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Trends in K-12 Literature and Related Media

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Trends in K-12 Literature: Verse Novels

The first verse novel I ever read was Sonya Sones’s *What My Mother Doesn’t Know*. I was, at the time, teaching seventh- and eighth-grade Language Arts and Literature. One of the students in my homeroom brought the book to my attention. A reluctant reader herself, I noticed she had read the book many, many times in the course of the school year. I couldn’t help but find out what was so appealing about the book, that the girl who “hated to read” couldn’t help but continually renew this particular book from the school library. I asked the student if I could borrow it. Reluctantly, she said I could, making me promise to read it quickly so she could get it back.

The book, about a middle school girl who tells the reader about her trials and tribulations of being a Jewish teen who was worried about her first kiss and other typical teen behavior had me hooked from the get-go. And the fact that it was written in a form I was unaccustomed to – verse – intrigued me, too. I read the book in one evening, partly because the plot kept me enthralled and partly because there were such few words on a page, even though so much was said with so little.

I quickly learned that Sones had written other books in verse, and I encouraged my reluctant-reader to try one of her other books. I was excited to learn she loved them as well, although even until she graduated from high school last year, she would still claim *What My Mother Doesn’t Know* was still her favorite. Since then, I have been book talking verse novels to all students, but particularly to reluctant readers. I have found that many students, who have never finished a novel, will gladly read a verse novel because they read so quickly. The literature teacher in me, however, is also pleased that although there are few words on a page, many thoughts, ideas, images, and events can be described in these few pages. These books have true literary merit.

Novels in verse began appearing on publisher’s YA lists about fifteen years ago. Many of the books at that time covered such heavy issues as teen pregnancy and school violence. Although initially the first verse novels were written from a teenage voice for teenage readers, today’s verse novels are just as apt to be historical fiction or biographies. Multicultural literature has also caught on to the verse novel trend, including *After the Death of Anna Gonzales* by Terri Fields. According to Jill Heritage Maze in her article “Poetic License, “through verse, . . . author’s [are] able to craft authentic teen voices and amplify a story’s emotional punch, all at a pace impossible to reach through prose.” Young readers may think they are getting away with an easy read, when in reality, they are getting an incredible amount of artfully composed literature.

It is not likely this trend in verse-novels will end anytime soon. According to Ed Sullivan in his article “Fiction or Poetry?,” teachers and librarians alike have found verse-novels to be an “appealing, accessible introduction for students turned off by poetry or reluctant to read it.” The verse in these books is not like the poetry that students are forced to read in their literature classes – they do not require analysis. The poems are straight-forward, written in a narrative or free-verse style while retaining, “the rhythm and succinctness of traditional poetry.” (Sullivan)

Finally, let us not forget the final reason this trend will not be going anywhere soon. Jane Sullivan in her article, “Readers Well-Versed in This Form of Novel,” verse-novels are “far from being an arcane fad, verse novels . . . may reignite the joy of reading for disillusioned people who don’t feel they have the time or inclination for vast tomes of dense prose. There’s something very user-friendly about those pages with their short lines and wide blank spaces.” There is the practical attraction to students to read verse novels – they are shorter and faster to read, “readers quickly forget the writing form and become engaged in the story” (Vanneman 23). The large amount of white space on the pages of these books most definitely appeals to students who are reluctant readers, or who simply procrastinated and need to read something quickly.

Keeping in mind the great appeal these books have to reluctant readers, it is important to point out one of the “controversies” regarding verse-novels. Where should they be shelved? Should they be shelved along with the fiction – for they are make-believe stories? Should they be placed in the poetry section – for they truly are poetry? Or should they be placed in a separate section all their own? This is certainly something librarians need to think about as this trend in literature has been growing in popularity and certainly does not seem to be going away anytime soon. At one time, educated people could recite “large chunks of Victorian and Edwardian verse epics;” (Sullivan) and then just as poets were complaining that no one was reading poetry anymore, the “form reinvented itself as the verse novel.” (Sullivan). Simply put, this “trend” has been around for thousands of years in some form or another.

And today, the audience for these books is much more far-reaching. At one time, epic poems were for the highly educated. Today, anyone who can read can find a verse-novel that is right for them – from Sharon Creech’s *Love that Dog* to Karen Hesse’s *Out of the Dust*, to Terri Fields *After the Death of Anna Gonzolas*. Consulting various professional articles on the topic of verse novels and reading numerous book reviews from publications like *Booklist*, *Horn Book*, *School Library Journal*, and others, I’ve compiled an annotated list of verse novels. There are verse novels written for tween, middle readers, young adults, and adults alike, covering a range of interest levels and topics so fellow library media specialists can find something for each of their students.

**Verse Novels: An Annotated Bibliography**

**Brown, Susan Taylor. *Hugging the Rock*. New York: Tricycle Press, 2006. Grades 3-6.**

An ALA Notable/Best Book, in this novel in verse Rachel expresses her emotions about the recent divorce of her parents, what it’s like to live without her mother, who seemingly abandoned the family, and her changing feelings toward her father. Although the verse gives readers only the information they need to know, without creating characters of depth, this is a quick read for early readers of young adult fiction.

**Creech, Sharon. *Heartbeat*. New York: Joanna Catler Books, 2004. Grades 5-8.**

Both a *Publishers Weekly* Starred Review and *School Library Journal* Starred Review, in *Heartbeat,* twelve-year-old Annie struggles with life the year her mother gets pregnant (at her age? – gross), her live-in grandfather begins getting ill, and her best friend begins pulling away from her. In free-verse, Creech uses lyrical phrases of poetry to portray the inner emotions of Annie.

**Fields, Terri. *After the Death of Anna Gonzales*. New York: H. Holt, 2002. Grades 6-12.**

In forty-seven natural and direct poems, each told from a different person’s perspective, including students, teachers, and other school staff, *After the Death of Anna Gonzales* shows the brutal effects a teen girl’s suicide has on students and staff. Some people seem to remain unaffected while others blame themselves. Many of the poems rely heavily on stereotypes; however, this is a book that many will read over and over despite that the individual voice in each poem doesn’t quite allow each speaker to take on a life of his/her own. Anna’s suicide note, included at the end, is sure to raise provocative discussion in classrooms or book clubs.

**Frost, Helen. *Keesha’s House*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003. Grade 7-12. Hi-Low.**

A Printz Honor Book, in this novel told in a series of dramatic monologues that are poetic and personal, seven teens dealing with problems such as pregnancy, homosexuality, and abuse describe in verse what led them to leave their homes and find shelter at an adolescent safe-house in their city. With the help of Keesha, a fellow runaway, characters find a new *home* in this safe *house*. With lots of line breaks that make for easy reading, readers will be drawn to characters portrayed with aching realism who speak the poetry in ordinary words.

**Roy, Jennifer. *Yellow Star*. New York: Marshall Cavendish, 2006. Grades 5-8.**

Inspired by the real experiences of the author’s aunt, this story takes readers into the Lodz ghetto at the start of WWII. Following Syvia from the time she is 4 ½ to the time of her rescue when she is ten, this book shows the Holocaust and is atrocities through the eyes of child who struggles to understand what is going on and why her world has suddenly been turned upside down. In simple free-verse, Syvia’s voice naturally matures as she grows from a very young child who does not understand what is happening around her to a young girl who is consciously fighting for survival.

**Rylant, Cynthia. *God Went to Beauty School*. New York: HarperTempest, 2003. Grades 6-12.**

This *Horn Book* starred book explores the question, “What if God is just a guy who plays poker, watches movies, and owns his own nail salon?” In this collection of thought-provoking and insightful verse, each poem begins lightheartedly with God attempting some normal, everyday activity – like getting a desk job – but the poems wind up providing some serious food for thought.

**Sones, Sonya. *One of Those Hideous Books Where the Mother Dies*. New York: Simon and**

**Schuster Books for Young Readers, 2004. Grades 6-12.**

In this solid and well-written novel in verse, after fifteen-year-old Ruby’s mother dies, she is forced to leave her home, her school, and her friends to live with her father – whom she’s never met and knows almost nothing about. Her father turns out to be Whip Logan, a famous movie actor in Hollywood. As Ruby comes to really know her father and learn why he really divorced her mother before Ruby was born, secrets will be revealed, and acceptance won’t be far behind. Although some parts of the plot are predictable, Ruby’s story is gripping and enjoyable.

**Turner, Ann Warren. *Hard Hit*. New York: Scholastic Press, 2006. Grades 6-12.**

Sophomore Mark Warren has it all – great friends, a beautiful girlfriend, and he’s a star-pitcher for his high school baseball team. But all of this suddenly means nothing when Mark learns his hero – his father – has been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. Turner uses her intense and lyrical poetry to paint the reality of gradual loss and the guilt that often accompanies it.

**Wild, Margaret. *Jinx*. New York: Simon Pulse, 2002. Grades 8-12.**

Connected poems tell this story of Jen. The always reliable, dependable, and predictable girl at school finds her perfect world turned upside down when her first boyfriend dies. But when her second boyfriend dies as well, Jen begins calling herself Jinx – for that must certainly be what she is. With the help of her understanding mother and a good friend, however, Jen learns to deal with the death of these two boys and outgrows her self-imposed nickname.

**Woodson, Jacqueline. *Locomotion*. New York: Putnam’s, 2003. Grades 5-8.**

Eleven-year-old Lonnie Collins Motion, “Locomotion,” has had a rough life. At seven, his parents died in a fire, and his little sister Lily was adopted while he was sent to live in a foster home. Inspired by his teacher to put this thoughts and emotions down on paper, Locomotion finds poetry is the best way to do it. As Lonnie experiments with forms including sonnets, haiku, and epistle poems, although most poems are simple free-verse, readers will laugh, cry, sigh, and grow as Lonnie finds love and acceptance at his foster home and while finding a way to stay in contact with the little sister he thought he had lost.

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