

# ***Trackers* Reader Response: An Alternate Approach to Young Adult Literature**

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When one is walking through the halls of any middle school or high school, it is not uncommon to hear students expressing extreme frustration with their English courses. The discontent is typically the result of teachers assigning complicated meanings to literary texts and authorial intent, or it may be the consequence of teachers imposing their own personal interpretations of literature on their students. In her article on Reader Response Theory, Diana Mitchell provides an alternative to this oppressive approach to literature in the classroom. As Mitchell says, “English teachers love literature. They eagerly share their opinions and interpretations of it. They love to feel they’ve mastered a text and know all the subtle ins and outs of it” (41). However, there is a much better way for English teachers to share their love of literature with their students, and Mitchell provides it in the form of Reader Response Theory. In the pages that follow, I will give an overview of Mitchell’s ideas about Reader Response Theory and how it is especially effective in terms of young adult literature. Furthermore, I use Patrick Carman’s 2010 young adult novel, *Trackers*, to demonstrate the uses of Reader Response Theory and how several elements of this approach—namely media responses, personal connections, and discussions of memorable quotes—can be used to uncover students’ interpretations of the text. Reader Response Theory works well in young adult classrooms and provides an opportunity for students to control their learning and connect with literature in a way that other methods do not always allow. Through several prompts and further analysis of my responses to *Trackers*, it becomes apparent that Reader Response approaches enable young readers to connect with the text in a personal way that helps uncover the text’s relevant themes and literature’s practical applications.

## **Reader Response Theory**

Reader Response Theory is an approach to teaching English that emphasizes students’ individual experiences and interpretations of the text, allowing them to control their own learning. A teacher’s role shifts from dictating the meaning of a text to “helping students discover what a piece of literature can mean” (Mitchell 41). No wrong answers exist in Reader Response as long as students can support their ideas and interpretations with evidence from the text. This approach puts students in control, encouraging them to engage in the reading and discussion of the literature and challenging them to find evidence within the text, ultimately leading to in-depth analysis. Reader Response first focuses on a student’s initial response to a text, placing attention on a student’s experience by asking questions about how the student felt about the text and its characters. Emphasis is also placed on the parts of the text that struck the student as most interesting and the reason the parts stood out. Individual student responses can then be shared in the classroom—as a whole or in small groups—so students can practice listening to and synthesizing the ideas of other classmates to form a coherent interpretation.

Collecting and then discussing students’ initial responses are imperative for further analysis of the literature because they allow teachers to set up assignments—written, oral, and visual ones—based on

student responses. If the writing assignments are constructed correctly, they will display the core principles of the Reader Response approach: “students have options, students have the freedom to discover what the piece of literature means, students see that their responses are valued because the assignments are based on their response, and students think and create rather than regurgitate” (Mitchell 48). In other words, students are given the confidence to voice their opinions, they are more engaged in the learning process, they become more invested in their pursuit of understanding, and they are meeting teaching goals linked to such higher-level thinking processes as analysis, creativity, and synthesis of ideas.

The freedom provided by Reader Response is especially effective when teaching young adults because it gives them a sense of control. Unlike the unfortunately common and expected approach to teaching—as a series of disengaging lectures that leave students distanced from the subject as well as discouraged from voicing opinions—Reader Response makes young adults active participants in their learning. Because every response is acceptable (as long as it has valid support), Reader Response “empowers students by showing them that what they have to say is valued” (Mitchell 42). This is ultimately what young adults are seeking: a sense of value, a sense of power, and a sense that they can confidently interpret their own experiences with literature. This method moves students far away from dull and daunting discussions of symbolism. Instead of lecturing at students about the symbolism of a text, teachers are allowing them to uncover their own meaning.

This approach is especially important when teaching literature to young adults because teachers often give students pieces of literature that the teachers themselves have mastered. Teachers know every fine detail, and it “stays with us because we were part of the process of uncovering” (Mitchell 43). Teachers must give the students this same opportunity to become active participants in discovering a text’s meaning through their reactions and discussions with other classmates. If students can learn by engaging and actually choosing to learn, the knowledge will more likely stick with them rather than the forgetfulness that tends to follow a boring lecture. Instead of feeling overwhelmed by a teacher’s imposing interpretation and belabored analysis of symbolism, students have a much more positive experience with Reader Response. In fact, educators have to remember that with confidence comes an eagerness to participate and share ideas. Thus, when students are given the opportunity to interpret a text on their own and the teacher helps them see the value in their opinions, students gain confidence and are further encouraged to explore and facilitate their own learning. Young adults are often discouraged when they hear that their interpretation of a text is wrong, but when being wrong is not an option, student creativity can flourish. In fact, when asked to give a personal response to the text, students are more likely to provide a more truthful reading of the literature, which will ultimately encourage classroom discussion of motifs and themes.

Because Reader Response caters so well to the needs of young adults, it is no wonder that it is especially pertinent to teaching young adult literature in the classroom, and Patrick Carman’s young adult novel *Trackers* is one such text that fits very well into Reader Response Theory’s techniques. This first book in Carman’s *Trackers* series uses an interview format where the main character, Adam, recounts his dangerous experiences in the world of online hackers with his friends Emily, Lewis, and Finn—a group of teens who call themselves the trackers. Adam is the leader of this group, and he controls all of their tracking missions from his secret hideaway attached to his dad’s workshop. This room is filled with all of Adam’s computer equipment and nicknamed “the Vault.” Adam and his fellow hyper-intelligent friends quickly find themselves drawn into a world of online crime, where they are trapped by two alleged Internet hackers, Lazlo and Zara. Adam and his friends’ tracking missions become a reality as Adam tries to discover who Lazlo and Zara really are. As the novel progresses, readers learn that Adam and his friends are secretly being tested by a government organization.

Carman’s book is especially interesting because, in addition to its engaging plot, the text has an online component that gives students the ability to enter the world of the trackers by playing games and watching videos. At the end of certain sections of the book, readers are given codes to enter The Trackers Interface website (<http://trackersinterface.com/>). When they visit the site, they can watch videos purportedly taken by the novel’s characters. Although readers do not have to visit the website to understand the book, those who do so feel as though they are immersed in the tracker world. The supplementary website thus promotes deeper understanding of the text and provides a sensory experience that places the readers directly into the novel. This website keeps the young readers engaged because they

are actively participating in the story of Adam and his interviewer, each video being unlocked and revealed to the reader as Adam reveals the information to the interviewer. Even without the website, because Carman has crafted an engaging plot, *Trackers* is particularly suited for the Reader Response approach because of the degree to which this approach encourages students to be active readers.

Because *Trackers* follows the lives of hyper-intelligent teenagers whose dialogue and thought processes are likely very similar to those of the book's readers, the novel draws on themes that are applicable to adolescent life, such as friendship, teamwork, and Internet safety. In this way, students will likely have deeper personal connections to the text, which will encourage them to engage more. Students will most likely experience young adult literature in a way that teachers may not, shedding new light on possible interpretations of the text. Thus, the students' insights not only empower the students, but become a source of encouragement for teachers who get to see their students engaging. In a way, the students can become the teacher, creating an exciting classroom dynamic that facilitates higher-level thinking.

As I discussed before, Reader Response writing prompts encourage a judgment-free response from the students by asking them to relate to the text in a personal way. These prompts address the feelings of the readers, their experiences while reading the text, and any connections they may have made to their personal life or broader, outside contexts. The English department at Maine South High School in Park Ridge, Illinois, created four such prompts to give students several ways of approaching their summer reading ("Reader Response Theory—Summer Reading Homework"). These prompts encourage students to perform an in-depth analysis of the work through an author critique, a connection to outside media, an attraction to a memorable passage, or an appeal to a personal experience. Below, I have applied three of these prompts to Patrick Carman's *Trackers*. Through my responses, I found that I was able to gain a better connection to the text and a deeper understanding of its focus on communication and Internet danger, as well as the themes of teamwork and creativity, all of which I did not notice at first glance.

### **Response 1: Media Connection**

When I reached the end of Patrick Carman's *Trackers*, I couldn't help but make the connection to one of my favorite books, *Ender's Game* (1991), by Orson Scott Card. In this intriguing novel, which is part of a larger series, a futuristic military agency recruits promising young children to train as soldiers in order to lead planet Earth in a war against an alien race, the Buggers. Colonel Graff specifically looks for children who show promising signs of being able to survive at a military base in space; he believes the creativity and innocence of children make them the perfect candidates for generals. Ender, a young prodigy, is quickly elevated to the status of commanding general, and with the help of his army of friends, he defeats the Buggers, all while under the impression that he is playing a video game.

I could not allow the parallel between characters and themes in *Ender's Game* and *Trackers* to go unnoticed. Adam, like Ender, is also a child prodigy when it comes to computers, solving problems that even Microsoft cannot and inventing cameras, software, and tracking scenarios for his friends. Throughout the novel, Adam is under the illusion that he is tracking one of the world's most dangerous computer hackers. In reality, Lazlo is a member of a secret government agency that is testing Adam's abilities. This discovery is where the parallel between Card's Colonel Graff and Carman's Lazlo becomes evident: both young boys are secretly being used by the government and having their extraordinary abilities tested. In one of the last video files of the story, Lazlo explains himself: "[I am] with the ISD, the Internet Security Directive... a highly classified federal agency. We recruit all the best programmers and technicians" (Carman 197). Adam tells us that Lazlo "hires programmer types to go after hackers who are into cyber theft on a pretty big scale" (197). In essence, Lazlo recruits programmers—in this case, prodigy adolescents like Adam, Zara, Emily, Lewis, and Finn. Even Zara, whom the trackers initially view as their enemy, is actually another hyper-intelligent teenager that Lazlo has recruited. Despite his attachment to and respect for these children, Lazlo, as part of a secret government federation, is like Graff in that he puts these adolescents in a position of danger to save the world. The danger becomes especially apparent in one of the passages from the novel that I found most memorable.

## Response 2: Memorable Passage

In many books that I read, the most memorable passages tend to concern pivotal moments, and in *Trackers* this certainly held true when I read the following:

### **You were determined?**

Yeah. I had to crack the thing. You have to understand—I was used to cracking whatever was put in from of me. So the fact that I hadn't figured this out yet was driving me crazy—as much as the feeling of being watched was freaking me out. And besides that, I knew the answer. I had determined there was more to be gained by filling in the blanks than cutting off communication with this thing.

### **So what did you do?**

I grabbed the floating Glyph symbols one by one and watched them click into place. It was eerie seeing my grandfather's quote take shape in a game that might be hosted in one of six places around the world.

THE HARDEST THING TO FIND IS PEACE, THOUGH IT LAY IN PLAIN VIEW.

(Carman 69)

This is that passage that seals the trackers' fate. It is also the passage that reveals so much about Adam's character. Adam's curiosity and determination are both strengths and weaknesses. In this passage, he allowed his curiosity and his inability to refuse a challenge to expose the Vault, himself, and his friends to a potential threat beyond anything they could have imagined. If cautious Lewis had been in Adam's place, the red cord to shut off the Vault's power, sealing in all of its information, would have been pulled, and the trackers never would have been catapulted into this world of computer hackers and criminal masterminds. However, Adam's curiosity enables him to be cunning and predictable, which is why Zara and Lazlo so easily manipulate him and lure him into a test mission that risks his and his friends' lives.

It is this part of the novel that worries me. Because I do not know what happened to the trackers (presumably to be revealed later in the series), I do not fully understand the consequences of Adam's actions at this point. He does not tell his parents. He does not alert the authorities. He simply complies with this girl, Zara, whom he does not know and agrees to meet her (and, unknowingly, her older, more powerful partner, Lazlo). This is a serious problem in society today, and it is important for young readers to understand the seriousness of hidden/false identities on the Internet. They need to understand the dangers of giving away too much information and agreeing to meet "friends" that they have met on the Internet. It is always best to tell someone who can help. Thankfully, the fact that Adam appears in a detective's office being questioned and reprimanded (a fate determined by the pivotal passage above) indicates that something terrible did happen, serving as a warning for young, impressionable readers. The novel shows that, as a leader, Adam made some mistakes that had severe consequences; however, he also made several good decisions that resonated with me, creating a strong personal connection, which, as mentioned earlier, the Reader Response approach recognizes as another effective way to engage students.

## Response 3: Personal Connection

The following passage from the novel really resounded with me as an athlete, an upperclassman, and a team leader:

The cool thing for me as I looked at this amazing group of friends was that I saw the hidden value in their flaws. Emily was critical, but without her we'd never get anything done—she was the taskmaster we needed. Lewis, I knew, would never let us get into a jam without first making sure we understood the risks. And Finn? Finn took the edge off of everything stressful, a huge advantage in a group full of braniacs. (Carman 92)

Adam's mature and profound understanding of teamwork and his role as a team leader is very impressive. He displays a deep understanding of each of his team members—their faults as well as their crucial strengths—and how he must respond to them to get team members to work as a cohesive group that has confidence and believes in its members individually and collectively.

The ability to understand the different personalities and mindsets of my teammates has been really important in my experience as a college athlete. Captains and team leaders must learn how their team members best function together, what each individual member's strengths and weaknesses are, and

how to inspire everyone to play with focus and passion. Many times the team on which I played has been teetering on the edge in an important game—a tied score, a game-changing play, a match point—and in these crucial moments, we must come together as a team and play for each other to give ourselves the best chance of success. The ability to understand each of his friends and how they form a strong team is exactly what Adam encounters in the scene described above. Adam’s understanding, in fact, helps him call his friends to action: “... None of us is perfect; we all have shortcomings. But together, as a team, we’re unstoppable” (92). This quote definitely applies to the crucial moments I experience during a tough game. As the saying on my team goes, “Play with passion, and play for the girl standing next to you on the court.” When we are all reminded that we are playing for something bigger than ourselves—just as Adam and the trackers are fighting a power far greater than they imagined—we have the focus and confidence that we need to be successful.

This personal connection that I was able to establish with the text helped create a better understanding of the book’s themes, and it allowed me to interpret *Trackers* in a way that resonated with me. This type of Reading Response really helps teachers gain a better understanding of students’ reactions to a text. This type of response also helps students express their opinions without fear of being wrong. However, several other assignments and techniques can encourage students to engage with a text—one of which I will discuss in the following section.

### **The Plus/Minus/Interesting (PMI) Chart**

In addition to written responses, other techniques can be used to support Reader Response’s focus on students’ initial reactions to texts. The Plus/Minus/Interesting (PMI) Chart is an effective way of accomplishing this. As students read, they are encouraged to write down what parts of a text they find to be positive, negative, or simply interesting. Not only does this prompt students to be active readers (giving them a chart to which they can refer when composing written responses), but it also helps teachers discover what the students are looking for in a novel: What interests them? What turns them off? This way, teachers can choose their next book based on what will most likely engage the students.

Additionally, this chart opens the door for class discussion, for students have to explain why they liked or did not like a book. The chart helps to eliminate impulsive reactions that could affect the students’ approach to the novel and keeps the students more open-minded. Reader Response methods are designed to prevent students from forming initial judgments and evaluations that merely indicate whether they like the text. Instead, the PMI chart forces students to explain their reasoning because they have to consider all aspects of the piece of literature. This way, they can measure their reactions to several facets of the text to make a justifiable judgment.

### **Conclusion**

All in all, Reader Response Theory is a fantastic approach to teaching young adult literature that counteracts previous methods defined by dull lectures, teacher-imposed interpretations, and student disinterestedness. By encouraging students to be active participants in their reading, to engage in the novel, and to create a personal connection with the text, Reader Response methods make students more likely to participate in classroom discussion and recognize the value of their own interpretations of the text. Additionally, the stress put on providing support for points of view and on engaging classroom discussion stimulates such higher-thinking processes as analysis and synthesis.

When young adult literature is applied to Reader Response Theory, the results are amplified because student interest is increased when students can relate to the characters, the setting, and the plot of a novel. By encouraging students to expand on these connections, teachers give students control over their learning, making them more likely to be invested in their own growth. This approach also helps teachers create a welcoming and stimulating atmosphere in the classroom. In turn, this opens up the door for passionate discussion and student creativity that helps students get as much out of a piece of literature as possible.

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