (Facts and T.V Statistics, n.p.). These shows are not targeted toward the teen age group; however, there is a high percentage of teenagers watching these shows. Since the broadcasters are targeting the adult age range it should be of no surprise that sexuality and profanity are included. The Parents Television Council also reports that, "On December 10th, 2003, Fox failed to bleep the f-word and the s-word during the Billboard Music Awards." There were over 1 million 2-11 year olds as well as over 1 million 12-17 year olds (Facts and T.V.

Statistics, n.p.). All over the country, children and adolescents heard crude language. It does not seem logical to attack young adult literature due to sexuality and profanity when teens are exposed to it everyday from the media. It is part of their lives whether they read about it or not. Ultimately, YAL can provide children with an outlet that is important to have while grieving. Any inappropriateness a child learns could be from other outside sources.

Aside from teenagers being exposed to what their parents consider “inappropriate” on a daily basis, the novels are more than sexuality and swearing. John Green, the author of *Looking For Alaska*, has said, “I write books for teenagers because I vividly remember what it felt like to be a teen facing everyday and epic dangers. I don’t write to protect them. It’s far too late for that” (qtd. in Baldassarro, n.p.). His books are intended to be realistic to the challenges and lifestyle of young adults. Nicki, the author of the blog, “Wicked Awesome Books,” writes, “John Green isn’t promoting deviant behavior. He’s showing us what already exists, but more importantly, he’s showing us that there is always hope and life does go on” (n.p.). His purpose isn’t to teach his readers that sex, swearing, and destructive behavior is acceptable, his purpose is to give the readers an experience about life and its lessons. Likewise, in the *Absolutely True Diary of a Part Time Indian*, it is not intended to be a book about sex and profanity. The chairman of the English department at Antioch High School argues for the book and tells *Chicago Tribune*:

While there is graphic language, keep in mind that Arnold [the main character] uses this language to express his own feelings to himself or to exchange taunts with his best friend... He never uses this language in front of girls, to his family or to other adults, and he doesn’t act on such thoughts. He is consistently polite. (n.p.).

Arnold’s actions do not show the readers that it is appropriate to have bad behavior. On the other hand, Sherman Alexie is displaying the true thoughts and emotions that teenagers have. Simply because a novel may have language that is not proper or actions that are considered disobedient does not follow that a novel is inappropriate. YAL depicts real life situations that children deal with everyday, which includes swearing and naughty behavior as well as how to cope with death. This is of greater importance to young adults in their time of trouble.

As human beings, we have much to learn about death and ways to deal with it. Typically adolescents have a challenging time understanding death. Young adult literature gives answers to adolescents looking for ways to manage their feelings from losing a loved one. YAL includes a variety of novels that depict death and the reactions of characters in different ways. This is important because teenagers all have different perspectives on their losses and need to find ways to cope that specifically help them. With relevant cultural aspects and relatable characters, young

adult literature connects to the teenage lifestyle. It provides a gateway of exploration and understanding that adolescents may not find anywhere else. Furthermore, it assists in the development of a discussion of death between parents and their children that would otherwise not occur. Any arguments that parents may have against YAL are irrelevant because the purpose of YAL is to educate the young readers on the real world by providing life like stories. Anything that parents deem inappropriate is something that they are allowing their child to be exposed to in other manners such as on television. John Green's *Looking for Alaska* and Alexie Sherman's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part Time Indian* present real world stories with challenges that adolescents face everyday. They also include useful coping mechanisms used by the characters that readers can implement in their own lives. It is important for adolescents to know how to deal with a loss because we all experience it. So, if we all experience the loss of a loved one shouldn't we expose adolescents to more young adult literature so they can cope with their losses in a productive and healthy way?

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