

Rural Young Adult Literature: Considering Diversity and Combatting Rural Erasure

RACHELLE KUEHL, GUEST EDITOR
VIRGINIA TECH

CHEA PARTON, GUEST EDITOR
PURDUE UNIVERSITY

Welcome to Study & Scrutiny, Issue 6.2. For this special issue of Study and Scrutiny: Research on Young Adult Literature, deftly curated by Rachelle Kuehl and Chea Parton, we are excited to share with you research and analysis on rural young adult literature. The study of young adult literature in rural settings is not new, but it has never been so focused. Research abounds across many scholarly journals, and other resources for exploring rural young adult literature have been established to enrich our understanding of this vital body of literature.

EDITORS' INTRODUCTION – RACHELLE KUEHL & CHEA PARTON

When we first issued the call for this special issue on rural young adult literature, we were not sure who would respond or what they would choose to share. We invited pieces that would help expand the notion of rurality as racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse, with characters whose stories resist stereotypic representations. This goal aligns with our work as founder and facilitator of LiteracyInPlace.com (Chea), a website with a corresponding YouTube series/podcast, [Reading Rural YAL](#), that aims to spread the word about rural young adult literature, and curator of the [Rural Literature Library](#) (Rachelle), an initiative housed at Virginia Tech to collect and share books for children of all ages that are set in rural places.

It was somewhat surprising to find that the majority of our submissions focused on queer and rural intersections, an identity that has only recently begun to be seen as compatible. In our recent article in *Journal of Literacy Research*, “‘Bet You Can’t Wait to Get Out’: Complicating Narratives of Leaving in Rural Young Adult Literature” (Parton & Kuehl, 2023), we explored the ways that rural young adult literature both takes up and disrupts the familiar trope that rural young people must

leave their hometowns to find success elsewhere. One of our focal texts, Courtney Stevens's (2017) *Dress Codes for Small Towns*, features Billie, a teenager exploring her queer identity and trying to come to terms with having to leave her beloved rural community, which is dominated by conservative Christian culture, to be accepted. More recently, the number of submissions to the [Whippoowill Book Award for Rural Young Adult and Middle Grades Literature](#) that feature queer rural characters has increased steadily, indicating a growing interest in readers' and publishers' interest in affirming rural queer experiences.

The first article in the special issue is a content analysis examining representations of rural people and places in award-winning young adult and middle grade books. Jen Sanders identified 15 novels fitting these criteria that were set in rural places. Using qualitative critical content analysis methods, Sanders identified several trends in the book set, including that (a) rural characters often feel a strong sense of belonging to their communities; (b) rural characters sometimes feel stuck in their hometowns; (c) rural places are disproportionately depicted as impoverished; and (d) diversity in terms of race, culture, gender identity, sexuality, and religion or spirituality is adequately represented. Sanders's examination complements other recent research on middle grade books set in rural places (Kuehl & Eppley, 2024), suggesting nuanced depictions of rural people and places are becoming more prevalent in literature for young people.

The second article is by Kate Kedley and Ryan Schey, who take a deeper dive into one of the books mentioned in Sanders's piece, *King and the Dragonflies* (Callender, 2020), analyzing it alongside two other books featuring queer and rural characters. *King and the Dragonflies* is the story of King, a 12-year-old Black boy in rural Louisiana whose family is coping with the sudden death of his older brother while King is beginning to recognize and name his queer identity. *The Art of Saving the World* (Duyvis, 2020) is a futuristic novel in which the main character, Hazel, is a White teenager living in near-isolation in her rural Pennsylvania farming community when she begins receiving visits from other Hazels who exist in other dimensions, each of whom has a distinct identity and personality. The third novel, *Elatsoe* (Little Badger, 2020), is a realistic fantasy featuring an asexual protagonist from the Lipan Apache Tribe of Texas who can see and communicate with the spirit world; notably, *Elatsoe* is one of the Indigenous YA texts Muñoz recommends teacher candidates explore to as a way to "consider epistemological frames of reference regarding physical and spiritual reality" (p. 126). Kedley and Schey layer applications of queer theory, metronormativity (Halberstam, 2005), and critical rusticity (Herring, 2010) in analyzing these novels, challenging the

epistemological, racial, and narratological normativities identified within the books. Along the way, they share sets of questions teachers can use to help young adult readers critically analyze queer rural representations in texts.

Third, we hear from Josh Thompson and Clint Whitten, two English educators who identify as both rural and queer, who blend an analysis of J. R. Jamison's *Hillbilly Queer: A Memoir* (2021) with autoethnographic reflections of their own experiences as rural queer youth. Recognizing the power of using stories like Jamison's in schools to support and affirm LGBTQIA2S+ students, Thompson and Whitten take a close look at *Hillbilly Queer* through a conceptual framework combining the disruption of cisheteronormativity, queerness (Muñoz, 2009), awayness (Biddle et al., 2019), and Critical Rural English Pedagogy (Petrone & Wynoff Olsen, 2021); a review of this book by Suico appears later in this volume). After a discussion of their findings in relation to their own rural queer experiences, Thompson and Whitten offer practical suggestions for using *Hillbilly Queer* in ELA classrooms.

Finally, Gretchen Schroeder provides an analysis of Jennifer Murphy's (2021) *Pumpkin*, a novel set in rural Texas whose openly gay main character, Waylon, takes on a drag persona and is nominated for prom queen. (Note: *Pumpkin* is reviewed by Anne Marie Smith, later in this volume.) Schroeder employs queer theory and Critical Rural English Pedagogy (Petrone & Wynoff Olsen, 2021) in her analysis, and like the authors of each of the special issue's other articles, Schroeder suggests that *Pumpkin* presents a world in which queerness and rurality can co-exist. As Waylon forms meaningful relationships with the rural drag community he's newly discovered, notes Schroeder, "the narrative of *Pumpkin* becomes less about [Waylon's] potential journey from rural to urban and more about his movement towards visibility and connection in his own community" (p. 97).

Together, these articles suggest that rural landscapes and publishing are becoming increasingly accepting of LGBTQIA+ characters, and that the ways rural people are represented is also expanding. As the research articles and book reviews in this issue demonstrate, authors (many of whom identify as rural themselves) are working to bring more nuance to the representations of rural people in their books. Likewise, as demonstrated by Suico's reviews of *Teaching English in Rural Communities* and *Teaching Diversity in Rural Schools*, the latter supplemented with an interview of the author, Lisa A. Hazlett, more teachers are considering the unique and specific needs of rural readers and writers. There is no one way to be rural, and as we share our hope to see a

continued diversification of rural places and people in young adult literature, we also hope you will enjoy and learn from this special issue.

A WORD FROM THE MANAGING EDITOR – CRAG HILL

Study & Scrutiny has always been a journal looking for multiple ways to expand the study of young adult literature, adding in reviews of scholarly books with accompanying interviews with the authors and editors of these publications to complement the empirical and critical scholarship we have been seeking since our first issue in 2015. The first article in this issue, *Indigenous Knowledge, Young Adult Literature, and Teacher Education: Literature as Stories for Education Practice* by Joaquin Muñoz, initiates a new section, Conceptual Studies. This paper reconceptualizes a required course on American Indian and other diverse communities by utilizing Indigenous Young Adult Literature to create spaces for preservice teachers to exam critical ideas regarding Indigenous knowledge and worldviews. We have also added another interview section, *Conversations with ALAN Elders*. As an online journal, *Study & Scrutiny* has the space to publish in-depth interviews. We hope these interviews will help maintain the institutional memory of the study and teaching of young adult literature.

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RACHELLE KUEHL is a visiting assistant professor in the School of Education at Virginia Tech and a 2022 National Academy of Education/Spencer Foundation postdoctoral fellow. Her research focuses on critical literacy, antiracist pedagogies, children's literature, and rural education.

CHEA PARTON is a rural middle school English teacher and limited term lecturer at Purdue University. Her research focuses on the role of rurality in the identity development and practice of rural and rural out-migrant teachers as well as rural representation in YA literature. You can learn more about Chea’s work on her website, <https://literacyinplace.com>.