

The Power Dynamics of Empathy in Young Adult Speculative Fiction

From the “Roots of Empathy” program to discussions of literature serving as windows into other experiences, recent references to empathy sometimes give the impression that empathetic interactions are an unmitigated good. However, C. Daniel Batson’s categorization of different forms of empathy highlights situations in which “feeling with” another may not lead to compassionate action, and may even tend toward greater marginalization of the oppressed. Amy Robillard complicates the issue further by analyzing the similarities between empathy and strategies of appeasement that abuse victims sometimes employ in an attempt at self-protection that privileges the perspective of the abuser. On the question of whether empathy can support social justice activism, the answer depends on how power dynamics inflect the process of imaginatively aligning oneself with another’s viewpoint.

This paper will analyze the complicated power dynamics of empathetic interactions in recent young adult speculative fiction. In Melina Marchetta’s *Finnikin of the Rock* (2008), exiled princess Isaboe regains her kingdom when she takes on the memories of her subjects who lived through an oppressive occupation, a process that reorients the locus of power—political, emotional, and moral—within women’s experiences. This act of empathetic heroism engages Isaboe’s intersectional identity as an upper-class woman in a patriarchal society. Marie Lu’s Legend trilogy (2011-2013) similarly centers around a privileged young woman who employs empathy toward the betterment of her society; however, the series treats empathetic interactions with less nuance than *Finnikin* and ultimately replicates some of the fundamental inequities that the reformed society claims to address.

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