

# ENGLISH JOURNAL

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## MULTICULTURAL AND MULTIVOICED STORIES FOR ADOLESCENTS

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And Much More . . .



*Iris-between-Worlds*  
Colleen T. Helie

## Using *Moon at Nine* to Broaden Multicultural Perspectives

*Moon at Nine is Deborah Ellis's lyrical and moving young adult novel about two young women growing up in post-Shah Iran, where the strict Islamic laws regard homosexuality as punishable by death. Farrin and Sadira's love story offers a powerful vehicle for teachers to broaden multicultural perspectives.*

But first and most important, we are human beings with a right to choose for ourselves how we want to live. All we have is our lives. Each person gets just one. We owe our parents and the revolution our respect, but we don't owe them everything. And everything is what they want.

I choose you, not just because you are wonderful and not just because you love me.

I choose you because the act of choosing you belongs to me. It is mine, my choice, my free will.

I choose you over my father. I choose you over my country.

And even if you decide you don't want me. I still choose you.

Because in choosing you, I am choosing myself.

—Deborah Ellis, *Moon at Nine*

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his letter from Sadira to Farrin, the two female protagonists in *Moon at Nine*, highlights the themes of coming of age and identity formation that pervade Deborah Ellis's powerful love story set in a culture that forbids homosexuality. The experiences in using this novel presented in this article will suggest that empathy may be fostered through the reading of YA literature even when the setting or experiences of a character seem foreign to the reader. Dawan Coombs reminds us of the efficacy of this approach.

It's not that these [YA] books allow the reader to totally understand the experiences of others, to really 'know' what it is like to experience the pains or triumphs of another. Readers do not even have to agree with the situation, beliefs, or opinions in the text. But through the act of reading, they cannot not consider experiences beyond their own. (26; bold added)

### Focusing the Sociocultural Lens

Coming of age is a common theme in YAL because adolescence itself is about finding an individual

sense of identity. This period of searching for a sense of self and how to relate to the world has been called by G. Stanley Hall "a time of storm and stress" (Alsop), and for many teens that is exactly how it feels. Most adolescents can relate to universal struggles such as a need to belong, familial conflict, and a desire for freedom to make choices—just as Sadira and Farrin do.

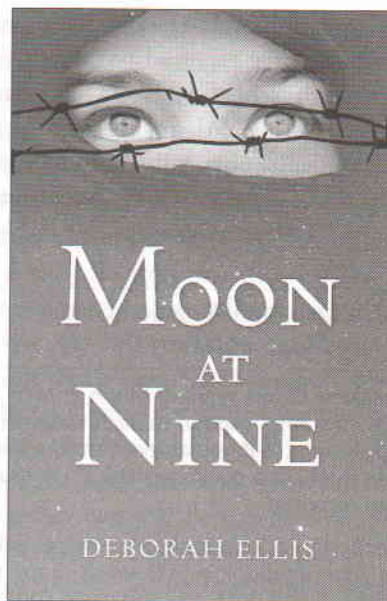
The importance of examining coming-of-age stories through a sociocultural lens cannot be overlooked, particularly across diverse societies that may be different from ours and those of our students. Leigh A. Hall and Susan V. Piazza assert that students' interpretations of the messages found in texts are influenced by their social and cultural backgrounds. They cite the work of Bruner to maintain that readers' "backgrounds serve as a framework for interpreting the situation and ideas they encounter in texts and the understandings that arise from them" (33). Our students involved in this classroom project are no different; their lives growing up in a conservative, Bible Belt, mid-southern state undoubtedly contribute to their

interpretations of *Moon at Nine*. Indeed, Farrin, a female teen coming of age in Iran in *Moon at Nine*, is likely to have different cultural influences than any female teen in the United States because of the complex interplay of differing social, cultural, and political influences.

### Setting the Scene

Ellis has written several books that introduce young adults to a focus on social and global experiences. She wrote *Moon at Nine* after casually encountering an Iranian woman and hearing her moving story; the woman had fled her country for her own safety and freedom. Ellis, as is her practice in previous novels, immersed herself in researching the culture in which the woman's situation developed. In this novel, Farrin is the 15-year-old protagonist who feels stifled by circumstances. She attends an elite, all-girls school where she is not very popular, but she displays intelligence and self-confidence beyond her peers; each day she returns home to her mother who holds secret "bring back the Shah" parties with her friends where Farrin is expected to entertain. Her only joy is in losing herself in the contraband literature and American television shows and movies her father procures for her—until the day she meets Sadira. She finally finds a friend in whom she can confide the dualism of life that she feels, as well as someone with whom she can share her hopes and dreams. The girls realize they are falling in love, unaware that by simply kissing they are breaking the law; soon they learn that homosexuality in Iran is punishable by death.

This book was originally selected as the focus of an action research project and introduced to pre-service teachers in a graduate program in secondary English (7–12) or middle level English language arts (4–12). The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board, and participation was not mandatory and was not tied to a grade in the class. A graduate assistant administered surveys and guided the class activities and discussion related to the book. The class population included students from an undergraduate middle level language and literacy methods course and, for the most part, reflected the culture of the urban university they attended in the mid-south. Ten females and two males participated in the project; three who identified as African



American/Black and nine as Caucasian participated in the activity. Ages ranged from 21 to 60; this age disparity represents the population of undergraduate candidates, graduate students who have just earned a degree, as well as nontraditional students making a career change.

Participants were asked to read Ellis's *Moon at Nine* in preparation for class activities and a post-reading survey that would be administered after working with the book. The original conception for the study was to administer a prereading survey, work with the book in class, and then administer the same survey (plus an open-ended question) as a post-reading survey to measure the participants' changes in perceptions. However, while working through the action research and results, the researchers reflected that the narrowly focused questions on the survey failed to adequately target the many diverse and complex issues in the book. Thus, the open-ended question and class discussion proved more valuable for reporting results, and the prereading surveys were discarded.

### Interpreting through Anticipation/ Reaction Guides

This pre- and post-reading survey technique has been used by others to informally measure student perception changes based on carefully chosen texts that feature social justice issues. Crag Hill; Karina

Clemmons and Judith A. Hayn; Clemmons et al.; and Hayn et al. have reported positive attitudinal changes in high school students and preservice teachers when using YAL to examine teen pregnancy, ELL students, physically disabled youth, and LGBTQ teens. A version of the Anticipation/Reaction Guide for *Moon at Nine* appears in Figure 1.

**FIGURE 1.** Anticipation/Reaction Guide for *Moon at Nine*

*Part I Directions:* Before reading *Moon at Nine*, in the "Before" column, respond to each statement by putting a plus sign (+) if you agree with it, a minus sign (-) if you disagree, or a question mark (?) if you aren't sure of your response.

*Part II Directions:* For one of the statements below, respond in your notebook in 500 words or more why you feel the way you do. Copy and paste your response on our Discussion Board. Provide an alternative way to share without technology if necessary. One classmate should respond and post.

*Part III Directions:* After reading *Moon at Nine*, respond again to the statements in the "After" column. Then write a reaction in 500 words or more to one of the statements; you can choose your original writing or respond to another statement. Post on the class Discussion Board.

Before	Statement	After
1. _____	Some countries in the world punish homosexuality by death, imprisonment, or beating.	1. _____
2. _____	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender teens are at an increased risk for depression, suicide, and homelessness.	2. _____
3. _____	I am comfortable with having a friend who is LGBT.	3. _____
4. _____	Adolescents are not old enough to be aware of their sexual preferences.	4. _____
5. _____	I agree with the teachings of my church that homosexuality is a sin.	5. _____
6. _____	I think the issue of sexuality should be addressed at home, not at school.	6. _____
7. _____	If I could find a book that helped me understand LGBT teens in the classroom or school library, I would want to read it.	7. _____
8. _____	If I heard a classmate use a slur toward LGBT students, I would intervene.	8. _____

With preservice teachers, the Anticipation/Reaction Guide did not deliver many perception changes dealing with LGBT topics and examining biases as nearly all respondents were open and accepting of each statement. However, the comments written in reactions revealed issues that they uncovered while reading and discussing.

These future teachers worried about parental reaction in conservative communities where they will teach. Another wondered about how to address these topics so that students do not respond inappropriately or immaturely. Another spoke of the novel as "heart-breaking" while one reader found an expanded knowledge of fundamentalist Islam as important. Several noticed that their awareness of LGBT students was heightened through engaging with the text.

### Building Empathy through Discussion

The class discussion about *Moon at Nine* proved to be a genuine learning process where it became evident that students had given a lot of thought to the themes in the book. Students agreed that the story was powerful, and they asserted it was even more meaningful when they learned it was based on a true story. Knowing that many of the struggles the main character Farrin faced truly happened to a young woman made the connection to the book more tangible for the preservice teachers; thus, they were able to view the book from a human rights/social justice perspective. The class began with a whole-group discussion of the universal adolescent problems Farrin faces—those to which any teenager could relate, no matter the culture. Answers ranged from coming of age and keeping secrets to grades in school.

After reading the novel and completing the post-survey, the class worked in pairs to brainstorm challenges Farrin faced as a result of the cultural, religious, and political climate in which she lived. Once the pairs had made lists, the brainstorming led to class discussion of the contents of the lists as a whole group; then they added them to the chart alongside the universal adolescent challenges they had previously listed (see Figure 2). One student had made the comment at the beginning of class that she had a difficult time reading the novel because the experiences of the characters were so foreign to her own personal experiences; however, after

**FIGURE 2.** Challenges Faced by Farrin in *Moon at Nine*

Global Challenges	Specific Cultural, Religious, and Political Challenges
Finding love	The Iranian Revolution
Homophobia	Fundamentalism
Rebellion	Arranged marriages
Bullying	Class struggles
Relating to peers	Very restrictive environment
Relationship with mother	Elite private school
Desire for freedom of choice	Bombings
Clash of cultures	Culturally specific clothing (e.g., <i>hijab</i> or <i>chador</i> )
Secrets	
Finding self	
Coming of age	
War	
Future	
Special relationships	
Grades	
Belonging	

the class discussion and viewing the lists that were made, she admitted that there were more commonalities among adolescents that she could connect with than there were specific issues she could not conceive. Another commented: "I have learned a lot after this novel. I have gained a greater appreciation for the struggles or norms in other cultures. We should work to have all kids feel safe and secure."

The students proved particularly adept at seeing cultural differences, so moving the comparison exercise into interaction with the text helped to tie each adolescent challenge to the novel. For instance, Farrin's family interactions often create tension. Her father, a prominent architect, is pleased she has a new friend while her mother, a royalist snob, thinks Sadira might be part of the Revolutionary Guard's spy network. A brief introduction to the Iranian Revolution that ended in 1979 with the self-imposed exile of Shah Reza Pahlevi and the ensuing tyrannical rule of the Ayotallah Khomeini might be of value as this event is part of history for today's readers. The background of upheaval and unrest provides fodder for much of the family turmoil as Farrin schemes to keep her secrets from an inquisitive, overprotective mother. Are her confrontations with her mother any different because

they occur in post-Revolutionary Tehran rather than Atlanta? One reader noted: "I have gained a great appreciation for the struggles or norm in other cultures."

The discussion of the underlying theme of the lesbian relationship between the two young women revealed that changing attitudes can occur. For some the love story was just that—a beautiful, lyrical relationship that ended in tragedy; their romance was real and could perhaps have been lasting in another culture. Much as other lovers do, the girls select a symbol for their love. Sadira provides the link to the title: "Let's look at the moon every night at nine, and that way, if we are not physically together, we will be together in spirit" (85). A reader noted on a post-reading survey: "I learned the importance of being open and accepting of all students regardless of gender/race/sexuality, etc."

For another, however, the issue resulted in this statement: "The book was very informative about the issues that adolescents face in the Iranian culture. It helped me to become more sensitive to the LGBT community and their choice to be with who they choose, whether I agree with it or not."

Following the class discussion, the class participated in a brown-bag exam. (See Appendix A for instructions, Appendix B for suggested steps, and Appendix C for the exam sheet.) Brown-bag exams were created by Denise Ousley (ousleyd@uncw.edu) and are creative forms of alternative assessment. Each student received a closed brown bag that held an item that was either mentioned in the book or was representative of something from the novel. A few of the items that were used included a book of poetry by Rumi, a moon, a teacup, *Frankenstein*, a scarf, a blindfold, a picture of the Shah, a notebook with pen, chalk, and a car. The students were then asked to complete the exam, first working independently and then forming pairs or triads to list ways in which the item related to the plot, characters, theme, and/or setting.

The students made meaningful connections, which they shared with the group as a whole, and several of them revealed even deeper connections than anticipated when coordinating the items for the exam. For example, the book *Frankenstein* might signify Farrin's interest in not only the macabre but also the illicit; however, the student who received the bag with this item in it took the analysis a step

further. He believed that Farrin could relate to the character of Frankenstein because she herself was an outcast among her peers, as well as with her own mother. By interpreting meaning at deep levels, the preservice teachers were demonstrating this book's ability to connect the reader with Farrin's character, plight, and setting, even though her experiences were much different than the US readers.

*Moon at Nine's* main characters were both female, and they fell in love; however, the issue in the book is not simply homosexuality, and it was immediately evident from participants' responses that they understood this. Additional universal themes of social justice, freedom, and equality also pervade the novel. Discussants touched only briefly on the issue of homosexuality during the class discussions because the other issues were what captivated readers more; teen readers might have completely different responses. However, the preservice teachers reacted to the lack of freedom and choices Farrin had due to the political and social context in which she lived; they were able to see how reading this text with a sociocultural lens could enhance conceptions of freedom in their own lives, as well as push them toward being more empathetic English language arts teachers. One participant stated, "I have gained a greater appreciation for the struggles or norms in other cultures. We should work to have all kids feel safe and secure." Another admitted, "I think this book showed that culture & society affect people's daily lives whether or not we want them to." These are important ideas to share and discuss with adolescents.

Thus the preservice teachers affirm Susan M. Landt's view that introducing multicultural literature into the curriculum can help connect students to the world through a wider view:

Literature can open doors to other cultures and introduce students to ideas and insights they would otherwise not have encountered. . . . Opening their eyes and their minds requires helping them discern the similarities among cultures while learning to appreciate the differences. (681–82)


## Conclusion

Choosing a text that offers students the chance to empathize with a character from a sociocultural background different from their own and that is

based on an understanding of universal challenges all adolescents face offers the opportunity to change minds. The preservice teachers who field tested the use of *Moon at Nine* in middle school and high school classrooms used their experiential knowledge base since they have all gone through adolescence, and that knowledge gave them the ability to relate to the characters despite the differences of country, politics, and amount of personal freedom. This concept gives credence to the belief that YAL can enhance, and even change, perceptions, as well as help us all to become more empathetic human beings.

As Mary Napoli summarizes in her 2007 interview with Deborah Ellis:

Exposing readers to Deborah Ellis's books is a viable means of introducing social and global experiences that foster intercultural connections. . . . Through the eyes of Ellis's characters, readers experience life through a unique point of view while learning to appreciate the interconnectedness of humanity. . . . Ellis has opened the doors to other cultures by introducing readers to places, people, situations, and struggles that they would not have otherwise encountered. (58)

Educators need to adopt, support, embrace, and advocate the stance that including diverse young adult literature from the perspective of the varied interpretations of the term, including multiculturalism, in curriculum is a must. "Imaginary barriers dissolve as students see themselves reflected in a diversity of cultures and recognize similarities across invented boundaries" (Landt 697). 

## Appendix A: Instructions for Brown-Bag Exam Preparation

1. Collect brown bags, lunch size.
2. Collect items that evoke something from a text read by your students.
3. Place each item separately in its own bag; fold, staple, or seal.
4. Give each student a bag; instruct students to wait until everyone has a bag before opening.
5. After bags are opened, students use the attached Steps for a Brown-Bag Exam.
6. Alternately, find images online and prepare a group of images for the exhibit guide. This will remind you of the actual items you used if you prefer the "hands on" method in the classroom.

## Appendix B: Suggested Steps for a Brown-Bag Exam

Adapted from Denise Ousley's Brown Bag Exam; for more information, contact ousleyd@uncw.edu.

### Step One:

Open your bag!

### Step Two:

List all possible connections between your item and the novel. Items may (or may not) fall into the following categories:

plot	character	theme	all of these
setting	symbol	event	something else entirely

### Step Three:

Get into triads.

Each person shares connections and then asks group members for the connections they see.

Please list all additional connections in the second box.

### Step Four:

Find at least two passages from the exhibit guide or supplemental material connected to your brown-bag item.

Copy them into the third box. Provide enough of the passage that you (and others) can find it.

Please be sure to include page numbers.

### Step Five:

Choose one idea you'd like to share with the class about your brown-bag item. (This could be a bit about your discussion, connections, passages, initial reaction, or surprises.)

Note: This is in the final box and prepared to share with the entire group.

### Works Cited

Alsop, Janet. "More Than a 'Time of Storm and Stress': The Complex Depiction of Adolescent Identity in Contemporary Young Adult Novels." *The Critical Merits of Young Adult Literature*, edited by Crag Hill, Routledge, 2007, pp. 25–37.

Clemmons, Karina, and Judith A. Hayn. "Transforming Perceptions of English Language Learners: Action Research with *Mexican WhiteBoy*." *SIGNAL Journal*, vol. 36, Spring/Summer 2013, pp. 12–14.

## Appendix C: Brown-Bag Exam

Brown-Bag Item: \_\_\_\_\_

Initial ideas: Connection of item to exhibit guide/supplemental class materials (a bulleted list is fine)

Additional comments from small-group discussion:

Passages:

Idea/Connection/Comment to share with the class:

Clemmons, Karina R., Judith A. Hayn, and Heather Olvey. "Fostering Inclusion and Respect for LGBTQ Youth with Young Adult Literature: Action Research with *It's Our Prom (So Deal with It)*." *Ohio Journal of English Language Arts*, vol. 55, no. 1, 2015, pp. 7–16.

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**Judith A. Hayn** is a professor of teacher education at the University of Arkansas Little Rock. She has 40 years of experience teaching in public schools and in higher education. Her research focuses on social justice issues, especially in young adult literature. She has been a member of NCTE for more than 20 years. She can be contacted at jahayn@ualr.edu. **Karina R. Clemmons** has 20 years of experience in the field of education. Her recent research has focused on teacher education, young adult literature, social justice, and medical education. She is currently an associate professor in the Division of Medical Humanities at the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences and may be contacted at KRClemmons@uams.edu. **Heather Olvey** is a secondary educator who has published and presented research on the efficacy of young adult literature in dealing with social justice issues and increasing empathy in the ELA classroom. She currently teaches junior high English at Our Lady of the Holy Souls School in Little Rock, Arkansas, and can be reached at olvey@holysouls.org.

#### READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

The article highlighted the use of an Anticipation Guide. When teaching fiction, generate a list of compelling or controversial thematic or topic-based statements that relate to key ideas of the short story, novel, or play students are about to read. List those statements in the left-hand column and ask students to rate their level of agreement for each. Then have students explain why they chose their level of agreement by writing a short rationale. Explain to students that they should be thinking about these compelling thematic or topic-based statements as they read. After they have read, pass back the guide and ask students to reflect on their current thinking. Have students write reflective statements that indicate how their attitudes or opinions have changed and facilitate small- or large-group discussions to explore those dynamics. <http://bit.ly/2oJW2Mc>

## 2017 NCTE Election Results

In NCTE's 2017 elections, College Section member **Leah Zuidema**, Dordt College, Sioux Center, Iowa, was chosen vice president. Zuidema will take office during the NCTE Annual Convention in November.

The Secondary Section also elected new members. Elected to the 2017–2018 Nominating Committee were **Jalissa Bates**, East Baton Rouge Parish, Louisiana, chair; **Susan Barber**, Northgate High School, Newnan, Georgia; and **Hattie Maguire**, Novi High School, Michigan.

On the NCTE website, see additional 2017 election results and details on submitting nominations for the 2018 elections (<http://www.ncte.org/volunteer/elections>).