

## **You Are What You Read: Young Adult Literacy and Identity in Rural America**

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## **You Are What You Read: Young Adult Literacy and Identity in Rural**

### **America**

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this empirical research study is to understand the reading habits and preferences of rural U.S. high school students as well as if and how they see their current and future lives depicted in media marketed to young adults. Using an inductive approach, we surveyed tenth-grade students in rural counties in one southeastern American state about their reading interests and habits and their self-perceptions and aspirations. This study provides insights into a large but invisible subculture of youth in the United States. The practical implications of this research include an increased understanding of rural teens' relationship with identity and media that can be used by the school and library communities as they try to improve the offerings—in terms of collections, programming, and services—that they provide for teen audiences.

### **Introduction**

A recent research brief published by the Institute of Museum and Library Services, an agency of the U.S. government, identified that small and rural libraries constitute the majority (80%) of public library systems in the United States.<sup>1</sup> Considering this significant figure, there is a surprising dearth of research about small and rural libraries in America. This scarcity of research on one facet of rural American life is indicative of a larger trend, that of America's focus on larger, urban areas, which are perceived as having more diverse and progressive economic and

lifestyle opportunities. Indeed, the U.S. Census Bureau’s definition of “rural” is dependent on what it is not: urban. The geographic designation of “rural” is defined as that which “encompasses all population, housing, and territory not included within an urban area.”<sup>2</sup>

Jacqueline Edmonson aptly describes America’s perception of rural life today by naming it the “rural American ghetto.”<sup>3</sup>

Having had professional experience working with young adults in libraries, we were intrigued by the notion that so much is unknown about the communities served by the largest type of public library system in the United States. Similarly, as Elizabeth Birr Moje noted in writing about adolescents and their technology use, research about this topic is a reflection of the participants most often studied—middle- and upper-class teens who have ready access to technology. Essentially, “who gets studied and in what numbers matters a great deal to what we know about who young people are as readers.”<sup>4</sup> Particularly, we wondered if and how rural young adults in America saw themselves reflected in reading materials marketed to their age group. These reading materials could be digital or paper, visual or textual, fiction or nonfiction.

As researchers, we live and work in the state of North Carolina, which the United States Census Bureau (USCB) classifies as being “more rural than U.S. average” with 45% of the state’s population residing in rural areas. Nationally, North Carolina ranks twenty-first in having the most rural population of the fifty states.<sup>5</sup> Eighty-five of the state’s one hundred counties are classified by the USCB as being rural.<sup>6</sup> Approximately 36% of public libraries in the state of North Carolina are classified as rural libraries.<sup>7</sup> Given the significant population of rural communities in the state of North Carolina, we wondered if and how North Carolina teens are seeing reflections of their current and possible lives in the media with which they engage.

Our research was theoretically grounded in Louise Rosenblatt's theory of individual reading as a product of transaction.<sup>8</sup> Rosenblatt challenges the traditional notion of the reader-text relationship, where the reader and the text are both viewed as fixed subjects that interact with each other. Rather, Rosenblatt suggests that each individual comes to each text with a particular frame of reference, or context. She explains:

The reader approaches the text with a certain purpose, certain expectations or hypotheses that guide his choices from the residue of past experience. Meaning emerges as the reader carries on a give-and-take with the signs on the page. As the text unrolls before the reader's eyes, the meaning made of the early words influences what comes to mind and is selected for the succeeding signs. But if these do not fit in with the meaning developed thus far, the reader may revise it to assimilate the new words or may start all over again with different expectations. . . . [M]uch of this goes on subconsciously, but the two-way, reciprocal relation explains why meaning is not "in" the text or "in" the reader. Both reader and text are essential to the transaction process of meaning making.<sup>9</sup>

To Rosenblatt, rural young adults come to the texts they read with a frame of reference influenced by their sociocultural experiences to create a recursive reading at a particular time and place. As Paul W. Richardson and Jacquelynne S. Eccles note, by engaging in literacy practices, "we directly and vicariously contemplate who we are at any one point in time, who we might hope to be in the future, who we fear being, and who we expect to be."<sup>10</sup>

### *Reading and Youth Identity*

Several researchers have described various ways in which teens create, imagine, and play with identities through the readings that they choose.<sup>11</sup> Studies have also shown that teens enjoy reading about characters like themselves and situations similar to their own.<sup>12</sup>

Research on adolescents and their reading practices has shown that the amount of

voluntary reading done by teens decreases with age and that females generally read more often than males.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, many studies report that teens' voluntary reading choices are influenced by their social connections, a finding that may suggest the extent to which teens wish to craft their current social identity.<sup>14</sup> Several researchers who have examined the material that adolescents choose to read have found overwhelming preferences for magazines and web content, potentially indicative of the appeal that visual representations of information have for teens.<sup>15</sup>

Although there is much consensus about what and how adolescents read, there is no overwhelming agreement as to where teens get their reading materials. Reports suggest that teens get their voluntary reading materials from home or chain bookstores<sup>16</sup> and from the school library, public library, and classroom.<sup>17</sup>

### *Rural Teens and Identity*

Recent studies suggest that there is no single rural youth identity to be discovered and described, but instead many possibilities; in fact, the identity of each individual rural teen is dynamic, constantly evolving, and contingent upon a host of factors.<sup>18</sup> One consistency in many of the rural identities constructed by the teens surveyed and interviewed here is a recognition of both the much-lauded benefits of rural living—including connection to the natural world and tightly knit communities—and the negative aspects of rural teen life, such as a lack of engaging activities, of appropriate spaces to gather with peers, and of transportation and necessary services.<sup>19</sup> Notable to our research is Howard's finding that rural teens were more likely to identify themselves as non-readers<sup>20</sup> compared to their urban counterparts.<sup>20</sup>

### *Rural Teens and Reading*

Few studies have been conducted about rural reading and literacy practices in North America. Of these, research of rural readers has challenged the prevailing notion that teens do not read, showing that when the definition of reading is broadened beyond the novel, a surprising number of teens can be counted as regular readers. Further, while teens may reject or resent reading material assigned for school projects, they respond much more positively to materials they have a personal interest in and have selected themselves.<sup>21</sup> Robin Boltz's study of rural male readers identified several other factors that positively influenced young men's reading: having a male role model who reads, feeling confident in their reading skills, and the freedom to read material in digital format.<sup>22</sup>

Paulette M. Rothbauer, in a study of older Canadian teens from rural areas, reported that though the teens enjoyed reading and read daily, there was no vital reading culture to connect with in their community.<sup>23</sup> Teens lacked a place to go to select books—most just happened upon their reading material in their homes or on the Internet—and a community of readers to share recommendations and ideas. This situation resulted in what Rothbauer termed the “nonactive teen reader” and a phenomenon she called the “placelessness of reading.”<sup>24</sup> In a subsequent piece, Rothbauer found that these teens described the role of reading in their lives in four different ways: autonomy and independence; habit and comfort; experience (including learning about possibilities for themselves); and knowledge.<sup>25</sup>

Rothbauer's findings suggest that teens seem to be acquiring their reading material by “accident,” simply picking up whatever happens to be handy at home.<sup>26</sup> Many of them live in communities that do not prioritize literacy, reading, and education. The offerings in the school and public libraries are slim and unappealing, making teens feel that they have no one who can help them seek out material that they might find appealing and useful. In fact, many of the teens

who enjoy reading keep this habit private, afraid of the social repercussions of being identified as a reader.

Based on the findings of these studies, the following questions were developed to guide our research:

1. What are the reading habits and preferences of rural high school students?
2. What issues do rural teens want to read about and in what formats?
3. Do rural teens consider themselves to belong to the culture of youth represented in the books that they choose to read, and how does their reading help to shape their ideas of their possible future selves?

## **Research Design**

The design of our study was rooted in the belief that talking directly to youth about what they think and want would provide us with reliable and trustworthy results. Rather than relying on assumptions about what media is popular and using library circulation data to determine what teens are reading, we must engage in discussion with young adults to understand the intricacies of this issue.

Data collection for this study took the form of a twenty-question multiple-choice/open-ended question survey, modeled on a reading interest inventory.<sup>27</sup> We took an inductive approach to the use of this survey as a data-collection instrument, understanding that the open-ended question format would provide us with the opportunity to identify themes prevalent throughout our participants' responses. This survey was distributed in electronic form to rural North Carolina public schools that served students ages 14–18, the average ages of high school students in the United States, grades 9–12. We acknowledged that, with the state's geographic

diversity, there are probably more rural experiences than one; therefore, we sought to administer the survey to at least one rural high school in each of the three geographic regions of North Carolina: the mountains, the piedmont, and the coastal plains. Using a statewide school librarian Listserv, we asked for help from school librarians to assist us in administering this survey. Once school librarians responded to our call, we analyzed the population and geographic orientation of the school that librarian served. We compared this information with the U.S. Census's definition of "urbanized areas" and "urban clusters," and were able to determine if each individual school fit its definition of "rural." We did not limit the number of schools we would include in the sample; however, the number of schools included was dependent on the number of school librarians who volunteered to assist us and whether or not they worked at a school in a rural area. Ultimately, four school librarians from four schools agreed to assist in the collection of this data. From those schools, 118 students participated in this study.

The school librarian at each high school was asked to distribute the survey to tenth-grade students; this age group was chosen as our focus in part to help us formulate questions to ask future focus groups of teens that would consist of broader age ranges, with both younger and older participants. Targeting tenth-grade students also allowed for a more manageable collection of data. The school librarians each worked with sophomore English teachers, who allowed classes of tenth-grade students to take the survey on computers during the school day.

Upon receipt of the completed surveys, we performed a basic statistical analysis of the multiple-choice question responses; we individually sorted the open-ended question responses into categories that we later compared, refined, and tested. This method allowed us to draw out patterns and trends in the data.

## **Results**

Four high school librarians agreed to help distribute the survey to their school’s sophomore students. Our participants were 118 young men and women who were between the ages of 15–17 (table 1). From the survey data, we found that these participants preferred to engage with magazines, books, and online content as their favorite formats for reading (table 2) and accessed most of their reading material from home (table 3). Examples of “other” places they accessed reading material included Walmart, thrift stores, and friends.

**Table 1:** Gender and age distribution of respondents

	Percentage of All (N = 118)	Percentage of Female (N = 67)	Percentage of Male (N = 51)
15-year-olds	33	37	27
16-year-olds	60	57	65
17-year-olds	7	6	8

**Table 2:** What types of formats do you like to read? (Multiple items may be chosen.)

	Percentage of All (N = 118)	Percentage of Female (N = 67)	Percentage of Male (N = 51)
Books	64	75	49
Magazines	56	60	51
Comics or graphic novels	25	18	33
Online content	44	45	43
Newspapers	14	18	10
Prefer not to answer	3	1	6
Other	9	9	10

**Table 3:** Where do you get or access your reading material? (Multiple items may be chosen.)

	Percentage of All (N = 118)	Percentage of Female (N = 67)	Percentage of Male (N = 51)
Home	74	79	67
School library	44	51	35
Public library	31	35	22
Bookstore (physical or online)	40	55	20
Prefer not to answer	3	0	6
Other	11	12	10

The participants in total most enjoyed reading adventure and humorous stories, but there was a significant difference between the females' and males' preferences of romance (60% vs. 8%) and mystery/detective stories (54% vs. 24%) (table 4). Other genres that the participants mentioned reading were sports, general fiction, news, and war. When asked to list the subjects and issues they liked to read about, the participants indicated many of the genres that they had chosen in the previous question, but many added biography, history, military history, science, mythology, video games, celebrities, current events, fan fiction, realistic fiction, outdoor, TV shows, and teens. In correlation with the results of a previous question, the participants indicated that they mostly read books (46%), magazines (28%), and online content (37%) on a regular basis (table 5). Several also indicated that they read text messages. The highest percentage (36%) of the participants indicated that they read for enjoyment fewer than thirty minutes a week, with the next highest (29%) reading thirty minutes to an hour each week (table 6).

**Table 4:** What genres do you enjoy reading? (Multiple items may be chosen.)

	Percentage of All (N = 118)	Percentage of Female (N = 67)	Percentage of Male (N = 51)
Adventure	56	49	65
Horror	47	49	43
Fantasy	39	42	33
Science fiction	32	21	47
Romance	37	60	8
Humor	46	46	45
Historical fiction	21	21	22
Mystery/detective fiction	41	54	24
True crime	19	25	10
Nonfiction	25	30	18
Short story collections	13	13	12
Poetry collections	15	24	4
Prefer not to answer	2	0	4
Other	11	7	16

**Table 5:** Which of the following do you read on a regular basis? (Multiple items may be chosen.)

	Percentage of All (N = 118)	Percentage of Female (N = 67)	Percentage of Male (N = 51)
Books	46	54	35
Magazines	28	31	24
Comics or graphic novels	9	10	8
Online content	37	42	31
Newspapers	10	13	6
Prefer not to answer	6	1	12
Other	11	12	10

**Table 6:** How much time do you spend reading for enjoyment (not school-assigned reading) in a typical week?

	Percentage of All (N = 118)	Percentage of Female (N = 67)	Percentage of Male (N = 51)
Fewer than 30 minutes	36	33	35
30 minutes to an hour	29	31	29
1 to 2 hours	15	15	16
2 to 4 hours	4	3	6
4 or more hours	12	18	4
Prefer not to answer	4	0	10

As a follow-up question, we asked the participants why they spent as much or as little time reading as they indicated. Of those who spent little time reading, their responses suggested that they didn't enjoy reading or found it boring, or that they chose to do other things instead. Those who spent more time reading indicated that they did so because they thought reading was fun, or they were bored and had nothing else to do. We also asked when and where the participants read for fun; few participants answered the "when" part of this question, but those who did indicated that they read any time they could or late at night. As for the "where" portion of this question, most participants noted that they read at home.

When asked what they wanted to do after high school, many of the respondents indicated more than one choice. The participants' responses included "pursue post-secondary education" (63%); "pursue a specific career" (60%); and "military/National Guard" (12%). Examples of the

careers that the students wanted to pursue included truck driver/mechanic, electrical engineer, teacher, game designer/tester, and traveling nurse. To broaden their thinking, we next asked the participants what they thought their life would be like in five years, and again many of the respondents offered more than one choice. The overwhelming response (48%) was “pursuing a post-secondary education,” followed by “pursuing a career/profession of choice” (23%) and “have a job” (17%). We differentiated the notion of “career” and “job” by the participants’ choice of words. For example, many participants (23%) indicated that they wanted to be pursuing their career and/or mentioned their desired career by name, such as forensic scientist, professional skateboarder, or Navy SEAL.

We next asked participants if any of the items that they read included characters, fictional or real, who are like them or people they know. Over half of the participants (58%) indicated “yes” (table 7). When asked to give specific examples of these characters, the participants mentioned characters from books, such as Katniss Everdeen and Peeta Mellark from the Hunger Games trilogy and Jake from the Animorphs series. Participants also mentioned books such as *A Walk to Remember*, the Harry Potter series, the Mortal Instruments series, and the Bleach series. Some participants gave specific examples of the ways in which characters they read were like themselves or people they know, such as the following:

“Their attitudes, what their hobbies are, etc.”

“They have gone through hard times, depression, other mental illnesses.”

“My sister is very opinionated and like [*sic*] to make it know [*sic*] what she thinks. In many of the books I read the characters are like that.”

In response to this same question, participants also described types of people or figures whom they read about that they felt were like them or people they knew, such as mountain bikers, celebrities, and people they read about in the newspaper.

**Table 7:** Do any of the items that you read include characters (fictional or real) that are like you or people you know?

	Percentage of All (N = 118)	Percentage of Female (N = 67)	Percentage of Male (N = 51)
Yes	58	64	51
No	34	30	39
Prefer not to answer	8	6	10

Similarly, we asked participants if any of the items they read included characters, fictional or real, that were similar to whom they wanted to be one day. By a slim majority (49%), their response as an overlarge group was “yes” (table 8); however, many more females (60%) than males (35%) identified with characters and made connections to their future selves. When asked for specific examples of these characters, only 39% of the respondents provided an answer. The majority (58%) of those responding participants described the disposition or personality traits of characters that they wanted to emulate, such as “high expectations and morals,” “strong heroines,” and “people who overcome serious issues and live happily.” Many of the responding participants (43%) also gave examples of career or professional goals they aspired to: “well educated and making lots of money”; “scientists and such”; and “I read a lot about trucks, different engines, and things about cars which is what I would like to do.”

**Table 8:** Do any of the items that you read include characters (fictional or real) that are similar to whom you would like to be one day?

	Percentage of All (N = 118)	Percentage of Female (N = 67)	Percentage of Male (N = 51)
Yes	49	60	35
No	45	36	57
Prefer not to answer	6	4	8

We next asked our participants if any of the items they read included situations that they, their friends, or their family might realistically find themselves in today. Exactly half (50%) of the respondents indicated that they do read about these types of situations (table 9). When asked to give specific examples of these situations, the participants described family issues such as taking care of an elderly relative, death, and dealing with a brother who took drugs. They also mentioned non-familial relationships and the conflict associated with them, including breakups with romantic interests, bullying, and helping friends deal with poverty.

**Table 9:** Do any of the items that you read include situations that you, your friends, or your family might realistically find yourselves in today?

	Percentage of All (N = 118)	Percentage of Female (N = 67)	Percentage of Male (N = 51)
Yes	50	57	41
No	40	36	45
Prefer not to answer	10	7	14

Prompting our participants to look toward their future, we asked them if any of the items they read gave them ideas or inspiration for what their future might hold. The majority (54%) of respondents indicated “yes” (table 10). When asked for specific examples, participants again described career or professional goals to which they aspired:

“Doing art as a profession, therapy, etc.”

“Being a high ranked military leader.”

“When Cassie’s parents are scientists or vets that [*sic*] is why I want to be one[;] also because I love animals.”

Participants also noted examples of self-discovery/character/fulfillment, including the following:

“Make me want to be a better person.”

“Finding out things you didn’t know about yourself.”

“Just reading the things that the people been [*sic*] through and being able to be successful gives me hope.”

Respondents made connections to their education as well:

“Going to college.”

“In some books I read about how people are so educated and that motivates me to be more educated.”

“For example I might not be going to college [because] money and not having papers.”

**Table 10:** Do any of the items that you read give you ideas or inspiration for what your future might hold?

	Percentage of All (N = 118)	Percentage of Female (N = 67)	Percentage of Male (N = 51)
Yes	54	60	47
No	37	33	41
Prefer not to answer	9	7	12

In order to better understand their interests and how those interests were reflective of those held by characters in contemporary young adult fiction, we asked the participants what they did in their free time. The majority of the responses (37%) indicated some sort of physical or outdoor activity, such as participating in sports, hunting, working out, and playing with pets. The next most shared interest among the participants was “reading,” which was listed by 33% of the 118 participants surveyed, a finding that does not mirror the larger group’s response to our earlier question about time spent reading each week. After having asked several questions related to reading, this response was likely artificially high due to reactivity. Many (32%) of the participants also mentioned that they engaged with people and communities in their free time, by way of spending time/talking with family, friends, and/or romantic interests; going to church; and volunteering.

Our last question to the participants asked, “If you were meeting someone for the first time, what would you tell them about yourself and your life?” We asked this question to better understand how their identity did or did not reflect the youth culture represented in young adult fiction. The majority of responses indicated that the participants would tell someone about their hobbies or interests such as sports, music, technology, and being outdoors. Along with basic information such as their name, age, and family structure, respondents also said that they would share their personality traits, such as being shy, expressive, weird, or honest. Several participants also described themselves in relation to others; for example, they would tell people upon meeting about their friends and family, their relationship with God, whether they were or were not a people person, and their various stages of comfort based on familiarity. Finally, several respondents noted that they would tell someone about their place or “rurality” upon meeting; we used both the terms “place” and “rurality” in tandem because we could not be certain if the participants were referring to geographical location or referring to a culture based on living in a rural area. Examples of these responses included the following:

“I am country and live on a farm.”

“I’m just about as country as a country girl comes.”

“I’m from a county that only has one stop light.”

“I’m from Cleveland, OH.”

“I would tell them that I love where I live and I love how nice and kind people are to everyone. It means a lot to have some stranger basically come up and tell you to have a good day.”

“I don’t want to stay in the town that I grew up in because I think that there is nothing for me here. That being said, I will always love where I grew up.”

The way in which the participants used the term “country” to describe themselves led us to understand that this term meant something more than their geographic designation; perhaps it suggests a lifestyle that someone from a rural area might choose to live.

## Discussion and Conclusions

We acknowledge that our focus on tenth-graders is a limitation of this study and that the results of this research speak mainly to the tenth-grade population we surveyed, and may or may not be generalizable to the broader “teen” demographic. Overall, our analysis of the data suggests that teens do consider themselves as belonging to the youth culture represented in materials currently marketed to their age level. Exactly half (50%) of the respondents admitted to seeing themselves in the characters and situations that they read about, and many provided specific examples from young adult materials that illustrate this. The situations that they have read about with which they identified included topics found in literature for teens today, such as family issues and conflicts within relationships. Interestingly, two of the examples that teens provided most often, *The Hunger Games* and Nicholas Sparks’s books, have connections to North Carolina in that *The Hunger Games* movies are filmed in the rural mountainous region of the state and Sparks’s books are most often set in small towns in North Carolina. It is important to note that while the majority of the participants indicated that they do see themselves in the materials they read, this was not a strong consensus; many of the teens we surveyed, especially male teens, did not see themselves in what they read.

### *Gender Differences in Conceptualizing Self and Future*

Five of the survey questions asked students to consider whether they see themselves, people they know, and possibilities for the future in the materials they read. In general, females tended to see

these types of connections more than males. A majority of young women saw themselves or people they knew in their reading (64%), saw characters that resembled the people they'd like to be in the future (60%), recognized familiar situations (57%), and gained inspiration for the future from their reading choices (60%). On the other hand, fewer young men saw themselves or people they knew in their reading (59%), saw characters that resembled the people they'd like to be in the future (35%), recognized familiar situations (41%), and gained inspiration for the future (47%).

The students' responses when prompted to give examples might help to explain the large disparity in male and female answers to the question of whether or not they saw characters they would like to be in the future in their reading material. These responses suggest that males interpreted this question to fundamentally concern a future profession or career. Nine of the 10 males who offer specific examples referenced a character in the profession that he plans to pursue; the tenth referenced a leisure activity he is passionate about. By contrast, just 6 of the 30 responses written by females discuss or name a profession. Other responses deal with character—one respondent, for example, admired characters who are “strong, outspoken and [fight] for what they love and believe in,” and others mentioned some version of “finding true love.”

In a related finding, when asked what they want to do after high school, most male respondents (50 of 51) and most female respondents (63 of 67) answered by naming a specific career or profession or by making a more general statement about going to college; however, when asked the broader question “What do you think your life will be like in five years?,” the responses begin to diverge along gender lines. Male respondents tended to describe one element of life only, either school or work: 25% of the responses focused exclusively on college, while

23% mentioned only a job or career. Only 10%, (5 respondents) offered a multidimensional response, referencing both school and work (3) or school and/or work in combination with relationships or family status (2). In contrast, female respondents seemed naturally to consider more than one aspect of life when asked this same question. While 33% of responses focused solely on college and 10% focused on work or career, 25% (17) blended multiple elements, such as school, work, and/or a place to live (10) or school/work with relationships or family status (7). Both sets of data also included unsure/uncertain responses and a few that focused on general success, money, or providing descriptive adjectives such as “amazing,” “cool,” and “awesome.” These results suggest that while both female and male teens prioritize education and career when conceptualizing their futures, females are more likely to consider multiple factors, including money, living arrangements, and relationships, as well as the interplay among these elements, when describing their future lives and when looking for connections between themselves and the characters they encounter in their reading material.

### *Rurality and Cultures of Reading*

When asked about which format they like to read and do read most often, the most popular answer (46%) was “books.” This finding was particularly intriguing, given that much of the current dialogue about teens and reading focuses on elements of new media as a way to better engage youth in reading. These teens may actually prefer reading traditional books, or they may have associated the act of reading with reading a book, something that they undoubtedly encounter in their school work in some fashion every day. Alternately, these participants may not have access to high-speed Internet services, which would make accessing reading materials on electronic devices more difficult.

The participants' reading and personal leisure time preferences reflected the variety of young adult materials on the market in the United States today. The largest percentage (36%) of these participants indicated that they read less than 30 minutes per week and that this reading was done at home. Additionally, home was the place that these teens accessed their reading materials. These findings evoke those of Rothbauer's,<sup>28</sup> in that rural teens may have a difficult time finding suggestions for reading and tend to stumble upon materials at home. Also, the overwhelming participant response that students read for small amounts of time at home is suggestive of Rothbauer's assertion that some communities in rural areas are not supportive of the practice of reading and, because of this, some teens keep their reading practices private. The participants' practice of reading the majority of the time at home may also suggest that there are not many places to go to read or that those places do exist but would require transportation, money, and time to travel to there.

From their responses, the reading in which these teens partake does provide them, to a certain extent, with ideas of what is possible for their futures. These teens indicated that their reading provided them with ideas about future professions, education, self-discovery, personality traits, and personal fulfillment. Inherent in their responses was a sense of independence, in that they wanted to live on their own, support themselves and possibly others, and engage in relationships they chose to initiate. Additionally, most (95%) of the participants inadvertently indicated that their future plans would take them outside of their present community by attending a college or university, military training camp, or acquiring specific career training. Perhaps this represented a point of tension for those who felt that their reading did not give them ideas for possible future selves. There was a definite sense of geographic culture in how the participants

described themselves; for those who identified proudly as being “country,” there is not much reading material that portrays rural careers or staying in one’s hometown after high school.

A question that arose from this study that would be well served for future research is “How does the contemporary young adult literature canon portray rural life and spaces?” As we indicated earlier, some within this group of teens seemed to gravitate to literature that had a rural North Carolina connection. Understanding how these texts represent rural experiences would be a very important step in comprehending rural teens’ relationship with young adult literature. Another offshoot of this research that would be worth exploring further is understanding from rural teens what it means to be “country,” how they identify with that concept, and how this facet of their life does or doesn’t extend to their reading preferences and practices.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Institute of Museum and Library Services, *The State of Small and Rural Libraries in the United States*, Brief No. 5, by Deanne W. Swan, Justin Grimes, and Timothy Owens (Washington, DC: Institute of Museum and Library Services, 2013),

[http://www.imls.gov/assets/1/AssetManager/Brief2013\\_05.pdf](http://www.imls.gov/assets/1/AssetManager/Brief2013_05.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, “Urban and Rural Classification—Geography,”

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<sup>3</sup> Jacqueline Edmondson, *Prairie Town: Redefining Rural Life in the Age of Globalization* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), 23.

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