



WHAT THE EXPERTS SAY

SPOT: Realistic Fiction *Jumping Into Genre: Realistic Fiction* (developing wide reading)



How Realistic Is It?

Realistic Fiction accounts for far more books sold than any other kind of children's literature. Realism means that a story is possible, even though it didn't really happen. These stories are about growing up today and finding a place in the family, among peers, and in modern society. Many children like these stories because they feel a strong connection to the characters they read about. These characters deal with familiar real-life issues and conflicts found in ordinary families and in everyday society, and they respond to these conditions with the same feelings many of us would express if we found ourselves in similar circumstances. Well-written Realistic Fiction helps readers acquire empathy as they develop their awareness of, compassion for, and sensitivity to others' behavior while at the same time reflecting on their own.

Due to the nature of some situations described in Realistic Fiction, this kind of children's literature is surrounded by more controversy than any other genre. How much graphic detail should be included in a book for children? How explicit should an author be in his or her descriptions? Children's authors know that their books must first pass through the hands of parents, teachers, librarians, and other adults. Still, questions can remain regarding the age-appropriateness and limits of reality in children's books. As a parent, if you have concerns about a book, you may wish to read it first, in order to determine if the content is "too real" for your child. The following story elements may help you to frame your thinking as you make your decision:

- Dialogue – Nothing brings a character to life more than dialogue. However, what a character says may cause confusion or discomfort to some readers. This may include the use of regional dialect, poor grammar, insults, or sometimes the use of profanity.
- Character – Nobody is perfect. Well-rounded realistic characters have a flaw or two, just like real human beings. Their behavior may be less than ideal. This may include inappropriate behavior, disobedience, expression of negative feelings, or making poor choices.
- Family relationships – Real life families are not perfect. Family arguments, annoyances, unkind actions, divorce, abuse, and abandonment may be described.
- Endings – Many children's stories end happily ever after, but not all – especially when they are about real characters in real situations. Some realistic stories have sad endings that don't necessarily turn out how we'd like.

What is appropriate literature for one child may not be appropriate for another. Consider your child's age and maturity level when deciding if a book is appropriate for him/her. You may want to consider using the book to discuss the characters' choices with your child as they compare with your family values.

References:

- Kiefer, B. Z. (2010). Contemporary realistic fiction. In *Charlotte Huck's children's literature*, 10th ed. (pp. 388-396). New York: McGraw-Hill.
- O'Connor, B. (2010). Keeping it real: how realistic does realistic fiction for children need to be? *Language Arts*, 87(6), 465-471.