

“Oasis or Mirage?”*
The ambivalent gifts of literacy in YA fiction

Harvey Graff defines the literacy myth as “the belief, articulated in educational, civic, religious, and other settings, contemporary and historical, that the acquisition of literacy is a necessary precursor to and invariably results in economic development, democratic practice, cognitive enhancement, and upward social mobility” (*Literacy Myth* 4). If our investment in literacy can be characterized as a myth, is reading an oasis, the refreshment that enables people to lead a good, civically responsible, critically aware life? Or is it a mirage, a con game, a tool of oppression rather than empowerment?

Books and reading are central to many recent YA novels, including Zusak’s *The Book Thief*, Miéville’s *Un Lun Dun*, and Brande’s *Evolution, Me, and Other Freaks of Nature*. The protagonists of the novels resist the dominant readings of important books, and instead read critically, enabling their oppositional political participation. Yet the reading they engage in may not always challenge the implied reader’s preconceptions. Literacy, thus, functions much the way Roberta Trites argues that YA fiction itself does: as simultaneously encouraging and constraining growth, often providing the patina of resistance while ultimately incorporating the adolescent into the status quo. The power granted to adolescents who read [in] these novels, then, may function as either oasis or mirage. As the protagonists struggle with an oppressive state, fundamentalist religion, and “narrative causality,”** their critical reading may indeed refresh them, as in an oasis. At the same time, the implied readers of the texts may not always gain the same benefits. Reading, re-reading, and rewriting are central to these texts: in this paper I will argue that seeing literacy as an oasis may blind us to the ways it can sometimes be a mirage.

Works Cited

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* The title reference comes from Antonio Iturbe’s *The Librarian of Auschwitz*, and refers specifically to the children’s school there (13).

** I take the term from Terry Pratchett, who uses it to mean “the idea that there are ‘story shapes’ into which human history, both large scale and at the personal level, attempts to fit . . . [or] that we ourselves for some reason have the story shapes in our mind, and attempt to fit the facts of history into them” (“Imaginary Worlds,” 166).