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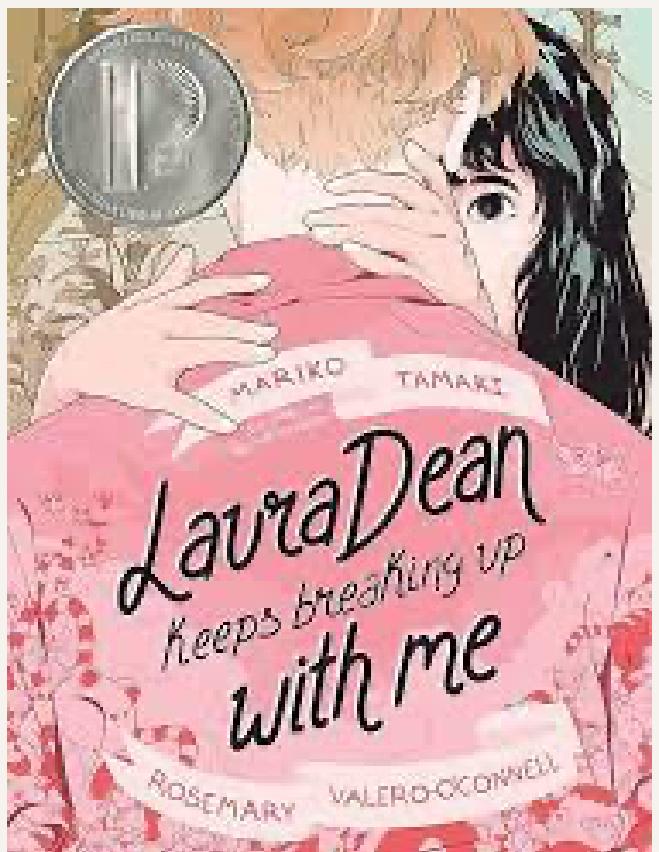
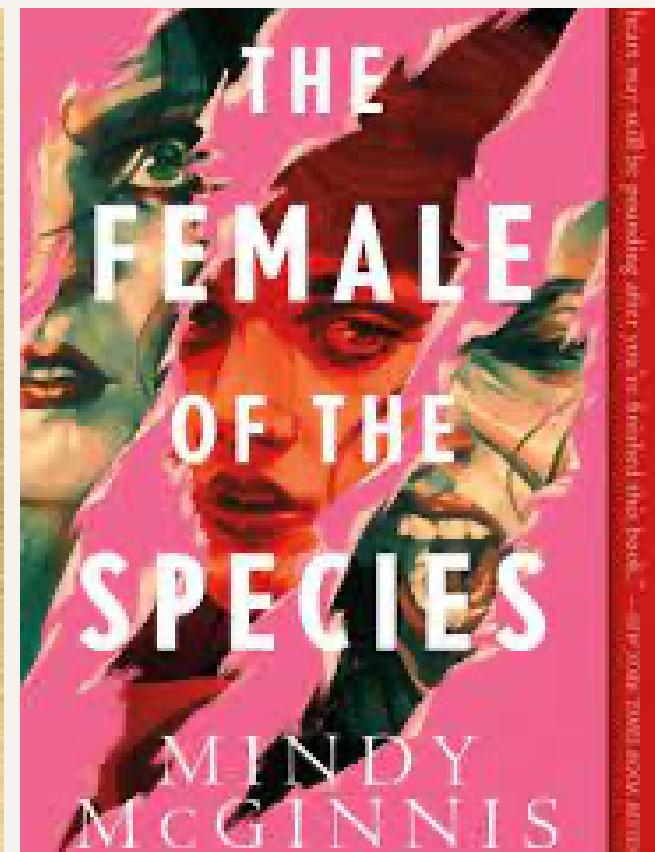
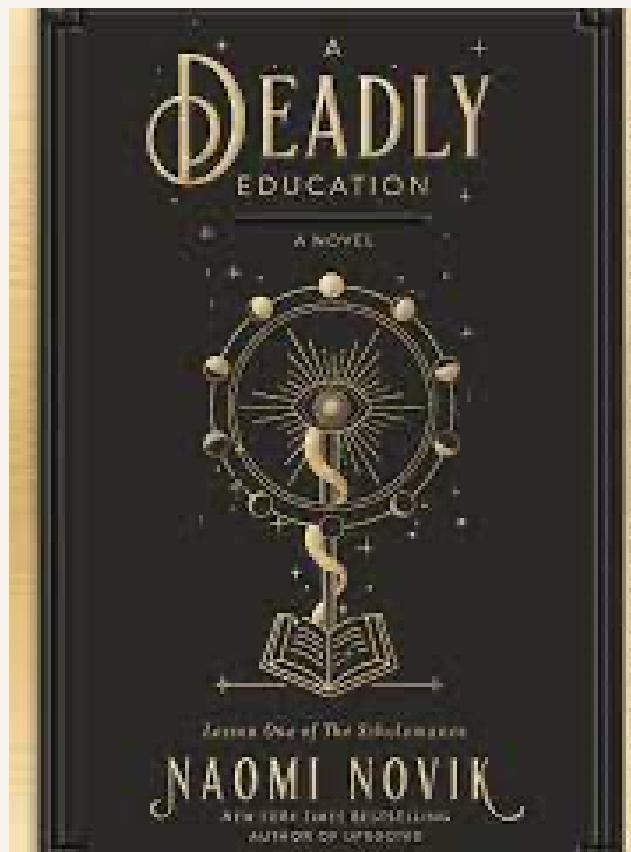
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6 DECEMBER 2023

ABSENT PARENTS



A RESOURCE FOR
teachers and book clubs

for helping students with absent parents recognize that they are not alone in this world through literature



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Introduction

Naomi Novik's *A Deadly Education*, Mindy McGinnis' *The Female of The Species*, and Mariko Tamaki's *Laura Dean Keeps Breaking Up With Me* are three very different Young Adult novels that all have one thing in common—**an absent parent**. The three novels have differing dynamics of absent parents such as a **deceased father before childbirth** in Novik's *A Deadly Education*, **an abandoning father** in McGinnis' *The Female of The Species*, and **a simply not present or mentioned mother** in Tamaki's *Laura Dean Keeps Breaking Up With Me*. Each novel focuses on teenage girl characters living in these differing familial structures. Despite the different relationships, these blogs serve as a resource for teachers or book clubs to reference when conversations surrounding absent parents arise, and literature with examples is desired to help show students that they are not alone.



“Parentified” Children

One interesting dynamic that is prevalent in two of these three novels is the concept of “Parentified Children”. Sharon Martin in her article “Parentified Children” on Psychcentral defines a parentified child as “one that has taken on some or all of their parents responsibilities” (Martin). Mindy McGinnis’ *The Female of The Species* has the most evident examples of this dynamic through the relationship of the main character, Alex, and her mother. Interestingly, this dynamic is not even the main conflict of the novel but still serves as a great resource for examples of teen girls parenting themselves. McGinnis through Alex explains that their house is kept pitch black all day because “It’s easier for mom to ignore the outside world...out of sight, out of mind, the only thing perpetually in her line of vision a bottle of scotch” (McGinnis 77). The implied meaning of that last sentence is that Alex’s mother is an alcoholic who stays inside all day, only roaming to fill up her glass with more scotch. As a high school girl with a dead sister, minimal friends, and an absent father, an alcoholic mother is just about the last thing she needs to support her in her development. Martin explains that “kids become parentified when their parents cant/wont fulfill their responsibilities. This often happens when a parent is addicted to drugs or alcohol or is severely mentally ill” (Martin). Alex has been forced to grow up far too early and understand the difficult implications on both herself and her mother with the absence of her father.

“Parentified” Children cont.

She even recognizes traits in herself that seemingly come from her father: “Dad’s things are still here...the only thing of his not covered with dust is a punching bag, because I’ve kept it in perpetual motion since he left” (McGinnis 114). Her remembrance of her father’s aggression makes for a difficult understanding of her love for her father and the desire to be nothing like him. She even goes on to say that “if he’d stayed, he would’ve killed our mother, eventually” (McGinnis 115). This understanding of the dangers of her father, who for most teen girls serves as a role model and support system, makes for a difficult combination of resentment and understanding for his leaving. Therefore, this novel serves as a resource for educators on the difficulties of parentified children and why adult support from other places, such as schools or clubs, can help these teens feel less alone.



Wikihow

“Parentified” Children cont.

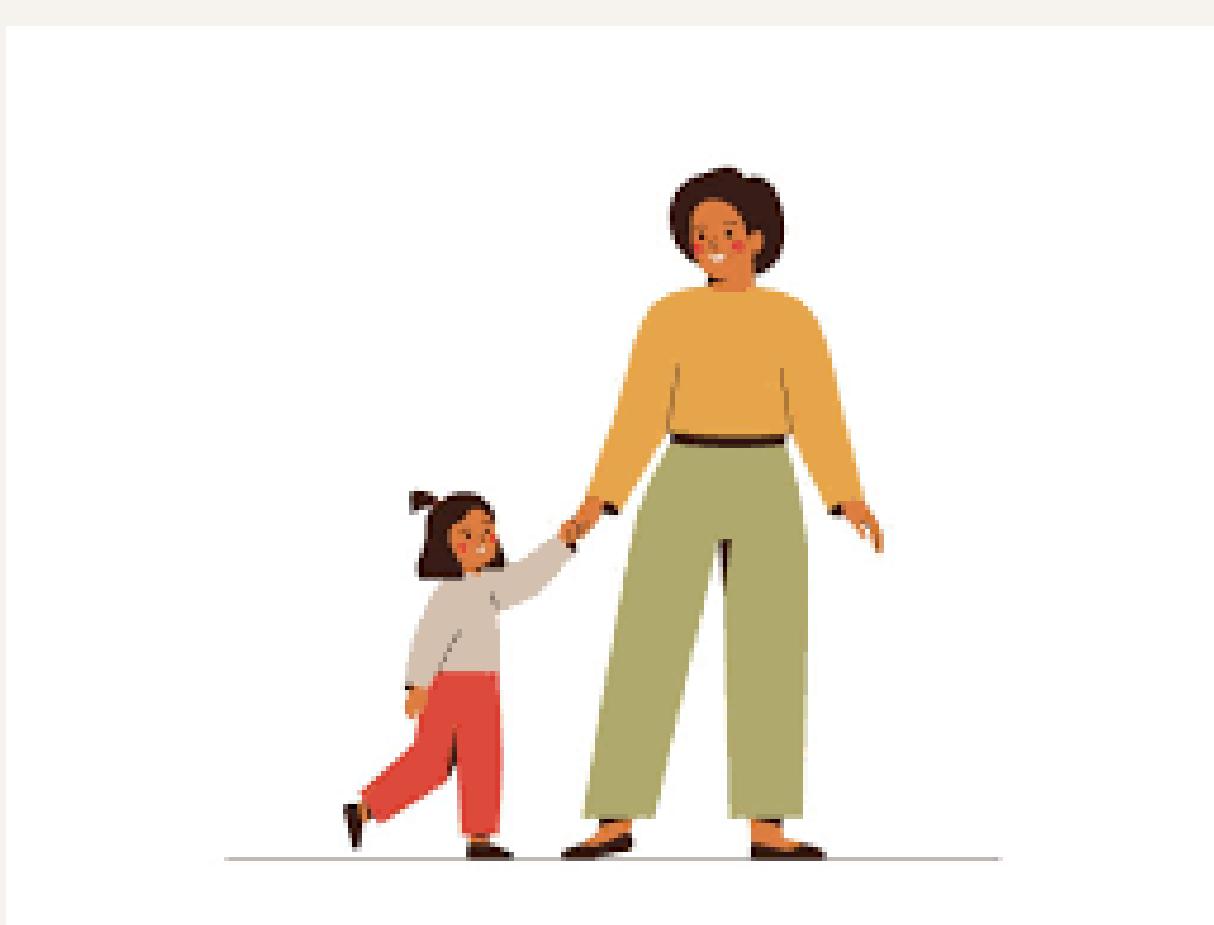
Naomi Novik's *A Deadly Education* also has a representation of a parentified child as Galadriel's father died before birth and she is sent to a magic boarding school with no adult supervision. She is forced to be her own mother and father which directly correlates to Martin's findings in which she states, “parentified children don't get to be children” (Martin). Galadriel must try to keep herself alive and teach herself everything she needs to know in order to survive graduation and after. Mike Pelvso wrote an interesting article titled “Single/Single Syndrome: Single Parents with Only Children” that I find especially compelling to apply to Novik's novel. Prior to being all on her own in the boarding school, Galadriel's mother attempted to join the family of her late husband, yet “my (Galadriel) great-grandmother took one look at me and fell down in a visionary fit and said I was a burdened soul and would bring death and destruction to all the enclaves in the world if I was not stopped” (Novik 13-14). Therefore, Galadriel and her mother were left just the two of them.



The Atlantic

“Single/Single Syndrome”

Pelvso explores this dynamic and finds that by not having that second parent (or group of other family members) to observe the social cues of others in interactions, often times single/single syndrome parents often have small social circles because they do not have a great understanding of how to properly interact with others. For the children in this dynamic “they don’t have the balance they would have if there were two managing parents” and often similarly have a hard time making social groups (Pelvso). Behaviors that may be normal to just the child and parent may be unsettling or inappropriate in the presence of others which in turn results in a stronger relationship between child and parent, but more distant relationships with peers. Both of these novels are great resources to provide to students with absent fathers to help show that even in the fictional world of literature, families that look similar to theirs exist and hopefully help them feel less alone.



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Single Fathers

Mariko Tamakiro's *Laura Dean Keeps Breaking Up With Me* challenges the commonly understood social norm that single dads cannot raise a daughter (or children in general) on their own. This novel serves as a positive representation of a single father who supports his daughter no matter the circumstance. Stef Daniel's article titled "Dads Are Capable of Raising Daughters on Their Own" provides interesting data from a U.S. census report that found "around 2.5 million children in the United States alone [are] being raised by single fathers" (Daniel). The dynamic present in Tamaki's novel is between a supporting character, Doodle, and her father. There is no background information provided as to where Doodle's mother is because it is not a relevant issue to the novel. The instance of unconditional support her father provides comes from her need for an abortion after an accidental pregnancy. In the conversation between the main character and friend of Doodle, Freddy, Freddy says to Doodle, "Is your dad okay with all this?" to which Doodle responds, "Yes. My dad is a scientist. I think for him it's like science" (Tamaki 232). Abortion and accidental pregnancy are stressful situations for anyone, especially teens, therefore the fact that Doodle's father is able to understand that it is simply science gives Doodle security in her relationship with her father. Further in this conversation between the two, Freddy asks Doodle "He's not mad?" to which she responds, "Why would he be mad?" (Tamaki 232). Doodle's response implies that her father was able to understand from the start that his daughter needed his support and not a lecture on her behavior. In this way, Doodle's father is a prime representation of a single father successfully raising a teenage daughter on his own.

Conclusion

These young adult novels are just three of many that include **stories of single parents raising teenagers**. The fact that these dynamics are not the central plot of any of the novels listed serves as a **representation of the commonality of such family dynamics**. This in itself can serve as a positive reminder to real-world teens feeling alone in their family situations whether that be the death of a parent or abandonment by a parent. Educators and book club leaders, **I encourage you to read these novels and these blog posts to have resources available to provide to other employees or students who may express they are struggling with feeling alone about a missing parent in their life.** Growing up is hard enough with two parents, and even harder when children have to step up and parent their own parents. Single fathers are way more common than generally thought and for children of single fathers, it is important that they know they are not alone. Single parents with a single child are an uncommonly discussed dynamic, yet there are resources available such as these blog posts **to help children recognize that there are other children like them.** All in all, **child need to know that they are not alone in this world no matter what their situation is.** It is up to you as educators to recognize when a child is feeling alone in their situation and encourage them to find comfort in novels that depict similar familial structures.

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