

“This Isn't a Place for Castoffs. We're Here Because We Want to be Here”: A Conversation with Lisa Hazlett on Rurality and Young Adult Literature

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*Former classroom teacher, teacher educator, and young adult literature scholar, Lisa Hazlett offers insight on her experiences in rural areas and how these experiences prompted her to write her book *Teaching Diversity in Rural Schools*. In this discussion, she explains the singularity of the Upper Midwest and why place matters when it comes to reading and teaching young adult literature.*

While scholarship on young adult literature (YAL) has grown significantly over the past 24 years (Suico et al, 2022), one aspect of YAL that deserves more attention are books that focus on rural settings. Fortunately, Dr. Lisa Hazlett, professor at University of South Dakota and South Dakota native, has written *Teaching Diversity in Rural Schools: Attaining Understanding, Tolerance, and Respect through Young Adult Literature*. She is well-positioned to write about this topic for a number of reasons. Besides her focus on incorporating YAL into the classroom and on LGBTQ issues in YAL, Hazlett is a long-time teacher in and resident of South Dakota, and her lived experiences as well as her academic knowledge help inform her book. She is also passionate about her home, wanting others from outside South Dakota and the Upper Midwest to learn more about rural areas in general as well as the specific characteristics for different regions. In this interview, Hazlett's expertise comes to the forefront as she talks about *Teaching Diversity in Rural Schools*, her work with young adult literature, and the realities of life in the Upper Midwest.

Terri Suico (TS): How did you first become interested in studying young adult literature?

Lisa Hazlett (LH): I graduated with my doctorate in 1989 from the University of Kansas. My dissertation was on writing, and I was more interested in aspects of writing in the content areas, and I knew very little about adolescent lit. I took a YAL class as an undergrad and graduate, but for whatever reason, we read a variety of titles with many not YAL. Actually, that's where [young adult literature scholar] Judy Hayn and I met. It was our first class for both of us in our doctoral degrees, and we sat next to each other in adolescent literature.

I got to the University of South Dakota (USD), and the very first class that I was assigned was adolescent literature, and I had virtually no background in it.

Fortunately, my colleagues at USD were all reading or elementary scholars, so I was going with them to the IRA (International Reading Association, now the International Literacy Association) conference and the affiliate IRA conferences. This is where I was introduced to the literature side, and I began focusing there.

About my third year at USD, I realized adolescent lit is really what I was interested in, and it just kind of went on from there, for a long time actually. Whatever I do, it's about adolescent lit. If I write, it's about adolescent lit. If I present, it's about adolescent lit.

TS: You came to adolescent literature at a time when it was going through a period of transition, because this was before it started being rejuvenated in the 2000s.

LH: When I started my doctoral work at the University of Kansas, my advisor was Jack Bushman, and his wife, Kay, was then the president of ALAN (Assembly on Literature for Adolescents of NCTE), so what Jack did, we did. And I went to ALAN, and it was like wow, this is great! I didn't have any of the books, so this was like heaven. At the time, fewer educators really understood adolescent lit, or they knew of it but weren't using it, or they thought it was just for younger kids or those who were less bright. And I kind of built this little niche, and I suppose just got in at the right time, let's put it that way.

TS: When you were first starting to learn about young adult literature, there was probably a lot of mass market books, like *The Nancy Drew Files* and *Sweet Valley High* as well as the Christopher Pike horror books.

LS: Yeah, and *The Baby-Sitters Club* series. I remember when Chris Crutcher was a new author. We had all the books from the '70s, but they were getting a little bit old. There were many quality titles out there, but they were not necessarily taught in classrooms. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, educators were focused on using adult classics. In the '80s, it seemed like there were so many mass market books, and it took a while to begin recognizing more titles. It seemed the only YAL title taught was *The Outsiders* -- it's a great book, but we needed more. So many books from the '70s were very urban, gritty, and just about as unrealistic as the 1950s titles. I got into young adult literature right when so many wonderful authors began writing young adult lit, and that was great because the field was just exploding.

TS: You mentioned that all of the presentations and the work that you've done has really focused on young adult literature. I was looking at some of your previous work—so you've looked at the presence of young adult literature in classrooms as well as diversity in young adult literature, particularly as it relates to the portrayal of LGBTQ characters. How did those topics influence your book, *Teaching Diversity in Rural Schools*?

LH: We live in the sticks, all right (laughs). My students do not care who or what you are—they don't care if you're LGBTQ or any other minority. I was teaching class a few years ago, and we were reading *Honor Girl*, which is set in the year 2000. It's the author's, Maggie Thrash, autobiography. She goes to summer camp, has a crush on a counselor, and realizes she's gay. We were discussing the book, and one of my students asked, "In the 2000s, were they still prejudiced against gays?" And I said, "There's still prejudice against them now."

Anyway, our school, USD, has always been LGBTQ-friendly, and we've had quite a few professors who were out and proud. We have a large LGBTQ student group. However, my students will tell me about how difficult it is being in a small town. Most of them aren't out at all. Judy and I started presenting on LGBTQ issues in the late 1990s, and there were few LGBTQ-themed titles then. I had joined WILLA, which was Women In Literature and Life Assembly, and while it's no longer extant, this was where I became interested in the topic because so many of the members were LGBTQ. And then when that group folded, I went over to GSEA [Genders and Sexualities Equality Assembly].

Every year since 1989, in my adolescent lit course, I always had my students read a book with an LGBTQ character or theme, and I've always discussed the topic and issues in my other

classes. Of course, in the early '90s, I would get hate mail, you name it. It wasn't frightening, but I had several senior professors tell me that I shouldn't be writing and presenting on these topics because it would prevent me from earning tenure. I didn't believe this, and there was no problem. My first thought was, "Well, then I don't want tenure." I've always discussed the topic and have worked to promote acceptance. In the early 1990s, anyone outwardly gay would never have been hired to teach in the public schools so we had closeted students.

While I was doing *Honor Girl* in one of those classes, I had a student who wrote me this note saying that my class was the first one that she had ever seen any literature that was LGBTQ themed. I put that in my book, but I just about fell over. I couldn't believe it, but my students tell me stories that are shocking. For example, one from a tiny town said the pastor and his youth group would go to the school's library and just remove all of the books that were LGBTQ. And I asked, "Did you do it too?" and she said, "Yeah." I asked why and she said, "I don't know. I mean it was youth group, and I just had to. I thought it was stupid, but we all did it as it would have been difficult to refuse"

Remember *Daddy's Roommate*? When that came out, our librarian at USD bought multiple copies because people take it out and do not return it. And now, of course there's still prejudice, but before it was the students who would push back against learning about LGBTQ themes. And now it's older adults, politicians, with students feeling it just doesn't matter.

When discussing *Honor Girl*, students didn't care that Maggie was gay. We were focused on discussing how unethical Erin, a camp counselor, was toward Maggie, and their horrific final date. Erin leaves Maggie, who sits stunned, and one of my students said, "Oh, that's just like when our boyfriend breaks up with you. And you shut your apartment door, and you think he's going to knock again, and he doesn't. You're waiting, and that silence." But ten to fifteen years before, students would have focused on the LGBTQ aspect rather than the relationship issues, shared by everyone. Some would've been upset about me teaching that book or anything that was LGBTQ, and I'm sure I have those who disagree with learning of these issues, but I haven't had a negative comment in years.

We have the same LGBTQ population as anyplace else in the country, but the actual individuals aren't the same. That is, if in a small town, those who identify as LGBTQ don't necessarily have anybody else like them. A typical example is a school with a senior who is a gay male, and the other LGBTQ students are a junior lesbian female and another gay male in eighth

grade. These students don't have the same peer group as larger schools, and we don't have GSAs [Gay-Straight Alliance clubs] because we don't have enough students in the towns to form one. They are in the larger city schools, but often too far to travel.

TS: That brings up something that I appreciated in your book: you have so much data about rural populations and the diversity that is present, and sometimes the diversity that isn't present, in these areas. Was this something that you felt you needed to include to provide some context for the book, or was it something that your publisher, Rowman & Littlefield, told you to do?

LH: I included this information because people don't understand what the area is like. The Upper Midwest is unlike any other place because we don't have diverse individuals, literally. If you go elsewhere in the country, it's far more populated. For example, in the South, there are many small towns, but they also have African Americans and whites there, so these smaller towns are diverse in a way not found in the Upper Midwest. There are also more and larger cities in the South.

Here, our cities are small; Wyoming's largest, Cheyenne, for example, has some 65,000. Statistics provide the percentage of area diversity, but when looking closer, minorities are not living *throughout* these states, but only in *some* counties. Essentially, this breaks down to minorities in the largest cities and university towns, but many towns with none at all. The area lacks too few African Americans and Asians to count, both fewer than 1%, and in university towns, with our largest group Hispanics and Latinx. They are in the largest cities, working in meatpacking and factory jobs.

Our Native American population is high, but this group often stays on the reservation and attends their own schools and colleges. I've been at USD for 35 years and have had fewer than 5 Native American students in my classes. They have many difficulties; Pine Ridge Reservation in SD is the nation's poorest, and aside from poverty, alcoholism and other similar issues, leaving the reservation is challenging. That is, if they leave, the people on the reservation disapprove, and White society is not particularly welcoming to them either.

Diversity is absent here because of size, with the largest cities and universities holding the vast majority. For example, SD has only two cities with more than one high school; Sioux Falls [population 200,000] has three and Rapid City [population 83,000] has two. Diversity is found in university towns, but it is also largely transient. Of course, consider the issue; who wants to move here without a support system? If one is Jewish and the nearest synagogue is 50 miles away, how attractive is that? We will never be diverse because if wanting to attract minorities, then others of

that particular group need to be living here, and they aren't. Most of our towns in the region are 1000 or under and hardly offer the job opportunities of larger cities, which are few. We don't attract diverse individuals by saying they will be the only Black or Asian or Hispanic family in town.

TS: I appreciate that you point out the difference between the Upper Midwest and other rural areas. One of the questions I had for you was, how would you imagine that the book you wrote would be different if it focused on other rural areas, such as the rural South?

LH: In the Upper Midwest, our states are big, but there's literally no one in them. South Dakota has some 800,000 people. Most of its population is on the extreme eastern and western sides of the state, with very small towns in the middle, and miles between them. Other areas, as the South or Northeast, are far more densely populated with more large cities. In South Dakota, after Sioux Falls and Rapid City, the next largest city is Aberdeen, at 28,000 people. Pierre, our state capital, has 13,000 people and is our tenth-largest city. This is similar for the other Upper Midwestern states, too.

It's hard. You've got students in your class, and you're trying to talk to them about diversity, but the students don't see any in the school or in the town. The Internet has changed everything, but it is still not a substitute for people. For example, we have too few African Americans in the area to count, and only a few at USD. And, yes, they are the football or other sports players. We have one African American professor in our School of Education and very few, if any, elsewhere, with the same found in the other Upper Midwestern states. There's no community for these students, so of course they don't stay.

TS: You mentioned in the preface of your book an exchange you had with someone going to NCTE that really provided the impetus for this book. Had you been thinking about writing about this topic before this exchange?

LH: Yes, because I write for rural publications, I do talk a lot about rural areas and the importance of place. Part of the value of adolescent lit is that students can see that they're like everybody else. Everybody's worried about dating—I've broken up with somebody, am I going to be able to find my locker, will I have friends, all of these kinds of things. You want students to read about people who are different from them, but you also want teens to read about those who are *like* them.

Unfortunately, there aren't many books for the Upper Midwest, set in these states. Sure, you can read a book that takes place in a small Texas town, but it isn't quite the same thing as living in a place that is really desolate. Here you've got to drive, usually for several hours, for larger places.

Another unique feature is many of our schools are just K-12, one building, and you don't see that in books. There are so many other things that students here experience not in books. We have school consolidation issues—there may not be enough students in a school to have a football team; they may have to join with three other schools to form one, and many sports and other classes aren't offered at all. But you don't see those kinds of things in books set in small towns elsewhere.

Anyway, I had been thinking about writing the book. I was at a point where I'd been teaching diversity issues in classes, and I didn't have anything huge on my plate. Of course, when it came to writing it, it was a disastrous chain of events. I signed the contract in February 2020. In March, COVID came, and suddenly we were redoing everything to put our courses online, no one knows what's happening, and as I'm trying to write, the publishing houses went on furlough. Let's just say that wasn't a good time to start a book.

As I was writing, I found an article that I wrote in 1997 for the *Rural Educator* about books set in the Upper Midwest. I was thinking I could use the books mentioned then. Of course, they're outdated, but I wanted to list as many as I could find, and I planned to add to them. However, I think I found maybe 11 more books, total. From 1997 to 2023, there were only some 11 titles set in the Upper Midwest written, which surprised me.

TS: The exchange that you had in Baltimore on the way to NCTE was in November of 2019. You must have had a very quick turnaround if you were signing the contract in February of 2020. Did you go to Rowman & Littlefield while they were at NCTE and make the pitch?

LH: I did it there. I walked up to the table and shared my idea, and they wanted it. It took me longer than I wanted because of COVID, but I know a lot about adolescent lit and other topics covered, so it wasn't as if I were writing about the unfamiliar. I've lived in South Dakota for a long time, so I was researching what and where I was already living.

TS: It sounds like Rowman & Littlefield were excited when you approached them with this book idea.

LH: I don't know if they were glad after beginning working with me! My editor is from Kansas like myself, and he was wonderful. Also, it was even more challenging because I was writing it myself, and that makes a difference. I didn't want to do an edited book, no offense to those who go that route because there are few, if any, professors here who study YAL and who actively write. It's hard to interact with peer professors as our universities don't have strong networks with one another. Plus, many don't attend NCTE, and I am usually the only person from South Dakota there, or the only person presenting; there may be a few others but for YAL, I'm essentially it.

I know educators who live in smaller rural areas, but the Upper Midwest is a different kind of rural, so I would need somebody with that expertise, and I don't have anybody. I'm also a loner and not great working with others, and I really wanted to write it myself. However, it's a lot of work to do it yourself, and I have no idea what I was thinking by not taking a sabbatical to write it. As I recall, it required too much paperwork. But looking back, I probably should have.

TS: It seems like there was an enormous amount of work to do for this book. There is a lot of information here, and I can't even begin to imagine how much went into it.

LH: Yes, it was a lot of work. I didn't think I was going to finish, ever, and of course, everything takes longer than one thinks. I would do my work for school, and then evenings and weekends would be dedicated to the book. I worked on the book all the time, and when I finished it last December. It took me at least a month to realize I didn't have to write because it had been so much of my life.

Of course, I had the Internet. These aren't the days of pulling cards in the library, which I did for my dissertation but that would probably kill me now. It's a lot to type in demographic or other information needed and have the stats appear.

One thing that I found difficult, and that I was snide about in one chapter, is that books and book reviews didn't always specify the setting for the book, and place matters to me. If the review didn't list where the book took place, it literally would take me at least an hour to an hour and a half to find it. I used some 700 titles, with only about half listing the place, so this was a massive amount of time. The reason it made me angry is that if you're a teacher and looking for books that are set in your state or in your area, reviews are what you read for this information. Educators don't have time to read five books that *may* be set in the Upper Midwest and then discover they aren't.

It seems like you should put the place in the first chapter, rather than waiting until the middle or only identifying by naming a nearby city, such as reading a character “lived near Tulsa.” Anyway, if looking for books that are in a certain place, I don't know very many teachers, or anyone really, who has an extra hour and a half for finding the location of a book. It's really difficult, far more work than I had expected.

We have so few titles set in the Upper Midwest, and most of those are dated. Again, using another small town isn't the same, as our lifestyle is different. For example, the school is the town social center. Everybody goes to the game, everybody goes to prom to see the grand march, the whole town gets involved with homecoming. I don't see that type of community in other novels. Plus, one knows everybody in town when the population is 1,000 or 500. If the school is having a concert or debate, most of the town attends. If you're in a larger city, and there's a concert or debate, the audience is those from the students' families.

TS: How do you hope that *Teaching Diversity in Rural Schools* is used? What audience are you hoping to reach with this book?

LH: I am really hoping teachers and teacher educators especially read and use this. Teachers in the classroom are the ones who are choosing the books and what the students should read; why not think about diversity more? I know that some in the Upper Midwest or other places may ask, “Why do we care about this because we don't have that group in town? We don't have X, so why do we need to spend time discussing them?” This book gives the reason why. I want educators to consider diversity and realize one can discuss its many issues, even without many minorities or any at all. It can and should be discussed.

I also want teachers to look at the novels inside and select those that take place in smaller towns, because, when viewing YAL as a whole, there aren't as many titles as one may have thought. At first glance they appear numerous, but many are old, dated, or mediocre.

TS: You mentioned that you're hoping classroom teachers, teacher educators, and pre-service teachers read this book. Something I noticed about the book was that you include a lot of pedagogical ideas that really could be used by teachers in any setting.

LH: I was focused on rurality in the Upper Midwest, but I was also trying to write the book so all educators could use it. Of course, the page limit was surprisingly limited at times.

I did spend a lot of space on microaggressions because, living here, there are so many people denigrating you and the area. We are constantly asked things as, "Do you have any restaurants there? Do you have any culture here?" The comments can be hurtful, especially to teens. I can't tell you how many people have said to me, "What are you doing in South Dakota? Why haven't you moved?"

We're like any other place; our campus and cities could be anywhere. As a result, I included a whole section focused on helping teens advocate for where they live and be proud of their hometown.

TS: What reception have you gotten, or what feedback have you gotten, since the book was published last year?

LH: Most people have been asking me, "How did you find that many books set in the Upper Midwest?" I have reviewed novels for years and did have some help from a grad assistant, so locating books was easy. Finding their exact location was incredibly time consuming and definitely the most work of anything written. I definitely wasn't expecting that, and it really slowed progress.

People were also asking about the stats about what population lives where and where the different groups were, those kinds of things. However, mostly, the response I hear is, "There aren't as many books set in the Upper Midwest as I thought." And again, so many listed are outdated or older, as from 2008 or so.

TS: What young adult book set in the Upper Midwest would you recommend to people? Or you could have several books. I know that you were able to find an impressive number for your book.

LH: That is an evil question! (laughs) I really liked Rainbow Rowell and Faith Erin Hicks's *Pumpkinheads*. I had to laugh at *Clown in a Cornfield*. To be honest, I think my favorite, not so much from the Upper Midwest, but Chris Crutcher and his novels set in Trout, Idaho, capture the area and its small town life here better than anyone else. I know how this sounds, with my being upset with so many older novels, but his *Running Loose* is my favorite.

It features Louie, whose life is great and then his girlfriend dies in an automobile crash, and he's broken. He gets wonderful advice from an older friend and at its end, you feel he's grieving but moving on to better things. The novel resonated with me, and I've used it with my students who loved it also, with so many saying Trout was where they lived. I think I cried when I read his later *Deadline*, and Louie was featured as a teacher. There, he's alone and living in a tiny apartment and

seems to have no friends, no support, certainly not a happy life. I wasn't expecting that, I thought he would be married with kids, happy, a great role model. I'm still upset about Louie!

TS: What do you wish young adult lit authors and publishers knew about rural areas?

LH: I wish they knew that, overall, we are the same as anybody else. We are just as educated. We have the same facilities. We live the same way. If you go to Sioux Falls, you could be in any city in the US. There's the attitude that if you live here, it's because you aren't bright enough to go someplace else, and if you like it here, there's something the matter with you.

When I first moved here, I had other job offers, and I took this one because I liked the school and position offered—it was five hours away from my folks, and I thought I would be here for two years. But I cannot tell you how many people would say things like, "Why are you in South Dakota?" and I had so many students say, "Why are you teaching here? You're too good for South Dakota." We get that a lot.

I suppose I want others to understand we are the same as anyone else. We like it here, and there are so many advantages to the Upper Midwest. There is little crime, pollution, and crowds; we have great technology; demographics open doors; people are friendly and helpful. Many students want to return to their home state [in the Upper Midwest] to teach or work. We don't have the mass exodus as many believe, and this isn't a place for castoffs, for people who aren't bright enough to move or to take a job elsewhere. We're here because we chose to live here.

TS: Is there anything that we haven't discussed that you hoped that we would touch upon?

LH: One thing that always works when you're with an author or anyone, and you blank on what to say or ask, is, "Have you ever been to South Dakota?" That's a great way to get a conversation going and works for every state. Of course, most people haven't been up here and when hearing "South Dakota" assume I live on Mt. Rushmore (it's some eight hours away), but it also gives me a chance to promote my state and area. The Upper Midwest isn't perfect, the same as elsewhere, but it is a wonderful place to live and nothing like its typical stereotypes.

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