

YOUNG-ADULT FICTION: What Makes a Great Novel for Boys?  
by Mike Klaassen

What do the following novels have in common?

- *Ender's Game*, by Orson Scott Card
- *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, by J. K. Rowling
- *Immortal: A Buffy the Vampire Slayer Novel*, by Christopher Golden and Nancy Holder
- *Holes*, by Louis Sachar
- *Eragon*, by Christopher Paolini

Even though these five novels vary significantly, they have one large common denominator: each is a great story that adolescent boys can enjoy. Great stories share common traits, and those traits coincide with the five fundamental elements of fiction (character, plot, setting, theme, and style).

**CHARACTER.** According to Donald Maass, in *Writing the Breakout Novel*, great stories “. . . involve characters whom you cannot forget. . . they are larger than life . . . they act, speak, and think in ways you or I . . . do not.” Each of these five novels has at least one unforgettable character. In young-adult novels, that often means characters who are intriguing and complicated; they grow or mature; they emerge from the story as changed people.

In four of the five novels listed above, the protagonist is a boy. That's not a coincidence. Just as girls are more likely to identify with a female character, boys are more likely to enjoy a male protagonist. But *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* shows that an intriguing female character can also hold a guy's reading attention.

**PLOT.** The characters must do something important. According to Maass, in great novels “what happens to the characters in the course of the story is unusual, dramatic, and meaningful. A great story involves great events.”

In the novels listed above, the respective protagonist:

- Wages intergalactic war against aliens
- Uses magic to battle evil wizards
- Fights and kills the undead threatening her hometown
- Searches for buried treasure in a juvenile-detention camp
- Rides a dragon into battle to defend the oppressed

**SETTING.** Characters don't perform on an empty stage. As outlined by Maass, your favorite novels “probably . . . whisked you into their worlds, transported you to other times or places, and held you captive there.” That means setting is more than just a stage. It incorporates a milieu, a broader sense of culture and environment, so integrated into the story that setting almost becomes another character.

In the novels listed above, the settings include:

- A space-station training facility
- A school for young wizards
- A town infested with vampires
- A juvenile-detention facility on a dry lake bed inhabited by poisonous lizards
- A medieval world ruled by an ruthless sorcerer

**THEME.** A great novel is more than just entertainment. According to Maass, another aspect of great stories is that they alter the reader's way of seeing the world. Ideally, a great young-adult novel leaves the reader better able to cope with whatever real-world challenges he may face. In each of the novels listed above, a young protagonist overcomes incredible obstacles and emerges as a stronger, wiser person.

**STYLE.** Style is the "how" of fiction, reflecting a myriad of choices made by the author, from individual word choice to establishing the tone. Although the novels listed above differ significantly in various aspects of style, they share one overall trait: they are each told in an accessible, straight-forward style.

In capsule form, the cornerstones of a great novel for young-adult males are:

- An intriguing, complicated, larger-than-life character
- A dramatic, meaningful plot
- A captivating setting
- An appropriate theme
- An accessible, straight-forward style

When these traits are combined into one story, the reader is hooked from the beginning, keeps turning the pages, and at the end is left hungry for more.

Copyright 2008  
Michael John Klaassen