REALISTIC FICTION

Children frequently describe realistic fiction as “real stories about real people.” In essence, this description is fairly accurate. Realistic fiction is the term used to describe stories that could have actually occurred to people or animals. The possibility exists that the events or similar events could have taken place. Fictional characters react to a situation in the same manner that real people might react.

Realistic fiction can be divided into four categories: factual, situational, emotional, and social. In factual realism, facts describing actual persons, places, and events are accurately recorded; it is often a main characteristic of historical fiction. Situational realism occurs when a situation is not only possible, but probable. The author identifies both location and characters by place, age, and social class and treats them in a believable manner. The SURVIVAL STORY is one example of this type of realism. Emotional realism, often a major element in the coming-of-age story, has believable feelings and relationships between characters. Social realism provides an honest portrait of society, both the good and the bad. A work of realistic fiction will include some or all of these categories.

The contemporary realistic novel, also called contemporary realism, describes stories that take place in the present with accurately portrayed attitudes and social mores. Frequently this type of story is considered a “problem novel” in that the plot emphasizes social or personal issues such as child abuse, alcoholism, divorce, teenage pregnancy, or suicide. Examples of problem novels include the NEWBERY MEDAL books Holes (SACHAR, 1998), Walk Two Moons (CREECH, 1994), and the Honor Title What Jamie Saw (1995, Coman). The problem of the protagonist becomes the source of the plot as in Newbery Medal title Maniac Magee (SPINELLI, 1990). True-to-life portrayals of minority and MULTICULTURAL characters and situations has become another aspect of the genre. Walter Dean MYER's Scorpions, 1989, Newbery Medal Honor Book, and Somewhere in the Darkness, his 1993 Newbery Medal Honor Book, are examples. Realistic fiction does not have to be contemporary. Historical fiction or historical realism places the plot and characters in the past with verifiable details as to dress, food, and life. Characters and plot may be based on historical figures, may be just “pretend” and placed in a historical setting (The Midwife's Apprentice, CUSHMAN, 1996 Newbery Medal Award), or may be a combination of both as in the 1990 Newbery Medal Award title Number the Stars (LOWRY ). Animal realism adds a story dimension to accurate details about the animal as in Phyllis Reynolds NAYLOR's 1992 Newbery Medal dog story, Shiloh. An objective point of view is necessary in order for the animals to act like animals and not be given human characteristics. SPORTS STORIES, MYSTERIES, and romances may be considered types of realistic fiction, but are also considered separate genres.

The content of children's literature, while it has always contained elements of realism, has changed markedly as society's view of children has changed. In the seventeenth century, children were seen as being in need of salvation and most children's literature was instructional, didactic, and of a religious nature. During the eighteenth century, the trend towards instruction continued, but some literature was written strictly for entertainment. By the nineteenth century, children's literature became less moralistic and folktales and FANTASY became important genres. An early type of realistic fiction that reflected this decline in didacticism was the ADVENTURE novel, exemplified by Swiss Family Robinson (1816) by Johann WYSS and Kidnapped (1886), as well as Treasure Island (1883) by Robert Louis STEVENSON.
Realistic ANIMAL STORIES like Anna SEWELL's Black Beauty (1877) also became popular during the latter half of the nineteenth century. A more modern kind of realism became popular with the publication of the dime novels, Mark TWAIN's The Adventures of Tom Sawyer (1876) and Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (1884), the Horatio Alger novels, and FAMILY STORIES such as Louisa May ALCOTT's Little Women (1868) and Margaret SYDNEY's (pseud. Harriet M. Lothrop) Five Little Peppers and How They Grew series (1881). During the twentieth century, childhood came to be considered a “golden age” and the attention paid to children's literature grew markedly. Early realistic novels of the century included books such as Lucy Maud MONTGOMERY's Anne of Green Gables series, Kate Douglas WIGGIN's Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm (1903), and Frances Hodgson BURNETT's The Secret Garden (1911). The NEWBERY MEDAL (1922) and CALDECOTT (1938) MEDAL AWARDS, that recognized outstanding quality in children's literature, began during the early part of the century. Realism in children's fiction grew as a major genre, with dime novels and SERIES BOOKS important early examples of the trend. Harriet the Spy by Louise FITZHUGH, published in 1964, is considered the benchmark novel for modern realism with its graphic and truthful depiction of an unhappy, unpleasant child. Children's literature in the 1960s and 1970s focused on intellectual freedom, relevance, and realism, supporting the trend toward the “problem novel.” Unlike the realistic novels of earlier periods that emphasized happy, mostly middle-class families and few controversial issues, today's realistic fiction speaks openly of current societal issues such as divorce, child abuse, drug addiction, and alcoholism, poverty, racism, and homelessness. Also, prior to 1950, few books for children and YOUNG ADULTS portraying any culture other than the white middle class were available. According to Kay Vand-ergrift, “Young Americans could more easily read about cultures of those in different lands than they could about various racial, ethnic, class, or religious differences within their own neighborhoods or nation.”

Plot, character, setting, and theme remain the standard elements for evaluating realistic fiction. Well-developed, dynamic characters who show growth or change and a well-structured, believable plot are essential. The setting should be suitable for the story line and the theme should not be didactic or overtly moralistic. Also, in contemporary fiction of the problem novel type, the character’s situation should not overwhelm the plot or characterization nor should the book become a soapbox for the author.

As the popularity of realistic fiction continues to grow, so do the issues concerning its subject matter; contemporary realistic fiction has become a major area for book challenges and CENSORSHIP attempts. To help avoid such challenges, five values of realistic fiction are identified as: (1) The stories are easy for children to relate to and enjoy because they can often see their own lives or lives much like their own. (2) Realistic fiction permits children to see how other people live their lives and solve their problems. (3) Children can explore the many commonalities in basic human values across cultures. (4) Children can become aware that other children have lives that are much different from their own. (5) Bibliotherapy, using selected to books to help children deal with social and emotional problems, often draws books from this genre.