

# Where Have the Parents Gone in Young Adult Fiction?

by **Ramona Matthews**

While I don't toil like my peasant forebears did, I like to think that my DNA has blessed me with the ability to enjoy the sound sleep a hard day of physical work brings.

So, it was unsettling to be visited by insomnia, with one thought swirling 'round and confounding my rest.

I've read enough women's magazines to know that one cure for sleepless nights is to write down what is on one's mind; what a catharsis!

This is what I read in the morning ...

*Dear Canadian Young Adult Authors and Publishers:*

*Imagine the most diligent Grade 8 reader you have ever encountered. She reads deeply, immersing herself fully in the lives of the people she comes across on the page, drinking in the places and the people to which reading introduces her. She yearns to understand. As she discusses her latest Canadian YA read with me, my student says, "I thought it was so sad that the main character's mother died..." Her voice trails off as she looks at me, sideways, "...or was that the last book I read? The dead mother, I mean." The wheels turn in my head. I sigh. "Sadly, that would be both," I reply. Yes, sadly for the protagonists and the story line; sadly, for you, eager young reader; sadly, for Canadian literature.*

*Is it just you, or have you noticed it among your peers too? The casualty count is mounting, with dead moms and dads accounting for an alarming presence (or would that be absence?) in too many books with contemporary settings these past few years. I'm no statistician, but aren't divorce and family separation more common in our country?*

*As someone who has survived a life-threatening illness, I have been more of a potentially-dead mother of teens – bluntly speaking – than the average Canadian my age. I take personal umbrage with the dead-parent-as-easy-plot-device. "The author does the dead parent thing," another student remarked, "so the kid in the story has a reason to have issues." Please, say it isn't so!*

*(Parenthetically, I know oncology patients rejoice that cancer is out of the closet and is discussed openly. Do use your influence to do the same with other diseases and infirmities. We're all for equal opportunity here, and some balance. Oh, and to you writers of historical fiction: exceptions do apply: we need historical veracity. Death in childbirth, demise from the common cold gone wrong, consumption, a farm accident, the plague... these are all legitimate.)*

*No one willingly suspends disbelief like yours truly. Make it worth my while, folks. Make it worth the time of your young readership. The crusade for no more dead dogs was taken up by another some years ago. Maybe it's my turn to hoist a placard: No more dead moms!*

*Sincerely,  
Ramona Matthews, Teacher-Librarian and avid reader*

**A**s readers, we have taken on the world sans parents with *Oliver Twist* and *Huck Finn*, with *Mary Lennox* and with *Anne Shirley*. We understand that in times gone by, young people with no mother or father – or both – were likely. Set in more recent times, other fictional characters face the challenges of growing up either without one or both parents. S.E. Hinton’s *The Outsiders*, Cornelia Funke’s *The Thief Lord*, J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter*, not to mention the Sonya Somes’ aptly-titled *One of those Hideous Books Where the Mother Dies*, all come to mind.

But Canadian YA fiction is also rife with the parent who has died a premature death, leaving behind children of various ages, often teens, to carry on in grief and confusion. How does this figure in the plots of YA works?

Recently, a few Canadian authors weighed in on the subject of dead or absent parents in the works they read and create. Marsha Skrypuch, award-winning author and current White Pine nominee, succinctly pointed out, “In YA fiction, the action swirls around a young person plunged into a time of decision-making. If all she has to do is ask Mommy or Daddy to fix it for her, there’s not much of a story, is there?”

Helene Boudreau, new fiction author (*Acadian Star*) and non-fiction author for Crabtree expands on this: “One of the most pervasive qualities of Middle Grade and YA fiction is the character’s ‘journey’ and how the character ‘grows’ within the context of that journey. If parents are too visible, too accessible, the main character has less opportunity to be self-reliant in solving the ‘problem’ and growing as a character. A common tool is to just omit the parent(s) altogether, either by being deceased or otherwise inaccessible.”

Multi-award-winning writer Eric Walters concurs, “It’s pretty simple – if parent(s) are present they’re the ones who will intervene. At three in the morning, if I hear a noise downstairs, I don’t wake up my 16-year-old daughter and send her to investigate. For the teen protagonist to take the action role, you have to remove the parents.”

From a purely practical standpoint, Marsha Skrypuch reminds us, “Also, YA fiction is comparatively short, which means fewer characters can be developed. For each parent who isn’t a charac-

ter, the author can save about 5,000 words.”

As teacher-librarians and readers ourselves, we know the power of books and the role they can play as “bibliotherapy.” What role does this factor play in writing for the YA audience?

Eric Walters explains, “If you write about real things you hit real issues and people can learn from them. I don’t go into any book with that in mind, but it is a natural by-product. If it’s too upfront then books become ‘preachy.’ It’s sort of like in science fiction, the fiction, not the science, has to always be in the forefront, if you want to tell a good story. With *Wounded* [being released this spring by Penguin], it’s about a young boy whose father is serving in Afghanistan and the whole PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder] issue. It will help young people going through this situation, but the issue is discussed through the story.”

“An absent parent can represent many different kinds of loss for the reader,” observes Marsha Skrypuch. “It can also represent the need for autonomy. In that way, there is an element of bibliotherapy. The absent parent is a device used in YA fiction as a way to plunge the young protagonist into action and decision-making – often at a time when they’re emotionally vulnerable due to loss. The device works to heighten action and emotional impact with fewer words (i.e., fewer characters needing development). And the loss resonates with teens because young adults are constantly dealing with all sorts of loss issues in their personal lives.”

Maybe I was being too hard on our writer friends. The dead or absent parent trend is just one of many that is evident in YA today. Plots involving sexual identity and an open discussion of gay and lesbian issues, social justice, dystopias, vampires and werewolves, plus newer formats such as graphic novels and novels set in free verse, make the range of reading on offer for the YA crowd very wide indeed. Lucky them – and lucky us as teacher-librarians, to be able to share in the riches available. †

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