

## All about Realistic Fiction for Teens

By Jennifer Brannen

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### Here's what Realistic Fiction is:

Realistic fiction is real life set to fiction. It's about anything that can happen in real life -- good, bad, and in-between. It's real emotions and behaviors in real settings and encompasses the experiences of characters from all different backgrounds. It can also include extremes, both positive and negative, from high living with a focus on wealth, designer clothes, and private schools to the darker extremes of drug use, family breakdowns, and sexual assault. The only limit is reality, which, depending on one's point of view, is either a jump-off point into the fantastical or just where it starts to get interesting all on its own.

### Here's what happens in a Realistic Fiction novel:

Well, almost anything except the fantastical is fair game. Stories are frequently about life changing events and their repercussions or opportunities for growth. It can be as sweet as first love and finding out who you really are (*Into the Wild Nerd Yonder*) or as bleak as coming to terms with a sexual assault (*Speak*). Friendships, love, sex, relationships, cliques, school, growing up, family issues, and leaving for college are all common themes in realistic novels for teens. Often, realistic fiction focuses on solving problems, voyages (sometimes literal ones) of self-discovery, and coming of age. These stories can be played for humor or for drama, but angst and silliness are not necessarily mutually exclusive in the same story.

### A few things to keep in mind:

- Coming of age is a very common theme; the trials and tribulations of growing up take many forms but they comprise a classic and rich theme in YA realistic fiction.
- Issues that teens face every day frequently come up: bullying, cliques, drugs, divorce, crushes, fitting in vs. being true to yourself, etc.
- Realistic fiction can cross over into historical fiction, adventures, mysteries, and thrillers, but stays in the real world.
- Realistic fiction can be a good place to explore multicultural issues from race and religion to class and gender.
- Subject matter and tone can range from gritty and bleak to charming and fluffy.
- Realistic fiction isn't all problem novels and coming-of-age stories. Escapism is also a welcome part of the genre as is demonstrated by the popularity of authors such as Kate Brian, Sara Shepard, and Cecily von Ziegesar.

## Why teens might like reading Realistic Fiction:

- To work through problems, issues, and ideas that they face in their own lives through literature.
- Because they want to explore how people who are different from them live, think, and feel.
- Because the humor and drama of real life appeals to them more than the world-bending turns of fantasy, science fiction, or horror.

## Key Realistic Fiction titles:

- *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian* by Sherman Alexie: In this funny and unsparing novel, Arnold tells his story of life on and off the Rez using words and his comics with self-awareness.
- *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson: A grim and eloquent story of an alienated and mute ninth-grader coming to terms with her rape and finding her voice again.
- *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* by Stephen Chbosky: Charlie comes to terms with his best friend's suicide, his own sexuality, and experiments with drugs while telling the story of his freshman year and new friendships in a series of letters to an anonymous friend.
- *The Chocolate War* by Robert Cormier: A small rebellion against being forced to sell chocolate for his school fundraiser has life-changing implications for one teen in this bleak YA classic where doing the right thing doesn't guarantee justice or a happy ending.
- *The First Part Last* by Angela Johnson: A pregnancy complication leaves teen father Bobby parenting his new daughter, Feather, by himself, contemplating "then" and "now."
- *The Disreputable History of Frankie Landau Banks* by E. Lockhart: Smart and sharply funny, Frankie turns her boarding school on its institutional head when she decides to take on the school's all-male secret society.

## Key authors who write realistic fiction:

- **Chris Crutcher:** Uses sports of all sorts to help his characters find their ways in the world -- sometimes they're running from something, sometimes to it, and sometimes they run for the joy of it. Intense, outspoken, and funnier than the dark themes would indicate, get started with *Whale Talk* or *Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes*.
- **Sarah Dessen:** Her novels often cross over into romance, but they are first and foremost about girls coming to terms with their pasts, their futures, and their friendships. Issues include: abusive relationships (*Dreamland*), teen pregnancy (*Someone Like You*), and divorce (*Along for the Ride*). Get started with *Just Listen* or *The Truth About Forever*.
- **John Green:** He crafts an inspired mix of pathos and humor which doesn't shy away from the realities and sometimes the eccentricities of his teen characters. Love, cancer, math, and mystery have all played roles in his books so far. Get started with his first, Printz award-winning novel *Looking for Alaska* or his most recent novel *The Fault in Our Stars*.
- **Ellen Hopkins:** All of the darkest topics in YA fiction can be found in her novels in verse: drug addiction, abuse, prostitution, cutting, mental illness. Dark and even brutal, but very popular with teen readers. Get started with *Crank* or *Identical*.

- **Walter Dean Myers:** Gangs, war, romance, sports, crime, friendships -- Myers has explored all of it in his impressive body of work which explores, in particular, the urban African-American experience. Get started with Printz winner *Monster* or *Autobiography of My Dead Brother*.
- **Paul Volponi:** Sports, drugs, bullying, crime, and race all come into play in his high appeal urban-based novels, which are consistently good choices for reluctant readers. Get started with *Black and White* and *Crossing Lines*.

### **Crossover with other genres:**

Realistic fiction can cross over with even fantastical genres if characters' emotions are depicted honestly and care is given to creating and hewing to an internal logic. Some genres such as romance and mystery are easier crossovers though.

#### **Romance**

Love takes many different forms and these romances reflect just a few.

- *Perfect Chemistry* by Simone Elkeles
- *Stargirl* by Jerry Spinelli
- *Hard Love* by Ellen Wittlinger

#### **Mystery**

Mysteries are made in the details. They draw readers in through setting, careful plotting, and denouements made viable by emotionally realistic character development.

- *Thirteen Reasons Why* by Jay Asher
- *Tangerine* by Edward Bloor
- *Please Ignore Vera Dietz* by A. S. King

#### **Urban fiction**

Rooted in the urban teen experience, these stories are realistic and even gritty, though not always without humor.

- *Tyrell* by Coe Booth
- *Money Hungry* by Sharon G. Flake
- *Bronx Masquerade* by Nikki Grimes

#### *Crossover with Nonfiction:*

Realistic fiction, not surprisingly, can cross over with a variety of nonfiction categories depending on what topics it's addressing. Here are some nonfiction categories to keep in mind for the avid Realistic Fiction reader including:

### **Memoir/Autobiography**

Real-life stories compellingly told can echo both the humor and angst of realistic fiction.

- *Hole in My Life* by Jack Gantos
- *Fist, Stick, Knife, Gun: A Personal History of Violence in America* by Geoffrey Canada

### **History**

Realism is not all in the eye of the contemporary beholder. Just as some realistic fiction readers find enjoyment in historical fiction, they may also find pleasure in reading about some of the actual history that inspired those novels.

- *Hitler Youth: Growing Up in Hitler's Shadow* by Susan Campbell Bartoletti
- *Flesh & Blood So Cheap: The Triangle Fire and Its Legacy* by Albert Marrin

### **True Adventure**

Real-life adventures can be just as breathtaking as fictional ones, as these books prove.

- *High Exposure: An Enduring Passion for Everest and Unforgiving Places* by David Breashears (Alex winner)
- *The Lady and the Panda: The True Adventures of the First American Explorer to Bring Back China's Most Exotic Animal* by Vicki Croke
- *Between a Rock and a Hard Place* by Aron Ralston

*Crossover with adult titles/authors:*

When suggesting crossover reads with adult titles, it's useful to keep in mind that sex, language, and violence (quite often in combination) are often dialed up in adult realistic fiction.

- **Sherman Alexie:** Teens who enjoyed the humor and unflinching emotions of *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian* may also find much to enjoy in Alexie's adult fiction, especially his short story collections. Get started with *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*.
- **Roddy Doyle:** Rife with humor and generally set in Ireland (often working-class Dublin), Doyle's earlier novels may hold particular appeal for teens because they feature younger protagonists looking for ways to define themselves in relation to their world. Get started with *The Commitments*.
- **Katie Fforde:** Light and gentle, Fforde's books are humorous stories of women finding themselves and their place in the world and (often) finding love. Get started with *Restoring Grace*.
- **Jodi Picoult:** Her novels are complex explorations of her characters' lives and the ethical and emotional choices they face. She would be a good crossover for teens who enjoy Sarah Dessen's stories. Get started with *My Sister's Keeper*.

### **Here's how to talk with Realistic Fiction fans:**

- Realistic fiction fans aren't likely to think of themselves as such. They may express a lack of interest in the fantastic or paranormal or they may be drawn to stories that reflect their own lives. Listen carefully to how they describe the stories they enjoy.
- Tone may be important to your realistic fiction readers. Some are seeking the release of humor, others are drawn to grittiness and problems, while others want a mix of emotional intensity and lightness.
- Teens don't just read realistic fiction to sort through their problems vicariously; they also read it to make themselves feel good. That may be through humor or simply feel-good stories where underdogs triumph, high school is conquered, and angst is at a minimum. Some examples include: *Dairy Queen* by Catherine Gilbert Murdock, almost anything by Meg Cabot, The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants series by Ann Brashares, and Carl Hiaasen's mysteries for tweens.
- Don't forget that novels in verse can be a very good choice for these readers. From *Make Lemonade* to *Crank*, there is a surprising variety in tone. (And don't forget to include them in a poetry display.)
- Find out if your reader is looking for a new series, not just a new book to read. Teen readers often enjoy immersing themselves in series. Series are a common occurrence in realistic fiction and, just like standalone novels, reflect its breadth in tone and content: from the materialistic jostling of the Clique novels and cheerful nastiness of the Pretty Little Liars series to the urban feel of the Bluford series and warm-hearted silliness of the Confessions of Georgia Nicolson series.
- Realistic fiction readers are likely to cross over into other realistic genres such as romance, adventure, mystery, or even historical fiction if the tone and the details resonate.

### **A few more tips:**

- To market your realistic fiction, try creating displays and booklists around popular themes such as friendship, sports, or different cultures.
- Realistic fiction titles often work well for teen book clubs, especially at the beginning. Common experiences, pathos, and humor can all be access points for readers with different interests.

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