

Out of Solitary Confinement: Representations of Youth Incarceration in YA Literature

Many youths across the United States have inherently skeptical views of the police and the justice system. They base their experience on interactions with the police--both their own and their friends'. Many of my own students viewed themselves as victims with the police "out to get [them]." While adolescents often see themselves as victims in conflicts, we must acknowledge that for many youth, primarily those of color, this feeling of victimhood is coming from a statistically justified place of fear and distrust. Regardless of whether youths of color know the specifics that Black men make up 6.5% of the U.S population but 40.2% of the prison population (DuVernay), they are generally aware of the disproportionate policing that occurs. Despite these alarming statistics, the prison system and mass incarceration are rarely talked about in adolescent school settings, even though many adolescents have known, will know, or currently know someone who is incarcerated, or even have been incarcerated themselves. I consider the ways YA novels such as Myers' *Monster* (1999) and *Lockdown* (2010) as well as Jackson's *Allegedly* (2017) construct youth incarceration. I argue many of these deficit constructions are also eye opening and provide a starting place for conversations around mass incarceration. Teachers can not only use these texts as a platform to inspire students into activism as allies and to lead in humanizing ways, but also can remind students whose lives have been touched by incarceration that we see them and want to hear their too-often-silenced stories.