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### The Importance of Middle Grade Literature for Adult Readers

Throughout elementary and middle school, I had viewed middle grade as a taboo genre of literature. I was pushed to read novels with high reading levels, which led me to believe that children's books were not going to challenge me. Eventually, my love for reading waned in middle school. I did not want to feel forced to read, and I thought I had better things to do than to have my nose in a book. Although I read from authors such as Margaret Peterson Haddix and Lois Lowry from time to time, I perused through the adventures and mysteries of Jules Verne, Agatha Christie, and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle mainly to improve my reading comprehension skills. In sixth and seventh grade, I read a total of 20 books, but the burning fire -- symbolizing my devotion to literature -- received its boost of gasoline in eighth grade.

Inspired by my eighth grade English Language Arts class and teacher Mr. Harris, I devoured *The Giver*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Night*, and *1984* both inside and outside of class. When my school's annual Scholastic Book Fair rolled around in the spring, my curiosity became piqued as my eyes fell upon the *Infinity Ring* series -- a Middle Grade historical and speculative fiction series written by James Dashner, Carrie Ryan, Lisa McMann, Matt de la Peña, Matthew J. Kirby, and Jennifer A. Nielsen with eight installments. Seeing that books one to five were five dollars each, I decided to purchase the first three and try them out. After becoming fascinated by

three kids my age fixing time and meeting anyone from Vikings to conductors on the Underground Railroad, I came back to the fair a few days later and bought the next two books. I felt so exuberant that I found a series that I could enjoy and complete in a short amount of time. I soon convinced my parents to order the last three installments online for me, and I finished the series satisfied yet wanting more. I knew I needed my hands on more books.

During my freshman year of high school, I became great friends with my school librarian Mrs. Mason. I asked her for some book recommendations that were short and light since I was easing into reading. Starting with Janet Evanovich books and slowly ending up into Young Adult and memoirs, I became an avid reader. Reading began to be an escape from reality. Whenever I felt alone or stressed, I could always pull out a book and transport myself into another world. My love for YA started when I decided to pick up *The Islands at the End of the World* by Austin Aslan, which daunted yet interested me. By the end of 9th grade, I befriended literary detective Thursday Next in her titular series by Jasper Fforde, gaped as my life changed with *Between Shades of Gray* by Ruta Sepetys, and laughed and cried during *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak. My passion for reading grew so large that I started up my book blog called LILbookKlovers as an outlet to share my love for literature to the world.

Although I did read *A Wrinkle in Time* in my freshman year (though I did not know it was MG at the time), my foray in Middle Grade did not start until the fall semester of my sophomore year. I had won a copy of *Just Like Me* by Nancy J. Cavanaugh from its publisher back in ninth grade, but I did not pick up the book for a few months. When I decided to give it a shot, I had very low expectations on its quality since it was written for children. The author proved me wrong! I found myself connecting deeply with the protagonist's struggles and feelings to where I

felt I was actually at summer camp. I would not have the opportunity to read another MG novel for another year until *Prisoner B-3087* by Alan Gratz and *Eden's Wish* by M. Tara Crowl, but I did not understand the power of Middle Grade since then.

Since I started my book blog in May of 2016, I have been the most active in the Young Adult community. The first online friends I ever made were YA bloggers. Most of the books I read and promoted fell under this age group, and most of the authors I hosted on my blog (through interviews or guest posts) wrote for teens. It was not until the spring of 2017 when I began to dive deeper into the MG end of the #kidlit pool. MG books such as *Be Light Like a Bird* by Monika Schröder, *14 Hollow Road* by Jenn Bishop, and *Strong Inside: Young Reader's Edition* by Andrew Maraniss became three of my all-time favorites (the first two are fiction and the latter is nonfiction). My taste in Middle Grade grew in size on my reading palate. After attending the Southeastern Young Adult Book Festival in March 2017 and the Southern Festival of Books in October 2017, I connected with so many middle grade authors both in the real world and in the online universe that I was inspired to take on a more active role in the Middle Grade community (thanks mostly to Jarrett Lerner, author of *EngiNerds*). I wanted to not only read more MG novels but to promote more MG authors as well.

Middle Grade should not be limited to children only. While it is critical for book bloggers (especially MG and YA bloggers) to aid educators and librarians in finding the right books for their students, it is important to share these “forever books” (as Mr. John Schu, Scholastic Ambassador of School Libraries, coins them) with teens and adults (Krueger). Regardless of their intended age, Middle Grade books can and should be read by adults since the power of children’s literature can impact readers of all ages and stick with them throughout their lives.

In its most simplest definition, Middle Grade encompasses any book that is written for children ages eight to 12, although it can stretch slightly below or above that range depending on the content. (This does not mean readership is limited to juveniles.) Another major indicator of an MG novel is that the main protagonist falls into this age range, with younger main characters being nine to ten and older main characters being eleven to thirteen. However, not all MG novels have children as the protagonists, who can include senior citizens, monsters, and even animals (evidenced by *A Dog Like Daisy* by Kristin O'Donnell Tubb). Literary agent Marie Lamba of The Jennifer Di Chiara Literary Agency describes any book in this literary category as “generally 30,000-50,000 words” and usually without any “profanity, graphic violence, or sexuality” (Lamba). However, the MG community is fairly new. Although books have been targeted towards children for centuries, many well-known examples of MG novels are *A Wrinkle in Time*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Wonder*, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, and *Harry Potter*. It was actually the *Harry Potter* series that brought significant attention to Middle Grade from major publishers and the general public, sparking the rise of an entire community along with a literary culture.

There is not exactly a linear history that could trace the development of Middle Grade. Before the MG and YA communities were formed and boundaries were drawn, all books written for minors were clumped together as juvenile fiction, especially by publishers and libraries. This was especially the case for classics such as *Little Women* and *Jane Eyre* that are appropriate for children but transcend age boundaries by having the characters progress from childhood into adulthood. During the late 20th century or “sometime in the sixties” to be specific -- according to Jeanne Birdsall, National Book Award for Young People’s Literature winning author of *The Penderwicks* -- the Young Adult literary movement specifically for teens began to form (though

there have been earlier efforts to create a subset for teens), and series such as *Twilight*, *Divergent*, and *The Hunger Games* dominated the shelves in the 2000s (Birdsall). As this target demographic for ages 13 to 18 began to solidify, many authors and publishers soon realized the market for pre-teens and began tuning their books specifically towards children who have not reached their adolescence. Although the term “Middle Grade” may have been slowly popularized and adopted by publishers as a marketing tactic to specifically target this young demographic (as a result from the rising popularity of Young Adult and additional advancements in the book world), Middle Grade literature has evolved into a highly respected literary community and culture. As time went on, the MG community continued to grow and evolve in response to the expansion of the media and to the changes in society, the literary world, the publishing industry and markets, and students’ and children’s reading interests.

In 2000, *The New York Times* announced that the newspaper “will print a separate best-seller list for children’s books... largely in response to the expected demand for the fourth [*Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*] in the *Harry Potter* series of children’s books” (Smith). Before this massive change, *The New York Times* factored both adult and children’s books for each of their six lists (which were separated into paperback and hardcover lists for fiction, nonfiction, and advice and how-to). Since many children’s books at the time dominated the bestseller lists, many publishers called for the addition of another category to create more room for more adult and children’s books to make the *Times*. In 2015, *The New York Times* made another change to its lists by “separating hardcover middle grade and young adult titles from paperback and e-book bestsellers” because “in 2011, middle grade and YA were reported

together under the category ‘chapter books,’ with paperbacks a separate category” (Gilmore). These shifts further marked the division between MG and YA.

The boundaries of Middle Grade have changed very greatly over the past few decades. Rosemary Brosnan, Vice President and Editorial Director at HarperCollins Children’s Books, reflects upon these transformations:

When I started working in publishing—and I’m dating myself—there were two middle grade categories: eight to 12 and 10 to 14. The 10-to-14 age category has disappeared, so all middle grade books are slotted into the eight-to-12 category. However, many [readers] are ready for the 10-to-14 age group, which is the older end of middle grade (Maughan).

Since the trend of “reading up” (e.g. a 10-year-old preferring to read about characters at least two or three years older than he or she is) is becoming very prevalent among young children, an increasing number of MG novels are beginning to stretch these traditional parameters by having 13- and 14-year old protagonists and tackling serious issues often reserved for YA. Due to these overlaps and the transition period into adolescence being a special category itself, the essence of MG is constantly evolving. Jennifer Hubert Swan, director of library services and middle school librarian at Little Red School House and Elisabeth Irwin High School, describes, “Sure, middle grade was just included with juvenile literature, then it was called ‘tween’ for a while, and now we’re using ‘middle grade,’ which seems to be the vaguest of the three” (Maughan). There is truly no exact definition for this literary culture.

Regardless of the ongoing debates, the lines between MG and YA are not very clear. From this stems constant confusion and misconceptions about Middle Grade. It is too common

nowadays to see MG and YA clumped together as if they were synonymous. *The Atlantic Wire* sparked major outcry when it labeled tweens Meg Murry, Harriet M. Welsch, Ramona Quimby, and “nine-year-old Pippi [Longstocking]” as Young Adult heroines (Doll). In addition, books such as the *Harry Potter* series (in which the main character progresses from a pre-teen to teenagry and even adulthood) can be classified as either MG or YA depending on the perspective. This is not helped by how Young Adult often overshadows Middle Grade since YA often gains more attention and publicity from publishers and fans. YA is often seen as a more marketable age group since teens and adults ages 20 to 29 have the power to purchase their own books and to promote those books on social media, two abilities that are very limited with children before high school. Many adults who condescend against MG hold many stereotypes and false assumptions regarding the literary culture: They believe it to be light and fluffy as if it were a picture book, without any literary merit or depth. These opponents often forget that Middle Grade novels can incorporate a variety of writing styles, controversial and serious issues and topics, character personalities, and literary genres.

Thus, Middle Grade has such a wide appeal to various audiences of all ages, and this is evidenced by its rising popularity within the last few years. Jake Burt, author of *Greetings from Witness Protection!*, depicts this trend: After *The New York Times* created a children’s bestseller list, “MG fiction was dominating sales, and would continue to do so for the better part of a decade” (Burt). On Amazon, MG novels have dominated the Best Sellers lists for the past five years: *A Wrinkle in Time* currently holds #5 as of April of 2018, *Wonder* reached #1 in 2017, *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child* garnered the #1 spot in 2016, *Go Set a Watchman* (which is considered Adult but is a “sequel” to the MG classic *To Kill a Mockingbird*) peaked at #6 in

2015, and *Diary of a Wimpy Kid: The Long Haul* rose to #5 in 2014 (Amazon). In 2017, *USA Today's* Top 100 Bestselling Books listed *Wonder* as its crown victor, beating out *milk and honey*, *Origin*, and *The Handmaid's Tale* (Schnaars). However, the successes of *Wonder* and *A Wrinkle in Time* are in part due to the releases of their film adaptations and statuses as modern classics. *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child* outperformed books released in its same year because of its pre-existing hype from the *Harry Potter* fandom and its production into a play performed in London, Melbourne, and New York City. These ulterior causes do not diminish the intrinsic value of MG; in fact it increases it. Novels such as *A Wrinkle in Time*, *Wonder*, and *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child* were adapted into film and play productions because the international film and theater community saw the massive power of their stories to moviegoers and theater watchers.

These sales are driven not by children but by adults. Bridget Hodder, author of *The Rat Prince*, explains, “Middle grade is not usually sold directly to children; it’s sold to adults first. So it’s natural for adults to read it before they pass it on to their students or their children, or read it together with them. In fact, I hope they do!” (Hodder). Parents, educators, and librarians often purchase books and read them first to see whether it is suitable for their children or students. They have the immense power to go back to their favorite childhood novels, try out the latest releases, and access hundreds, if not thousands, of MG literature. Children do not have the same resources to live up to these incredible abilities (in the sense that they cannot buy books on their own and that they require the transportation of an adult to libraries, bookstores, and school most times). However, if an adult is seen reading a children’s novel without a child around, he or she is often judged as less mentally competent. This negative stereotype is constantly fueled by the

misconceptions ever present in the general public today. Should not adults have the opportunity to read any story that appeals to them, regardless of its intended age? The reason why the *Wonder* film adaptation, in which the book was intended for kids, became a blockbuster hit is that the story resonated deeply with adults. They loved it because they could see themselves and their own struggles and lives in the characters. Teenagers and adults of all ages can easily relate to *Wonder* and can have their hearts wrenched and their eyes fill up with tears. Why not the same with Middle Grade novels?

Adults who read MG literature can find themselves connecting very greatly to the story and the characters. As Jake Burt explains, it is “instantly relatable, given that no matter who you are, no matter what angle you come at the books, you are, or were once, a kid” (Burt). Every grown-up has been a child, and almost everybody can at least remember a few memories from their childhood. Some can brighten up over reminiscing the “good old days” and their family and friends. Others can recall the struggles they had endured growing up, from separation to abuse to bullying. Regardless, every person’s childhood has influenced him or her in some way, and everyone had their ups and downs. Middle Grade covers a wide span of issues and topics in which every adult should be able to find a story that resonates with their inner child. The lessons that the main characters learn can be applied to even an adult’s stressful and depressing life, no matter what the story may be about. For example, as Kat Greene, the titular protagonist in Melissa Roske’s debut novel *Kat Greene Comes Clean*, overcomes the struggles of living with her divorced mom who is suffering from OCD and of facing turbulence in her relationships with her friends and classmates at school, readers could easily relate with Kat’s feelings of overwhelm and fears as she manages through a rough patch in her life. This connection is especially stronger

if the adult had gone through similar trials throughout his or her life or childhood, including divorce, mental illness, and stress from friendships and school. Middle Grade possesses a kind of instant relatability that cannot be found elsewhere.

Unlike many misconceptions, MG fiction often tackles very deep and serious matters. While there are books that are written to be hilarious and light-humored to make reading fun and exciting for reluctant readers (which does not diminish their literary value), there is an expansive trove of novels that cover issues from the opioid epidemic to the refugee crisis, from racism and discrimination to physical and mental disabilities, from families and friendship to grief and death. As Reka Simonsen, executive editor at Atheneum Books for Young Readers, describes,

Middle grade fiction deals with the things kids are going through at those ages: friendships made and lost, family relationships changing, physical changes, a wide range of school experiences, and a growing awareness of the wide world outside of oneself and the injustices it often contains (Maughan).

By bringing light to these topics through the perspective of a child who might be beginning to explore the world, MG authors deliver powerful messages that can impact readers of all ages through unique literary techniques. These novels can be anywhere from heartbreaking to heartwarming, light to dark, sorrowful to uplifting, traditional to innovative, realistic to fantastic.

Linda Williams Jackson, Lynda Mullaly Hunt, and Supriya Kelkar tackle very deep issues in their writings as they accomplish this goal. Linda Williams Jackson's *Midnight without a Moon* and *A Sky Full of Stars* gives readers a glimpse of the racism and injustice African Americans endured during the 1950s. Set at the time of the Emmett Till murder and case, the duology follows a young girl named Rose Lee Carter who is torn between wanting to move to

the North for better opportunities or to stay in the South to fight for change and equality. *Fish in a Tree* by Lynda Mullaly Hunt is set through the eyes of Ally as she attempts to overcome her dyslexia with the help of her sympathetic teacher and her newfound friends, but she encounters frequent bouts of bullying, isolation, and despair along the path. In Supriya Kelkar's MG debut *Ahimsa*, which takes place during the Indian Freedom Movement, Anjali rallies for an independent India alongside her mother, which require defying her own prejudices along with withstanding others' attempts at resisting her and her reforms. Nevertheless, she pursues a free nation along with social equality using nonviolent, peaceful tactics. These novels prove that serious issues such as racial and social equality, neurodiversity, and prejudice and bullying are not only portrayed in MG fiction but also portrayed accurately and uniquely.

Reading a Middle Grade novel as an adult can provide for a very enlightening experience. Adults are able notice details and even jokes that fly over children's heads. While middle school students may not be able to detect subtleties such as foreshadowing, allusions, and other figurative techniques, adults are able to sense those details along with jokes intended for older minds. They are also able to understand themes and events that children may not be able to fully grasp. Reading from a child's perspective can be refreshing at times. As evidenced, MG tackles deep and controversial topics but in a unique way.

Seeing occurrences such as prejudice, separation of or from parents, and loss of a loved one from a child's point of view allows adults to view these tragedies from a different light, one full of innocence and raw truth. As Emily Blejwas, author of *Once You Know This*, writes, "The voice of a 12-year old boy, if well captured, can mesmerize teen and adult readers just as easily as the voice of a young boy or an old woman" (Blejwas). Their "lovable stubbornness" along

with their charm, resilience, and innocence can inspire readers of all ages, and many times adult readers can see themselves or their childhood reflected in the personalities of the main characters or the struggles they go through (Benjamin). Grown-ups are able to foster a deeper understanding and connection towards the novel, allowing them not only to become more emotionally invested in the story but also to have their perspectives changed. *Be Light Like a Bird* by Monika Schröder is one of my personal all-time favorites, and as a teenager, being able to see what Wren, the 12-year-old protagonist, had to go through moved my heart greatly. Wren has to confront the death of her father, her mother's sudden move to Michigan, the possibility of her family crumbling, and not fitting in to a peer group that does not fully accept her. I connected so much with Wren's personal social struggles that I found myself almost in tears at times. The raw innocence and emotion that Schröder projected in her novel along with her simplicity led me to leave a special place in my heart for *Be Light Like a Bird*.

As Middle Grade impacted my personal life and worldly viewpoints tremendously, it has the ability to influence the lives of anyone from adults to children. The literary culture itself teaches valuable lessons that cannot be found anywhere else. Since all books have the power to change readers' lives, the best Middle Grade books transcend age boundaries. For instance, Jada Bradley wrote in *The Horn Book*, "Perhaps you have read about the studies that demonstrate how reading can build empathy. Those studies usually use adults as subjects" (Bradley). As MG fosters empathy among children, it does so among grown-ups. By seeing the world through a child's perspective, adults can better understand the light and darkness around them. This can lead them to develop their moral consciences, relive their childhood emotions and memories, and become "upstanders' rather than bystanders" (Maraniss). The greatest MG books also make

readers of all ages continue to inquire more regarding the world around them. Both fictional youngsters and real-life children undergo many trials throughout the beginning of their lives that they may not be able to understand them at that moment, but adults can. By exploring controversial issues such as racism, inequality, and poverty, MG purposefully allows much room for the readers to ponder upon their opinions. It is through these works that will lead readers to become better human beings and better citizens in their own communities.

The most important lesson that MG teaches readers is hope. Bridget Hodder reflects, “It’s hard to find adult fiction that offers warm, uplifting, hopeful tales about friendship, honest, acceptance, growth, bravery... things Middle Grade offers all the time. I believe many adults, exhausted by a very bleak literary landscape, experience Middle Grade as a huge relief” (Hodder). Often times, Adult and YA novels can often be so bleak or intense that the storylines offer little to no room for hope. Although reality can be very harsh and unforgiving at times, many people want to read as an escape from their current situations. They desire for hope, hope for a better future. Reading novels that do not possess happy endings -- along with excessive violence and unrealistic scenes -- can lead to further discouragement. What is great about MG novels is that more likely than not, the story will conclude on a high note, and this should encourage those who need a boost in their lives. Reading is many times a refuge from the outside world, and thus it should offer comfort and relief when the reader is in need of it the most.

Brooks Benjamin, author of *My Seventh Grade Life in Tights*, says, “When we’re young, we’re limitless. But as we grow up, we find ourselves limited in too many ways” (Benjamin). Adults have much to learn from children as it is vice versa. Children, as they first become exposed to the dangers and troubles of the world, possess a special resilience that often leads

them to continue fighting until they have found a solution to their problems or a resolution to their conflicts. They know the true meaning of hope, and they are not afraid to pursue their dreams, regardless of the costs. By reading Middle Grade, adults can tap into a massive reservoir of hope, reminding them that everything will be alright with a little patience. MG prompts adults to realize that they should not focus on the negatives but the positives of life. Life should be about perseverance, hopes, kindness, strength, and dreams, and children are the best examples for adults to be reminded that they can bear through their trials.

Albert Whitman editor Annie Nybo writes, “To me, middle grade can have unadulterated moments of mercy and gentleness that the more plot-heavy YA cannot, and a good middle grade makes me feel proud of my fellow humans” (Maughan). One book that accomplishes this is the Newbery Honor winner novel *The War that I Finally Won* by Kimberly Brubaker Bradley. Ada, a 10-year-old girl who was born with clubfoot, had to endure through years of isolation, ridicule, and abuse from her ashamed and disowning mother. When World War II hits Great Britain, Ada escapes with her younger brother Jamie to the English countryside, and the siblings are placed in the care of the single Susan Smith, who has no experience with children or parenting. It revolves around a young girl named Ada who was born with clubfoot during World War II. At the beginning of the novel, consumed with the possibility of her new life coming to an end, Ada possesses little hope for herself that she will feel loved and fit in with her others. However, she starts to warm up to Susan, and Susan’s home becomes a refuge full of love, hope, and acceptance. Finally, once in her life Ada truly feels as if she belongs and she is loved. Reading books such as *The War that I Finally Won* can restore one’s faith in humanity and see how the

good in the world will overcome the bad, and it inspires adults to never give up hope regarding of one's circumstances.

As earlier mentioned, MG novels provide the perfect escape from reality. Busy adults might not have the time to complete an entire adult novel such as an installment from the *Game of Thrones* series or *The Goldfinch*, but an MG novel can be read and finished in one sitting. With hope and resilience abounding throughout the pages, readers of all ages can find a world where they never want to leave. MG authors intricately craft up beautiful universes that dazzle readers from their first glimpses on the included map and the story. Monica Tesler, author of the *Bounders* series, says, "For me, the best kinds of books have immersive worlds. Science fiction, fantasy, and adventure stories in middle grade often have fantastically detailed worlds filled with mystery and magic" (Tesler). Series such as *The Changelings* by Christina Soontornvat, *The Unicorn Quest* by Kamilla Benko, and *The Water and the Wild* by K. E. Ormsbee house worlds that are not only inspired by but also can rival the one in *The Chronicles of Narnia* by C. S. Lewis. With lovable and relatable characters, delicately painted magic systems or technology, and fantastic or futuristic cultures and settings, MG fiction offers a variety of imaginative places that readers of all ages are welcome to travel into.

In spite of the growing success and popularity of children's fiction, many literary elitists vehemently argue that only kids should read Middle Grade while the grown-ups should peruse adult novels alone. In her infamous article "Against YA," which sparked major outrage in the literary universe, Ruth Graham writes, "Adults *should* feel embarrassed about reading literature written for children" and instead should be "graduating out of the kiddie pool" and enjoying "the thrill of growing up" (Graham). These literary snobs conclude that since MG is written for

children, it is exclusive to that age group alone. Adults have no business touching a children's book. They judge the 40-year-old reading *The Hunger Games* on the bus and believe her to be less smart than her peers. Elitists are very caught up with the false notion that Middle Grade does not possess "the depth of language and character as literature for people who have stopped physically growing" (Stein). For them, the purpose of reading is not for enjoyment or personal development, but for stretching the intellectual boundaries of one's mind and improving their reading comprehension. Complexity in adult literature is superior against the simplicity of children's literature.

This condescension and stereotyping could be not be any further from the truth. Reka Simonsen calls out these elitists, saying, "So for those people who don't take our entire category of books seriously, it's not surprising that they can't be bothered to figure out the differences between middle grade and YA" (Maughan). Their perspective is ridden with so many misconceptions and inaccuracies that they have no true grasp of what MG truly is. These literary snobs will confuse many MG novels for YA and vice versa. Common stereotypes they hold against these age groups include YA being all about vampires and love triangles and MG being too immature and underdeveloped in writing quality. They often forget that many classics such as *Jane Eyre*, *The Giver*, and *To Kill a Mockingbird* fall under juvenile fiction. In addition, they disdain children's book writers as inferior, but many adult fiction writers have forayed into the MG universe, such as "Neil Gaiman, Philip Pullman, L. M. Montgomery, Lois Lowry, [and] E. L. Konigsberg" (Nose in a Book). Does this mean that these world-renowned authors possess a lesser talent than other writers? Of course not!

Most readers do not read to stretch their minds or expand their comprehension; they read to escape from a world that can be unforgiving at times and to have their lives changed. Non Pratt, YA author of *Trouble* and editor at Usborne Publishing, speaks for the majority of readers in her rebuttal against Ruth Graham: “I do not read novels to transcend my intellectual boundaries. I read because my soul sings when I’m lost in a good narrative or caught up with characters I wish were real. I read because I love reading, not because I crave the reward of being stretched” (Pratt). While it is important to expand one’s knowledge through books, reading for pleasure should not be quickly dismissed. Authors write books to immerse readers in the story, to leave an impression on their souls, to make them laugh and cry and love and hope. If an adult enjoys Middle Grade, which is his refuge, his relaxation, his source of hope and inspiration, then he or she should continue to take pride in loving those books.

One of the most common indicators of the literary quality of a book is the reading level of the text. Often, people associate adult novels with having higher levels and thus higher quality. Many parents and educators freak when their children or students are reading books such as *The Hunger Games* that are given a fifth grade reading level. However, many well-known classic and adult fiction authors have a writing style that only reaches a middle school level (more specifically fifth to eighth grade). A study conducted by Shane Snow for *The Content Strategist* showed that Ernest Hemingway’s novels stand at a fourth grade rating while the works of Cormac McCarthy and Jane Austen can be understood by fifth graders. Stephen King’s, Stephenie Meyer’s, and J. R. R. Tolkien’s novels lie at a sixth grade reading level. The books of John Grisham, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and James Patterson lie at a seventh grade reading level while Leo Tolstoy’s, Danielle Steel’s, and Michael Crichton’s novels have a reading ease suited for

eighth graders (Snow). These authors prove that most adult books do not possess a reading level that is supposed to “challenge” a more mature mind.

Novels that are easy reads, especially those that fall under Middle Grade, are more well suited for the budding or reluctant reader. A person striving to read more and find his or her niche in the literary world would not start with behemoths such as Leo Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* or *War and Peace*, which can take even the most avid bibliophiles weeks to months to finish. By reading shorter novels that have a higher reading ease, which is highly prevalent in MG, a beginning reader unlocks a sense of accomplishment at the prospect of completing a story and wanting more. Middle Grade novels are also very flexible to read during busy schedules, and they allow readers to be able to finish the story without sacrificing a huge allotment of time. Novels such as *Fish in a Tree* by Lynda Mullaly Hunt, *Open If You Dare* by Dana Middleton, *Eden’s Wish* by M. Tara Crowl, and *Almost Paradise* by Corabel Shofner can be finished in a single sitting since they can immerse readers into the storyline and engage them in a plot full of humor, action, adventure, and conflict.

There is no actual correlation between a text’s reading level with its literary quality. Drs. Paula J. Schwanenflugel and Nancy Flanagan Knapp dispel this myth: “And of course, none of these [reading level] scales can measure how well the text is actually written -- whether the author uses transitions effectively, provides rich descriptions, or explains things clearly, all of which certainly affect the readability of a text” (Schwanenflugel, Knapp). Just because a book utilizes more complex sentence structure and higher level vocabulary does not mean that it is possesses a high enough quality that readers could enjoy. A higher-level novel could be hard to

read or get into at times, have a messy and poorly written storyline, and lack the character depth and literary techniques that make stories lively and engaging.

In fact, some of the best novels were written very simply. Ernest Hemingway is one of the most famous writers in the 20th century, and it is his concise writing style that led to his works becoming iconic. Madeleine L'Engle, the acclaimed author of *A Wrinkle in Time*, once said, "You have to write the book that wants to be written. And if the book will be too difficult for grown-ups, then you write it for children" (@MadeleineLEngle). Readers will often choose to not finish a book because it becomes too confusing or too slow for them. Common complaints include having too many subplots; too much description and dragging; and too many characters, places, and details to remember. Monika Schröder, author of *Be Light Like a Bird*, knows these problems, saying, "For once, I think most books for young readers are very well written and edited. I find myself shaking my head more often when reading books for adults, when I encounter overly long exposition or just poor dialogue or sloppy story-telling" (Schröder). Middle Grade authors have to undergo constant revising and editing, refining the voices and the stories, so their books can fit children's interests and tastes, which can sometimes be exacting.

As K. E. Ormsbee, author of *The Water and the Wild* trilogy, describes, "There's an old adage I've often heard circulate writing circles: The younger your reader, the more difficult a task writing is" (Ormsbee). With a target range of 25,000 to 50,000 words (it can be stretched to accommodate longer stories), MG authors are required to be concise. They must tighten the story as much as they can and avoid any unnecessary scenes or details that just fill up space. (Although all authors do this, this process is much more strict for children's writers.) During all of this drafting and revising, they still manage to tackle "complex ideas with lightness, humility and

even humor” and keep the very essence and emotion of their writing (Hollingsworth). This process often leads to a greater quality of fiction that cannot be found anywhere else and that can suit both younger and older readers.

In addition, many Middle Grade authors utilize various techniques -- from allegories to rhetoric to extended metaphors -- that add to the depth and quality of their works. Taylor Norman, editor at Chronicle Books, appraises the literary culture by saying that it “allows for any kind of experimentation you’d find in any other genre: Russian literature, poetry, drama, anything” (Maughan). By combining this experimentation of various genres, cultures, poetry and prose styles, and perspectives with the vast world of themes, issues, real-life inspirations and people, and conflicts, Middle Grade is an entire buffet of unique stories and qualitative writing that can be considered by many literary enthusiasts as modern classics. Alyssa Hollingsworth, author of *The Eleventh Trade*, reflects upon this high degree of excellence: “[I]t was just so amazing to me as I read *Story Thieves* that I was having the same metanarrative discussions on the same level that I did in an upper level English class at college” (Hollingsworth). Whether they possess subtle symbolism or majestic world-building or authentic realism, MG can be dissected for lesson plans in the classroom or discussed by readers of any age in book clubs and panels. It tackles a wide variety of issues in ways that more mature fiction cannot, and it has the power to promote unity and dialogue between children, adults, and their fellow peers, regardless of their backgrounds.

Middle Grade also often avoids the obscenities and vulgarities that are ever too present in Young Adult, New Adult, and Adult fiction today. Alice Faye Duncan, children’s picture book

writer of *Memphis, Martin, and the Mountaintop* and *Honey Baby Sugar Child*, comments on this phenomenon, stating,

Some middle grade novels are perfectly suited for the teen and adult reader, who likes to dive into current and/or controversial issues without a saturation of profanity and gratuitous sex scenes.... In the way of Wharton and Poe or Welty and Faulkner, middle grade novels may be a more classic literature because it lacks the crass and graphic conventions of today (Duncan).

For adults who are more conservative towards profanity and promiscuousness, Middle Grade suits their reading tastes by avoiding these elements. While more mature age groups in literature frequently utilize curse words, sexual scenes and innuendos, moral vices, and graphic violence, MG excludes these elements due to the purity and innocence of the main characters. Thus, many MG novels hold a degree of classicism and quality that many modern writers have forgotten or ignored in their own works. *Pride and Prejudice*, for examples, is a romance that did not include any graphic or explicit content (especially since the sexual ethics during Jane Austen's time were very rigid), yet it is considered as one of the world's greatest works of literature. While cleanliness is not the only factor to consider when determining the literary quality of a novel, Middle Grade books have the ability to explore dark and controversial issues without needing to include any crude content that are not suitable for young children.

K. E. Ormsbee's love for her literary community reflects the notion that there is always a story for every person in Middle Grade: "[W]hen I pick up a Middle Grade novel, I will find writing inside that simply doesn't compare to any other fiction. I will find boundless adventures, timeless themes, and resilient young heroes and heroines" (Ormsbee). MG covers such a diverse

array of topics, themes, and techniques that it possesses a universal appeal for children and adults alike. These stories take on unique approaches and premises that lose their effectiveness if they were portrayed in an adult novel. Instantly relatable, *Middle Grade* is a beacon of light, a fountain of hope, a source of inspiration, in a world full of disaster, depression, and disillusionment. These “forever books” have the power to sway the hearts of younger and older readers for generations to come. Indeed, “Good stories are good stories, period, regardless of their intended reader age” (Ormsbee).

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