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LIT 4333  
T 8-9; R 9  
Fall 2000

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Hours: T 6-7; R 8  
& by appointment

## Literature for the Adolescent

### Texts

Francesca Lia Block, *Weetzie Bat* (1989)  
Judy Blume, *Are You There, God? It's Me, Margaret* (1970)  
Frank Chin, *Donald Duk* (1991)  
Robert Cormier, *I am the Cheese* (1977)  
Chris Crutcher, *Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes* (1993)  
Christopher Paul Curtis, *The Watsons Go to Birmingham -- 1963* (1995)  
Anne Frank, *Diary of a Young Girl* (1947)  
S. E. Hinton, *The Outsiders* (1967)  
Victor Martinez, *Parrot in the Oven: Ma Vida* (1996)  
Robin McKinley, *The Hero and the Crown* (1984)  
Francine Pascal, *Sweet Valley High #131, Fashion Victim* (1997)  
Katherine Paterson, *Jacob Have I Loved* (1980)  
J. D. Salinger, *Catcher in the Rye* (1951)  
Sarah Shandler, *Ophelia Speaks* (1999)

### Overview

The term "adolescence" descends from Latin, and the earliest entries in the *Oxford English Dictionary* date from the fourteenth century. Shakespeare describes the "seven ages" of mankind; picaresque heroes and heroines like Gil Blas and Moll Flanders struggle to survive the vicissitudes of youth and poverty. As the nineteenth century unfolded, however, new genres dramatized the transition from childhood into adolescence, and glorified adolescence as a distinct and crucial period of development. By the end of the century, many "adult" novelists were devoting their attention to (if not quite writing for) adolescents; representative titles include Dostoevski's *The Adolescent* (1874) and Henry James' *What Maisie Knew* (1897). Such texts emerged alongside clinical-pedagogical literature about adolescence -- e.g. Granville Stanley Hall's two volume *Adolescence: Its Psychology and Its Relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion, and Education* (1904). Literature by adolescents also began to appear by the century's end; the first adolescent diary written for publication was apparently Marie Bashkirtseff's *Journal* (1887).

That history, however, is not our focus, though it will inform our discussions. Adolescent fiction has come of age only recently, and we'll begin with some of the more canonical or foundational texts of mid-century (Anne Frank, Salinger). We'll concentrate on young adult literature from the 1960s to the 1990s. The modern teen is of course intimately connected to material culture; being a teenager means watching tv, driving cars, and buying lots of cool stuff. It also means being a social "problem," and many of our selections are problem novels in the "new realism" mode.

Although I will sometimes provide you with background information, for which you are responsible, we will conduct class as a seminar, which means that participation is vital. Please come to class every day on time having read the assigned material. Be ready to share your responses. On occasion I may ask you to work in small groups. If you take more than three unexcused cuts from class, your final grade will be reduced one-third of a letter grade for each

excess cut. Habitual tardies will be considered absences. I will take attendance in a variety of ways, sometimes at the end rather than the beginning of class.

By Tuesday, please have read the entire book, unless I specify otherwise.

## Assignments and Grading

Your course grade will be based on the following assignments. There are no exams; nearly all of your grade comes from your writing. This means that while you won't have to remember all of the texts in detail, you will be writing about most of them. Because we have a lot to do in class, I don't plan to devote class time to writing issues, but I'm very available during office hours for help. I'm always happy to read drafts.

I reserve the right to give unannounced quizzes if I feel that students are too far behind in the reading or if discussion lags; should we have quizzes, they will be averaged with the memos.

Memos (10)	25%
Précis	25%
Essay/Project	30%
Group Presentation & active participation	20%

**Memos.** Over the semester, you will write 10 reading responses of 1-2 s-s., typed pages each. Out of some thwarted business urge I call such a response a "memo." The memo is simply a short meditation on the reading. Your memo should offer a response to the book as a whole; don't turn in a memo if you haven't finished the assignment. You may address a number of issues or focus more in-depth on one or two; just be as specific as you can, and support your responses with examples and details from the text.

I do not expect you to have a thorough interpretation, but your memo should offer some kind of evaluation or analysis of the book as a whole. In other words, it should be more than simply random or unconnected thoughts about the work. If you like, you may make use of outside readings (biographical sketches, scholarly articles, websites, etc.). This assignment is designed to stimulate class discussion, and to help you remember the texts and generate paper ideas.

You may write these at any point in the semester, but you may not do more than one memo per week, and I will accept them only on Tuesdays and in class -- do not email them to me, or leave them in my mailbox. I will return them on Thursday or the following Tuesday at the latest. They do not need to be perfect, but please try to correct spelling and typing errors. I will grade each memo and average the grades.

**Précis.** You will also write one 1-2 s-s pp. précis of a scholarly article or book chapter addressing some aspect of adolescent literature, media, or culture. There are a number of journals you can consult, among them children's literature journals such as *The Lion and the Unicorn*, *Children's Literature*, *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, as well as other journals and assorted book-length studies. Start looking soon; this may take some time. Let me know if you need help.

This assignment requires to you not only to summarize, but also to analyze the method and rhetorical strategy of the article or chapter. The original article or chapter must be at least 10 pages long; I'd prefer that it be longer. It may not be from the web/internet unless it originally appeared in a journal. Refer to specific page numbers (even when paraphrasing) so that we can locate the ideas you're summarizing and discussing. Attach a photocopy of your article/chapter, and use the following set-up:

1) First summarize the article or book chapter in 5-8 sentences. Explain the author's overall focus and the main claims of the piece.

2) Describe that author's critical methodology and perspective(s): Is the essay informed by a feminist sensibility? Does the writer emphasize psychological themes, or provide useful historical contextualizations? Is there any attention to socioeconomic issues (i.e. use of Marxist criticism)? Or is it a more traditional "close reading" of a text's language and plot? Often writers rely on a variety of methodologies: if so, what approach seems dominant, and does that primary approach effectively organize secondary ones? If the writer's method doesn't seem easy to categorize, just describe that method -- how does s/he approach the topic?

3) Offer an analysis of the essay's rhetorical strategy (the way it's designed to affect the audience): why is it organized the way it is? What makes it effective (or not)? What sorts of logic patterns does the writer rely on? Are there appeals to emotion, and if so, are they appropriate and successful? What makes it (or keeps it from being) effective and convincing? Describe the writer's ethos.

4) Speculate about the implications of the information, both for our understanding of the text and beyond. What's useful about the essay? How could you expand it? What questions does it raise about the story, author, reader, the state of adolescent literature/publishing, etc.? What, in other words, is the piece good for? You may also want to comment on what's ignored or devalued in the analysis: is the writer overlooking something which complicates (or even undermines) her argument? Does his or her commitment to a particular critical methodology rule out other interpretations?

Essay. Write a 7 d-s pp. analysis of a young adult genre or special topic or particular author, using at least two outside primary readings and at least two outside secondary sources. If you like, you may instead use a particular critical methodology (Marxism, feminism, psychoanalysis) to illuminate and connect two texts. Whatever you choose to do, develop a specific argument and support your claims. Some biographical information may be appropriate, but this paper should not be a biographical essay. You must meet with me to discuss this paper.

**or**

In lieu of the critical essay, you may plan and begin work on a young adult writing project of some kind, probably a novel but perhaps a work of poetry or nonfiction, even a play. If you would like to work on such a project, you must come talk to me about your ideas during office hours by the end of October, even though of course the piece will continue to evolve as you work on it. I will evaluate your project according to both its quality and the energy you put into it, with the understanding that a good faith effort with relatively few writing errors can earn you an "A." In other words, I do not expect literary genius -- though that would be nice for everyone, you especially -- but I do expect you to put in some real time and effort. Your mission, should you choose to accept it, is to produce at least the following:

1. A chapter-by-chapter outline, or possibly a detailed section outline;
2. A complete first chapter;
3. Another fairly complete section, preferably a later one, which might include important scenes and dialogue; and
4. A short explanation of how you got your ideas and how they changed (if they changed) in the process of brainstorming, writing, and revising.

If you model your work on other writings, you might want to photocopy relevant sections and attach them as well. Probably it would be best to assemble a portfolio or folder so that these individual items don't get separated.

As always, I'd be happy to help in any way, so don't hesitate to come see me. This could be quite fun, but don't underestimate the time it will take. If you're looking for some inspiration, there are a number of creativity manuals out there; a particularly useful (if also somewhat flaky) one is Julia Cameron's *The Artist's Way*.

Grading Scheme. I give A's to essays using an original and spirited argument to illuminate complexities of language and theme. I give B+'s to well-organized, well-developed, relatively error-free essays with sparks of originality or daring, and B's to competent essays needing more complex development and/or clearer focus. Lower grades mean greater problems with development, structure, and grammar. Recurrent grammatical errors lower the grade; occasional spelling errors and typos don't. The best essays sustain complex and or audacious arguments; a good B essay capably summarizes and compares themes.

Group Presentation. Working in groups of 4-5, you will teach the class for one class period (Period 8) on Tuesday. Presentations may be formal or informal, and you may use whatever formats you think are appropriate -- you could act out key scenes, put together a talk show, develop a skit, and so on. Props and handouts are encouraged. Your group will need to do research on the author and text, and use that information and your own sense of the book's themes to guide your presentation. You must devote at least half of the class period to class discussion, and find a way to get everyone involved.

I hope the presentations will be fun, but I will evaluate them on how effectively they address/dramatize the novel and facilitate discussion. You need to have something substantial to offer – a few assorted and unrelated pieces on author background and so forth won't suffice. You will receive a grade and a written assessment.

Active participation means attending regularly, asking questions, offering insights, sharing memos -- in short, being actively involved. I respect individual styles, and I do not expect you to talk all of the time, but plan to attend and to contribute to discussion.

## Reading Schedule

### August

24 (T)            Introductions.  
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29 (T)            *The Diary of Anne Frank*.  
31 (R)            cont.  
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### September

5 (T)            *The Catcher in the Rye*.  
7 (R)            cont.  
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12 (T)            *The Outsiders*. Group 1.  
14 (R)            cont.  
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19 (T)            *Are You There, God?* Group 2.  
21 (R)            cont.  
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26 (T) *I Am the Cheese.* Group 3.  
 28 (R) cont.

### October

3 (T) *Jacob Have I Loved.* Group 4.  
 5 (R) cont.

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10 (T) *The Hero and the Crown.* Group 5.  
 12 (R) cont.

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17 (T) *Donald Duk.* Group 6.  
 19 (R) cont.

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24 (T) *The Watsons Go to Birmingham -- 1963.*  
 26 (R) cont. **Précis due.**

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31 (T) *Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes.* Group 7.

### November

2 (R) cont.

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7 (T) *Parrot in the Oven.* Group 8.  
 9 (R) cont.

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14 (T) Screening: *Beautiful Thing.* *Weetzie Bat.*  
 16 (R) cont.

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21 (T) *Fashion Victim.* Group 9.  
 23 (R) Thanksgiving holiday.

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28 (T) *Ophelia Speaks.* Group 10.  
 30 (R) cont.

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### December

5 (T) Wrap-up. Last class day. **Essay/project due.**