

PROFESSIONAL CONNECTION

Column Editor Kathleen M. Carico

Professional Journal Articles and the Novels they Illuminate: A Resource for YAL Courses

Kathleen M. Carico

Articles related to young adult literature are currently many in number and wide in the range of topics they cover. They can be used by teachers in a number of ways: to gain a deeper understanding of and appreciation for a novel; to consider specific issues related to novel; to learn about strategies for teaching; to connect literary theory and the classroom. For someone teaching a young adult literature methods on the college or university level, it is entirely possible to construct a syllabus from the body of articles in *The ALAN Review* alone, and there are many other journals that focus on young adult literature, as well. For this column, I selected journal articles that feature young adult novels and, in the commentary, cover a topic of importance in the teaching of adolescent literature: theory, social issues, history, exposition, practice. The column is divided by the novels under consideration, and each segment contains a summary of the novel, a summary of the accompanying article, as well as information about the journal and the article topics.

***Park's Quest*, by Katherine Paterson**

This is the story of Parkington Waddell Broughton the Fifth (AKA Park), whose father died in Vietnam when he was three months old. While Park was growing up, his mother talked very little about his father, and when Park would inquire, she relied on the cliched response, "You're too young to understand." When Park reaches adolescence, and it becomes clear that he is still "too young to understand," he begins to take his quest for information matters into his own hands. When he hears about the dedication ceremony for the Vietnam Memorial, and learning his mother will not attend or take him, he goes himself. The experience of touching his father's name etched on the Wall only spurs him on to learn more about his father. Buoyed by remembrances of the Arthurian legends that captured his imagination at school, his journey begins with a trip to his father's home in southwest Virginia. The rest of the book tells the tale of his personal quest and its unforeseen conclusion.

Article: "Validating the Personal in Katherine Paterson's *Park's Quest*," by Robert Lockhart. *The ALAN Review* (See inside front cover of this issue for information.) (Full citations are provided in the reference list at the end of this column.)"

Topics: A transactional theory of reading; pedagogical implications

Summary: Robert Lockhart's article provides readers with an excellent foundation for understanding a transactional

theory of reading. Lockhart does this by first explicating the theory and then by illustrating it with *Park's Quest*. His is the first article I assign in my young adult literature methods class, and my goal of teaching pre-service teachers the nature and importance of transactional reading is made attainable through the description of Lockhart's own powerful transaction with the novel.

That *Park's Quest* would evoke a very personal response from Lockhart seems inevitable because his experiences so closely mirror Park's. Lockhart describes the day he and his mother watched the Marine Corps officers approach their house to tell them his father had been killed in Vietnam. And the feelings Park later experienced as he searched for information about his father were similar to Lockhart's as he looked through his mother's memorabilia for clues about his father's life. He and Park shared the same anger at their loss and confusion at the questions surrounding it. Most poignant is the double vision of Lockhart and Park, as Lockhart describes his reaction when he read about Park's trip to the Vietnam Memorial: "So when Park reached out to touch the wall, I was not dispassionately reading the story of someone to whom I could not relate. ... As Park reached out and touch the black wall, my heart raced because my hand, too, was reaching out" (p. 12).

Lockhart's story deeply affects my students and me when we read and discuss it, but the point he makes with the story is no less powerful in its context: "When we enter the literary discussion of the novel as human beings, we can understand the personal nature of the event of reading" (p. 14). Without an understanding of the personal nature of reading, transactional theory cannot be appreciated, and a pedagogy informed by it impossible. If the meaning of literature is even in some part dependent on the reader, then our teaching will reflect the reader's importance. From that foundation, we can lead students to a deeper, more meaningful experience with literature.

***I Hadn't Meant to Tell You This*, by Jacqueline Woodson**

Marie is the young adolescent narrator in this story of her brief but momentous friendship with Lena, a poor White classmate who is new to Marie's predominantly Black 8th grade class at Chauncey Middle School. At first seemingly opposite in ways beyond the color of their skin, the two girls form a bond based initially on the fact that neither of them has a mother living with them: Lena's died from breast cancer; Marie's left her and her father two years ago in what

was clearly a state of depression and out of a desperate need, as her mother would say, to breathe. The death of Lena's mother put Lena at the mercy of her father, who began to abuse her sexually. When Marie's mother left, her father retreated into his grief and, though it is clear he still loves Marie and cares for her financial and physical needs, he distances himself emotionally from her, no longer hugging and kissing her as he did when she was a younger child. Thus, both girls suffer, not only from the loss of their mothers, but from the hurt and confusion caused by their fathers as well. Gradually, the friendship between Marie and Lena deepens as they get to know each other and begin to offer each other emotional support.

The numerous personal and social issues in the book come together convincingly through the story of the friendship. First there is the poverty that disadvantages Lena, and the wealth that privileges Marie and makes it difficult initially for her to see past Lena's outward appearance. Second, negativity toward interracial relationships characterize both fathers' attitudes as well as the attitudes of many in the student body of Chauncey Middle School. Third, the challenges of adolescence are significant, as both girls must navigate motherless through the changes, with Lena's problems exacerbated by the abuse. Finally, when Lena's father begins his assault on her younger sister, Lena is forced to make a decision that will forever change her life and her friendship with Marie.

Article: "Who's Protecting Whom? *I Hadn't Meant to Tell You This*, A Case in Point in Confronting Self-censorship in the Choice of Young Adult Literature," by Freedman and Johnson in *The Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, a publication of the International Reading Association.

Topics: Censorship and the importance of developing school or district policies; ideas for handling discussions of controversial issues; the difference between self-censorship and selection; the richness of conversation that is possible when students are allowed to spend time responding to literature.

Summary: This article focuses on the outcomes of a study of teachers' and students' responses to *I Hadn't Meant to Tell You This*. 15 in-service middle school teachers and 11 middle school girls discussed the book in terms of its attention to racism, sexual abuse, and friendship. Their responses revealed that the study raised awareness of the deeper issues of the novel. For example, the participants discussed the significance of Marie's decision to act independently from her peer group by being Lena's friend. Independence was also a characteristic they ascribed to Lena and one they admired. In another example, both groups discussed the issue of sexual abuse, even while seemingly reluctant to name it as "sexual," instead describing it as "the problem Lena had" or "improper attention." What may have been most important in this conversation, however, was the discovery that neither group was confident that they knew how to handle this kind of topic in their own school environments.

Only one student participant referred to controversy in relation to the book, but it was used to describe the issues affecting Chauncey, Ohio, not to describe a potential problem created by the use of the book in schools. However, though the teacher participants saw the importance of the issues the book raises—controversial and otherwise, nearly all of them admitted their unwillingness to use the book in

the classroom. The authors describe this paradox:

"It is distressing that all of the teachers (with one exception) were willing to self-censor this book when it is the controversy in it that makes it a powerful tool to equip young adolescents with the kinds of understandings and critical thinking that allow the "Lenas" in our classrooms to speak up. Through reading and discussing this book, the teachers and students could truly begin to grapple with solutions to the problems of racism, classism, and abuse of various kinds that currently plague U.S. society" (p. 364-365).

Their observation brings us to the major focus of the article: teachers' self-censorship and the resulting withholding of educative experiences for the students through reading and responding to literature such as *I Hadn't Meant to Tell You This*. Having illustrated the benefits found in discussing weighty issues through samples of the participants' responses, the authors make their case against censorship—and self-censorship in particular. While censorship is carried out by outside forces, and, though affected by outside forces surely, self-censorship is a decision the teacher makes herself. And while the issue is complex, the authors offer compelling reasons to tackle it again.

The Giver, by Lois Lowry

In this now-classic novel, author Lois Lowry details a utopian society through the eyes of Jonas, an eleven-year-old boy on the verge of adolescence. In this particular society, becoming twelve means Jonas will leave his childhood behind at the Ceremony of Twelve and embark on specialized training, as will the other "twelves" in his community. This Ceremony, involving a Ceremony of One, a Ceremony of Two, and so on, is attended by all in the community, and moves each child below the age of 12 into the next stage of life, with its accompanying duties and privileges, all uniform, and all to be observed assiduously. In the Ceremony of Twelve, Jonas is assigned to be the next Receiver of Memory, and his training will reveal to him that life he had known in his community, an experience he believed to be universal, was a carefully constructed and scrupulously controlled world, beyond which lay an Elsewhere, where life was very different.

The current Receiver, who with Jonas' selection is now referred to as The Giver, shows Jonas these differences through the physical transmission of Memory. As The Giver lays his hands on Jonas, memories accumulated from the world before Sameness—the condition of uniformity and conformity that characterizes Jonas' community—reveal to him color, climate changes such as snow and heat, live animals rather than artistic representations of them, and the personal experiences absent from his former life: love, pain, and choice. As time goes on, Jonas continues to "see beyond," not just beyond the gray sameness of his community to a colorful world of difference, but beyond the seemingly benevolent and fair practices of his community. With a life and death struggle looming, Jonas and The Giver reach a decision that will put Jonas at great risk and will alter the course of the future for each of them and for the entire community.

Article: "Learning to 'See Beyond': Sixth-grade Students' Artistic Perceptions of *The Giver*," by Jessica Whitelaw and Shelby Wolf, *The New Advocate: For Those Involved with Young People and their Literature*, published by Christopher Gordon.

Topics: Aesthetic responses to literature; processes involved in responding through the visual arts; comprehension, interpretation

Summary: This article focuses on a 6th grade teacher's attempts to enhance the reading experiences for her students through aesthetic responses to literature. The authors begin with a helpful theoretical background in a section entitled, "Literary Interpretation and the Visual Arts." Drawing on the works of Eliot Eisner, Jeffrey Wilhelm, Kathy Short, Jerome Harste, Patricia Enciso, and others, they outline a process for using visual arts in reader response. The process begins with *envisioning*, or "calling on [the] bank of stored visual imagery in order to understand the words on the page" (p. 58). The second component is "composing," which, in the context of producing an aesthetic response, means putting the images on paper. The third component is interpretation, in this case, as a group or in small groups, using the artistic representations to inspire and guide a discussion of the novel.

In the second half of the article, the authors share Whitelaw's process of teaching aesthetic responses to her sixth grade class. The segments in this half are artfully framed (as befitting an article on aesthetic response) with *The Giver*. Each begins with a title and a quote which express a theme both of the novel and of the work the students will be asked to do. For example, the first section is entitled "Envisioning Utopia," named after a major theme of the novel, and the excerpted dialogue centers on The Giver's attempts to educate Jonas about his world and community. From there, the authors describe strategies to help the students explore the concept of utopia, from brainstorming to the creation of a visual to illustrate their explorations and to use as prompts for composition and discussion throughout the rest of the unit.

As a result of this unit, the students demonstrated a deeper understanding of the novel, an understanding created in a social process that encourages dialogue and exploration:

"...[T]he arts slowed them down, and in this decrease in pace they listened to, argued, and consulted with one another. In addition, by drawing attention to the elements of art, students were able to more ably imagine the possibilities for visual responses. In this way, the group's own Capacity to See Beyond was extended and enhanced" (p. 67).

Speak, by Laurie Halse Anderson

This novel deals with the subject of rape and recovery from it. As the title indicates, this novel is also about voice, and although Melinda is the narrator who gives voice to her story, this ability to speak about her ordeal comes only after a dark year of struggle to survive the trauma of rape.

The novel begins with the onset of Melinda's ninth grade year, and it becomes clear quickly that something has happened to her. Exactly what that is, the reader does not know until halfway through the book. What we do know is that in the middle of a summertime drinking party—the first one of its kind Melinda has attended—she, inexplicably, it seems, calls the police, who naturally come, raid the party and arrest a teenager. Thus she begins her year ostracized from her former middle school friends and carrying a secret that she cannot tell.

The book is divided into sections representing each of the four marking periods in a school year. As I read *Speak*, I was reminded of Matt Groening's cartoon collection, *School*

is Hell (1987). The majority of the cartoons focus on ineffective schools, the elements of which are vivid in one called, "High School: The 2nd Deepest Pit in Hell" (Junior High being the first): meaningless rhetoric; unhappy, unfulfilled teachers; empty activities; and irrelevant classes. These things are what Melinda sees as she struggles to survive the shock and confusion of her ordeal, and she begins to withdraw. As she becomes less and less involved and increasingly less visible in classes, the close of each marking period shows a steady drop in her grades. And as she finds no true friends in whom she can confide, and as the adults in her life seem to miscue at every encounter with her or stay consumed with their own needs, she begins to speak less and less as well.

Her sole emotional outlet and opportunity for at least intermittent success is art class, and the one person who presents an opportunity for making meaning and sense out of her life is the art teacher, Mr. Freeman. He stands out in the group of teachers portrayed in this book, not because of his positive attitude—he, too, is discouraged and frustrated—and not because of his appealing good looks and personality. Mr. Freeman stands out because he believes in the power of art, as he shares on the first day of school in what will be one of many frequent rants: "If you don't learn art now, you will never learn to breathe!!!" (p. 11). And it is largely through a year-long project he creates that Melinda is able to express the feelings she cannot speak out loud to anyone.

The novel is a look at high school from the perspective of a teen in trouble, and it is a look at the teen herself. It is not a pretty picture, but the author manages, partly through Melinda's witty commentary, to bring humor to what is a desperate situation. And Anderson does it without sacrificing any of the honesty of that situation. *Speak* is a powerful novel for teens as well as for teachers, guidance counselors, principals, parents.

Article: "Between Voice and Voicelessness: Transacting Silence in Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak*," by Elaine J. O'Quinn, *The ALAN Review*.

Topics: The power of story; expectations for girls and women; agency

Summary: In a thorough analysis, author Elaine O'Quinn offers a feminist interpretation of *Speak* as she relates the messages of agency she uncovered in Melinda's story. Melinda's silence, though imposed by outside forces, eventually becomes a means to recover, and, in many ways, to begin life anew.

"...Melinda, by story's end, refuses the frequently implied directive which says women must silently adjust their behavior rather than strengthen their presence to fit the crisis of experience" p. 55.

Melinda had to invoke silence in order to "strengthen her presence." Appropriating silence, which for centuries has connoted powerlessness and acquiescence, is one more choice women can make, O'Quinn suggests. And though for women in Melinda's circumstances, there is always the possibility that their enforced silence will be lethal, or, at the very least, damaging emotionally, O'Quinn's analysis shows how it can also be redemptive. The difference, according to O'Quinn, is "between being silent and being silenced" (p. 54), and it is clear in *Speak* that Melinda's experience could have easily resulted in her being silenced. Instead, Melinda ultimately listens not to the voices around her that attempt alternately to shame, ridicule and patronize her, but to her own inner voice. And she struggles to hear that voice as she moves

alone through painful encounters with friends, teachers, and family, who are ignorant of the truth of her circumstances. In the light of those circumstances, however, the folly and patent injustice of their demands that she live by social prescriptions for feminine behavior are made all the more prominent to the reader. Witnessing the power of this oppression, it is frighteningly clear that Melinda's was a very close call. O'Quinn's article and the powerful book she analyzes make it clear how much is at stake for our children and students.

Night, by Elie Wiesel

This is the now famous and tragic account of Wiesel's imprisonment in Auschwitz and Birkenau from 1944 until his liberation in 1945. As Hungarian Jews, Wiesel's family were forced into a ghetto in their hometown of Sighet and later transported to Auschwitz-Birkenau, where he and his father remained together until their transfer to Buchenwald. While in Sighet, Elie had been a very religious, observant Jew, but the experiences he encountered in the ghetto and in the camps gradually rob him of his faith. His father's death in Buchenwald left him alone with no more will to live, and if liberation had not occurred soon after, it is doubtful that Elie would have survived.

His is a small volume—in fact, many students choose to read it because it is thin—but it is a very difficult one to read because of the darkness of the deeds that other humans inflicted on Elie and his fellow sufferers in the camps. In the article summarized below, Alexander Hernandez (2001) responds the question so often asked about this and other novels dealing with horrific acts of human oppression: Why teach this to young people?

They need to understand that the seeds of prejudice and racism still lie just below our thin veneer of civilization, that racism and prejudice know neither color nor gender, and that acts of genocide are still being committed today, more than fifty years after the defeat of Nazi Germany. (p. 59)

Article: "Telling the Tale: Sharing Elie Wiesel's *Night* with Middle School Readers," by Alexander Hernandez, *English Journal*, published by the National Council of Teachers of English.

Topics: teaching an historical novel, professional development

Summary: Author Alexander Hernandez describes a nine-week unit on issues related to tolerance and prejudice, in which *Night* is central. This article is valuable for pre-service teachers because of the details Hernandez provides about the structure of his unit plan. Due to the dark and troubling issues of the Holocaust and of *Night* itself, it is important to pay special attention to how the unit is approached and how students are led through it. Hernandez's introductory readings on the themes students will encounter and his focus on the events leading up to the Holocaust provide an important context for what is to follow. For example, his study contrasting the Nuremberg Laws to the Bill of Rights could be a powerful way for American students to both grasp the terrible loss of freedom the Jewish people endured before the war began in earnest and gain a new appreciation for their own freedoms and responsibilities. His journal assignments are carefully chosen to move his students together toward an in-depth exploration of the books' topics and structure: loss of faith, the issue of "truth," binary oppositions, figurative language and symbolism, and the role of the narrator (p. 57). The unit ends as students gather stories of intoler-

ance from other historical eras and from the present to share and discuss.

As helpful as the unit summary is, the more striking part of the article is the story of the author's journey to "the gates of hell" (p. 55), as he describes his trip to Birkenau with a group of teachers studying the Holocaust. Reading about the effects of his trip on his teaching allows pre-service teachers to consider the value of outside experiences as a way to enhance teaching. The translation of Hernandez's experiences to his classroom, what he sees as bearing witness in the way that Wiesel exhorts, sets the study of *Night* in a context a bit closer to reality than is often possible in schools.

Spite Fences, by Trudy Krisher

It is 1960, and thirteen year old Maggie Pugh lives as imaginatively as she can in an oppressive home environment and in a Georgia community sharply divided between the rich and the poor, between White and Black. At home, her mother continually berates her soft-hearted salesman father for what she sees as the poor business skills that keep them on the edge of poverty. She is verbally and physically abusive to Maggie, while fawning over Maggie's beautiful sister Gardenia, in whom her hopes and ambitions rest. The next door neighbors, the Boggs family, are coarse and racist, the vilest of whom appears to be the son Virgil, an increasing threat to Maggie's safety. There are a few bright spots in Maggie's life: the love of her father and Gardenia; her friendship with Pert Wilson and with Zeke, the black peddler in town; and her camera, traded to her by Zeke and through which she is learning to see the world.

Knowing that Maggie is steady and mature beyond her years, Zeke gets her a job cleaning house and making deliveries for her employer to the post office, to the Black minister in town, and sometimes to Zeke. Maggie doesn't immediately realize that her deliveries are part of an information pipeline for a growing civil rights campaign in her town, until she discovers that her employer is himself Black and at the center of the movement. Meanwhile, the Boggs continue to be a thorn in the side of the Pugh family, and when Maggie narrowly escapes being raped by Virgil, Mama has the family erect a tall wooden fence between the two properties. What Maggie understands is Mama's decision to fence out the Boggs comes out of a reservoir of spite and hatred rather than concern for Maggie. Mama's bitterness grows, and when she eventually learns that Maggie has been working for a Black man, her anger boils over and Maggie knows she must leave or suffer severely at Mama's hands. Tension is also increasing among the townspeople, and soon Maggie finds herself right in the middle of the conflict.

Article: "Teaching Social Justice through Young Adult Literature," by Jacqueline N. Glasgow, *The English Journal*.

Topics: Social justice, integrating technology into literature study, audience

Summary: In this article Glasgow uses social identity theory to provide a framework for a unit addressing oppression in society and young adult literature. Glasgow considers the ways oppression impacts the development of adolescents in the novels through a series of questions about the characters, e.g., What is the naive stage? Is there evidence of acceptance of the dominant values? What events trigger resistance to the identity embedded in the dominant culture? (p. 57). During the unit, her university students,

paired with local high school students, were to choose from a list of nearly 40 books featuring some form of oppression (see p. 55), and correspond through e-mail about the novels chapter by chapter. In addition, they each were to develop Power Point presentations on the social justice issues in the novel, with the option of using excerpts from their best exchange related to social justice issues, an original metaphor to illustrate and explain, an illustrated quote from the novel, or some other device to interpret the issues in the novel.

Although a number of novels were included in her unit, Glasgow focuses on *Spite Fences* to illustrate her students' and their cyber-pals' responses to the assignments. These samples show the important conversations between the pals as well as a deep understanding of the racism, abuse, and hope that co-exist in Maggie's life. The article also shows how electronic media as simple as e-mail and Power Point (which is becoming more and more versatile as a multi-media tool) can be effective learning tools. In addition, the list of questions to determine the social identity development of the young adult protagonists is an excellent framework for understanding oppression as well as agency.

Plain City, by Virginia Hamilton

Plain City's main character is an adolescent with a burning desire to know her father. Making up an implausible fantasy that he is missing in Vietnam when the war ended five years before she was born, Buhlaire Sims is trying to fill in the gaps in a life that feels incomplete. Even though she is supported by the love of her aunts with whom she and her mother live, by her extended family in the town, and by the principal of her school, a man Buhlaire once declared was her father, she feels like a misfit. Part of the reason lies in her appearance. Though African American, her light skin and eyes and the honey-orange colored Rasta hair that frames her face make her feel she stands out from the other black students and teachers in her school. Her home in the projects makes her even more self-conscious, and, even worse, her mother's job as a singer and fan-dancer in a local club puts her clearly, she fears, in a lower class of people. As she searches for her father, she searches for herself and her place in the world, and the inner dialogue she carries out reveals both her personality and her struggle.

Article: "Remembering, Knowing, and Imagining: Writing under the Cold Eye of Toodie, the Witch Lady, My Muse," by Virginia Hamilton, *SIGNAL (Special Interest Group - a Network on Adolescent Literature)*, published by the International Reading Association.

Topics: a writer's process; life reflected in fiction

Summary: I include this article, not simply because it refers to *Plain City*, but because it represents an important genre for our students to encounter: author commentary. In *SIGNAL*, as in *The ALAN Review*, authors' speeches or interviews with them are often featured, and through them, we may get a better understanding of their works. (Hamilton's article was taken from a speech delivered at the IRA Young Adult Literature Institute in April, 2000.) However, what may be equally valuable is the glimpse we are afforded of a writer's process, which can serve as a partial demystification of the writer and writing, for us and for our students. Thus, we are given a view of writing as work done by real flesh and blood creatures who, as Hamilton declares in this article, simply from what they know. Hamilton states that after publishing her twentieth book, "...I looked back

and discovered that every novel of mine has a core of true happening." Additionally, we can discover the work of the muse in an writer's life. Hamilton named her muse "Toodie":

"Toodie lives. She is where I come from, what I was, how hard it was, how I learned, what I never had time to figure out, what I loved and hated. Toodie, the shadowy herstory of my personal bloodline and the skinny of my being and becoming. Toodie is generations, the past, present and future, pursuing, prowling, snooping, always tracking me, helping me figure out how it all works" (p. 10).

Thus, according to Hamilton even a muse comes partly from what and who a writer is and knows.

I also include the article as a tribute to Virginia Hamilton, who died last year. Her words, whether in speeches or in one of her numerous award-winning books, deserve to be remembered and read.

Concluding Remarks

Matters of theory and pedagogy are often made salient when set in the context of a novel that speaks to the students. Reciprocally, the novel that heretofore may not have seemed particularly special often takes on new relevance when supplemented with an article that illuminates in it some way. I've touched on only a few articles in this column. There are hundreds more, many in other fine international, national, and state journals, just waiting to be discovered!

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