## What is a bildungsroman?

You may not recognize the funny name, but if you've taken high school English or watched pretty much any blockbuster movie about teenagers, you've probably experienced a bildungsroman.  The German word “Bildungsroman” means “formation novel.” Bildungsroman recount literal or figurative voyages of discovery, the final destination of which is a sense of one’s unique purpose. Typically a bildungsroman will involve a trial, a life-altering question, and sometimes a resolution.

Themes within the bildungsroman change with shifting social mores, but they all include at least a few of the following: a David-and-Goliath situation in which a child faces a monumental challenge, often without adult aid; a stepchild, orphan, or outcast; the sense that domestic or parental affection is not enough; the discovery that life is not easy or clear; doubt about one’s purpose or beliefs; and a quest for freedom, self-expression, and horizon-expanding love.

The horizon of the bildungsroman genre itself has expanded steadily since its beginnings in the eighteenth century. One could argue that the bildungsroman was born in the 17th century, but that it came of age in the works of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe.  Many critics consider Goethe’s 1795*Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* to be the first work in the genre, though of course more ancient narratives touch on themes of maturation. During the nineteenth century, works such as *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë and *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens dealt with the struggle to find one’s identity within a rigid class structure.

When adolescence became recognized as a distinct period of life near the beginning of the 20th century, bildungsromane such as J.D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* and Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar* directly addressed the sense of alienation that often occurs during that confusing stage.

Here at the beginning of the twenty-first century the genre is evolving once again. Series such as *Harry Potter* and *Twilight* increasingly engage elements of fantasy and the paranormal, and one might also expect future bildungsromane to increasingly emphasize self-identity in a pluralistic and multicultural society.

Some novels about growing up

The Art of Fielding by Chad Harbach

\*The Perks of Being a Wallflower by Stephen Chbosky

Wait Until Spring, Bandini by John Fante

Skippy Dies by Paul Murray

Allegra Maud Goldman by Edith Konecky

Prep by Curtis Sittenfeld

Fun Home by Alison Bechdel

How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accent by Julie Alvarez

The Red Badge of Courage by Stephen Crane

The Chocolate War by Robert Cormier

Go Ask Alice by Anonymous

A Hero Ain’t Nothing but a Sandwich by Alice Childress

\*I Know Why a Caged Bird Sings by Maya Angelou

\*Little Women by Lousia May Alcott

A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man by James Joyce

\*Stealing Buddha’s Dinner by Bich Minh Nguyen

\*A Tree Grows in Brooklyn by Betty Smith

\*Goodbye, Columbus Philip Roth

Absolute Beginners by Colin MacInnes

The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole Aged 13 1/3 by Sue Townsend

The Growing Pains of Adrian Mole by Sue Townsend

\*Great Expectations by Charles Dickens

\*Jane Eyre by Charlotte Bronte

Never Let Me Go by Kazuo Ishiguro

\*The Outsiders by SE Hinton

\*Catcher in the Rye by JD Salinger

American Born Chinese by [Gene Luen Yang](http://www.goodreads.com/author/show/68959.Gene_Luen_Yang)

Websites for novel about growing up

<http://www.shortlist.com/entertainment/books/the-30-best-coming-of-age-novels>

<http://bildungsromanproject.com/list>

The Project:

1. Find a novel that you have not read and that no one else in our class has chosen. (Physically due Tuesday.)
2. Read that novel over a three to four week period while writing a reaction journal (directions and format to follow)
3. See a film as a class on the theme “Growing Up”
4. Do a project that shares your novel with the group (directions and rubric to follow)