

THE PUBLISHERS' CONNECTION

Column Editor M. Jerry Weiss

Potpourri

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Drama and Audiobooks

As a high school teacher of English and teacher at the college/university level, I have often used audiovisual materials to show students the relationships between print and media. (I still believe in Marshall McLuhan. I can thank NCTE for the indoctrination.) Even though times have changed, I know that the use of good media, such as the *BFA American Folklore Series*, and well performed audiobooks can enhance teaching and motivate students to read and write critically and more creatively.

Random House Audiobooks deserves special recognition. They have produced unabridged versions of some of this year's prize-winning books:

A Single Shard, 2002 Newbery Medal novel by Linda Sue Park, read by Graeme Malcolm;

The Land, 2002 Coretta Scott King Award novel by Mildred Taylor, read by Ruben Santiago-Hudson;

True Believer, 2001 National Book Award novel by Virginia Euwer Wolff, read by Heather Alicia Simms;

The Golden Compass, *The Subtle Knife*, *The Amber Spy Glass*, novels by Philip Pullman, performed by the author and a full cast in wonderful dramatic versions.

I feel assured that playing any of these tapes while students listen will motivate students to explore the books. It's also a great way to have students discuss the talents necessary for being effective storytellers. I would have no qualms in having students sign up to become storytellers themselves. They might begin by reading stories for younger readers, no abridging allowed. If some want to attempt a dramatization for *See You Later, Gladiator* by Jon Scieszka, they can get on the Website for Jon Scieszka and Lane Smith, <http://www.chucklebait.com/>, and request information about the script that Jon has adapted on this funderful Time Warp Trio adventure. Students should feel free to select any books they want to read or dramatize. The Tower High School adventures created through the poetry of Mel Glenn are also good for readers' theater. Hooray for a little drama in the classroom.

I have found the Drama Book Shop, 250 West 40th Street, New York, NY 10018, to be my most valuable source for any materials on any phase of the performing arts. Its toll free number is 1-800-322-0595, and its Web address is www.dramabookshop.com. It is a valuable resource; I have found copies of plays I have wanted to use as part of various themes. How many recent plays have you used recently?

Some Random Thoughts

Not too long ago I was asked to be a visiting professor to teach a course on young adult literature to students who were getting a Masters Degree in Teaching. These were students who had degrees in English as undergraduates and had since decided they wanted to become teachers. They matriculated in this special program which would lead to certification and also give them a master's degree. This program did require student teaching.

The students, for the most part, were young and bright. They had undergraduate degrees from a number of different colleges and universities. None had had any experience with young adult literature. Some even assured me they would never use young adult literature since they were going to become teachers of honor classes in various senior high schools, and therefore had little use for these materials. A couple thought they might wind up in middle schools. None of these students was thinking seriously about the possibility of getting jobs in urban areas where the reading interests and abilities are quite diverse. I still required them to read twenty-five books and wouldn't relinquish any of the oral and written assignments I had made.

Several students challenged me with this comment: "If these books are so important, why didn't our undergraduate professors mention them or advise us to take a course in young adult literature?" I replied that I didn't have an answer. Maybe the department had no one to teach such a course or anyone who had a particular interest in such books. How are we to answer?

I should add that most of these students admitted that the only course that they had in dramatic literature was Shakespeare. None, and I repeat NONE, had ever heard of Eugene O'Neill. A few had read Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*, Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*. "If we wanted to read plays, we would have majored in drama, not English." I questioned how they could compartmentalize literature. We know we study literature by various periods in history, and the arts often reflect on the ideas and creativity of that period. Wouldn't it be important to know about the contributions of dramatists, as well as the novelists and poets, in the 20th century? Aren't there young adult books that reflect the various times of this past century? See Don Gallo's excellent anthology, *Time Capsule: Short Stories about Teenagers Throughout the Twentieth Century*. Each author has taken a different decade as the setting for the story. (For young adult

literature that focuses on the future, please see Michael Cart's anthology, *Tomorrowland: 10 Stories about the Future*).

And I Thought, "Where or When or Once Again"

Now let's look at one more scene. It was a meeting of a state affiliate of the NCTE. About 60 people attended a late afternoon, early evening session, highlighted by a speaker talking on the current state assessment tests and what techniques might be helpful in preparing students for such exams. Four workshops followed, and I was invited to speak on what's happening in young adult literature. While most of the participants in this workshop were interested in hearing my ideas about thematic teaching and using a mixture of classics with young adult literature, there were two young women, both in their 30's, who assured me that I was not responsible in recommending books by such writers as Robert Cormier, Chris Crutcher, Avi, Mildred Taylor, Walter Dean Myers, Suzanne Fisher Staples, Paul Zindel, among others. They asked me if I think such authors as these should replace Thomas Hardy, and that *Fade* or *Stotan!* should replace *The Return of the Native*. They continued by asking, "How can you compare the rich use of language one gets through the study of the classics?" I assured the women that I was not against the classics. I was suggesting literature that could be used with the classics. As it turned out, their argument for "the rich language" made me wonder if their English classes were places for vocabulary development. I tried to get them to see the variety of historical fiction available which could enhance vocabulary as any novel could. No such luck. Other teachers tried to make suggestions to them, but to no avail.

So, the problem continues. I find many high school teachers reluctant to use young adult literature. They talk about "standards." I tell them that the books I'm talking about have been written by very good writers who have standards also. I go on to talk about books that deal with real social issues that seem to reach many teenagers. For example, I mention *The Counterfeit Son* by Elaine Marie Alphin, winner of an Edgar Allan Poe Award. This book is a shocker with a focus on child abuse, a serial murderer, and a plan by a boy who tries to take the place of a missing son and who has to live constantly with the fear of being found out. The boy has suffered much from physical abuse; now he is finding the genuine pain of psychological fear. The author has done a brilliant job in creating this character of Cameron Miller/Neil Lacey.

Other students could read *America* by E. R. Frank, the story of an abused child now in a psychiatric setting who fights and needs his therapist. He has set his home on fire, and a man who was abusing him died in the fire. What is a kid to do? How do you get over the shame and the pain of years of abuse?

When Jeff Comes Home, by Catherine Atkins, is the story of a teen who is kidnapped, abused, and returns home after having disappeared for two and a half years. It's not easy picking up the pieces. How does one adjust to returning to school after missing two and a half years and not wanting to talk about the humiliating experiences? In this novel there is a challenging situation involving a so-called best friend's reactions to what Jeff has gone through. Yes, it hurts.

And then there is the novel by Susan Beth Pfeffer, *The Year*

Without Michael. This story is as perplexing as the others by its conclusion. How do you resolve a story about a missing child, not knowing what happened to him? My students asked Susan, "What happened to Michael? Is he OK? Will he return?" Susan threw the questions back to them, asking, "What do you think?" But the readers were deeply touched and concerned. Isn't that the involvement one wants?

A number of years ago, I had the assignment to develop the Teacher's Guide for Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* in conjunction with the release of the movie which starred Gregory Peck. In many schools this book is used to teach about prejudice and the thwarting for justice. Now we have a few more books that provoke thought about law and order in the South. Chris Crowe's *Mississippi Trial, 1955*, shows the impact of the murder of a young black man on a young white man and his observations of a community and a grandfather he is trying to understand. Karen Hesse's *Witness* shows the rise of the Ku Klux Klan in a small Vermont town and the threats to a young Jewish girl and a young Black girl. The story is told completely through poetry, and it is interesting to see what is in the minds of those who inhabit the small town.

harvey says:

the ku klux klan are here, vi.

there's not a thing to stop them. we might as well join them.

why not?

they're not low-down, like some folks say.

they're good men,

100 percent good american men.

and they might bring us some business. (p. 24)

Suzanne Fisher Staples, in *Dangerous Skies*, opens with two thirteen-year-old young people, best friends, a Black girl, Tunes, and white boy, Buck, who discover a dead body in the water while they are out fishing. Staples draws the characters into her web of intrigue as the reader tries to figure out how justice will result in this Virginia community. Tunes knows more than she wants to admit, even to her best friend.

I (Buck) turned to Tunes. She just stood there, her arms out at near shoulder level, like she was balancing on a high wire, her breath all sucked in. "Hold on to this so's I can get a line on him. We got to tow him back to the dock."

Tunes looked at me like I was crazy. Without a word she jumped over the gunwale. The chilly water poured over the tops of her rubber fishing boots, but she seemed not to notice or mind. She stood looking at me for a long moment over the angle of her shoulder. Then without a word she turned and slogged through the marsh, knee-deep in the thick marsh grass and sucking mud. "Tunes, come back here! Where you going? Tunes, I need you!" (pp. 26-27)

While Tunes hides out, Buck continues to come to her, to try to help her. It isn't until late in the novel that the pieces come together. Tunes is a hunted person. But is she the killer or responsible for the killing? Who else knows? How will a Southern jury react to the testimony of a young black girl? Great story.

9/11/01 – One Year Later

The grim tragedy that struck these shores in New York, Pennsylvania, and Washington, D.C., on September 11, 2001, has led at least three publishers to publish books for young

adult readers. Each is quite different and unusually good.

Cricket Books has published *9/11: The Book of Help*, edited by Michael Cart. Here is a collection of essays, short stories, poems, and a short play by well-known authors. One entry is by Katherine Paterson, who describes the pains she went through in writing *Bridge to Terabithia*. When David, one of her sons, was in second grade, he came home from school with the news that he and Lisa Hill, his good friend, were going to make a diorama of Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House in the Big Woods*. The two children really enjoyed each other, playing games, laughing at each other's jokes, and in the spring they both turned eight. Then one night the phone rang. Lisa was dead; she was killed by lightning on a bright sunny afternoon. David seemed convinced that Lisa died because God had made a list and was going to kill of everyone he loved. Ms. Paterson explained that this was one of the toughest books for her to write. Yet, it was an important book. "I couldn't comfort my grieving child. So I would do what I could. I would write a story that would somehow help me make sense of this senseless tragedy." And she did. The book is 25 years old in 2002 and has sold millions of copies. She concludes her entry by stating:

"I believe this is the task of all the arts—of literature, music, dance, theater, the graphic arts—to sustain us with illumination, to heal us, to repair our devastated spirits. Art takes the pain and chaos of our broken world and transforms it into something that brings forth life." (p. 12)

Russell Friedman describes in detail "A Candlelight Vigil At the Fireman's Monument" at 100th Street and Riverside Park in New York City. The event took place on September 14—three days after the terror attack. Several hundred people participated, holding candles, speaking softly with friends and hugging each other. When someone began to sing "We Shall Overcome," the crowd joined in. And then they sang "God Bless America." Then the crowd moved slowly up 100th Street to the local firehouse, and when they saw the firemen, they called out, "Thank You," "God bless you," "You're all our heroes!" And then they belted out "God Bless America," singing for those who lost their lives, those who were injured, and those who were the many heroes of the day. A very moving piece.

Jim Giblin describes "Three Crises," Sept. 11, the attack on Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941, and the Cuban Missile Crisis in October 1962. How did he react to the three events and the following days? How did people help each other?

Other writers in Cart's collection include Virginia Euwer Wolff, Sonya Sones, Marion Dane Bauer, Arnold Adoff, Nikki Giovanni, Joan Bauer, Avi, Jim Murphy, Kyoki Mori, Susanne Fisher Staples, Walter Dean Myers, Margaret Mahy, Sharon Creech, Chris Raschka. This an important book for students to read and to discuss.

Scholastic has published *The New York Times A Nation Challenged: A Visual History of 9/11 and Its Aftermath—Young Readers Edition*. The photographs and text by The New York Times reporters are outstanding. The book is divided into four parts: "September 11, 2001," "The Days After," "Meeting the people, the clean-up process, the response by President Bush in launching a "war " in Afghanistan, and reactions to new threats, indicated what people are doing and can do to sustain America the Beautiful. This is a significant book of memories and reminders of what we all can do in these days of continued crises.

Harper Tempest has published *With Their Eyes*, edited by Annie Thoms, an English teacher and theater advisor at Stuyvesant High School, New York City. The school is near ground zero and had to be evacuated for several weeks. Ms. Thoms knew she was going to be responsible for the Winter Drama. "What if, I thought, we created a play in which Stuyvesant students were able to tell their own stories, and the stories of others in our community, about our experiences on September 11?"

After choosing a student director and two student producers, the group sent out word to all students that they wanted to assemble a cast that reflected the diversity of the school, 50 percent Asian, 40 percent white, and the rest made up a Black and Latino students. After the cast was chosen, students were given tape recorders, and they were to go out and interview two or three people. (They were following the dramatic techniques and performances of Anna Deavere Smith, who is well known for her performances and plays *Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights, Brooklyn and other Identities*; *Twilight, Los Angeles, 1992*; and *House Arrest*.) The play focused not only on September 11th, but also covered reactions and events days, weeks, and months that followed. After recording the interviews, the students had to transcribe the interviews, word for word, with pauses, repeating of words, changing of thoughts a people spoke. The motions and gestures of the people had to be captured, also. Then the monologues had to be put into some order that built as the play went along. There was humor in the remarks, and this was a protective coating for the seriousness of the drama. Some of the real names of the students were used, and other preferred to be anonymous. The actors realized it was important they portray the individuals as realistically as possible and to make sure their performances were not caricatures. (Some special education students were interviewed also and their remarks were included in the play.) Ten actors played all of the parts, changing costumes right on stage and becoming the different characters. The play was performed on February 8 and 9, 2002, before friends from outside Stuyvesant. Several media organizations covered the performances also. The productions received standing ovations.

The text of the play includes many reactions to the tragedy, the fears and tears in the closing of the school and having to go on a split session at Brooklyn Tech, the volunteer work of many students, the remarks heard within and outside the school. What a production!

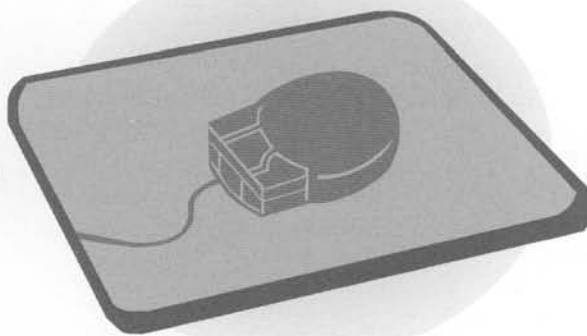
Yes, the authors of many young adult books and the publishers are producing relevant reading—and audio—materials for today's students. Here is a challenging cry to mix the best of today with the best of yesterday. Students need to know that there are many good writers penning poems, stories, nonfiction, novels, and plays today. Not all good writers are dead or from other time periods. Let's give students a balanced curriculum.

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**Have you
tried these
Web sites yet?**



ALAN:

<http://www.alan-ya.org>

The ALAN Review:

<http://scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournal/ALAN/alan-review.html>

National Council of Teachers of English:

<http://www.ncte.org>

The ALAN Review Web site has recently been recognized by researchers at Lightspan's StudyWeb as "one of the best educational resources on the Web."

It has been featured on studyweb.com.