

2023

## Kindling a Desire to Read: A Review of Three Young Adult Novels

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### Recommended Citation

Rasheed, M. (2023). Kindling a desire to read: A review of three young adult novels. South Carolina Association for Middle Level Education Journal, 109-113.

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Published online: March 2023  
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## Kindling a Desire to Read: A Review of Three Young Adult Novels

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**Abstract:** Drawing on experiences as an English teacher and as a teacher educator, this article offers a review of *Nothing Burns as Bright as You* by Ashley Woodfolk (2021), *Paradise on Fire* by Jewell Parker Rhodes (2022), and *Year on Fire* by Julie Buxbaum (2022). The review offers suggestions to promote adolescent reading. Authentic characterizations, realistic dialogue, credible events, and elements of suspense draw readers in and keep them reading. Recommended as viable works to spark students' interest in reading, *Nothing Burns as Bright as You*, *Paradise on Fire*, and *Year on Fire* are contemporary young adult novels to consider when guiding students through self-selected books.

**Keywords:** adolescent literature, YA novels, climate change, gender identity, sexual orientation, parent-teen relationships

### Introduction

A fire sparks, ignites, enflames, engulfs, and smolders until it is extinguished. Much like bystanders drawn to the simmering embers of a slow burning fire, readers are enticed into the lives of adolescents in *Nothing Burns as Bright as You* by Ashley Woodfolk (2021), *Paradise on Fire* by Jewell Parker Rhodes (2022), and *Year on Fire* by Julie Buxbaum (2022). From climate change to gender identity and sexual orientation to parent-teen relationships fraught with complexities, these novels expose realistic issues from adolescent perspectives. These novels compel readers to consider various viewpoints, empathy for others, and acceptance of differences. Mirroring real life, few topics are off limits, and much is laid bare for readers in Woodfolk's, Parker Rhodes's, and Buxbaum's recently published young adult (YA) novels.

Collectively, *Nothing Burns as Bright as You*, *Paradise on Fire*, and *Year on Fire* abound with robust characters with diverse ideas, identities, expectations, religions, genders, places, families, cultures, and communities. While most readers are readily familiar with typical trials and tribulations of adolescent friendships, young love, relationships with parents, and a need to belong, these novels are catalysts to extend readers' thinking about particularly complex issues today and create a desire to read about these realistic subjects. As an adult reader of young adult literature (YAL), I often find myself jettisoned back to my own struggles as a teenager; yet, through these narratives, I am vividly reminded of challenges adolescents face today that are vastly different

from my own. The authors' realistic and frank use of language in dialogue complements the authenticity of the characters. In each of these YA novels, readers are positioned to step inside the minds of diverse adolescents who each contend with their own struggles. Through these novels, I raise the question: how do I, as an educator and caring adult, better support and respond to adolescents' challenges today? The insights gleaned from *Nothing Burns as Bright as You*, *Paradise on Fire*, and *Year on Fire* offer opportunities for constructive conversations around serious and sensitive contemporary issues. Too, these YA novels portray characters and situations which resonate with young readers today.

Young adult novels can serve as a conduit to explore life's many challenges and affordances. Zaczek (2022) notes, "Books are an immensely powerful tool for intersectional understanding" of critical issues and promote critical thinking (para. 8). Like many teachers, I take great pleasure in making time for books by reading, recommending, discussing, and revisiting works to promote reading with the goal of sparking a love of reading with students. Prioritization of reading is a hallmark of good instruction, and *Nothing Burns as Bright as You*, *Paradise on Fire*, and *Year on Fire* are ones that I choose to include in my classroom library.

*Nothing Burns as Bright as You*, *Paradise on Fire*, and *Year on Fire* candidly address real issues that warrant awareness and understanding without over sentimentality or maudlin characterizations. In this way, Bishop's (1990) book-life metaphor is fitting:

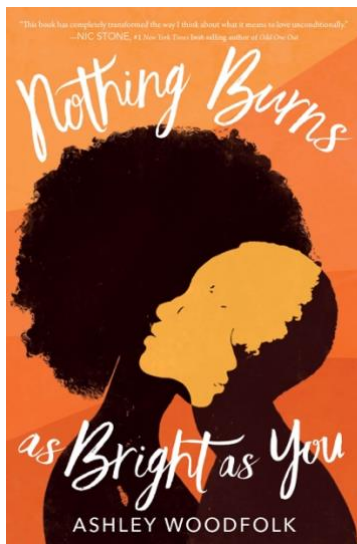
Books are sometimes windows, offering views of worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange. These windows are also sliding glass doors, and readers have only to walk through in imagination to become part of whatever world has been created or recreated by the author. When lighting conditions are just right, however, a window can also be a mirror. Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection we can see our own lives and experiences as part of a larger human experience. Reading, then, becomes a means of self-affirmation, and readers often seek their mirrors in books. (p. ix)

*Nothing Burns as Bright as You*, *Paradise on Fire*, and *Year on Fire* spark a desire to read – created through mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors – and illuminate authentic experiences and emotions of adolescents.

### Book 1: Nothing Burns as Bright as You

Ashley Woodfolk's *Nothing Burns as Bright as You* is narrated from a unique second-person point of view – a nameless, female adolescent addresses her partner and reveals past, present, and future ideations of their intense relationship. Woodfolk's lyrical verse novel explores the complications and boundaries of friendship which evolve to queer love. The

powerful story unfolds in a single day with nonlinear alternating chapters that illuminate the foundations of friendship, courtship, and demise of their relationship. The tenuous bond of an adolescent friendship which turns to love reveals excitement and passion but also deterioration. While the narrator's life is a metaphorical dumpster fire, the two young women set a dumpster on fire. Their pyromania and consequences of the destruction set their relationship ablaze. Through it, the narrator confronts "you" – her friend turned lover – and questions the path of their friendship which leads to love and then to destruction. The evolution of their relationship brings to light myriad variables that influence the trajectory of their relationship altogether. It begs the question, is a relationship ever too far gone to make amends?



From beginning to end, Woodfolk discloses the depths of emotions and vulnerabilities of two young, black, gay women whose "lives are on fire and no one f--king cares" (p. 54). They are students with "potential" but are viewed as "too different. And no one likes different" (p. 50). Difficult choices and circumstances consume the characters and readers alike. Reminiscent of an awakening, the narrative evokes catharsis with the realization that sometimes

people, "are wrong, so wrong. Wrong for each other, and most of the time wrong about each other" (p. 262). It is this revelation that offers a sense of acceptance and understanding of a partnership gone awry.

If readers seek an action-packed YA novel, this is not the book to read. A character driven novel, *Nothing Burns as Bright as You*, forefronts difficulties and delinquency that profoundly impact the narrator's formative years and her future. Woodfolk's vivid descriptions immerse readers into a passionate, yet troubled, relationship where intensity and destruction tug at the heartstrings.

Woodfolk realistically illuminates social constructs and conventions about love as well as harassment of females. For the narrator, these experiences occur at thirteen as she spends a day at the beach with her family. While there, she notices a girl on the beach and "the tiny flowers on her swimsuit" (p. 41). She recognizes that it "meant something: about what [she] liked, about who [she] might love someday" (p. 42). Too, she understands that her feelings are unconventional and contemplates what "people might think, how it might change everything" (p. 42). This revelation highlights the need for acceptance, even in – especially in – a world where difference is frowned upon.

Too, the notions of vulnerability and naivety are exposed. Her thoughts are interrupted by a man who lures her into the water on the pretense that his own child, a toddler, is learning to swim. Once they are in the ocean, he tells her the toddler has disappeared. At that frantic moment, she suspects "something sinister" and makes a lifesaving but risky decision to escape and swims far past the "ropes and buoys" (p. 47). She nearly drowns but is rescued at the last minute by her father. Although her family is grateful for her rescue, she is berated by her own father who chastises, "What the hell were you doing?" (p. 47). To that, she acquiesces, "I didn't need to be rescued" (p. 47). The sentiment is not lost on readers as she asserts, we live "in a world that always makes things that aren't your fault your fault" (p. 48). A powerful testament to the prevalence and impact of victim-blaming.

Contradictions run throughout the novel, and the most evident contrasts are between the two women themselves. The narrator refers to herself as "reckless and oddly sweet and gentle and possessive" while her partner is "moody and bizarrely kind and gorgeous and intense" (p. 68). Danger and safety. Fear and excitement. Together and apart. Fire and water. The tensions bring forth the imminent demise of their relationship. While fire is the metaphor that holds the narrative together, it is also fire that leads to the ruinous ash heap of their relationship. The narrator even refers to their relationship as a "novel length word problem" (p. 227) where she is "afraid to stay, but more afraid to go" (p. 224). These two young women navigate their own passions and perils where juvenile delinquency and "violence delights" (p. 210). Destruction alters their lives forever. Caught up in fear and desperation, the narrator protests, "F--k it; F--k everything; F--k the whole world" as she contemplates setting alight a series of fires (p. 233). Just as a fire can be contained or blown out of control, the characters confront the dumpster fires in their lives through decisions that affect them long after the fires are out.

The first chapter is a prelude to the contentiousness of relationship as "Opposites" sets up a series of contrasts between their personalities. The narrator reveals the crux of their fraught relationship as she compares the two of them to "Fire and water. Flames and frost. Hot and cold, burning and freezing. Opposites" (p. 6). Like a fire, their relationship ignites, burns wildly, and is snuffed out. To rekindle desires would be to set the fire alight again, but will the fire burn again, and will the two women succumb to the backdraft?

Woodfolk's syntactical precision and word choices mesmerize and sustain the reader, while the unraveling of events moves the nonlinear story forward. In a recent interview, Woodfolk (Stone, 2020) provides three key take-aways from *Nothing Burns as Bright as You*: for readers. First, nothing is wrong with you. Second, there is someone out there who will love you unconditionally – if not now, later. And third, you are worth fighting for. These are life lessons driven home through poignant thoughts and feelings of a candid narrator.

Fire is a metaphor for the relationship between the narrator and her partner. The narrator professes, "You set me on fire while I sent something else up in flames, and the only thing

that will put me out now is you” (p. 19). Just as igniting a fire requires a heat source, so does a relationship. It is the unpredictability of the fire and relationship which keeps readers tuned in and waiting to see if a renewal will bellow life into the old flame.

### Book 2: Year on Fire

*Year on Fire* by Julie Buxbaum explores the intricacies of family, friendship, love, identity, and the truths or lies people tell to protect themselves and others. Told from alternating perspectives of four teens in Los Angeles - Immie, Arch, Paige, and Rohan - the primary plot centers on a case of arson when a fire is set in a restroom at their high school. The fire mystifies students, and speculations about the arsonist run rampant. With an arsonist on the loose, the case heats up through first-person accounts of the four friends. Immie, Arch, Paige, and Rohan provide commentary on the school fire and reveal their own private fires. Through these personal narratives, their innermost insecurities, vulnerabilities, and perceptions of their lived experiences are laid bare as revelations about the arson are exposed. The suspense, diverse characters, and multiple plot lines engage readers from the first to the last page.



Each teen contends with a myriad of internal and external conflicts, which run the gamut from appearance, physical and emotional attraction, neglect, domestic violence, self-worth, academic performance, and societal expectations. Twins, Immie and Arch Gibson, struggle with a father who is narrowminded and volatile while their mother tries to maintain a sense of normalcy. Immie and Arch contemplate their own feelings about their respective romantic interests against a backdrop where family and societal norms take an emotional toll. Paige lives a financially privileged life, but she is largely left on her own to navigate nearly every aspect of her teenage life, including romantic interests, high school friendships, and day to day decision-making. Rohan, a transfer student from the United Kingdom (UK), is caught between his parents' contentious divorce as he navigates a move to the United States that he did not choose. Rohan faces his father's marital infidelity, his mother's independent life, and separation from Kaia – his best friend and former girlfriend in the UK – all while dealing with the demands of academics and friendships in a new high school.

Buxbaum depicts difficulties between adolescence and adulthood through authentic characters and realistic events; consequently, the characters' struggles resonate with readers.

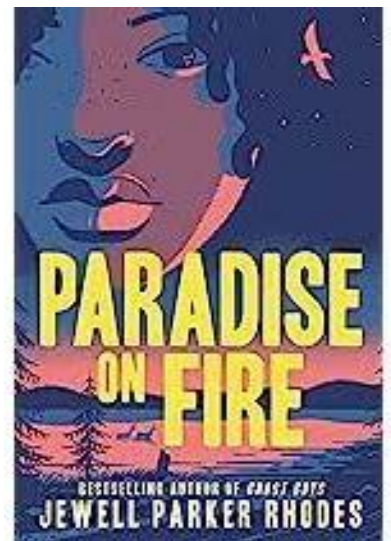
*Year on Fire* provides a clear reminder of the complexities of growing up and the tensions which persist into adulthood. Buxbaum boldly explores queer and straight love, marital and parental relationships including domestic violence and infidelity, and nuances of friendships and siblingship. Buxbaum's exploration of human experiences illustrates both boundaries and bonds of relationships. Too, Buxbaum illustrates that actions have lasting consequences and emotions are very much a part of the human psyche. The heartfelt novel affords readers with opportunities to understand teenage experiences, dilemmas, and choices. For adolescent and adult readers alike, this recommended novel serves as a timely reminder of the need for acceptance, compassion, and understanding through life's challenges.

### Book 3: Paradise on Fire

Jewell Parker Rhodes's *Paradise on Fire* takes readers on a teenager's journey across the United States to a California wilderness camp. It follows Addy as she travels solo for the first time from her and her grandmother's New York home. Although it is Addy's grandmother, Bibi, who decides to send Addy to the camp, Addy makes the best of it as she takes both a geographic and emotional journey to overcome the trauma of her parents' untimely deaths.

On a plane with a group of unfamiliar teens from the east coast, Addy and the others are destined for Wilderness Adventures located outside of Los Angeles. Referred to as "Paradise Ranch," Addy wonders how a remote camp could, in any way, be paradise. From the first page, Rhodes establishes themes of transition, maturation, trauma, survival, and loss. Just as Addy has been tested as a child when her parents died as a result of a fire, Addy's spirit is once again tested when faced with a California forest fire. The fire causes a chain of events in which she and her fellow campers find themselves in grave danger. Defenseless, the only way for the campers to survive is to escape, but where do they go? Without knowing the lay of the land, how will the teens escape? With an aptitude for spatial awareness and geography, Addy's cartography skills have the potential to save lives, but the emotional toll is great, and the consequences are lasting.

As the fire burns acres of land, the campers seek escape routes, but no one – not even the camp counselors – knows the lay of the land better than Addy. Seeing, feeling, and tasting the fire bring back latent memories of her parents, yet her survival depends on calculated measures to find a viable escape route. Addy wrestles with the past and the present. Caught in a dire situation, it is her grandmother's advice that keeps her



going as she recollects, “Bibi always told me I could fly” (p. 98). Will it be enough to keep her from clouded judgement and propel her into action to save her own life? Will her campmates succumb to the suffocating smoke or escape the rolling flames? In addition to the obvious man-vs-nature conflict, the internal battle and remembrance of deadly fire rattles Addy. The heat, smoke, and fastmoving flames are no match for anyone much less an inexperienced group of teenager campers. It is Addy’s penchant for cartography and adroit geographic skills that have the potential to save her and the others, but in doing so she risks her own life. Without her efforts, she knows her campmates will perish. The flames, advice of her grandmother, bonds to her new campmates, and the haunting memories of her parents’ deaths do not escape her. With her past experiences and knowledge, she confronts the all too familiar flames.

It is through Addy’s journey from the Bronx to LA – placed alone for hours on a plane, thrust into a van, and plopped into Paradise Ranch – that readers vicariously experience leaving home, traveling, making friends, contemplating the past, and battling for a brighter future. Through Addy’s journey of firsts, she sees the world from fresh eyes – housing unlike any in the Bronx where “thirty single-story homes, mostly painted white” and “mobile homes” coexisted (p. 15). Along the way, Addy skeptically views forests of trees from the van window like “a horror movie” where “people have vanished” (p. 19). She experiences night air that “[smells] of green, cedar, and smoke” (p. 23). And later, she finds herself up against the choking cinder and smoke that claimed the lives of her parents and consumed her own life. Could she, would she, have the strength, endurance, and fortitude to survive it? In doing so, would she be able to save others?

Rhodes depicts Addy’s childhood trauma and the incredible strength of spirit it takes to reconcile the past, deal with the present, and hope for a promising future. A straightforward plot, realistic character development, rich descriptions, and authentic dialogue engage readers from beginning to end. Rhodes taps into her own appreciation of the natural environment as a backdrop for the novel. She captures the importance of “environmental stewardship” while recognizing the significance of human impacts on the natural world (Macchia, 2021). Rhodes presents National Parks as opportunities for adolescents to better understand the natural world, but notes that students of color infrequently access National Parks. Gathered from a 2020 survey, Rhodes’ afterward in *Paradise on Fire* indicates “minority visitation [to National Parks] is low: less than 2 percent of African American, 5 percent Asian American, and 5 percent Hispanic American” populations (p. 246). As Rhodes offers understandings about environmental wonders, she affords readers with ideas for exploration and learning in National Parks. In this way, adolescents are exposed to opportunities that exist for little or no costs across the United States.

### Conclusion

When I first began teaching several decades ago, the body of YAL was not nearly as robust, diverse, or abundant as it is today; yet, it has also never been so publicly scrutinized,

criticized, contested, and banned (Natanson, 2021). Today, perhaps more than ever, the impetus to engage students in the act of reading is imperative. To kindle a desire to read, adolescents need opportunities to access a wide variety of texts that reflect their lives, demonstrate relevancy, and pique their interests.

Fisher and Frey (2018) assert:

to increase reading volume, teachers have to expand the amount of choice students have in what they read. Students who have opportunities to choose their own books develop elaborate strategies for selecting books and are more likely to become intrinsically motivated readers (p. 91).

It is simply not enough to offer works from the cannon alone. Although the classics have a special place in my heart as an English teacher and avid reader, today’s adolescent readers need more...more supports such as modeling, resources, choices, and time for reading.

Throughout my career I have prioritized reading, whether it was first grade, high school special education, secondary English, or today with pre-service teachers. I enjoy discussions with my students where we talk about authenticity, credibility, readability, representation, cultural consciousness, interest, engagement, and self-selected books. Ultimately, I want pre-service teachers to kindle a love of reading with their students and spark a desire to read beyond the classrooms. In this way, reading allows students opportunities of self-discovery. Ivey and Johnston (2013) suggest “that while constructing meaning from text, students [also use] text to construct meaning in their lives” (p. 270). These opportunities support students to become lifelong readers, writers, thinkers, and learners.

Teachers play a critical role in enriching students’ reading experiences. Time to read and opportunities to choose books are important factors to kindle students’ desire to read. Morgan and Wagner (2013) assert that book selections allow students to “[rediscover] reading by choosing good books” and in turn “[invigorates] their passion for reading” (p. 666 & 659).

*Nothing Burns as Bright as You*, *Paradise on Fire*, and *Year on Fire* abound with rich language, well-developed characters, realistic depictions of adolescents’ life challenges, and candid explorations of prevalent social issues. As the YAL market expands with genres, subject matter, literary forms, and representations of the diverse world in which we live, readers are presented with opportunities to recognize, understand, and act upon the very real issues presented. *Nothing Burns as Bright as You*, *Paradise on Fire*, and *Year on Fire* offer diverse perspectives, lifestyles, identities, understandings that are larger than ourselves.

Appealing to a wide audience, *Nothing Burns as Bright as You*, *Paradise on Fire*, and *Year on Fire* provide readers with understandings about friendship, love, survival, loss, reconciliation, redemption, and hope.

*Nothing Burns as Bright as You*, *Paradise on Fire*, and *Year on Fire* each offer a slice of what contemporary YAL looks like. As I emphasize with preservice teachers, it is essential to:

- Know what is happening in the YAL market and know what is happening with students
- Explore YAL authors and genres
- Evaluate the strengths, challenges, and opportunities around banned and challenged YAL
- Discuss YAL with colleagues, friends, and students.
- Advocate for a wide variety of YAL in libraries and classrooms
- Promote a culture of reading
- And, read lots of YAL including these three titles!

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### About the Author



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Recommended Citation (APA 7th ed.)

Rasheed, M. (2023). Kindling a desire to read: A review of three young adult novels. *South Carolina Association for Middle Level Education Journal*, 109–113.

This article is open access by the South Carolina Association for Middle Level Education (SCAMLE). It has undergone a double-blind peer review process and was accepted for inclusion in the SCAMLE Journal.

Published online: March 2023

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