Chapter 11 Contemporary Realistic Fiction

Children’s Literature Briefly

Contemporary realistic fiction tells a story that never happened but could happen. Unlike fantasy, which includes at least one natural law, object or circumstance not found in this world, everything is contemporary realistic fiction is possible on planet earth.

Identifying with Contemporary Realistic Fiction

Of all the genres in children’s literature, contemporary realistic fiction is the most popular. People are interested in their own lives, and this genre is about “my life.” This is my world. This is how I live. This story is about a girl like me.

Almost all readers want to find a least an occasional title that reflects and confirms their lives. For instance the half-million people in the United States who are Deaf are represented at the time of this writing in seven picture storybooks currently in print in the United States. The lack of such books also means that others have less opportunity to get to know and understand the Deaf.

Contemporary Realistic Fiction and Society

1. Contemporary realism reflects society and the child’s place in it. The view of life in a realism story reflects societal mores and attitudes of the time in which the tale is set.
2. Until the mid-1960s the world in children’s books typically was presented without negative or earthy aspects. Geoffrey Trease (1983) lists some of the generally accepted restrictions that applied to the writing of children’s books before 1960: no budding love affairs, no liquor, no supernatural phenomena, no undermining of authority, no parents with serious human weaknesses, no realistic working-class speech (including cursing). Events in history and society changed and children were exposed to the harsh realities facing Americans. A new attitude came and children were now viewed as citizens with rights.
3. Contemporary realistic fiction is most often the genre in which the taboos of literature are tested.
4. Changes, beginning in the 1960s and flourishing in the 1970s came to be called new realism. The harsher parts of life simply had not been given center stage in books for young readers until then.
5. Society continued to change. A new generation of problems popped up in headlines and public consciousness, such as inner-city survival, teen suicide, gang life, AIDS random shootings, anorexia nervosa, white supremacy, and terrorism. As those issues took root in society they spouted in contemporary books for children, and that cycle continues as ever-newer concerns surface in both society and writing for young readers. The books for children acknowledge such problems is seen as relevant and helpful by some people and abhorred as too stark and unnecessary by others, and so the debate begins.
Common Categories of Contemporary Realistic Fiction
When children go to the local library they do not ask the librarian for a book on contemporary realistic fiction, but instead they zero in on a specific type of book in that genre. Some of the most popular reading categories include: survival and adventure, animals, humor, mysteries, problem novels, series books, and sports.

- Animals- A mainstay of contemporary realistic fiction is the animal story.
- Humor- It is possible to have too many humor books in a classroom or school library.
- Mysteries have been at the top of children’s preferences lists since the 1920s, regardless of the children’s sex, ethnicity, or IQ (Haynes, 1988; Tomlinson & Tunnell, 1994).
- Problem novels were born early in the age of the new realism when taboo topics about the problems of growing up became acceptable fare for juvenile books. Most of these books focus on coping with problems of the human condition.
- Series books- Books in series vary greatly in quality. Series books include The Hardy Boys and Nancy Drew, and Mary-Kate and Ashley just to name a few. The offerings of contemporary realistic fiction are as wide as life, helping explore today’s people problems and places. Whether the appeal of the book lies in a skillful re-creation of current lifestyles or a comfortable pattern found in a series, the best of contemporary realistic fiction always will examine human feelings facing and overcoming the challenges of living today (Jacobs & Tunnel).