

Revolutionary War and Contemporary Students

It Happened a L-O-N-G Time Ago!

Before the sad events that occurred in the United States on September 11, 2001, the war experience had become quite remote in the imagination of the average American student. These students often thought of war as a Third World problem, or the actions of the economically deprived nations in Africa, Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and South East Asia. In so doing, they are unable to recognize the similarities that exist among people of different societies involved in the common struggle for survival and justice. The constant threat on our nation's security in the twenty-first century, however, is beginning to change this perception. More and more, people are coming to terms with the fact that war can actually occur once *again* within the boundaries of this country, as it did a long time ago. This means, then, that we need to educate students to understand the phenomenon of war: its causes and destructive effects on every aspect of human life, as well as the opportunity it offers to reaffirm the human spirit for survival.

Exposing students to literature about war is one way teachers can begin this awareness process. This is because literature provides answers to some of our questions and enables us to ask a few more about the human experience as we (readers) reflect on our individual lives and/or collective experiences. Also, as Nilsen and Donelson (2001) note, “[r]eading literature about war [. . .] acquaints young people with the ambiguous nature of war, on one hand illustrating humanity's evil and horror, on the other hand revealing humanity's decency and heroism” (pp. 247-248). When we use literature to teach about the war experience, we empathize with the soldiers authorized to kill

each other, parents forced to deal with the early demise of their teenage children, and children who become orphans at an early age. We also reckon with the fact that war destroys whites, blacks, Hispanics, Asians, and Native Americans. It destroys foes and friends, for, as Stephen Ambrose (1997) remarks, “when men undergo the same privations, face the same dangers before an impartial enemy, there can be no segregation” (349-350). Indeed, war spares no one.

Many adolescent novels have been written about this subject from different cultural perspectives (see Appendix A for a partial list). Although there are more than two sides to the story, I will use two novels to demonstrate how war creates universal suffering and touches every aspect of the life of those involved for generations; it has a way of spilling over to those not even directly participating in the conflict. I have decided to focus on the Revolutionary War, not only because of its significance within America's national and international history, but also, with the current trend of events, it is necessary to examine America's involvement in the struggle to protect its people from outside forces and to establish its national identity based on clearly defined principles.

Collier and Collier's (1974) *My Brother Sam Is Dead* and Lunn's (1997) *The Hollow Tree* are two award-winning novels that tell the story of war from two distinct perspectives. While Lunn focuses on the Canadian view and uses a female protagonist to relate the experience, Collier and Collier explore the United States' perspective with a male narrator at the center of the story. Although some may argue against pairing *The Hollow Tree*, a young adult novel, with *My Brother*

Sam is Dead, read by children in grades five through seven, both versions of the war story appeal to middle school students. In the course of the discussion, I will examine the sufferings this particular war caused to soldiers and civilians alike.

One War: Two Nations

Collier and Collier's (1974) *My Brother Sam is Dead* captures the plight of the Meeker family during the American Revolutionary War. As the story unfolds, we are introduced to Sam's conflict. He wants to join the Patriots and fight the Tories to liberate the colony from British oppression. His father, however, sees this as an act of subversion that must be curbed. Hard as

the older man tries, he is unable to dissuade his son from becoming a soldier. Sam joins the army, placing his family members, residents of the loyalist town of Redding, in a complicated situation.

Ironically, he is eventually killed while protecting them against his peers—soldiers from his own troupe who attempt to steal from his family. Collier and Collier (1974) eloquently

depict the dilemma of a son torn between two loyalties, the family he loves and the nation he must serve. Choosing his family over his greedy peers lands him in the gallows, which is no laughing matter. Tim, the young narrator, is confused and disappointed with this kind of justice.

Lunn's (1997) *The Hollow Tree* tells a similar story, only from a different perspective. It is one of the few novels that actually captures an adolescent girl's view of the Revolutionary War and establishes the United States' historical connection with Canada. In this novel Phoebe's father, a college teacher, opts to fight against the British to liberate America from colonization. Although Phoebe, like Tim Meeker in *My Brother Sam is Dead*, does not understand why there is war and never actively takes sides, she is accidentally entrusted with the responsibility of delivering spy papers to the British—a task meant for Gideon, her favorite cousin,

who had been captured and hanged by the Sons of Liberty for treason. The entire process of carrying and hiding the papers and walking through the wilderness for months is tedious, dangerous, and at times, frustrating to this teenage orphan. Nonetheless, she survives and ends up in Canada with “the King's loyal American supporters [who] had not been welcome back in their old homes” (253).

Thematic Analysis

Like most books about war, these two novels explore powerful themes and raise issues about the human condition, including oppression, betrayal, starting anew, acting on one's personal/political beliefs, and human suffering. Although there are other themes a reader could focus on, these five are particularly compelling because they reflect our universal concerns. Oppression and betrayal can take many forms in our society, and we do not necessarily have to wait for a crisis to experience these. The other three are also integral to our existence. Human beings must continue to adapt as we search for better options in life; in our quest for justice, most often it is inevitable that we experience some form of suffering, especially if we have a clear sense of what we actually want in life.

As the authors describe the war experience through their young narrators' eyes, we are also faced with some of the ethical questions the protagonists confront. For example: would you kill another to save yourself? Would you fight against your father or siblings knowing you might kill each other? Would you willingly deliver spy papers to the people responsible for your father's death? Would you kill someone for food? Who really is a good guy—a Patriot, a Tory, or a Rebel?

In the two novels the protagonists are, at times, also confused about some of the actions of their relatives, friends, and community leaders. Consequently, they must abandon their former values and forge new ones to help them survive the chaos that surrounds them. Tim must mask his emotions and watch the Rebel soldiers execute his brother for what they consider in wartime as treason, and Phoebe must carry on with Gideon's mission, even though she knows the action could lead to her own death. These events contribute tremendously to the suffering each of these characters' experience.

The more questions they pose after reading these books, the better they are able to understand that human pain and suffering transcend the individual.

Suffering of the Individual

Collier and Collier (1974) and Lunn (1997) expose our vulnerabilities as human beings and illustrate our fortitude in the face of challenges. In doing so, they capture the different kinds of suffering prevalent in the fictional world, drawing the reader into the characters' lives, their struggles, and victories. As the war rages on and more friends, relatives, and "enemies" die, these youths must survive in their war-torn environment. Their primary goal, then, is to stay alive. They must continuously seek ways to protect themselves from assault, feed their hungry stomachs, and heal their sick bodies. To accomplish this, Tim maintains close ties with his mother and continues to run the family tavern the way his father had. He is also wary of the people around him, including his brother, Sam, whom he can no longer trust.

Phoebe cannot carry on as Tim does; her father's and Gideon's deaths leave her with nobody to hold on to. However, to make herself useful to others, she decides to complete her cousin's mission. The responsibility of dispatching the spy papers then becomes an obsession and gives her an additional reason to leave the village she no longer feels attached to and do something meaningful with her life. The magnitude of the task means she needs to protect herself against the "Patriots," who are aware of her father's ideological stance in the war, and the Rebels, whose fate she carries in the packet. Depending on whom she runs into, she is a traitor or hero as she guards the spy papers with her life. Thus, Phoebe must stay alert at all times, eat whatever she can catch or fix with her own bare hands, and occasionally rely on kind fellow travelers also fleeing from the turmoil. Despite this, she is careful about what she says and to whom, for she is aware that doing the "work of a Loyalist scout" (99) can get her hanged as it did her cousin.

Suffering within the Family Unit

Another kind of suffering conspicuous in both novels has to do with family. Adjusting to the loss of relatives within the nuclear and extended family units and dealing with issues of trust and betrayal threaten to tear families apart. The two protagonists must accept, or at least live with, the pain that comes from losing their fathers and other close relatives in a war that makes no sense to them. Tim loses his brother, Sam, who thought he was fighting for a good cause,

and loses his father, who sold beef to the British enemy. Tim wonders whether his brother, Sam, was indeed fighting against his own father.

Phoebe also loses her father and her cousin, Gideon, two people she loves dearly. In an emotional outburst, she asks, "Why did [Gideon] care so much for the King that he would leave his precious plants to go off and fight? Why had her father cared so much for being free of that King that he had let himself be killed for it?" (22) Through these characters, we get a sense of the ambiguous nature of war and are able to understand why and how families disintegrate during war. The reader is faced with the fact that often in war teenagers must assume grownup roles and carry on from where their parents left off. Tim, a pre-teen when the war begins, must support his mother emotionally and materially as they struggle to salvage what is left of their small family. Phoebe must carve out a new future for herself by fulfilling a promise. She also has to renegotiate relationships with her aunt and cousins and adopt a new family out of mutual love and respect as she tries to create a life for herself within a new community far away from home.

Suffering Within the Community

The communities where both protagonists have grown up are torn apart by war. The Meeker family is shunned because of Sam's decision to join the Rebels. Together as a family, they must endure the ridicule and disparaging comments from those who matter in Redding Ridge, Connecticut, a community where people knew each other very well and were supposed to uphold similar values. Tim recalls, "[N]obody was going to let me forget about it [Sam running off to fight for the Rebels], that was sure. Mr. Beach made it a subject of his sermon" (p. 28). Although Tim is upset about the war and would like to understand the issue at stake, he is still unable to comprehend people's position in the argument. He remarks,

"What kept confusing me about it was that the argument didn't have two sides. Some people said that the King was the King and that was that, and we ought to do what he said. Other people said that men were supposed to be free to govern themselves and we should rebel and drive the Lobsterbacks out together. Some others said, well, they were born Englishmen and they wanted to die Englishmen, but that the colonies ought to have more say in their own government, and that maybe we'd have to give the Lobsterbacks a taste of blood just to show the King that we

meant business [. . .]. You see how confusing it was when you realize that sometimes Sam's side was called Patriots and sometimes they were called Rebels (25-26).

This comment is at the heart of the issue in these novels and invites the reader to be part of this debate. Who then should Tim really believe are the Patriots or Rebels if the interpretations keep changing back and forth with each group of people he meets? Who should he believe is right or wrong in this conflict that is wrecking so many lives and homes? These are questions to ponder as we attempt to understand the causes and effects of war on local and global communities.

In Lunn's novel, Phoebe is forced to leave Hanover, New Hampshire, first when her father dies. Later, she flees from Orland Village, a community torn apart as people take sides between the Loyalists and Sons of Liberty. In the ensuing tension the town's people actually lynch those identified as spies or suspected to be Loyalists. Neighbors turn against one another, accusing each other of treason. Lunn (1997) notes, "There were stories of families — children and adults alike — being hounded from their homes, injured, and even killed, by neighbors who called them enemies, sometimes in the name of the King, sometimes in the name of the rebellious Continental Congress" (23).

Even family members turn against each other, as Gideon and Phoebe's father do when they fight on opposing sides in the war. By the time the war is actually over, many have lost their lives, and two nations have emerged.

When relatives, neighbors, and friends are killed because of conflicting beliefs, such acts remain deeply engraved in the collective memory, and the healing process usually lasts longer than many anticipate. Tension and hostility linger as people struggle to resettle, rebuild old communities, relocate, and hope for peace and a better future. This post-war adjustment process poses a challenge, and some people must decide whether or not they want to go back and live with the same people who had betrayed them or killed their loved ones during war, as is the case with our two protagonists. Tim and his mother must relocate to Pennsylvania after the loss of their loved ones, while Phoebe crosses over to Canada.

War and the Human Condition

War has a way of touching each one of us in our local and global communities. In some cases we profit from the experience if tyrannical and exploitative leaders are overthrown, but often times we lose a great deal, as well, and must take time to heal. This means individuals within a given society must attempt to process the pain involved in killing enemies or friends, the agony of dying, and the suffering inflicted on all by war. Focusing on this aspect of our collective human experience is more beneficial to society than simply itemizing the causes of the war and identifying the winners and losers. Our two novels explore these issues.

As we exit Collier and Collier's *My Brother Sam Is Dead*, we see an aging Tim reflecting on the war. While he accepts the positive social change brought about by the event, he is skeptical, however, about the use of excessive force to resolve the conflicts between the Patriots and the Rebels. These sentiments are also echoed by an older Phoebe, who now believes that "[w]hatever the future would bring she did not fear [. . .]. She belonged to herself now" and would continue to live with the loyalist strangers she had come to love dearly (251-252). She does not consider being a Loyalist a crime. Rather, she cherishes the moment she had shared with kind people scattered across the continent by a war that showed mercy neither to the Sons of Liberty nor the Loyalists. During the war they all had a common goal of escaping to wherever there was peace, where they could put the past behind them, learn to forgive and start afresh. Tim does a similar thing even though he remains in America.

The novels end on a hopeful note, leaving the reader breathless, tentative, and eager to understand the different roles we play in perpetuating human conflicts. They empower us to critically examine our relationships with each other and authority figures and force us to deal with some of the issues raised in the two novels. We come to realize that even though both Tim and Phoebe take pride in their heritage as an American and a Canadian, they also wonder why the conflict couldn't be resolved without war.

These two novels, therefore, have great potential in the classroom. The rich themes they explore, ethical questions raised, and other socio-cultural issues addressed make them worthwhile for students in

junior high/middle school. Teachers can use them to introduce an interdisciplinary unit on war or historical social conflicts, with the goal of raising awareness about the human experience, survival and social in/justice. Within this framework, they can explore some of the ethical issues raised in the novels to help students to understand the phenomenon of war or the concept of conflicts in general. One strategy teachers can introduce in the classroom to begin the meaning-making process with literature is the “grand conversation.”

Engaging Students in the Meaning-Making Process

When using the grand conversation instructional strategy on particular novels with students, the teacher or discussion leader is careful to let participants share their honest feelings about the story they have read (Paterson & Eeds). Sharing personal responses is a great way to informally assess the students’ understanding and processing of the novel and sets the pace for a healthy discussion of the issues raised by readers and/or the author. Because meanings negotiated from texts initially can be refined, expanded, or connected to other aspects of life and media, the teacher can probe further for clarification. This way students can maximize their use of prior knowledge to bear on their interpretations of events that take place in the fictional world they’ve read about. The teacher can then discuss the historical background of the Revolutionary War in some detail to give students a sense of the state of the country and the world when the war occurred. If they wish, students can re-examine their responses based on this new knowledge.

Another way to get students to negotiate personal meanings from these two texts is to ask them to write readers’ theater scripts of their own based on their understanding of the characters and plot. They should select six to ten powerful passages from the two novels that represent any aspects of the war experience they find interesting, making sure they record the page numbers for future reference. After doing this in groups of three or four, they can now work on scripts for readers theater on different themes that make the connection among war, human suffering, and social change. The readers’ theater should include only three characters: the narrator, one symbolic youth, and a symbolic

parent or adult. Students can arrange these passages carefully so the script reads as though it was written by one person and taken from one book. Or they can paraphrase these in their own words and come up with a new script that still reflects the original message of the quotations used. The narrator should give the background of the themes that run through the two-page script. Passages selected should reflect the predominant attitudes manifested toward war by the young people and parents in the two fictional communities.

Once this is done, each group of students will read their scripts aloud, injecting the desired feeling manifested by the characters. By doing this, students will somewhat experience the war as characters as they attempt to communicate the young men’s desire to enlist in the army, the parents’ anguish/disillusionment about war, and the narrator’s solemn comments on the pain and suffering involved in the process of social change. Therefore students will claim ownership of the literature experience as they fuse thought and feeling to bring the Revolutionary War experience alive in their own way (Rosenblatt). Johannessen (1997) also notes that “when students have a choice in what goes on in the classroom, then they have a genuine stake in the outcome and will be more likely to approach such assignments with enthusiasm, and the products from these assignments will usually be of a higher quality” (61).

After each presentation of the Readers Theater, students can comment on what they found compelling in each other’s performance. Later, the teacher can ask them again to share personal reactions as they engage in what Probst (1988) and Karolides (1992) refer to as reader response. Only this time the responses would be geared toward particular experiences in the novels. This is another way of making them active participants in the learning process. The discussion should eventually evolve to critical issues about the human experience in contemporary society. This is important because, as Ruddiman (1997) rightly observes, “[A]sking students to critically think about the consequences of war and to relate those events to today encourages awareness of human behaviors, both heroic and evil” (71).

While working with my eighth-grade son on a similar project for a conference, we came up with a well-scripted text from five novels that explored war experi-

ences. Because our topic was “war across cultures,” we were able to capture basic elements about war from different perspectives and make the newly constructed text tell a story of universal pain and suffering. We rounded out our presentation with the ethical question of whether it was really necessary to go to war (see Appendix B).

An alternative way of bringing the experience alive is to get students to have an email dialogue with Canadian students regarding the American Revolutionary War, as depicted in Collier and Collier’s *My Brother Sam Is Dead* and Lunn’s *The Hollow Tree*. Which of the two versions do they prefer, and what are their reasons? The dialogue can last three weeks; at the end of this phase the teacher can divide the class into six to eight new groups of three to four students. Each group should create a Web page on the Revolutionary War from a particular perspective. Thus three to four of the groups must include specific information on their Web pages from the United States perspective (Sons of Liberty) and the remaining three from the Canadian view (Loyalists). On these web pages, students can also add original lyrics written by members of their group that reflect their attitudes toward war.

Working with these two novels, our students are able to see the emotional turmoil people underwent as they fought for freedom or to maintain the status quo. Did Sam do the right thing by enlisting to fight for freedom against his father’s orders? Did Phoebe do the right thing in delivering the spy papers when her father had given up his life for the freedom cause? These are questions students could pursue as they attempt to further understand the world they live in, their history, and our collective struggle to co-exist as human beings with different worldviews. The more questions they pose after reading these books, the better they are able to understand that human pain and suffering transcend the individual.

Students will see that literature is a powerful tool enabling us to come to terms with who we are, where we have been, and where we may be going. They will also see that the America we know today did not always exist and that people have made, and are still making, tremendous sacrifices so that we may live and study in peace. Thus, they should not be quick to judge other nations still engaged in the liberation struggle. Neither should they look down on their immigrant classmates who could be refugees from war-torn countries, coming to the U.S. to start afresh, just as most American’s ancestors did . . . once upon a time.

Appendix A

Adolescent Novels on War: A Global Experience.

Revolutionary Wars:

- Avi (1984). *The Fighting Ground*
 Collier, J. and Collier, C. (1987). (19). *War Comes to Willy Freeman*
 DeFord, D.H. and Stuart, H. (1987). *An Enemy Among Them*
 Forbes, E. (1943). *Johnny Tremain*
 Fast, H. (1961). *April Morning*
 Gregory, K. (1961). *Winter of Red Snow: The Revolutionary War Diary of Abigail Jane Stewart, Valley Forge, Pennsylvania*
 O’Dell, S. (1980). *Sarah Bishop*
 Weaver-Gelzer, C. (1992). *In the Time of Trouble*

Civil Wars

- Collier, J. and Collier, C. (1994). *With Every Drop of Blood*
 Crane, S. (1990). *The Red Badge of Courage*
 Emecheta, B. (1982). *Destination Biafra*
 Filipovic, Z. (1994). *Zlata’s Diary*
 Hansen, J. (1988). *Out of This Place*
 Hunt, I. (1986). *Across Five Aprils*
 Jiang, J. (19). *Red Scarf Girl: A Memoir of the Cultural Revolution*
 Kidd, D. (1989). *Onion Tears*
 Myers, W. (1988). *Fallen Angels*
 Paterson, K. (1996). *Jip: His Story*
 Paulsen, G. (1997). *A Soldier’s Heart*
 Reeder, C. (1989). *Shades of Gray*
 Rinaldi, A. (1988). *Last Silk Dress*

World War II

- Choi, S. (1991). *Year of Impossible Goodbyes*
 Coerr, E. (1993). *Sadako & the Thousand Paper Crane*
 Cormier, R. (1988). *Heroes*
 Greene, B. (1973). *Summer of My German Soldier*
 Ngugi, W. (1987). *Weep Not Child*
 Pearson, K. (1989). *The Sky is Falling*
 Reiss, J. (1972). *Upstairs Room*
 Silko, L. (1977). *Ceremony*
 Uchida, Y. (1991). *The Invisible Thread*
 Yep, L. (1995). *Hiroshima: A Novella*
 Yolen, J. (1990). *The Devil’s Arithmetic*

** For more information about Young Adult novels (historical fiction), read Stix, Andy & Marshall George (1999). “Using Multi-level Young Adult Literature in the Middle School American Studies.” In www.interactiveclassroom.com

Appendix B

Readers Theatre

CHARACTERS: One Youth, one Parent and the Narrator.

Narrator: “It was in the morning when the youth first heard the bell. He was standing in the warm open field feeling hot, dirty, and bored. His father, not far off, limped as he worked along the newly turned rows of corn. As for the youth, he was daydreaming about being a soldier. His older brother and cousin were soldiers. He dreamed of one day taking up a gun himself and fighting the enemy; but his father no longer spoke of war.

The youth had burned several times to enlist. He had read of marches, sieges, conflicts, and he had longed to see it all. His busy mind had drawn for him large pictures extravagant in color, lurid with breathless deeds. But his mother had discouraged him. She had affected to look with some contempt upon the quality of his war ardor and patriotism. But he enlisted anyway.”

As the scene opens we meet the youth discussing his/her plans with a parent.

Youth: “Ma, I’m going to enlist.”

Parent: “Don’t you be a fool.”

Youth: “I am going to enlist and there’s nothing you can do to stop me. I am going to fight to keep my country free.”

Parent: “You, fight? Is it worth war to save a few pence in taxes? Must you fight because our politicians are corrupt?”

Youth: “It’s not the money. It is the right to live free in my own homeland!”

Parent: “Freedom! Justice! What do you know about them? You may be thirteen, fifteen, seventeen or twenty for all I care. One thing you don’t know anything about is war!

Have you ever heard a man shriek when he felt his bayonet go through the middle of his back? For whom do you really want to die?”

Youth: “For my country, Father.”

Parent: “Your family ought to be more important than your country.”

Narrator: “The youth strolled away lost in his thoughts. Thinking about the possibility of fighting with the enemy brought a smile on his lips.”

Youth: “Oh Lord, make it be a battle. With armies, big ones, and cannons and flags and drums and dress parades! Oh, I could, *would* fight. I would fight the *enemy!*”

Narrator: “And indeed it was a grand battle; almost the way the youth had imagined it. But not quite. For not only was there fighting, there was also hunger, cold, and fatigue. There was anxiety, death, misery, and none of the glamour he had anticipated. First, he was afraid of his own gun. Then he thought about dying slowly from an *enemy* bullet. At this thought, he shuddered and laughed hysterically. Knowing that he was considered somebody’s enemy on the battlefield, the thought of escaping crossed his mind several times. But he could not. That was desertion. So instead, he got nightmares about the treatment and maybe punishment he would receive from society if he performed this cowardly act. To the youth it was an onslaught of redoubtable dragons. He seemed to shut his eyes and wait to be gobbled. A man near him, a soldier who up to this time had been working feverishly at his rifle, suddenly stopped and ran with howls. The youth threw down his gun, too, and fled. There was no

shame on his face. He ran like a rabbit. He ran in terror, straining every muscle, pumping his legs, his arms, not daring to look back. He was a frightened animal!”

Meanwhile his parents are at home waiting frantically for either his corpse to arrive or he, himself unhurt.

Parent: “Why did my son have to go to war? Why did my son have to kill his brother, the enemy? Why did he have to become a *methodical idiot*? Why is glory so important to him? Why must he become a murderer in order to attain justice? Why should people die from gunshots, hunger, and disease because of our quest for social justice?”

Narrator: “The advance of the enemy had seemed to the youth like a ruthless hunting. He began to fume with rage and exasperation. To him the fighters resembled animals tossed for death struggle into a dark pit. His mind pictured the soldiers who would place their defiant bodies before the spear of the yelling battle fiend, and he saw their dripping corpses on an imagined field, he said that he was their murderer.”

Parent: “I wonder what I’ll become after the war.

A hero? An orphan? A widower? A pauper? A homeless person? A colonial master? A revolutionary? An armed robber? A corrupt businessman? I truly wonder what the future holds for me!”

Narrator: “It took the loss of many lives for the youth to understand the futility of war. It took the death of relatives, friends, & strangers — all human beings, for us to begin to understand that we are somewhat connected. It took the maiming of young children in distant lands, famine in far away countries, political upheavals in neighboring nations, poverty and violence in our backyard, out break of disease, an upsurge of mental illness—crisis after crisis for the United States, its allies, and the rest of the world to come to terms with the fact that we are not resolving disputes and conflicts in a constructive manner. Can we continue to use violence to seek the path of peace? Can we really?”

** The above script is adapted (some passages are taken directly) from the following texts:

Avi’s *The Fighting Ground*

Collier & Collier’s *My Brother Sam is Dead*

Crane’s *The Red Badge of Courage*

Emecheta’s *Destination Biafra*

Myers’s *Fallen Angels*

Ngugi’s *Weep Not Child*

Vivian Yenika-Agbaw is an associate professor of English Education at Bloomsburg University, Pennsylvania, where she teaches children’s and young adult literature and coordinates the secondary English education program. She has published several articles on literature and critical literacy. She is currently working on a book entitled: Liberating the Self: Reading Power in Children’s and Young Adult Literature.

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