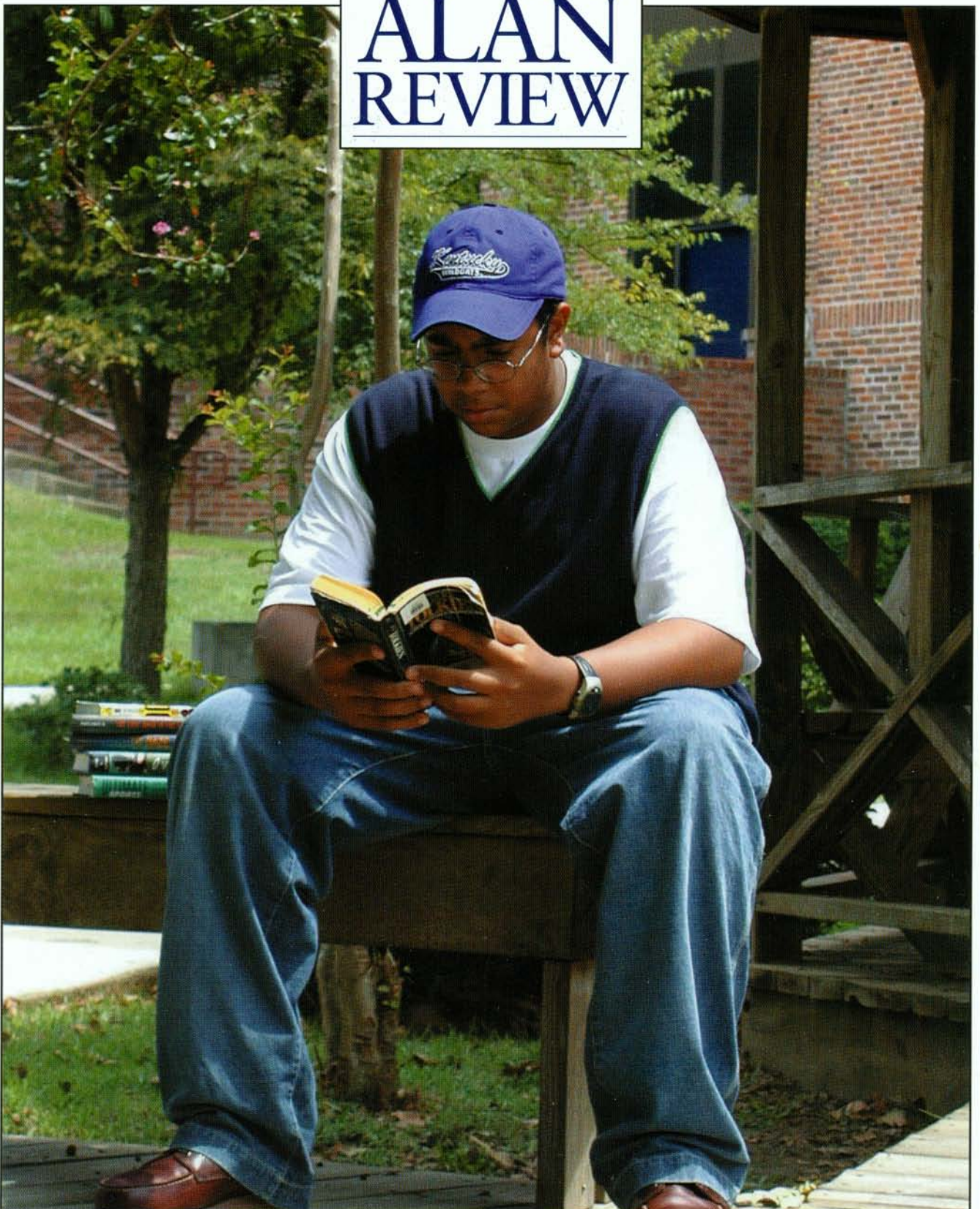


Volume 30

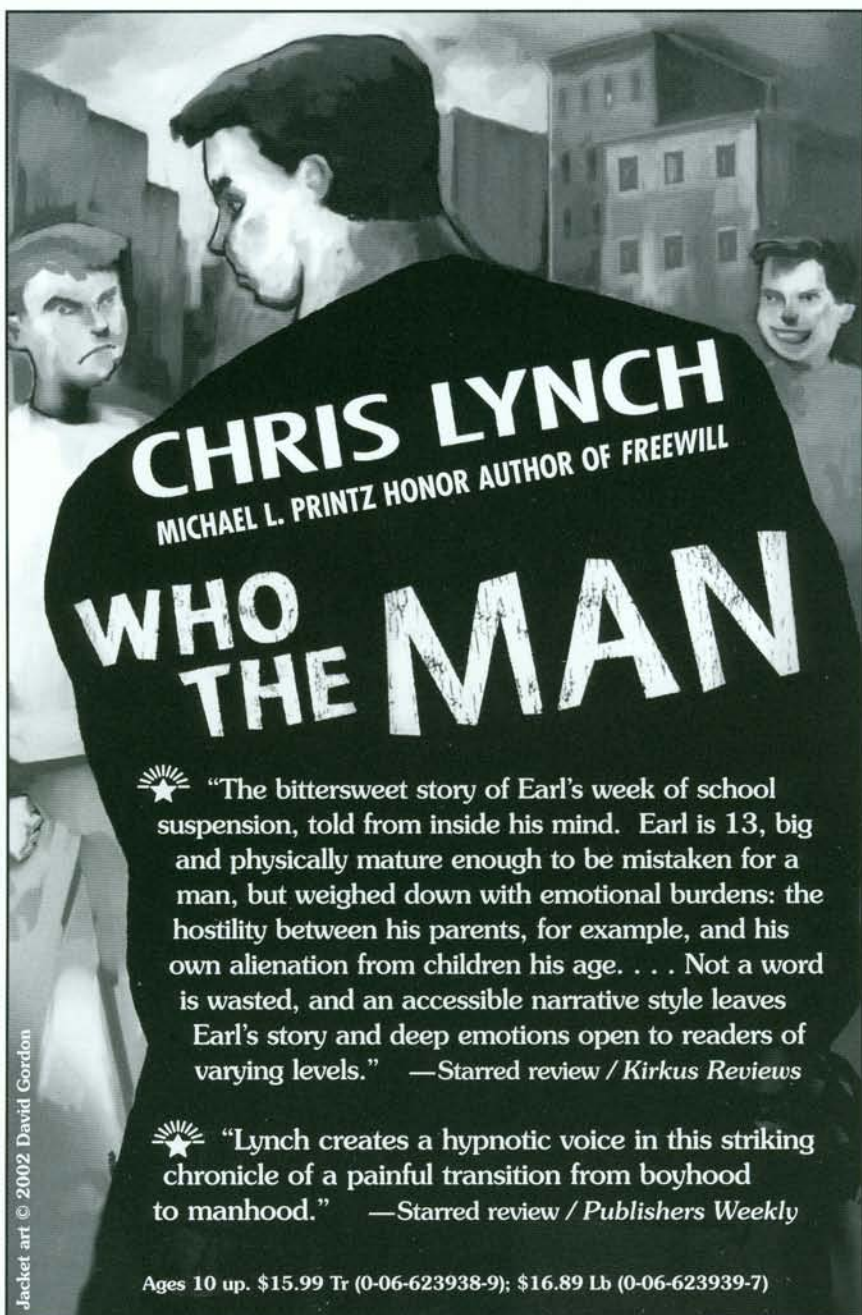
Spring/Summer 2003

Number Three

T • H • E
ALAN
REVIEW



Assembly on Literature for Adolescents of the National Council of Teachers of English



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CHRIS LYNCH
MICHAEL L. PRINTZ HONOR AUTHOR OF FREEWILL

WHO THE MAN

★ "The bittersweet story of Earl's week of school suspension, told from inside his mind. Earl is 13, big and physically mature enough to be mistaken for a man, but weighed down with emotional burdens: the hostility between his parents, for example, and his own alienation from children his age. . . . Not a word is wasted, and an accessible narrative style leaves Earl's story and deep emotions open to readers of varying levels." —Starred review / *Kirkus Reviews*

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REVIEW

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ABOUT THE ALAN REVIEW. The ALAN Review is a peer-reviewed (refereed) journal published by the Assembly on Literature for Adolescents of the National Council of Teachers of English. It is devoted solely to the field of literature for adolescents. It is published three times per academic year (fall, winter, and spring) and is sent to all members, individual and institutional, of ALAN (The Assembly on Literature for Adolescents of NCTE). Members of ALAN need not be members of NCTE.

THE ALAN REVIEW publishes reviews of and articles on literature for adolescents and the teaching of that literature: research studies, papers presented at professional meetings, surveys of the literature, critiques of the literature, articles about authors, comparative studies across genre and/or cultures, articles on ways to teach the literature to adolescents, and interviews of authors.

AUDIENCE. Many of the individual members of ALAN are classroom teachers of English in middle, junior, and senior high schools. Other readers include university faculty members in English and/or Education programs, researchers in the field of adolescent literature, librarians, authors, publishers, reading teachers and teachers of other related content areas. ALAN has members in all 50 states and a number of foreign countries.

PREFERRED STYLE. Manuscripts should usually be no longer than fifteen double spaced, typed pages. A manuscript submitted for consideration should deal specifically with literature for adolescents and/or the teaching of that literature. It should have a **clearly defined topic** and be scholarly in content, as well as **practical and useful** to people working with and/or studying adolescents and their literature. Research studies and papers should be treated as **articles rather than formal reports**. Stereotyping on the basis of sex, race, age, etc., should be avoided, as should gender specific terms such as "chairman."

MANUSCRIPT FORMAT. Manuscripts should be **double spaced** throughout, including quotations and bibliographies. A **title page** with author's name, affiliation, address, and a short professional biographical sketch should be included. The author's name should not appear on the manuscript pages; however, pages should be numbered. Short quotations, as permitted under "fair use" in the copyright law, must be **carefully documented within the manuscript** and in the bibliography. Longer quotations and complete poems or short stories must be accompanied by **written permission** of the author and/or publisher.

Author interviews should be accompanied by **written permission of the interviewed author** to publish the interview in *The ALAN Review*. Interviewers should indicate to authors that publication is subject to review of an editorial board. The title of *The ALAN Review* should not be used to gain an interview.

Original short **tables and figures** should be **double-spaced** and placed on a **separate sheet** at the end of the manuscript. Notations should appear in the text for proper placement of tables and figures.

The ALAN Review prefers the use of the Publications Manual of the Modern Language Association. A 3 1/2-inch MS-DOS disk in either a recent version of Word or Word Perfect format must accompany all manuscripts. Disks must be clearly labeled with author's name, manuscript title, disk format, and file title.

SUBMITTING THE MANUSCRIPT. Send three clear copies and a disk of the manuscript to: Dr. James Blasingame, Co-Editor, *The ALAN Review*, Department of English/English Education, College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, P.O. Box 870302, Arizona State University, Tempe, Arizona 85287-0302.

Include a self-addressed stamped envelope to which return stamps are clipped. The manuscript cannot be returned if the envelope and stamps are not included. Articles submitted only by facsimile or e-mail cannot be considered, except when sent from overseas.

REVIEW PROCESS. Each manuscript will receive a blind review by the editor and at least two members of the editorial review board, unless the length, style, or content makes it inappropriate for publication. Usually, authors should expect to hear the results within eight weeks.

Manuscripts are judged for the contribution they make to the field of adolescent literature, clarity and cohesiveness, timeliness, and freshness of approach. Selection also depends on the manuscript's contribution to the overall balance of the journal.

PUBLICATION OF ARTICLES. *The ALAN Review* assumes that accepted manuscripts have not been published previously in any other journals and/or books, nor will they be published subsequently without permission of *The ALAN Review*. Should the author submit the manuscript to more than one publication, he/she should notify *The ALAN Review*. If a submitted or accepted manuscript is accepted by another publication prior to publication in *The ALAN Review*, the author should immediately withdraw the manuscript from publication in *The ALAN Review*.

Manuscripts that are accepted may be edited for clarity, accuracy, readability, and publication style.

Upon publication, the author will receive two copies of *The ALAN Review* in which the article appears. Publication usually occurs within 18 months of acceptance.

A manuscript published in *The ALAN Review* is considered to have been copyrighted by the author of the article.

DEADLINES. Please follow these deadlines if you wish to have your article considered for a particular issue of *The ALAN Review*:

FALL ISSUE Deadline: JULY 15
 WINTER ISSUE Deadline: OCTOBER 15
 SPRING ISSUE Deadline: MARCH 15

Please note that the journal will be organized to reflect the following focus in each issue, but that the focus will not restrict attention to other issues:

Fall Issue: Authors, Issues, and Concerns in YA Literature for High School Readers
Winter Issue: Authors, Issues, and Concerns in YA Literature for Middle School Readers
Spring Issue: Authors, Issues, and Concerns in Using YA Literature for Interdisciplinary Instruction

A Note from the Editor

Eudora Welty wrote, in *One Writer's Beginnings*:

It is our inward journey that leads us through time — forward or back, seldom in a straight line, most often spiraling. Each of us is moving, changing, with respect to others. As we discover, we remember; remembering, we discover; and most intensely do we experience this when our separate journeys converge.

Editing *The ALAN Review* has been an inward journey, in many ways, for me. In preparing this issue, the last one I have the pleasure of editing, I have been thinking back about what the experience has taught me, and how it has changed me. And as I have discovered, I have remembered.

I remember Paul Zindel's *My Darling, My Hamburger* as my introduction to YA literature. In remembering, I have discovered, with Zindel's death in April, 2003, what many of you have known all along: his work has had an indisputable impact not only on the field of YA literature, but on our individual professional development, as well.

I remember the teachers who broke tradition to bring young adult books into secondary school classrooms I sat in during the 1970s, and the university teacher-preparation courses I took, under Dr. Terry Ley's guidance, where I first swam in an ocean of YA books. In remembering, I have discovered that YAL will be always be part of my identity—as a professional and a person. In remembering my early encounters with the genre, I have also discovered that great gaps still exist in my own reading and understanding of the field. I know too little about science fiction; I haven't read enough by writers from other countries; I already can't recall the IRA Best Book choices for 2002; so many research questions are left unasked; the list of my deficits goes on and on. So I keep reading and ruminating.

While thinking about my time as editor, I remember the frustration of young teachers who have written to me about trying to assign contemporary adolescent novels, only to be told by department chairs that they must stick to a rigid canon of recognized classics. And in remembering, I have discovered the significance of the work of leaders like Dr. John Simmons and the late Anne Webb (the latter of whom is remembered on pages 5-6 here), who urge us to question censorship in its blatant and subtle forms.

I remember the joy of teachers who have been convinced that they have "nothing to say" to an audience of readers until they see their articles published in the journal, and am humbled by their enthusiasm and intelligence. And in remembering, I have discovered that teachers too often hide their talents, assuming that their contributions are pedestrian, common, unimportant. And I remember that feeling...and the cycle continues...

The role of editor has, foremost, given me a chance to find the places in which the "separate journeys" that we, as YAL advocates take, "converge." This convergence, this chance to be part of a much bigger whole, has been, for me, an extraordinarily powerful and meaningful experience.

I want to thank the many authors and publishers, writers, readers, and critics of *The ALAN Review*, for your contributions to the journal during the past five years. I would like to give special public thanks to these folks, members of the "team," without whom I could not have done the job, period:

Dr. Pat Kelly and Dr. Robert Small, previous editors, who continually answer questions for me and give encouraging boosts, and to Dr. Jim Blasingame and Lori Goodson for helping me with this issue during the transition to their move into the editor's seat this fall;

Dr. Gail P. Gregg, Assistant Editor, who has an amazing ability to cut to the chase to get jobs done, is a constant encouragement, and treasured friend;

Jennifer Dail, and her predecessors, Randy Withers and Kim Quackenbush, each of whom has worked as an editorial assistant while in graduate school at Florida State, and who did more of the leg and eye work for the journal than anyone else knows;

The Editorial Review Board, who give academic credibility to the journal through their work for it;

My FSU colleagues, for their support and very real help;

The column editors, for their reliable and always-solid contributions:

Jeff Kaplan, YA Book Reviews editor, and before him, Lawrence Baines

M. Linda Broughton, Middle School Connection editor, and before her, Rita Karr and Kathy Corder

Alan Teasley and Ann Wilder, High School Connections editors

Elaine Stephens and Jean Brown, Research Connections editors

Jim Brewbaker, Interdisciplinary Connections editor

Kathleen Carico, Professional Connections editor

M. Jerry Weiss, Publishers Connections editor

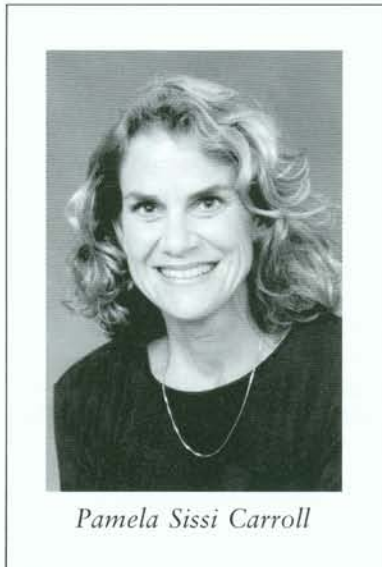
John N. Moore, Library Connections editor

Jean Brown, Non-Print YAL Connection editor, and before her, Marjorie Kaiser

And finally, a huge thank you to Norm Madsen, Dawn Azar, and their son, Eric of Graphic Press, Tallahassee, who have done more than print each issue; they have proof read, corrected, and jazzed it with their printing and graphics expertise—all with unbelievable good cheer.

The role of editor of *The ALAN Review* has given me the opportunity to think carefully about what should be made public, what should be questioned, and what should be celebrated in the field of contemporary adolescent and young adult literature. I have discovered the enormous commitment to YAL of experts who, while busy writing, publishing, teaching, and promoting young adult literature are willing to contribute essays, interviews, columns, and advertisements to share their thoughts with ALAN Review readers. ALAN is a group that is academically demanding and encouragingly supportive; it is particular and forgiving. Thank you for helping me discover and remember.

Note: Please see the change of address for submitting your manuscripts to new editors Jim Blasingame and Lori Goodson on page 2!



Pamela Sissi Carroll

Meeting the Challenge

Winter 2004. The theme for our 2004 winter issue, *Meeting the Challenge*, is intended to provide a means for examining the diverse challenges faced by young people today and how these are portrayed in young adult literature. YA authors write about everything from surviving an outdoor adventure to surviving a hostile home or school environment, and more. This theme is meant to be broad enough to cover a wide range of issues, as wide as the real challenges our kids face. A few questions to consider: What are the daily challenges of life for youth in 2004? Are they changing as we move further into the 21st Century? Is YA lit changing to reflect this? How do authors capture the nature of these challenges in ways that benefit or appeal to young readers? How can teachers and/or librarians make use of the theme of meeting the challenge? Manuscripts dealing with our theme are by no means limited to answering these questions. Articles dealing with how our 2003 ALAN Workshop authors portray the challenges faced by young people are especially welcome. Those authors scheduled for the workshop, which will follow the NCTE Fall Convention in San Francisco on November 24th-25th, are listed below. The deadline for manuscripts for the winter 2004 issue is October 15. Please see the **Instructions for Authors** page for specific instructions about submitting manuscripts.

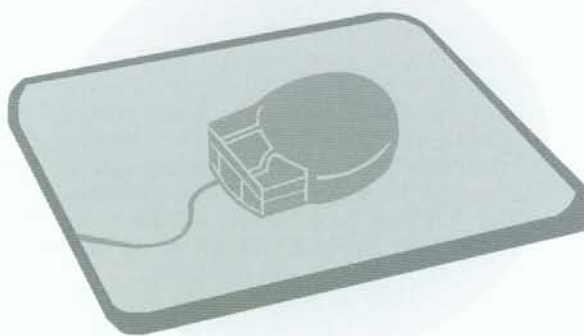
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John Ritter
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Rich Wallace
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Have you
tried these
Web sites yet?



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."

ALAN Tributes to Anne Webb

After a long illness, on December 22, 2003, Anne Webb—a former ALAN President, a major force in English education, and a grand lady—passed on. The following tributes clearly illustrate how much Anne meant to us:

When I first joined NCTE and the CEE Commission on the Preparation of Middle School English Teachers, I met Anne. She made me feel very welcome and assured me that I would be able to contribute a lot to NCTE - in particular the middle level. I have tried not to disappoint her! Her contributions to NCTE are many and she will certainly be missed.

—Martha Magner

My memories of ALAN workshops always include a vivid image of Anne Webb: distinguished, energetic, friendly, and poised—despite physical challenges. Like many others, I had the privilege of working with her when she served on my ALAN nominations committee. I learned up close about her vast knowledge of others who loved books and young people as she did.

—Connie S. Zitlow

I met Anne in the early '80s when I went to my first ALAN reception and was more than a little nervous. Anne came up to me and made me feel at home, and over the years this feeling grew as she was always there to smile and make me feel good.

—Lois Buckman

Anne and I go back to almost the beginnings of ALAN, and I shall miss her—her clothes that were brighter (and better) than my neckties; her constant and infectious smile, often in a time of painful physical adversity; and, most of all, her unflinching commitment to ALAN and NCTE. People like Anne come along too seldom, and I am honored to be among those who honor her.

—Ted Hipple

I will never forget a conference in which Anne strolled up with what I can only describe as a devilish grin. She flopped down into a chair and threw her arms back and shook her head.

“Well, aren’t you in a sassy mood.”

“Sassy?”

She shot me a horrified look. Then she giggled and her eyes turned into constellations of twinkling stars. She didn’t fool me. Beneath that gruff no-nonsense exterior was the most adorable and lovable softy I ever knew.

—Jonathan Schmidt

A great lady, a consummate adventurer - in spirit, in travel, and in her unrelenting efforts and quantifiable contributions toward opening and expanding the world to young minds.

—Kathleen Doherty

In teal costumes and incredible Native American jewelry, Anne Webb energized me with stories, adventures and laughter every time I saw her. Being a student in her classroom must have been a very special privilege; knowing her certainly was. I hope I will live my life as fully.

—CJ Bott

Anne’s unceasing energy, her great interest in books and her love for kids will long be remembered by those of us who were fortunate enough to know her. She was funny and bright and warm, a great friend and a fine human being. It is hard to think that she is no longer with us, but her indomitable spirit lingers on.

—Leila Christenbury

Anne’s vivacious enthusiasm for her work with ALAN and for the authors she encouraged over the years brought a corresponding enthusiasm to all who knew her. Authors, teachers, publishers, and great numbers of young adults have been influenced by her and will miss her joy in the world of young adult literature.

—William C. Morris

I, indeed, was saddened to learn of Anne’s passing. She was a devoted ALANophile, but more a very special individual who believed deeply in the purpose and integrity of young adult literature. She was candid in her opinions, forthright in her devotion, and fierce in her passion. She will be forever missed.

—Jeffrey S. Kaplan

Anne Webb was a true original, a woman with a huge zest for life. One look at her marvelous hair, her interesting jewelry, and her flair for clothes, and you knew that behind this striking exterior was somebody special who lit up the room.

—Patty Campbell

Anne Webb’s certainly a person that was a true-blue ALANer and quite a character in her own right. Imagine Anne as a protagonist in a YA novel! Her flair and unique personality are not easy to forget, but she will be sorely missed by us all.

—Joan F. Kaywell

Anne was a dynamo. She cared about students and teachers. She was instrumental in getting classroom teachers and school librarians to become active participants in ALAN. She served NCTE well, just completing (in absentia) her term as chair of the Committee Against Censorship. She was a realist and helped me foster a greater understanding of how to get trade books into the classroom.

—M. Jerry Weiss

I will never forget my first ALAN Workshop and how Anne Webb made me feel at home! Anne was a special lady whose vivacity, enthusiasm, and knowledge enhanced the lives of all who knew her.

—Bill Mollineaux

What I liked best about Anne was her fighting spirit—she never pulled punches and so we always knew where she stood on important issues. And where she stood was at the forefront of battles to promote Young Adult books in schools and libraries.

—Don Gallo

Anne Webb was a truly inviting friend who made attending conferences real fun as well as rewarding in the usual ways, and her laughter and sly sense of the absurd kept me honest when I might have wanted to exaggerate some achievement. At the same time, she was serious in her commitment to ALAN and NCTE, and these organizations are in many ways the successes that they are because of the profound ideas and hard work that she devoted to them. They will not be the same without her, and I will not be as happy an attendee as I was when she was there.

—Robert Small

She was the friendliest person at ALAN every year—when I was a rookie at the ALAN meetings, Anne always made me feel welcome, and when it was announced that I'd been elected president, Anne gave me an autographed copy of Bob Carlsen's book.

—Chris Crowe

How can I possibly write just a couple of sentences about this phenomenal woman? My first encounter with Anne was during a cocktail reception for ALAN many, many years ago. I seem to recall a woman in pigtails holding court in one corner with the likes of Bob Probst and Don Gallo. I do not recall the subject of her declaration at the moment I summoned up the nerve to join this august group. What I still remember is her evident passion. Anne was a passionate advocate for YA literature. I will miss talking to her at NCTE conferences.

—Teri Lesesne

She was always such a caring person who loved making the personal connections between books, authors, and readers. She knew so many authors and publishers personally. Whenever she approached me it was always with a funny story to tell, and a connection to be made, and with laughter along the way. I will miss her.

—John Mason

What really set Anne apart were her unquenchable spirit - and that mischievous twinkle in her eye. Anne, a true middle schooler at heart, was always at the center of any gathering of middle level educators. The last time I saw Anne was at the first ever Middle Level Section Thursday Night Get Together. Instead of her usually elegant ensemble, she was sporting a spiffy Middle Level Section t-shirt - and a HUGE smile. How much she will be missed!

—Katherine D. Ramsey

Anne Webb had such spirit for YA lit and ALAN! Every meeting with her was filled with sharp observations about the field and endless "Have you read . . .?" questions. Few of us could keep up with Anne's voluminous reading and marvelous wondering.

—Gary Salvner

★ "Expertly revealed."

—Starred, *Booklist*

★ "At 17, Noreen has led an unhappy life, overloaded with conflict. One stormy night, she drives off in her most recent boyfriend's truck and finds her way to a run-down café in a small Canadian town . . . A clear-eyed and clarifying look at the power of community, and the relative inadequacies of any one individual to weather the storms of life alone."

—Starred, *School Library Journal*

★ "Set during ten days in July, this beautifully written story explores the effect of a stranger on a small town . . . Brooks has a masterful hand at description, drawing a vivid picture of the town, its lake, and the prairie around it. She seems to know the place and people intimately and, through them, she shares her vision of the richness of ordinary life in all its pain and glory."

—Starred, *Kirkus Reviews*



True Confessions of a Heartless Girl

MARTHA BROOKS

\$16.00
0-374-37806-1
Young adult

Melanie Kroupa
Books

FARRAR
STRAUS
GIROUX

Are YA Novelists Morally Obligated to Offer Their Readers Hope?

John H. Ritter

Dear Mr. John H. Ritter,

Hi, my name is Riley W. and I am in the sixth grade. I want to tell you that my teacher read your book *Choosing Up Sides* in class. Why did you call it *Choosing Up Sides*? My best part was when Luke strikes out Skinny Latmann. It was all cool except for at the end, it was sad.

At first I didn't know why the dad had to die. I wish that after his son saved him, his father and him would get close and spend time together and do things together like baseball. My teacher told me to look at the story again and try to think why you did that. It took me two days to think about it. Then I remembered how my dad used to hit my mom. But he never hit me. They always would fight then we moved away. I did not want us to go. That was the worst time in my life. But now I know why my mom had to leave.

I can relate to the book because I feel like the mom. My dad used to hit my mom so hard that I would sit in my room and cry all night. I never knew why he never hit me, but the book helped me figure it out a little. My mom would stand up to him, but I couldn't. When I started writing this letter, I started to cry.

I also want to thank you for writing this book 'cause it taught me a lot about life and told me without saying it. For instance, when "Pa" broke Luke's arm it told me what could have happened if we would have stayed. Now I know why my mom left. I mean I knew but now I understand. When you write your next book I would like for you to remember this letter.

Your friend,
Riley W.

* * * * *

Dear Riley,

Thank you for your letter. You have a great gift for making connections and understanding how stories can relate to real life.

You asked me why I called the book, *Choosing Up Sides*. One reason was the fact that life is full of choices. Often difficult ones, with many sides to the issue. I think your mother made the right choice, though I'm sure it was difficult.

So I hope you can use your gift of understanding to see



why I made the tough choices I had to make in this story.

I know it's hard to feel much sympathy for a man who hits his son—or his wife. But it was something I had to do in order to write truthfully about "Pa" Bledsoe. The toughest part was the fact that I had to go back into my own childhood to do it.

When I was four years old, my mother died from breast cancer. And my father, who deeply loved her, fell into a depression and began to drink heavily. After being left with four young children, my dad feared he would not be able to handle it. I learned quite early what fear and alcohol can do to a man's brain. When a man drinks, he morphs into someone else.

I didn't like that drinking man. And I hated that he was so scared. I hated the late night arguments that filled our house, the screaming, the breaking of furniture, and the

many sleepless nights I would lie in bed praying for peace, praying that my father could see the pain he was causing, how he was harming his children with his tirades, and driving the housekeepers away.

In the morning, sober again, my dad would return to being the gentle, loving soul I knew him to be. And sometimes it would last all day. But never all week. Before long, I'd see his car roll up the driveway, see him climb out drunk and belligerent, and I would disappear into my room.

I never went through what Luke did. My dad never hit me or anyone. And like Luke, deep down I knew he loved us all. As your father loves you.

But we had no mother to swoop us away. And no place to go.

Besides, I always held out hope that my dad would change.

That on every day, not just some days, we could, as you write, "get close and spend time together and do things together like baseball."

But the fact was, in one way or another, he'd "broken the arm"—or weakened the spirit—of all his children.

As time went on, my dad did coach our ball teams, and we did have some great times. He even remarried. But he never stopped drinking. And on the days when he came drunk to my high school games, I shuddered as the other players laughed at "the crazy man down the foul line" yelling and whistling at the opposing team. Eventually, his second wife divorced him. His children grew up and moved away. And my dad

retired into a dark and lonely house.

Then one day, my older brother called to say Dad was in the hospital, near death. He had given up. Deeply depressed, my dad had stopped eating, stopped taking his heart medication, and merely waited to die.

After a week in the hospital, he had stabilized some. But we knew that if he was discharged and returned home, he'd fall into the same old pattern again.

It was Thanksgiving Day. But instead of gathering together for a big family dinner, my older brother and I sat in a bare, green hospital room while I wrote out a note to the doctor.

And when I started writing, I started to cry.

I told the doctor that our father had been depressed for as long as we could remember. I told him that unless he was treated for depression, he would be right back here in no time. Or worse. We walked to the doctor's office in the next building and left the note on his desk.

That was nine years ago. Today, my dad is alive, upbeat, and sober.

He is the father I had always wished for.

He treats us well, with kindness and appreciation. We enjoy our visits and relish being entertained once again by his masterful storytelling.

Then, a few days ago, he told me something he'd never been able to say before.

"The doctor showed me your letter," he said. Then his voice caught. But he seemed determined to speak. "You know, it could've gone either way." Now he spoke in a forced whisper. "Well, I appreciate what you did. I'm grateful. To all of you. And that—that you didn't give up on me."

Together, my brother and I were able to take the right action. And, unlike Luke, we were able to save our dad.

It could've gone either way.

Riley, there is a man out there who loves you deeply. He probably loves your mother, too. Some day he may be able to come to you both and say so. With actions and words. Maybe not.

But until then, it's important that you and your mother are safe. And that you never give up on him.

That's why I wrote *Choosing Up Sides*.

Thanks for asking.

All best wishes,
John H. Ritter
April 5, 2003

* * * * *

The letters above are included in a compilation of author/reader correspondence called *Letters of Hope*, to be edited by Dr. Joan Kaywell, of the University of South Florida, scheduled to be published by Philomel Books in 2004, and aimed especially at Young Adults.

And the timing could not be better. At a point in our country's history when the economy is bleak, when mass media programming has turned "reality" into vulgar insults, backstabbing, and scheming for love or money, when the moral values of our national leaders appear to be as bleak as they've been in decades, and when large publishers deem it necessary to bring out lines of dark, self-indulgent books which push grace and courage out of the picture in the minds of young readers, our children certainly could use a fresh dose of fearlessness and hope, i.e., love.

As I write these words, U.S. troops have just opened fire

with machine guns on a cluster of Iraqi civilians protesting the American military presence in their neighborhood school, killing 15 and wounding scores more, some—according to Reuters—just for "shouting."

The idealistic hopes and dreams for a better, more balanced, and peaceful world which guided so many of us in the '60s and '70s seem to have evaporated into thunderclouds of arrogance, self-indulgence, and anger.

In other words, the same *fear* that overwhelmed my father in the letter above. And our country's reaction to terror has been that of a panicked man's aggression.

I know I'm old-fashioned in my thinking, but I was brought up by a wonderful church pastor to believe that we should love our enemies—as Jesus taught repeatedly—not bomb them. And I'm not talking about the lip-service "love" that is so popular today among the conservative religious groups, who easily sanction war. I mean an actual, demonstrative love that includes the risking of one's own life in order to bring a sense of security, dignity, and hope to one's enemies. That is to say, when trouble begins to brew, I believe the first action is to allay the enemy's fear. And our own.

According to recent polls, that thinking puts me in among a 9% minority in our nation. And that sounds about right, as I look around about me.

So, in the context of our times, *The ALAN Review* Editor, Sissi Carroll, put this question to me: "What obligation, if any, does a YA writer feel for providing kids with at least some sense of hope through one's novels?"

Before I give my answer, let me take a little consensus among my peers:

"Actually none," says Chris Crutcher, veteran author of many YA novels, including his latest award-winner, *Whale Talk*. "The obligation of any writer is to tell a good story, a thought provoking or funny or sad or tragic tale. We have exactly the same obligation to our readers that any writer of adult fiction has."

Yeah, I say, but you always tend to slip some hope in there, don't you?

Chris nods in agreement. "Personally, I always put some sense of hope into my stories because I believe there is always some sense of hope in the world, and I want to reflect that. But a writer who doesn't share that view may tell a different kind of story...and that's the beauty of stories; that there are all kinds."

I put the question to Joan Bauer, Newbery Honor winner for (of all things, in this quest) *Hope Was Here*.

"I certainly feel an obligation to provide hope through my novels," says Joan. "I couldn't work on a story that didn't have hope. Which is not to say we should only write happy endings, because life can be bitterly hard. My dad committed suicide when I was in my early twenties. Suicide is an act devoid of hope...It took a long time for me to pass through that sorrow. Maybe because of it, I look for hope when things get dark—I look for the way out of profoundly hard places."

Proactive writer and speaker, Catherine Ryan Hyde, brought the whole world new hope with her bestselling novel, and later, hit movie, *Pay It Forward*, which addresses the renewal of hope in the lives of an English teacher, a homeless man, a single mom, and others, all brought about by the imagination of an idealistic young boy.

Though Catherine has written for the adult market for over ten years, her latest novel, *Momma Lion*, due out in 2004

from Harcourt, is a strictly YA effort. To the question at hand, she states that, "I believe it's important to leave readers of any age with a sense of hope. The reader becomes immersed in the fictional world you have created, and takes it on—if only briefly—as reality. And for a young adult audience, the element of hope is far more crucial, because the young reader's view of the world is still forming."

Verse novelist, Sonya Sones agrees. "When I'm writing about tough situations, I feel a deep responsibility to make it clear that things can, and probably will, get better. Why write stories for teens that present a bleak view of the world? Aren't things tough enough for them already?"

Like Catherine, David Lubar also believes that, "In a novel, the reader has invested a substantial amount of his own time and emotion. The characters have become part of his life. The fictional world has merged with his world. To let him walk this path and then say, 'Sorry, life sucks,' is contemptible. It's cheap and easy drama."

Ah, yes. I could not have said it better. You see, I'll let you in on a little secret. Most writers know, whether they'll admit it or not, that bleak stories—sad and dark and hopeless stories—are far easier to write than upbeat, funny, or hopeful ones; that is, to write them well and to actually pull them off. That's why you see so few really good upbeat stories and far too many dark "literary" ones—even among the classics. And that's why "dark" authors—particularly young writers—have so much trouble inserting any ray of hope into their novels. Even if they wanted to, they simply don't know how to do it well.

Good fiction writing requires, minimally, an 8-10-year apprenticeship. And as I tell my writing students, it's generally best for all concerned if it's not done in the public eye. This allows time for the fledgling writer to learn the craft of storytelling while acquiring the requisite and substantial battering of one's ego, through having one's talent constantly questioned from the mountaintops, and coming to realize at several points in the process (typically around the third and seventh year) that, "I really am horrible at this and I don't know a damn thing about writing a good story, do I?"

So who can blame the author who chooses to travel the easy road? Besides, as English professor and YA author, Chris Crowe (*Mississippi Trial*, 1955), noted in NCTE's *English Journal*, "Dark is deep." Or so, he pointed out, the thinking goes among many literary critics, high school teachers, and college professors. Many teens also buy into the corollary idea that "Dark is cool."

In the same article, highly acclaimed author, Kristen D. Randle (*Breaking Rank*, 1999, and *Slumming*, 2003), chimes in with an essay.

"Bleak' books," Kristen writes, "allow only one focus, often claiming that they do so in order to offer comfort to the wounded and introduce compassion to the uninitiated. But the solution to drowning has never been, to my understanding, to push the face of the struggling swimmer deeper into the water." It's this, "Misery loves company," aspect of YA Lit that has Kristen baffled.

"Many of our stories," she continues, "are no longer about healing, about reconciliation, about harmony and honor and courage and honest interdependence. At their best, they offer

almost no hope. 'Those *bleak* books,' my sixteen year old daughter sneers. 'Just a bunch of adults who think they know how we feel—like all we do is sit around indulging in angst. How lame.'"

I agree, but we all know how sappy a poorly written "hopeful" story can be, as well. So, for many writers, it's best not to take the chance and risk exposing themselves to the ridicule of being labeled a lightweight or sentimentalist, when a self-indulgent, alcohol/druggie, or angst-ridden story is so easy to write.

Basically, it all comes down to that great suppressor of talent and imagination: *fear*. They're afraid they will not be able to handle it.

Do you note an underlying trend here?

The role of the storyteller, I've always believed, is to make the invisible visible. To tell the untold story, to shine a light on hidden truths. And one of a novelist's most sacred charges is to bring forward the marginalized souls among us and somehow, in a credible and fearless fashion, add definition, value, a spotlight, and a song to their lives of quiet (or loud) desperation. At least once in the story, we need to expose the innate sense of goodness that even the least among us is born with.

In my first novel, *Choosing Up Sides*, ultimately, it was

Luke Bledsoe's own sense of right and wrong that gave him not only the hope for a better life, but the courage to act on it.

Tyler Waltern's dad in *Over the Wall* was hopeless, too—seemingly, a suicide waiting to happen. But again, it was an innate sense of fairness—of

what's right and wrong—that Tyler eventually used to quell the *fear* and reignite the spark of hope, not only in his own life, but in his father's as well.

Hope burns eternal inside Tom Gallagher, in *The Boy Who Saved Baseball*, even against great odds. Of all my fictional characters, he is unique in that way. I'm beginning to see another trend here, in my own evolution as a writer.

And I think that trend reflects my growing belief that *no* person is without hope. It only takes the shining of a light into that sometimes bruised and buried, innate sense of hope we all carry within us. And who better than the storytellers of a nation to do so?

But are we obliged to do so? While I personally believe, as Chris Crutcher does, that I will "always put some sense of hope in my stories," I would never want someone to tell me I was obligated to do so. We should be able to write freely, and if dreary stories get popular, the rest of us need to smother them with love, with hope and grit, guts and grace—or however we choose to approach the matter.

Henry David Thoreau, perhaps the very first Young Adult author—certainly the very first hippie—may actually have said it best, some 175 years ago, when he wrote in *Walden*, "While we aren't obligated to rid the world of all its wrongs, we must not personally participate in anything wrong." Amen. But as he notes, too, it is a *personal* choice.

Joan Bauer's comment about the hopelessness of suicide reminds me of something I realized when I was seventeen, during the height of the Vietnam War. Suicide and war have a lot in common. That's why it didn't surprise me to learn later in life, as Tyler Waltern discovers in *Over the Wall*, that far more Vietnam vets died from suicide, after they returned home, than the 58,000 American soldiers who died *in* the

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A book may show you something brilliant, new, and amazing, or it may not. Depends on the words. Personally, I look for the ones that do. For my money, that's what a book should do. It should tie you up, it should work you up, make you think, make you see, make you feel extra happy and sorrowful, extra nervous, scared, and bold. It must be dream laden, scheme sodden, soul shaking. And it must do all of this as mysteriously as a left-handed curveball coming at your head, twisting and spinning and making you duck—until, at the very end, you decide to pick up your head—and you see a glimmer of hope.

war. By some estimates, over 100,000 U.S. military personnel of that era took their own lives.

Going to war is just another form of giving up, both morally and spiritually. It's pure hopelessness. (Though, ironically, as Mark Twain shows us in *The War Prayer*, the entire process, from the flag-waving parades to the chest-thumping speeches, is embedded with hopeful clichés.) It's like saying, no use in trying to salvage the situation in a humane way, to do the fiercely hard work it takes to preserve human life. "Kill 'em all," as the bumper stickers shout on the pick-up trucks in my town, "and let God sort 'em out."

Where, then, do I find the hope in my own life so I don't give up entirely on this country or this world? One source has always been in the books I read.

From the time I could decode a baseball boxscore in the morning paper, I've loved reading. But I've never been a so-called voracious reader. Call it the boredom factor, call it impatience, call it a lust for a certain music on the page, but from as far back as I can remember, I've been so picky about what I want from a book that, even today, I finish reading maybe one novel out of every twenty I start. And it's not for lack of trying.

In my early years, biographies topped my list. Wild and crazy Dizzy Dean, crazier still, Jimmy Pearsall, and beer sucking, hot dog chomping, cigar puffing Babe Ruth, to name a few. And every one was a character. By the time I was nine years old, I'd read all about their lives and so many more.

And I had a reason. With the added hope that some day I could be a pro ballplayer myself, I needed to know what each one was doing by age nine (when I was nine) and at age ten (when I turned ten), and so on, year-by-year, until well into my teens. I needed to know their tricks and philosophies. I needed to know how wild I could be. I needed to know each turn and juncture in their lives, so I could measure the progress of my own hopes and dreams.

Ah, but dreams can change. And lucky thing. Because so did my ability to hit a left-handed curveball, coming at me, as a lefty hitter, about head high, making me duck and close my eyes just before it magically broke right over the plate. Somewhere around my junior year in high school, somewhere between the time a Charlie Company 1st Battalion 20th Infantry unit slaughtered some 450 unarmed villagers in the hamlet of My Lai and my senior prom, I realized that whatever gift I'd had for hitting a baseball—and the dreams tied to it—were no longer important enough or relevant enough for me to pursue.

It was right around that time when a certain black book fell from heaven into my hands and changed my life. An amazing book—full of crazy characters, of sadness and love,

of desperation and revolution, of insight and morality. It was political and poetical, religious and surreptitious. It was a biography of the world and it was pure fiction. I was captivated by it, motivated by it, undressed, unblessed, and depressed by it. All that summer, I'd been teaching myself primitive piano, had fancied myself a bluesy, outraged rock star or an actor maybe or anyone with an audience, anyone with a voice. Then on this one particular hot, dry October afternoon, my older brother left for college and left behind his copy of *The Bob Dylan Songbook*.

It was long, lean, shiny and black, a paperback, over a hundred pages full of musical notes and chords and the most surprising poetry this sixteen-year-old had ever read. All of a sudden I had a new dream. I tore the baffle off my electric organ, cranked up the tiny Sears and Roebuck mail order amp, and sang that raggedy book from cover to cover, memorizing beat street lyrics, adopting the wail of a moaning man of constant sorrow, a tambourine man, a weather man, only a pawn, only a hobo, but one more is gone, leaving nobody to sing his sad song, and on and on. And I knew what I wanted to be.

I would be the storyteller, the historian, the biographer of mixed up, dreamed up characters like these, who push fake morals, insult, and stare, whose money doesn't talk, it swears. Or those who sing in the rat race choir, bent out of shape by society's pliers. Characters with eyes, with guts.

And so I wrote. Dear God, I wrote. I began carrying around a spiral notebook in my back pocket, cover torn, metal spirals flattened from school desk seats, pages bent, half-ripped, but all filled with blue pen lines scribbled out, fast paced, double-spaced, into crumpled civil rightist protest war love songs about *jack the pauper earnin money now sellin plants he grows around*. Or, *the welfare girl who lives next door, sleeps with poisons on her floor*. Or, *judy and the gypsy drinkin shot after shot, screamin out the backseat, what hath god rot?*

Stuff like that. Stupid stuff, but, like Dylan's work, it always had hope.

John Updike once said that of all the fine arts, writing is the most self-taught. I agree. You learn to write by reading what other thinkers have thought, what other writers have wrought, by studying the struggles and battles they've fought. You watch them riff, then you try it yourself.

A book may show you something brilliant, new, and amazing, or it may not. Depends on the words. Personally, I look for the ones that do. For my money, that's what a book should do. It should tie you up, it should work you up, make you think, make you see, make you feel extra happy and sorrowful, extra nervous, scared, and bold. It must be dream laden,

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Text © John H. Ritter, 2003. Portions of the above essay will appear in *Making The Match: The Right Book For The Right Reader At The Right Time*, edited by Dr. Teri Lesesne (Stenhouse, November 2003).

Ritter's *The Boy Who Saved Baseball*

A Review by Pamela Sissi Carroll

With *The Boy Who Saved Baseball* (2003), John H. Ritter ends the long quiet inning that followed the publication of *Over the Wall*, his eloquent, award-winning novel of baseball and the moral consequence of the Vietnam conflict. Readers will cheer this endearing new novel, which features with a cast of likable locals from a dusty small town at the base of the mountains in the Southwest. In *The Boy Who Saved Baseball*, Ritter walks confidently to the mound, grins at the batter, stretches into a graceful wind up, and delivers perfect pitches through each of 216 pages.

As readers of *The Boy Who Saved Baseball*, we are introduced to a rag-tag group of 12-year-old friends—male and female—who comprise the local little league team, the Wildcats. The team, which lacks baseball prowess, has bigger powers: It is able to draw Dante Del Gato, a scruffy near-hermit who is a former professional star, out of his mountain retreat to come coach them, and it summons Cruz de la Cruz, a mysterious, charming, and exceptionally talented 12-year-old to the ballpark, too. Cruz, a modern cowboy whose saddle is emblazoned with *Cruz-on.com*, appears in town just in time to help the Wildcats prepare for the biggest little league game in its history. And in the end, the Wildcats demonstrate the power to face up to huge challenges and to conquer them.

When the Wildcats gather for summer baseball camp in Dillontown, they find themselves in quite a fix: the fate of the entire town rests on their shoulders. Here is how it happens: Many of the town's leaders want to sell Dillontown land to developers who promise to turn the dying community into a thriving oasis—new homes, stores, roads, and a proper recreation center. Most of the land has already been sold when we meet the group, but there is one hold-out: old Doc Altenheimer, a baseball fan, owns the land that the ballpark sits on. After he is courted by the mayor, who begs him to sell, the historical society, who urges him to protect the field, and Tom Gallagher, his 12-year-old friend whose parents run the baseball camp for local kids every summer, Doc makes an odd decision: He will keep the field if the local team of 12-year-olds can beat their archrival team, a group of kids from the more affluent town south of Dillontown. If the local team loses, he will sell his land, and the developers will tear up the old field to make room for new development, new growth.

The situation looks hopeless to the despondent Wildcats, at first. Tom and his friends, including feisty and strong María, cocky Frankie, quiet Rachel, and brainy Ramón, have a lot of heart, but they cannot hit—or catch—and the big game is only five days away. But while they

Then, as it magically crosses home plate, you swing. And if it's a good book, you *connect*—with such grace, insight, heart, and hope that it humbles, crumbles, and amazes you.

For my money, that's what a book should do. But, hey, writer, it's up to you.

are standing in the field on the first day of baseball camp, where they train and live together, Cruz de la Cruz appears in the outfield:

The stranger rode in from the east.

Under the rays of the rising sun, through the dust of a swirling wind, the horseman rode downslope, down Rattlesnake Ridge, just as Blackjack Buck had seen in a vision, dreamed in a prophecy, a century ago. In his rifle scabbard, laced low and tight, he carried a baseball bat made of hand-cut mountain maple, custom-lathed, and sanded to a shine. (page 11)

As the story unfolds, we begin to understand that Cruz de la Cruz, who hits every pitch hurled at him, catches every ball hit toward him, and injects his teammates with confidence, courage, and a new sense of joy in playing the game of baseball, is no normal kid.

On his first night at camp, Cruz takes Tom with him on a secret adventure: they ride their horses to the mountain hideaway of reclusive Dante Del Gato. Del Gato had held the batting record for professional ballplayers, but he quit just before the World Series, and refused to talk about why. After years of living in the mountains, alone, he had earned a reputation of being slightly crazy, anti-social, and mean.

Cruz wasn't stopped by that reputation; he and Tom asked Del Gato to come coach the team, adding that with his expertise, his secrets, he was surely their only hope. Del Gato surprises even Tom and Cruz when he appears at the ballpark and agrees to be the coach. His training methods are unusual, to say the least: he has the kids scramble down the mountain during free form runs, has them follow the blinks of a string of Christmas lights with their eyes, in order to help them retrain their neural pathways so that they will follow the baseball with their eyes and their minds, and has them do batting practice against a softball pitcher, so that they learn to anticipate the spin and timing of the ball.

Cruz, too, teaches his new friends some secrets; he has developed a computer simulation that helps them learn how to judge the speed and spin of a baseball when they bat; the team spends their nighttime hours in the school library at "batting" practice. Encouraged not only by Del Gato and Cruz, but also by the adults who march into the camp to the tunes of the school band, and with "platters of *mango y jalepeño* salsa, crumbled goat cheese, fresh *cilantro con limón*, lettuce, tomatoes, an iron skillet of Spanish rice with diced tomatoes and black olives, another with refried pinto and black beans smothered in cheese, three kilo baskets of warm tortillas under white

cloth, and grilled chicken strips kept warm in a pan of bubbling brown sugar, tequila, ginger, and lime juice marinade" (105), the Wildcats start to think and act like one body—a true team. They work harder than they ever have during the week of baseball camp, and slowly begin to think that with their two special weapons, Coach Del Gato and Cruz de la Cruz, they might just have a chance at winning the big game.

Then, as quickly and mysteriously as he arrives, and on the eve of the big game, Cruz disappears. When he rides his horse away from camp, he leaves Tom and the others to prove to themselves that they can be winners—by themselves.

The game itself is an epic one; Tom, who is the worst player of the group, has to play, and ends up pitching when María, the team's best pitcher, is hit by a line drive and is in too much pain to continue on the mound. In the final inning, as series of hits and errors accumulate, the Wildcats actually win. The kids and their supporters are jubilant—until all realize that in the excitement, old Doc has suffered a fatal heart attack. Because he had no will and no family to claim his estate, his land would not be protected after his death.

Tom and his teammates were inconsolable, sad about Doc's death and discouraged that their efforts to save the town by winning the game have been useless—until Tom looks in the back of his "dreamsketcher" notebook at the "words of encouragement" that Doc had penned there a week earlier, on the day that he and Tom sat on his front porch and discussed the future of the ballpark and the town with him.

This uplifting novel is a joy to read and to carry in the mind. It is a treasure that will bring energy, laughter, and thoughtful discussion to middle school classrooms. Like Ritter's previous novels, it is about baseball, but also about friends, families, and heroes, and about the ways that the past and present inform the future.

Even the most reluctant adolescent readers will have

fun finding the puns and word play that Ritter sprinkles throughout. Some of my favorite examples include these: The title of the prologue is "In the big inning." A newscaster explains to Tom, "Don't you see, kid? This Big Game, your situation here, has caught the attention of the entire nation. It's David and Goliath! It's loyalty versus big bucks...It's a metaphor for the entire game of baseball" (154), then adds emphasis, "I'm telling you buddy. It's more than a metaphor. This could be a *metafive!*" (154).

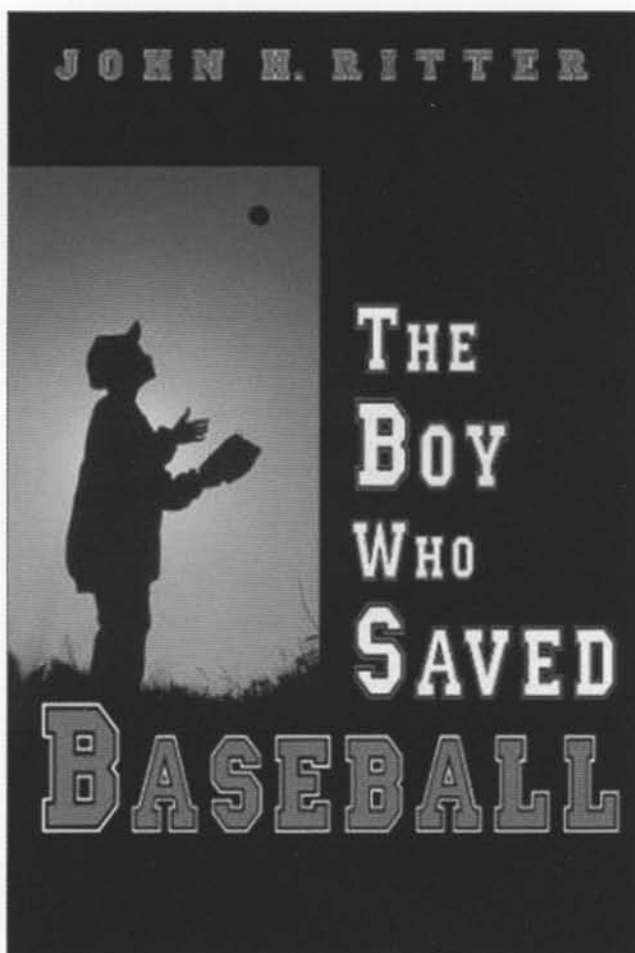
Adolescents who like to keep notebooks of their own thoughts will find a kindred spirit in Tom, who hides from his classmates to draw and write his thoughts in his dreamsketcher notebook at every opportunity. Young writers will be sure to notice the figurative language and the symbols that float across the pages with the red-tailed hawk. Those who like to meet unusual characters among the people of fiction will delight in watching the antics of Hollis B, who wanders around town with a pretend cellular phone at his ear so that he can comment on all of the action on the streets. Those who are drawn to computers will be pleased to see that even the mysterious Cruz—a kid who seems to be made of legend as well as flesh and blood, is computer savvy; in fact, he creates a computer simulation that allows the team to practice its hitting while sitting in the school library. And savvy readers are encouraged to meet Cruz, and author John H. Ritter, at www.Cruz-on.com and www.JohnHRitter.com.

In the movie, *Jerry Maguire*, the female lead character tells Jerry, "You had me at 'Hello.'" I feel that way about John H. Ritter and his young adult novels. Like others who are among the finest of today's writers for young people, Ritter addresses the realities that trouble today's teens and the forces that shape and reshape local and national cultures. Yet John H. Ritter's game is unfailingly hopeful and encouragingly positive. This book, like the best games, is a joy to experience. He had me at "In the big inning..."

★ "A baseball tale of legendary dimension... Developing both cast and multiple plotlines in 'wild and woolbacious' prose, John H. Ritter dishes up another winner!" —*Booklist*, Starred Review

★ "Enthralling...Stunning...a book filled with memorable moments. [John H. Ritter] takes the cosmic view of a local story: [The hero] not only strives to save a patch of land but the soul of his hometown."
—*Publishers Weekly*, Starred Review

Announcing
John H. Ritter's
novel tribute to
Bob Dylan,
Gabriel García
Márquez, and
the holy game
of baseball.



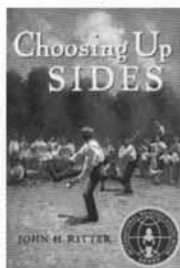
"A down home story with all the stuff of legend—a stranger riding into town, a former hero and shadowy recluse with a secret, a grim prophecy—all served up with a substantial helping of life truths.

"Here is Dillontown, where a laptop slides neatly into a saddlebag, and Cruz de la Cruz, a cyber-*vato* desperado, not only saves *el civismo*, the very spirit of the town, he saves the holy game of baseball as well.

"Within the network of cyberspace, gender equality, cross-cultural and cross-age friendships, issues of moral choice and human understanding, *The Boy Who Saved Baseball* zings!"

—Susan Vreeland, author of *Girl in Hyacinth Blue*

Also by John H. Ritter



Choosing Up Sides

◆ "No ordinary baseball book, this is a rare first novel." —*Kirkus Reviews*, pointer review

An ALA Best Book for Young Adults

Winner, 1999 IRA Children's Book Award

Over the Wall

"This is a profound book, unusual for YA fiction." —Claire Rosser, *KLIATT*

"Imbued with passion and grace...one of the year's best." —*School Library Journal*

"An incredible novel." —Dr. Teri Lessene, NCTE (*Voices from the Middle*)



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An Interview with Author, Teacher, Mom, Coach (Whew!) S. L. Rottman

Pamela Sissi Carroll

PSC: Our readers will be eager to know: How you have managed to have a career as a teacher and then to add a career as a writer for young adults? I wonder: Have your jobs as a *teacher* and *coach* of teens informed what you do as a *writer* for teens? Can you think of any experiences or personalities from your teaching that have really stuck with the *writerly* you?

SLR: At the beginning of my first year of teaching, we had a district-wide English department meeting. We were paired up with other teachers and asked to introduce each other. Well, in my enthusiasm for what I was going to do with my life, I told my veteran partner my plan. And in introducing me, his voice was practically dripping with disdain as he said, "She, like all new young English teachers, has grand dreams of being a *novelist*." That hurt. So I stopped talking about my plans. I didn't want to be yet another average English teacher who let dreams of being a writer interfere with teaching. I decided I would focus on my teaching, be a real teacher, hopefully a good one, and save my writing for my retirement.

I began teaching. My first job was at a junior high school in southern Colorado Springs. And the joy and excitement I had felt as a coach quickly gave way to frustration. I discovered the vital difference between the two jobs: the willingness of the participants. When you're coaching, for the most part, the kids are there because they want to be. Often, when you're teaching, the kids are there only because they have to be. That was definitely the case in my school.

And it amazed me the number of students who wouldn't read—at all. They wouldn't read anything at home, and whined incessantly when we read in class. This is when I learned another important lesson: by the time students are in junior high or middle school, there are usually two factors that will keep them from reading: ability and interest. Now we all know that the way you get better at something is by practicing. And the way to get someone to practice is to get them interested.

So I set out with the goal of writing something that would capture my student's interest, but still have some literary meat to them. I hope one day to reach that goal.

PSC: Your novels feature teens who struggle with problems that extend far beyond issues that are the "garden variety" trouble spots for adolescents. I am thinking, for example, of Sean's alcoholic, abusive mother in *Hero* (2000), Scott's crusty uncle, his parents' death, and his troubled older brother in *Rough Waters* (2000), Skye's older brother Sunny, who has Down Syndrome, in *Head Above Water* (2003), and Stetson's alcoholic dad and previously unknown sister in *Stetson* (2002).

Might you discuss your choices, as an artist and as a person who is sensitive to adolescents' realities, as they are reflected in these characters and in the kinds of troubles the characters work through?

SLR: I have often said that if I were to write about my real life, my books would be favorites with people who suffer insomnia. I grew up in a very ordinary suburban area, with parents who are still married and one younger sister. I have encountered, either through friends, acquaintances, newspapers, or students, components of the family dynamics that I write about. (After my first two books, in which the parents are either abusive, dead-beat, or just dead, my parents did ask, with a great level of concern, if I had bad memories



of my childhood!)

While the situations my characters face often do "extend far beyond" typical trouble spots for teens, I think that they are situations that most teens could see themselves or a close friend experiencing. What I try to do in my writing is to take

"What I try to do in my writing is to take what I know or have experienced, and twist it so it would be interesting or exciting to the readers."

what I know or have experienced, and twist it so it would be interesting or exciting to the readers. Sean (from *Hero*) is a combination of five students I had in my first year of teaching. For *Rough Waters*, I drew on my extensive rafting experiences, and wondered what it would be like for someone who didn't have a choice about being on the river.

When I'm teaching, I like to use my students as my guinea pigs. I offer extra credit for anyone willing to read an unpublished manuscript and critique it. After completing the manuscript for *Stetson*, I had to put it on hold for a semester, because we had a student killed in a car accident, and I did not want to upset my students further.

PSC: Your books include a lot of action (the rafting in *Rough Waters*, for example, and the swim meets in *Head Above Water*), as well as a lot of character development.

I am curious: When thinking about your work as a writer, what do *you* feel like are your strongest areas, and is there anything that you wish you could do better, and so on? How do you move from an idea into print? Have critics noticed anything about your writing that has come as a surprise to *you*?

SLR: I like to think that my character development and use of dialog are my strengths. My endings are frequently criticized for being too rushed, but I'm not sure that comes as a surprise to me. I would like to be able to wrap up my stories a little more smoothly.

When I come up with a story idea, I usually let it stew and make my brain sort through as many of the plot components as I can before I start writing. The fun and infuriating part of actually writing is watching what the characters do with the situations I put them in. It's fun when they do what I was expecting, but it's infuriating when they lead to a plot twist that I'm not ready to deal with.

As for having action in my novels, it's necessary. Look at the way the world works. Kids expect action and entertainment from everything, including the classroom. Teachers now need to add a flair for dramatics to their lesson plans to keep the students involved. I want students to read, so I've got to meet some of their needs. Adding the character development and moral or philosophical issues is a way of meeting my own (and hopefully some other teachers') needs.

PSC: In this issue of *The ALAN Review*, author John H. Ritter addresses a question: Do writers of YA literature feel an obligation to provide hope for their readers?

How might you answer that question?

SLR: I wrestle with this question almost as much as I wrestle with the use of language in my books. As an American author, I believe that freedom of speech is incredibly important and censorship in any government form is wrong. Yet as a teacher, I know that there are stories and

Hope is important for teen readers, but most of them see a very different reality in their day to day lives. The trick is finding the balance between supplying enough hope and still making the story 'real'.

materials that, as much as I know they would have a valuable impact on my students, I simply cannot bring into the classroom. I've attempted to reach a happy medium with my writing; I know full well that the language I use in my books is very tame compared to what most students hear (and say!) everyday in the halls during passing period. But that doesn't necessarily mean they need to read them in the classroom too.

The need to provide hope to YA readers is just as sticky a question. For some of our readers, they'll call you on any kind happy ending, because the readers don't see happy endings in the world outside—and sometimes even inside—the school walls. I have a lot of rather bleak material in my books, and at least two of my books originally had very different endings than what was published. My editors did not want to books to be too depressing. Hope is important for teen readers, but most of them see a very different reality in their day to day lives. The trick is finding the balance between supplying enough hope and still making the story 'real'.

PSC: *Head Above Water* is the first of yours to feature a female protagonist.

Can you talk a bit about your decision to write a book that focuses on a female athlete?

SLR: The first outline I did for *Rough Waters* involved a female protagonist. My agent flat out refused to work with it. His comment was incredibly politically incorrect, but the bottom line was financial: it's easier to sell a male protagonist in YA literature, because although teen girls will read about boys or girls, teen boys will only read about boys. You get the bigger market when you write about boys.

When I did write *Head Above Water*, it was a very emotionally draining book. I'm not entirely sure why. But I do know that throughout the editing process, the comment that I kept getting was that it was a "girl's book." I kept wondering why that sounded like an insult. I'm a girl, lots of girls like to read, why is it a bad thing to write a girl's book?

Female athletes as protagonists are a natural reflection of today's society. There are a lot of girls out there who turn to sports for a safe physical and emotional release, and quite a few of them are also turning to their coaches for adult guidance that they don't find elsewhere. This is, obviously, not unique to girls—a lot of boys are in sports for the same reasons. But boys have the more visible, big fan-drawing, professional potential sports than girls do, and the high school female athlete has been ignored in literature for far too long.

The embarrassing flip side to this is the fact that of the six YA books I've either published or have under contract, only one is about a female athlete! I've got other completed manuscripts with female protagonists, but I've been unable to get contracts for them. For some reason, my male protagonists seem to come to life easily.

PSC: You have worked as a swimming coach for a girls' team. Are you still coaching?

SLR: Unfortunately, I'm not a coach at this time. We live on base outside of a relatively small city, and the opportunity for me to teach or coach doesn't exist at this time. I'm looking forward to moving and getting the chance to work with teens again!

PSC: How have your colleagues and former students responded to your success as a writer for adolescents? How have you responded to the awards and recognition? (Your first novel, *Hero*, was selected as an ALA Best Book for Young Adults, and your second, *Rough Waters*, was named as an ALA Quick Pick for Young Adults—quite an impressive—and perhaps daunting—start!)

SLR: I have been stunned by the student response and awards that my books have gotten so far. And I have to admit that I love it! My favorite awards, though, are the state awards that are student-driven. *Rough Waters* and *Stetson* have both been Colorado Blue Spruce Award nominees (1999, 2003), and *Hero* won the Nevada Young Readers Award (2001).

When teaching, though, my colleagues and students simply see me as another teacher. When I'm in the middle of writing a story or editing one for print, papers occasionally are a little late in being graded. But the only time my writing directly affects my teaching is when I have to take leave to

attend a conference, or when I'm assigning a writing assignment to a class. It frequently goes something like this:

"I need you to write a two page—"

"Two pages!" they interrupt. "How can we write two pages?"

"Oh, come on you guys, two pages is easy! It's nothing—"

"Yeah, for you! You write books!"

PSC: Our readers would be interested in hearing about the kinds of letters or electronic messages that you might get from young readers. Can you share any of the memorable responses that you have received from readers?

SLR: I received an e-mail in April that gave me goosebumps. I asked her for permission to use it, and she agreed (I promised not to share her last name).

Dear Mrs. Rottman,

I wanted you to know what you have done for me. You came to our school (Newton) just about a few months ago and you changed my life. I always hated reading since I was about six years old. Coming into Newton, I knew about the AR [Accelerated Reader] system, and fought to find ways around it, yet finding nothing, I purely didn't get any points. When you visited our school, everyone was reading your books. I didn't get a chance until after you came, and the first book I read was *Head Above Water*. Usually, it took me weeks to read books, sometimes even months. I read your book in about one week flat. It was probably one of the best books I had ever read. That was how it started. I then read *Hero* and then *Stetson*. All in very short time periods, unlike the usual me. I am writing this email mostly to tell you that you have inspired me. Inspired me to read, and maybe even to write. I write mostly poems, but I do have stories in my mind for writing about, although i doubt I will ever get to

writing them. I have read many books since then and I read faster, and understand more now. I know have more points than I need for AR. I actually go home, wanting to read my book. So thank you. I also think that you should write sequels to many of your books, and I am awaiting you new book to come out. Thank you from the bottom of my heart.

Lera

(8th grade student from Newton)

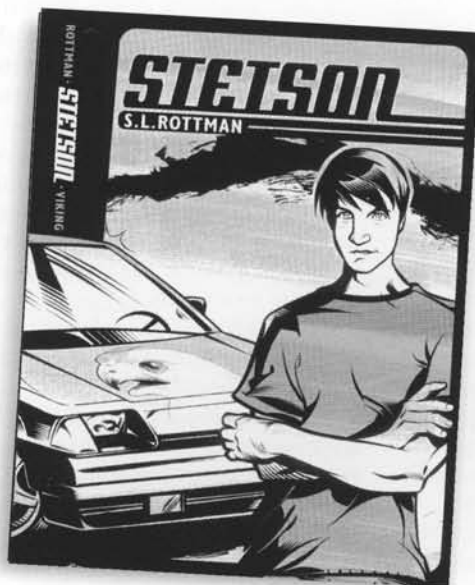
PSC: Can you give us any hints about projects that you are currently working on?

SLR: This is a tough question, mostly because there is usually a big difference between projects that I'm working on, and what's coming out next in print!

My next book is *Shadow of a Doubt*, and scheduled for a fall 2003 release (Peachtree). Shadow, a fifteen-year-old, is beginning high school and hoping for a fresh start. He's been a quiet loner for a while, primarily because his older brother broke his trust (and his heart) when he ran away eight years ago. When Shadow answers the phone during the first week of school, his world is once again violently shaken as he finds out that his brother is now facing homicide charges.

I also have a skiing YA book, currently untitled, with an anticipated 2005 release (Viking). Beyond that, I just finished a new YA manuscript, and am planning to do some editing on an adult manuscript that I wrote a few years ago and still hope to place. I'm also trying to break into the children's market, and have a children's book scheduled for a 2006 release.

I am a very lucky person because I love all of my jobs—being a mom, teaching, and writing. And all three of those jobs intertwine, influence, and support each other.



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of Penguin Putnam Books for
Young Readers.*

*Jacket design by Teresa
Kietlinski.*

S. L. Rottmans' *Stetson*

Pamela Sissi Carroll

S.L. Rottman must be an acrobat. I don't know whether she can walk on a tight rope, or even if she can jump into the air then do a couple of flips and twists before landing on the ground again. But she is an acrobatic writer, one who writes equally compelling fiction using the first person voices of female and male characters. Two recent novels, *Head above Water* (Peachtree, 1999) and *Stetson* (Viking of Penguin Putnam, 2002), demonstrate her talent for telling stories from the perspective of teens in desperate situations. Of the four novels she has published for teen readers, *Head Above Water* is the one that features a female protagonist, a talented swimmer named Skye. Skye struggles to balance training rigorously for the state championships, caring for a brother who has Down syndrome, and pleasing her demanding new boyfriend. Finally, Skye sees that her family is more important to her than her racing or the pushy boyfriend. Rottman's experience as a swimming coach shines through the scenes of tough practices, tired swimmers, and elusive goals.

Stetson, her latest novel, is told from the first person voice of its eponymous character. It is a fast-paced novel with threatening characters that attract the reader to the page like a moth is attracted to flames. *Stetson*, the 17-year old son of a man he describes as a "drunken slob" (p. 27), tells readers about his life. His dad works at the mill, and expects his son to quit school in order to join him—and most of the town's male population—there. Stet's mother walked out on her husband when Stet was three, leaving her son with unanswered questions about why and how she could abandon a baby, leaving him with such a poor excuse for a father.

Both father and son are nasty characters when the novel opens. For example, Dad, a former rodeo champion, berates his son for not having a full time job, and repeatedly encourages him to move out of the trailer. He also hurts his son by telling him that Stet's mom left because, "She saw what a lousy brat you were turning into, and decided she didn't want you around to rub off on the next baby!" (p. 35). Early in the novel, Stetson seems to be his father's son. He agrees to do pranks at school when his classmates promise to pay him cash for them, but the pranks sometimes get ugly. In a particularly painful scene, he embarrasses a teacher by suggesting that her white pants are revealing that she is having her menstrual period. He coolly collects \$10 from a classmate who'd ask him to distract the teacher so that she would not give a quiz, then moves on to the school office, where he tells the principal's secretary that he is suspending himself for two days.

But there are two people in Stetson's life who provide him with relief and hope for a better future: Jason is a

Vietnam veteran who lost an eye in the war; he runs a glorified junk yard and allows Stetson to work there, offering him money and spare parts, when they are available. Stetson's primary goal, in addition to beating the odds against his graduating from high school, is to rebuild an old car—one he has been working on for two years—until it is perfect. The other person is Kayla, his 13-year-old sister, whom he learns about and meets when he is 17. Kayla appears at the trailer one day, looking for the father she had never met, with nowhere else to go. Stet tries his best to be a big brother to her, despite repeated disappointments that she gives him, including her decision to drink beers before school, to dress in tight shirts and micro-mini-skirts, and to party with his older friends at the local bar.

Finally, Stet and Kayla begin to form a bond and his crusty shell begins to fall away. He allows Kayla to help him finish the paint job on his prize possession, the car, because she has a talent for drawing. He decorates the exterior with an airbrushed design that Kayla creates. He enjoys the attention that his remarkable car draws when he drives it to school. Then Stetson is faced with a mountain of misfortunes. He cannot cut school any more if he hopes to graduate, but without cutting he can only work evenings and weekends, thereby barely making enough money to buy food for himself, Kayla, and their father. He learns that Jason is terribly ill and eventually that he is dying of cancer. While Stet is staying at Jason's to care for him one night, Dad calls the trailer, and insists that Kayla drive Stet's prized car to pick him up from the bar. She refuses at first, but when her drunken dad demands that she come, she does—then she crashes the car and ends up in a coma for over a week. At that same time, Jason is checking into a veteran's hospital where he knows he will die. Through all the turmoil that this situation produces for Stetson, he does learn some things about his mother's and his father's love for him. As readers, we even become a bit more sympathetic toward the despicable father when we begin to consider the losses he has experienced over the years. Stetson is finally able to break free of the town with new dreams for himself and, upon her recovery, for his little sister, too.

Rottman convincingly tells this story of family disputes, cars, bars, and troubled, troublesome teen sisters from the male's perspective. It is a book that will appeal to male and female readers...and one that they will find themselves wanting to move through quickly, as they learn more and more about the enigmatic protagonist and narrator. That Rottman can make readers care about a character who seemed so nasty, when we first met him, is itself an acrobatic feat of world-class proportions.

EVERYTHING

David Lubar

Three years ago, ALAN journal's editor (fondly known as the Belle of Tallahassee) allowed me to appear in these pages — a move not unlike inviting Spanky and Alfalfa to an embassy brunch. Since then, I've experienced a dizzying rise from total obscurity to vague familiarity. Thanks in part to ALAN, I'm mistaken for much more important people these days than ever before.

To honor the end of Dr. Carroll's reign as editor, I've been asked to write another article. After a great deal of thought, and after accepting the sad truth that I have a hard time making decisions (I've been known to hover for twenty minutes in the produce department trying to pick the right tomato or, more importantly, avoid picking the wrong tomato), I realized there's only one possible topic worthy of this event. Everything. So, in this article, I'll cover the entire history of YA literature, past, present, and future, describe the important people and organizations in the field, and explain everything I've learned as a writer of YA novels. If there's space left over, I'll toss in my wife's recipe for cream of broccoli soup.

The History of Young Adult Novels

In 1951, J.D. Salinger, author of such action-packed works as "A Perfect Day for Banana Bread," and *Franny and Zoooooooey*, creates a new genre with *Catcher in the Rye*, spawning an industry frenzy for novels with red covers. Teachers rejoice, and celebrate this emerging literature by assigning *The Brothers Karamazov*. Also in 1951, three-year-old Chris Crutcher grows his first mustache.

Ten years later, Harper Lee creates a YA classic that doesn't have a single YA character. A short time after that, S. E. Hinton, realizing that she's just as qualified as Salinger to go by her initials, writes several ground breaking YA novels while still in utero. Teachers across the land respond by assigning *Silas Marner*. Robert Cormier, feeling that Holden Caulfield got off too easily, kicks the crap out of his characters. Things start to get interesting. Judy Blume and Stephen King write about girls getting their first period, with broadly different outcomes. Someone points out to M. E. Kerr that she also has two initials.

In the eighties, angst reigns supreme. During that decade, YA novels give us 837 rapes, 943 murders, 1,247 suicides, 12,457 dead parents, 19,382 dead pets, and three smiles. Legions of dogs are bred for the sole purpose of dying in the penultimate chapter. So many parents drown that the Red Cross steps in to offer free adult swim lessons to any interested fictional characters. Loneliness runs rampant — nobody

wants to be the main character's best friend because that's almost a guaranteed death sentence. During this period, I attempt to write books using my first two initials, but people misread the meaning of D. R. Lubar and hound me for amphetamine prescriptions.

The nineties bring us a huge diversity and bold experimentation. Characters get drunk, use bad language, and contemplate intercourse, just like Holden Caulfield, but authors bravely use their whole first names. Except for J. K. Rowling, but then again she can do whatever she wants, even if it means that an entire generation of her book-toting fans will eventually suffer scoliosis. (One youngster was already tragically

crushed when he tried to bring his entire Harry Potter collection to school in his back pack. This represents an alarming trend in page-count injuries affecting younger and younger kids. It used to be only Robert Jordan fans who got hurt.)

The next ten years should be just as exciting, especially when a wave of adult authors dives into YA novels, allowing teens to share the joys of deciphering enigmatic references, plotless meanderings, epiphanies by the cart load, and the many other wonders of the finest literary and academic fiction. It's about time. There's no reason all of this joy should be the exclusive property of New Yorker subscribers.

Beyond that, two or three decades hence, we'll see the end of the printed word as ebooks take over the world. Or as global warming raises the ambient temperature above 451 degrees Fahrenheit (which, as any science fiction fan knows, is the kindling temperature of banana bread). While the end of the printed word was also predicted by the advent of educational radio, educational television, personal computers, laser disks, computers, and Jim Carrey movies, the prognosticators are bound to be right sooner or later. If not this time, maybe next time.

Some Key People in the Field

(Voice shift alert — I really like the people in the field, so this section might not have quite the same tone as the rest of the piece. On the other hand, I've been known to shoot myself in the foot, so we'll just have to see what happens.)

Between the reader and writer lies a vast array of other folks. Foremost among them is M. Jerry Weiss, who realized that he could slip cleverly into the middle ground by using just one of his two initials. M. (as we like to call him) has a marvelous talent for getting publishers to send writers to conferences at



places we'd never get to see otherwise, like New Orleans, San Francisco, Hoboken, and Toronto. For this, we all love him.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, there's that one guy who has absolutely no sense of humor. His name eludes me at the moment, but you know who I mean. The same guy who's proud of the fact that he doesn't like teens. On second thought, let's just move on. No point making him crankier than he already is. I'd rather talk about those who've chosen the light side of the Force.

And they are legion. The array of folks who promote good books is amazing. There's probably no field on the planet where everyone is so cool.

Wait — it's coming to me even as I write this. Let's bag the descriptions and just do the thing we all enjoy the most: give out awards. But these will be fun awards. None of this stuff about enduring literary value or redeeming social messages.

Okay. The envelope, please. In the category of best hair on an individual over six feet seven inches tall, the winner is Walter Mayes (aka Walter the Giant Story Teller). For best hair, couples division, the winners are Don Gallo and CJ Bott. The award for best drawl on an answering machine message goes to Dr. Pamela Sissi Carroll. (Not that I'd ever admit to calling her office when I knew she was out just to hear that cheerful southern phrasing). Bill Mollineaux wins best punster, in the division of important guys I'm trying to suck up to. (Yikes — wait — I ended that with a preposition. Let's make it "important guys to whom I am trying to suck up." Wait. Darn. That won't work either. Okay — got it — "Important guys up to whom I am trying to suck." There. Perfect.)

Okay — back to the awards. Di Tixier Herald wins the Green Earth award for building her new house out of recycled Advanced Reading Copies (ARCs). The "It Seemed Like a Good Idea at the Time" award goes to Cathi Dunn MacRae for letting me write whatever I feel like in VOYA. And, in a tightly fought contest among dozens of candidates, Richie Partington wins best grasp of YA literature by a goat farmer.

Seriously, (and I promise that this is the only time I will use that word in this article) there is nothing cooler than being at the ALAN conference, because you are the folks who actually understand what all of this is about. And I was kidding about prepositions. They're a perfectly fine thing to end a sentence with.

Important Journals

This is actually pretty simple. Every journal on the planet is important except for Kirkus Reviews. (The opinions expressed here are solely those of the author and do not reflect the opinions of NCTE, ALAN, USFL, NFL, ICBM, QWERTY, or any other individual, organization, or acronym. Which, of course, doesn't invalidate the likelihood that nearly everyone on the planet shares this view.) While this may seem like

a cheap shot on my part, I'd like to point out that at least it's not anonymous.

Major Organizations

Various organizations exist for the worthy goals of promoting young adult literature, and meeting on occasion at places like New Orleans, San Francisco, and Toronto. (Hang in there, Hoboken; your turn will come.)

The most puzzling group is the NCTE. It's not unreasonable to expect English teachers to come up with a spiffy acronym for their organization, such as BOOKZ or TENSURE. Sadly, it appears that someone dropped the ball. Other than a vague resemblance to "nictate," or "incite," NCTE doesn't seem to resemble any known word.

The International Reading Association, on the other hand, has forced countless writers to follow the statement, "I'm working on my IRA talk," with disclaimers along the lines of, "No, I'm not a terrorist," or "Sorry, I can't give you advice on planning your retirement."

ALAN, with a bit of fudging on the "N," managed to create a reasonable acronym, though nobody is sure whether the inspiration is Alan Funt, Alan Sherman, or Alan Seuss. ALA strikes the eye as a foreign preposition while YALSA seems more like a mislabeled condiment. (I'm pretty sure that at the Texas Library Association banquet, they served Enchiladas ALA Enrique con YALSA verde, but my memory might be imperfect due to an allergic reaction to my fifth margarita.)

In the eighties, angst reigns supreme. During that decade, YA novels give us 837 rapes, 943 murders, 1,247 suicides, 12,457 dead parents, 19,382 dead pets, and three smiles.

The nineties bring us a huge diversity and bold experimentation. Characters get drunk, use bad language, and contemplate intercourse, just like Holden Caulfield, but authors bravely use their whole first names.

Everything I've Learned about Writing for Young Adults

It's just like writing for old adults.

And in Conclusion

The soup recipe is way too hard. And all that cream can turn a body to lard. So allow me to offer instead:

Chocolate Chip Banana Bread

Ingredients

- 2 1/2 cups flour
- 1 tsp. baking soda
- 3/4 tsp. salt
- 1 1/4 cups sugar
- 1/2 cup vegetable oil
- 3 large eggs
- 1 1/2 cups mashed ripe bananas
- 1 cup chocolate chips

Preheat oven to 325 F. Grease 4 small loaf pans. Stir flour, baking soda, and salt together. Beat oil, sugar, and eggs. Add bananas and beat. Add flour mixture until moistened. Stir in chips. Pour into baking pans. Bake 45 - 50 minutes. Cool in pans for 10 minutes, then remove from pans and cool completely.

P.S. Bye-bye, Dr. Sissi. You done good.

Adolescent Readers *Flip* for David Lubar

Sissi Carroll

With a mind that orbits at warp speed, David Lubar offers readers an amazing gift with each of his books: a reason to have good, silly, deep, full, long-lasting laughs. His newest novel, *Flip* (Tor, July, 2003) continues the zany tradition that Lubar began when he penned books like *Psychozone: Kidzilla and other Tales* (Tor, 1997) and when he took us and with young readers for a wander down *Monster Road* (Scholastic, 1997).

Flip

Flip features 13-year old twins. Taylor is the intelligent student and dutiful daughter; Ryan, on the other hand, cemented his reputation as the family failure when he was only six years old. By chance, Taylor and Ryan discover hundreds of disks that have been dropped by a space craft near their backyard. Ryan learns, by trial and error, that the disks carry powerful magic; when he flips one then catches it in his palm, it melts into his skin, and imbues him with the strength, mind, and talent of a legendary figure from history. While hosting the spirit of Babe Ruth in his long-legged 13-year-old body, Ryan shocks his friends and the school coach by swatting one homerun after another. When the disk that melts into his skin turns out to contain the essence of Queen Victoria, Ryan suddenly develops a distaste for the unruly behavior and unclothed presence of the guys in his gym class. He entertains the school when he flips and absorbs the Elvis disk, and in the book's climactic scene, he settles a feud with the school bully by invoking the non-violent spirit of Gandhi. Ryan knows that if he could decode the odd writing on the surface of the disks, he might be better able to predict what would happen with each flip. Yet the mystery of what will happen each time Ryan flips a different disk is part of the entertainment in this fun and frenetic novel.

David Lubar's Books and the Classroom

Today, maybe more than ever, we need to find reasons to laugh with the adolescents with whom we spend time. That need is a good reason to welcome David Lubar's books and stories into middle and high school classrooms and media centers. He delivers punch lines with perfect timing, but his talent as a writer for adolescents is not limited to his humor. Lubar's books are appealing to adolescent readers—even reluctant readers—for many reasons. They are popular in part because Lubar often plays around with the conventions of fiction, in ways that welcome readers to join in on the fun of fiction. One example occurs in *Flip*, where Lubar adds short narrative "Snapshots" that are separated by "clicks" between many of the chapters; readers learn that these snapshots are the novel's equivalent of a video collage of a scene. These quick shots also give a nod of recognition to the fact that many adolescent readers have short attention spans. Other examples occur in *Hidden Talents*, where Lubar helps readers get comfortable with the school setting by breaking up the narrative text to add clippings of the newspaper ads that are stored

in one teacher's desk, textbook passages, the principal's memos to the faculty, and the class bully's drawings—all items that middle and high school readers will recognize from their time in schools.

In addition to his expert use of textual innovations, Lubar's books are also popular among young readers because they have many of the most important characteristics of adolescent fiction, including subtle positive messages about relationships, self-image, intelligence, and determination into his stories. He recognizes that kids see the world differently than adults see it, and he shows respect for his readers by creating honorable though imperfect adolescent characters. In addition to his talent for creating short, exciting adolescent novels, Lubar is a fine writer of short stories for young people. One of his best stories, "Dual Identities," is included in M. Jerry and Helen Weiss's collection, *Lost and Found* (Forge, 2000). Another, and one that is quite different from most of his work, is "War is Swell," included in Jennifer Armstrong's potent collection, *Shattered: Stories of Children and War* (Knopf, 2002).

Primarily, though, David Lubar's books do appeal to young readers (and older ones, like me, too) because they make us laugh. Lubar has several successful strategies up his sleeve that keep us laughing. Three that have caught my attention are these: First, he tickles readers with the lively characters he creates. One of my favorite examples is Miss Nomad, the free-spirited English teacher in *Hidden Talents* (Tor, 1999), who writes terrible poems, with lines like these: "A single grain of might sand, I hold it lovingly in my hand. Gentle orb, so small and simple...A speck no bigger than a pimple" (p. 48). Second, Lubar causes readers to grin at the unusual yet somehow believable situations in which his adolescent characters find themselves. I cannot forget Chad Turner, who goes into training to work as a dunking booth clown on the Jersey boardwalk, whom I met on the pages of Lubar's innovative *Dunk* (Clarion, 2002). Third, he encourages readers to chuckle as we encounter the shimmies and twists of his stories' plots; this characteristic is obvious in *Flip*. While Ryan is almost obsessed with the disks that give him the power to be other people, he also has to deal with his terrible school record, the daily reports to his dad about his (lack of) school success, and dodging Billy Snooks, the local hood, after he insults Billy's mother. All of this is balanced by Taylor's unwavering quest to do the right thing, earn perfect grades, and make her parents proud.

David Lubar welcomes adolescents into an appealing world of literature. His books and stories make an ideal addition to classroom collections and school libraries. Don't be shy: invite students to join you in reading David Lubar's novels and stories, and take a visit or two to his Website: www.davidlubar.com. You will find links to excerpts from his literary works, as well as links to humor, his biography (your students will recognize Frogger II, the computer game that he created), a schedule of school visits, and — you guessed it — plenty of good reasons to laugh.

“A Crime That’s So Unjust!”

Chris Crowe Tells About the Death of Emmett Till

Jim Blasingame

“If you can’t speak out against this kind of thing, a crime that’s so unjust,
Your eyes are filled with dead men’s dirt, your mind is filled with dust.”

*Line from the song, “The Death of Emmett Till” by Bob Dylan,
© 1963, Warner Brothers. Renewed 1991. Special Rider Music*

In 1955 Emmett Till, a fourteen-year-old African American visitor from Chicago, Illinois, left his cousins waiting outside of Bryant’s Grocery and Meat Market in Money, Mississippi, while he went inside. Exactly what happened during those next few minutes while the two were alone only Carolyn Bryant, the 21-year-old white storeowner, and Emmett himself would ever know for sure. What happened four days later, however, is quite certain. According to Emmett’s great uncle Mose Wright’s testimony in court and the admission of the two men later in a paid interview with *Life Magazine*, Carolyn Bryant’s husband Roy and his half brother J.W. Milam kidnapped Emmett, and he was never seen alive again. Three days following the kidnapping Emmett’s horribly disfigured body was found in the Tallahatchie River. The two men were found innocent of murder and innocent of kidnapping (PBS American Experience Series: *The Murder of Emmett Till*).

The murder of Emmett Till is the subject of *Mississippi Trial, 1955*, BYU Professor of English Education and former ALAN president Chris Crowe’s first venture into young adult fiction. He followed soon after with a nonfiction companion work *Getting Away with Murder: The True Story of the Emmett Till Case*. The success of *Mississippi Trial, 1955* has been remarkable for any book let alone a first work. The American Library Association named it a 2003 Best Book for Young Adults, and the National Council for the Social Studies honored it as a 2003 Notable Social Studies Trade Book for Young People in the category of History, Life and Culture in the Americas. It has also won the IRA Children’s Book Award in the YA novel category which Chris accepted in May at the IRA convention, and the Jefferson Cup, an award given for the best young adult historical book, fiction or nonfiction, which he will receive in November.

Chris was kind enough to speak with us recently by email:

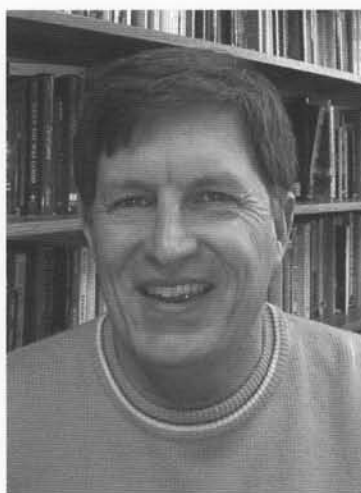
JB: Chris, Congratulations on having your very first young adult novel, *Mississippi Trial, 1955*, win so many awards. Readers are also finding that your nonfiction work, *Getting*

Away with Murder: The True Story of the Emmett Till Case is a wonderful complement to the fictionalized account. The research and the two books were quite a project. Were you thinking of a specific readership as you began?

CC: I’m always thinking about young adult readers, so when I learned about the Emmett Till case, I knew that I wanted to tell the story for teenagers. Emmett was only 14 when he was murdered, so I thought his story would be especially important for YA readers. There are many stories about teenagers in the civil rights movement, and Emmett’s death and the trial of his killers was a catalyst for the Montgomery Bus Boycott that took place just months later. The story of Emmett Till was a story I had been ignorant of, and it’s a story everyone should know. I thought it would make sense to share it with YAs. I started the novel first, without any plans for a nonfiction book. It wasn’t until I finished the novel and looked over the stacks of notes and research material that I realized I had enough information for a nonfiction book about the case. And because this was such an important event in US history, I wanted to present teenage readers with the straight story, illustrated with photographs from the case. I wanted YA readers to know the facts of the murder of Emmett Till without any doubt about what was fact and what was fiction.

JB: In the Acknowledgements to *Getting Away with Murder: The True Story of the Emmett Till Case*, you thank Mildred D. Taylor, author of the Logan family series, *Roll of Thunder, Hear my Cry, Let the Circle be Unbroken, The Road to Memphis and The Land*, “an awe-inspiring writer, who first sent me in search of Emmett” (6). Was this a figurative or literal sending? Can you tell us about that?

CC: It was more figurative than literal. When I was working on a book about Mildred D. Taylor, I came across a comment she made about the impact the murder of Emmett Till had on her when she was a high school student. That reference sent me in search of the story because I wondered if it might have had some influence on her writing as well. As



Chris Crowe surrounded by YA literature in Provo, Utah

I said, previous to this, I'd never heard anything about Emmett Till, so when I found the photo of his corpse in *Jet Magazine*, I was shocked. I was shocked because it was such a horrible crime, but I was also shocked because the murder had been a huge event in 1955 but somehow it never made it into most history books. In all my years as a student and a teacher, I'd never read about it. My ignorance of this major historical event shamed me.

JB: Speculating about the truth is perhaps one of the biggest requirements of writing a fictional account of an actual event. In *Mississippi Trial, 1955* you had to imagine or speculate about the truth of what happened during those seven days in 1955, a truth that may have also died, in part, with Emmett Till. How did you accomplish that?

CC: I wanted to make sure that any speculation I did was based on fact, so I did lots of research. As I learned about the people involved in the crime, I tried to imagine what they were like, what would make someone believe that they could justify murder. To create the fictional character of R.C. Rydell, I tried to imagine what sort of childhood a boy would have to have in order to grow up able to do awful, cruel things. I imagined what his home life must have been like and what might have warped him. In terms of the events, I read as many accounts of the murder and trial as I could find. Because it was such a sensational crime in 1955, there were lots of newspaper and magazine articles written about it. The trial transcripts have been "lost," so those weren't available, but I did make good use of microfilm records and even some video interviews of people involved in the case. I even spent a week in Greenwood, Mississippi, the same week in August that Emmett had been there, so I could have an accurate sense of the setting—the weather, the towns, the way people spoke.

JB: There is more going on with your characters in *Mississippi Trial* than just the story that people could have read in the news. What did you mean for your characters to show about the human experience?

CC: I suppose I was thinking most about Hiram Hillburn, my narrator. In many ways, mainly the cowardly ways, Hiram is a lot like I was when I was a teenager. Hiram's oblivious to the racism around, oblivious to the goodness of his own father, oblivious to the unsavory qualities of many of the people he thinks he admires. Hiram was a racist without being aware of it. He also was a part of an intergenerational family conflict. Hiram hates his father. Hiram's father hates his father. As I said, some of this comes from my own teen years. When I was in high school, I didn't get along very well with my own father, and it was my fault. After I got married, and especially after I had kids of my own, I realized what a dope I had been, and I regretted that I hadn't made a better effort at understanding Dad when I was a teenager. Anyway, my dad died while I was working on *Mississippi Trial, 1955*, and that caused me to reflect a lot on what my relationship had been with him and what I wish it had been.

One of the nice things about fiction is that it gives you a chance to work out some angst, and that's what I did through Hiram. I knew that this novel couldn't be about the Emmett Till case—it had to be a story that stood on its own, a story affected by the case rather than about the case. For Hiram, I wanted it to be a story of reconciliation; I wanted him to come to see his father in a new light, and I wanted him to learn about racism and how evil it is. Having him get caught up in the Emmett Till case provided the catalyst for both those lessons to take place.

So, I wanted Hiram to learn that our perceptions of others aren't always accurate. I wanted him to learn that people he loves can still do bad things. I wanted him to face something really scary and find the courage to do what was right, even if he didn't want to. I guess those are the same things I wish I would have learned when I was 16.

JB: Both books required an enormous amount of research (over 50 sources in the bibliography of *Getting Away with Murder*), and the facts you uncovered were hardly benign. As you were searching for Emmett's story what was going on with you on a personal level? What experiences along the way most affected you?

CC: The research was both fascinating and agonizing. I learned facts about the case, of course, but I also learned an awful lot about the Jim Crow South and many of the terrible things that happened following the 1954 Brown vs. Board of Education ruling by the Supreme Court. I'd never realized how that decision had inflamed the South. So the educational part of the research was fascinating. But it was agonizing because much of what I was reading and writing about was so awful. Emmett wasn't the only African American murdered in Mississippi in 1955, and reading about the hate and violence that was erupting then made me feel awful.

The details of the Emmett Till case, of course, are singularly horrifying. Here's a boy, barely 14 years old, the only child of a widow, who ends up kidnapped, tortured, and murdered for being rude to a white woman. The blatant racism during the trial was incomprehensible to me, and the cocky pride his murderers had for "doing their duty" was simply stunning. It was hard for me to believe that there really are people like that. Anyway, being immersed in this story for the years I spent researching and writing about this case kept me in a perpetual dark cloud of sadness. I have to admit, that when I finally finished both books, I felt a ton of relief, not just because the projects were done but because I could finally emerge from all the dark stuff I'd been dealing with for so very long.

For me, one of the most painful aspects of Emmett's story was his tragic death. I have four children of my own, and I can barely imagine the agony Emmett's mother endured when she learned what had happened to her only child. In the course of my research, I had the opportunity to have two long phone interviews with his mother, Mamie Till Mobley, and she was a remarkable, noble woman. If I had been her, I'm afraid I would have been festering with hate about the whole

The story of Emmett Till was a story I had been ignorant of, and it's a story everyone should know.

In the course of my research, I had the opportunity to have two long phone interviews with his mother, Mamie Till Mobley, and she was a remarkable, noble woman.

thing, but she had this regal charm about her, very gracious, very smart, very objective. When I was talking with her, I felt a sort of awe—here I was, a nobody white guy talking with the woman who was a big part of the civil rights movement, a woman who has shared speaking engagements with Rosa Parks. Mrs. Mobley was polite and kind and so very open. It was clear that she still mourned the death of her son, but also that she had forgiven his killers. What a magnificent woman! Those conversations with her were the high points of my work on these books.

JB: How did you ever find the time to write these two books? You have a full schedule as a professor at BYU, you were president of the ALAN at the time, you have a family, and many other obligations; I'm sure. Do you have a time management secret?

CC: I don't have any secrets about getting writing done. In fact, I usually feel like I'm an unorganized, undisciplined slacker. The research was interesting and seemingly never ending, and I realized at one point I was using research as an excuse to avoid writing. Anyway, I didn't set any writing speed records. I started research on the novel way back in 1997 and started writing in earnest the following year. I had other writing projects going on at the same time—and, of course, all the stuff that comes with teaching at a university—so I had plenty of distractions. My best writing period came when I'd go to a carrel in the library every morning and work on the novel for one or two or three hours. That daily rhythm helped me finish the first draft, and I still do my best writing when I can work on it daily. Though the university provides lots of work that takes me away from writing, it also offers support and much more flexibility than I had when I was a high school teacher. That flexibility and support really helps my writing. Here's what I know about writing—and about most things in life: we make time to do what we really want to do.

JB: You could have chosen a much safer, less challenging topic for your first attempt at a novel. Why did you choose the story of Emmett Till for your opening endeavor?

CC: I suppose I may have thought that historical fiction might be easier because it provided a ready-made story for a framework. Man, was I wrong about that! I found that it was incredibly difficult blending history with fiction because my fictional plot and characters kept bumping up against

real history, so I had to keep rechecking facts to make sure I was faithful to the historical events. I chose the story of Emmett Till because I felt it had to be told, that kids should know about the murder of this 14-year-old boy and its place in American history. Looking back, I realize that I was pretty naive about what this work would entail. It was painful being immersed in the facts of this case for so long, but I'm glad I did what I did and that it's turned out all right.

JB: What contributions do you believe the genre of nonfiction makes, or can make, to young adult literature?

CC: I guess Betty Carter and Richard Abrahamson's book about nonfiction was the first thing that made me aware of how important nonfiction is to YA readers. In recent years, many states have added nonfiction or informational books to their core curricula, so it's clear that kids are going to encounter more nonfiction than ever before. And the recent nonfiction is incredible, much better than anything that was available when I was in high school. Jennifer Armstrong's *Shipwreck at the Bottom of the World* is just one example of the fine YA nonfiction that's being produced these days, and it's only the tip of the iceberg (sorry about that pun). Kids today have a wide range of really terrific nonfiction books to choose from, and I assume the market will continue to expand.

JB: Any advice to aspiring writers?

CC: A writer is someone who writes. If you want to be a writer, you've got to sit down and write; you've got to make time for writing. I also recommend that writers find trusted mentors, someone who can read their work and tell them what's working and what's not.

Aspiring writers also need to read widely. Of course they should read the sorts of books they hope to write, but they also need to read all kinds of other books too. It's all grist for the writing mill; you can never know how what you read will influence you as a person and as a writer.

Both *Mississippi Trial, 1955*, and *Getting Away with Murder: The True Story of the Emmett Till Case* are available from Phyllis Fogelman Books.

Works Cited

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The Murder of Emmett Till. Dir. Stanley Nelson. PBS American Experience Series.

I wanted to make sure that any speculation I did was based on fact, so I did lots of research. As I learned about the people involved in the crime, I tried to imagine what they were like, what would make someone believe that they could justify murder.

Paul Zindel, author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning play *The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds* (1970) and over 30 books for adolescents, including the always-popular *The Pigman* (1968), *Pardon Me, You're Stepping on my Eyeball!* (1976) and *Harry and Hortense at Hormone High* (1984) died of cancer on March 27, 2003. Following are personal tributes from ALAN members; their words help us understand the impact Paul Zindel had — and has — on young adult literature.

-psc

Tribute to Paul Zindel

M. Jerry Weiss

What words come to mind when one mentions the name Paul Zindel? Dramatic! Realistic! Tragic! Humorous! Intriguing! Innovative! Horrifying! Paul was all of these. As a pioneer in the field of young adult literature, for which he was honored by ALAN and the American Library Association, and a Pulitzer Prize winning playwright, he knew how to captivate his audiences. He showed great sensitivity, recognizing that teens have feelings, and all of us are imperfect in making decisions. Paul's classic, *The Pigman*, shows what a couple of bored teenagers do just for the fun of it. Then they must face the consequences. Paul was sure that one day every teen would meet his pigman.

When Paul spoke before groups, he told how, in describing and developing his characters, he drew on both his experiences growing up in an unstable home and his years as a chemistry teacher on Staten Island. In his autobiography, *The Pigman and Me*, he begins by saying: "Eight hundred and fifty-three horrifying things had happened to me by the time I was a teenager." (Bantam Books, 1993). Explaining where he got his idea for his short story, "Rachel's Vampire," he writes:

My years in high school were ones I've drawn upon often as inspiration throughout my writing career. There were so many phantasmagoric and exciting and frightening corners of my heart in which all kinds of secrets and dreams were able to hide. More than anything, I remember high school as a time of yearning. There was much I wanted to say, so many classmates I wanted to tell my secret feelings to—but I was too shy or cowardly in high school. I met the life models (my inspiration homunculi) that often have populated my fiction, my dozens of plays and novels and movies. But there were

many others, fascinating kids who were the smaller canvasses, supernumeraries for whom I have yet to find a place. . . (Weiss and Weiss, ed., *Lost and Found*, Tor Books: 2001, p.195)

Paul was a genuine friend of teachers, librarians and students. He enjoyed listening to what others had to say. He liked the questions people asked of him. He was thoughtful, generous, practical, and creative when it came to making suggestions on writing. He'd pop a popper and say, "You have to start with a bang!" For example, in his terrifying novel, *Rats*, he grabs the reader within the first few paragraphs and never lets go. I couldn't believe what I was reading, but Paul knew that *Rats* had its genesis in something that really did happen and pointed that out to many audiences.

At his eulogy, Beverly Horowitz, his editor at Random House Children's books, told of the joy she had in working with Paul. When the suggestion of a book, *The Pigwoman*, had come up, Paul smiled and said, "Do you really think so?" They agreed it would be a good idea. At this point there is an unfinished manuscript. It is not known how many more notes are available to complete the book. Perhaps. . . .

For those who have heard Paul speak or talk about his books, movies, TV shows, and plays, there have been laughter and sighs and great respect. So many have appreciated his multitude of talents. His sense of timing and skill as a dramatist, his fast moving action, his frequent surprises reveal his superb craftsmanship. For those we are thankful.

M. Jerry Weiss is Professor Emeritus at Jersey City State College

Saying Goodbye to Paul Zindel

Alleen Pace Nilsen

Whether or not we have read a book by Paul Zindel, all of us working with contemporary young adult literature have been influenced by his work. Both Robert Cormier and M. E. Kerr have said that when they first considered writing for teenagers, they read Zindel's 1968 *The Pigman* to decide if the genre were worthy of their best efforts. Obviously, Zindel's book convinced them. Later writers, pondering the same question, could be convinced not only by Zindel's work, but also by that of Cormier and Kerr.

Paul was generous with both his time and his talents. Back in 1984 he came to Arizona State University to speak to our students and to participate in one of the early humor conferences. HarperCollins paid his travel expenses, but he donated his time and energy. When he learned I was teaching children's literature, he bemoaned how often his young son, David, had forced him to read Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are*. He philosophically confided that the gods were getting even with him because he had harbored suspicions that picture books were all pretty much the same; it was just marketing and luck that made the difference. His son's attachment to *Where the Wild Things Are* convinced him otherwise.

Ten years later in 1994, Paul again generously donated his time and talents by coming to the International Society for Humor Studies Conference held at Ithaca College in upstate New York. He brought David with him, who by now was a

tall, handsome college student with dark curly hair and a wonderful twinkle in his eyes. After Paul participated on the opening panel with Joan Bauer, Jerry and Helen Weiss, Paula Danziger, and Bruce Coville, Paul and David stayed throughout the conference. They attended sessions, took notes, ate in the cafeteria, and laughed along with everyone else. Observing what Paul was giving to his son made me think about what Paul's books have given to all of our sons and daughters. He has been more than a Mr. Pignati for a whole generation of kids.

Looking back on that week of seeing how Paul respected and interacted with David, I can understand why David would assume that his father's interests were the same as his and why he would therefore tell a *Los Angeles Times* reporter that his father's "heart was always in the theater," even though the books were what provided the "steadier income." Making money from writing YA books is, in itself, a new high for our field, but still there are a lot of us who, in spite of what David thinks, are going to keep believing that Paul had a heart so big that there was plenty of room in it for both his young adult books and his Broadway plays.

Alleen Pace Nilsen is a Professor of English and Director of English Education at Arizona State University.

Remembering Paul Zindel

Don Gallo

We've lost a giant in the field of books for teens. An incredibly talented person. A nutty, fun-loving, kid-loving guy. A brilliant thinker.

The New York Times obituary focused on his Pulitzer Prize-winning play, *The Effect of Man-in-the Moon Marigolds*, which was, of course, no small contribution to theater. But they minimized what we in the world of Young Adult Literature know so well: his ability to write novels and stories that teenagers were drawn to, especially the lonely and slightly weird kids just like Paul had been as a teen.

In recent years some educators and librarians were disappointed that Paul's work did not match what they felt was the quality of his earlier works, especially *The Pigman*. Novels about monsters beneath Stonehenge, raptors in the Southwest, and giant rats devouring people around New York Harbor are not the kinds of books most educated adults favor. But Paul was never thinking about educated adults when he redirected his writing. He was thinking about kids—especially those middle school boys—who usually don't like to read, who have never gotten excited by anything they had to read for school, who have never read a book cover to cover. They certainly read *The Doom Stone*, and *Raptor*, and *Rat*. Devoured them (a play on words that Paul would have appreciated). More recently he abandoned the monsters and produced several thrillers about a pair of teenage detectives—the P.C. Hawke Mysteries—a series of rather brief, high interest-easy reading paperback novels ideal for high school readers who might have trouble getting through *The Pigman*.

Paul never lost his touch. He could write for any audience—plays for the Broadway stage, fast-moving adventures for the movies, mini-series for television, picture books for children, and high interest-easy reading novels for reluctant and disabled readers. He always wrote, he said, “for those who need you and are waiting hungrily for any comforting, exciting light.”

I never realized how incredibly brilliant Paul Zindel was until I spent several months interviewing him via e-mail for the Authors4Teens website, an interview that turned out to be the longest and most complete he ever gave anyone, he said. His descriptions of his thinking and writing processes were stunning. No other writer comes close to how Paul created a story.

Another thing about Paul Zindel was his kindness and his humility. Here was a man who helped shape what is today's literature for teens, a man who received just about every major literary award there is, including the ALAN Award for Contributions to Young Adult Literature and the Margaret A. Edwards Award for his lifetime achievements, a man who partied with Hollywood celebrities (Shelley Winters, Walter Matthau, Keanu Reeves, Paul Newman, Paul McCartney, Barbra Streisand) and knew all the important people in the publishing world, but who could also face an auditorium (or cafeteria) filled with several hundred squirming seventh and eighth graders and have them screaming with delight at his antics and his bizarre stories. Then he would chat one-on-one with those same kids—and their teachers and librarians—as if they were the most important individuals in the world. And he loved every minute of it. He loved to tell stories to a live audience as much as he loved to write for them. He loved speaking at schools and conferences. He loved creating. He loved performing.

While the lights have gone out on his zany performances, Paul Zindel will always shine through the many books and memories he left us.

Don Gallo, now retired from his role as Professor of English at Central Connecticut State University, is the editor of numerous short story collections for young adults, and of the Authors4Teens website.

A Farewell to Paul Zindel

John H. Bushman

It was a Saturday noon in early March in 1995 in Lawrence, Kansas, when I said: "Let us give a warm welcome to Paul Zindel." At that moment everyone stood up and applauded for 30 or 45 seconds. The man went to the microphone with a very broad smile on his face and began to speak – a speech that lasted 55 minutes. By the time he was finished, the audience experienced a roller coaster ride: sometimes silent, sometimes laughing so hard they had tears in their eyes, but always enthralled with what they were hearing. Paul Zindel had come to the heartland – Lawrence, Kansas – and treated the 300 or so people in attendance as if they were special people. That was the man, Paul Zindel. He didn't need to come to the Conference on Writing and Literature in Lawrence, Kansas, but he did. That was the man, Paul Zindel. His presence commanded respect from all who were present, even those who were nationally known speakers also presenting at the Conference – Phyllis Reynolds Naylor, Tom Romano, and Sara Holbrook. All were experiencing a warm, thoughtful, and sometimes irreverent talk.

Young and old alike lost a giant of a man and a giant of a writer for young people. He certainly can be given the honor of "one of the founding fathers of young adult literature." To this day, *The Pigman* (1968) is still offered as curriculum reading in classrooms across the nation, as well as supplemental reading outside the curriculum. His writing left a legacy that will not soon be duplicated.

Paul said, when asked about writing:

I love a good story. I try to feel strongly about what I write. Better yet, I try to write about only those things that make me cry or laugh acutely. I try to be honest. I try to be daring and human. I trust my instincts. I ignore critics, usually. I believe the perfect story is a dream. I believe writing is a complex, problem-solving adventure – a process Nature has given to all of us.

Indeed.

John H Bushman is a Professor of English Education at the University of Kansas and Director of The Writing Conference, Inc.

Loser, by Jerry Spinelli
HarperCollins, 2002, 224 pp., \$15.99

Self-Acceptance/Family Life
ISBN: 0-06-000193-3

Loser tells the story of Zinkoff, a lovable “loser” who is neither smart enough to recognize when his exuberant behavior is inappropriate, nor competitive or worldly enough to care.

Despite the teasing of his peers, Zinkoff’s main goals are to have fun, explore his surroundings, and see the best in others. This is what makes *Loser* such a wonderful read: it celebrates the child in all of us, while at the same time it points out the problems inherent in growing up.

Fortunately, Zinkoff is not alone in making his journey: his sister Polly, his 1st and 4th grade teachers, and a heroic snowplow driver all support him. His mother and father do too, which is important because there are plenty of bullies unable to appreciate what Zinkoff has to offer.

Fans of Spinelli’s work will enjoy this vivid and poignant, though not especially dramatic, coming-of-age tale (please do note that Zinkoff is only in 6th grade when this narrative ends). I recommend it as an excellent read-aloud, and catalyst for discussion of social and ethical issues. And as usual, Spinelli delivers.

Tom Phillion
Chicago, IL

With Their Eyes, edited by Annie Thoms
HarperTempest, 2002, 228 pp., \$17.89

September 11/Oral History
ISBN: 0-06-051806-5

New York City’s Stuyvesant High School was on the front lines the morning of September 11, 2001. As faculty and students watched, the nearby Twin Towers tumbled into dust. Relocated while their school was used for the rescue mission, the students in Annie Thoms’s English class tried to decipher the event’s effect on their school community.

Fitted with tape recorders, the students sought out students, faculty and staff and interviewed them about their experiences on and after September 11. They transcribed each interview, selecting twenty-five to turn into a two-act play, with students portraying their interviewees through dress, gesture and speech patterns. The play was performed on February 8 and 9, 2002, at Stuyvesant High.

Thoms’s students have created a unique art form, part oral history, part drama, that depicts the wide range of emotions and reactions experienced by those in the inner rings of ground zero. This text can be a resource for producing the play, but also for other teachers to use in constructing a multigenre project. Powerful and poignant, *With Their Eyes* is testament to the power of writing.

Michele Winship
Columbus, OH

Stand Tall by Joan Bauer
G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 2002, 192 pp., \$16.99

Contemporary Fiction
ISBN 0-399-23473-X

At six feet three inches tall, twelve year-old “Tree” is a middle school giant. Thus far, this has proven to be a source of trouble, criticism and teasing. Now, he is slowly realizing the strength he can obtain in his size throughout the events of the story.

Along with his disabled Veteran grandfather, unpopular best friend, and newly divorced parents, Tree is learning how to struggle through “war” without losing hope. Though the situation seems unbearable, Tree and the others look to each other for support.

When things seem like they just might work out, the entire town is struck with the devastation of an unexpected flood. This forces the community and Tree’s family to unite in making it through the flood and rebuilding. Through these and other events, Tree is slowly learning how to stand tall amidst difficulties, using his height as a strength. In that journey, we learn how to maintain hope against all odds.

Katie Marshall
Redford, MI

Young Adult Books In Review

Recently Published Titles

Jeff Kaplan, Editor

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REVIEW

<p><i>Fire-us Trilogy: 5 Book 1: The Kindling</i> by Jennifer Armstrong and Nancy Butcher HarperCollins Children's Books, 2002, 224 pp., \$15.95</p> <p>The authors imagine what life would be like in the adult-less environment of Lazarus, Florida, after the Fire-us virus has killed the adults in 2002. Set five years later, the book reveals how a group of young adults and children have survived. They have taken on new names because their memories of the before time no longer exist. Mommy, Hunter, Teacher, Action Figure, Teddy Bear, Baby, and Doll don't live "happily ever after," but in a <i>Lord of the Flies</i> setting, functioning with anxiety.</p> <p>Enter Anchorman, who becomes Angerman, and his mannequin Bad Guy, who intends to go to Washington to find the President. Two wild kids emerge, Kitty and Puppy. The group sets off with the goal of the Capitol. On page 223, "kindling is lit," and the book ends, as do many chapters, with a tease to read what follows. The story is drawn out and demands patience. Although the authors have enviable credentials, they seem to have designed a pattern that demands tighter control than they are willing to maintain in this book. The reading is an arduous path to discussing the possibilities the book presents.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Len DeAngelis Newport, RI</p>	<p><i>Big Bang: The Loud Debate Over Gun Control</i> by Norman L. Lunger Twenty First Century Books, 2002, 160 pp., \$25.90</p> <p>Contemporary Issues ISBN 0-7613-2260-4</p> <p>One of a series of books on contemporary topics of interest, this is an excellent one which thoroughly examines both sides of the gun control issue for young adults age 12 and up. Useful information is presented, including the history of gun use from frontier times to the present in the United States, and an explanation of our constitutional right to bear arms. The author also discusses the legal issues surrounding this right, and tracks the development of gun control legislation that has both been proposed and passed into law. A comparison of gun control laws in other countries, such as Great Britain, Japan, Canada, and Brazil, is provided so readers can judge the influence of culture on such legal traditions.</p> <p>Gun safety education is emphasized and positions for and against gun control are fairly argued and supported with documented detail. This book has an excellent set of source notes for each chapter, plus suggested additional readings.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Edgar H. Thompson Emory, VA</p>
<p><i>Boston Jane: Wilderness Days</i> by Jennifer L. Holm HarperCollins, 2002, 242 pp., \$16.99</p> <p>Historical fiction/Adventure ISBN: 0-06-029043-9</p> <p>Fiesty Jane Peck is determined to return to her native Philadelphia from the remote settlement of Washington's Shoalwater Bay. But her loyalty to the settlers and the Native American community and her growing passion for a sailor keep her from leaving.</p> <p>The second in the <i>Boston Jane</i> trilogy exposes readers to an early American reality: the harsh wilderness can become a home, complete with neighbors and friendship. Simple living surpasses city life when one's community is welcoming. Though Jane often complains about the living conditions, she takes pride in her ability to sew shirts and bake homemade pies. At 16, she runs an oyster business and exhibits bravery in several dangerous situations.</p> <p>This quick, fun read includes an author's note that places the context in history. Jane Peck is an admirable, though perhaps not totally plausible, heroine. It's a terrific book for 10-12 year olds.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Lisa K. Winkler South Orange, NJ</p>	<p><i>Breaking Point</i> by Alex Flinn HarperTempest, 2002, 241 pp., \$15.95</p> <p>Peer Pressure ISBN: 0-06-0623847-1</p> <p>When you are a new student, sometimes making friends is difficult. Perhaps that is the reason why Paul jumps at the chance to join Charley Good's inner circle of friends. Initiation seems simple enough at the outset: the pranks the group of friends play are harmless at first. And Paul is a willing accomplice. Eventually, though, what Charley expects from his new friend is beyond what Paul feels comfortable doing. How far will Paul go to maintain this relationship?</p> <p>Flinn has already demonstrated to readers that she is willing to explore the dark side of the human condition. <i>Breathing Underwater</i>, her debut novel, examined the inner turmoil of a young man who has physically abused his girlfriend. Here Flinn again turns an unflinching eye to the price one is willing to pay to fit in, to belong, to be popular.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Teri S. Lesesne Huntsville, TX</p>

<p><i>Handbook for Boys: A Novel</i> by Walter Dean Myers HarperCollins Publishers, 2002, 179 pp., \$15.95</p> <p>Conduct of Life ISBN: 0-06-029146-X</p> <p>When Jimmy and Kevin find themselves before the judge, they are willing to do anything rather than go to a youth facility, even work every day at Duke's Barbershop in Harlem. Jimmy, though, didn't know this community mentor program would mean he had to listen to the ramblings of the men who gathered each day at Duke's, even if they weren't getting a hair cut.</p> <p>Soon Jimmy realizes the talk isn't idle reminiscing of senile men, but lessons for a successful life. Too bad they haven't been written in a handbook. Kevin seems to need one. And above all, Jimmy hopes his friend can stay out of more trouble as Jimmy himself hopes to do, but it doesn't seem that Kevin will make the right choices.</p> <p>The lessons in this novel are excellent, and teachers should be aware of the tastefully handled, but mature themes used in presenting the message.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Lu Ann Brobst Staheli Spanish Fork, UT</p>	<p><i>Hoot</i> by Carl Hiaasen Alfred A. Knopf, 2002, 292 pp., \$ 15.95</p> <p>Realistic Fiction/Adventure ISBN: 0-375-82181-3</p> <p>Roy Eberhardt's most recent move has taken him from the mountains of Montana to the flatlands of Florida. "Disney World is an armpit," he states unhappily, "compared to Montana."</p> <p>On the first day of school, he meets Dana Matherson... rather he meets Dana's fist during a bus ride brawl. While pressed against the school bus window, Roy spots a running boy. This boy is carrying no backpack, and oddly enough, is wearing no shoes! Desperate to find some action in Florida, Roy trails the barefoot runner.</p> <p>As a friendship with the mysterious boy develops, Roy becomes involved in an attempt to save a colony of burrowing owls from the construction of the new "Mother Paula's All-American Pancake House."</p> <p>In his telling of Roy's story, popular author Carl Hiassen creates a character who is not only believable, but extremely likeable. The story is told in a way that gives the reader insight into Roy's thoughts, actions, and rationale. Hiassen captures our interest as he manages to show how young Roy can be obedient, caring, and unconventional – all at the same time.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Lindsey L. Webster Wheaton, IL</p>
<p><i>Surviving the Applewhites</i>, by Stephanie Tolan HarperCollins, 2002, 216 pp., \$15.99</p> <p>Family Life/Individuality ISBN: 0-06-623603-7</p> <p>Individuality is important to Jake Semple. He is a juvenile delinquent who sports an eyebrow ring, spiked and garish red hair, black clothes, numerous earrings—anything it takes to be noticed. In a final attempt to rehabilitate him, Jake is sent to the Applewhites, a quirky, artistic family whose many interests include butterflies, goats, dogs, and theater. Before long, Jake is immersed in the family's lives and projects. Soon, Jake no longer feels a need to make a statement with his appearance, since no one really cares about how he looks. He only wants to find his true self.</p> <p>The Applewhites's sense of family, love of learning, and ability to accept people of all backgrounds send a strong yet subtle message. Readers will find this book appeals to them on many levels. It especially speaks to the rebel in all of us. This book will pique the interest of even the most reluctant reader.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Joy Frerichs Chatsworth, GA</p>	<p><i>Sorcerers of the Nightwing</i> by Geoffrey Huntington Regan Books/HarperCollins, 2002, 278 pp., \$17.95</p> <p>Mystery/Suspense/Fantasy ISBN: 0-06-001425-3</p> <p>Devon March and his father appear perfectly normal, but are really Nightwings, members of an ancient group who use their powers of good to send escaped demons back to the Hellholes that contain them within.</p> <p>After his father's death, fourteen-year-old Devon discovers that he was adopted, and he possesses a special destiny as the Nightwing's hundredth-generation child. Moreover, he must now live with his chosen guardians, the mysterious and troubled Muir-Crandall family. Together, they reside in an isolated, haunted mansion named Ravenscliff. Also living at Ravenscliff is an Apostate, a Nightwing turned evil, who pursues Devon. Soon other Nightwings appear, and Devon begins a roller-coaster ride of thrilling, frightening adventures as he battles demons and investigates Ravenscliff's mysteries, and learns that all of them, including the menacing Apostate, are somehow tied to his own murky past and future.</p> <p>Mystery and fantasy fans, as well as reluctant readers, will find this novel difficult to put down. It ends with tantalizing unsolved mysteries, but as Book I in <i>The Ravenscliff Series</i>, this one sets up readers for its sequels.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Lisa A. Hazlett Vermillion, SD</p>

<p><i>Dog of Discovery</i> by Laurence Pringle Boyd's Mill Press, 2002, 149 pp., \$17.95</p> <p>History/Adventure ISBN: 1-59078-028-0</p> <p>This informative book recounts the 1804-1806 Lewis and Clark expedition from St. Louis to the Pacific Ocean and back. The book details the expedition's planning, its adventures and discoveries, and its aftermath, focusing especially on the exploits of Seaman, Meriweather Lewis's Newfoundland dog. Seaman was a faithful companion and guard dog as well as a hunter and retriever. He underwent the same hardships as the other members of the Corps of Discovery: insect bites, fatigue, hunger, Indian and grizzly attacks, to name a few.</p> <p>Information is presented in a non-threatening way, utilizing sidebars, maps, historical illustrations, as well as actual journal entries from Lewis and Clark. <i>Dog of Discovery</i> is an ideal entry into non-fiction for younger readers. Nature and animal lovers of all ages will enjoy it, and learn a great deal about this uniquely American adventure into the Wild West.</p> <p>Eileen Callery Shrub Oak, NY</p>	<p><i>Ruby Holler</i>, by Sharon Creech HarperCollins, 2002, 310 pp., \$16.99,</p> <p>Orphans/Adventure ISBN: 0-06027732-7</p> <p>This is a fast moving novel about an exceptional relationship between two older, adventuresome country souls named Tiller and Sairy Morey and twin orphans from the Boxton Creek Home for Children, Dallas and Florida Carter.</p> <p>The home, operated by Mr. and Mrs. Trepid, seems to be little more than a ramshackle parking place for the thirteen children who live there. The Trepids have mapped out a large number of spirit-numbing rules and regulations. However, as a character later points out, not everything is on maps.</p> <p>Tiller and Sairy Morey temporarily adopt the twins, and take them to Ruby Holler, a magical place named for the brilliant fall colors of the maple trees. The Moreys live like pioneers without modern conveniences, but with a respect for the land and a creative way of carving birds and boats out of wood chips.</p> <p>The spunky, lively twins are transformed by being softened up with good food and Tiller and Sairy's loving and gentle ways. They assist each other in adventures featuring physical challenges, treachery, and treasure maps. Recommended for young readers who love fantasy, adventure, and just plain whimsy.</p> <p>Tom MacLennan Wilmington, NC</p>
<p><i>The Big Burn</i> by Jeanette Ingold Harcourt, Inc., 2002, 295 pp., \$17.00</p> <p>Historical Fiction/Survival/Forest Fires ISBN: 0-15-216470-7</p> <p>In this fascinating, gripping adventure/survival story based on a 1910 fire in Idaho and Montana, author Jeanette Ingold skillfully intertwines the lives of three teenagers caught up in the fire. There is Seth, an insecure 17-year-old African-American soldier whose unit is called in to help fight the fire, escapes the pernicious influence of a "friend," and discovers that he, like his father, has a future in the army. And there is 16-year-old Jarrett, who loses his railroad job, leaves the home of his domineering father, and proves himself by successfully leading ill-trained fire crews, and who learns that a career in forestry is for him. Finally, there is 16-year-old Lizabeth and her widowed aunt, who are forced by the fire to abandon their homestead, but find equal danger in town.</p> <p>The romantic relationship between Jarrett and Lizabeth, as well as that between Jarrett's older brother and Lizabeth's aunt provide nice romantic touches. Nonfiction "field notes" interspersed throughout the story provide necessary background by chronicling the actual events of the fire. Additionally, the short chapters, which shift from one character to another, make for a lively, suspenseful read.</p> <p>Bill Mollineaux Granby, CT</p>	<p><i>Horse Thief</i>, by Robert Newton Peck HarperCollins Publishers, 2002, 231 pp., \$16.95</p> <p>Rodeo/Coming of Age ISBN: 0-06-623791-2</p> <p>The horses and colorful characters of the rodeo become like family to the orphan Tullis Yoder, but it is not until he faces even more difficult times that he gains the family he has wanted for so long. After a tragic rodeo accident in 1938, Tullis spends time recovering with Doc Platt. Still mourning the deaths of her son and husband, Doc mothers Tullis back to health.</p> <p>The rodeo closes after another accident threatens its financial future, and the horses are to be sold to a dog food company. Tullis, Doc, and Doc's father face adventures and obstacles as they steal the horses and take them to safety.</p> <p>This book was difficult to read at times because the speaker changed in each chapter, and there were several storylines that only converged at the end of the book. This could be problematic for struggling readers. After the first few chapters, though, the book became easier to read and a pattern seemed to develop. Boys between the ages of 12-15 would be most likely to enjoy this book.</p> <p>Maryanne Obersinner Eugene, OR</p>

<p><i>Outside In</i>, by Karen Romano Young Greenwillow Books, 2002, 201 pp., \$16.95</p> <p>Family/Friendship/The Sixties ISBN: 0-688-17363-2</p> <p>Soon to be 13, Cherie's world is changing too fast. She is delivering newspapers during a year when bad news appears to be the norm. It is the year of the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Bobby Kennedy, as well as the events of the war in Vietnam and the ensuing riots here in the United States. More frightening to Cherie, though, is the news from a nearby town of the kidnapping of Wendy Boland. The young kidnapped girl is unknown to Cherie, but she is still too real because Wendy, like Cherie, is 13 and has long braided hair. Cherie is constantly on the lookout for the kidnapper's green station wagon, thinking she could be the next victim.</p> <p>Alongside this story about kidnapping, there is Cherie's relationship with Dave, the boy across the street. Now that they are 13, has their childhood friendship developed into something more mature or is it time for their friendship to end completely?</p> <p>Middle school students should easily relate to many of the books' conflicts about loss, romance, and survival.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Kay Parks Haas Ottawa, KS</p>	<p><i>How to Disappear Completely and Never Be Found</i>, By Sara Nickerson, Harper Collins, 2002, 281 pp., \$15.95</p> <p>Mystery/Humor ISBN: 0-06-029771-9</p> <p>A few years after twelve-year-old Margaret's father dies, her mother takes her and her little sister, Sophie, to an abandoned mansion and places a 'For Sale' sign in the front yard. When her mother avoids basic questions about the house as well as her father's mysterious death, Margaret enlists the help of Boyd, a comic book-obsessed loner, to help sort through to the truth. However, she finds that family truths are always elusive and depend on who tells the story.</p> <p><i>How to Disappear Completely and Never Be Found</i> blends comic book style fantasy with mystery and family drama into a surprisingly realistic story. Nickerson's unique work should become an instant classic, especially popular with young fans of Francesca Lia Block's <i>Weetzie Bat</i> series or Louis Sachar's surreal <i>Holes</i>.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Rob Linne Garden City, NY</p>
<p><i>Amy</i>, by Mary Hooper Bloomsbury, 2002, 171 pp., \$14.95</p> <p>Internet Chat Rooms/Date Rape ISBN: 1-58234-793-X</p> <p>After Amy's embarrassing and very public "breakup" with her two best friends during a heated argument, she is ostracized among her peers. Lonely and depressed, she seeks new friendships and a sense of belonging in Internet chat rooms. Online, the hours melt away and Amy finds intimacy easy to establish in cyberspace.</p> <p>In one sexually charged chatroom, Amy meets "Zed," a young man who comes across as much more mature and worldly than the other boys, and he seems to really listen to her. However, when Amy sneaks away to meet Zed, the image he created of himself does not match reality. Most adolescent readers will see the trouble coming early on in the couple's online exchanges. Yet, the issues of date rape and identity in our digital age are raised with nuance, and should give young readers much to think about or discuss.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Rob Linne Garden City, NY</p>	<p><i>Red Midnight</i>, by Ben Mikaelson Harper Collins, 2002, 212pp., \$15.95</p> <p>Central America/Contemporary History ISBN: 0-380-97745-1</p> <p>When Guatemalan soldiers attack and burn his village, Santiago and his four-year-old sister, Angelina, are the only survivors. This violent scene may startle some readers, but it also introduces them to the tragedy of Guatemala during the 1980s.</p> <p>Santiago's only hope is to escape Guatemala, and his only means of doing so is his Uncle Ramos' <i>cayuco</i>, a small sailboat. From here, the novel recounts Santiago and Angelina's arduous trip from Guatemala to the US. These two children battle hunger, storms, and sickness as they sail across the Gulf of Mexico to reach the Florida coast. Initially met with anti-immigrant hostility, a poor reflection on the US policy at the time, they are eventually granted asylum and allowed to report their family's massacre.</p> <p>This story is often gripping, told in the present-tense voice of Santiago as he confronts each trial. Readers will appreciate his determination and resourcefulness in the face of great danger, although they may find the occasional heavy-handed political commentary intrusive.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Colleen M. Fairbanks Austin, TX</p>

<p><i>The Lottery</i> by Beth Goobie Orca Book, 2002, 264 pp., \$16.95</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Drama/Suspense ISBN: 1-55143-161-0</p> <p>Every year, an elite group of students called the Shadow Club choose a lottery “winner” from among the student body. While performing duties specified by this club, the lottery winner is subsequently shunned by the remainder of the student body in accordance with tradition. This year’s winner (or victim) is Sally Hanson, a seemingly average tenth grader whose significance to the club lies in her past.</p> <p>Beth Goobie reveals a society where fear and conformity rule the masses. This is today’s high school taken to an entirely new level. In identifying Sally’s dilemma, readers will find themselves in Sally’s shoes, questioning what they would, or would not do in her situation. In any case, the end of the story leaves readers empowered and hopeful that maybe they too could take the risk of being themselves to stand up for what is right.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Amanda Halley Carol Stream, IL</p>	<p><i>The Thief Lord</i> by Cornelia Funke Scholastic, 2002, 349 pp., \$16.95</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Modern Fantasy ISBN: 0-439-40437-1</p> <p>Venice is a city of beauty, mystery, and plenty of secrets. Prosper and Bo are brothers who come to Venice to escape their terrible aunt Esther. They soon join a gang of street children determined to make their own living in the shadows of everyday Venice life—with the help of each other and their mysterious leader, the Thief Lord.</p> <p>While the practice of petty crime keeps the group alive, temptation becomes unbearable when a secretive client offers the Thief Lord a burglary challenge he cannot refuse. At the same time, a hidden danger draws near. A detective, paid by Esther to hunt down Prosper and Bo, is on the brink of discovering the Thief Lord’s hideout. Yearning only for a better life, the children begin the commission that will change their lives forever, and will set the Thief Lord to his hardest trial yet.</p> <p>This novel, translated from the original German text, is full of delightful characters and creative plot line twists. Funke’s imagination touches the adventurous parts of the heart, as well as the simple human desire to belong and be loved. This story is pure magic.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Laura Schmidt Wheaton, IL</p>
<p><i>The House of Scorpion</i> by Nancy Farmer Atheneum Books for Young Readers, 2002, 380 pp., \$17.95</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Science Fiction/ Coming of Age ISBN: 0-689-85222-3</p> <p>Looks can be deceiving. Though he has grown up in relative isolation, young Mateo Alacràn looks like a normal boy of six. Yet on the day he meets his first outsiders, he discovers he is anything but a normal boy. He is a clone.</p> <p>In a futuristic world in which clones are despised by humans and used only for medical purposes, Matt is an exception. He carries within him the DNA of the powerful drug lord El Patròn, and therefore, is treated to the finest life and education. As he grows and learns, he attempts to reconcile his love for El Patròn with the evil world the man has produced, a world in which millions of humans and animals are turned to zombies and many clones are slaughtered for their organs.</p> <p>Guided by a few friends who love and watch over him, Matt must summon the courage to flee to safety after El Patròn’s death, and the compassion to return and attempt to change the drug kingdom forever.</p> <p>Farmer presents a fresh look at the coming of age theme in her futuristic and controversial world of clones and zombies. Despite a rather hasty and almost simplistic ending to the novel, the plot is engaging, and the characters are well developed and sympathetic. High school students will connect with Matt as he grows from a frightened little boy to a young man who wrestles with difficult issues and decisions.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Erin Nita Miller Wheaton, IL</p>	<p><i>First French Kiss and Other Traumas</i> by Adam Bagdasarian Farrar Straus Giroux, 2002, 134 pp., \$16.00</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Humor/Coming of Age ISBN: 0-374-32338-0</p> <p>Growing up is both exhilarating and traumatic to Will. Born into a well-to-do household in California, Will tells stories from his adolescence that mark his life. Whether he’s trying to set a record for the longest French kiss or getting the pulp beat out of him, his life is never far from exciting.</p> <p>However, dealing with a demanding father and losing a brother to college strike notes of sadness into Will’s heart. Constantly torn between turning to his mother for comfort or being tough like his father, Will treads the scary path towards manhood. Despite the normal inconveniences of everyday living, his toughest test comes when he is forced to deal with death of someone he dearly loves.</p> <p>Will’s anecdotes are the product of his survival of adolescence. Through his stories, this protagonist’s unique voice teaches us how to love simply, trust greatly, and live freely.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Blaine Davis Wheaton, IL</p>

<p><i>Up on Cloud Nine</i> by Anne Fine Delacorte Press, 2002, 151 pp., \$15.95</p> <p>Friendship/Teen Problems ISBN: 0-385-73009-8</p> <p>Stol is different. While his friend Ian is concerned with sports, Stol contemplates his life—and thinks about ending it. Although he cannot see the value of his life, he is not a bad guy: his attitude does not prevent him from manipulating a charity-sponsored raffle so that less fortunate students will benefit from it. Unfortunately, Stol's latest attempt to end his life may be successful. That is why Ian has decided to write this account of Stol's life—to remind his friend, if he wakes up, that his life is worth living.</p> <p>Are Stol's attempts at suicide a consequence of having "too-busy" parents or simply an outgrowth of his swinging emotional state? If he wakes up from the coma, will Ian be able to convince him that life really is worth its imperfections?</p> <p>This novel, challenging and engaging, allows teens to enter the life of two British teens waging a mental and physical war against a common yet often silent battle—suicide.</p> <p>Susan Swanson Wheaton, IL</p>	<p><i>Behind the Mountains</i>, Edwidge Danticat Orchard Books, 2002, 176 pp., \$16.95</p> <p>Violence/Family Upheaval ISBN: 0-439-37299</p> <p>Young Celiane is presented with the best gift of all, a blank notebook, in which she decides to write down all of her feelings. Living in Haiti, Celiane, her brother Moy, and her mother, Manman, are threatened by bombs going off in Port-au-Prince during election time. Celiane writes of her mixed emotions of the uncertainty of their arrival in New York, where their father has been working to support them. As they begin their new life in New York as a family reunited, things are not as picture perfect as Celiane had imagined.</p> <p>Celiane encounters many things that confuse her emotions, including moving to a brand new country, riding in a bus that has been bombed, having a brother that moves out of the house. Celiane is able to record and sort out this spectrum of feelings by writing them in her little notebook.</p> <p>The first person narration by the author of <i>Krik? Krak!</i> will likely capture reader's hearts and emotions as Celiane's pain, sadness and triumph are shared in this interesting story.</p> <p>Kimberly Sandberg Wheaton, IL</p>
<p><i>Dolores</i> by Bruce Brooks Harper Collins, 2002, 135 pp., \$15.95</p> <p>Coming of age ISBN: 0-06-027818-8</p> <p>There's just something about Dolores that draws everyone to her. Her unique personality, great sense of humor, and strong sense of identity make her a very interesting character to read about. Dolores is kidnapped, her parents get divorced, the kids at school start rumors about her, and just about every guy who lays eyes on her is so enchanted by her beauty that they all miss the real Dolores underneath. Yet through all of these things, she only grows stronger.</p> <p>Dolores' perspective encourages readers to be themselves without caring what other people think or say. The book is divided into six self-contained episodes, each one a story in itself. However, they all work together to create a picture of who Dolores really is in many different situations. Readers will feel like they truly know and love Dolores by the time they finish this engaging book.</p> <p>Janell Barnhart Wheaton, IL</p>	<p><i>A Corner of the Universe</i>, by Ann M. Martin Scholastic Press, 2002, 189 pp., \$15.95</p> <p>Fiction/Mental Disabilities/Family ISBN: 0-439-388805</p> <p>Hattie Owens begins her summer vacation in the typical way: helping her parents run their boarding house and drinking lemonade on the front porch. But life changes when Adam enters their world. Adam is Hattie's 21-year-old, mentally disabled uncle; until now she has never even heard of him. The Owens' world is thrown upside down as they learn to care for and relate to Adam. Hattie's grandmother has difficulty dealing with Adam's unsophisticated ways and loud temper tantrums. Yet Hattie and Adam are instant friends, and she discovers that Adam brightens her world with his happiness. Through this relationship, Hattie must struggle with family, friendship, and what it means to be different.</p> <p>This is a beautiful tale of heartache and true friendship that challenges readers both to evaluate how they relate to those who are different, and find a way to "lift a corner of the universe" by exploring beyond their world.</p> <p>Lindsay Schwanbeck Wheaton, IL</p>

Simon Says by Elaine Marie Alphin
Harcourt, 2002, 258 pp., \$17.00

Art/Identity
ISBN: 0-15-216355

For sixteen-year-old Charles Weston, life feels like a game of Simon Says, with parents, teachers, and peers imposing their expectations on him. Determined to figure out how to be true to himself and to his art, Charles enters a boarding school for gifted artists. A painful history of rejection leads him to close himself off from everyone, hiding the powerful truth about life in his painting.

Captivated by the profundity of a fellow student's novel, Charles befriends the author. However, Charles discovers that the one he thought could show him how to escape the expectation game is really the best player of all.

Capturing the inner reality of the artist, *Simon Says* wrestles with intense themes of identity, homosexuality, and suicide. High school students will find Charles' journey to self-expression thought provoking as he learns to connect with others, and to remain true to himself, regardless of others' expectations.

Sarah Gartland
Wheaton, IL

Hoop City by Scott Blumenthal and Brett Hodus
Scobre Press Publication, 2002, 138 pp., \$9.95

Inspirational/Basketball
ISBN: 0-9708992-1-1

Tony had it all figured out. Soon he and his brother Mike would be headed to college. They would finally be rid of the hopelessness that surrounded them. The Hope brothers were finally going to get their chance to be somebody, their chance to make something of themselves, a chance to fulfill their dreams together, the dream to play hoops in the NBA. Tony had the plan, everything was going perfectly. Tomorrow all their problems would go away, but tomorrow never came. As tragedy rocks the world of the Hope brothers, Tony has to make a difficult choice. Does he continue to go after his dreams even if it means his brother will not be with him? Does he continue on with his life while leaving his brother behind? It will take courage and strength for both brothers to rise above and to make their dreams a reality.

Davona Reynolds
West Chicago, IL

The Frog Princess by E.D. Baker
Bloomsbury, 2002, 200 pp., \$15.95

Fairy Tales/Fantasy
ISBN: 1-58234-799-9

Uninterested in marrying Prince Jorge, Princess Emeraldal (Emma) escapes to a nearby swamp and encounters Eadric, a prince-turned-frog. Emeraldal kisses him to reverse the spell; however, the kiss backfires and Emeraldal becomes a green-skinned frog.

Emma and Eadric take a harrowing journey to break the spell. They are kidnapped by an incompetent, evil witch named Vannabe, but rescued by Li'l, the bat. Li'l and Fang, their new snake friend, escort them to Emeraldal's castle, where Emeraldal's Aunt Grassina aides them in recovering Emeraldal's lost bracelet, a key in breaking the spell.

Baker has added a twist to a popular Grimms tale; however, the story begins slow and characters are colorless. The plot could be tighter—Emma and Eadric's encounter with a nymph seems insignificant. Nonetheless, the story features crisp dialogue and is peppered with comedy. While the happy-ever-after ending is predictable, Emma and Eadric become friends, not lovers. The story will appeal primarily to young girls.

Pam B. Cole
Kennesaw, GA

The Named by Marianne Curley
Bloomsbury, 2002, 333 pp., \$16.95

Fantasy
ISBN: 1-58234-779-4

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Freya J. Zipperer
Savannah, GA

Special thanks for Steven Layne for having his students at Wheaton College, in Wheaton, IL, read and review books for this and a forthcoming issue of *The ALAN Review*!

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An Interview with Avi, 2003 Newbery Medal Winner for *Crispin, The Cross of Lead*

Jim Blasingame

One of the most moving and memorable events at the 2002 NCTE Convention in Atlanta was Avi's heartfelt talk about his life, his work, and the condition of education in America. As he spoke, most of us were hastily attempting to write down particularly insightful or profound thoughts of his, thoughts we no doubt shared but had never heard articulated so succinctly or expressed so poetically. No one at that Middle Level Luncheon on Saturday was left sitting down when he came to the conclusion. The finale of his talk was a reading from his 50th book, the 2003 Newbery Medal winning work of historical fiction, *Crispin: The Cross of Lead*, from Hyperion. Although most people at the luncheon had not yet read the book, it was apparent as Avi read from it that this was a remarkable creation.

Crispin is a fictional account of events surrounding England's Peasant Revolt of 1381. The novel's main character, a fatherless boy of 13, finds himself cut adrift from society, albeit a society of oppression, when his mother dies and the death tax leaves him with no possessions and no means to support himself. In the beginning he doesn't even know his given name until the local priest tells him that he was baptized as Crispin. When the local authority, a manor steward named Aycliffe, falsely accuses Crispin of thievery and then murder, the boy must run for his life. The search for Crispin's true identity takes the reader through an accurate and suspenseful portrayal of life in medieval England. Scholars and students of that time period will recognize the basis in fact for many of the names, events and even conversations.

Avi is not only highly experienced in this genre (his first work of historical fiction, *Captain Grey*, was published in 1977), but also highly qualified; he holds a degree in history from the University of Wisconsin and won the Scott O'Dell Award for Historical Fiction in 1985 for *The Fighting Ground*. *Crispin* is surely the realization of Scott O'Dell's hope that Avi would continue in this genre and also his prediction that Avi would one day become the very best at it (Bloom and Mercier 50).

Avi graciously consented to a few questions about his 2003 Newbery Medal winner:

JB: Good historical fiction reveals details of life in a given

time period without beating the reader over the head with it. Without even noticing it, the reader comes away from *Crispin* with a new understanding of what life in 1377 must have been like for a peasant. How hard was it to weave in history without diminishing the story?

Avi: The problem inherent in all historical fiction is the fusion of fact and incident. One tries to root the action in historical reality. Thus *Crispin* is proclaimed "a wolf's head,"

It was during this rebellion that the idea, "All men are created equal," was first expressed in English.

which means, under the law of the time, that he is placed beyond the pale of law—and anyone may kill him. It is this that propels the boy into flight.

Consider the problem of time. This story takes places before the

existence of clocks—time thus is measured by the church, its canonical hours, its feast days. To use them is to help understand the totality of the church in people's lives.

JB: From the beginning of the book, *Crispin's* wonderfully poetic language contributes to the setting. How did you so successfully create a verbal tone to suggest the time period?

Avi: The English language of the day was Middle English—not usable as such. In any case I don't know it. But in the course of my research, I read the poetry of the period, mostly Chaucer and William Langland. I then used their poetic forms and wrote about a third of the book in that style of verse. Once I got the rhythm, I restructured the lines: Thus:

Time was the great millstone
Which ground us to dust
Like kernelled wheat.
The Holy Church told us where we were
In the alterations of the day,
The year,
And in our daily toil.
Birth and death
Alone
Gave distinction
To our lives . . .

JB: Starr LaTronica, chair of the 2003 Newbery Award Selection Committee, says, "Readers experience *Crispin's* surroundings through Avi's sensory descriptions; they see, hear, smell, taste and feel his world." You include a wealth of gritty details about how life operated back then, both in the villages and in the cities. Which details did you especially want read-

ers to know? Were there any details of life at that time that especially shocked, surprised or otherwise affected you?

Avi: The historian Barbara Tuchman wrote a history of this period called *A Distant Mirror*. Her thesis was that the European 14th century, in all its violence and cruelty, was like a mirror to our own 20th Century. To be aware of the horrors of the past hundred years primes you all too well to what life was like then.

JB: The details of the plot are remarkably historically accurate. John Ball is surely based on a rebellious priest in the County of Kent by the same name who preached rebellion after mass, and the language of the peasants' charge (pp. 200-201) echoes the language of the charter which Walter Tighler presented to King Richard in 1381. How much research did this project require, and was it done beforehand or as you went along?

Avi: I read or used more than 200 books about the period. John Ball, of course is real, and his speech is a paraphrase of one he gave during the Peasants' Rebellion of 1381—which was extraordinarily violent—both the uprising and the suppression. It was during this rebellion that the idea, "All men

are created equal," was first expressed in English.

JB: How did the Peasants' Revolt actually end, and was it a conscious choice not to write that into the novel?

Avi: The Peasants' Revolt was brutally suppressed, but it helped pave the way for the end of English Feudal Society.

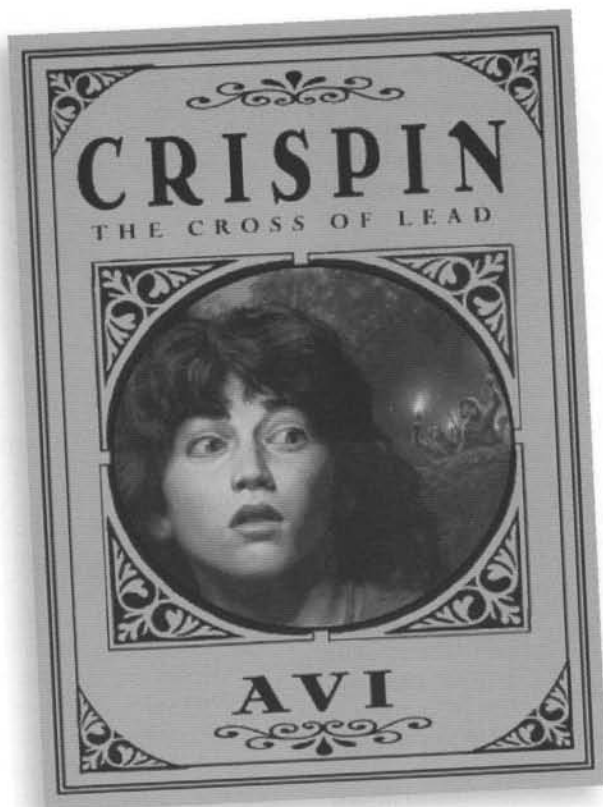
JB: Any advice to aspiring young writers?

Avi: The art of fiction writing is the art of transforming ideas (which we all have) into written words that build a narrative design. To become a novelist, the most crucial thing one must do is read, read and read again — Gradually you begin to *think* like a writer. Ideas are not found — they are shaped.

Crispin, The Cross of Lead is available from Hyperion Books.

Works Cited

Bloom, Susan P. & Mercier, Cathryn M. *Presenting Avi*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1997.



The ALAN Review proudly presents
BOOK BUBBLES

From Carmelia Becenti and the students at
 Lukachukai Community School, in Lukachukai, Arizona.
 Students' Thoughts about *Loser* by Jerry Spinelli

"Let everybody
 play in the game so
 that a person won't be left
 alone even if they are not good
 at the game. I think that not
 everyone is perfect because the
 meaning of life is to have fun."

Chantel Becenti
 4th Grade

"It made me
 sad when Mrs. Biswell
 was mad at Zinkoff and told
 him to "get out of the classroom."
 Teachers should not do this. My
 favorite character was Claudia. She
 was funny because she had chocolate
 on her face."

Shaylyn Becenti
 1st Grade

"When someone
 shows you something that
 they haven't shown anyone else,
 you feel happy and you think that
 the person is the only friend you've
 got. Sometimes doing good things
 for people can be rewarding."

Sheree Sam
 7th Grade

"When Donald
 was looking for Claudia,
 it was like his heart was
 locked and he unlocked
 his loving and caring side."

Dominic Becenti
 5th Grade

"This book taught
 me to open up my heart to
 others, not just myself. People around
 you can bring you happiness. The amazing
 thing about the book is how they talk about
 the stars in the sky. He likes to be comforted by
 big numbers. I love the way the mother
 gives Zinkoff a star for good things that
 he accomplishes. No one is a "Loser" in the
 world of their mother and the father."

Natasha Pribula
 7th Grade

"Mailmen are
 not looked up to,
 but you have to know
 that if they weren't here,
 you wouldn't have your
 mail at all."

Natasha Pribula
 7th Grade

"I learned that having a best
 friend move is hard because it's hard
 to choose another one. My favorite characters
 were Claudia and Zinkoff because they were brave.
 I enjoyed the part where Zinkoff was trying to find
 Claudia. I learned that if you go outside, far from
 your house, you should travel with somebody that
 you know. People should read this to bullies so they
 can understand feelings and they can use their
 energy to get better grades in school rather
 than pick on children."

Chantel Becenti
 4th Grade

"I enjoyed
 reading the part
 where Zinkoff first
 started school with
 his giraffe hat."

Gilvonna Yazzie
 7th Grade

"What I like
 about Zinkoff is
 that his childhood
 was very interesting
 and exciting."

Sheree Sam
 7th Grade

"Stand your
 ground if you
 want to do something
 that will help you in
 the future."

Natasha Pribula
 7th Grade

"I learned that
 being mean is not the way
 to be noticed or to be cool.
 This book was like a friendship
 book and I really liked it. I liked the
 part when his dad said, "he wasn't a
 clunker. Just a honeybug to him." So
 that means even though you're the
 oldest of all the children, you'll
 always be loved by your parents."

Dominic Becenti
 5th Grade

Young Adult Literature, Race, Arts, & Confidence: At-risk Students Building Critical Literacy with Lester's *Othello*

Angela Beumer Johnson and Stacey Ciancio

"Stop watering down the curriculum; make it more rigorous."

"Oh, you're in that class."

The first statement could come from any one of the many critiques of English classes in general, particularly classes incorporating young adult literature. The second could come from a student addressing an at-risk student in a special freshman English class. Whether a general attack on the "dumbing down" of the curriculum or a personal judgment of someone's intellect, the instructional strategy of having at-risk students read young adult literature and respond through art would be looked upon by many as watering down curriculum for kids who couldn't handle anything tougher. However, as one of our students commented, "They [other students and teachers] think we're stupid, but we're not."

We also believe these students are not lacking in intelligence, and so we challenged them with Julius Lester's excellent adaptation of *Othello*, encouraging them to pose questions, make hypotheses, and argue interpretations to critique not only the world of the text, but also the world around them. We wanted the students to experience the rewards of thoughtful and engaged reading of literature as we addressed significant themes and issues. We wanted the students to know they were indeed capable of higher-level thinking sometimes thought to be the exclusive territory of those labeled gifted. In short, we wanted to help them build critical literacy skills and confidence through reading young adult literature and responding through music, visual art, and poetry writing.

For typical ninth-grade at-risk students, like the ones we describe here, Shakespeare is often either non-existent, or read aloud at a sleepy pace, wringing out most of the beauty and emotion of Shakespeare's language to attain a literal, plot-level understanding. At-risk freshmen don't learn to savor language, or story in and of itself, through such tactics. Instead, we think students should ponder the complexities of plotlines still relevant today. They should get excited over characters, betrayals, and rich descriptions embedded in figurative language. They should enjoy literature, engaging with texts in ways that will help them think not only about literature, but also about their own lives. They should experience the rewards of thought-provoking books and poetry to encourage them to seek those rewards through a lifetime of reading.

Lofty goals for any students, let alone at-risk freshmen? Yes, they are lofty, but we also believe they are feasible, as we let the

students' work and words describe. In this article, we advocate three ways of engaging students with literature to develop critical literacy: incorporating young adult literature, responding through the arts, and addressing issues and themes (even the controversial ones). We argue that accessible literature, thought-provoking artistic methods, and genuine, higher-level questions encourage in-depth thinking that all students deserve.

Setting the Scene

For six weeks, we co-taught a unit with Julius Lester's *Othello: A Novel* as the core text. Stacey's class consisted of five¹ at-risk-labeled males who were part of the school's Occupational Work Adjustment (OWA) program. Students in this program attended a regular four-year high school, but their academic day consisted of four classes, as opposed to seven. The students earned the remainder of their credits by working at a fast food or retail job in the community. Students in this class were considered at-risk for reasons such as excessive absences, truancy, low grades and test scores, extreme personal or home problems, family financial difficulty, substance abuse, or a dislike of school in general. The small class size and individual attention help students increase their chances of graduating. The small class size may also reflect the culture of the community. Many parents do not want their eligible students in a program that places them in a low-status job, which they view as a stigma. Some of the students themselves do not want to take part in the OWA program for the same reason. While this group certainly had challenges to their learning, they supported one another as a group, in a sense bonding based upon their at-risk label and showing genuine concern for one another.

Our Goals: Critical Literacy and Confidence

"I want to teach a critical literacy that equips students to 'read' power relationships at the same time that it imparts academic skills" (Christensen 210). Linda Christensen nicely sums up our main goals for students in all classes, but particularly those who, through their own or others' actions, have been alienated from school. Critical literacy "questions the basic assumptions of our society" (Christensen 212)—assumptions about OWA students, for example, as Bob critiqued, or assumptions about race, as Icy would later critique. A teacher who does not help students address unjust representations in literature "allows readers to silently accept these practices as

¹ Of course the small class size benefited the students, but we have also seen the power of young adult literature, artistic response, and significant issues in large classes as well.

just" (Christensen 212). Like Christensen, we want students to be engaged by literature, to be enlightened by it. She explains, "But beyond illuminations, students must use the tools of critical literacy to dismantle the half-truths, inaccuracies, and lies that strangle their conceptions about themselves and others. They must use the tools of critical literacy to expose, to talk back to, to remedy any act of injustice or intolerance that they witness" (211). Christensen's point is crucial: Students not only need to learn to read literature critically but also the representations of the world around them, as Paulo Freire advocates. Examining the realities of students' lives plays a significant role in developing critical literacy; for, "in critical literacy, their lives are part of the text of the class" (Christensen 213).

Othellos

With our goals of critical literacy and building students' confidence in critiquing the world of texts and their own world, we encouraged students to interrogate social and historical contexts. Lester's *Othello* provided a space for this interrogation, as we heard the story of a strong and respected African man who saw flaws in white, European society—the lack of hygiene due to infrequent bathing and eating with their fingers—but most importantly the racist views of many of the characters.

As a society we readily accept popular adaptations of the Bard in film or on stage. The most recent version in the theaters, "O," sets Othello's tale in a high school with the main characters on a basketball team. Similarly, PBS recently aired a contemporary *Othello* with the main characters as law enforcement officials. Lester's novelization of *Othello*, as with the two recent film adaptations, provides readers an opportunity to ask different questions regarding plot, themes, and characters, while experiencing the power of Shakespeare's borrowed tale. In fact, Lester incorporated some of Shakespeare's phrases and boldfaced them in the book, so students read not only Lester's poignant metaphors and images, but also many of Shakespeare's. While we addressed differences between Lester's novel and Shakespeare's play, we wanted to expose the students to a tale not usually taught in high schools (especially not to at-risk freshman) through this YA novel. We both found Lester's "reconceptualization" (xv) of Shakespeare's *Othello* a fascinating and well-written work of art.

In his introduction to the novel, Lester explains the differences between his novel and Shakespeare's play. While Lester changes some names (Lord Bertrand for Brabantio, Desdemona's father; Emily for Emilia), the most intriguing adaptation is the change of the ethnicity of Iago and Emily to black African from white European. Lester wanted to explore the complexities of betrayal from within the same ethnicity and community. According to Lester, it would have been too simple to label Iago a racist—end of story (xiii). Instead, Lester adds another level of complexity by having Iago, Emily and Othello come from the same tribe.

The OWA Students Meet Othello

An initial survey of students' attitudes reinforced our suspicions that this group, either by experience or hearsay, had negative thoughts on Shakespeare. On an interest level of 1 (low) to 5 (high), the majority of the students rated Shakespeare's works a 1 or a 2. One exception was a student who wrote, "I love poetry, and he helps guys get girls nowadays."

After some initial background on Shakespeare, the Globe Theatre, and Elizabethan society, we engaged the students in a pre-reading activity of interpreting the cover art. We asked students to tell us what they saw and how they interpreted these images. Depicted on the cover, we see a shirtless Othello, muscular arms crossed, looking directly left. In front of him a pale-faced Desdemona, her small frame with her head just below his chin, peers up and to the right. In the background, a stormy sky with daylight breaking through creates an eerie effect. Brad started our discussion by observing, "He's [Othello] really, really big!" Proudly, Icy (the one black student in the class with four white students) added, "A big black man!" Noticing another element of the cover art, Ryan yelled out, "Background!" and Brad picked up on that and analyzed

For typical ninth-grade at-risk students, like the ones we describe here, Shakespeare is often either non-existent, or read aloud at a sleepy pace, wringing out most of the beauty and emotion of Shakespeare's language to attain a literal, plot-level understanding. At-risk freshmen don't learn to savor language, or story in and of itself, through such tactics.

it further. "Cloudy. . . but it's sunny. If you go left to right, it'll be good in the end and bad in the beginning." We asked the students, "What about Desdemona?" Bob responded, "She looks like a living dead girl." Icy added, "Her dad keeps her in the shadows . . ." and Bob eagerly tagged on, "Yeah! He keeps her in the shadows, but she's trying to speak!" We asked, "How about the fact that they're looking opposite ways?" Bob replied, "Opposite. She's white, he's black." And Brad closed with, "Opposites attract!" While

not all of their predictions were correct, they had already begun considering relationships and complexities the text would raise.

Because of the half school day-half workday design of the OWA program, students were not typically assigned homework. In addition, some students had learning disabilities and individualized education plans that required extra help with reading. And so we read *Othello: A Novel* aloud in class. At first, the two of us took turns reading dramatically, and then students started volunteering to read. Some would read only a paragraph, others an entire chapter, helping each other with difficult words. We were excited to see the students' interest and reading skills rise as the book continued. Like good readers engaged in a novel, they often tried to predict what would happen next, and choruses of "uh-oh's" and "ooh's!" were particularly evident toward the climax. Rather than assuming students labeled at-risk could not enjoy or understand a Shakespearean plot, the YA literature helped them experience success as readers—rewarding their efforts through an intriguing plot they could comprehend, which built their confidence and encouraged them want to read and discuss further.

² This could be an intertextual reference to the students' prior reading of Anderson's *Speak*.

In his introduction to the novel, Lester explains the differences between his novel and Shakespeare's play. While Lester changes some names (Lord Bertrand for Brabantio, Desdemona's father; Emily for Emilia), the most intriguing adaptation is the change of the ethnicity of Iago and Emily to black African from white European. Lester wanted to explore the complexities of betrayal from within the same ethnicity and community.

Experiencing Literature through the Arts: Wake Up and Hear the Music

However, we too had our gray days with students trying to stay awake. On one particularly disheartening day when we were still in the exposition phase of the novel, Bob, a Shakespeare-hater from day one, asked, "Do we have to keep reading this book?" With his head down on his desk, he said he was sick of Shakespeare. Coincidentally, that was the same day that we had planned to assign a music response to the novel. We asked the students to bring a piece of music that represented a character. We had barely gotten the words out of our mouths when the students came to life. They began thinking of ideas for songs, and even Bob surprised us by asking, "Can I do two? Can I do as many as I want?" "Sure!" we enthusiastically replied. In the next 5 minutes, Bob had come up with six characters and songs, as well as charted how the songs revealed relationships among characters. Bob wisely asked, "Do the CD's have to be clean?" (i.e., language appropriate for school). While appropriateness is important, we opted to allow any music as long as it was relevant, with clear connections to characters. By the end of this class period, Bob had asked twice if he could take his book home to read. The book went home, and read he did, bragging that while the class was only up to chapter eight, he had read to chapter eleven.

With the weekend to select, interpret, and apply music and lyrics to a character, students arrived on Monday ready to present their music responses. Yes, we frowned through some inappropriate language, but students' music analogies were right on target. One of Bob's many songs (that he continued for two weeks to present to the class) was "Kryptonite" by 3 Doors Down. This song contained more than one example of metaphoric thought. He said, "Desdemona needs Othello to protect her [from her father, toward the beginning of the story]. Iago is like kryptonite because he is the one person who can destroy the "superman" Othello. Embedded in Bob's music response is the metaphor of Iago as kryptonite, as well as the allusion to Superman and his one weakness.

Icy selected Jackson Five's "I'll Be There" to represent Othello and Desdemona. Having only read half of the novel at this point, Icy was intrigued by the intensity of the love and commitment between Desdemona and Othello. Icy's music response encouraged Ryan to think about other committed, loving relationships. Ryan commented that the song was "kind of a mixture for Lord Bertrand [Brabantio, Desdemona's father], Othello, and Desdemona." Ryan's comment reminded us that loving, dedicated relationships are not solely wife-husband relationships, but also daughter-father relationships.

Greg presented Earthride's "Under a Black Cloud," explaining that Iago's hatred for Othello symbolized a black cloud over him. While many of us would assume, as had Greg, that

Iago is the metaphoric black cloud, Bob, who had to some degree identified with Iago's manipulative nature, challenged this assumption. He and Greg then debated who was the black cloud—Othello or Iago? If, as Lester has Emily ponder, Iago had wrongfully been denied the promotion given to Cassio so that Othello would not be accused of favoring one of his own race, then perhaps Othello is the black cloud over Iago. Here and in the previous example, we see that the music analogies encouraged students not only to define their own views, but also to debate and question those of their classmates. What initially seemed like a given was now open to question.

While we believe in the value of art to help us think metaphorically and interpretively, we were surprised at the power of students' interest in music to motivate them and to help them engage more deeply with the literature. Unfortunately, at-risk students are often given primarily literal-level comprehension questions, such as simply recalling character names or setting, as they study literature. Higher-level thinking, interpretation, and critique of the text and the world are not only possible for at-risk students, but also more engaging and motivating, especially when students' interests are taken into account. At the end of the *Othello* unit, all the students commented that the music assignment was "cool." Greg stated, "Music from our generation, we got to match it with *their* generation, which was *sooo* long ago." The music responses led the students to realize that literature can and does connect to their lives—to the very music they love.

Digging into Issues

With the many negative portrayals of race in *Othello* and the conflicts relating at least in part to race, we thought it was important to address this from a social and historical perspective. Students viewed and discussed several film clips from the documentary *Ethnic Notions*, which presents and critiques negative images and metaphors of blacks throughout the history of media and art in the United States. Next, we linked the discussion to *Othello*. When asked what they thought of the clips and the white characters' ideas of blacks in the novel, Icy stated, "It was worse in our country." When we probed about the connotations of blackness believed by some whites in the novel, Icy remarked, "Black is ugly and bad." Some whites in the novel considered blacks savages, to which Icy replied, "I'm not a savage." It is important here to note that Stacey had established a very close relationship with her students. At school, both in and out of class, they often spoke from their hearts, telling her things they might not speak to others. Ignoring the painful images and beliefs about blackness in *Othello* would be a mistake³. In this class, Icy (and all the students) talked back to the text, confronting others' discriminatory beliefs rather than letting them remain silent and undebated.

³ One of Angela's preservice teachers had recounted her painful experience reading Shakespeare's *Othello* in which the teacher never mentioned the racial conflicts. As a student, she had inferred that the slurs were either sanctioned, or not important enough to merit class time.

The clips from *Ethnic Notions* led to a discussion of stereotyping. Icy noted one stereotype: "All blacks steal." Bob added, "All guys are players." And Brad responded, "All women are cheaters." All of these stereotypes can be found in *Othello*—Lord Bertrand's notion that Othello had stolen his daughter, Iago's portrayal that Cassio was having an affair with Desdemona, and Othello's notion that Desdemona was cheating on him. Again, students noted that literature parallels life—even in our stereotypes.

As noted, perhaps the most intriguing change in Lester's novel is the race of the characters Iago and Emily. This added layer made the book more interesting to the students. Here is a teacher/student exchange from a class discussion:

Stacey: We told you the one huge difference from the book to the play—

Icy: Is that Iago's black instead of white, and Emily's black instead of white.

Stacey: What did you think of that as a theme?

Icy: It made it more interesting. 'Cause if Iago was white, like he normally is, it could just be a racist thing. But since he's the same race, it makes the book more interesting. 'Cause it's like, why's he doin' this? They're from the same tribe and all that.

Lester's changes definitely made the students more aware of the complexities in the plot. Addressing rather than dismissing the prejudices and negative portrayals of both blacks and whites in the novel helped the students think not only about the plot, but also about motives of characters and their own realities of being stereotyped or stereotyping others.

In addition to the racial conflicts, another issue we addressed was deception. For example, Greg noted that Iago always made up lies. Here is his exchange with Icy, when asked if themes of deception stood out for them.

Icy: Desdemona deceiving her father.

Greg: Iago making up lies.

Icy: Hey, but they weren't lies—it just stuff that he said. He said you didn't have to believe him—they were just my [Iago's] words, my thoughts.

Greg: Yeah, he said that, but he said that in a lie.

When asked if manipulation played a factor, Greg replied, "That was a big part of it." Here, Icy and Greg were essentially debating who was to blame for the tragedy—Iago for spreading rumors, or Othello for believing him. They continued:

Greg: Just bringing up those subjects [a wife's infidelity] to your best friend—who you *think* is your best friend—can really throw you off, and like, you want to believe him, so you do.

Icy: I know. 'Cause he's been like a son—he's [Othello] been like a father to him [Iago]. It's kinda hard *not* to believe him. . . . It breaks people down. . . . You wouldn't think your best friend would make all this stuff up. *I* wouldn't think my best friend would make all this stuff up.

Greg and Icy debated this dilemma—believing a longtime

trusted friend versus a new wife, who appears to be very loving and faithful. Their discussion flowed between the world of the text and their own worlds. Occasionally, they used first person pronouns, indicating their identification with characters. Icy explicitly turned the scenario toward himself, predicting what he would believe if he were in that situation: "*I* wouldn't think my best friend would make all this stuff up." Directly confronting major issues in the novel allowed the students room to find and explore their own thoughts and beliefs through literature.

Icy and Greg continued to debate whether or not they would have acted as Othello had—believing his so-called friend, or his new wife.

Greg: Still, I don't care what anybody else thinks. I'd have to have one hundred percent proof. I'd have to do the research and make sure [Desdemona was unfaithful to Othello].

Icy: Iago set it up that it *was* proof that she was havin' an affair.

Greg: That wouldn't be enough proof! Just because, just because that *rag* [handkerchief], for me, wouldn't be enough proof.

Icy: [somerly] It was for him, 'cause it was *very* important to him.

Greg and Icy's debate exhibited a depth of emotion and engagement regarding the deception and perception versus reality themes in *Othello* absent from our previous discussions. By encouraging students to express their own interpretations and pose authentic questions on issues that reflected the reality of today, students sharpened their critical literacy skills by empathizing with characters, exploring moral issues, and debating their interpretations.

The students also debated whom they pitied most. Greg said he felt most sorry for "Othello, by far. Because he was lied to and took the life of his love. Then he killed himself. I feel bad for Desdemona, too. I could care less about Iago. He deserved to die!" Greg's reaction is fairly typical, but Bob surprised us by saying he felt most sorry for Iago. Why? "'Cause he was caught." Greg yelled, "SO?!" Bob responded, "He got stabbed and hung. He had to admit his whole plot. I think I'm kinda him—but I'm not as mean as he is. I'm just sneaky." Although he had been bored with the early stages of the novel, over the course of the unit Bob had come to identify with a character, and interestingly enough, one who typically receives no pity—a character we love to hate. We then discussed how Iago with his cruel nature could be considered a sad character. For students who initially wanted little to do with a Shakespearean story, these emotionally and intellectually charged exchanges were encouraging. Again, we see the students finding themselves in literature, experiencing the rewards of a stimulating conversation about good literature, and critiquing the world of the text and their own world.

Visual Art and Issues

Based on the students' previous conversations and work in class, we knew they held solid opinions regarding *Othello*. From the quality of presentations done in the music response, we thought another artistic medium might be appropriate to end our study of Lester's novel. Often students have thought more deeply about the literature than their writing evidences,

While we believe in the value of art to help us think metaphorically and interpretively, we were surprised at the power of students' interest in music to motivate them and to help them engage more deeply with the literature.

and writing was not a strong point for this group.⁴ As Purves, Rogers, and Soter note, “Limiting the form through which we respond to literature actually inhibits what we may be able to communicate about our response” (127), and so we provided an opportunity for the students to express their thinking in a visual manner. Through the visual response, students’ thinking on racial issues became evident once again. After reading the entire novel, we prompted students to create a visual representation of their thinking on the novel—either by drawing or creating a collage. They could respond to one of several general prompts (e.g., What did the novel make you think of? Did it connect to anything you’ve ever experienced?) or explore one of their own. Students then wrote a few sentences explaining the meanings of their art. We brought art supplies and a variety of magazines for the collages, and students completed and presented their artistic responses during one class period.

Ryan, who was often quiet in class, produced some of the most interesting art.

Though only asked to do one artistic response, Ryan created two. As with the music response, we were both surprised and impressed that some of the students went beyond the assignment, doing more than was asked of them. One of Ryan’s art responses depicted a landscape split into thirds, symbolizing Desdemona, Othello, and Lord Bertrand with each section. On the left third was a green section (Desdemona), in the middle a light blue section (Othello), and on the right a brown section (Lord Bertrand). Ryan explained:

“The brown represents dirt [Lord Bertrand] and the blue represents water [Othello] so when they mix they create mud. So also saying othello is making the lord stuck, no matter what, he [Othello] wants to be with Desdemona which is the green representing grass. And when water hits grass it just sinks in, so othello the water fitting right in with Desdemona the grass.”

Early in the novel, Lord Bertrand is stuck with no choice in his daughter’s husband, and he is also stuck with his own prejudices. However, when Othello, the water, mixes with Desdemona, the grass, they combine naturally as during the early phase of their love. Though the art is simple, its meaning is significant in relation to the novel. Ryan’s own metaphors of natural elements provide a way to think about the triangle of Othello, Desdemona, and Lord Bertrand.

The art of Icy’s collage was also simple, yet its message carried much meaning. Icy displayed two paparazzi photos of white women actors joking with and being kissed by black men musicians. To explain his collage, Icy wrote, “Black and white people can have a good social life. Why isn’t good for them to marry [marry]?” Again, the racial issues in the novel come to the forefront. Icy connected the text to our current society, talking back to the text’s portrayal of prejudice against Desdemona and Othello’s marriage. Through his popular culture art, he showed that while we are certainly not free of prejudice now, whites and blacks can have, as he put it, “a good social life.” While some students found themselves relating to characters in the novel, as a black student, Icy met negative portrayals of blacks. It was important for him to confront these negative portrayals of blacks and interracial marriage in the novel, and the visual art response provided one avenue for this resistance. At the end of the unit,

all students agreed that expressing their ideas through visual art was “awesome.” Again, for us the music and visual art responses were important reminders that, for at-risk students in particular, we need to offer a variety of ways for students to express their thoughts on powerful YA literature.

A visitor who passes by Stacey’s classroom and notices that the students are making collages or drawing pictures may judge that the students are playing—wasting time. Quite the opposite is happening. Students, those who might not be most intelligent in the linguistic sphere, are shaping their interpretations, relating the world of the text to their own world, critiquing it, and shaping hypotheses. Rather than sitting at their desks passively taking in (or not taking in) a teacher’s interpretation of literature (which may be well beyond their grasp), students engaging with YA literature through artistic experiences that ask them to pose questions and ponder new ideas can enhance their critical literacy.

Connection and Critique through Reading and Writing Poetry

With the formal study of the novel completed, once again we wanted to connect the novel to themes and issues currently facing teenagers. Selecting themes of perception versus reality to parallel *Othello*, we chose poems from Betsy Franco’s edited collection, *You Hear Me? Poems and Writing by Teenage Boys*. We were encouraged that students volunteered to read poems aloud, browsing and selecting ones they wanted to read. Icy chose 16-year old Michael Tobias Bloom’s “Joker”—a poem about a class clown who, in reality, is hurting. Brad immediately applied this poem to a friend whose mother was battling cancer, saying, “I should give this one to Dave. He’s the funny man, but sad man.” Through the powerful words of another young adult, these young men found again that literature can and does connect to their lived realities, and that we must question our assumptions about others.

Next, Brad volunteered to read “What I Am (In the Eyes of My Father),” by Dwight Beavers, age 17. The poem speaks of a son never good enough for his father, with his father metaphorically (and perhaps literally) beating him down: “he puts me/beats me/down, down” (Franco 45). A powerful silence followed Brad’s reading, and then in a choked voice, all he said was, “Sweet. Awesome.” Icy whispered, “That’s my dad.” While we could have pushed the connections of perception versus reality in *Othello* (our initial idea), the moment urged us to respect the students’ personal experiences with the poems. The power of the students again finding themselves in YA literature and experiencing the power of the written word were perhaps the best lessons we could have taught that day. More importantly, they understood they could resist negative images of themselves by empathizing with another through poetry.

After seeing the work of other teenage male poets, we asked the students to try their hand at poetry. Christensen reminds us that “critical literacy creates spaces for students to tackle larger social issues that have urgent meaning in their lives” (220). Throughout the unit, we saw students such as Icy who questioned and talked back to texts that shape what they, or others, might think of themselves. Issues of race in society are certainly of urgent meaning to Icy. His poem took us into a powerful critique of the realities of his life, as well as back to the race issues in *Othello*:

⁴ Stacey focused intently on writing instruction at a later time.

You could say
I'm sick
You could say im down with the sickness
I'm a beast
You could say Im the king of the jungle
I'm a animal
You could say I am a wolf
I'm Black
You can say Im a thug
But this is what you say, you say, you say
Not me

Though as teachers we can't change our students' home lives or protect them from prejudice or poverty, through YA literature, artistic response, and exploring serious issues, we can teach all students critical literacy skills necessary to read through injustices and to question societal assumptions.

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The Epistolary in Young Adult Literature

Emily Wasserman

In the span of years that constitutes the period of adolescence, it is common for young men and women to be immersed in self-created worlds of conflicting emotions. As they attempt to become adults, they often experience doubt and despair at the same time that they feel and reflect a sense of hope. Thus, as a form, the personal thinking and private worlds of letter writing are well-suited to the reflection and construction of identity which takes place in young adult literature. In both Megan McCafferty's *Sloppy Firsts* (2001) and Steven Chbosky's *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (1999), young adult characters engage in letter writing activity as they experience the tumult of adolescence. In the novels, the epistolary form, with its limitations, is used in different ways. Each novel, however, utilizes it as a vital tool that allows readers to enter the minds of two young adults for an intimate view of their struggles for identity and self in a confusing and often frightening world.

Although many may dismiss the literature written for young adults, there are an equal number of proponents who realize its value for adolescents. Author Peter Hollindale writes, "the fact remains that over the years since 1970 a highly intelligent and demanding literature has emerged which speaks with particular directness to the young adult mind – the mind which is freshly mature and intellectually confident, mentally supple and relatively free of ideological harness" (86). In examining the research done on today's adolescents, it becomes clear that the reality of life for young adults today is neither easy nor ideal. In fact, many young adults are never even exposed to literature. One proponent of YA books laments, "Since the 1980s the gulf between kids and books, especially books as sources of pleasure and entertainment, has been expanding. Kids today have grown up with Nintendo, VCRs, cable TV, and computer games... Their lives are fast paced and ever changing; their schools are crowded and increasingly dangerous" (Crowe 114). Yet, as works written for those in adolescence, young adult literature can clearly be a constructive tool for allowing readers to read, think about, and discuss experiences which may be familiar to them in either positive or negative, exciting or frightening ways.

In *Conflict and Connection: The Psychology of Young Adult Literature*, Sharon A. Stringer writes, "In literature and life, adolescents cope with additional crises such as parents' psychological abandonment, loss through death, disillusionment, defeat, exposure, and resistance to corruption or to intimidation. These stressful experiences may swallow some individuals and stimulate identity achievements in others"

(3). The literature written for young adults can be a helpful coping mechanism for adolescents who experience traumatic difficulties or for ones who are dealing with the normal, but painful, everyday experiences associated with a changing mind and body. One researcher notes, "Young adult books frequently show young teens that they are not the only ones who experience problems and even turmoil when dealing with their new bodies and sexuality, with changing relationships with parents and friends, with more philosophically advanced ways of thinking about themselves, the world, and their place in it" (Carroll 25). The literature written for people of this age often depicts characters embroiled in the types of controversies and concerns which are also occupying the minds of readers themselves.

One method used by writers of young adult literature to express these themes has been the epistolary, or letter writing

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form. Although its conventions have infrequently been related to young adult literature, the epistolary form has been discussed as a genre for many years. And, although there seem to be more works written by, for, or about young adults in diary form, such as Anne Frank's seminal *The Di-*

ary of a Young Girl, there are many examples of adolescent fiction that utilize the epistolary style. For instance, such books as Chris Crutcher's *Chinese Handcuffs* (1996), Jaclyn Moriarty's *Feeling Sorry for Celia* (2001), Gary Crew and Libby Hathorn's *Dear Venny, Dear Saffron* (2000), and John Marsden's *Letters from the Inside* (1994) all use the epistolary form in writing for and about young adults.

Many authors have extensively analyzed and commented upon this form. In one discussion of the epistolary, Elizabeth Campbell defines this type of novel as "a novel written in the form of letters, either an exchange of letters between two or more correspondents, or a single letter, or number of letters from one correspondent to one or more recipients" (333). Another scholar expands the definition, arguing that the epistolary "speaks to the deeper truth that people are locked in their own skins, in their own consciousnesses" (Perry 107). Both of these statements are true of McCafferty and Chbosky's novels, as in each, the protagonists, Jess and Charlie, write letters to others that stem from feelings buried deep within themselves. Through their letters, the extent to which each is trapped within his or her own world and within his or her own skin becomes increasingly clear. The rocky nature of adolescence makes the epistolary well suited to adolescent literature, for "[y]oung adult literature describes how the interior monologue can lead to constructive change" (Stringer 42). In these epistolary novels, the "interior monologue" is

expressed through letter writing, which ultimately leads to increased understanding and transformation.

The Epistolary in *Sloppy Firsts*

As a form, the epistolary is clearly vital to Megan McCafferty's *Sloppy Firsts* in a multitude of ways. It has been written that, "in the adolescent novel, protagonists must learn about the social forces that have made them what they are. They learn to negotiate the levels of power that exist in the myriad social institutions within which they must function, including family; school; the church; government; social constructions of sexuality, gender, race, class; and cultural mores surrounding death" (Trites 3). In McCafferty's novel, protagonist Jessica Darling must learn to face many of these institutions and come to terms with the role she is playing and will play within them. It is often institutions such as family, school, and constructions of gender which cause her confusion and pain.

In the novel, Jess is a high school student who feels bereft and betrayed by the loss of her best friend Hope, whose family has moved to another state. Thus, Jess is left without the one person in the world whom she feels knows her best, and must face the trials of high school and adolescence in her own way, without the support of a best friend. Throughout the novel, she attempts to deal with the problems she sees in high school culture, such as conformist attitudes, cliques, and issues of sex and sexuality. And, at the same time, she must confront issues within her own family, such as her relationships with her parents, whom she feels do not see the true Jess, and her older sister Bethany, who has always been the "perfect daughter".

In an attempt to deal with these issues, Jess writes monthly letters to Hope in which she expresses her hopes, fears, and emotions. Yet, in this novel, the letters which Jess writes to her best friend Hope are also interspersed with more frequent diary entries written for only her eyes. When contrasted with the diary, the letters become even more significant. Throughout the novel, as we move back and forth between the two forms, we are able to view Jess's process of self-discovery. Although the diary is crucial for what it contains, the letters ultimately reveal more about Jessica's growth through what they refuse to acknowledge to her best friend as time progresses.

At the time of her first letter to Hope, Jess feels alone and separate from both her family and supposed friends. In her view, since Hope's departure, almost nothing has been right in the world. Her letters consistently express this sadness and anger. One scholar's words, "when women are writing to other women especially, they are about both despair and revolt" (Campbell 337) certainly ring true in Jess's case. In her letters to Hope, Jess writes either ironically or angrily about her dislike of school, the phoniness of her friends, and the injustice of her family life. At the same time, in her diary, Jess continually writes of her faith in Hope and of Hope's knowledge of her. She feels only Hope would ever be able to write the speech, "The Jessica You Never Knew" (McCafferty 20). She values Hope's friendship in such a way that she even writes in her diary, "I need my boyfriend to be

the male equivalent of Hope" (McCafferty 33). Clearly, at the start of the novel, Jess idealizes Hope as the perfect confidant and friend.

However, as more days pass with Hope's absence, Jess begins to experience more and more of life itself. Rather than merely sit back and angrily continue to watch life, events force her to become more actively engaged in her own existence for both good and bad. The tone of her letters to Hope initially remains the same even as her life begins to change. Thus, at this point, her diary reveals more about the actual changes which are taking place in her daily life. At the same time, by their absence, the thoughts and feelings which are not present in her letters to Hope more clearly elucidate her emotional growth.

Campbell writes of the epistolary, "Women send themselves in letters, feel the presence of the addressee in letters they both write and receive, and, in contemporary novels especially,

see the letter as a mirror in which they examine themselves" (Campbell 336). In young adult literature as well, the idea of the mirror "is also used to address the question of 'who am I' for the teenage girl" (Crew 63). The concept of the mirror may play a role in the importance of the letters to the novel. Throughout the book, Jess is fascinated by the wonder of mirror images and the fact

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that what one sees in the mirror is not how one truly appears. She writes in her diary, "I never realized that what I see in the mirror is my *reverse* image. Bethany positioned me in front of a set of mirrors that bounced off each other in a way that let me see the *reverse* of my reverse image – which is what I *really* look like" (McCafferty 34). This concept confuses her whole sense of self, as the image which she had been accepting for so long turns out not to be her true image. In a way, one could view the letters which Jess writes as another type of mirror. As she starts to see the words that are reflected back at her from within her letters and the words that she leaves out, she may be at the threshold of a new sense of self. Her image of Jess Darling cannot remain constant while she sees herself reflected in these letters because she is slowly beginning to change, despite what she writes to Hope.

The letters, therefore, become increasingly out of sync with the diary. For, in her letters, she seems to be constantly aware of her audience and the feelings and observations expected from her by Hope. Yet, in the diary, her thoughts are less ironic and witty and more honest about her true feelings concerning the current state of her life and her prospects for the future. For instance, although she feels rejected by the "Clueless Crew", her supposed group of friends, her letters to Hope continue to trash them. Although in one letter she writes to Hope, "This is my new hobby. I watch my life depart minute by minute" (McCafferty 49), in reality, she begins to live her life, however awkwardly, in a manner that leaves Hope behind in a small way. Her observer status, and the observations which she relays to Hope, lessens by the moment as she becomes more involved in what is going on around her. Ultimately, however, it is the issue of Marcus Flutie, a boy who fascinates her and a boy with whom she becomes

involved, which complicates her situation the most. Despite the fact that she feels connected to Marcus in a way in which she has not felt connected to anyone but Hope, she cannot describe her feelings to her best friend, who hates Marcus for personal reasons. She writes in her diary, "How can I possibly tell her that I helped one of the people she hates most in the world get away with one of the sins she hates most in the world?" (McCafferty 122).

As Jess breaks out of the mold which she and others have created for her, the letters allow for reflection on her thoughts and actions. Although we cannot know the feelings of others around her because we are confined to only her letters, this limitation serves to thrust readers more deeply into her story. We cannot see these events through the eyes of others in the same way that Jess is limited to her own viewpoint. Yet, while she feels lonely and continues to miss Hope, it is almost as if she resolves, through her letters, to experience some of life's electricity once again. Without the letters and with only a diary, it would have been impossible for her to see the contradictions and complications which arise from living life rather than merely critiquing it. She needs the reflection she finds in the mirror of the letters in order to truly change and grow.

By the end of the novel, despite the fact that her attempts at being "normal" falter, she seems to be more able to readily accept the trials of life. In her last letter to Hope she writes, "Obviously our friendship will never be the way it was before you moved. And if we try to force it to be that way, we'll fail. But for the first time I can remember, I'm optimistic about both our friendship and the future in general" (McCafferty 280). It is clearly difficult to argue about the importance of the epistolary to the novel. Stringer notes, "Young adult literature also demonstrates the beauty and power of friendships to help people change and grow in positive ways..." (32). Indeed, Jess's letters to her best friend allow for a type of reflection that is vital to both the novel and to young adult literature in general. Despite Jessica's scorn for her mother's notion of "perspective", this perspective appears to be exactly what she begins to gain through these letters.

The Epistolary in *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*

Similar to *Sloppy Firsts*, the protagonist in Stephen Chbosky's *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* also writes letters. Here, however, the letters are employed in a different way to achieve a discovery of the self. In the novel, main character Charlie is a high school freshman dealing with a jumble of problems and emotions. As a newcomer to a new school, Charlie must deal with feeling like an outsider who remains outside of the crowd. In adolescent literature, it can be particularly true that characters may "feel as if some experience sets them apart from others. They may search for ways that they can become like everybody else and not feel so different" (Stringer 42). Here, Charlie certainly feels separate and alone, as if he is totally isolated from all those around him. Yet, he cannot truly understand why this is. Because of these feelings of difference, he has trouble fitting in with the larger school culture, and he often observes others in an at-

tempt to see what they are doing differently from him or to see what makes them "normal". In addition to these problems, Charlie must also confront family issues at home, such as the legacy of his deceased aunt's sexual abuse of him during his early childhood. Because of these conflicting issues and emotions, Charlie uses letter writing to reflect on his own and others' lives, as well as to recognize and come to terms with his past and its implications for his future.

Charlie's letters, unlike those of Jess, are sent to an unnamed individual, but one who Charlie specifies "didn't try to sleep with that person at that party even though you could have" (Chbosky 2). This clarification is essential because it informs readers from the start that Charlie is searching for someone he can trust with his most private reflections. At times, the story is limited by the fact that the receiver never writes back. Yet, as one scholar notes, even if the writer does not expect a reply, "Once the letters are begun, the writers seem to be speaking to themselves, and, though the reader is

ever-present, the writer becomes immersed in a discovery of herself" (Campbell 336). Although, like Jess, we only see Charlie's singular view of the world, we do become privy to secret thoughts, fears, and desires.

As a forum for Charlie to speak his mind and to record his observations, the epistolary form is essential to the novel. Stringer writes, "The protagonists of young adult literature often learn by confronting the most disturbing images and fears inside their heads and hearts" (92). Here, Charlie's letters provide him with a space in which he can reflect and construct his own way of thinking, a space necessary for human development. It is in these letters where he confronts his particular demons. Charlie seems to recognize the importance of his writing and comments at one point, "Also, when I write letters, I spend the next two days thinking about what I figured out in my letters" (Chbosky 28). In addition, the letters do not allow Charlie to repossess anything he has written because he cannot reclaim his words after they have been sent. This fact becomes crucial for him as he begins to remember painful events. During one situation, he writes, "I knew that if I didn't put it in a mailbox that I couldn't get it back from, I would never mail the letter" (Chbosky 98). Charlie needs to feel as though someone is listening to him, and these letters are his chosen medium for being heard.

At the time of his first letter, Charlie feels frightened and lonely at the thought of beginning high school. According to Ruth Perry, this feeling of aloneness is necessary for one to write letters, "for these stories are about *reactions* to separation and isolation" (94). Furthermore, "In this state of heightened consciousness, there are pleasures of intense awareness" (Perry 113). Charlie senses this awareness and allows himself to use it in order to begin to claim a sense of himself as a person with his own wants and needs.

Throughout his letters, Charlie is intensely honest about what he sees and experiences. Unlike most adolescent boys, he verbalizes his sensitivities and is not afraid to admit he cries. However, for the most part, he begins high school as an observer of the human behavior of others. He writes, "At the school dances, I sit in the background, and I tap my toe, and I wonder how many couples will dance to 'their song'"

Charlie uses letter writing to reflect on his own and others' lives, as well as to recognize and come to terms with his past and its implications for his future.

(Chbosky 23). It is not until he meets people with whom he can connect that he feels at all engaged in life. He writes of his new friends, "Patrick and Sam didn't just throw around inside jokes and make me struggle to keep up. Not at all. They asked me questions" (Chbosky 19). As he writes letters, Charlie reflects on his growing participation in life and shares increasing feelings of acceptance with the recipient of his letters.

It is also in the letters where he begins to remember blurry details concerning his relationship with his deceased Aunt Helen. As he reflects on his new relationships, he is able to loosen the hold Aunt Helen has had over him in memory because he now receives positive feelings from others, such as his new friend Sam. When Sam tells Charlie she loves him, he writes, "it was the third time since my Aunt Helen died that I heard it from anyone" (Chbosky 69). One writer, in a discussion of adolescent victims of sexual abuse, notes, "victims learn they have power over their own voice: they can overcome their victimization only by talking about it" (Trites 96). Because he no longer feels as though his aunt was the only one to love him, he can begin to see the truth of their relationship. By writing about his feelings of pain and fear, he gains a new perspective on his life, and later, on his victimization at the hands of his aunt.

As Charlie's letters continue, he still remains in the role of observer, letting others mold him into what they wish him to be. He knows he is unlike other people his age but wants others to fix him. At one time in the novel he declares, "I just wish that God or my parents or Sam or my sister or someone would just tell me what's wrong with me. Just tell me how to be different in a way that makes sense" (Chbosky 139). It is through the reflection in his letters, however, that Charlie finally comes to recognize that no one can live his life for him. He writes of one of the book's he's reading, "I think the idea is that every person has to live for his or her own life and then make the choice to share it with other people" (Chbosky 169). In a way, his letters are his initial way of sharing himself with the world. Finally, as he reflects further and engages more and more in life, he realizes that no matter what has happened or will happen to him, his experiences are *his*. In a final letter, he comes to some kind of closure, much like Jess does in *Sloppy Firsts*. He writes, "So I guess we are who we are for a lot of reasons. And maybe we'll never know most of them. But even if we don't have the power to choose where we come from, we can still choose where we go from there" (Chbosky 211). When Charlie, at the end of the novel, triumphantly stands up in his friend Patrick's car in a way that he had only before watched others do, it is almost as if he gains his very own sense of self.

Clearly, the epistolary form is a near perfect fit with adolescent literature, particularly in the novels of McCafferty and Chbosky. Each novel contains a character in a precarious time of adolescence who needs to grab hold of his or her

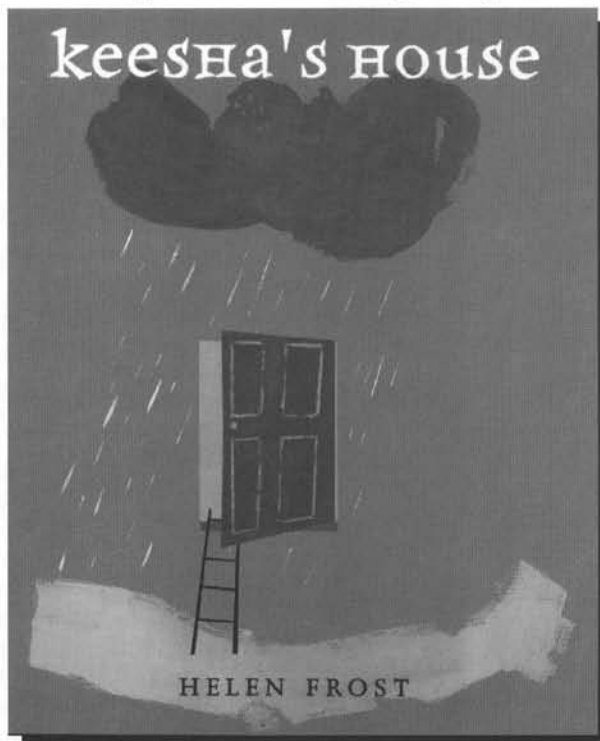
life in some way. Each is attempting to make better sense of the world around him or her. And, in each case, the protagonist needs to establish his or her own perspective in order to live in the present. Through their letters, Jess and Charlie are able to examine their lives in an articulate manner in order to strike a balance between participation and observation. They discover a balance between allowing others to act upon them or for them and acting for themselves and their own interests. Ultimately, both use letters to engage in a process of honest self-reflection, a process in which the adolescents who read these novels are also involved.

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Emily Wasserman is an English major at George Washington University.

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Non-Print Media Column

Evaluation of Audio Books: A Guide for Teachers

Jean E. Brown
Non-Print Column Editor

I am amazed by how much I enjoy listening to audio books. Whether it is the performance of a book I've recently read or of an introduction to a new book, I find that the stories unfold like blooming flowers. Hearing the words triggers vivid images in my mind's eye, imagining what characters and place look like, and hearing the performer's voice all remind me of the riveting power of storytelling. And they remind me that listening evokes many of the same joys for me that reading does.

I first got hooked on listening to books on tape while driving long distances, sitting around airports, or traveling on airplanes. While traveling with friends, we often listen to tapes and find ourselves discussing the book we heard throughout the trip and beyond; it is a great shared experience. As it is with any addiction, I found other ways to indulge myself beyond a pastime for travel. I listen to audio books while weeding my garden, painting my shed, and even doing some types of housework (and it's a great excuse not to vacuum). Listening to stories makes the time go quickly. As the story unfolds, I am engaged, and the banalities of the task at hand drop away. Additionally, the experience of listening to books while completing necessary but boring jobs provides me with the feeling that I am spending time in a worthwhile way. I have rediscovered short stories I taught to my high school students and have revisited classics that I hadn't read for years. I listen to mysteries, adventure stories, contemporary novels, biographies, and historical accounts. Audio books make even tedious tasks more bearable. Beyond that, I am always frustrated not to have enough time to read all that I want to, so listening while I do other things is very satisfying. Multi-tasking always has its appeal.

While this began as a source of entertainment, when I found YA books on tape, my enjoyment gained a more practical purpose and an effective use of my time by allowing me to review books for my classes. I found an unabridged tape of a favorite book of mine, *Belle Prater's Boy*, by Ruth White, at a local

bookstore. I was delighted to be transported to Coal Station, Virginia, by Gypsy. She relates the sights and occurrences of her world, introduces her cousin Woodrow and leads us to unravel family mysteries. When I mentioned my discovery to Joan Bauer, she immediately sent me audio books of *Squashed*, *Thwunk*, and *Sticks*, her first three novels, and I began developing a library of audio books. I use these and other audio books I've collected with students in my YA literature classes and lend them to teachers I work with out in the schools.

Discovering audio books has an impact on my classes in a number of ways. Listening to audio books provides many of my students with heightened enjoyment, and it enables me to revisit old favorites in new ways and make new discoveries. Audio books in the English classroom provide students with a valuable and different type of literary experience, allowing them to hear the evolving of characters, the nuances of the narrator's voice, and the subtle interaction of characters. *A note of caution:* Not all students share my enthusiasm. For visual or tactile learners, audio books may be frustrating. I have suggested to them that they use the book as they listen, but several of them express frustration because they read so much faster than the tape. I have found that optional listening guides are helpful for these students.

Recognizing that audio books have tremendous implications for instruction, I've talked with several teachers who use audio books, but almost exclusively reserve the practice for small groups or individual students who have reading problems. After we talked about the potential for using books on tape in the classroom for all students, I felt the need to develop a rationale for teachers to recognize the value of audio books in any class.

As we recognize the importance of improving listening skills among students, the role of audio books gains curricular significance. Teachers can use them for whole class work, or for students to work in small groups, or individually.

Recognizing that audio books have tremendous implications for instruction, I've talked with several teachers who use audio books, but almost exclusively reserve the practice for small groups or individual students who have reading problems.

Keeping up with media-savvy students is a challenge for middle school and high school teachers everywhere. Some of the concerns I regularly hear are as follows: "How do I find a book on tape that will grab my students?" or "Is there a guide that I can use to find good audio books?"

- Listening to books on tape provides students with outstanding models for reading aloud.
- Audio books are a terrific vehicle for working on active listening skills as well as developing students' critical listening skills.
- An audio book provides teachers with a way to introduce different literature that fits the curriculum.
- Building listening skills along with studying literature seems like a doubly beneficial approach in any English classroom.
- Beyond that, books on tape are a great equalizer for students of varied abilities; all students, regardless of their reading levels, can enjoy them.
- Even the best readers can be challenged by books above their reading level, and all students will benefit from learning vocabulary that is new to them. Teachers have the opportunity to develop vocabulary lessons based upon students hearing new words in context.

Accessibility to audio books has increased as public libraries now regularly add them to their collections. Many libraries include young adult titles in both audio books and CD format. Most school libraries, however, do not have many audio books or CDs because of the prohibitive expense.

Evaluating Audio Books

In her *ALAN Review* column "Non-Print YA Literature Connection, *Bud, Not Buddy*: Common Reading, Uncommon Listening," Marjorie M. Kiser (2000) identifies selection criteria for audio books. The criteria she identifies are as follows: quality of the book, relevance of the themes to maturity of students, quality of the reading on the audio book, and potential of the book to absorb students without a text before them." I discussed these criteria with a number of educators and then began to develop ways to evaluate this medium. I started with two fundamental assumptions. First, audio books are high quality, professionally recorded and produced. Second, because I wanted to deal with entire texts, with rare exceptions, we would focus on unabridged versions. Most of the YA audio books are unabridged, but that is the first criterion I use in selecting one of them. An abridged text might be useful for teachers wishing to play only excerpts of books with the students; however, I would rather use an unabridged version and determine the selection I feel is consistent with my objectives. I can do that only when I have the whole text to choose from. After having purchased and listened to a number of my favorite young adult books on tape, I noticed a variation in content, quality, performance, and technical elements. These variations came up as I recommended audio books to teachers.

Keeping up with media-savvy students is a challenge for middle school and high school teachers everywhere. Some of the concerns I regularly hear are as follows: "How do I find a book on tape that will grab my students?" or "Is there a guide that I can use to find good audio books?" or "I want to have a range of audio books available for my students, but I don't have easy access to review them." or "I've reviewed all the appropriate audio books at the library, and I need to know more." All of the teachers find good audio books?" or "I want to have a range of audio books available for my students, but I don't have easy access to review them." or "I've reviewed all the appropriate audio books at the library, and I need to know more." All of the teachers who have talked with me about this have shared a common need: help in creating a reference resource for evaluating audio books.

As a result of talking with them, I realized we needed an evaluation instrument that would provide teachers and librarians with a guide and recommendations for including audio books in the curriculum. I mentioned this frustration to my sister, a former high school English teacher, who is now an educational researcher and a devotee of audio books. As we talked about the frustration I was hearing from teachers, we began identifying elements we thought should be included in an evaluation form. We shaped and refined the form, and I then distributed it to several of the teachers who had expressed interest in having an instrument that might help them. I asked them to field test the instrument. We incorporated their suggestions and prepared the form for use. In consultation with teachers who had completed the pilot test and some others from area schools, we decided to begin collecting audio book evaluations and have them available upon request. The revised form is as follows:

ASTAL Guide for Evaluating Audio Books

Book _____
 Author _____
 Book Publisher _____ Date _____
 Audio Publisher _____ Date _____
 Reader _____ Length _____

Presentation:

Effectiveness of Reader(s)	5	4	3	2	1
Voice quality	5	4	3	2	1
Ability to capture characterizations	5	4	3	2	1
Provides clues to different characters	5	4	3	2	1

Is the narration appropriate? Why or why not?

Would multiple narrators or an ensemble of readers be more effective? How?

Content:

Overall effectiveness	5	4	3	2	1
True to the text	5	4	3	2	1
Easy to take an excerpt from	5	4	3	2	1

Is there an introduction to the reading? If so, what does it add?

Is there an after word or postscript? If so, what does it add?

Technical:

Technical quality effective	5	4	3	2	1
Sound effects	5	4	3	2	1 NA
Cueing aids	5	4	3	2	1 NA
Music	5	4	3	2	1 NA

Can the tape be played at all volumes without feedback?

Are there echoes or other types of feedback?

Overall rating: (average of all the scores)

Recommendations:

Reviews of Audio Books Using the Evaluation Form:

Book: *Shipwreck at the Bottom of the World*

Author: Jennifer Armstrong

Book Publisher: Scholastic, Inc.

Date: 1998

Audio Publisher: Audio Bookshelf

Date: 1998

Reader: Taylor Mali

Length: 4 hours

Presentation:	Effectiveness of Reader(s)	5
	Voice quality	5
	Ability to capture characterizations	5
	Provides clues to different characters	5
	Effective use of dialects	5

Is the narration appropriate? Why or why not?

Yes, the narration is appropriate because it provides the reader/listener with a real sense of the immediate, life-threatening danger and incredible adversity the crew of the Endurance faced. I listened to this tape in my car. Upon reaching my destination, I would have to wait until the end of a chapter before I could get out, so gripping were the details of this story!

Would multiple narrators or an ensemble of readers be more effective? How?

Not necessary in this case...the narration was superb.

Content:	Effective independent of reading the text	5
	Overall effectiveness	5
	True to the text	5
	Easy to take an excerpt from	5

Is there an introduction to the reading? If so, what does it add?

Yes, there is an introduction which greatly enhances the story because it gives us a context in which to place these men. The introduction speaks of the harshness and treacherousness of the Antarctic — so much so that I actually felt a chill.

Is there an after word or postscript? If so, what does it add?

Yes, the epilogue explains what became of the men of the Endurance, and I felt so connected with them at the end that I couldn't wait to tell anyone who would care to listen to me the final, sometimes ironic fates of these heroes.

Technical:	Technical quality	5
	Sound effects	5
	Cueing aids	NA
	Music	5

Can the tape be played at all volumes without feedback?

Yes.

Are there echoes or other types of feedback?

Not that I'm aware of.

Application:	Appropriate for classroom use	5
	Whole class	5
	Small groups	5
	Individual students	5

Are there special considerations for use in your classroom?

No.

Could the book be used in other disciplines? If so, which one(s)? How might it be used?

This book could certainly be used in a social studies classroom or in a classroom where students are studying geography. In the social studies (or history) classroom, the teacher might use it in connection with other world events during World War I or as an example of triumph over adversity in an era of little or no technology.

Are there recommendations for future use?

As you may have already discerned, I love this book and can't wait to find an opportunity to use it in my own classroom. It speaks of fine leadership and loyalty and cooperation among Shackleton's crew. There is bravery and grace under the cruelest conditions. The men were ever resourceful in their struggle for survival, and survive they did, every last one of them!

Overall rating: 5

Recommendations: I originally bought this book for my nine-year-old daughter through her third grade class Scholastic Book order. It sounded like an interesting story, and because it is a true story, I thought she would benefit from its information. Little did I know that when she brought the book home, I would become so enamored of it. This story of men who survived under the harshest conditions imaginable with little hope for rescue is truly inspiring. With each chapter I read, I became more and more invested in the fates of these brave souls. The audiobook added an even richer dimension to the tale because suddenly the story was alive — it felt like listening to a real-time news commentary. For the entire winter, I never once complained about the cold!

Denise Vincelette

Central Falls High School
Central Falls, Rhode Island

Book: *Harry Potter and The Prisoner of Azkaban*

Author: J.K. Rowling

Book Publisher: Scholastic Press, Inc. **Date:** 1999

Audio Publisher: Random House **Date:** 2000 (1999)

Reader: Jim Dale **Length:** 12 Hours

Presentation:	Effectiveness of Reader(s)	5
	Voice quality	5
	Ability to capture characterizations	4
	Provides clues to different characters	4
	Effective use of dialects	4

Is the narration appropriate? Why or why not?

Jim Dale's narration of *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* catches the essence of the novel and allows it to come alive through your stereo's speakers. As I slid the first tape into the cassette player, I was hesitant because I was unsure of what to expect from the narrator and was fearful that the narration would make the experience of listening to the story difficult. Dale's voice not only effectively captures the English dialect and personality of each character, but also draws in and takes hold of the listener. On the other hand, if the narration were ineffective and inappropriate, it would have been impossible for the audio book to maintain the listener's attention, making it easy to hit the STOP button. It is one thing for a novel to be considered a good read and another for it to be a good listen, and that fact alone describes the importance of an appropriate narration.

Would multiple narrators or an ensemble of readers be more effective? How?

Initially, I felt more than one narrator would have been more effective, but as the narration progressed, my opinion slowly began to change. More than one narrator or an ensemble of narrators would have taken something away from the overall experience of the audio book, and instead of making the narration authentic, it would have been confusing. There are so many different characters in this novel that more than one narrator would have made it extremely difficult to keep the characters and corresponding voices straight. Dale effectively portrays each character while maintaining the continuity of the novel.

Content:	Effective independent of reading the text	5
	Overall effectiveness	5
	True to the text	5
	Easy to take an excerpt from	5

Is there an introduction to the reading? If so, what does it add?

There is not an introduction to *Harry Potter and The Prisoner of Azkaban*.

Is there an after word or postscript? If so, what does it add?

At the conclusion of the novel, there is only a brief statement by Jim Dale concluding the reading and mentioning the publisher of the audio book. There is not an after word or postscript, but it is worth noting that this is the only time during the reading of the novel when you hear any type of instrumental music, although it is only for a few seconds at the final moments of the narration.

Technical:	Technical quality effective	4
	Sound effects	NA
	Cueing aids	NA
	Music	NA

Can the tape be played at all volumes without feedback?

The tape of *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* can be played at all volumes without any feedback, although the volume must be set to an unusually high volume in order to hear it clearly.

Are there echoes or other types of feedback?

There are no echoes or other types of feedback in the audio book of *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*.

Application:	Appropriate for classroom use	4
	Whole class	4
	Small groups	4
	Individual students	3

Are there special considerations for use in your classroom?

Special considerations for this book would be dependent on the grade you were going to teach the novel to. Younger middle school students may not be familiar with the story of *Harry Potter* (which is hard to believe!) and may be afraid of some of the events that take place. Also, some parents feel the story of Harry Potter is too violent and may "put ideas" into their child's mind. This idea is something that could hold true for students in any grade, not only younger students. Another objection that may arise in the classroom when introducing any *Harry Potter* novel revolves around the subject of religion. Some parents may

feel the concept of magic is against their own personal and religious beliefs. Due to possible situations like the ones described above, it is best receive permission from parents if the novel is not part of the already required curriculum.

Could the book be used in other disciplines? If so, which one(s)? How might it be used?

My first inclination would be to say that it would be difficult to incorporate this novel in other disciplines beside English. The only possibility I can think of is history when the class begins to study American colonial times and the witch trials. I am not exactly sure how you could incorporate this novel effectively with this topic, but you could maybe use an excerpt from the novel as an introduction to the lesson on the witch trials. The excerpt could be used as a lead-in and possibly a point of discussion to gauge what the students may or may not know on the topic of witches and wizards.

Are there recommendations for future use?

I would have no reservations recommending this novel for use in the classroom. *Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* has a universal appeal that is extremely rare for any one novel, never mind a series of novels. This book, along with J.K. Rowling's other novels, could be used for all students but would be most useful in the younger grades (grades 6-8) and would lend itself to a lively class discussion. This audio book would be best used in either small groups or as a class because of the value of discussion, questioning and brainstorming. The audio recording makes it easy for the teacher to pick out excerpts and then discuss that portion of the novel. Instead of asking students to read the novel, allowing them to listen to it introduces literature on another level, one most students do not even consider when they think of the reading experience.

Overall rating: 4.2

Kaylin Curran

I will be including reviews of audio books periodically in this column. I would like to have feedback from any listener/readers after they've used the form.

Jean E. Brown is an Associate Professor of educational studies at Rhode Island College.

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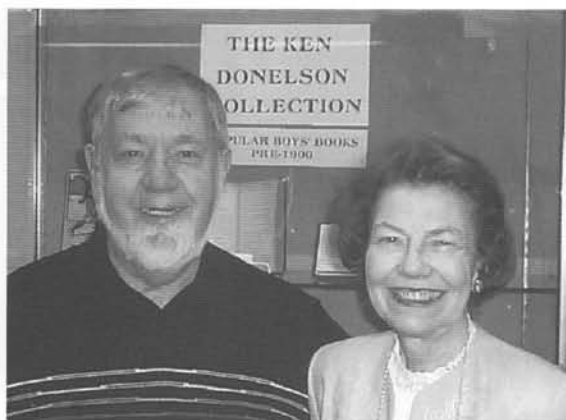
Jim Blasingame

When Arizona State University Professor Emeritus Ken Donelson bought his very first book as a small boy in Clarinda, Iowa, he had no idea it was the beginning of what would eventually become The Ken Donelson Special Collection of Juvenile Literature now residing in ASU's Hayden Library. In a dedication ceremony and reception on April 29, 2003, Special Collections Librarian Marilyn Wurzburger recognized Dr. Donelson and his wife, Marie, for their donation of over 800 books dating back to 1835, and invited scholars of young adult fiction to make good use of them. Although some of the books in the collection are still being catalogued, and many of the oldest, especially those with remarkable illustrations, are on display in glass cases, the entirety is now available for use with the help of the special collections librarians.

Ken began this collection when he was in elementary school and added more books as he grew up. He lost a few upon the advent of WWII and a tour in the Navy when his mother gave some of them away. Ken began acquiring significant titles in earnest while working on his doctorate at the University of Iowa and continued to the present day. He looked for books primarily in bookstores, such as Acres of Books in Long Beach, California, which he believes is one of the best bookstores on the West Coast, along with Powell's in Portland, Oregon. Acres of Books in Cincinnati, Ohio, was also a help, as were two bookstores in Kansas City, Missouri, that were later lost to urban renewal.

Books from the early Nancy Drew series were the most difficult to find, according to Ken:

They were starting to cost me a lot of money. The later ones were less expensive, but they were also not nearly as well written. Fortunately, many of the books I had collected as a boy were the early ones from the 1930's and 1940's. *Derrick Sterling* by Kirk Munroe, was also a difficult acquisition. I looked for that one for a long time and finally found a first edition that was just gorgeous and another copy that I kept for myself. That's probably the most rare book in the collection. Some of the books from the American Sunday School Union would be very difficult to find because, although you can easily find books printed by that organization (they printed them by the thousands), it would be very hard to locate a specific title that you might want.



Arizona State University Professor Emeritus Ken Donelson and ASU's Hayden Library Special Collections Librarian Marilyn Wurzburger (4/29/2003)

A majority of the works in the collection were originally written for a young male readership, although Ken did not consciously set out with that intention; rather, he was a boy when he began and first collected what he liked to read, including sports stories, mysteries and adventures. His favorite authors in the collection include Capwell Wykoff, who wrote great mysteries although he was never an especially influential author; John Tunis, who wrote mostly sports books; Ralph Henry Barbour, who wrote sports, mystery and adventure books; and William Heyliger, who wrote sports stories and career

books, although they weren't called career books back then in the 1920's and '30's.

Ken believes the Nancy Drew books may receive the most scholarly attention, given the Nancy Drew conference at the University of Iowa in 1993, and purely by coincidence an ASU student defended a master's thesis based on the entire Nancy Drew series and all that has been written about it on the day of the collection's dedication. He also believes some scholarly inquiry is merited by the youth mystery books from the 1920's through the 1940's. When asked if he saw any other use for the books other than for scholarly purposes, Ken replied, "Yes—for fun."

Ken's long-time colleague and coauthor of *Literature for Today's Young Adults*, Alleen Nilsen, Professor of English at ASU, remarked, "Ken always insisted on going directly to the source himself rather than relying on someone else's opinion. This collection makes it possible for scholars of young adult literature to study the actual books and follow in Ken's footsteps."

During the dedication ceremony, Special Collections Librarian Marilyn Wurzburger highlighted some of Ken's accomplishments as provided by the Arizona English Teachers' Association who recently recognized him with its rarely awarded Distinguished Service Award. These accomplishments included "51 years of service to English education, serving as the editor of *English Journal* for eight years and contributing to the recognition of literature for adolescents as an individual genre. Mostly, however, he is just remembered by thousands of his former students as a lovable man who showed them how to become English teachers."

Inquiries about the Ken Donelson Special Collection of Juvenile Literature may be directed to:

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ALAN Members who are interested in doing research in any aspect of young adult literature (and who would like up to \$1000 to support your efforts!) are encouraged to apply for the 2003 ALAN Foundation for Research in YA Literature Awards.

Winners will be recognized at the ALAN Breakfast
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The Research Connection

Literature-Based Instruction for Middle School Readers: Harry Potter and More

Pamela Sissi Carroll

Gail P. Gregg

The most basic educational skill is reading. The most basic obligation of any school is to teach reading. Yet, earlier this year, we found that almost two-thirds of African American children in the 4th grade cannot read at basic grade level. For white children, that figure is 27 percent. The gap is wide and troubling, and it's not getting any better. That gap leads to personal tragedy and social injustice. In America, literacy is liberation, and we must set all our children free.

(President George W. Bush, speech to 2001 National Urban League Conference, August 1, 2001).

Above all, make this the golden rule, the equivalent of the Hippocratic oath: everything we ask a child to do should be worth doing.

(Award-winning writer Philip Pullman, from the Isis Lecture given during the Oxford Literary Festival, Oxford University, England, April 1, 2003.)

Personal knowledge, knowledge based in one's own experience and practice, is an irreplaceable source of wisdom....But personal knowledge is also a limited source of wisdom...It must be compared to knowledge from other sources, connected with knowledge based in research, and interwoven with knowledge derived from a theoretical perspective to be made useful.

(Catherine Snow, literacy researcher, in her address as President of the American Educational Research Association, 2001, p. 8)

I like to read because when you read, you are in a world of you. With movies you don't get to live in a world of you.

(Female middle school student, age 12, discussing her view of literary experiences, 2000.)

In today's educational environment, attention has turned from a concentration on the art of literature to a narrow focus on the skills of reading. Many of the teachers of middle and high school English language arts with whom we work are concerned that they have little specific knowledge about how to teach reading skills. These teachers' concerns are tinted with anxieties that arise when their students' reading scores on standardized tests are scrutinized by school boards, students' parents, community members, local newspapers, and politicians. Their concerns are also laced with fears that time devoted to reading instruction will necessarily steal time from the major components of contemporary secondary English language arts curriculum: literature, composition, language, and media studies.

These are legitimate concerns about significant problems related to the need for reading instruction in today's secondary schools. But we have good news: middle school teachers can find ways to use literature that appeals to students' interests while emphasizing the development of critical reading skills. Middle school students themselves have pointed us toward solutions.

Books That Appeal to Today's Young Adolescent Readers

Harry Potter's Footprints

In the year 2000, we surveyed secondary school students, interested in how they would describe themselves as readers at the turn of the 21st century. Responses—2,070 of them—poured in from middle school students from Washington and Oregon, Arizona and North Dakota, Wisconsin and Illinois, Ohio and Kentucky, Connecticut, New York, and Florida. Among other questions, we asked them, "What is your favorite book?" and "Why?" The overwhelming response to the first question, across 6th, 7th, and 8th grades, and among both male and female readers, was one of the Harry Potter titles. That response was no real surprise. With the publication of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (1998), the young wizard's name became part of the lexicon of today's young adolescent. The popularity of the Harry Potter books—each of which is quite long by young adult novel standards, and each of which has unusual names and unfamiliar settings that increase the chances that readers will have some difficulty moving through the pages—attests to the fact that kids are willing to work to read books they like. Adolescent readers who are interested in the wizard will find ways to get inside Harry's magical world. The attraction of the books continues to grow, and is enhanced by the movie versions of the first two books of the series; the feature film version of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* was released by Warner in 2001, and the feature film version of *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* was released in 2003. The June, 2003, publication of the much-anticipated fifth novel, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, will create a new wave of enthusiasm and publicity for Harry.

The positive impact that the young wizard has had on encouraging young adolescents to read is undeniable. Author T.A. Barron, who himself has a fine series of novels that chronicle the early life of another famous wizard, Merlin, acknowledges Rowling's gift to readers: "All of us who write books for young people are grateful to Harry Potter. He has reminded a lot of people, of all ages, just how much fun reading books can be!" (Carroll with Barron, 23).

Young adolescents themselves provide persuasive and in-

formative explanations of the Harry Potter phenomenon for themselves. Eighth grade males told us the following about why they like the Harry Potter books:

- “All kids dream about having powers and all the creativity in the magical world makes it interesting.”
- “[It’s about a] kid like me who is always in trouble.”
- “[It is] interesting, funny, mysterious, and it has many many many twists, plus it’s not real.”
- “[It] gives you something to imagine.”

Their 8th grade female counterparts added explanations including these:

- “It has so many twists and adventures and it’s not just a one topic book. It has all topics, like horror, romance, fantasy, adventure, excitement.”
- “I read it for hours and hours without even noticing.”
- “It is about kids my age.”
- “It was fun to envision the story as I read it.”

Seventh grade males told us they are drawn to Harry for reasons that include these:

- “It is fun to read, it takes you to a cool world, and it makes you feel like him.”
- “I like fantasy, plus it’s realistic.”
- “I barely wanted to put it down.”
- “Humorous and cool, keeps you locked.”
- “It’s fun!”

Their female classmates added reasons including these:

- “It is a story about a boy who lived with relatives who hated him.”
- “It is about good and evil.”
- “It is just wonderful, magical, and mysterious.”
- “I can relate.”
- “It is fun and never gets boring.”

Sixth grade males told us that they are fans of Harry Potter because, among other reasons:

- “It shows what I want to be like—full of adventure!”
- “I like imagination.”
- “JK Rowling goes into great detail and has different ideas than other writers.”
- “[It is] really long and very fascinating”

Their young female classmates explain why they are fans, too:

- “I wish we could stay at a school like that.”
- “I like the author.”
- “It is so fiction and really exciting.”
- “It is different from real life and I think magic is fun.”
- “It is fun and scary, kind of like a mystery.”

Walking Behind Harry Potter

Through the 2000 survey, we found that a preference for fantasy does not begin and end with Harry Potter, though. Male and female middle school students also rated other fantasy choices high on their lists. Male readers identified J.R.R. Tolkien’s neo-classic *The Hobbit* (1938/1951) as a favorite in grades 6,7,8, and also in grade 9. Reasons for their choice of Tolkien’s books include these: “It gives you things to think about” (an 8th grade male); “It has a lot of magic, adventure, strange creatures, dense history, and a good plot” (a 7th grade male); and “I like fantasy” (a sixth grade male). The creatures of Middle Earth have enjoyed gains in popularity as a result of the release of the two feature-length movies based on the *The Lord of the Rings Trilogy: The Fellowship of the Rings* (2001) and *The Two Towers*

(2002), and the popularity will increase when the third movie of the trilogy, *The Return of the King*, is released in December, 2003. Ralph Bakshi’s animated version of the trilogy, released on September 11, 2001, has not proven as popular as the newer version, yet it has its own following, as well.

Female readers demonstrated a leaning toward a fantasy that presents a female protagonist by selecting the contemporary Cinderella tale, *Ella Enchanted* (1997), as one of their favorite books in grades 6,7, and 8. Their reasons include these: “It shows how she struggles and beats her problems” (an 8th grade female); “...it has fantasy and romance all mixed into one” (a 7th grade female); “[It has] fantasy with an unusual ending” (a sixth grade female).

Different Footsteps

Fantasy is not the only genre that young adolescents show a preference for as readers. The other kinds of books that rated high on middle school students’ lists of favorites were split across gender lines: male readers tended to like what some adults would view as the antithesis of fantasy books: realistic adventures. For example, Gary Paulsen’s *Hatchet* (1987) the compelling story of a boy’s struggle as the sole survivor of a plane crash into the Canadian wilderness, was cited second to the Harry Potter books as a favorite among 6th, 7th, and 8th grade boys. Another popular choice for those readers was Louis Sachar’s *Holes* (1998), the quirky tale of a boy’s misadventures in, and odd family connections to, a juvenile detention camp, also now a feature film.

Females stepped away from fantasy in their runner-up choices, too. They identified Lois Lowry’s thought-provoking Holocaust novel, *Number the Stars* (1989) as a favorite. They also named as a favorite series the widely marketed personal/self-esteem readers, *Chicken Soup for the Teenage Soul* (vol. 1, 1997) edited by Jack Canfield, Mark Victor Hansen, and Kimberly Kirberger (a book that approximately 330 readers in grades 9, 10, and 11 also ranked first among their favorites). Middle school females added a non-fiction selection, David Pelzer’s wrenching true account of child abuse, *A Child Called It* (1995) among their favorites, as well.

Matching Literary Interests with Reading Skills Instruction

As we thought about approximately 2,100 middle school students’ answers to the two questions, “What is your favorite book?” and “Why?” we began to question several of our assumptions about young adolescents’ habits and preferences as readers. We began to wonder, too, how those habits and preferences can be effectively incorporated in literature-based reading instruction in the middle grades. One assumption that we have had to examine has to do with the kinds of books young adolescents will choose when given the freedom to do so. While we are convinced of the value of allowing students to choose at least some of the material that they read for school, we were surprised to find that their choices included long books with challenging levels of detail, with the Harry Potter novels as the prime example. We were surprised, too, with the sophistication in subject matter and themes for which many young readers indicated a preference. Books like David Pelzer’s non-fiction account of child abuse, *A Child Called It* (1995) and Gary Paulsen’s survival adventure, *Hatchet* (1987), can be described as “heavy,” in contrast with the light, even fluffy, choices that we anticipated middle school readers would make. Our understanding of the preferences of middle school readers, now in-

formed by middle school students' own words, caused us to think about what we know about teaching reading to middle school students. We found it instructive to consider the results of our survey through the lenses provided by two secondary reading specialists, Richard Allington and Kylee Beers. The key principles in Allington's research-based, informative *What Really Matters for Struggling Readers* (2001), and Beers' teacher-friendly, convincing, practical *When Kids Can't Read, What Teachers Can Do* (2003), considered within the context of adolescents' comments about their reading habits and preferences, provide us with solid suggestions for how—and why—to combine literature and reading skills instruction.

Reading Skills and Literature Instruction

Give Adolescent Readers Choice and Time

When we asked readers to tell us if they enjoy what they are asked to read in their English/language arts classes, one teenage student surprised us by writing, in *November*, "We haven't read yet." We suspect that he had probably been assigned some kind of reading in the fall months, but that none of the required reading was memorable or meaningful to him. Another reader reported, "I like the books but most of the time hate the activities that go along with them, which take away from my enjoyment of the books." Both comments remind us that we have to demonstrate that we believe "just reading" is of value by building time for it into our curricula.

Allington insists that the first need of readers is opportunities to read—often and much. Understandably, in today's schools—ones that are driven by accountability measures and standardized testing—many teachers have grown skeptical about the value of sacrificing instructional time to give students time to "just read". Yet, as Allington explains, it is likely to take an average 6th grader approximately eight hours to read the 50,000 words of Gary Paulsen's *Hatchet* (1987), if the reader is interested in the novel, and is left alone and allowed to read silently (Allington, 37). But how often are teachers able to give students eight successive hours of class time for "just reading"? How often do we interrupt classroom time that is set aside for the reading of literature with assignments that test students' comprehension, require them to sketch scenes, or demand that they summarize the plot in a line graph?

Beers (2003) offers one simple and effective practice for increasing reading time in middle school classrooms: read aloud to students as they follow along. Beers claims that reading aloud serves as motivation for reading, and points out that the practice has significant cognitive benefits, too, including these:

- Builds background knowledge—an essential ingredient for comprehension
- Improves listening comprehension—a precursor to reading comprehension
- Improves listening vocabulary—this store of words informs your speaking vocabulary and reading vocabulary
- Builds common vocabulary—of both common and rare words
- Creates interest in reading
- Improves students' understanding of sentence structure and usage
- Improves students' ability to visualize the text

(197-198)

Give Readers Books that They CAN Read and WANT TO Read

Beers insists that "When reluctant readers tell us they don't want to read, they mean they don't want to read the novel we've chosen for them" (288). Teachers of secondary reading and English need to accept an obligation to match readers with

books that interest them. The match can depend on many variables, including these: topic, style, temporal and geographic setting, genre, author, or theme. The important idea is that we need to know what our students' interests are in order to recommend appropriate matches. Young adolescent readers have shown us, in the survey, that they are drawn to fantasy novels and to realistic adventures and painful non-fiction. They have shown us, too, that many are drawn to essays and short stories like the pieces they find in the life-confirming *Chicken Soup* books. The adolescents who responded to our survey have given adults—especially their teachers and media specialists—advice and direction. Not only should we provide time for students to read, in school, but we should allow students to choose their own books, and encourage them to read—without the pressure of a test or formal book report response—at least occasionally. Titles like those named by the young adolescents who completed our survey, including *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, *Hatchet*, *Ella Enchanted*, *Chicken Soup for the Teenage Soul*, *Number the Stars*, *The Hobbit*, *Holes* and all other readers' favorites, should be welcomed into middle school reading and language arts classrooms, and across subjects. We strongly recommend that every teacher ask his or her students to identify the books that are meaningful for them, as a place to begin building a classroom library that will be appealing to student readers.

The need to fill classrooms with books that kids can and will read is particularly acute in the schools that serve low-income neighborhoods. Allington cites Smith, Constantino, and Krashen's study of the print environments for children in families in Beverly Hills (a middle to high-income area), Compton (a low-income area) and Watts (a very low-income area). The study reveals that the poorer the child, the less likely he or she is to have access to books at home and even at school: children in middle or high income families had access to approximately 199 books at home and 392 books in a classroom library. Students in low-income families had only 2.6 books at home and 54 to choose from in the classroom library. Students in the poorest families had, on average, less than one-half of a single book available at home, and fewer than 50 in classroom libraries (Smith, Constantino, and Krashen, 1997, in Allington, p. 57). We propose that teachers gather money and resources from county and state-wide grants, the school's Parent Teacher Organizations, civic partners, and any available resources and stock their classroom libraries with the kinds of books adolescent readers have identified as the ones they not only *can* read, but also ones that they *will* read. Community standards may dictate some restrictions, but readers' interests should be a paramount consideration when teachers and media specialists make choices about the books that fill classroom and school library shelves.

Beers makes a practical, low-tech suggestion for helping students connect with books that are likely to appeal: Stock a "Good Books" box in middle school classrooms. To create a "Good Books Box," the teacher can use the classroom library, or work with the school media specialist, to choose several popular books that are deposited in a box. Members of the class make their selections from the books in the box. This strategy works, according to Beers, because it narrows the potentially overwhelming set of choices that readers face when they search for a title in the media center. As she reminds us, "Until you are comfortable with authors, genres, and interests, it's hard to find a good book" (295).

Through the survey, adolescent readers have shown us that they want their teachers to become acquainted with popular contemporary and award-winning authors and to bring them into classrooms, where they can read like readers do outside of the classroom: without interference. In addition to the others authors we have named above, we recommend these from among our list of students' favorites: Chris Crutcher, John H. Ritter, M.E. Kerr, Christopher Paul Curtis, Lois Lowry, Chris Lynch, Carol Lynch Williams, Phyllis Reynolds Naylor, Sharon Creech, Virginia Euwer Woolfe, Will Hobbs, David Lubar, James Howe, Jack Gantos, T.A. Barron, Anne C. LeMeiux, Walter Dean Myers, and Sue Ellen Bridgers. Writers and their books, if unfamiliar to teachers, are simply unlikely to make their way into reading and literature curricula. In order to serve our middle school students well, teachers must continually build our knowledge of those writers and books.

Give Readers Support as they Develop Reading Fluency

As Allington points out, the more time readers read, the more fluent they become. That means that books that an adolescent can read independently, without intervention from a teacher or other adult, contribute to the student's development as a reader. And yet when teaching, we almost always expect students to read texts that will challenge them, books that they may not find engaging, but that, in our opinion, will serve to nudge them to higher levels of comprehension and sophistication. Why? Some teachers argue that, given the limited time available for reading in our classrooms, we have to make every minute "count" by including in it "educational" reading material (i.e., literature that introduces new vocabulary, complex themes and imagery, complicated or archaic syntax, and so on). Yet like young children who beg to pour over the same picture book again and again and again, unaware that their familiarity with the text is contributing to the development of their emerging reading skills, young adolescents benefit from reading texts that they can move through, unimpeded. As Beers points out, readers who increase their fluency are less frustrated by reading situations, and are therefore more likely to develop a positive attitude toward reading—in and out of school. She suggests several strategies for addressing fluency development that we believe can be incorporated into literature study, including these: build students' knowledge of high-frequency and sight words (212-215); give students opportunities to hear text read by skilled readers who model intonation, phrasing, and pacing (215-216); provide direct instruction for phrasing and intonation when needed (216); encourage students to repeatedly reread selected texts (217); prompt students with words such as "read that again" when they need help decoding a print passage, but do not supply a correction for them, and do not allow their classmates to correct them (217-218).

Do we believe that teachers should avoid including books that students cannot read with fluency, upon the initial encounter, books that challenge students to move toward the use of more sophisticated reading skills? Not at all. And yet we advocate providing reading opportunities for students that mirror reading experiences that adults enjoy: Sometimes, adults need and want to read challenging material slowly and with great care toward our comprehension of it; at other times, we choose texts that entertain us and that we can finish without much effort. When we are perusing changes in our insurance company's policy, the latest short story in *Harper's*, or a poem in *The New Yorker*, we might choose to read care-

fully, deliberately. Yet when we go to the dentist and sit in the waiting room, aren't we as likely to read a *People* magazine or a John Grisham novel as we are to delve into a serious work of literature? Why is that? Because we know that when we occasionally read texts that are not high in intellectual demands, we can read for the pleasure of reading. Period. And at those times, we also read fluently: we are fast and accurate in our processing of the printed text.

We believe that instruction in literature and reading should include, but not be limited to, texts that students can read quickly, without intellectual barriers or challenges. The simple truth is that we impede students' reading achievement when we do not allow them access to texts that they can read fluently, because the more words per minute they read, the more likely they are to improve their reading.

Give Readers Opportunities to Increase Critical Literacy through Literature-Based Reading Instruction

When answering the survey question that asked them to explain *why X is their favorite book*, many wrote a brief synopsis of a book. Very few articulated a personal opinion or response. One 6th grade male wrote, for example, that Paulsen's *Brian's Winter* is his favorite, "because it is about the survival of a young kid." That answer provides information about the book, but not about *why* it is the reader's favorite. A 7th grade female wrote that David Pelzer's *A Child Called It* is her favorite, "Because a lot of kids get abused." We assume that this reader intends to say that the book is good because it offers insights into a serious problem, but we are left to try to second-guess the reason that it is her "favorite book". We interpret these kinds of responses as evidence that many adolescents have failed to learn to generate their own ideas about texts, or to construct their own meanings as readers and thinkers, with confidence and authority. We wonder if they have been taught how to develop these kind of critical responses. Perhaps in our rush to check comprehension by asking students what they *think the book is about*, we too seldom ask students what they *think about a book*.

Allington insists that we extend reading instruction from a focus on the acquisition of discreet skills to learn to make what Keene and Zimmerman describe as the text-to-text, text-to-self, and text-to-world connections that promote thoughtful literacy (Keene and Zimmerman, 1997, in Allington, 107). We must also help students understand that reading skills are among the basic literacy skills that can provide the foundation for development of critical literacies that are essential for successfully making sense of the infinite kinds of print and non-print messages that they, and adults too, are recipients of in today's multi-media, world. We must teach adolescents to use reading skills and broader literacies in order to differentiate between important and unimportant ideas, helpful and harmful information, reasonable and unreasonable conclusions, humane and inhumane recommendations, and uplifting and damaging credos—all of which might be found in both print and non-print messages that they, and we, experience when participating in today's world. Those students who are able to make these distinctions, who can read the world with critical eyes, are able to achieve a balance between the personal responses that they can trust, with broader perspectives that they may have gained from another source. We believe that the 8th grade male who gave this explanation for why the books in Brian Jacques' *Redwall* series are his favorite demonstrates the be-

ginning of translation/critical literacies that can be grounded in thoughtful print literacy:

It was a story about peaceful creatures in a famous abbey and a heinous band of destructive creatures whose purpose was to conquer. It provided adventure and excitement and a very descriptive story, which made me interested in reading it and seeing what would happen next.

Adolescent Readers, Literature Study, and Reading Instruction

Our advice for teachers and media specialists in middle schools, based on the combined look at the results of our survey of almost 2,100 middle school readers, and the principles for reading instruction outlined by Richard Allington and by Kylene Beers, can be summarized in these points: (1) Fill spaces with books, and allow all students easy access to them. Allow students to leave the classroom or media center with books as often as possible. Have them "just read" as a regular part of the curriculum. (2) Be sure to include books for which today's young adolescent readers have indicated a preference. Middle school readers have told us that their favorite types of books are fantasy, realistic adventure, nonfiction, and collections of shorter works that promote positive human values. Get to know several of these yourself, in order to make convincing pitches when students ask for suggestions. (3) Provide plenty of time for reading, and do not restrict students to serious texts that are difficult and challenging for them. Recognize that the more words students read, the more their fluency improves; therefore, balance the challenging texts with easier ones that appeal to readers because of subject matter or theme or escape or the potential for a fun literary experience. (4) Give student readers credit for making sense of texts themselves, for creating meaning with the authors, and teach them to have confidence in their own readings. Then use their thoughtfulness as a vehicle for extending lessons of reading to the non-print media that are so prevalent in their worlds, such as feature-length movies, television advertising, popular music and music videos, magazines targeted toward teens.

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Readers interested in receiving a list of the most popular books and topics, as identified by the approximately 1200 middle school readers whose surveys were returned in usable form, or those who would like a blank copy of our reader survey to use in their classroom or media center, are encouraged to contact Pamela Sissi Carroll at pcarroll@garnet.fsu.edu; she will happily send you electronic copies.

—psc and gpg

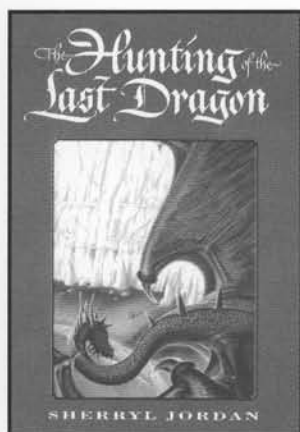
ALA Best Books for Young Adults 2003



ABARAT
by Clive Barker
\$24.99 Tr (0-06-028092-1)
JOANNA COTLER BOOKS



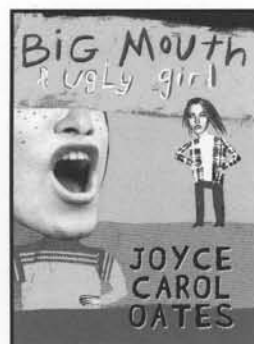
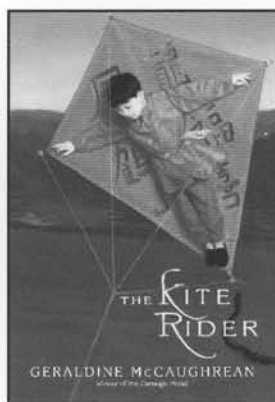
CORALINE
by Neil Gaiman
illustrations by Dave McKean
\$15.99 Tr (0-380-97778-8)
\$17.89 Lb (0-06-623744-0)
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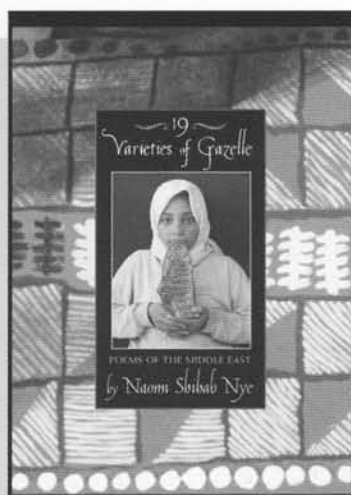
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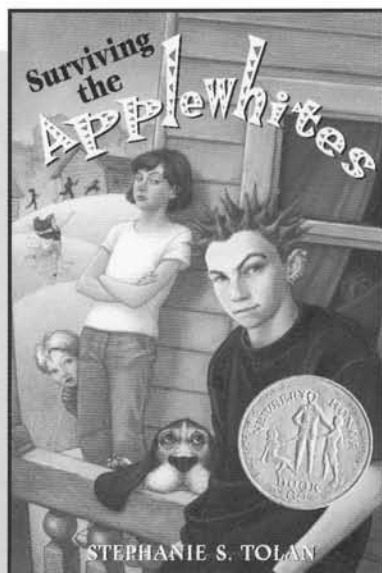
THE HUNTING OF THE LAST DRAGON
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