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## Fictional Characters as Anticipations of Adolescent Readers' Dreams

**Abstract:** The aim of this article is to look through the most attractive characters in books important to the contemporary Polish young adults. It concerns the ways young readers use, interpret and find the meaning in literature designed for them. The position of literary protagonist in the adolescent readers' horizon of expectations has been described on the basis of values and attributes associated with enjoyable reading and books worth to recommend to readers' peers. The analysis of spontaneous reading choices and characteristics pertaining to highly esteemed books formed the part of the results of nationwide adolescents' readership survey conducted at the end of 2017. The article it is an attempt to answer the question: how adolescent readers engage with characters or entire books, how they could even become attached to them? There is discussion about the characteristics of a literary protagonist important in adolescent readers' expectations of a satisfied reading, particularly in their axiological approach in interpreting literature and identification with literary protagonist and how they matter in reading engagement.

**Keywords:** young adult literature, reading engagement, reading attitudes, literary protagonist

Adolescents pass through rapid changes as they develop mentally, physically, cognitively and emotionally. These changes are accompanied by a deep engagement on the part of the adolescent in the construction of personal identity. Adolescents try to position themselves in their environment by enacting specific identities, also shaped by discourse and structural constraints. Adolescents often find themselves in a position where they can decide between different discourses (Moje, Dillon, 2006: 88; Erikson, 1968) and then make choices about enacting a good daughter, student, friend, etc., or resist the enactment and bear the consequences of that resistance.

Let us look at the conclusion of a study based on empirical premises of whether adolescence constitutes a period of

“(a) biophysiological development, including transformations in brain structure and organization, as well as changes associated with puberty; (b) cognitive

development, including increased reasoning ability and comfort with abstract thought; (c) development in identity and social relationships, including greater autonomy and heightened orientation toward peers; and (d) shifting school contexts and educational expectations”. (Alexander, Fox, 2011: 158)

Adolescents need to feel secure and stable – instead they experience permanent changes in this stage of their life. As young adults grow up, they have to define the framework of many social situations – a “fixed” sense of self – and create socially situated identities (Gee, 2004). Individuals have multiple identities dependent on social contexts and situations – this process is critical for adolescents. I propose to define “identity” after Ann Locke Davidson, as a presentation of self in a matrix of social relationships – a pattern of social assertion that significant others recognize and come to expect (Davidson, 1996: 2). In many cases, adolescents are positioned or recognized as powerless in relationships, although they often seize power through the act of resistance, especially in the school or family setting. They often explore different patterns of behaviour, engage in active experimentation with roles and values, and look for clues in peer and adult models as well as literature (Nielsen, 2006; Alexander, Fox, 2011). In the latter case, critical reading could be the cure – they construct, reconstruct or confirm their own gender and role beliefs and identities in the examination of the text they have read (Moje, Dillon, 2006:104; Marsh, Stolle, 2006). The question this article asks is how young adult readers’ response to young adult. The study and presented analysis raise question about students reading expectations connected to their sense of agency, and in their relational, moral, and intellectual lives (Ivey, Johnston, 2013).

#### PLEASURES OF READING – FORMS OF READING ENGAGEMENT – THEORETICAL CONTEXTS

This article is based on the results of a national study of the reading habits and attitudes of adolescents, which falls within the empirical research tradition of the Institute of the Book and Reading, where reading is understood as a social practice linked to cultural norms and patterns at a particular time and place, and to readers’ social roles (Wolff, 2009). This is a socio-cultural approach focused on social factors that shape the reading practice, account taken of its situational and functional volatility (Barton, Hamilton, Ivanić, 2000). A reader undertakes reading at a certain point in his or her reading biography with a particular horizon of expectations in mind (Jauss, 1975). By starting to read within a particular social and cultural context, the reader adopts an active attitude and creates meanings through reading (Alexander, Fox, 2011). Young readers “construct meanings” based on their own reading experiences and expectations, or anticipation of what they can and want to find in the text. In the reader response theory, the reader approaches the text with a certain

purpose, certain expectations or hypotheses that guide his or her choices from the residue of past experience (Rosenblatt, 1995: 26). Different pleasures could be derived from reading the text – what matters is the kind of “use” that readers make of the texts they read, how they look therein for the reference and the guidance that would be useful in their own life – as put by the theorist of popular culture John Fiske (Fiske, 2006).

The reception of books among teenagers and their expectations towards reading are conducive to the reading engagement. We can describe the reading engagement as an intrinsically motivated attitude to reading demonstrated by the intensity of the reading practice (Guthrie, Wigfield, 2001). The crucial dimension of the reading engagement is the intrinsic motivation – the involvement in reading, taking reading as an important activity and exercise of curiosity with respect to the read text. The best empirical example of the reading engagement is the engagement in fictional narrative (Andringa, Shreier, 2004; Miall, 2006; Zunshine, 2006). The reader transported to new places expands his experience by new states of mind often unknown in his everyday life (Kuiken, Miall, Sikora, 2004). The experience of a simulated reality provides the opportunity for feeling real emotions in response to adventures and troubles of the story protagonist (Oatley, 1999). The simulation of social experiences makes it possible to acquire knowledge about human psychology, helps to understand others, even generates feelings of empathy. Keith Oatley thus describes this peculiar interaction between the reader and the narrator or the character: “the meeting of minds that I discuss here has some characteristics of meeting friends. But it also has characteristics that are unlike ordinary meetings” (Oatley, 1999: 440). This meeting and enjoyment that accompanies it can decide on the reading engagement.

Let us look at types of literary characters that can appeal to contemporary young readers and also at types of literary meetings that are possible.

Young adult literature is made valuable not only by its artistry but also by its relevance to the lives of its readers, by addressing their needs (Cart, 2016). In addition to addressing their needs, it also addresses their interests and, thus, becomes an inducement for them to read. Engagement with young adult novels invites dialogic relationships with the characters whose narratives have relevance for readers' lives (Rosenblatt, 1983, Ivey, Johnston, 2013). According to Martin Cart, another of the chief values of young adult literature is its capacity for offering readers an opportunity to see themselves reflected in its pages. Young adulthood is intrinsically a period of tension. On the one hand, adolescents have an all-consuming need to belong; on the other, they regard themselves as being unique, which – for them – is not a cause for celebration but rather for concern. For to be unique is to be unlike one's peers, in fact, it is to be “other”. And to be “other” means not to belong but, instead, be perceived as an outsider. This is how Cart emphasises this particular function of literature:

Thus, to see oneself reflected in the pages of a young adult book is to receive the blessed assurance that one is not alone after all, not other, not alien but, instead, a viable part of a larger community of beings who share a common humanity, common questions, problems. (Cart, 2016: 12)

#### PROFILES OF THE ADOLESCENT READERS PARTICIPATING IN THE NATIONAL SURVEY

The aim of this article is to look through the most attractive characters in books important to contemporary Polish young adults<sup>1</sup> (Zasacka, 2020). It concerns the ways young readers use, interpret and find the meaning in literature designed for them. To begin with, it needs to be emphasized that, when presenting adolescent readers' literary preferences, we have to bear in mind the existence of two different reading audiences with particular reading attitudes – boys and girls. Gender was also the strongest differentiating factor for the reading engagement. This presentation could be supplemented and corroborated by an analysis of reading motivation measured by two editions of a youth readership survey conducted in 2013 and 2017 (Zasacka, 2014: 73–85; Zasacka, 2016, Zasacka, 2020). The results of that measurement lead to the conclusion that girls experience a stronger motivation for reading, especially in terms of intrinsic motivation – they engage to a greater extent in reading fiction even if they face challenges in doing so. This is proven by the existence of a difference between adolescent girls and boys in declaring that they feel strong intrinsic motivation for reading. The results of the 2017 survey can be illustrated by the example of school students' agreement or disagreement with certain statements, such as "I enjoy a long, involved story or fiction book". The difference between boys' and girls' declarations of positive opinions reaches 35%. Another example of such statement is "I can imagine the stories I read" and the difference here has increased over the analysed period (from 2013 to 2017) from 27% to 38%. Another example of this gender-based disproportion is the predilection of getting "engrossed" in reading, since as many as 73% of girls responded positively to the statement "When I read, I picture the stories before my eyes", while only 58% of boys declaring this as their experience. And statements related to the subject of this article – the importance of literary heroes for literary reception – provide the same regularity. In the case of the next statement – "I like to read fictional stories and imagine that ..." – 40% of surveyed boys and 53% of surveyed

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<sup>1</sup> An analysis of the values and characteristics pertaining to highly esteemed books formed part of the last youth readership survey results. The Polish youth readership survey conducted in November 2017 by the National Library of Poland on a nationally representative sample of 1794 fifteen-year-old third-grade students from 104 junior high schools. All quantitative assessments were conducted on a random sample statistically representative of the entire Polish population.

girls declared their agreement with it, whereas 37% of girls and only 17% of boys agreed with the final statement included in the survey for the purpose of finding out how easily school students can become friendly with literary protagonists – “I feel like I make friends with people in my favourite books”.

During the time between surveys (2013 to 2017), the reading motivation in its four dimensions (Zasacka, 2020) lost its power except for one exception – girls declared stronger feeling of intrinsic motivation, particularly connected with literary reading.

#### MOST POPULAR AUTHORS IN YOUNG READERS' SPONTANEOUS READING CHOICES

The results of the 2017 national readership survey, similarly to surveys conducted using the same methodology in 2003, 2010 and 2013, demonstrate that the literary genre most valued by teenagers is fantasy featuring young characters. The growing availability of fantasy books for teenagers in the literature market has significantly broadened their choices over the last decade. The segment of novels with teenage vampires as protagonists, urban fantasies and paranormal romances has become very popular among girls. The latest survey found a substantial growth in the popularity of science fiction and dystopian novels among young adults, which started in 2010 with the fame of *The Hunger Games* by Susanne Collins. Fantasy adventure novels, with the works by Joanne K. Rowling being the most prominent example, are continually held in high regard by all teenagers, despite the gender. Boys find less attractive a novel where the main protagonist is a female. It is evident that teenage boys find it more difficult to identify with the views and feelings of a girl of their age. It is hard to find among boys' spontaneous reading choices novels with romantic plots and with girls as main characters. Paranormal romances, dystopian literature and, particularly, realistic problem novels are rarely chosen by boys, who prefer speculative fiction and adventure fantasy works written by authors such as Rick Riordan and John Flanagan.

Table 1. Most popular authors in spontaneous reading choices among adolescents in 2017.  
N=1159

	%	Number of readers
Joanne K. Rowling	13	150
J. R. R. Tolkien	8	94
<b>John Green</b>	7	69
Paula Hawkins	6	64
Andrzej Sapkowski	6	63
Cassandra Clare	5	58
Gayle Forman	4	46

	%	Number of readers
Stephen King	4	47
Glukhovsky Dmitry	3	38
<b>Veronica Roth</b>	3	38
Stephenie Meyer	3	38
<b>Susanne Collins</b>	3	37
Anne Todd ( <i>After</i> series)	3	30
Nicolas Sparks	2	28
Rick Riordan	2	28
James Dashner	2	25
Federico Moccia	2	24
Jay Asher	2	24
Kiera Cass	2	23
Rosie West	2	24
E. L. James	2	21
C. Hoover, Fisher Never Never	2	21
Yoyo Moyes	2	20
George Martin	2	20
Becca Fitzpatrick	2	20
Ewa Nowak	2	20
Barbara Rosiek	2	19
John Flanagan	1,5	18
Rupi Kaur ( <i>Milk and Honey</i> )	1,5	16
Christianne F.	1,5	15
Dan Brown	1	14
		1159

Source: own study

As in the case of reading choices and preferences, fantasy literature for adults is favoured by boys (comp. Zasacka, 2014, 2016, 2020), who expect their peers to be impressed with fantasy books for adult readers or with historical novels. Boys who recommended books to peers as worth reading most often chose fantasy novels. They listed a variety of authors, most popular being J.R.R. Tolkien, Stephen King and Dmitry Glukhovsky, and also the Polish writer Andrzej Sapkowski. Girls were dominant among those surveyed adolescents who recommended books, and mainly young adult fiction.

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PATTERNS OF READING – ENTERTAINING, MORAL,  
COGNITIVE AND AESTHETIC

An analysis of adolescent readers' horizon of expectations which has been described on the basis of values and attributes associated with enjoyable reading provides a meaningful context for the presentation of literary characters the most important and attractive to young adults. This description helps to discover certain regularities related to the circumstances in which young readers find satisfaction in reading as well as the modalities of reading they believe to be valuable. With this purpose in mind, the responding students were first asked to choose a book they would recommend to their peers and then the book contents and the rationale behind the recommendation were examined and categorized. To describe the evaluative aspect of the teenagers' attitudes towards reading, the axiological sense of their responses was analyzed.

An analysis of the contents of students' book recommendations showed four basic ways of their use and interpretation of literature. I propose to call them "reading patterns" – entertaining, cognitive, moral and aesthetic. Those patterns often exist in line with each other, and depend of the character of read and recommended literary text. A reading pattern is the way the reader focuses his/her attention on certain elements in the text and ascribes them special functions (Rosenblatt, 1996; Felski, 2006). The reading pattern means the most valuable and preferable mode of "using" literary text by the reader.

The entertaining reading pattern was the dominant and most frequent declared by surveyed adolescents and was correlated with the escapist approach to literature. It occurs when the reader plays a game with the text conforming to the rules of the genre (Zasacka, 2016). When reading is experienced in this way, what matters is the range of involved emotions, such as fear when a thriller is being read, imagination in the case of a fantasy book, or emotion in the case of a romance or general fiction. This suggests that responding teenagers were mainly reading (but not necessary only for entertainment), emphasising the features that make reading a relaxing recreational, ludic activity with which they filled their free time. What we find here is the escapist function of literature, engaging the reader's emotions, accompanied by characteristics specific to literary reading (Miall, 2006) and the reading engagement. Teenagers especially valued those literary techniques that helped them to become immersed in reading, when one cannot stop reading on one's journey into an imaginary world (Mar, Oatley, 2008). They listed literary features that helped them identify with a character and follow an exciting plot full of suspense. The first feature means that the literary character is similar to the reader in terms of age, feelings and problems, but experiences completely different adventures. The entertaining pattern of reading is associated with emotional reception.

Emotions are the effect of playing with the plot and genre, and the process of being on the side of the literary hero gives satisfaction and pleasure to girls more often than to boys.

Some girls who recommended books based their choices on the presence of a romantic plot or romantic threads (11%), and for them that was one of the most valuable aspects of reading. An emotional response was associated with love stories, which were recommended for being poignant and moving. Young adult readers also looked for self-reflection and links with their personal experience. Different emotions were associated with reading thrillers and with reading romances. Emotions were easier to awake when the reader felt that the situation, story or hero was authentic, relevant and close to the reality, when the protagonist's story was believable and he or she was pictured in a convincing way as a genuine person. This approach is also typical to the cognitive style of reading favoured by teenage boys. In this style of reading, the mimetic function of literature and the reader's seeking behavior are crucial. In this context, adolescent boys value mimetic properties and look for a representation of the real world in what they read. While girls were more interested in descriptions of the contemporary social world, boys were more likely to look for historical information and records of the past (Zasacka, 2016, 2020).

Ethical and moral patterns of reading were found in every fourth recommendation: 29% of girls but only 13% of boys. Those who found ethical and moral values and messages in books usually saw them as the important guidelines how to live, how to make important life decisions and what values one should stand by. In their reading, teenagers looked for words of wisdom and philosophical thoughts, as well as advice on how to think about themselves and their own lives. They can apply this pattern to reading very different types of books, but especially romances and realistic problem novels for young adults, such as works written by John Green or Gayle Forman. The values pointed out by young readers were predominantly love, friendship, loyalty. These moral values are more persuasive if the reader can identify with the protagonist, if the latter is authentic, close to the reader. An ethical perspective is possible if the reader can imagine the situations and problems solved by the protagonist and if there is a need for engaging emotions in the reception of the text. The most popular was an emotional approach to the reading experience, when the reader sympathized with the literary character, but also tried to judge her or him. Here is an example of a typical reader's answer to the described modes of reception of young adult literature and recommendation based on Gay Forman's novel *If I Stay*:

Because it shows the real life of a teenager who wants to do in life what she loves to, she manages to go to school, which makes her dreams come true. It describes love, friendship, family and support, this melodrama moved me to tears, I fell in love with this book. [390]

The moral pattern of reading is more frequent for girls – they use literature in this way, especially in the case of problem novels, which are their frequent choice. But boys also look for reflection in a great variety of the texts. There is no one specific genre that motivates them towards “deep” and axiological thoughts as even fantasy books, especially in boys’ case, provide an opportunity to find role model behaviours, such as heroism, loyalty or even patriotism.

The ability to apply any of the above literary experience modalities is conducive to the reading engagement understood as a way of finding a variety of pleasures in reading.

#### PROTAGONISTS FROM THE MOST ATTRACTIVE BOOKS FOR ADOLESCENT READERS

According to declarations submitted by adolescent students, the most important aspect in getting satisfaction from reading is when the story told in a book is interesting, involving, drawing the reader’s attention. Protagonists are very important to readers, especially – as mentioned earlier – when there are similarities between them and the reader. The 2017 study proved that protagonists of current dystopian and post-apocalyptic novels for young adults (which are very popular at present) were very attractive to adolescent readers (Zasacka, 2020 – Table 1). These characters behave like people that are much older, mature beyond their age, experienced in spite of being sixteen or seventeen. These protagonists are always entrusted with difficult and dangerous tasks, are made to solve problems that are normally reserved to be coped with by adults, are faced with situations where they have to fight for the lives of their loved ones, must pass perilous, extremely dangerous, trials and experiments, get tortured, and live surrounded by cruel intrigues, danger, mortal fear. Teen characters in novels written by Veronica Roth, James Dashner, Kiera Cass, Tahereh Mafi, Victoria Aveyard or Lois Lowry participate in mortal trials and have to cope with another battle – an inner one. They have to overcome their weakness, diseases, loneliness, loss of parents and friends, and to reconsider their friendships. They experience love and sex for the first time, and have many other first-time encounters. As *Divergent* in Veronica Roth’s novels, they choose their own future and create their own identity, while all the time searching for the answer as to who they are, as does the protagonist in *Maze Runner’s* series, who is looking for a cure for a mortal disease. Sometimes they even lose their memory and have to rebuild their persona from the ground up. They are the same age as the readers, look like them – shown on the cover wearing similar jeans, t-shirts and shoes – but the world around them is oppressive, full of mortal traps and dangers. In this type of literature it is easier for girls to take the side of and identify with the protagonist because, since *The Hunger Games*, there has been a new generation of female protagonists. Here

is a selection of typical answers from young readers where they accentuate the role of literary characters in their reading experience:

These books are interesting. The protagonists are created in a juicy manner, realistic, and the story is great. These books are creative and make us think. [797]

I recommend books by Robert Muchomooore – because they are about a boy who is very close to my age and behaves like me. These books describe the difficult situation of the main character, who in spite of life obstacles always finds a solution. I think that kids of today can learn a lot from him. [588]

“Time Riders” by Alex Scarrow – the plot is very intriguing, main characters survive a deadly catastrophe – it is so riveting, they are now members of a secret agency that is saving the world. I think that the story is very immersive, worth of recommendation. The action takes place in different times and is very interesting. [721]

The next response covers all most important attributes of a satisfying narrative:

“The Maze Runner” series by James Dashner and “The Percy Jackson and the Olympians”, “Magnus Chase” and “The Gods of Asgard” and “The Trials of Apollo” series by Rick Riordan] – because these books are interesting, funny and often startle the reader. The reader can identify with the protagonist, forget about reality and his or her problems for a moment, and become somebody else. In these books, dynamic action and quick change of events dominate, and the reader is never bored. His imagination can run free and find new reality. And in spite of this, readers can discuss these books with others. [512]

When looking into the portraits and descriptions of protagonists in the most popular books, we find that it is especially important for male readers to find male protagonists – as, for example, in *Maze Runner* by James Dashner. As girls are more active and engaged readers, they chose more books for their independent reading and found more books worth reading than their male counterparts. As a result, the list of books most popular among adolescents features more girl choices (Table 1).

Let me present to you the main female characters chosen from the books and types of books most eagerly read and recommended by young adults, mainly girls (Table 1). The main criterium of choosing those protagonists was popularity between young readers – these dystopian novels and problem novels for young adults were on the top of frequency in their spontaneous choices (Zasacka, 2020: 142–192). The chosen protagonists are in the same age as surveyed readers. The first is Katniss Everdeen from *The Hunger Games* by Susanne Collins, who introduced a new pattern of a girl protagonist. She must survive a televised death match against 23 other young people if she is to return home and continue hunting to provide food for her family. This proves that pop culture will embrace a heroine capable of holding her own against smart and brave boys. Katniss

Everdeen is not a traditional superhero but female<sup>2</sup> – she possesses no special power but is smart, tough, compassionate, emotionally and physically strong as men used to be, armed only with her bow, arrows and her wits. Her strengths are not only physical but also mental, and she possesses the most important virtue: she does not give up on a fight no matter how impossible it might seem and could be rebellious, clever enough to fight injustice done by adults<sup>3</sup>. There are other young female protagonists in dystopian novels, for example in books written by Aveyard or Mafi. Most have a supernatural gift and manage to fight for their and their relatives' freedom and better life.

The next example of a protagonist is Tris in Veronica Roth's *Divergent* four-novel series. She was a dystopian heroine which caught readers' attention after Katniss from *The Hunger Games*. The main issue in the *Divergent* series is the creation of identity of a growing teenager in a dangerous and abusive environment. In post-apocalyptic Chicago, readers follow Beatrice "Tris" Prior as she explores her identity within an oppressive society that defines its citizens by their social and personality-related affiliation with five factions. Such division removes the threat of anyone exercising independent will and re-threatening. When each person enters adulthood at the age of 16, he or she must leave family behind, choose the most suitable faction and stay in it for life. Once the faction is chosen, they will become initiates who will have to complete an extremely difficult initiation process before they become members of the faction. And if they fail, they become factionless and live in poverty and horror. Tris was born in a family that belongs to the Abnegation faction, which values selflessness. But on her 16th birthday she has to choose her future faction. Insecure about her identity, Tris chooses Dauntless, which values bravery, but a special test classifies her for membership in three factions: Abnegation, Erudite and Dauntless. Because of this, she becomes Divergent. Tris is warned to never tell anyone about her test results, because being Divergent is extremely dangerous. As Katniss, Tris was the best at everything she did. She passed her initiation with flying colours and proved that she is clever, bold and loyal. The pace of the book is brisk, there is nonstop action and the story is full of thrilling twists and turns. Tris is a new model of a female heroine: she plays a non-feminine role but is full of girlish attributes: beautiful, fragile, romantic – and at the same time strong, responsible, brave and ambitious warrior competing with men.

Traditionally, dystopian novels used to be a genre identified with male readers. But the line has been crossed and now female readers also find the

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.wired.com/2012/03/katniss-everdeen-hollywood-heroines/> – Angela Watercutter: *The Hunger Games*, Katniss Everdeen: *The Heroine the World Needs Right Now*; <https://the-artifice.com/popularity-of-dystopian-literature/>.

<sup>3</sup> <https://magazynpismo.pl/rewolucje-dziewczat-fantazje-doroslych-greta-thunberg-feministka/?fbclid=IwAR1BckIYitdpEk9Hy0FW4eBaJlAo1viefInBYQleXznUN6FD-jK5xx9fdprE>.

opportunity to show their tough side, intriguing for girlish readers: it is a new pattern of girlish personality based on cleverness, bravery, rebellious attitude and inner power.

Dystopian novels are appreciated by young readers because of the thrilling narration and unexpected twists in key moments. One of the surveyed readers recommended a dystopian novel to his friends claiming that it can be read as a recreational and moral book. He found an axiological meaning in it and described it as follows:

Absorbing, gripping, I just couldn't put it down, riveting, engrossing, unputdownable, immersive "Hunger Games" – it pictured real love, friendship, fight for justice and good for the nation. In certain moments it was very moving. [455]

It is evident from the students' responses that literary protagonists should be involved in quick, intensive action, surprising, full of twists, suspense and mysteries. When the story is absorbing for readers (Nell, 1986) they "feel during reading as if they were together with the characters."

[Paper Towns] I recommend this book because of its end. The book is unusual and does not end like a typical romantic novel for adolescents. There is a sudden twist at the end. The protagonists are also presented in a very interesting way and you might even cry a bit when the main heroine disappears. We felt very connected to the book, from the very beginning. [440]

... The book is interesting and very absorbing, we can identify with the heroine, she is our peer. [858]

The second group of protagonists comes from the most popular young adult realistic problem novels where they have to act and overcome difficulties without magic or supernatural power. These novels were written by an author particularly important in the reported survey – John Green. His books, and particularly *The Fault in Our Stars*, were named in 11% of girls' spontaneous choices, but only 1% of boys chose at least only one of his books in the 2017 survey. Here is an example of a reader's recommendation of that book read in the moral style, where the steadfast attitude of the protagonist is valued most:

This book shows that it's worth to fight [for a right cause]. It shows that you can find the way out even of the worst situation if you have people who care about you, if you got somebody who can lift your spirits. [131]

The two main teenager characters in *The Fault in our Stars* are high school students suffering from terminal cancer. Hazel Grace Lancaster, 16 years old, is a cancer patient who meets Augustus "Gus" Waters, a charming teenager who has lost a leg to bone cancer. He invites Hazel to his house where they bond over their hobbies and agree to read each other's favourite books. They keep

in touch through a book recommended by Hazel – a novel about a cancer-stricken girl that parallels Hazel's own experience. The pair becomes close to each other and eventually falls in love.

This is the book's message: the freedom to live comes when the main character finds freedom from the fear of death, which turns into the freedom to live. In *The Fault in Our Stars* Hazel has mastered this concept when she finally accepts both death and life. She is able to combine the will to live with the acceptance of death. By coming to terms with Augustus' death and growing to understand that her parents will be able to cope with the reality, she stops being afraid of her own death. By understanding that love never dies, she is no longer afraid to live. Hazel's and Augustus' story is a meditation on how we become adults. Green's style is unsentimental and he does not shy away from the less salubrious aspects of the disease. The book is unusual because Green realizes that, as teen cancer patients who have to squeeze their lives into less than two decades, Hazel and Augustus get to ask the big questions<sup>4</sup>. Despite the melodramatic and "tearjerker" quality of the book, it contains smart dialogues as well as funny and thrilling moments. Heroines like Hazel, for example Tris and Katniss, face death, lose their loved ones, but do not give up hope and do not break down.

#### CONCLUSION

Presented analyses demonstrate certain regularities in young readers' response and ways of using literature connected with the reading engagement. One feature is particularly evident: the reader needs to be involved in the story and his attention needs to be sustained throughout its course. For young adult readers "disturbing books" about teens in troubles, contain sensational situations and details that make them curious, including encounters with mortal disease, drugs, fighting with death are very involving (Ivey, Johnston, 2013, 2018).

Relations with literary characters are very powerful. The process of identifying with a literary hero starts when the reader has to take care of and relate to him/her (Iser, 1975). The next necessary quality of the protagonist is that he or she be similar to the reader, also in terms of age. Common existential questions help the reader to follow the protagonist, sympathize with him/her, compare one's own expectations and thoughts with those of the protagonist. It is a crucial element of the process of engaging in reading. There are certain other functions in such identification. It can also create certain patterns of personality and attitudes. For example, Tris, Katniss and Hazel are female protagonists mostly attractive to girls. They are strong and brave in spite of the circumstances, believe in loyalty

<sup>4</sup> C. Malone, A. Thompson-Deeva, Is 'The Fault In Our Stars' Author John Green His Generation's Pop Philosopher? <https://prospect.org/culture/the-fault-stars-author-john-green-generation-s-pop-philosopher/>.

and friendship, and that helps them to find hope. In particular, heroines of dystopian novels such as Katniss and Tris present the social and cultural features of a new woman – rebellious, brave, smart. Such personality traits help to stand up to difficulties of life and deal with extraordinary situations. To be brave in dangerous circumstances is getting more useful nowadays.

Another quality that can be found in young readers' response is individualization, i.e. the relative aspect of reading satisfaction, the fact that the same book can be used differently by different young readers. It is also noteworthy that aesthetic values of a book are seldom present in the book's evaluation. The interpretation of fiction offers not only the possibility of choosing how to read a text, it also allows a choice of what to read, and it enables an affiliative joining of reader and author or, as Oatley puts it, of reader and characters. When adolescents decide to look deeper into what they read, they can find there a tool that will help them to define new situations, cope with understanding other people, take their own position on issues, and, ultimately, fashion their own identity.

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