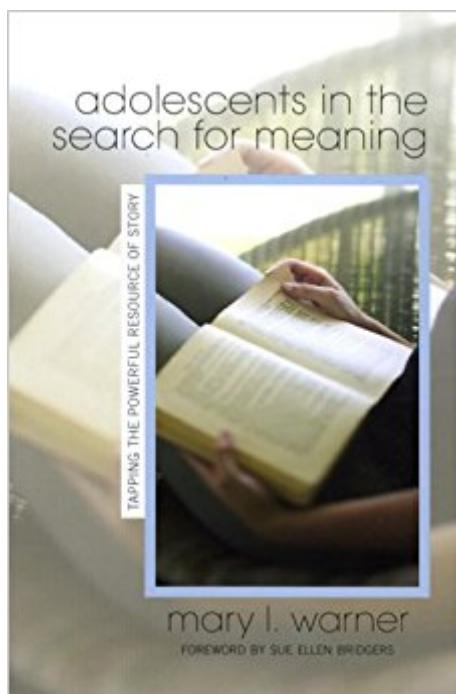


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Adolescents In The Search For Meaning: Tapping The Powerful Resource Of Story



Synopsis

As is painfully evident from the reports of school shootings, gang violence, dysfunctional family life, and from statistics on adolescent suicide, many teens live troubled lives. Even those who live a "normal" life still face the challenges adults face, but teens are also engaged in establishing independence and finding their identity. However, few adolescents have the same resources as adults for surviving life challenges. Building from the idea that story is a powerful source of meaning, particularly those stories that resonate with our own lives, this book suggests that the stories of other young adults offer a resource yet to be fully tapped. *Adolescents in the Search for Meaning* begins from the perspective of young adults by sharing the results of a survey of over 1400 teens and also includes the insights of authors of Young Adult Literature. The book presents over 120 novels that teens have identified as meaningful as well as books recommended by YA authors and experts in the field of YA literature. For any teacher, librarian, parent or counselor wanting to reach young adults, this book is ideal.

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Customer Reviews

Warner argues that adolescent literature can act as a means of support for young people as they face what she calls the major issues of teen life. This is not a new argument, but she goes further with her claim as she attempts to solicit information from young people about the issues they face and connect these findings with similarly themed fiction. While this subject-related correspondence

seems to be the primary criteria she uses for recommending powerful literature for teens, she also draws from the literary recommendations of teens themselves. According to Warner's findings, teens look first to parents, siblings, grandparents, or relatives, then to friends and peers. Very few report seeking guidance from books, journaling, or magazines. Roughly 50 percent of her respondents report that no book has helped them. In spite of this disheartening response, the author takes pains to include teens' own recommendations within the second half of her book, which annotates titles by category. While the bibliographic component does, to some degree, reinvent the wheel, Warner's research findings could inform and direct youth services librarians and teachers. "Amy S. Pattee, Simmons College, Boston Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Bottom line: Recommended. (Teacher Librarian)...Warner's research findings could inform and direct youth services librarians and teachers. (School Library Journal, 8/1/2006)Warner offers an important study documenting the power of young adult literature to provide assistance to teens coping with the myriad issues related to adolescence. (VOYA)Here Warner (adult and children's literature, San Jos© State U.) offers both the results of a survey of 1400 teens and a list of over 120 books they say have been meaningful in their time of life. Along with a very interesting report on the readings teenagers said helped them Warner shares how much authors of young adult literature care about their readers and reviews of books about real-life experiences, facing death and loss, identity, discrimination, struggles with decisions, courage and survival, allegory, fantasy, myth and parable. (Reference and Research Book News, August 2006)

I have always been a great lover of books; I just can't read enough. Sharing this passion is the single biggest reason that I want to become an English teacher. In the process of getting my Secondary Credential, I came upon the book Adolescents in the Search for Meaning: Tapping the Powerful Resource of Story by Dr. Mary Warner. It is the perfect resource to help me get my students excited about reading. The book examines the reading habits and recommendations of over 1400 young adults. The results of this survey, commentary from Young Adult authors, and superb catalog and commentary on over 100 Young Adult titles, provide an excellent resource for any teacher who wants to encourage reading in their classroom. Each section of the book illuminates what young people are seeking when they reach for a book and provides an understanding of how educators can connect students with books that matter. The book is divided by type of novel. For example, there is a chapter called "Books about Real-Life

Experiences and another called *Books about Identity, Discrimination, and Struggles with Decisions*. This is so helpful when you want to provide students with a book that will help them with a particular problem. Within each chapter is a brief description, and teaching resources and ideas for each novel listed. Additionally, and I think most helpful, for each novel there is a section entitled *Why Give this Book to Teens*. Here is where Dr. Warner's passion and love for both Young Adult Literature and for students is most exemplified. Reaching students because they may have experienced some form of abuse, (Warner, P. 245) or because they might have to deal with the death of a sibling, (Warner, 178) or because a fantasy world can often help us better understand the real world, (Warner, P. 258) is at the very heart of why we teach and this book can help us do that. With the aid of this book I hope to pass on my passion for reading to my future students.

Stories are as essential to our existence as air. We see ourselves as our own stories; each of us has a personal narrative, a family narrative, a national narrative, a human narrative, and an evolutionary narrative. Story gives us a shape and a depth. Without this shape life is hollow and can only be lived on the empty surface. A study was done in 2013 at Emory University that looked at fiction readers' brains. It is now scientifically proven that reading literary fiction makes you a more empathic person (Bergardo). This would not be news to Dr. Mary Warner, whose book *Adolescents in the Search for Meaning* is an outstanding resource for any of us who either have an adolescent in our lives or teach adolescents. Warner has great respect in the power fiction has to instill meaning: she wants young adults to understand that they need not float in a world of meaninglessness and cope by inflicting violence on themselves or others (Warner xiii). Why is this meaning so crucial, not only for adolescents themselves, but for the society they are part of? Violence, she points out, is one of the symptoms of loss of meaning but there are many others. Adolescents, even more than others, are at a pivotal juncture in their lives and their search for identity is key, *Teenagers want to know who they are and what life holds for them, and they are in the search for and development of identify with peers who are equally adrift* (Warner xix). With the relatively recent invention of the Internet, Adolescents are now facing different challenges than any other generation that has gone before. The market looks at them as a demographic. When our grandparents were teenagers, they might not have seen one single advertisement except in a shop or on the back of a newspaper. Teenagers are currently bombarded with an unprecedented amount of information and marketing pitches. There is a battle for their identity that is taking place every minute of their lives facilitated by their constant access to an

Internet that plugs them directly into the global economy. With one click they can purchase something that will promise to define them. This is a generation at risk like never before. It is imperative that we, who are interested in something other than their buying power, can guide them to make the right choices and be the shapers of their own story and their own identity. *For adolescents, in particular, what we “caring adults” need to address is their human spirit, where they have the disquiet, the restlessness, and the ache, but need guidance regarding what to do with the feelings* (Warner xix). The purpose of this book is to let teenagers and their teachers and parents know what books exist that can help them on their quest to be fully realized individuals that thrive as part of a healthy community. Though the internet is new in teenagers' lives, Warner points out that there are many other more typical problems that teenagers have to negotiate, such as: sexual activity, pregnancies, drug and alcohol abuse, eating disorders, obesity, poor fitness, violence, delinquency, serious injury, suicide, broken families, and not least poverty (Warner xx). In our local high schools suicide is a big issue and Warner gives us some appalling statistics: *In the United States a teenager commits suicide every two hours* (Warner xx). The book suggests that many of these behaviors are born out of isolation and alienation--something that adolescents can feel very deeply. After all, it is a vulnerable time where feelings go very deep, and troubles, while real, can be magnified in a developing teenage brain. Warner's deep empathy for teenagers comes through in her book, she point out that teenagers face grave adult issues with little control over their own environment. Warner states that finding solace and guidance in fiction can be an antidote to all these pressures and *as Adolescents find meaning, they need not resort to harmful ways to be fulfilled or antisocial behaviors* (Warner xxv). But why do we need stories? Humans have always used story to express the ineffable. To journey safely through hardships and adventure, to reach beyond our own limits and to see that survival is possible. All major religions have stories at their roots:

Noah's Ark, Moses and the Red Sea, Jesus rising from the dead, Mohammad hearing the angel Gabriel's voice, the young prince Siddhartha leaving the palace to find enlightenment, Shiva severing Ganesh's head and replacing it with that of an elephant, native creation tales of spiders spinning life into existence and turtles holding up the world. These stories become sacred. Story is an undeniably powerful part of our thinking. We look at our very DNA as alphabet strings twisting around each other as if we are made of words. In light of the power of stories over humans, it is key that our teenagers are reading those that will provide meaning and substance rather than just commercial fiction. Disneyesque stories and those from large multi-media corporations, often prey on their weaknesses, stories can manipulate them and ultimately rip them

off. Warner's book understands that and provides examples of the books that can help rather than hinder. Why do we need to get our students reading when they can access stories from a variety of mediums? In the Emory University study on the effects of fiction on the human brain, they compared brains of people who read with the brains of people who don't read, and also people who scan Twitter and social media all day. They asked "Are those readers' brains different from literary junkies who peruse the pages of 19th century fictional classics? Short answer: Yes." reading enhances connectivity in the brain. But readers of fiction? They're a special breed (Bergardo). The research found that "heightened connectivity in the left temporal cortex, part of the brain typically associated with understanding language. The researchers also found increased connectivity in the central sulcus of the brain, the primary sensory region, which helps the brain visualize movement" (Bergardo). The inference was that when you read you place yourself as the character in the book and you can take on the emotions that they are experiencing. Less demanding popular fiction was compared with literary fiction. Tellingly the study found that the readers of literary fiction scored dependably higher, by about 10% (Bergardo). The scientists justified this by saying "We believe that one critical difference between lit and pop fiction is the extent to which the characters are complex, ambiguous, difficult to get to know, etc. (in other words, human) versus stereotyped, simple." Thus Literary fiction expands the empathic part of the brain because it is more demanding and requires more brain power. You have to work harder at creating the characters. Reading demands something of you and is not passive. The researchers conclude that "The process of trying to understand what those characters are feelings and the motives behind them is the same in our relationships with other people." (Bergardo)

Those are the scientific studies that corroborate what I found in Warner's book, *Adolescents in the Search for Meaning*. Warner herself has done extensive research by talking to teenagers themselves. She passionately believes we have to listen to their stories and their concerns and pay attention to what they like to read. We can't impose meaning on them; we have to be attentive to what is significant to them. It is telling that she finds that "for both females and males between 10 and 16, peer pressure ranked the highest. Since adolescent psychology indicates that in the early teen years the search for identify it's a primary focus, the high percentage of respondents identifying peer pressure as their primary issue is not a surprise" (Warner 41). Over a wide spectrum of cultures we have coming of age rituals, Bar Mitzvahs, Confirmation, the Aboriginal Walkabout. These are designed to mark this important time in a person's life and to aid them in the transition to adulthood. Many of these have waned in actual significance in a globalized culture where media saturation and exposure to multiple cultures

can have an ungrounding effect. However, the struggle to find meaning and acceptance is still important. Warner finds out what are the issues teens face by asking them, she then asks them what books they read that gave that solace and guidance. An authentic part of listening to the adolescents: requires that we “teachers, parents, librarians, and other concerned adults” respect what the teens list (Warner 41). Even if some of the results are surprising, such as books that we might find inappropriate or even lacking depth. Warner reiterates that we have to value their own judgments otherwise we fail in reaching them. Thankfully, this book gives a thorough listing of books that could have such an impact, and she clearly breaks it down in categories that deal with specific issues. Reassuringly, the classics are here, but so too are contemporary books that adolescents might identify with more immediately. What makes this book invaluable as a concrete teaching tool, is that there are teaching guides, pertinent classroom discussion questions, and Internet sites listed as extra resources. My favorite section of the book was the entertaining and perceptive interviews Warner conducted with writers of Young Adult fiction. This section is both reassuring and inspirational. These wonderful writers care profoundly about what they write and who their audience is. When Mary Warner states “Adolescence is the time in people’s lives when they’re especially open to new ideas, to exploring who they are and who they want to become.” She also relates what Hans Nolan said to her on this topic, “It’s a time when so many of us wake up to the world around us for the first time and we’re so greatly influenced by what we see in that world, and what we think about the things we see.” (Warner 95). Furthermore, Ruth White states in her interview regarding teenagers, “They have not yet become skeptical, but they are old enough to think for themselves. And they have such a wonderful sense of humor.” (Warner 85). That distillation is exactly why teaching adolescents can be both daunting and exhilarating. One of the most striking things in this remarkable resource is that the reasons that the writers write for young adults reminds me of the reasons I want to teach that age group. Everything is momentous and significant; the road is wide open ahead. Mary Warner’s book brought it home to me that to be present in adolescents’ lives as a guide in what they read, and ultimately how they look at the world, would be a privilege. *Adolescents in the Search for Meaning* reminds us that while experiencing a part of your life where music means more, friends mean more, and troubles can seem more daunting, it follows that books can mean more too.

As an aspiring teacher, I found *Adolescents in the Search for Meaning* to be a resource that is practical and innovative because it is focused on the students first, and the teaching second. In it,

Dr. Warner exposes cutting edge research on what matters to teens and what kinds of books helped them personally with real-life struggles. It also provides insight and ideas for teaching through a range of great works of literature from canonical to contemporary texts, all while incorporating what today's teens will find meaningful. I remember reading several of these books, such as the Harry Potter series, but many of these novels are not ones that I would have previously considered teaching alongside classics. This guide was revolutionary for my teaching education, especially when it seems like our education system often places standards about students.

What's good about this book is that it gathers information directly from the horses mouth; few books on education bother to ask kids what they think. Author Mary L. Warner asked 1400 adolescents a whole battery of questions on what they thought about the books they had read and how these books influenced them, and the results are interesting to say the least. One surprising finding is the strong impact of the "chicken soup" series of books. Who knew? Salinger's classic The Catcher in the Rye figures prominently, as well as the Bible. Warner devotes the second half of her book to listing the "teen recommended books" along with a description of each, which should prove useful to a teacher in search of the best texts to use in the classroom. Caveats: the charts, tables and diagrams used in the book make for some slow reading. The science is fairly rigorous, and at times a little off-putting. This is not something you can munch through in a couple of sessions; it will require study to get the most out of it.

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