

Nurturing social and emotional development in gifted teenagers through young adult literature

Thomas P. Hébert and Richard Kent

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Abstract

*This article examines how developmental bibliotherapy featuring young adult literature serves as an effective strategy to address emotional issues in the lives of gifted teenagers. Following a discussion of bibliotherapy and a rationale for its use with gifted students, a description of a young adult novel entitled *The Mosquito Test* is presented. The authors then describe how a group of intelligent teenagers in a high school English class-room responded to the novel in a bibliotherapeutic fashion. Also provided is an annotated bibliography of current young adult literature, appropriate for use with bibliotherapy in secondary classrooms.*

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Thomas P. Hébert is assistant professor of Educational Psychology in the College of Education at The University of Georgia in Athens, Georgia, a Research Fellow of the Torrance Center for Creative Studies, and a contributing editor for Roeper Review. Richard Kent teaches English, directs the Writing Center, and coaches soccer at Mountain Valley High School in Rumford, Maine. Mr. Kent is the author of a volume of poetry, two young adult novels, and a book on the use of literary portfolios with secondary students.

We've all laughed and cried as our favorite characters succeeded and failed, because good literature is built on life itself - and life's not always easy!

Cornett & Cornett, (1980, p. 7)

The school year begins with a summer-refreshed high school English teacher greeting a group of gifted students enrolled in an advanced literature class. Excited about exploring the worlds of Hemingway, Steinbeck, and other literary giants with intelligent, energetic young adults during the upcoming year, she is exhilarated by her students' eagerness and intellectual vitality. As the weeks go by, she spends hours preparing lessons she is certain will enthrall her young literary protégés. Challenging assignments are tackled and high quality work is produced. Her students become prolific young writers and critical consumers of literature.

As the school year progresses, this dedicated teacher continues to enjoy her work with these gifted students yet realizes that not all is well with their world. It occurs to her that she has assumed that these gifted young people are free of worries, forgetting that although gifted students often appear to have so much going for them, and seem capable of handling life's difficulties, they actually may need the emotional support of a caring individual. While enjoying their written reflections, she becomes aware that these gifted teenagers are often troubled by personal issues and often overwhelmed by the daily pressures facing young adults. Reading their journals, she understands that they are often unable to release building tensions and stresses. She wonders how she can help.

Gifted young adults are often highly sensitive and very aware of their feelings. They can also be intense in their depth of feeling (Silverman, 1993). Gifted teenagers who exhibit a heightened level of sensitivity, an intensity, or emotional overexcitability (Piechowski, 1997) need supportive adults who view these characteristics positively and have a clear understanding of their frustrations and anxiety. Teachers who work with gifted youngsters also need practical classroom strategies to address these students' feelings and to create supportive environments where students feel comfortable expressing how they feel.

This article describes how young adult literature serves as a therapeutic tool, which addresses the emotional issues of gifted teenagers, and emphasizes the importance of having close friendships with people who appreciate their sensitivity. Following a discussion on bibliotherapy and its use with gifted students, a description of *The Mosquito Test*, a novel about young adult friendships, is presented. Students' responses to the novel are described.

Young Adult Literature as a Therapeutic Tool

As adult literature reflects society and culture (Ouzts, 1994) so does young adult literature reflect adolescent society and issues facing teenagers. Although secondary English literature teachers have recognized the positive impact of young adult literature in their regular classrooms, this genre has not been given the same importance in honors level English classes (Bushman & Bushman, 1997; Rakow, 1991). Although gifted teenagers are often voracious consumers of literature, it is their ability to respond

emotionally to the literature that is critical. Incorporating young adult literature, which addresses the moral and emotional concerns of young adults, in honors level and advanced English literature classes, provides gifted teenagers the same experience as their peers to benefit from the young adult literature in helping them understand their adolescent experiences.

Along with being asked to read classic literature, gifted students should be provided age-appropriate novels written by respected authors in young adult literature (Carlsen, 1980; Halsted, 1994). Young adult literature offers gifted students many well-written, carefully crafted and emotionally powerful novels which can be used to effectively teach all aspects of literary analysis as well as provide students opportunities to develop an understanding of themselves (Rakow, 1991). Halsted (1994) highlights another important feature of young adult literature stating that because authors often write about what they know best, many authors are gifted and were gifted adolescents, the characters in young adult literature are often characterized as gifted. Seldom, however, is the giftedness pointed out; it is simply there to be recognized by gifted teenagers who see something of themselves in the story.

When teenagers see something of themselves in a novel, identify with a character from the story, reflect on that identification, and under-go some emotional growth as a result of that reading experience, a teacher should be delighted. Such an authentic interaction with a novel that results in affective growth is referred to as bibliotherapy (Adderholdt-Elliott & Eller, 1989; Hynes & Hynes-Berry, 1986). Bibliotherapy is defined as the use of reading to produce affective change and promote personality growth and development (Lenkowsky, 1987). Bibliotherapy is an attempt to help young people understand themselves and cope with problems by providing literature relevant to their personal situations and developmental needs at appropriate times. Middle and high school teachers using this approach believe that reading can influence a student's thinking and behavior. Moreover, through guided discussions, selected readings can focus on specific needs of gifted students.

To clarify the appropriate use of bibliotherapy with students in school, a distinction is made between clinical bibliotherapy and developmental bibliotherapy. Clinical bibliotherapy involves psychotherapeutic methods used by skilled practitioners with individuals experiencing serious emotional problems. Developmental bibliotherapy is helping students in their normal health and development. One of the advantages of this approach is that teachers can identify the concerns of their students and address the issues before they become problems, helping students to move through predictable stages of adolescence with knowledge of what to expect and examples of how other teenagers have dealt with the same concerns.

Halsted (1994) proposes that young adult literature can hook teenagers emotionally; hence, the bibliotherapy process using young adult novels is easy to understand. The therapeutic experience begins when gifted teenagers identify themselves with one or more characters in a novel. Teenage readers may feel relief that they are not the only ones facing a specific problem. The reader learns vicariously how to solve some of the problems upon reflecting how the characters in the book solved their problem. As young people enjoy reading a novel, they learn vicariously through the characters in the book.

Adolescents are usually able to deal with common emotional concerns. However, emotional upheavals experienced by sensitive teenagers are sometimes overwhelming and using appropriate literature may serve as a catalyst in getting young people through their hurt, to find some answers. In addition to the reader's initial response, the therapeutic effect also depends on the group discussion facilitated by the teacher who provides follow-up techniques such as reflective writing, role-playing, creative problem solving, music and art activities, or self-selected options for students to pursue individually (Hébert, 1995, 1991; Hébert & Furner, 1997). When presented in this way, bibliotherapy can be enjoyable while providing a time for solid introspection for young people.

Why is bibliotherapy important for gifted students?

The trials and tribulations of adolescence are difficult for all young people in this developmental period filled with many new stresses. When gifted students arrive at adolescence, their experience may be different because of their high level of emotionality and sensitivity which often accompanies high intelligence and may exacerbate stressful experiences of daily living (Piechowski, 1997). Meeting their social and emotional needs is critical for gifted middle and high school students (Buescher, 1985; Halsted, 1994). Like all teenagers, they want to fit in with their social group while maintaining their own identity, including their intellectual ability. It is important that middle and high school teachers help them recognize that their sensitivity and awareness of other people's feelings may differ from their peers. Since it is important that gifted students realize that other young people can experience the same levels of emotionality when faced with the challenges of adolescence (Colangelo, 1997), discussions in bibliotherapy provide a wonderful opportunity for young people to listen to their peers and realize they are not alone with their feelings. Through these discussions, gifted teenagers may reach an understanding that their emotionality and sensitivity are important dimensions of their personalities that are valued by others.

Understanding that others have similar feelings may help gifted teenagers form friendships, is an important concern during

adolescent development, and is highlighted as a major focus in the annotated bibliography of recommended books (Figure 1). Topics involving friendship can become the focus of bibliotherapy sessions and may serve as a non-intimidating topic for secondary teachers who would like to begin using this approach with gifted students.

Middle and high school teachers using bibliotherapy can become successful in nurturing healthy social and emotional development in their students. Discovering literature that reflects the emotional essence of intellectually curious young adults requires knowledge of the affective development of gifted teenagers and knowledge of novels that depict that essence, both obtained through training in gifted education. Since few secondary schools can afford the luxury of having a full-time counselor assigned to the gifted population within a school (VanTassel-Baska & Baska, 1993), teachers with a repertoire of bibliotherapy may be appreciated. Classroom teachers who use bibliotherapy effectively are a real asset to a middle or high school community, as described below in Richard Kent's personal narrative of using a young adult novel entitled *The Mosquito Test* in his English classroom.

The Mosquito Test

The Mosquito Test (Kent, 1994) is a young adult novel about two teenagers' valiant efforts to overcome the physical and emotional setbacks of cancer and cystic fibrosis through friendship*. *The Mosquito Test* is seen through the eyes of the narrator and protagonist, Scott Cinander, who "would have been the first sophomore in six years to make the varsity squad at St. John's High School," a fictitious Maine secondary school. However, just before basketball season, Scott is diagnosed with cancer and is told that he cannot play contact sports. His doctor informs him he has a 70 percent chance of recovery, but this is no consolation to the talented young athlete. Scott's uncertain future would be even more traumatic were it not for his parents and a friend named Kevin, who always knows the right thing to say and carefully watches over him as they become best friends. When Scott loses his hair to chemotherapy, Kevin shaves his head, too. The relationship between Scott and Kevin is like that of the main characters in John Knowles' *A Separate Peace* who had been members of "the Brotherhood of the Tribe" since before high school. Unlike Knowles' unforgettable heroes, Scott and Kevin did not leap from a tree into a stream to solidify a bond of friendship. Instead, they had stripped to their undershorts and sat on a log in a mosquito-infested swamp for 10 minutes without flinching. They had passed "The Mosquito Test."

In dealing with his illness, Scott is not so overcome with self-pity that he is unable to think of others. For example, his mother regularly plays tennis at a neighborhood racquet club until he is diagnosed. When she stops playing, Scott convinces her to return to the court. In turn, she persuades him to accompany her even though he scoffs at the idea of playing his mother's sport. From the moment he picks up a tennis racquet, he displays a natural ability for the game. He discovers he loves the sport, but he also discovers something even more important when he meets and eventually forms another close friendship with Eric Burke, a star tennis player. Scott is shocked to learn that Eric is afflicted with cystic fibrosis. As they struggle with their illnesses, together the two young men discover the meaning of courage and the legacy of friendship.

One Teacher's Use of Bibliotherapy

The hair clippers came out and in eight or nine swipes; each boy's hairless head gleamed. Nathan and Rob² had planned it. Brent joined in at the last moment. My young adult novel, *The Mosquito Test* prompted it.

When I quizzed Nathan in front of the class about his book project, he explained in a soft, serious voice, "When Kevin shaved his head for his friend Scott, I was proud of him. I needed to do something like that. I wanted to give something up." Not only did Nathan's thoughtful words touch me, but also they moved our class into a discussion about friendship and created a memorable classroom moment.

A bright, sensitive young man, Nathan reads voraciously and creates stunning art projects in response to his reading. In Room 109, he is known as a "project master." As a tenth grader in my heterogeneously grouped English class of 26 sophomores, juniors and seniors, Nathan is popular. His reading level is much higher than that of his classroom colleagues' and he is exceptionally skillful in conversation. Because of the freedoms allowed and the opportunities realized in Room 109's portfolio pedagogy (Kent, 1997) – a thematically based class where students select their own books, determine the genre of their writing assignments, and set their own time schedules for the demanding amount of work due in their portfolios at the end of the quarter – Nathan continuously moves toward new levels. A gifted student, Nathan is self-motivated, interested and interesting.

* Publisher: Windswept House Publishers. Mount Desert, Maine 04660-0519. ISBN: 1883650038. Profits from the sale of this book are donated to the Cystic Fibrosis Foundation and to the Jimmy Fund of the Dana Farber Cancer Institute.

² All names used in this article are pseudonyms.



Throughout his school career, Nathan enjoyed rich opportunities in the school district's gifted and talented pro-gram. In elementary school, he spent time in the G/T classroom where he was encouraged to immerse himself in computer technology and hands-on science experiments. Throughout middle school, Nathan participated in a series of programs including his favorite, *Odyssey of the Mind*. His level of focused engagement led him to become a star in the program.

Wanting to fit in socially, Nathan played soccer in middle school. However, he realized little athletic success. An awkward teenager, Nathan's middle school soccer career was hampered by a young coach who belittled him. In high school, Nathan worked with a more sensitive coach on the junior varsity level and found himself fitting in socially. Still deeply committed to his interest in computers, Nathan also worked for the school district's computer coordinator. As I observed Nathan in Room 109, I celebrated as I watched his social status blossom in high school because of these co-curricular activities.

Though the reading level of *The Mosquito Test* did not challenge Nathan, the trials of the characters sensitized and moved him. As a highly sensitive gifted young man, Nathan often grappled with sophisticated adult issues, and in some respects, left his peers behind. Reading *The Mosquito Test* and reacting to it in such a passionate and powerful manner helped Nathan look closely at the friendships in his life. In his journal the previous quarter, Nathan had discussed the collapse of several cherished friendships. In my eyes Nathan had outgrown these friendships. In conversations before school, he revealed the recent disintegration of his closest friendship. His frustration at losing his best friend, along with the weakening bonds in other friendships, had Nathan feeling alienated and lost. As with many gifted students I have worked with, Nathan's carefree manner and ready wit masked the depth of his feelings.

Nathan's early morning talks with me, as well as his journal entries, began to create the kind of teacher-student relationship that moves toward mentorship. When I suggested Nathan's reading of *The Mosquito Test*, I did so for a number of reasons. The novel had opened various conversation doors for my students, from frank talks about death to down-to-earth conversations concerning friendships. The book had also inspired a wide range of interesting, and in some cases, dazzling art projects. I knew from past experiences with Nathan that he would find a unique, perhaps powerful way to express his response to my novel. Furthermore, I recommended the book as one more way of Nathan coming to know me and thereby strengthening our relationship. I have used this same relationship-building technique with a variety of books. Certainly, it is not a criterion that one be the author; my reaction to certain books creates a kind of scaffolding that helps my students and me find common ground. This, in turn, builds a foundation for more effective use of bibliotherapy.

I am sure that the strengthening of our relationship helped Nathan take a risk in Room 109. Shaving his head in front of his classmates in celebration of Kevin's show of friendship was certainly an act of courage on Nathan's behalf. In fact, he and the other two boys were the talk of the school for a couple of days. However, Nathan's actions had multiple layers of meaning; one a plea and the other a demonstration of the true spirit of friendship. Nathan's hairless head spoke volumes; this was a message he desperately needed to convey. Having this outlet provided Nathan with not only a stage and audience, but a chance to dialogue with others about his thinking, his fears and his hopes concerning the friendships of his own life.

The Mosquito Test is one of many young adult novels that may help students address and come to understand a variety of subjects by reading about characters with similar challenges. (See Figure 1 for a listing of recommended books.) From John Knowles' *A Separate Peace* to Rosa Guy's *The Friends*, books on friendships, commitment, and choice help young adults look closely at the relationships in their lives. Students in Room 109 read an average of five books per nine-week quarter. Because these books are self-selected, though I frequently consult on their choices and make recommendations, students seek books that genuinely interest them. This practice of providing a collection of books that address the needs of individual students is helpful in encouraging effective guided reading experiences that address developmental needs of young people without appearing prescribed.

What's more, in the case of Room 109, the portfolio pedagogy encourages students to explore and express their responses to literature in a variety of manners or mediums. Because of the choice provided, students find the experience richer and more fulfilling. From artistic projects and demonstrations to internships and apprenticeships (not to mention the shaving of heads) students seek ways of expressing themselves that touch on their various intelligences. Respecting Gardner's (1983) theory of multiple intelligences creates a classroom that is responsive to individual needs and thus allows students of all abilities to reach their own new levels of learning. This is especially important when considering gifted students, their intrapersonal intelligence, and their need to express the impact of the various themes in young adult books on their own lives. "We read *ourselves*," writes James Britton (1993) — and when we see ourselves in literature — straddling or perhaps balancing the roles of "spectator and participant" (Britton, 1982), we engage the reflective process. Indeed, we learn ourselves. This is bibliotherapy.

Many of my gifted students have developed fascinating ways of expressing their responses to *The Mosquito Test*. Marc decided to work with Jarod, a classmate with Down's Syndrome who also read the novel. Beyond the engaging poster the two boys created, including a three-dimensional mosquito constructed of simple art materials, Marc decided to move on and pursue an

independent research project focused on his growing friendship with Jarod. For two full days, Marc attended classes with Jarod and kept an observation journal. Next, he developed a series of interview questions and quizzed Jarod about the relationships in his life. Marc's final project, an essay, synthesized his observation journal and the results of his interviews with Jarod and others. Clearly, Marc's exploration of his relationship with Jarod created a unique and valuable opportunity for growth and understanding between the two boys. In addition, through subsequent classroom discussions, all of us in Room 109 became sensitized to special friendships.

Other projects in celebration of *The Mosquito Test* have run the gamut: Sarah's hand-painted miniature buildings she called "the mosquito houses" and Lesley's pledge drive for cystic fibrosis research; Aaron's first poem on friendship and Jessica's "Mosquito mobile." Over the years it has become clear that my student colleagues often use young adult novels as a way of confronting the issues in their young lives. By sharing their concerns through a variety of mediums, students not only search for solutions within themselves, but through their products create an avenue for others to join in the therapeutic discussion.

Summary

The use of developmental bibliotherapy in a classroom has the power to enrich gifted students' understanding of themselves and of their adolescent experiences. Such an approach may help create a classroom that is responsive both to individual needs and to the needs of a classroom society as a whole. Clearly, bibliotherapy has the potential to affect meaningful change.

Each book listed in the annotated bibliography below offers teachers an opportunity to look deeply at a variety of issues with their students. Hundreds of other high quality novels used in secondary classrooms do the same. In the hands of competent and caring teachers, engaging stories can usher teenage readers to greater understanding.

In *Shadowlands*, the movie biography of C. S. Lewis, we hear Lewis profess, "We read to discover that we are not alone." With awareness of and emphasis on bibliotherapy in middle and high school classrooms, gifted students will grow to understand that they, too, are "not alone."



Figure 1

Bibliography of Recommended Young Adult Novels about Friendship*

Binchy, Maeve. (1991). *A Circle of Friends*. New York: Dell.

At the center of an unforgettable circle of friends were two intelligent and unusual young Irish women. Fiercely loyal to one another, Benny was an only child smothered with love from her parents, and Eve was an orphan who was abandoned and raised by Catholic nuns. From their small village milieu to university life in Dublin, these two worlds of Benny and Eve collided in intrigue and mystery, and their fates were touched by the truth about death and loss, desire and real caring.

Crutcher, Chris. (1993). *Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes*. New York: Greenwillow Books.

When Sarah Byrnes was a child, her condition became synonymous with her name. Her face was badly burned in a mysterious accident and her father refused to provide reconstructive surgery. She created a defensive personality to protect herself against the taunts of an adolescent world. Eric Calhoun, an intelligent, highly sensitive and overweight child, appreciated their personal situations and became Sarah's only friend. When Eric participated in high school swimming, he shed layers of weight. Fearing the loss of the one friendship he valued, he gorged himself to "stay fat for Sarah Byrnes." The truth of Sarah's childhood burns was revealed, she became catatonic, and when she was hospitalized, Eric began his mission of helping his friend deal with her pain.

Guy, Rosa. (1973). *The Friends*. New York: Dell.

Phyllisia's problems as a teenager were overwhelming her. Having moved from the West Indies to her neighborhood in New York, she faced the daily insults and mockeries of classmates who did not appreciate her giftedness. Edith, an impoverished young woman facing great adversity in her family life, befriended Phyllisia and supported her through difficult times. The author painted a vivid portrait of an intelligent urban teenager surviving periods of ambivalence, resentment and emotional turmoil. The author described a story that explored young women's friendships and the situation of female as giver.

Jenkins, A. M. (1997). *Breaking Boxes*. New York: Delacorte.

Charlie Calmont is a teenage loner. His parents are gone, he lives with his older brother, and he doesn't need anyone, especially friends. When he gets suspended because of a school fight, he meets Brandon Chase, and his attitude changes. Privileged Brandon associates with the affluent crowd in school, but Charlie discovers that there's a real person under Brandon's phony rich kid exterior. Charlie and Brandon become best friends, and when Charlie reveals a secret about his older brother, Brandon is forced to test the authenticity of their friendship.

Knowles, John. (1959). *A Separate Peace*. New York: Macmillan.

Finny, the handsome school athlete, and Gene, the quiet intellectual, became unlikely friends at New Hampshire's Devon School during World War II. From the beginning of the story, we witnessed Finny's unique ability to charm Gene and the other boys. For Gene, balancing his relationship with his carefree, less scholarly friend created a number of internal battles. Against the backdrop of a world war and the struggles of their emerging adult selves, the boys of Devon School strived for their own "separate peace."

Peck, Richard. (1985). *Remembering the Good Times*. New York: Dell.

Three high school freshmen, Buck, Trav, and Kate knew each other since middle school. Though they came from different backgrounds, their friendships were deep. It was Trav, the intense, gifted young man, who was troubled by a number of issues in his crisis-filled world. However, their closeness to Trav blinded Kate and Buck to his danger signs of suicide. When the tragedy occurred, Buck and Kate learned from their friend about experiencing life intensely, supported each other through their grief and continued on with their lives with a deeper understanding of the human condition.

Voight, Cynthia. (1982). *Tell Me if the Lovers are Losers*. New York: Ballantine.

Cynthia Voight poignantly described the relationship that evolved as three intelligent young women entered their first year of college together. Ann, the sensible and predictable female, and Niki, a brash, intimidating, and competitive young woman, became roommates to Hildy, a plain, religious young woman who exuded a mature serenity. These three unique characters grew to appreciate their differences and became close friends until Hildy was lost in a tragic accident. With the loss of Hildy, the young women learned to cherish her memory and supported each other through their grieving.

Werlin, Nancy. (1994). *Are You Alone on Purpose?* New York: Ballantine.

Fourteen-year-old Alison was quiet, sensitive, unassuming, and highly intelligent. When her autistic twin brother Adam began preparing for his bar mitzvah through tutorial sessions with their rabbi, Alison had to deal with Harry, the rabbi's son. For years, Harry had taunted Alison in school about being Queen Nerd, but when Harry was injured in a diving accident and had to learn to cope with life from a wheelchair, his relationship with Alison slowly evolved into a meaningful friendship. All of her life, Alison's parents had focused on Adam and his needs, while Alison had always believed she had to be perfect. Through her special friendship with Harry, she realized her mistakes.

*Due to the sensitive content and provocative language included in some young adult literature, teachers should preview a novel to determine if the book is an appropriate selection for their students.

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