

Girls' Class and Character in Contemporary YA Fiction

Lisa Paolucci, St. Francis College

Abstract

Two contemporary works of young adult fiction that appeared on the New York City 365 Book List are examined in this paper as examples of the socioeconomic diversity that the creators of the list intended to include. Nic Stone's *Jackpot* (2019) and Ibi Zoboi's *Pride* (2018) both depict female high schoolers—Rico and Zuri—who grapple with their own identity-building as they demonstrate awareness of their socioeconomic situations, both of working-class backgrounds, and how their personal contexts contribute to the future opportunities available to them. Ultimately, even as the novels are propelled forward with romantic relationships with male teens of higher socioeconomic statuses, with greater access to power and privilege, both protagonists ultimately develop agency in their lives and powerfully negotiate their futures, especially through their understandings and analyses of class and its connection to their identities and relationships.

Keywords

Contemporary young adult fiction, working-class studies, socioeconomic diversity, teenagers and class, gender and class, culturally responsive-sustaining education

Introduction

“My mother’s fear of unpayable medical bills is stronger than her fear of death,” declares seventeen-year-old Rico, the protagonist of Nic Stone’s *Jackpot* (2019) (p.90). The challenge, to put it lightly, of handling unexpected and enormous medical bills is just one aspect of the young adult novel that may have led to its placement on the [New York City Department of Education’s 365 Book List](#) in 2020, when the list was last updated (Knudson, 2020). The initiative, originally created in 2015 (State News Service, 2015), was intended to regularly release book lists by grade level with the goal of increasing independent reading for pleasure among students in kindergarten to grade 12—the 365 indicating, of course, reading every day, all year. Importantly, as Knudson (2020) indicates, the book lists were intentionally designed to bolster culturally responsive-sustaining education, as they provide representations of diverse ethnicities, races, genders, religions, and socio-economic statuses. Young adult literature has been widely perceived as a helpful avenue for “introducing students to social justice issues,” including “discrimination based on race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, disability, class, and age” and “unpack[ing] the complexities” in all of these cases (Stover, et al., 2017, p. 176; Williams & Blasingame, 2017, p. 239; Boyd & Darragh, 2019). The New York State Education Department’s Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Framework (2019) defines the goals of culturally responsive-sustaining education as the following: “create student-centered learning environments that affirm cultural

identities; foster positive academic outcomes; develop students' abilities to connect across lines of difference; elevate historically marginalized voices; empower students as agents of social change" (pp. 6-7). Curious about the representations of socio-economic status included on the list and how the selected novels could succeed at empowering students as agents of social change—perhaps its most ambitious goal—I reviewed the titles on currently posted NYC 365 Book List, which has remained the same since 2020, and selected two novels that highlighted class in their blurbs and that had been widely reviewed. This paper will examine “how class works” in Nic Stone’s *Jackpot* and Ibi Zoboi’s *Pride* in the lives of the two seventeen-year-old female protagonists (Fazio et al, p. 4). Specifically, as both novels involve a romantic relationship with a wealthy male teenager, this paper grapples with the question of the extent to which Zuri, an Afro-Latino American from Bushwick Brooklyn, and Rico, who describes herself as white, Latina, and Black, from the state of Georgia, can be read as having become empowered by the end of each novel, even as they are depicted as becoming emotionally and sometimes physically connected to these wealthy young men who play powerful roles in the novels.

Class and Character Development in *Jackpot* (Nic Stone, 2019)

Jackpot is a YA novel that “explores how class, status, and money—or lack thereof—have the ability to limit or expand life opportunities [and] the choices we make,” or believe that we are permitted to make (Harris, 2019, p. 100). In *Jackpot*, Rico is a senior in high school who works at the Gas n’ Go as a cashier and shelf stocker, a place where she expects to work full-time after high school graduation in order to contribute to her household income, which includes her mother and younger brother Jax. Stone focuses on Rico’s family’s lack of resources throughout the novel, and how aware Rico is of the situation—how it continues to affect her thinking and behaviors. For example, when she sells lottery tickets to a Mercedes-Benz-driving man paying with big bills who calls her a “cute girl,” she notes to herself that “this guy doesn’t need two hundred and twelve million more dollars” (p. 1). She learns to put on an act, “chirp[ing]” in response when he announces that he will place a few dollars in the Salvation Army bucket outside the store. But when an elderly woman enters the store wearing a Christmas tree sweater that actually lights up, Rico’s demeanor changes. She happily sells tickets to the customer, noting that she is the sort of individual who should win the lottery, though she hopes that she doesn’t have to reveal her “(nonexistent) college plans” to her when the customer shares her granddaughter’s college news (p. 4). The customer coincidentally includes three numbers from Rico’s birthday in one of her lottery ticket purchases, which Rico notes with surprise, and is later astonished as a lottery ticket including those three numbers wins the millions of dollars. The remainder of the novel is based on Rico’s quest to discover the holder of the winning ticket as the person is not coming forward.

Rico herself has not played the lotto, and this decision not to is largely embedded in her view of her mother’s actions. She shares: “Mama’s been obsessed with the idea of winning for as long as I can remember... cling[ing] to this impossible hope while our finances literally crumbled around her” (p. 5). Rico’s mother is a housekeeper at the Hilton, working over 70 hours per week. She has moved her children to an area that is more expensive than she can afford, but that has better schools. Rico notes that “being poor in comparison with everyone around you sucks. Especially when you’re just a kid” (p. 11). And referring to her 7-year-old brother, she states “We won’t even talk about the fact that he’s brown where most of the (rich) kids around him are white” (p. 11). Rico demonstrates the “economic anxiety” that Marcela Valdes describes in her NPR piece about

young adult novels, writing that these “economic anxieties keeping adults awake at night—income inequality, food insecurity, downward mobility, winner-takes-all competition—have also invaded the literature of their children” (p. 5). Noting that novels like *Little Women* had already been depicting financial insecurity, the “economic distress” of today’s teens had “turned much darker” (p. 5). During the shift when Rico sells the aforementioned tickets, she also sees Alexander, or Zan, Macklin, enter the Gas n’ Go. He is an heir to the company that invented toilet paper, extremely wealthy, and only attends public school because he was kicked out of his private school due to hacking a computer. She avoids him, having her manager sell the ticket to him as she runs to the restroom. On the way home, his presence continues to irk her in combination with all that she already has on her mind about her family’s “financial precariousness”: “Now I’m crying. It’s like no matter how hard Mama and me work or how much we do, it always feels like we’re drowning. And now I’ve got images of the richest kid in school superimposing memories of our shelter days and smashing up against the helplessness and desperation constantly simmering beneath the surface of my *chill*. It’s bub-bub-bubbling up, pouring out, and stinging my windburned face from walking home in the cold” (*Kirkus*, 2019; Stone, p. 12). “I hate to admit it considering how low I try to keep my expectations, but the encounter with the cute granny planted quite the ‘what if?’ in the rocky soil of my heart. Which ain’t good: when you live as tenuously as my family does, there’s nothing worse than having even the slightest glimmer of hope dashed against the ugly boulders of life” (p. 13).

Rico’s description of herself as either cut off or enclosed, and rugged on the surface, not welcoming, are all ways that she attempts to protect herself, to cope with what she sees as harsh truths and unchangeable circumstances. Furthermore, she states:

...facets of my life that often plague my brain in the darkness: the fact that we’re always a few hours of pay away from not making rent; that Mama treats me more like a partner and co-parent than a kid; that my seventeen-year-old life consists entirely of school, work, and sleep; that I have no friends...[now] this world of possibility has opened up, and now I constantly find myself...curious. Which feels dangerous. There are few things worse for a poor kid than working up the courage to hope and then having that hope pulverized down to subatomic particles beneath the weight of (another) disappointment (pp. 25-26).

Rico’s desire to locate the winner of the lottery ticket leads her to begin breaking down the walls around her, but this is not a very comfortable experience for her. She reaches out to Zan Macklin, her wealthy classmate whom she finds extremely attractive, and asks him to hack into the Gas n’ Go’s security system so that she can see what sort of cab the elderly lady arrived in. This leads to a series of adventures during which Rico and Zan try to find more information, getting closer and closer to the truth. Their relationship, which becomes increasingly intimate, involves Zan driving Rico around in his expensive car, getting her paid time off from work, and even free medical care from his doctor relative who saves her brother’s life after he develops an illness. Throughout, Rico’s internal monologue often reflects her thoughts in this particular instance: “What would he say if he knew my skirt was held together by a safety pin or that I use the laces in these shoes for a different pair as well?” and she feels “a stab in the gut” when she realizes she cannot provide her cell phone number in return as hers is only an emergency phone (p. 42). While Rico’s list of what she would do if she herself could win that sort of money includes having a home, car, and health insurance, she imagines that Zan could not possibly understand what it’s like to not have

what one needs to survive, to be “constantly on the brink” (p. 47). The details above present a case of clear “power dynamics” with which Rico is uncomfortable (Khuri, 2019, p. 59).

Literary history presents numerous well-known stories centered on a “passive, suffering, female dependent on a male to rescue her”—with the male character being “clever, resourceful, and brave” (Brown, p. 2). Initially, *Jackpot* seems to follow this trend, as Zan carries out research that results in another lead on their search, and has Rico hop into his fancy car so that he can whisk her away to solve the mystery. Indeed, literature contains many models of a “spunky, sassy, independent heroine [who] turns into the good wife who subordinates her wishes, indeed her very self, to the desires and needs of others”—a prolific “boys do; girls are” theme, according to Mary Kay Ritchie’s 1971 study of books for young people (p. 5). But as Brown and St. Clair note, more contemporary young adult fiction typically depicts “female protagonists whose sense of independence and assurance contrasts sharply with that of their predecessors” (p. 22). Allen and Green-Barteet (2023) also characterize contemporary “empowered literary girls” as “girls who persist and resist” (p. 620). “Autonomous thought” and “autonomous action” are typically at the heart of YA fiction, and *Jackpot* is no exception (p. 26). Brown and St. Clair note that “fiction about empowered girls must find ways to subvert that [traditional] ending” of marriage or another subordinate role in a relationship, and that “empowerment often occurs only after some overt act of rejection or rebellion against the status quo” (p. 27). I argue here that Stone’s novel succeeds in doing so, even with the initial apparent domination of the wealthy Zan Macklin, and does so *through* the presentation of Rico as learning to set the terms that eventually allow her to acknowledge her own desires and to act on them.

Although Rico emphasizes again and again in the narrative that she is thoroughly annoyed by Zan’s wealth, privilege, and what she perceives as his lack of understanding of others, she begins to realize that she is also very attracted to him. When he hugs her and lifts her off her feet, she feels “legitimately hot all over and *so* not okay with it” (p. 55). In another scene at work, as she struts away from him, he pulls her back by her apron string. Stone is writing for a YA audience, which has long had romance used in marketing to their interest, from as far back as the 1940s when what is widely considered to be the first work of fiction published for a teenaged audience, Maureen Daly’s *Seventeenth Summer* (1942), emerged, though the inclusion of sexual topics specifically does not appear until the late sixties, and through the decades that followed until today (Cart, 2016, p. 18; Kaplan & Olan, p. 14). But Rico’s beginning acknowledgement of sexual attraction for Zan can also be interpreted as an element of empowered thought, as she begins to allow herself to have what can be perceived as completely selfish desires—desires that she rarely permits herself to have. The physical connection developing between Rico and Zan is also accompanied by their coming to understand the similarities between them—neither feels that what they personally want for their futures has ever mattered to those around them. They share experiences of facing prejudice in various situations as multiracial individuals—“intersectional issues” that contribute to each of their feelings of having limited choices, but for very different reasons (*Publishers’ Weekly*, 2019, p 70).

Brown and St. Clair point out that in fiction for young people, female “empowerment often occurs only after some overt act of rejection or rebellion against the status quo” (p. 28). During their adventures to locate the holder of the winning ticket, Rico stops and thinks to herself: “I hate how entitled he seems to feel to the information [about where I was]. How entitled he seems to feel to

everything. To *me*. He didn't ask if he could pick me up from work. He didn't ask me to get in his car. And he hasn't actually asked me to tell him why I really canceled. Not in a full sentence. With the word *please* tossed in there somewhere." Rico challenges him: "You're really used to getting what you want, huh?...You don't really ask for things...you...demand them...The only reason I'm sitting next to you right now is because you basically willed it so by creating an expectation I didn't feel comfortable defying. Which I have a hunch is kind of a pattern for you" (p. 106). After an argument in which Rico shows Zan how he cuts her off when she is speaking, and Zan ultimately offers his assistance as her mother is sick, they come to an agreement about how to treat one another and allow their friendship to continue with more awareness and understanding. It is only after this incident that both begin to be more honest about their feelings for one another: Zan realizes that she has brought him to life, made him feel "freer," and that he is "living for it...at this point" while Rico admits to herself that "he is nice to be around most of the time" (p. 111; 119). When Rico finally "steps forward and spreads [her] arms" for an embrace, she is literally and figuratively opening herself up to a relationship that she has actively molded to be grounded in respect and understanding. "Through...persistence and resistance," Rico exemplifies the girl characters that Green-Barteet and Allen describe as ultimately "com[ing] to understand themselves, their desires, and the worlds in which they live" (p. 622). "I'm allowed to want this," Rico declares to herself.

Toward the end of the novel, Rico's economic challenges feel insurmountable:

No cash to do anything.
 No cash.
 Rent.
 Electricity.
 Water.
 Food.
 Gas and maintenance for the truck.
 Spinal tap.
 Antibiotics.
 Extended hospital stay.
 Down, down, down. Sinking down, down, down.
 It's too much. I can't do it. I can't do anything about any of this.
 It's hopeless. I'm trapped. There's no getting out (p. 291).

But this time, rather than continue to lose her breath, she has someone to talk to, and she allows herself to cry in Zan's embrace. Rather than interpret this as needing a more privileged male to save her, Stone's narrative has set readers up to see Rico's ability to express her emotions about the situation as a strength. Previously, she would have kept everything inside, not even believing that she was entitled to discuss her feelings. Again, pushing at the Cinderella story, Rico's mother and friends collaborate to surprise her with a prom dress and she is able to go as Zan's date, providing the type of "support" that Hill and Darragh emphasize the importance of in their analysis of young adult literature focusing on "socioeconomically challenged" youth (2016, p. 44). The novel includes vignettes from the point of view of inanimate objects which act "as a Greek Chorus," as Jessica Coates' review indicates (p. 58), and the prom dress itself states the following:

“I’m the murky blurple of a dark night and bedazzled all over with tiny Swarovski crystals. So with the low lights and the dark walls and the little strings of light twinkling as they dangle from the ceiling, Rico feels like she’s twirling within a night sky” (p. 309).

This sense of freedom—representing her “agency and independence” is far from where we first met Rico (Silva & Savitz, p. 327).

Ultimately, it turns out that Zan has had the winning ticket the whole time. When he had finally realized it, he didn’t want his adventure with Rico to end, so he kept it to himself. This new knowledge destroys his relationship with Rico, as it highlights for her the great gulf that will always exist between them. He tries to give her the winning ticket, but she refuses it. Ultimately, in what admittedly feels a bit bizarre, Zan cashes in the ticket and then sets up an anonymous trust fund for Rico with half of the winnings that is distributed over a period of time and is also organized for a college tuition payment and a savings plan for her brother. They reconcile at the end of the novel, but only as friends, and both have decided to pursue their dreams in ways that they previously thought they couldn’t, attending colleges that will take them in different directions geographically. Both have improved their lives, exemplifying what Boon focuses on in reviewing *Jackpot*—that “we can strive to be better, regardless of bank balances”—as a result of their relationship (Boon, 2019, p. 248). The novel doesn’t end in a romance, just a friendly hug and good wishes, with Rico declaring, “I’m gonna go to Space Camp,” her childhood dream (p. 339).

Jackpot maintains the expected high-interest style of contemporary YA fiction in a way that allows teenagers to either see themselves reflected, or learn about others’ lives, especially through the intersecting lenses of class, race, and gender, which is one goal of exposing young people to fiction, as Rudine Sims Bishop points to in her oft-cited description of children’s books as “windows, mirrors, and doors” (1990, ix). *Jackpot* can therefore motivate young people to understand the need for change—building their “critical literacy,” and to believe in the agency of young people to be part of that change (Hill & Darragh, 2017, p. 86).

Class and Character Development in *Pride* (Ibi Zoboi, 2018)

Pride’s Zuri is a seventeen-year-old who finds herself in the middle of a rapidly-gentrifying Bushwick, Brooklyn (previously “working-class” with mainly residents of color) in a YA novel subtitled *A Pride and Prejudice Remix* (2018) (Anderson, 2021, p.483). Based on Jane Austen’s original novel, Zoboi’s work “offers a fresh perspective on racial identity, gentrification, and class disparity...exploring how these contemporary issues intersect with the timeless themes of love and prejudice” (Myer, 2024, p. 8). The narrative begins with Zuri’s reflection on her neighborhood:

“when rich people move into the hood, where it’s a little bit broken and a little bit forgotten, the first thing they want to do is clean it up. But it’s not just the junky stuff they’ll get rid of. People can be thrown away, too...What those rich people don’t always know is that broken and forgotten neighborhoods were first built out of love” (p.1).

She demonstrates awareness of “the difference between how outsiders see them and their communities and their own identities,” as Anderson notes in her analysis of *Pride and Prejudice* adaptations (2021).

Like Rico, she is acutely aware of her family's financial situation prior to meeting the very well-off Darius Darcy, one of the teenagers who moves into a renovated mansion across the street. The Darcys are part of this "unwelcome gentrification" and "erosion" of her community, and being a Black family rather than the white family that they had expected, their "arrival highlights class tensions" in the Black community as well (Anderson, p. 483). At the beginning of the novel, Darius is already playing the savior, pulling Zuri out of the way just in time so that she avoids being hit by a speeding bicycle. Unlike Rico, Zuri has plans for her future. She is actively learning about Howard University, the college she most desires to attend. She describes her plans as: "[I'll] live on campus in my own dorm room where I can stretch out my arms and legs and not to have a hit a little sister in the head while doing so. After I graduate, I'll get a job and my own apartment here too. None of those scenarios involved a boyfriend or a husband" (p. 18). The spaces in the novel are figurative representations of her own feelings about her life. Although she persists in her feelings of love for her Bushwick life, she also admits that she sometimes feels penned in. This is why the roof is their "happy place, way above it all...[we] unlock it and escape out onto the clouds...If Madrina's basement is where the tamboras, los espíritus, and old ancestral memories live, then the roof is where wind chimes, dreams, and possibilities float with the stars, where Janae and I share our secrets and plan to travel all over the world, Haiti and the Dominican Republic being our first stop" (p. 23).

When we meet Zuri, she is actively focusing her "creative attention" on constructing her essay for her Howard University application: "my neighborhood is made of love, but it's money and buildings and food and jobs that keep it alive--and even I have to admit that the new people moving in, with their extra money and dreams, can sometimes make things better. We'll have to figure out a way to make both sides of Bushwick work," she notes, and then begins her essay by referring to "fair housing, opportunities, and access to resources" (Anderson, 2021, p. 483; Zobo, p. 33). But poetry is where Zuri really focuses her writing, and the novel contains her poems throughout: "I force myself to write, and like always, broken words spill out. A rough, jagged poem, like the steps of this stoop, like the sidewalk in front of this building. Like everything around me right now" (p. 47).

Like Rico's feelings about Zan, Zuri may "reluctant[ly]" find Darius attractive but she expresses her annoyance and dislike of him multiple times (Anderson, 2021, p. 483). When she visits the mansion looking for her sister Janae who is dating Darius' older brother, she cannot believe how much empty space there is—Darius has his own apartment within the house just like Zan did in *Jackpot*—and critically questions their lack of "stuff," to which Darius replies that they have what they need, and that it's wonderful to be able to sit in an empty room and just think sometimes. Zuri is completely unfamiliar with this, as her home is packed with "stuff" and family living close to one another. She later acknowledges that "the basement [of her landlord, Madrina] is where I dive deep into my own thoughts and dreams with Madrina and her claims of *comunicado con los antepasados*. To Madrina...the basement is home to Ochun, the orisha of love and all things beautiful. For them, this is a place of magic, love, and miracles" (p. 56).

Zuri and her sister, two of the five Benitez sisters, visit Maria Hernandez Park with Darius and his brother Ainsley, where a musical performance is taking place. Calling it an "art and music festival

for white people,” where even before the music begins she notes that a white woman “starts dancing for no reason at all” and “do[esn’t] even know who Maria Hernandez was” (p. 64). Hernandez had been murdered for trying to stop drug dealers from selling drugs in the park in 1989. Even as Zuri expresses frustration, saying “there is nothing Maria or Ez about this park anymore,” she does notice that she is “tired of standing,” and sits down on a blanket in the grass. This isn’t how she grew up though, relaxing outdoors in a park such as this. “We sat on benches,” she states, “and kept our eyes wide open in case anything went down” (p. 64). There is an emphasis here on the stiffness and tightness of one’s body – not enough space at home to stretch out, not enough safety in social situations where one could lounge on a blanket. But Zuri is starting to realize that she needs a bit more space in which to grow. This is the conflict of the novel, the arena in which Zuri will develop into the empowered female protagonist that we expect in contemporary YA fiction.

The tension between Zuri and Darius continues to play out, as Zuri keeps challenging him for not being right for the neighborhood, demanding to know why he doesn’t come to the park just to play ball sometimes, and criticizing the way he acts around other guys from the neighborhood in the corner store. He throws it back to her, noting that she doesn’t seem to get out of her neighborhood much. In truth, Zuri hasn’t left her neighborhood much. Her critical view is deeper, though, than just feeling that he is not “street” enough for the neighborhood. She tells him: “Just so you know, in this hood, you’re just like everybody else. The cops and these white people will take one good look at you and think you’re from Hope Gardens Projects no matter how many tight khaki shorts or grandpa shoes you wear” (p. 67). Darius is insulted and feels that he cannot get close to Zuri as she continually criticizes him and shuts down the conversation. But even though Zuri hasn’t left her neighborhood much, she appears to feel secure enough to eventually do so, thinking: “I feel like I can fly around the world and back if I want to, because this is what will always be here waiting for me: my parents’ love; my loud sisters; my crowded and cluttered apartment; and the lingering scent of home-cooked meals” (p. 78). Almost as if she is doing so to spurn Darius, or to make him jealous, Zuri begins dating Warren, a Bushwick guy who checks all of her boxes in terms of his street behaviors and viewpoints, and who received a scholarship to the same private school that Darius attends, and who used to be his friend. But Zuri “can’t help it,” as she states, to smile when she sees Darius looking out the window. Through a plot adapted from Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, Zoi “explore[s] racialised, gendered, and cultural identity,” the intersection of which provides the arena for Zuri’s continued identity formation throughout the novel (Anderson, 2021, p. 482).

Their interactions become warmer, and immediately after we see Zuri changing her mind about Darius, she visits Madrina’s basement where a spiritual dance is taking place. Putting on the flowy white skirt that Madrina provides:

“I...move about like a wave. And my swirling and flowing skirt and dancing body, I form a river. The drumming ebbs and flows, comes to a crescendo before stopping completely; then I am stagnant water again. Like all those tears I hold in and never let flow...Something brand-new stirs inside and all around me, as if I’ve been turned inside out. I immediately know that this was more than just a dance, and maybe Madrina was right all along. Maybe there is something real in these spirits...quietly slip up to the roof. My lungs are still reaching for the night air as the orishas embrace me.” (p. 125-126).

A metaphor for Zuri's inner desire to be fluid, to stretch, to be able to navigate change, the basement inspires her to ascend to the roof, as Zuri "transforms" through the dance (McQueen, 2024, p. 260).

A turning point is when Zuri visits Howard University for an Open House, and notes how different she feels in an environment that is "clean and airy. No clutter" (p. 141). Being here expands my whole world much farther than I could've ever imagined...there's enough wide-open space for me to feel like I can actually chase my dreams here, and I'll be able to reach them too...I have an overwhelming sense that I belong here" (p. 141-143). Motivated, she attends a poetry reading in the area and reads her poem titled "Girls in the Hood," which receives enthusiastic applause and helps her to realize that her "words have earned [her] respect," and that "this place can be an extension of [her] block too, like home" (p. 154). This achievement of "active creation" and its "sharing" is one way that Zuri (McQueen, p. 256). Only after she has finished, she notices that Darius Darcy was sitting in the audience, having come to DC to drop off his sister at Howard University. This is when Zuri embarks on an adventure of her own that is reminiscent of Rico's, though it is only a trip home. Originally planning to take the bus, Zuri accepts a ride from Darius, not realizing they will have a detour at his grandmother's mansion. Zuri, like Rico, has her own rebellion of sorts which ultimately changes the course of the narrative over dinner, when she is spoken to with direct disdain by Darius's grandmother who realizes that she does not come from money. After refusing to have her worth diminished, and storming out, and being apologized to by Darius, they have a heart-to-heart of sorts in which they agree not to stereotype one another's family's as wholly based on their income. At this point, Zuri is able to "sit back in [her] seat" and "let her guard down a bit," while Darius drives back up to New York City, which, combined with the day as a whole, feels "familiar, but different," and "makes [her] feel brand new" (p. 180; p. 184).

When they stop to share a meal together, she's "able to sit back and take in the wide blue-orange sky and warm summer air. There are no tall buildings around or sirens or loud music and voices" (p. 187). Like Zan's view of Rico, Zuri is viewed as "unique" by Darius and they share their affection for one another.

Later in the novel, when Madrina is ill, she tells Zuri during a visit: "You have all these walls around you that it's like your heart is locked up in some room" (p. 209). This is clearly what Zuri must overcome in order to feel that she is living with self-actualization, with choices.

As Zuri permits herself to like Darius, despite her original annoyance over his wealth, and to see his other qualities, that he is a multidimensional person just as she is, they begin dating. She feels differently, her "insides...melting into sweet, gooey, sticky honey"—a feeling of physical desire that she does not act on in the moment (p. 253). But she is no longer the hardened young woman with walls up. Sitting on the roof of his house, Zuri thinks: the sky here seems wider. And maybe there are more stars from this view. And maybe the moon shines brighter. Maybe everything is better from the roof of the Darcy house" (p. 255). But what is actually happening is that Zuri sees the world differently from a place in which she allows herself to have desires, to be more flexible in her thinking, to assert herself, to write, to create. Acknowledging the complexity of having a boyfriend who is part of the gentrifying population coming in to Bushwick, (though different in that his family is African-American) but still caring for him as an individual person is a growth

area for Zuri. She is able to talk about this more directly with Darius now: “Do you see that rent is going up all over the place and people are not getting paid more? Schools are shitty because teachers think we’re a lost cause. I’m trying to get into college, but I need financial aid and scholarships ‘cause I have three more sisters who want to go to college too, and my parents have always been broke. That’s why I had a wall up with you. You were moving into my hood from what seemed like a whole different world” (p 257). Zuri demonstrates her “wisdom” and emotional intelligence here (Silva and Savitz, p. 328).

Unexpectedly, Madrina dies and her nephew decides to sell the house; it will be knocked down, and Zuri’s family has to move. They choose Canarsie, a totally different neighborhood, and Zuri has to contend with the fact that Darius’ family will get to stay in *her* Bushwick while she has to move. Her father, Papi, whom we meet earlier in the novel reading Howard Zinn on the couch, tells her that Bushwick will come with them, and not to let [her] pride get in the way of [her] heart” (p. 269). This helps Zuri and she is able to conclude that home is where her family and loved ones are; the people she cares about, thus helping her to resolve the many differing statements she has made about space throughout the novel. She remembers a past conversation with Madrina, in which she says: “Rivers flow. A body of water that remains stagnant is just a cesspool...it’s time to move, flow, grow. That is the nature of rivers. That is the nature of love!” (p. 281). This is the lesson that Zuri ultimately learns—that home, that love, the things that matter, are strongest when they are fluid. And this fluidity gives Zuri space to stretch as well...so that she can be comfortable in her own skin and grow in the directions in which she wants to grow, “becoming an individual and transforming the self” (Cart, p. 31). This empowerment comes not in spite of her family’s socioeconomic status in a neighborhood undergoing gentrification but because of everything that she is and has experienced, and how it has led her to interact with new people. While Darius occasionally plays the savior role, it is Zuri who takes initiative in her own life and sets the criteria, the standards, and the boundaries, illustrating her “new maturity” (Silva & Savitz, 2019, p. 324). This differentiates this narrative from traditional stories about young women, changing the meaning of her acceptance of Darius’ later behaviors, as he “gently turns her around to face him, wiping her tears with his thumbs...” (p. 283). Zobi intentionally “foreground[s] love...to allow the...novel to reach young adult readers,” according to McQueen (2024, p. 255). However, the romance aspect of the novel is integrated into the focus on Zuri’s growth and development into a character with agency. Indeed, not so different from *Jackpot*’s ending, *Pride*’s ending does show Zuri and Darius together, but there is “room for uncertainty,” and the mood is light and “playful,” thus taking the focus away from the romantic aspect of the novel and instead more directly emphasizing Zuri’s individual growth (McQueen, p. 261).

Conclusion

The endings of both *Jackpot* and *Pride* present Rico and Zuri as developed, robust characters who negotiate their understandings of class with their newly developing relationships and decisions about their futures and emerge more empowered and insightful, with fuller self-awareness and fluidity. As novels identified by the nation’s largest public school system as highlighting areas of diversity, these particular selections do more than depict young people in various economic situations. Rather, they are examples of how class can function in literature as a major characteristic of protagonists’ lives that they work through and with in order to gain agency as they “search for identity” so that they can develop into the individuals they want to be; this is not in

spite of, but because of, their living in a world with particular class circumstances (Boyd & Darragh, p. 2). In addition, they can be used to help students understand the “systemic factors that impact socioeconomic status” and how “social class affects people” (Boyd & Darragh, p. 126).

Both novels shed light on the complexities involved in literary analysis that focuses on issues of class. Specifically, the intersections of class, race, and gender are the sites for the character development that occurs in both novels. And even when identifying the young male love interests as being of a higher socioeconomic status, the race and ethnicity of each complicates assumptions of economic privilege in a white-dominated society, with Zan being biracial with a Hispanic background and Darius being African-American.

In *Jackpot* and *Pride*, class is not simply a lens, but is the major material of the work, even as it intersects with other major identity categories as stated above. These novels should continue to appear on book lists for young people due to their potential to assist with building critical capacities in young people, even as they offer the high interest love storylines that so much of YA fiction contains due to its marketability, with love, relationships, and identity- building often at the heart of typical adolescent development (Boyd & Darragh, 2019). Across disciplinary lines, it can also be “used to look at class issues throughout the ages and with attention to policy and national economics” (Hill & Darragh, 2016, p. 46).

Analysis of *Jackpot* and *Pride* indicates that readers can indeed go along for the romantic and action-packed ride of YA fiction while still drawing powerful conclusions about young peoples’ abilities to negotiate the terms of their relationships, to critically analyze their communities, and to make concrete plans for their own place in their “communit[ies]” (Hill & Darragh, p. 88; Bean & Moni, 2003). This literature also validates feelings that young people may have about the relationship between their own class and how it affects their relationships with others and the opportunities they have available to them. In summary, class *works* in these novels in powerful ways.

Author Bio:

Lisa Paolucci received her Ph.D. in English Education from Columbia University. She is currently an assistant professor of Education at St. Francis College in Brooklyn, NY and also serves as the Chair of the Education Department. Previously, Lisa was a New York City public high school teacher of English Language Arts.

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