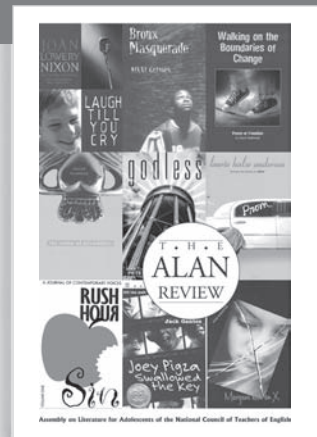


Volume 33

Number 2

Winter 2006



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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 copyright owner.

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 (MLA).

A 3 1/2-inch IBM compatible disk in a recent version of Word 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.

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

<b>FALL ISSUE Deadline:</b>	<b>MAY 15</b>
<b>WINTER ISSUE Deadline:</b>	<b>OCTOBER 15</b>
<b>SUMMER ISSUE Deadline:</b>	<b>FEBRUARY 15</b>

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## From the Editors

Sitting at last fall's conference, we marveled at the sight—rows and rows of individuals who cared enough about young adult literature and its thriving community to attend a two-day workshop as the hectic holiday season was approaching. But it wasn't one of those stuffy conferences—just one row in front of us sat author T.A. Barron; Joan Bauer walked down the aisle and offered a friendly pat on the shoulder; a friend and first-time ALAN attendee sat a few chairs down, carefully picking through her stack of books and already making connections of the books with specific students waiting at home in her classroom.

No, this wasn't the typical conference—this was one filled with passion—for young adult books—and the many people who care enough to keep the field thriving.

After a successful and rejuvenating fall ALAN workshop in Pittsburgh, those who attended will find this issue of *The ALAN Review* filled with reminiscences of the lively conference. And those who were unable to attend will get a taste of the insightful conversations regarding “The Caring Community of Young Adult Literature.” Authors, educators, publishers, librarians, and others once again gathered for their annual celebration of the genre and the role it plays in the lives of young adults, and we attempt to share just some of their discussions.

Ingrid Seitz leads this issue with an extensive interview with author T.A. Barron, who shares insight into his retellings of Arthurian lore. The interview provides a look at his continued success in this generation's examination of those timeless stories. Grace Enriquez offers another voice in the field; she

provides a not-so-common opportunity for adolescents to voice their own opinions about controversial young adult literature—a subject usually only approached by adults. Enriquez allows young adults to share their insight—their perspective—regarding such works.

Donald R. Gallo, considered one of the leading figures in young adult literature, shares his keynote address from the November workshop. Despite issues that may make us lean toward the negative (banned books, overemphasis on testing and inadequate budgets, to name a few), Gallo reminds us that we are a member of young adult literature's caring community—and how that caring attitude involves the storytellers, the books, and the teenagers who read them. One of the field's most well-known storytellers, Joan Bauer, has gifted us with the talk she gave at the ALAN workshop. Through her humor and insightful stories of everything from liposuction ads to her daughter's baptism, Bauer encourages us all to continue our efforts as bearers of light in the field of young adult literature.

Convention goers who heard Frank McCourt's NCTE opening talk were treated to the thoughts and feelings of a passionate English teacher (who also happened to win the Pulitzer Prize for Literature with *Angela's Ashes*) and probably not too surprised when he acknowledged his former Stuyvesant High School creative writing student, Jordan Sonnenblick, sitting in the very front row. Hear “the rest of the story” about Jordan's experiences learning from “Mr. McCourt” and publishing the smash hit, *Drums, Girls and Dangerous Pie*, in “Venturing into the Deep Waters: The Work of Jordan Sonnenblick.”

Diane P. Tuccillo speaks out for the significant

messages offered in what she calls “quiet voices” in historical fiction of young adult literature. She emphasizes several books that provide thought-provoking tales of discrimination that young adults could benefit from hearing. Accompanying the article is an interview Tuccillo conducted with Laura Malone Elliott, author of *Flying South*. Tuccillo sees Elliott’s protagonist Alice as one of those quiet voices that speaks out regarding segregation in her community.

Jeff Kaplan shares the results of his study, which provides a look at dissertations over the past five years that have attempted to shed some light on adolescent literature. Chris Crutcher’s coaches are the topic of Caren J. Town’s article, while Carmen L. Medina examines Latino/a literature as critical fiction. Cindy Lou Daniels focuses on literary theory and young adult literature, which she deems “The Open Frontier in Critical Studies.” *Whirligig* by Paul Fleischman and

*Stargirl* by Jerry Spinelli are the focus of Steve Redford’s “Transcending the Group, Discovering Both Self and Public Spirit,” in which he discusses how he uses young adult literature in a Japanese university to compare and contrast cultures.

Not to be overlooked are *The ALAN Review*’s regular features, including M. Jerry Weiss’s Publishers’ Connection, The Research Connection with William Broz, and more than 30 reviews of the latest in young adult literature with Clip and File.

The Fall Workshop may have come and gone for another year, but much conversation still lingers regarding young adult literature and the community that continues to care enough to see that engaging books reach the eyes that need them most—the young adolescent. Enjoy a little eavesdropping into those conversations with this issue.

## Call for Manuscripts

### **2006 Spring/ Summer theme: In the Midst of Conflict**

This theme is intended to solicit articles dealing with young adult literature with conflict of any nature at its center, the use of young adult literature as a means for helping young people deal with conflict or any related topic. The theme is meant to be open to interpretation, but might, for example, deal with young adult literature depicting war, family conflict, or the resolution of neighborhood violence. General submissions are also welcome. February 15 submission deadline.

### **2006 Fall theme: The Many Ways to be Human**

This theme is intended to solicit articles about young adult literature and its use in dealing with the great diversity of human beings across the face of our planet. This theme is meant to be open to interpretation and support a broad range of subtopics, but some possibilities include examination and discussion of issues of cultural heritage, gender identity, race, class and sexual orientation as they play out in young adult literature. We welcome and encourage other creative interpretations of this theme. May 15 submission deadline.

### **2007 Winter theme: Young Adult Literature: Key to Open Minds**

The theme for our 2007 winter issue will reflect the theme of the 2005 ALAN Workshop: “Young Adult Literature: Key to Open Minds.” This theme is meant to be open to interpretation and support a broad range of subtopics; in addition, articles about any of the authors scheduled to appear at the 2006 ALAN Workshop in Pittsburgh, as well as general articles on any topic dealing with young adult literature and its use, are welcome. October 15 submission deadline.



### You the Researcher

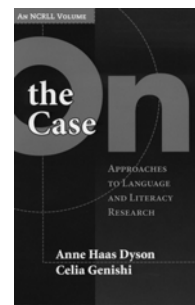
It is always risky to assume one's own experience mirrors the experience of others, but here goes one of those risks. This column offers reviews of several new and recent books that introduce or renew and extend our understanding of qualitative research methods, particularly case study research, as these methods apply to research in English language arts, literacy, and the culture of learning. Additionally, the reviews address classroom-based teacher inquiry that often takes the form of case study. The assumption I am making is that readers who are classroom teachers and librarians may be in the same position I was in, when as a veteran of 17 years in the public school classroom, I entered the doctoral program at the University of Iowa and took my first seminar focused on current research and research methods. I really didn't know much about qualitative research. I do not believe I had ever read a serious, academic research study of any kind, especially one done in my area of English language arts. I had earned my

masters degree before qualitative research was the norm. Returning to school in the early and mid-1990's, I was fascinated by the case study method and research reports using that method. For the last fifteen years, understanding and doing qualitative research has been essential for doctoral candidates in English Education. The reason I wish I had known more about qualitative research and classroom-based research by teachers while I was teaching high school English is that I think I could have and would have engaged in such projects as a classroom teacher if I had had a better understanding of how to do it.

This column will review the new book *On the Case: Approaches to Language and Literacy Research* by Anne Hass Dyson and Celia Genishi; a book in press, *What Works? A Practical Guide for Teacher Research* by Elizabeth Chiseri Strater and Bonnie Stone Sunstein; some examples of interesting and accessible case study research including *Just Girls: Hidden Literacies and Life in Junior High* by Margaret J. Finders; and some book chapters that address

teacher-candidate classroom inquiry in the book *Teacher Mentor: a Dialogue for Collaborative Learning* by Peg Graham, Sally Hudson Ross, Chandra Adkins, Patti McWhorter, and Jennifer McDuffie Stewart.

*On the Case: Approaches to Language and Literacy Research* (2005), by Anne Hass Dyson and Celia Genishi



*On the Case: Approaches to Language and Literacy Research* (2005), by Anne Hass Dyson and Celia Genishi, published by Teachers College Press under the

sponsorship of the National Conference on Research in Language and Literacy (NCRL) is a small book of 131 pages before the reference sections at the end. It is the second book in a series on "Approaches to Language and Literacy Research." In a forward to this book, the NCRL series editors



frame the purpose of their series this way:

“Do you wish you could go back to graduate school and take more research courses? Are you in graduate school and worried that you don’t have the tools to become a researcher? Does your current project cry out for an approach that you aren’t quite sure how to design?” (ix)

This rhetorical appeal attracts me, most importantly because this primer offers examples of actual language and literacy studies! The foundational material I read back in the day was all borrowed from sociology and anthropology, because, though language and literacy had a few qualitative studies including Heath’s great *Ways with Words*, we had not yet reconceptualized the methodology from the view of our own classroom windows thoroughly enough to write our own foundational guides to those research methods. Here there is still plenty of Clifford Geertz; it is just not ALL Clifford Geertz. This book, while not the only such title to present the language and literacy version of qualitative research methodology, covers the ground well.

So, does your experimental eighth-grade biography unit which ditches the old research paper format and now asks students to render their research as a multigenre paper cry out to become the focus of a case study? Why not? According to *On the Case*:

“Any objective situation—a lesson, an elementary classroom [middle school and high school too], a day-care center, a community writing program or a theater project—presents a plethora of

potential ‘cases.’ Thus, we illustrate that cases are constructed, not found, as researchers make decisions about how to angle their vision on places overflowing with potential stories of human experience” (2)

But asking the question about readers researching their own classrooms and libraries is jumping ahead to the eventual destination of this column: teachers as researchers. *On the Case* takes the more foundational and formal approach to case study research in which the researcher is likely more of an outsider who must gain access to the insider experiences of the subjects she studies. Dyson and Genishi offer chapters on coming to understand the research “site,” identifying the case and designing the study, data collection, data analysis, and making generalizations. By way of illustration of each of these concepts and researcher behaviors, each chapter includes substantial excerpts from two actual case studies, one conducted by each author. For Dyson it is “Mrs. Kay’s First Grade.” For Genishi it is “Mrs. Yung’s Pre-Kindergarten.” The fact that these two very illustrative extended examples are both inquiries into the learning of very young children is my only criticism of the book. I believe some readers who read just this book might have a hard time imagining gaining the cooperation of, termed “access to,” older student research subjects. But reading any of the other books mentioned in this column will assure readers that such access can be gained.

Additionally, the authors unify their discussions by threading

another story through each of their chapters. The children’s book *Madlenka* (2000) by Peter Sis, about a young girl’s exploration of her multicultural and multigenerational city block in New York City, serves as a fictional data collection site. It is a context and “speech event” that works well as a reference background for explaining case study concepts because the story is frozen in a book; therefore, *Madlenka* is a little less wiggly than the students in actual classrooms. I found this device cool and entertaining, as well as edifying.

In the following concluding statement, the authors send readers off with a charge that should, after reading their book, make complete sense:

Living through classroom life with teachers and children in detail-rich case studies potentially stretches educators’ experience in “naturalistic” ways beyond their own educational histories. And carefully constructed “propositions,” in which the details of a case are situated within broader assertions about teaching and learning, potentially help synthesize these experiences so that common principles become salient. In these ways, we hope that the intellectual labor and joy of being on the case come to matter. (131)



*Just Girls: Hidden Literacies and Life in Junior High* (1997) by Margaret J. Finders

Dyson and Genishi give one other piece of great advice that will

illustrate how much case studies can matter. In a five-title annotated bibliography headed “Illustrations of Case Studies” they recommend to readers *Just Girls: Hidden Literacies and Life in Junior High* (1997) by Margaret J. Finders published by Teachers College Press. Now this is a killer book. I have seen first hand how Finders’ case studies can rouse teachers to think “beyond their own educational histories.”

The scene is an Iowa Council of Teachers of English fall conference. Peg Finders, who began her career as an educator teaching seventh-grade English in southeast Iowa and had since become an assistant professor of English Education at Purdue, was our keynote speaker. We were proud to welcome her back and likely more interested in asking about her daughters than the actual content of her comments or her book. Were we in for a shock!

At that time Iowa was still staunchly “writing project country.” We would get 600 or 700 teachers at our fall conferences in the early ’90s, mostly writing project participants. Ours was a unified, state-wide writing project built on a lore that George Hillocks in *Research on Written Composition* (1986) calls a “naturalistic approach” to writing process pedagogy—invite students to write meaningful whole texts, offer them peer and instructor support through the writing process, and celebrate the successes of those pieces and the growth and development of those student authors with various kinds of classroom publishing. I believed, as did a lot of other people at that conference, that we could make the

invitation to write so attractive and the support for engaging in the writing process so non-threatening that nearly every student could and would accept the invitation. But that afternoon, Margaret Finders, an Iowa Writing Projecter from way back, told us that social and cultural factors in the school and in the lives of middle school girls lead many students to only pretend to participate in our sacred writing workshops. A group of working-class girls she came to know as the “tough cookies” could not be lured into trusting other students or the teacher enough to share their writing freely. Their home culture valued “doing things yourself.” Peer response to drafts-in-progress and other collaborative learning strategies were seen by the Cookies as “cheating.” When it came time for peer-written response celebrating the strengths of finished pieces, one Cookie brought to class a multicolored pen so she could write all of the comments on her own paper to make it look like others had read and commented on it. She did not trust her peers, even within the classroom community the teacher worked so hard to build. Wow! I remember being hardly able to wait until the end of Finders’ talk to jump up and start arguing about this.

And it was not just the Tough Cookies who found themselves constrained from participating in the “perfect Heinemann classrooms” we thought we were creating. The privileged girls, the “social queens,” were shown to be much more concerned about the number of notes they were passed between classes than the papers they wrote about their grandmoth-

ers in our classes! Finders showed us the Social Queens were under pressure to “dumb down” in order to be popular. Social Queens would check out two kinds of books from the library: the popular novels they carried in the halls, which advertised their membership in the group, and the real books they actually read, which they hid in their backpacks.

In concluding one of the themes in her 145-page book, Finders states:

Despite teachers’ perceptions of the success of small-group work and reading/writing workshops, the girls, constrained by their social roles, coopted literate practices when forced to work with those outside their circle of significance; yet, they maintained the appearance of performing in socially sanctioned ways. . . .

From the perspectives of the focal students, literate practices could be unsafe. Carrying the wrong kind of book, writing the wrong kind of story, passing notes to the wrong people, all might mark one as an outsider or as an insider in the wrong group. . . .

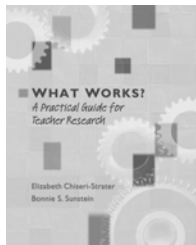
Indeed, there were multiple expectations circulating about the junior high classroom. . . . The institutional expectations, while clearly understood by the focal students, were often coopted by the girls in order to meet the expectations of other social networks. A keen awareness of the power of peer dynamics in the classroom prevented any student from believing in a classroom as a safe haven. (119)

I am not sure anyone who stayed in that hotel that night got to sleep before midnight. In the bar and in various hospitality suites throughout the hotel, teachers were talking about what Finders said. I imagine some poor salesman in the room next to one of those forums having to turn up his TV to drown

out the “English teachers” shouting next door.

There are a lot of other great things in the book besides parts I have touched on. Telling you that Finders named one of her case study groups the Tough Cookies is just the tiny tip of the iceberg of what her case study reveals about the lives and literacies of the Cookies. *Just Girls* does illustrate perfectly the case study concepts presented in *On The Case*. This is a book worth the time of every secondary English educator, librarian, and parent of adolescent girls. Reading *Just Girls* would benefit principals or counselors too.

But *Just Girls* presents a study that could not have been done by a full-time classroom teacher. The time demands would be too great and the case Finders constructed and the angle of her vision demanded the stance of an outsider looking in—someone who was not “the teacher.” The following two books show how we classroom teachers can study our own students with the aim of not only answering the fundamental qualitative question “what’s going on here” but with the further aim of improving our own teaching practices through the information we gather.



*What Works? A Practical Guide for Teacher Research* by Elizabeth Chiseri Strater and Bonnie Stone Sunstein

*What Works? A Practical Guide for Teacher Research* by Elizabeth Chiseri Strater and Bonnie Stone

Sunstein (in press from Boynton/Cook at the time of this writing) is the book I needed when I was a high school teacher.

Then I had questions like: Why is it so much fun to teach my Individualized Reading class? And what is going on with those senior boys who get so hooked on Steinbeck that I have to troll used bookstores to replenish my stock of *Tortilla Flat* and *Cannery Row*? Certainly, to many senior boys, the prospect of spending a few more years hanging out with guys like Pablo and Big Joe Portagee is understandably attractive. But having one after the other rural Midwestern adolescent male select and read *Grapes of Wrath* and especially *East of Eden*?

I wish I had taken the time to systematically discover and articulate what was going on there. If I had had *What Works?* I could have done it.

Sunstein and Strater (who partnered in another book on qualitative methods, *Fieldworking*, Bedford/St.Martin’s, 1997, 2002, third edition, late 2006) lead readers through the dual process of becoming a teacher researcher and doing teacher research (to my mind symbiotic but separate processes) with ten chapters featuring such titles as “PrepWork,” “Headwork,” “Legwork,” and “Eyework.” Each chapter contains three sections: “Strategies, Mindwork, and Snapshot.” While the Strategies section discusses some essential feature of qualitative methodology, Mindwork prompts personal/professional reflective writing exercises to get the would-be teacher researcher thinking in the right direction and about the right things. The Snap-

shot section of each chapter presents a different, accessible, and entirely “real” teacher researcher and the research study she conducted. I put real in quotes, not only because the teachers and the studies *are* real, but because I can see some aspect of my public school teacher-self in each of these teachers.

“Chapter 2: Scratchwork: Shaping a Question” won me over. The authors begin:

As teachers we’re not afraid of questions. We are active inquirers, constantly challenging our curriculum, our school culture, our colleagues, and our students. Questions frame our lessons, evaluate our students’ learning, and assess the worth of our own teaching. It won’t be unfamiliar to you to pose a research question for your study. Research questions often begin as small, nagging ideas, like an intuition that needs following, or a hunch that begs further attention. In a sense, shaping a research question is like scratching an itch that bothers you. (I cannot give you a page reference because I am reading only a manuscript copy.)

*Steinbeck . . . Was it the themes, the settings. . . ah, maybe the male-dominated cast of characters? Those questions still bother me.*

And Sunstein and Strater are correct when they assert in Chapter 2 that it would take teacher research in *my* classroom to answer *my* questions:

The teaching and learning that happens in our classrooms is often more qualitative than quantitative. We interact inside cultural settings, more like parenting, coaching, or mentoring. . . . When we study people inside their own cultures, we don’t try to generalize from a large population. We don’t look for what’s replicable, reliable, or statistically valid. Rather, we look for



what's singular, particular, and unique about the students in our classes and their work, about ourselves and our teaching. As researchers, we want to include as much of our situation as we can, rather than strip the context or "control" it somehow. In social science, qualitative research, and particularly in teacher inquiry, our goal is to capture particularity, to create a richly detailed, sharply focused snapshot.

*Maybe these male Steinbeck readers were given some kind license to read seriously by the context of a big guy with a beard who liked to talk about deer hunting handing out the books and saying that East of Eden was the best book he had ever read! Be kind of too bad if it was that simple.*

Really, you start reading *What Works?*, and you cannot stop thinking like this.

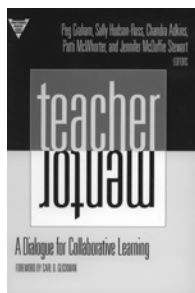
The strategy focused on in Chapter 2 is "Gaining the Insider/ Outsiders Perspective [through] Generating Trial Questions, Narrowing the Questions, Creating Subquestions within the Questions." Using these questioning strategies, teacher researcher Gail Russell, an inner-city high school teacher bothered by the lack of engagement of her students in their own writing, arrives at this research question: "In what ways does reflective writing encourage students to appropriate their writing?" Russell's study shows us how she refined her questions ("Do the ways that students talk and write about writing ('reflect') suggest that they know their own texts?"); and how she goes on to collect and analyze her data. To learn her conclusions, you will have to read the book.

There is no pie in the sky here. These authors know the difficulties

of public school teaching so well and confront them so honestly that one of their main discussions is how to fit teacher research around full-time teaching schedules.

Sunstein and Strater also promote realistic and extended calendars for such research. Teacher researchers supported here are not meeting thesis or dissertation deadlines. But I should caution readers: the stories of individual teacher researchers in this book are infectious. When you read this book you will want to do teacher research. And you will also know how to do it, so there will be no excuse not to.

Any reader of this column who has experienced the adolescent male/Steinbeck phenomena please contact me at bill.broz@uni.edu.



*Teacher Mentor: a Dialogue for Collaborative Learning* (1999) published by NCTE and Teachers College Press by Peg Graham, Sally Hudson Ross,

Chandra Adkins, Patti McWhorter, and Jennifer McDuffie Stewart

Finally, I want to mention a book that, while not primarily about case study research, presents some classroom case studies done by student teachers or done in collaboration between student teachers and their host teachers. I suggest that these case studies show not only how you might be able to work with a student teacher to do a small case study, especially if you have your student teacher for a whole semester (or in the case of the examples in the book, a

whole school year), but how classroom teachers might enlist the cooperation of aides, counselors, or a volunteer to assist in conducting teacher research.

*Teacher Mentor: a Dialogue for Collaborative Learning* (1999) published by NCTE and Teachers College Press by Peg Graham, Sally Hudson Ross, Chandra Adkins, Patti McWhorter, and Jennifer McDuffie Stewart is primarily the story of a noble experiment to create true collaboration between a university teacher education program and the classroom teachers who serve as hosts and mentors for the student teachers from that program at the University of Georgia in Athens. The way Graham and others collaborate with host teachers to reform their program is in itself worth reading for anyone who has prepared teacher candidates, hosted student teachers, or supervised student teachers for a teacher preparation program. I have been in all three roles and am envious of the partnership presented in this book.

One of the features of the context at UGA is that teacher candidates spend a whole year engaged in field observation and student teaching in the same school and classroom. During the fall semester of the year, those students divide their time between classroom observation and on-campus methods courses. In an attempt to instill in these future teachers the value of reflection on practice, part of the students' on-campus course work offers them training as qualitative researchers preparing to do "teacher research" in the classrooms where they will be student teaching. Part two of the

book, "Teacher Candidate Research on Literacy in High School Classrooms," presents four case studies done by student teachers. In some instances the special roles of student teacher and host teacher allow both parties to participate in data collection, the student teacher collecting data as she prepares to take over the class for her teaching units and the host teacher assuming the role of data collector while the student teacher is teaching.

In Chapter 6 Graham and Hudson-Ross give a detailed look at how they prepare their teacher candidates as teacher researchers. The experiences through which they guide their students could be copied by teachers to prepare themselves to become teacher researchers. Of particular importance is the repeated illustration of how and why the researchers must locate themselves and their own histories and biases within the focus of study. Graham and Hudson-Ross guide their students to profile themselves as learners, and to write and discuss their own writing and reading autobiographies before they attempt to study their future students' reading and writing lives. In the case studies that make up the rest of Part Two, one group of several student teachers reports "on the practices that encourage and discourage young writers." (80) Another student teacher studies "Small Group Book Sharing in Secondary Schools;" and a third studies "Using a Behavior Journal to Discover What Causes Disruptions." The final case study in the book shows the collaboration between the

student teacher and mentor teacher as they study student engagement in the curriculum of a new vocational English course in applied communications.

In introducing the section containing these case studies, the authors state:

In all of this research there is evidence of the collaborative nature of our community and the value we place on teacher research. The research questions often are negotiated by teacher candidates, mentor teachers, and the university faculty. We share results and insights; we reconceptualize our roles as educators; we act on our findings. Above all, we choose to continue the research each year as our group expands to admit new faces and new questions. (63)

I say, if a student teacher can do teacher research, we should be able to do it too. These new teachers entering the field already trained as teacher researchers deserve to be celebrated. The professional educators in both the schools and the university who collaborated to mentor these new teachers into the profession deserve to be congratulated.

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As practitioner/scholars, our lives as classroom teachers are filled with questions. Sometimes we find suggestions for answers to those questions in the professional literature and in the person-to-person professional discourse of our discipline. Sometimes that literature and those discussions do not provide specific enough or satisfying enough answers. Or maybe we just want to become more active participants in the professional

discourse by answering our own questions and sharing those answers with others. As Sunstein and Strater assert above:

As teachers we're not afraid of questions. We are active inquirers, constantly challenging our curriculum, our school culture, our colleagues, and our students. Questions frame our lessons, evaluate our students' learning, and assess the worth of our own teaching. It won't be unfamiliar to you to pose a research question for your study.

### **A Very Partial List of Books About Teacher Inquiry Suggested by Sunstein and Strater**

- Bissex, Glenda and Richard Bullock. 1987. *Seeing for Ourselves: Case-Study Research by Teachers of Writing*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook.
- Burnafor, Gail, Joseph Fischer, and David Hobson. 2001. *Teachers Doing Research: The Power of Action Through Inquiry*. Second Edition. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Goswami, Dixie and Peter Stillman. 1987. *Reclaiming the Classroom: Teacher Research as an Agency for Change*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook.

*Bill Broz is Assistant Professor of English in the Department of English Language and Literature at the University of Northern Iowa. His recent publications include Teaching Writing Teachers of High School and First-Year Composition, edited with Robert Tremmel, Heinemann, 2002, and articles on grammar and censorship in Voices from the Middle and the Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy. He was the 2002 recipient of the NCTE's Edwin M. Hopkins Award for his 2001 English Journal article, "Hope and Irony: Annie on My Mind." He can be reached most at bill.broz@uni.edu or 102 Baker Hall, University of Northern Iowa, Cedar Falls, IA 50614-0502.*

## The Chance to Dream:

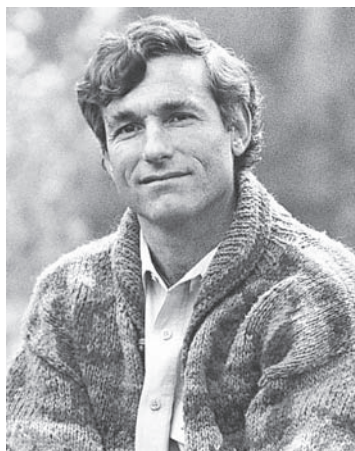
A Conversation with T.A. Barron

I was most pleased to meet and visit with Tom Barron during the ALAN Workshop in Pittsburgh this past November. I have heard him speak several times and am continuously impressed with this thoughtful and gentle man whose increasing acclaim as a young adult author does not diminish his sincerity.

Barron is the winner of numerous literary awards, including the 2005 Nautilus Book Award-Grand Prize Winner, for *The Great Tree of Avalon*. This award, for distinguished contribution to envisioning a better world, seems to embody the passion that drives this prolific young adult writer who has said, “I write books to wrestle with life’s biggest questions and to express my deepest passions and concerns about the fragile beauty of the planet that sustains us, and about the miracle of our children and the value of their dreams.”

The following interview was conducted through e-mail in the winter of 2006. As I pondered his large body of work, many of which have been written about in the past, I began this conversation with hopes of glimpsing the eternal young adult behind the pages.

**TAR:** Tom, you have had a varied and interesting professional career. Your history as a Princeton graduate, Rhodes Scholar, and successful New York businessman has been widely reported. Stopping midstream in a successful career to follow your dream of becoming a writer had to have taken an



incredible leap of faith. So what brought you out of the New York business sector into the fantastical world of a writer?

**TAB:** Look, when I switched careers, I didn’t know whether anyone would ever want to read a single page of my writing. (My first novel, written during my travels as a backpacker abroad, was rejected by dozens of publishers.) But I had always loved a good story, ever since the first time I heard a

campfire tale as a kid in Colorado. In addition to that, I sensed that trying to write a few stories of my own would stretch and deepen me as a person—would help me grow spiritually, and enable me to ask some of life’s biggest questions.

On top of that, I have always felt keenly aware of how very brief life is. How we have just this one chance to be all we can be. Life is our unique opportunity to discover our dreams and then try to realize them—to find our wings and see how far we can fly. So as scary as it was to change careers—and, believe me, it was—that wasn’t nearly as scary as the idea of growing old and realizing that I had never tried to follow my deepest passion.

Where did I develop such a strong sense of mortality? I’m not sure. Maybe it was getting seriously ill during my time in the Himalayas. Or maybe it was learning about geology from my

mother, who went back to school at age sixty “to learn to read the book of the mountains.” I’ll never forget the day we found a slab of petrified wood on our Colorado ranch. It was more than fifty million years old. How could I ever think about time in the same way after that? There is nothing like a bit of geologic time to remind us that life is truly a gift—brief, transient, and yet remarkably beautiful.

**TAR:** While you have written *High as a Hawk* and *Where is Grandpa* for the younger reader, the main body of your work is directed to the young adult audience. I am curious as to why this particularly challenging age appeals to you?

**TAB:** Young adulthood is the most challenging, uncertain, and paradoxical time of life. It compresses all of life’s extremes—beauty and ugliness, understanding and ignorance, fate and free will,

sorrow and joy, idealism and despair—into a few brief years.

Young adults still have the open-hearted yearning of childhood, together with the awareness of adulthood. They are honest enough to ask life’s toughest questions. And they still have the courage to hope. To them, anything is possible.

What a poignant and compelling time of life! I couldn’t ask for

any more fertile ground to plant the seeds of stories.

**TAR:** Why do young adults enjoy fantasy? And why do you?

**TAB:** Young adults understand both the fun and the power of fantasy. What could be more fun than traveling without limits to other times, other value systems, and other universes? And besides, dreams are often the best ways to talk about reality. Fantasy

novels, which are heroic adventures in mythic form, allow me to bend the rules of our existence, in order to highlight some troubling issues about the human condition. Fantasy is like a bent mirror. We can see ourselves, but with certain qualities enhanced and others diminished. And, in the process, we can explore what it means to be mortal human beings.

**TAR:** I am intrigued by your interest in Merlin, a character from the Arthurian legends. You have devoted many of your own years to this wizard. What has drawn you to this time period and to this character specifically?

**TAB:** Ah, Merlin. How I love that wizard! When I was a student at Oxford, I often sat under an ancient, twisted English oak that I called Merlin’s Tree. But I had no idea at all that, twenty years later, I would be adding a few threads of my own to the glorious tapestry of Merlin’s legend. Real life is much more bizarre than fiction!

Why is Merlin so fascinating? Why have people been telling stories about this character for over fifteen hundred years? I believe it’s because Merlin stands for three basic ideals: the universality of all people; the importance of embracing both the light and dark within ourselves; and the sacredness of nature.

First, take universality. When you look at the original Celtic tales, Merlin’s role was truly astounding: He was the bridge between Druids and Christians, nobles and peasants, archbishops and old gray wolves. Then take the light and dark within him. Merlin’s understanding of his own weaknesses and strengths made him far more humble, compassionate, and wise. Finally, nature is Merlin’s greatest teacher—a source of wisdom, healing, and inspiration. We don’t need to look far to see the importance of these same ideals today.

Plus something more personal: The young man I write about in *The Lost Years of Merlin* books is a lot like you and me. Right from the moment he washes ashore, more dead than alive, Merlin has struggles, sorrows, fears, joys, and secret aspirations. And he also has, hidden deep within himself, a certain inner magic. So just like the rest of us, he is burdened by the human experience while at the



same time exalted by it. Just like the rest of us, he can wash ashore . . . and also climb to the stars.

**TAR:** I believe that you have “hit the mark” with *The Lost Years of Merlin* and now, *The Great Tree of Avalon* trilogy. I teach middle level students and they are fascinated by the medieval settings of these stories, the fantasy, the conflicts that confront Merlin, and now Tamwyn, Elli, and Scree, and the thrill of the magical components that envelope these characters. I have been gratified to see that the content of these books appeals to my reluctant readers, as well as my avid readers. They want to know if you were as enthralled with King Arthur and his adventures when you were an adolescent as they are now.

**TAB:** The truth is, when I was a kid I was more interested in climbing trees than reading books. But among the books I did read, one of my most favorites was *The Once and Future King* by T.H. White. I felt deeply moved by the human flaws that ultimately destroyed Camelot, just as I felt inspired by the high ideals of that realm. And I loved one character more than any other—a quirky old wizard who could live backward in time, change Arthur into a fish, and place a magical sword in a stone.

**TAR:** Another question from my students lies in the intricate details you have created in the magical kingdom of Avalon. We are curious about your writing process in developing such a large body of work. Did you know that *The Great Tree of Avalon* would always be a trilogy, or did it evolve into that?

**TAB:** The writing process is still a mystery to me. All I know is that, to craft a story, I need three things: a character I care about; a wondrous, magical place; and a troubling question or idea. Without those three elements, I simply can’t muster the energy to spend a day writing or revising a page—let alone several years creating a trilogy. (*The Great Tree of Avalon* books have taken me five years to complete.)

I’ve also learned that writing requires both sides of the brain. The rational, organized side of our brain enables us to design believable characters with journeys that are logically consistent and

emotionally rewarding. The dreaming, poetic side enables us to make metaphors—as well as characters who come alive and surprise us with their secrets. In all this, details are crucial. My job as a writer boils down to one goal: making characters and places and plots feel true.

When I started *The Great Tree of Avalon*, I knew it would be a big, complex tale in three parts. I knew it would be about humanity’s relationship with nature. And I also knew how the saga would end. (You’ll find out when you see Book Three!) But the beginning, much of the middle, and most of the characters, bubbled up during the creative process. Each volume of the trilogy needed at least seven complete rewrites, start to finish. That was fairly hard work, but well worth it, because the story became tighter and more fully integrated with each new draft. In the end, a book should feel like a polished sphere, with no rough edges—smooth and round enough to be true.

**TAR:** *The Great Tree of Avalon* is an extension of *The Lost Years of Merlin*, so I must ask if you see another sapling emerging from Avalon?

**TAB:** Well, the answer is yes. I am considering writing a prequel to the trilogy, revealing the secret life of Batty Lad. You see, he wasn’t always the zany, helpless little fellow who befriends Tamwyn during the quest to save Avalon. Far from it! In his earlier life, Batty Lad knew the explorer Krystallus, the elf queen Serella, and the wizard Merlin. For he was actually the boldest, most powerful—But wait . . . if I tell you now, it will spoil the surprise.

**TAR:** You have stated that each of us, like Merlin, has the potential to reach for the stars. This theme resonates in many of your characters, indicating a truly positive, optimistic, outlook on life. For the adolescents to whom you write, this is such a message of personal power. That message is pivotal to all that we can wish for our young people. Were you raised in a family that enforced this belief in you? How do you translate that to your own children?

**TAB:** Just inside the door to our farmhouse, the door our kids pass through every day, is a picture of a

kitten who is looking in a mirror—and seeing a great lion. Under the picture are the words “Dream big dreams.” That’s an idea we try our best to encourage. We want our kids to feel loved and valued for who they are, to know they have enormous potential to shape their own lives and the world around them. Just like that boy who washed ashore, and who ultimately became the greatest wizard of all times, they have their own special magic down inside.

We give our children lots of hugs. We read aloud often, in every room of the house or outside under the trees. And we almost never watch television. This is how I grew up, on a ranch in Colorado. In my youth I remember feeling that life’s possibilities were every bit as vast as the blue sky overhead. We hope that our kids might feel that way, too.

**TAR:** So many of your books have main characters that come to believe in this heroic power for good that lies within them. Your non-fiction book, *The Hero’s Trail*, is a wonderful collection of stories of real-life, yet unexpected heroes. It not only is a great read in and of itself, but it is a powerful accompaniment to a teaching unit on heroes. What led you to this particular book?

**TAB:** I wrote *The Hero’s Trail* more as a dad than as a writer. In talking with kids of all descriptions, I was struck by how many of them felt utterly powerless, both in their own lives and in the wider world. Partly this problem stems from America’s confusion about the difference between a hero and a celebrity: While a hero is about inner qualities of character, a celebrity is merely about fame. And partly this problem stems from our society’s rampant materialism. The mass media gives our kids all sorts of negative, demeaning messages—telling them their self-worth comes from what they wear or drink or drive, not who they really are down inside.

I realized that these kids needed to hear stories about heroic young people. Not just fictional heroes, such as the girls and boys in my novels, but real young people who have faced terrible obstacles and triumphed through their own courage, perseverance, compassion, and wisdom. These young heroes come in all descriptions—every gender, race,

age, color, culture, or economic background. Some are well known, such as Anne Frank or Wilma Rudolph or Stephen Hawking, but many more are largely unknown. So I packed that slim volume with dozens of examples of amazing young people, both historical and contemporary. The result, I hope, is that any young reader will gain a sense of his or her own heroic potential.

Why did I use the idea of walking on a trail? Because life is a journey through uncharted terrain. Often arduous, often wondrous, and full of surprises—life resembles the long hikes I’ve taken through the mountains of Colorado, Nepal, or Patagonia. The older I get, with more creases on my hiking boots as well as my brow, the more potent this analogy seems. And in every journey we need our guides—heroes who have walked this trail before, who show us how high we can climb.

**TAR:** Quite obviously, you are passionate about this subject in that you have established the Gloria Barron Prize for Young Heroes. Inspiring young leaders are recognized for selfless contributions to their communities and/or the environment through this award. Named in honor of your mother, the award would indicate your deep love for her. She undoubtedly has been a powerful influence in your life. Would you care to share what was heroic about her life – at least in the eyes of her son, Tom?

**TAB:** Gloria Barron, the woman I was lucky enough to know as my mother, never sought fame. She simply lived the life of a teacher who cared deeply about her children and her community. She was always learning: The day before she died, at age ninety-two, she delighted in learning a new word origin! And she never lost her childlike sense of wonder.

I remember once when she took me outside on a cold winter day. I was four or five years old; most of the snowdrifts were taller than I was. But she patted one drift and said, “Guess what? There are flowers under there.” I was astounded. Flowers? She explained about the seasons, and the miracle of seeds. Only later did I understand that she was also teaching me about nature’s power to renew itself, to transform—a power all of us share.

She spent twenty years creating a unique nature museum at the Colorado School for the Blind—a museum where everything can be

touched. Blind kids can experience the grandeur of an eagle by touching its wings, just as they can feel a hummingbird's delicate nest or a polar bear's rich, soft fur. She never sought any credit for this accomplishment, and the only reward she wanted was the satisfaction of knowing that these kids could now experience some of the beauty of the natural world. That's the sort of quiet heroism that countless teachers, parents, and kids show every day. And those people truly hold our world together.

**TAR:** So much of your work indicates a strong environmental passion. Your work in this area has been acknowledged in your receipt of the Nautilus award and this strand of your life is woven through so many of your books. Are you trying to subliminally plant a seed of hope in the hearts of your young readers? A seed that they, too, might throw "into the future?"

**TAB:** Right you are. I would love, in some small way, to nourish those seeds of hope. For saving the environment is really about saving ourselves. The Earth, after all, is our one and only home. Viewed from outer space, it is a radiant blue sapphire—fragile, lovely, and alone. We human beings have the ability to protect our planet, to be wise stewards of its air and water and wilderness. Or we can destroy the planet, and all the forms of life it supports. Which will it be? The choice is ours.

And who knows? Maybe one seed in one young person will sprout into a tree as enormous as Avalon.

**TAR:** You introduce yourself to those who visit your website by saying, "A life—whether seamstress or poet, farmer or king—is measured not by its length, but by the worth of its deeds, and the power of its dreams." You instill in your readers the power to dream. For that, we thank you.

The final book in *The Great Tree of Avalon* trilogy, "The Eternal Flame," is to be published in the fall of 2006, and we look forward to it with great anticipation. There is always a "sigh of relief" that comes with finishing a project, and yet that relief is frequently cushioned with a bit of sadness, as if saying farewell to a dear friend. I imagine that

your mind is always filled with a backpack full of ideas for future stories, but if you knew that you could only write one more book—what would it be and why?

**TAB:** If I could write just one more book, it would concern religious intolerance. That could be humanity's gravest flaw—as seductive as it is destructive. So don't be surprised if the next book . . . Oops! Can't say more. It's still a secret between Merlin and myself.

**TAR:** Tom, your writing is born from a kind and compassionate man and I am grateful for your thoughtful responses and for the opportunity you have provided for us to see the "man behind the words." Thank you for your contribution to the literate lives of so many young people. We shall look forward to the books that lie within and ahead of you.

T.A. Barron is as passionate about opening the wonderful world of imagination to students as he is in a personal pursuit of writing. This is so evident in his commitment to reach out to teachers and young writers alike. Please visit Tom's website, [www.tabarron.com](http://www.tabarron.com), for a complete listing of his literary work, and environmental passions, as well as wonderful resources for teachers who long for a "bit more" to engage their students. *Information about the Gloria Barron prize can be found at <http://www.barronprize.org/>*

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## The Reader Speaks Out:

### Adolescent Reflections about Controversial Young Adult Literature

**"A**re we going to read aloud today?" Kevin<sup>1</sup> asks immediately upon entering the classroom. "Of course," I answer, but his impish grin warrants suspicion. Kevin's outward enthusiasm for reading has been a recent development since we began the book. I've even seen him with the book outside of class, flipping pages to read ahead of the class. Then it dawns on me. Quickly, I recall what occurs in today's chapter: the teenage protagonist describes his first kiss. Many adults would think that Kevin's interest in reading aloud stems from this risqué description. However, while the passage piques curiosity because it uses the word *breast*, it doesn't offer much sensual description beyond one four-sentence paragraph. In fact, it is the only paragraph in the entire 220-page novel detailing any physical intimacy between characters. Kevin's class merely blushes and giggles at the word, then continues on with the story.

The passage is from Robert Cormier's (1977) *I am the Cheese*, a young adult (YA) novel that has won multiple awards, including a *New York Times* Outstanding Book of the Year and a *School Library Journal* Best Book of the Year. Cormier won the 1982 ALAN award for his contributions to the field of adolescent literature. Students herald the book for its suspenseful, plot-twisting account of a fourteen-year old boy's search for his father, his past, and his true identity. The account of the kiss is a fleeting memory that leads the main character to unearth a major clue about these mysteries. Yet despite its nominal presence and the book's high interest level among adolescent readers, the novel is banned in school districts across

America because it speculates about government corruption and has a depressing ending rather than because it describes a first kiss (Karolides, 2005; Young Adult Library Services Association, 1996).

Virtually silent in the debates about controversial YA literature are the voices of those for whom these books are intended. It is not difficult to find arguments written by educators and writers of YA literature concerning the use of controversial texts in schools (e.g., Broz, 2002; Cormier, 1992; Crutcher, 1999; Glanzer, 2004; Swiderek, 1996). Some of those educators and writers offer their reflections on the controversial books they read when they were younger (e.g., Cart, 1995; Peck, 1990; Stoehr, 1997). Yet, few studies have considered adolescents as critical evaluators of their own learning and the information they gain from YA novels (e.g., Freedman & Johnson, 2000/2001; Keeling, 1999; Mertzman, 2002). Instead, adult powers, whether national governments or individual parents, have taken evaluative stances on children's literature. In Canada, Estonia, South Africa, and Australia, for example, adults have continued to examine controversy in children's literature throughout the past decade (Marsden, 1994; Monpetit, 1992; Naidoo, 1995; Tungal, 1997). In fact, the American Library Association's Office for Intellectual Freedom (OIF) reports that overwhelmingly, adults—primarily parents—initiate challenges to children's literature (American Library Association [ALA], 2005b; ALA, 2000). Thus, in many countries producing literature for younger audiences, adolescent views about the controversies surrounding such texts are hardly reported.



I often wondered how adolescent students feel about reading YA novels that some adults have judged inappropriate. Moreover, how does the presence of controversial topics influence their decision to read certain texts? In this article, I sought to provide an arena for their voices. First, I describe the unique characteristics of the body of literature written for the young adult reader and experience, reviewing several reasons for challenge and controversy among adults. Next, I present the responses of adolescents to controversial topics in literature and how their thoughts measure against adult opinions. Finally, I evaluate the results, arguing for the need to value student voices in the debate about controversy and censorship in YA literature.

## The challenge and controversy of young adult literature

Unlike other genres of literature, YA literature is not so easy to identify or categorize. Children's picture books and large-print chapter books are familiar enough to distinguish, and adult books unquestionably deal with adult content and situations, but YA literature "extends and applies the spare language, the focused story, and the sharply etched conflicts of fiction for younger readers to the multilayered, often ambiguous situations of the dawning adult world" (Aronson, 1997, p. 1418). Such ambiguity is precisely what fuels adults to challenge students' exposure to YA literature. Aronson continues, "Although we sense in these books a passion and intensity unequaled in any other category of fiction, we can't, as adults, decide exactly what coming-of-age literature is" (p. 1418). In fact, the YA novel has evolved so much in the last three decades that topics ranging from drug addiction to sexual orientation can be found in any contemporary adolescent novel (Cart, 2001; Glasgow, 2001; Mikulecky, 1998; Salvner, 1998; St. Clair, 1995).

Contention among educators and parents stems from questions about what students gain from

reading about these topics in depth. Critics of controversial YA literature claim that these novels either mirror the adolescent experience, assuring teenagers that they are not alone in their experiences, or they offer entry into and understanding of a way of life that differs from theirs. Proponents argue that students will be educated in either case; opponents fear such books condone immoral activities or teach topics that students are not yet mature enough to handle (Graff, 1992; Reid, 1999). As a result, "too often teachers choose not to use certain books for fear that these texts will create controversies leading to confrontations with parents, the members of the wider community, or school administrators" (Freedman & Johnson, 2000/2001, p. 357). Who decides what students should read and why becomes a matter of significance to adults rather than students. Since adult opinions can prevent students from reading worthwhile texts, studying what students themselves say about reading controversial YA literature in the classrooms presents an opportunity to better assess the significance of teaching it.

## Description of the students, texts, and data collection

Even with evidence of the success of student-centered pedagogy and teacher research, (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Kutz & Roskelly, 1991) the notable absence of adolescent voices in deciding YA reading material seems alarming. Because adolescents are the ones most affected by exposure to these texts, it is helpful to understand their definitions of controversy, the topics they consider inappropriate for the school setting, how much exposure they feel is too much, and their appreciation of literature in general.

With that aim, I gathered data in four public middle school literature classes. Two of the classes served as enrichment courses for reluctant or average readers; the other two classes catered to the interests of avid and advanced

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readers. Each class met five days a week for forty-five minute sessions and consisted of no more than 25 students. The seventy students involved, all between the ages of 11 and 13, were of varying ethnic backgrounds and hailed from a fairly affluent suburban school district. The community consisted primarily of college-educated, professional parents, many of whom were actively involved in home-school associations. Any book under consideration for approval on the district's booklist undergoes careful evaluation process. Books pass through several reviews by content area teachers, district evaluators, and administrators before they may be used in the classroom. Approval on the booklist, however, does not guarantee curriculum approval; rather, it allows permission for the books to be discussed at a teacher's discretion. Among those YA novels already on the approved booklist were Lois Lowry's (1993) *The Giver*, Robert Cormier's (1974) *The Chocolate War*, and J. K. Rowling's (1998) *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*.

I collected student responses over two weeks, in response to Banned Book Week, which honors the principle of intellectual freedom (ALA, 2001a). While there was no school-wide observance of Banned Book Week, prior student-initiated interest about censorship led me to address open-ended questions with students surrounding issues of controversial literature, focusing on YA novels because of their inclusion throughout the district's middle and high school curriculum. Four questions—"What makes a book controversial?", "Why are books censored?", "How do adolescents perceive inappropriate topics?", and "What makes a book worth reading?"—were used to promote examination because they address the areas adults often consider when exploring the same issue (Huck, Kiefer, Helper, & Hickman, 2004). Moreover, I hoped these questions would address state curriculum content standards for promoting critical thinking. Each question served as a focus topic for discussion, in-class writing, and homework assignments.

To triangulate data and to provide students with varying means of expression to voice their thoughts, data collection methods included double-entry journal writing between students and teacher and audiotape recordings of whole class discussions. The journal entries alternated as classwork and homework exercises, and the discussions were taped to clarify

student statements. During this study, students twice exchanged their journals with me. Discussions occurred during every class session. Processing the data involved both qualitative and simple quantitative analyses. Finally, I searched and broadly compared discussion recordings and journal entries for recurring threads of student opinion.

## Student voices and considerations about YA literature

### What makes a book controversial?

By middle school, students are quite conscious of what they should and should not do in a school setting. This first question immediately led to discussions about topics considered taboo in public schools. Students readily identified on their own and agreed upon which topics evoke controversy: drug use, profanity, racism, violence, religion, and sexual content. Moreover, they cited several reasons why these topics were forbidden to explore in school. Some students observed practical consequences, as did Karl regarding the use of profanity: "Curse words could find you a spot in detention." However, most students considered the social impact of these topics. They identified matters of religion, for example, in their journal entries:

- Some things that are taboo to read in school is the Bible because people are different religions. (Chris)
- Talking about other people's religion is forbidden because talking about other people's differences is wrong. (Drew)
- In some schools, *Harry Potter* is taboo because people's churches don't approve of witchcraft. (Elon)

During class discussions, most students agreed that racism is a topic of contention:

**Elon:** You can't say anything that's like racial remarks 'cause you'll offend people.

**Lara:** Yeah, you definitely can't be racist at school.

**Drew:** That's an easy one.

Likewise, all seventy students agreed upon another controversial topic, though they seemed reluctant to name it:

**Casey:** You know, stories about Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie and things like that.

**Me:** Are what?

**Siobahn:** Inappropriate adult matters.

Eventually, and more in writing than during discussion, they clearly labeled the controversy:

“Reading books of sexual affairs between people—my parents don’t want me to” (Morgan).

Overall, the teenagers viewed these topics as problematic in many school districts. As did Elon, they referred to peers in other school districts across the country who were not allowed to read books such as J.D. Salinger’s (1951) *Catcher in the Rye* or Laurie Halse Anderson’s (1999) *Speak*. Furthermore, the topics they identified matched what Huck, Kiefer, Helper, & Hickman (2004) identify as “targets of the censor”:

profanity of any kind; sex, sexuality, nudity, obscenity; the ‘isms,’ including sexism, racism, ageism; and the portrayal of witchcraft, magic, religion, and drugs (p. 635).

Further comparison of their responses to studies conducted by the OIF indicates more correlation between adolescent and adult responses (ALA, 2005a). Both populations, then, acknowledge that certain topics are too contentious to be readily accepted into the school curriculum.

### Why are books censored?

Most students also easily comprehended why adults raise concern about what is read in school, readily citing why the topics mentioned in the previous section are often censored. Regarding profanity, Elon understood that “books with lots of curse words [were prohibited] because the principal and the [guidance] counselors would not want them repeated in the classrooms and halls.” Tracy agreed, adding, “If we aren’t allowed to say [profanity], why read it?” During discussion, students also perceived concern about literature that depicts drug use:

**Matt:** Drugs are taboo, too, because we are trying to keep drugs away from kids, and we don’t want to influence it.

**Maria:** Yeah. They don’t want us to curse, and they don’t want us to think it’s okay to take drugs.

Furthermore, prior understanding that violence in literature was considered controversial seemed more urgent in the wake of school shootings, bomb threats, and September 11. Journal entries reverberated adult consternation about violence:

- I believe that talking about terrorism would be frowned upon because it is a touchy and bad subject with most. The terrorist attacks on New York and Washington D.C. hurt and touched many people. It may bring back many memories. (Den-nis)
- Endless killings and books with weapons in them can give students ideas of revenge through kills or evil. (Morgan)
- Your Language Arts teacher wouldn’t let you do a book report on a book that is about a serial killer. Now, that would be taboo! I think that we are not supposed to read about this stuff because we are taught that violence doesn’t solve anything. (Kyla)
- We also probably can’t read about murder, suicide, or blood and gore. We don’t want to get any ideas. We also can’t read about guns or weapons because of shootings and killings that happen at school. (Maria)

Regarding the complexity of discrimination, from racial to religious, students echoed public concerns:

- Anything talking about people of other races in a bad way teaches bad things to children. (Maria)
- Also, studying about religions as if that certain one was the best belief is also taboo because if everyone has free will, why choose it for them?” (Tracy)

Of all the reasons for banning books, students automatically explained why sexual content was a questionable topic:

**A.J.:** Anything about sex is not allowed in school because kids are considered not old and mature enough for it.

**Jack:** Yeah, some parents don’t want their kids to learn about that stuff at their age.

**Drew:** I think certain topics like those are taboo because we are too young or they are just wrong. And it’s forbidden to read about sex and drugs

because this is a reading class, not a sexual education class.

**Dennis:** Sex and romance is considered above us for various reasons. Books with them are thought of as adult books.

With further discussion, it became clear that students compared YA literature to other media that are subject to censorship for their age group:

**Sean:** Some of the [Play Station 2] games I play are more violent than what we read in that book [*The Giver*].

**Rajani:** I know, but my mom hates those games and [violent] movies, so I'm sure she wouldn't want us to read bad things like that.

Altogether, students' responses resonated with adult perspectives. These adolescents not only knew which topics adults considered problematic, but also the arguments against them.

### How do adolescents perceive inappropriate topics?

Reassuring as it may be that many teenagers acknowledge controversy in YA literature, the question remains about how much exposure to such issues is too much. If adults differ so greatly on this point, would adolescents? One student summarized popular teenage opinion:

- These [topics] are not allowed to be read because people (teachers) don't want us to be aware about all of this. Personally, I think we should be allowed because people in our grade already know about everything like that. (Siobahn)

However, such responses energize adult censors who believe therein lies the reason for censorship: adolescents *shouldn't* know about these topics yet.

In reality, most of these students actually placed limits on reading books with controversial content. As with adults, personal values determined their positions:

- The topic that I think is taboo is racial discrimination. It is not fair to those people who are being picked on. (Matt)
- Celebrity affairs are kinda disgusting, and it is very inappropriate. (Jack)

- I don't think students should read about actual murders because it's just way too violent. (A.J.) Student censorship also reflected a variety of possible repercussions, coinciding with adult views. Some students predicted a negative influence on vulnerable peers:

- I think books with drugs in it should be taboo. If you do talk about drugs, some children or teenagers might start taking certain drugs and skip school. (Denise)
- I think bad words are bad to read about and can set a bad influence. (Lynnette)
- Things about sex might put some unpleasant thoughts into people's heads. Even in health class, we shouldn't be reading about it because we're only 12 and 13. (Mika)

Others believed exposure to these topics may strike a nerve in some students, causing anxiety or flashbacks to psychological trauma:

- Some kids might be offended because they might know someone this [murder or drugs] happened to. It also might make kids scared that this might happen to them. (Tanisha)
- Weapons [are inappropriate] because it could be taken the wrong way. (Lara)
- [G]uns and weapons . . . could be translated into threats. (Elon)

Most notably, some students even perceived the value of adult guidance. To them, certain topics warrant more mature handling to help shed light on complex or troubling issues:

- I think that learning about murder or drugs is not an appropriate thing for school. We should learn about these things from our parents." (Tanisha)
- We are not allowed to read about sex or if we get talking about it, we can get in trouble which is only fair. Sex is not a good school subject because it's just not a 'school subject'! (Elizabeth)
- Only in health class should you talk about drugs. Maybe some children will learn not to take drugs there. (Denise)

Just as some adults draw the line at the mere mention of a hot topic, some students believed there are issues to be avoided in the classroom. Of the seventy students responding, seven censored profanity, nine drug use, eight religion, thirteen violence, and twelve racism, sexism, and ageism. Only eight banned books with sexual content, despite consensus among all that



it is the most controversial of YA topics.

Some students, however, qualified their reading of YA novels and tolerated controversial topics under certain conditions:

- I think violence in books is okay as long as the story is not based on actual events. Students need to know if they're reading something truthful or nontruthful. (Carli)
- It depends what the books say and what the children's interests are in reading it. (Julie)
- I think it's okay to talk about but not read about because kids might try it and take drugs because they heard it was okay. (Kathleen)
- Maybe in health class we are allowed to learn about these things [drugs and sex], but we shouldn't even think about bringing information on them into a different class. (Kyla)

While some censored contentious topics immediately, most students kept an open, albeit cautious, mind. Overall, student responses implied dependence on certain supports, whether provided by their own developing maturity or the experience and wisdom of adults.

### What makes a controversial book worth reading?

To determine their interest in reading books that detailed situations and topics they considered controversial, I read aloud the Amazon.com and BarnesandNoble.com plot summaries of ten award-winning YA books and asked students if they would want to read the book. These novels were Avi's (1990) *The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle*, Robert Cormier's (1977) *The Chocolate War*, Chris Crutcher's (1993) *Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes*, Bette Greene's (1973) *Summer of My German Soldier*, S. E. Hinton's (1967) *The Outsiders*, Lois Lowry's (1993) *The Giver*, Walter Dean Myers' (1988) *Fallen Angels*, J.D. Salinger's (1951) *The Catcher in the Rye*, Sonya Sones' (2001) *What My Mother Doesn't Know*, and Terry Trueman's (2000) *Stuck in Neutral*. Initially, I did not tell students that seven of those novels are among the most frequently challenged books since 1990 (ALA, 2001b; ALA, 2005a). Moreover, the plot summaries contained no indication that any of the aforementioned hot topics were involved. Immediately after reading the summaries, I asked students if they would still read those books that interested them if controversial topics were included in the novels.

Seventy percent of the students admitted that if a book's plot description sounded appealing enough, they would read it regardless of the amount of profanity, violence, sexual content, or discriminatory remarks:

- I would still read all of them that I said I would read. I don't think that it matters. (Kyla)
- [Curses and sex] doesn't add anything. If it's a good and interesting book, it doesn't change anything. (Karen)
- The words someone uses does not change the story. (Elon)
- I'd still read it if [the plot] was cool. (A.J.)

Ten students out of seventy said they would change their minds. However, their decision to read a book that initially sounded engaging seemed influenced by personal preference rather than inappropriate content:

- Curses on like every three pages? No, because I don't like curses. (Rachel)
- Bloody violence is too gruesome for me to read about. (Casey)

On the other hand, when asked if controversial passages would make a text they considered unappealing more interesting, all seventy students said no. Controversy, therefore, did not seem to sway student opinion if the plot of the story was not attractive in the first place.

## Discussion

Adolescence is and always has been a time of curiosity and experimentation. This article shows many adolescents to be well aware that certain topics in literature generate controversy regarding their appropriateness in a school curriculum. Throughout our exploration of controversial YA literature, students showed insight regarding the grounds for censorship. Young adult author Shelley Stoehr (1997) explained, "[T]he issues for contemporary young adults are not so different now than they have always been for young people—the main concerns still being sex, drugs, and rock and roll. What's changed more than the issues themselves is how they are dealt with by the media and the arts, including literature" (p. 3). Judy Blume argued that students may be "inexperienced, but not innocent, and their pain and unhappiness do not come from books. They come from *life* [author's emphasis]" (Swiderek, 1996, p. 592).

Because many YA novels now contain more controversial content, their inclusion in a school curriculum raises concern among both adults and teenagers.

Based on their criteria for judging what makes a book worth reading, the students I spoke with certainly appreciated the importance of context. Considering that many teenagers prefer plot-driven texts, it makes sense that what ends up mattering to most of them is the story itself. Yet their sensitivity to adult expectations, peer reactions, and individual interest enhances their perspective about controversial topics, enabling them to evaluate YA literature in profound ways.

This research, then, indicates that adolescent student voice can provide insight for making decisions about curriculum. Many censors believe if students were not exposed to these topics, then they would not engage in any unwanted behavior associated with them. Yet, many of these adolescents expressed some level of hesitation to read YA novels with controversial content. Of particular interest is the realization that more adults would ban profanity and sexual content in books, but more students would ban violence, indicating that they employ evaluative faculties when thinking about books. In other words, they are not passive receptors who simply model their behavior after a few intriguing YA characters. The finding that none of them found a novel compelling simply because its content was debatable underlines this argument. Furthermore, since adolescence is inherently a time for testing limits and developing individual identity, including student voices when evaluating YA novels promotes the critical thinking skills necessary to facilitate students' transition to adulthood.

Further considerations are needed, however, when soliciting student responses about curriculum. Many students in this study observed the need for adult guidance when dealing with controversial subjects. Fortunately, their school district provided many means through which students could find this support, such as health education classes, guidance counselors, social workers, periodic teacher in-services about student development, and significant communication between parents and educators. Communities without such support may find relying too heavily on student judgment or interest rather risky. Huck, Kiefer, Helper, and Hickman (2004) echoed the caution: "We should

not deliberately shock or frighten children before they have developed the maturity and inner strength to face the tragedies of life" (p. 634). In that respect, nor should educators promote examination of contentious topics without ensuring appropriate adult assistance. A school's ability to provide a helpful and healthy arena for exploring difficult subject matter should be considered along with student voice.

To that end, further research about the benefits of utilizing school and community support systems in connection with controversial YA literature would provide more specific information for making censorship decisions. When reading YA literature in the classroom, "nobody wants to turn the curriculum into a shouting match" (Graff, 1992, p. 12). However, because parents, educators, librarians, and public figures are so invested in the academic and character development of students, the literature adolescents read often falls under scrutiny and into contention. If adults take the time to listen to the reader's voice, they may realize that controversial literature is not a question of exposing adolescents to something adults want them sheltered from, but a question of in what context, with what approach, and with what aim. John Marsden (1994) affirmed, "If we accept that children are not automatically innocent and angelic, that they are complex, subtle humans who are trying to overcome their ignorance, trying to acquire knowledge so that they can move to the positions of strength that the knowing adults seemingly occupy, then we can get a clearer idea of the role of fiction in their lives" (p. 103). With that perspective and actual adolescent viewpoints, we can approach students' encounters with YA literature as a truly valuable interaction.

<sup>1</sup> All student names have been changed.

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## The Caring Community of Young Adult Literature

*Donald R. Gallo was kind enough to let us print his keynote address, delivered at the ALAN Workshop held in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, on November 21, 2005*

Good morning!

I'm going to be mentioning the names of a number of people during my presentation, but there isn't going to be enough time to note everyone who deserves to be included. So if you are someone important whom I fail to note, please try not to be offended. I mean no disrespect. And if you are one of those people whose name I mention, please do not stand up and wave your arms in the air and *woooo* at the top of your voice. I'm just going to mention individuals as examples, and your name may just be one of the many. But if you somehow feel especially honored to be mentioned, feel free to invite me to lunch later. I won't mind.

\* \* \*

[Holding up half-full glass of water:] My wife, whom many of you know, would say this glass is half full. She'd be right, of course. She would also tell you that *I* see it as a glass half empty. And she's probably right about that, too. Not only that, but I'm the kind of person who lies awake at night wondering why the glass hadn't been filled, trying to determine who was responsible for filling it, getting ticked off about how irresponsible some people are, and attempting to figure out what has to be done to get it filled. "Hey! Can we get some more water over here!?"

[Filling glass from nearby water pitcher:] Aah, thank you. That was easy!

There is much in education today that I could complain about: inadequate budgets, far too much emphasis on testing, too many incompetent administrators and under-trained colleagues, lack of time to prepare adequately, hostile or disinterested students, uninvolved parents, overly involved parents, religious fanatics who push their narrow agendas and bully school administrators to remove dozens of books from our classrooms and libraries.

Ooooh, there are lots of worthy targets I could take my lance to this morning. But Patty Campbell expects me to be positive, to be upbeat, to talk about "The Caring Community of Young Adult Literature," the theme of this year's ALAN workshop, to celebrate what's *in* the glass and not fret over what's *not*.

That's not easy for me to do, because I'm normally more of a gadfly than a cheerleader. But this morning I intend to be a cheerleader, albeit without a short, pleated skirt and pompoms. I'm going to do this because I love young adult literature. It's been a field I've valued and championed for nearly 40 years. Beginning with the publication of *The Outsiders* by S.E. Hinton, *The Contender* by Robert Lipsyte, and *Mr and Mrs Bo Jo Jones* by Ann Head in the late 1960s, my career has grown alongside that of contemporary young adult books. Helping to nourish young adult literature in a variety of ways has given me a very productive and satisfying life. I love what I do:



- reading dozens of excellent books each year—like Chris Lynch’s National Book Award Finalist, *Inexcusable*
- writing articles and reviews about books and teaching, as I do in my *English Journal* column, “Bold Books for Teenagers”
- editing anthologies of brand new short stories about and for teenagers (you have a copy of my next one in your packet—titled *What Are You Afraid Of?*)

Young adult literature nurtures my daily life as I

- read professional journals like *VOYA* and *The ALAN Review*
- conduct workshops for teachers and librarians across the country
- interview and correspond with dozens of fascinating authors—such as Joan Bauer, Walter Dean Myers, Nancy Garden, Laurie Halse Anderson, Alex Flinn, Graham Salisbury, Tamora Pierce, and other authors you will hear from today and tomorrow
- interact with like-minded colleagues in middle schools, high schools, colleges, and libraries—like Patty Campbell, Sarah Herz, Teri Lesesne, Walter Mayes, Mary Arnold, Patrick Jones, Michael Cart, and others whom you will have the opportunity to meet here.

I value the talks I’ve had with talented editors and creative publishers. I am thankful for the many congenial marketing and publicity people who send me books, and with Amazon and other wholesalers, paperback distributors, and salespeople in bookstores who make those books available for purchase.

I cherish my talks with teenagers during school visits, and meeting readers at book-signings.

I can envision no better life for myself.

And this event—this annual, two-day ALAN workshop that I have attended almost every year since the first one 31 years ago—is always the high point of my professional year. I expect it will be the high point of your professional year, too, because this is the largest gathering of authors who write for teenagers, and of educators who support young adult literature, that you will find anywhere on the planet! So I am extremely happy to be a part of this extravaganza with you all this morning.

How many of you have never attended an ALAN Workshop before? Raise your hands way up high.

How many of you have attended a whole lot of ALAN Workshops, maybe ten or more? Stand up, please. Are those first-timers going to have a good time here? [YES?]

I **guarantee** we will all have a fantastic time here today and tomorrow—once I get off this platform. You already have received the largest package of free books anyone has ever handed you, and if you had to leave Pittsburgh this minute, you would still be a happy reader with all those books. Books are wonderful things to own; free books are even better. You can thank the publishers and their authors for contributing those.

“The Caring Community of Young Adult Literature.” Just who are the members of this community? Who is it that cares?

Well, **we** care. You and I—all of us in this room. We care about books, and we care about teenagers. We tend to take those two things for granted, don’t we? ***We care about books, and we care about teenagers.*** Not all adults share that feeling or that perspective, as you well know. We know that a lot of adults don’t read any kind of books, no less books featuring teenage characters. I’m sure you know a few colleagues—even English teachers—who haven’t read a book since they graduated from college. Many of us also have colleagues in our English departments who, though they are generally readers, refuse to read a YA novel. I’ve met too many of them. That’s certainly a half-empty glass!

So let’s look at this in a positive way. Let’s acknowledge that those of us who read books, especially books about teenagers, are a special breed. ***You and I are a special breed.*** And it’s such a pleasure that we have each other, isn’t it? Even though many of us in this room are strangers to one another.

We can change that easily. Let’s take just a minute to make ourselves a little less strange to those around us. When I give the word, please lean forward, or twist sideways, or turn around and introduce yourself to someone you don’t know. Name, place where you work, and what you do. Go! [People are given a minute or two to talk, then are called back to attention.]

If you came here alone, you now know somebody you can go to lunch with later.

As much as we care about books, I believe most of us care about teenagers even more. Many adults do

**not** care about teenagers—or even **like** teenagers. A lot of adults even **fear** teenagers, look **down** on them, **shun** them in public, don't **value** their interests, don't **understand** their needs and attitudes, and don't **care** to. And while none of us can honestly claim to **really** understand today's teenagers (heck, they can't even understand themselves most of the time!), we still care about them and welcome them into our conversations.

Because we care about teenagers, we care about finding the right books for them, as Teri Lesesne says in her book *Making the Match: The Right Book for the Right Reader at the Right Time*, because we know how important books can be for understanding ourselves and understanding the wider world. That's where you and I differ from those adults who spend a great deal of their time trying to keep certain books out of the hands of teenagers. Those people and their organizations do not want teenagers to understand the wider world, do not want them to think for themselves or express themselves. They do not trust or respect teenagers. Nor do they respect us professional educators and librarians or our informed judgments about books. We see value in expanding students' minds and experiences; they want to keep children's minds as narrow as their own limited worldview. I greatly admire you educators and librarians who fight for these books and put your jobs on the line when certain adults want to keep all kinds of books out of the hands of teenagers who need them. And I am delighted and encouraged by the courageous stance of publishers of young adult books who refuse to give in to pressure from censors, and who continue to publish controversial books—books that have realistic teenage language (including the f-word sometimes), and characters who have sexual thoughts (and sometimes actions), and characters who are gay, and that deal with some of the harsher realities of life. Teenagers **want** to know, **need** to

know these things, and books are often their only way to find out.

As members of this community, we care about books because they contain not just information, but more importantly, they transmit stories of our lives. When I say "**our** lives," I mean that in the broadest sense of **human** lives. That is, the stories are not just about **my** insular life, or life as I wish it would be, but they are about the lives of characters that cover a broad spectrum, from today to the distant past, to possible futures and imagined other worlds, from wealthy suburban communities to crime-ridden city neighborhoods, to bucolic farm communities, to teenagers in other countries, to . . . well, you get the point. Contemporary teenage books tell the stories of all kinds of lives.

Author Susan Cheever, speaking at a Writers Guild forum in New York City during the fall of 2004, said:

storytelling is the thing that unites all genres [. . .] . Nonfiction, column writing, biography, whatever, it's all storytelling [. . .] . It's the way we understand our own lives [. . .] .

There's something "healing" about this process of telling stories and the way that we understand our lives through telling stories [. . .] . I think human understanding comes through storytelling. [*The Bulletin*, Winter 2005, p. 23.]

Those of us who are classroom teachers often forget about that when we are preoccupied with keeping order in our classrooms, are under pressure to teach lists of vocabulary words and prepare students to pass standardized tests, are trying to be accountable. And of course, those who demand that we give those standardized tests and those who construct those tests have **no** understanding that literature is about telling stories about our lives.

Those of us who are librarians often forget about that when we are concerned with cataloging, shelf space, overdue books, and slashed budgets.

Those of us in publishing often forget about that when we are

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**The stories are not just about my insular life, or life as I wish it would be, but they are about the lives of characters that cover a broad spectrum, from today to the distant past, to possible futures and imagined other worlds, from wealthy suburban communities to crime-ridden city neighborhoods, to bucolic farm communities, to teenagers in other countries.**

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concerned with contract wording, sales figures, and promoting celebrity authors.

**It's all about story.** English teachers would have little to teach if it weren't for stories. Librarians wouldn't have anything on their shelves if it weren't for stories. Publishers wouldn't have jobs if it weren't for stories.

And so our "caring community" depends upon storytellers—on fiction writers who create unforgettable characters—like Ponyboy Curtis, Wetzie Bat, Stargirl, Nightjohn, Jerry Renault, Jenna Boller, Sarah Byrnes, and of course, Harry Potter. Our community depends on storytellers who place characters in situations that reflect and illuminate important truths about Life; on nonfiction writers like Russell Freedman, Jim Murphy, Elizabeth Partridge, Susan Campbell Bartoletti, Marc Aronson, and Chris Crowe who research and assemble information that informs us as well as entertains us; on poets like Helen Frost, Eireann Corrigan, Jaime Adoff, and Marilyn Nelson, who play with rhythms and rhymes to make language sing to us; and on cartoonists like Craig Thompson, Chris Ware, Jeff Smith, Marjane Satrapi, and a host of Japanese manga artists who present stories in graphic form, making them more appealing to reluctant readers.

During the rest of today and all day tomorrow you will hear authors talk about their craft, their experiences, and their intentions as they attempt to communicate with teen readers. You will find that they write for teenagers because they care about teenagers. In fact, you will likely hear a couple of authors quote from letters they receive from student readers who have been touched by their work, and others may tell you how comments and questions from readers motivated them to write a particular novel or a whole series of them.

These authors, as they will tell you, also value teachers and librarians who bring kids and books together. They value all of us so much that they sometimes even work for free. In fact, all of the authors here at this workshop have come without remuneration. Our publishers—mine being Candlewick Press—provide our travel, lodging, and meals, and have, as I said earlier, contributed copies of our books for all registrants. They also were responsible for last evening's delightful wine and cheese reception that most of you attended. Talk about a

caring community! Together, that's tens of thousands of dollars worth of caring!

All that's expected in return is that you go home and purchase millions of copies of our books. Or maybe hundreds. More likely, a class set. In truth, we'll all be very happy if you go home and share these books and experiences with your students and your colleagues.

Because they care about their teenage audience, these writers, unlike writers of generations before S.E. Hinton, are incredibly honest with teen readers. Which is the primary reason that teens love these books, and why so many contemporary YA writers get into trouble with certain parents, and why teachers and librarians who try to use these books in our schools and communities get challenged so often. These books deal candidly with issues of significance to teenagers, and, perhaps more importantly, they deal with human feelings. Author Terry Davis suggests that this is why some parents are so afraid to have their kids read this kind of literature—it's the only thing in their school lives that involves emotions! There are no human emotions to deal with in an algebra class or a calculus class. History classes tend to focus more on the facts and issues than on the emotions of our past. The subject of science is designed to keep emotions out of investigations. And the only emotions that students in an English class express when studying grammar are frustration and boredom.

In all good literature there is an intimacy—especially when there's a first-person teenage narrator, as occurs in so much of young adult literature—an intimacy that draws the reader in, making him or her a willing confidant, if not an active accomplice, of the main character. So readers struggle with the characters' problems, feel the pain, experience the anger, laugh and cringe and cry, and celebrate the protagonist's accomplishments with him or her. It is that involvement, and its accompanying pleasure, that makes teenage readers want more.

Most bookstores—even the largest chains—these days seem to be doing their part to provide teenagers with access to all sorts of books, but a lot of schools and libraries could do more. (That half-empty glass again. Sorry.) But that fact is that not a lot of kids are reading much on their own. A Harris Poll reported earlier this year of kids in grades 3 through 12 conducted in a random selection of schools in October

2003 indicates that more than half the students had done no personal reading on the day prior to the survey. **More than half—no personal reading!** To the question: *Thinking only about yesterday, how much time did you spend reading a book that was for your own enjoyment (not a homework assignment)?* only seven percent of the kids said they had spent between 30 minutes and an hour reading, and none of the 2,032 students said they read for more than an hour. None. (Reported in the Cleveland, Ohio, *Plain Dealer*, March 26, 2005, p. B11)

From what I've gathered from teenagers, an awful lot of them have no idea that books like those you have by your feet this morning exist. They have never heard of Kathleen Jeffrie Johnson or Han Nolan or Pete Hautman or Pam Munoz Ryan or Laurie Halse Anderson or even Robert Cormier. How could they? Television commercials do not advertise them. These authors and their books are not mentioned in the music teens listen to on their iPods. Many of their parents never had access to these books and authors, so parents can't recommend them. Most of the old textbooks they have to read for English classes don't include these works. Even some librarians and English teachers are unfamiliar with these authors and the marvelous stories they have to tell.

At a Barnes & Noble book-signing a couple of weeks ago in Ohio, I met a middle school librarian who picked up a copy of my short story anthology *Destination Unexpected* and looked at the list of the contributing authors noted on the back cover. She did not recognize a single name. Not Alex Flinn, or Kimberly Willis Holt, or Ron Koertge, or Richard Peck, or Graham Salisbury, or Ellen Wittlinger. What was worse, this was part of the store's Teacher Appreciation Week, and I was one of ten authors who were signing copies of our books. Or I should say had HOPED to sign copies of our books. Not a single middle school or high school English teacher showed up. (That's not just a half-empty glass; that's a nearly drained glass! And it's very depressing.)

How **will** teenagers learn about these excellent books, these talented and dedicated authors? The main source of information about these books and authors is [**spread arms wide**]*—us!* As a believer in young adult literature, I've often felt like I imagine members of the early Christian church felt—trying to spread the Gospel one person at a time, often alone in an ignorant and hostile world. That's another reason

why this gathering today is so important to me. **We**—this caring community—are the ones who must spread the good word about young adult literature. **We** are the ones who must talk about these books in our classrooms, display these books in our libraries, let teenagers know they exist. Because we care.

Our classrooms and those of our teaching colleagues can be enlivened by the use of more books like these. The circulation of our libraries can improve if more teenagers learn about these books. There are teenagers out there who need these books, whose reading lives can be changed. Indeed, whose emotional lives might be improved as a result of what they read. Teenagers are often desperate to find others like themselves, and if they can't find caring companions in real life, they can surely find kids like themselves in contemporary novels. Whether they are emotionally confused, physically abused, suffering from peer pressure, struggling through conflicts with parents, agonizing over moral issues, or questioning their sexual identity, there is a book waiting for them, if only they knew it is available.

**We** are the ones who can share these books, who can reach these teens—because we care, because we are the caring community of believers in the value of young adult literature.

You may say "Amen" to that. Amen! Yes.

Now, as I turn this podium over to Joan Bauer, who will surely make you laugh and maybe even cry, and to Mary Arnold who will introduce her [Holding up glass of water], I wish you an unprecedented two days of invigorating experiences and a lifetime of reading pleasures. Fill your glass!

*Don Gallo has been a force of nature in the promotion of young adult literature. In addition, to mentoring and assisting everyone from authors and editors, to librarians and teachers, to young readers themselves, he has been president of ALAN, has been the recipient of both the ALAN Award and the Ted Hipple Award, served in numerous positions for NCTE, ALAN, and other organizations, and continues to provide wonderful short story collections on a regular basis. He is Professor Emeritus of Central Connecticut State University, and continues as adjunct faculty at Cleveland State University. His website [www.Authors4Teens.com](http://www.Authors4Teens.com) is a wonderful resource. Dubbed "the Godfather of young adult short stories," Don's column, "Bold Books for Bold Times," has appeared in English Journal for the past two years. In 2003 Don established a grant to help new teachers attend the ALAN Workshop for the first time.*



## Bearers of Light

*Joan Bauer was kind enough to let us print her speech, given at the ALAN Workshop, which was entitled “Bearers of Light: The Caring Community of Young Adult Literature,” in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, November 21, 2005.*

I’ve been asked to talk about light this morning. And light isn’t one of those easily contained subjects because it tends to mean different things to different people. But when I think about light, I think about candles. And when I think about candles, I think about my daughter’s baptism.

It was twenty three years ago now. My husband, Evan, and I had been told what to expect during the ceremony. The minister sprinkled the water on Jean’s head; she didn’t cry—I did. He gave her to my husband, and then the pastor did something we hadn’t expected. He handed me a big candle, lit it, and said, “Never let the light of God go out in your child’s life.”

I held the flaming candle, quite stirred, and vowed, “I won’t. I swear.” Evan gave me a look. I muttered “amen.” We went back to our seats in the second row of the church. I was still holding the burning candle as Jean gurgled happily.

I sat there with the candle. It was early in the service.

We sang a few hymns—not easy when you’re holding a burning candle. Bible verses were read, and by now the hot wax was beginning to form. I tipped the candle over; the wax dripped down my pants leg. Evan whispered that we could take Jean out, but the minister was climbing into the pulpit for his sermon, and I didn’t want to be rude—this is one of the real downsides of sitting in the second row. By now hot wax was dripping down my hand, and I didn’t know what to do because I’d just taken a vow in public that

I wouldn’t let the light of God go out in my kid’s life, and to blow the candle out seemed, you know, *hostile*. Evan whispered that Jean would start crying any minute and then we could take her out, but she didn’t cry.

I’m not proud of this—I took her bottle. But she didn’t cry; she just gurgled—transfixed by the flame.

I took her toy. That didn’t work either. By now hot wax was scarring my hand, and I thought, *no offense, God*, and blew out the flame.

*Then* she started wailing.

“It’s just a symbol,” I stammered.

Being a bearer of light can be a lot of pressure.

Let’s face it, light isn’t always appreciated. It’s got heat, it burns, it shows things we’d rather not see like the dust on your coffee table and the stain on your carpet. Light can be tough on the fashion conscious. Ever go out of the house and realize what you’re wearing clashes because you didn’t see it in good light? Or the black shoes you thought you put on were actually brown, and you spend more time than you’d like that day hiding in the shadows.

Light comes to us in so many forms—lamps, flashlights, laser beams, lighthouses. Morning light is hopeful, a lamp turned on is illuminating, the heat of a fire, depending on the situation and your mood, can be warming or threatening. The one thing all light has in common is that it changes every place it streams into. Think about what Rembrandt’s work would be like, or Vermeer’s paintings, without that light. Well drawn, certainly, but lacking something so deep. I



wonder what they carried in their hearts to be able to paint like that. They bore the light, carrying it from their hearts to the canvas.

And there is the heart-stirring, dramatic light that Olympic runners carry. I used to be a runner (not like that!), and I always thought there was no greater moment than when the last runner lifts the torch, runs across the bridge/the platform, etc. and up all the stairs as the music swells and the Olympic flame is ignited.

I'm sorry, you couldn't get that same effect with smoke machines, laser shows, or balloons—it's got to be *on fire*.

But it is dangerous, this light to which we're drawn. My family and I lived in southern California years ago during the season of big fires in the hills. We were driving up there one day and the sight of the fire was both frightening and strangely beautiful. We almost felt drawn to it—we wanted to get closer but knew that it was dangerous.

What is it about light that draws us and holds us back?

I think the great powers in life, actually, draw us and we pull away. Love can be the greatest thing we desire, and yet when it comes it can seem like too much; we pull back afraid. We can say we seek truth with all our hearts, but sometimes when it appears we're repelled by it. We are complex creatures who live in the light and hide in the shadows that it offers. And to walk this world right now trying to find the light, much less bear it, is a daunting task.

As I was forming these remarks, I had a period of real illumination and I felt I was beginning to understand what I wanted to say. That made me hungry. I went to the grocery store, partially illuminated. And as I stood there at the check out line, I was besieged by the Dark Side. The magazine racks, that is, and the headlines:

*Brad and Angelina – The Real Truth*

*Brad and Angelina – Like You've Never Seen Them Before*

*Why Men Won't Tell You What They Really Want*

*Why Women Won't Tell You Either*

And my personal favorite of 2005 . . .

*Madonna's Tips on Parenting*

All of this sandwiched between the covers of Katrina victims trying to start again, and all the tragedies and horrors of our time.

I stood there numb and felt all the light within me diminish. I bought my fudge-covered Oreos and slumped home. How easily light is diminished.

We can learn about light from ancient man and woman who first figured out about making fire. Never take fire for granted. It needs to be fed to keep going.

But the truth is, being a bearer of light has a downside, a painful side: candles burn out, people in lighthouses are lonely. A dear friend of mine works in stained glass. How I love that art form, but the cost to the artist is real—cut hands from working with sharp glass and sharp tools.

We don't need light in the day nearly as much as we need it at night. Once a year in New York City, two beams of laser light stand in the night sky, a powerful tribute to the World Trade Center—it's such a quiet, powerful memorial. What will the memorials be for Katrina, Iraq, the Tsunami, Bali? It's too soon to know, I suppose. Disasters keep coming at us so fast. We need the light. And yet, it is so hard to keep close. It is so very hard to bear.

There was a terrorist threat in New York City where I live over Presidents' Day. The subways, we were told, had been targeted. You couldn't get a car or a taxi that day. I took the subway and I admit it, the fear and the headlines got to me. I was scared. It seemed like every rider in my subway car had a newspaper and every headline blared SUBWAY TERROR THREAT—NYC ON HIGH ALERT.

I tried to stand like I was on high alert.

*Come on, make my day.*

But I was having some lower back pain and the suitcase I dragged on the subway was getting in people's way. The car was stuffy and the fear of what could happen to all of us just hung in the stale air. I looked up at the ad from Dr. Sherman Kazinsky, a plastic surgeon, who said that he had helped many women my age turn into really hot numbers with liposuction. All I had to do to begin this new sultry existence was call his 800 number.

I sucked in my stomach—on high alert. I wondered if my subway car was going to be blown up, wondered if the last thing I would read on this earth was an ad for liposuction.

I looked at the faces of my fellow travelers—everyone had to be a little afraid, but there we were on the subway, sticking out our tongues in terrorism’s face. Woody Allen said that 90% of success is just showing up. And we’d done that, damn the threats, all bearing in some small way, the light of resolve.

I try to find moments of light when I create my characters. I want them, I need them, to carry a light inside—it’s the only way they can make it through the darkness. I think of it as their inner lighthouse. And I have to know where it came from before I can bring it forth.

In Ellie Morgan of *Squashed*, it’s her unbowed stance on being who she is, hopelessly P.O. (pumpkin obsessive). For A.J. McCreary of *Thwonk*, it’s her artist’s eye that appreciates weird light. Harry Bender’s light came from spending so much time in the dark regions of alcoholism and finding the way out. Hope Yancey’s light comes, in part, from her determination to live and rise to the power of her name. It’s not easy:

*Harrison Beckworth-McCoy, my best male friend at school had given me a good-bye present, and I was opening it now as Addie pushed the Buick through Ohio. Inside the box was a small glass prism that caught the sun. A hand-painted note from Harrison read, “New places always help us look at life differently. I will miss you, but won’t lose you.”*

*Enter memories, sweet and sour.*

*Harrison and me baking enormous mocha chip cookies for the high school bake sale and having them stolen on the Lexington Avenue subway.*

*Harrison’s African fighting fish, Luther, who ate Chef Boyardee Ravioli without chewing.*

*Harrison reading my mother’s photocopied annual Christmas letter that she sent to family and friends—“Dear Friends . . .” (she’d cross out friends and write in “Addie and my little Tulip.”) Harrison commenting that motherhood should be like driving a car—you should have to pass a test before you get to do it legally.*

*I held the prism up to the light. The sun hit it and showered colors through the windshield.*

*“Now isn’t that something?” Addie said, smiling at the sight.*

*“Yeah,” I looked out the window, trying not to cry.*

Mrs. Gladstone of *Rules of the Road* and *Best Foot Forward* has a special kind of light and if you mentioned it to her, she would probably get huffy. But the light she bears is doing the right and hard thing. Mrs.

Gladstone’s light is costly because it comes at the cost of her relationship with her son and the role she plays in her company. She is a lonely bearer of light, but because of that she’s not swayed by darkness, not drawn to it. She doesn’t compromise. Her light changes lives. There are just some people put on this earth that were created to fight the hard battles.

Tree Benton in *Stand Tall* is curious about the light. He packs big questions into everyday moments:

*Getting ready for bed, watching the clock tick off the seconds, minutes. On Saturday Tree had taken the clock apart to see how it was made, and when he put it back together, there were two parts left on the table. He didn’t trust the clock much after that.*

*He got into his queen-size bed, lay at an angle, covered himself with two blankets. Angle sleeping gave him more room.*

*He had heard that people grow when they sleep, so last year he’d tried to stay awake to stop his bones from expanding. He was so tired, he kept tripping over Bradley, who up to that time had felt safe sleeping in the hall.*

*A cold draft blew into the room. He hadn’t minded a drafty room as much when his parents were still married, but his room seemed colder these days.*

*He tried to sleep. Couldn’t.*

*Got out the cool laser pen his father had gotten him from the sporting goods show at the convention center.*

*Took out the insides. Put each part on the desk. Studied the laser section—it was so small to make such a big light.*

*There was beauty in seeing how things worked, machines in particular.*

*Grandpa taught him that.*

*He put the pen back together piece by piece, saw the clean lines of each ink cartridge, the small tunnel for the laser beam that had to be fixed on the little battery just so. The batteries had to be put in the right way or the flashlight wouldn’t work. There was no other road to take in the battery world—the negative and positive ends had to be touching.*

*He turned out the light and shone the laser on the wall, making circles and slashes like a space warrior.*

*He wished life could be simple like a laser pen—with clean lines and a clear purpose.*

Jenna Boller is no stranger to the light. And she sees it, too, in everyday places. Here’s one of those moments in *Best Foot Forward* as Jenna “lovingly” locks the door of her new car:

*My new car was glistening red and cool in the early morning light. People talk about light dancing off a lake in summer or sunshine pouring through a kitchen window, but there's a true beauty to light beaming off the hood of a recently washed red car that is absolutely yours.*

But in every story I write there's always a black hole of sorts that the main character falls into for awhile and struggles to find the light.

Jenna, surrounded by the pain of her dad's alcoholism.

Hope Yancey in *Hope Was Here*, carried off against her will to the land of lactose.

Ivy Breedlove in *Backwater*, climbing a tall mountain in the middle of winter to find her hermit aunt.

A.J. McCreary in *Thwonk*, plunged into the darkness of unrequited love.

Mickey Vernon in *Sticks*, beaten again and again by the dirty rotten bully.

Scientists tell us that black holes in space are places devoid of light. I know a bit about places like that.

I struggled with so much as a teenager. Like Jenna, my dad was an alcoholic. The pain of that followed me for years. Whenever I think of that time, I remember Garrison Keillor's story about a woman named Margaret. "Margaret," Keillor explained, "did not believe in God, but there was a great deal of evidence to show that God believed in Margaret."

I spent several years as an atheist before I moved on to agnosticism. And then, when I was twenty-four years old, I entered one of life's black holes—a place devoid of light.

My father committed suicide.

There was no hope, no comfort, only the darkness of regret and unrelenting sorrow.

I don't remember getting on the airplane. Don't remember getting to the funeral home, but I remember walking in the door and seeing the casket and all the years of our complicated relationship just hit me.

What a colossal waste of a gifted life.

I was numb, of course, I couldn't function. And then something happened. It was dramatic, too, because clear and plain was the only way I was going to pay attention.

I felt a hand on my shoulder. I turned around. No one was there.

It was God's hand.

And in the days and weeks to follow, that hand never left me. It steadied me, it gave me comfort, I stopped feeling alone, it opened the windows of my heart and, little by little, the light came through again. I will never forget when God made Himself so real to me. It has changed everything in my life, that touch. It influences everything I do. All my writing comes from that time of contact. I don't have the words to tell you how that moment of deepest loss opened the door to deepest gain.

There are human hands, of course, that lift us:

A teacher takes extra time so a struggling student can learn to read.

A librarian takes an illuminated story and shares it again and again.

A friend comes to sit with us in the dark and brings light.

A child comes up and hugs us when we need it the most.

It's a journey to find and keep the light. Part of it requires maintenance because lights go out. How well I know this.

I live in an 1875 brownstone in Brooklyn with wonderfully tall ceilings and recessed lighting. It's just so charming *until* you have to change the light bulbs. My husband and I actually sit in semi darkness as bulb after bulb burns out until we finally can't stand it anymore, for we know the painful road we must travel to find the light.

It begins with the ladder from hell.

It weighs 65 pounds and has to be endlessly unfolded, like aluminum origami.

Evan is up on the 8 foot rung, trying to unscrew the recessed bulbs that the realtor assured us would "just pop out"—he's turning like a contortionist and groaning because he has a bad back. My job is to keep the ladder steady, hand the new bulbs up and shout at him to be careful. It's not the most magic time in our marriage.

Hours later when all the bulbs are in and all the lights are on, we flop on the couch and say, "Well, that was almost worth it!"

Maybe we'd feel differently if someone applauded when we were through.

More and more I'm thinking about Olympic torch carriers—there they are in prime condition with good posture. They don't falter. They are assured of their mission. They don't get shin splints like I used to get

as a runner. They know they're going to be appreciated when they run up the steps, not breathing hard, to light the great flame.

Teachers and librarians are no strangers to lugging things up stairs, but you rarely get applause when you get to the top. You can stand there with your torch all alone with no place to ignite it for the glory of literature.

There's no eternal flame to honor books, except that is, in the hearts of true readers.

I'm a reader and my candle is lit from within.

And as for Dr. Sherman Kazinsky and his liposuction—I won't get that ever!

I've earned my cellulite—it's from the layers and layers of all the books I've read, the stories that have made me weep and laugh, the characters that have challenged me and changed me and pressed my skin to new horizons.

Listen up, Dr. Kazinsky. Humor is emotional liposuction—it sucks out the stuff that's causing your soul to ripple and injects you with joy!

In this super-sized, turbo-charged age, a book can seem like a small thing. A light on a key chain does, too, until you press it and the light comes forth. I was intrigued to learn that the word *metaphor* comes from the Greek, which means to bear, to carry over. Maybe that's why we have sore backs and shoulders. As Don Gallo so well said, we're struggling against so much that would pull education down, but God bless you, you're carrying it, bearing it, and the power of that is incalculable to measure.

To bear a thing, to lift it up, to carry it all the way . . .

Pregnancy, whether in actuality or in metaphor, always makes its presence known.

So if you're feeling a little nauseous in the mornings, if you've got lower back pain, if you're tired and cranky; if your stomach is getting a tad too big for your jeans, and your ankles are swollen. If you're weepier than normal, not sleeping too well at night, feeling some odd stirrings in your belly, a kick now and then . . .

You just might have a light within you that is growing. It won't be all roses carrying it through, but to bear it is an honor.

So raise the blinds high,

Open the windows,

Fling wide the doors,

And let there be light!

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*Joan Bauer has a gorgeous website, maintained by Evan Bauer, her husband, at [www.joanbauer.com](http://www.joanbauer.com). Joan has been well-described as an author who "explores difficult issues with humor and hope." Among the awards she has won are: the Newbery Honor Medal, the LA Times Book Prize, the Christopher Award, the Golden Kite Award of the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators, ALA Notable Book, ALA Best Book, ALA Quick Pick, American Bookseller Pick of the List, School Library Journal Best Book, Smithsonian Notable Children's Book, and VOYA's Perfect 10. Joan's appearances are cherished events for members of ALAN who have been fortunate enough to see and meet her in person. She and her husband, Evan, live in Brooklyn, New York, where their daughter, now in graduate school, is a regular visitor.*

## Quiet Voices with a BIG Message

**W**hat if youthful wisdom brought into focus one of the prime absurdities of our humanity—that through our history, certain groups of people have dominated, persecuted, and made subservient other groups, simply using color, beliefs, or other reasons as justification? We don't have to look far to find these human inequities right within our own society, and right within young adult literature. There are a number of thought-provoking historical novels set in the not-too-distant past for middle and high school age readers with characters that appear to have quiet voices, but who speak up and act in a way that makes the world take notice about issues of discrimination. Their messages are worth hearing, and young adult readers can learn a great deal from these characters' quiet yet powerful challenges to situations that are inherently wrong.

The following books would make good choices for classroom reading, discussing, and studying about societal inequalities that have helped shape our history. Paired up with factual titles and informational articles, these middle readers and young adult novels can paint a portrait of unjust conditions more intently than a history text. They can help teen readers see parallels and contrasts in their own lives and in today's world. These books would also make excellent selections for teen book discussion groups and booktalks.

### Voices from the Tumultuous Sixties

One well-known title that fits the above criteria is *The Watsons Go to Birmingham, 1963* by Christopher Paul Curtis, which won a Newbery Honor. With

humor and poignancy, Kenny, the young main character, relays how he and the rest of his African American family, the "Weird Watsons," head to Alabama to visit Grandma during the time of the civil rights movement. There they encounter the horrific 16th Street Baptist Church bombings that killed four young-teenage girls and seriously injured two more. Kenny's first-person voice clearly conveys the fear, anxiety, and turmoil of an innocent young boy who has faced such a challenging ordeal, and brings the heartbreaking injustices he has seen to life.

Another character who witnesses and expresses her feelings about related injustices is Celli Jenkins, in *Black Angels* by Rita Murphy. Celli is quite embarrassed by her greatly admired black housekeeper's involvement in the civil rights movement. Set in Georgia in 1961, the story is told in Celli's first-person voice. Through it, she shares the details of her mystical belief in beautiful black angels she sees around her home while relaying the stark reality of prejudice in her community, and ultimately unveils her own true heritage.

*Flying South* by Laura Malone Elliott (see the interview with Ms. Elliott following this article) deals with the same basic time period, and is told from the perspective of Alice, a pre-teen white girl who doesn't acknowledge or understand the existence of segregation in her town. Through her quiet and innocent voice, Alice teaches those around her a lesson or two they don't want or are not ready to hear. She even addresses another societal change that surfaced during that time period, when she says "But change is going to come whether they like it or not. The whole world is getting evened up. Even for girls."



## Voices as Forerunners of Change

The civil rights movement in the United States, reflected in the above-mentioned stories, did not begin in a vacuum. It was the culmination of frustration and anger over years of injustice and inequality, and a demand to repair and compensate for innumerable wrongs. There are many quiet yet clear voices in young adult literature replicating the factual struggles that occurred in the decades *before* the tumultuous 1960s, leading up to that point. The following titles are good examples of other quiet voices that question injustices and hope for a better future.

Chris Crowe chronicles a dire situation and precursor to the civil rights movement that erupted in the mid-1950s, still echoed in the news today, in *Mississippi Trial, 1955*. The fictional voice of a 16-year-old white Arizonan, Hiram Hillburn, who is visiting his grandfather in Mississippi for the summer, experiences the horror of racism when he is immersed in the true nightmare of the brutal murder of Emmett Till, an African American teenager from Chicago accused of whistling at a white woman. Hiram speaks up with information he knows about the suspected murderers, even though his grandfather warns him against it and it doesn't change the outcome of the trial. "It was the right thing to do," he says. Crowe's subsequent nonfiction companion, *Getting Away with Murder*, reinforces the fictional story.

Similarly, *Devil at My Heels* by Joyce McDonald zeros in on the Ku Klux Klan and its evil influences in the late 1950s. 15-year-old Dove Alderman is a white girl who lives a quiet life in the ironically named rural town of Benevolence, Florida. When she begins to see the growing injustices around her—mysterious fires being blamed on the black migrant workers on her father's farm, harassment of a young black friend and a white girl who fall in love, and suspicions of the KKK influence in her community—Dove has no choice but to speak out and stand up for what is right, even though it means a terrifying ordeal, and challenging and alienating her own father.

A reverse situation occurs in *Lizzie Bright and the Buckminster Boy* by Gary D. Schmidt, as the main character's father supports his son's decision to stand up for what is right rather than opposing him. Set decades earlier in a 1911 coastal town in Maine, this powerful and brilliantly written Newbery and Printz

honor book again brings fiction based on fact to life. In it, Turner Buckminster, the 14-year-old minister's son, who is white, befriends smart, perceptive Lizzie Bright, an African American neighbor his age from nearby Malaga Island. Although written in third person, Turner's voice comes through with humor, pathos, and clarity. When the townspeople decide to banish Lizzie and the members of her community so that they can take over and develop a tourist spot on her island, Turner speaks up against the cruelty and unfairness of the plan and tries to stop it. His father finally speaks up as well when he realizes Turner is right: "I will not stand with you at the destruction of Malaga Island. I will instead stand with my son."

A comparable story, set in the 1920's in a small Texas town, is Carolyn Meyer's *White Lilacs*, also based on an actual situation. Twelve-year-old artist Rose Lee Jefferson loves her home and family, and finds special pleasure in the beautiful gardens planted by her beloved grandfather. When she discovers the white townsfolk are planning to evict the African American Freedomtown community to the "sewer flats" so they can build a park in the center of town, Rose Lee realizes her voice of protest must be heard. Despite the sad outcome, Rose Lee's first-person narrative is powerful and moving.

Also set in the 1920s, Jonathan Scott Fuqua's *Darby* features a young white girl from Marlboro County, South Carolina, who writes an article promoting racial equality for the local newspaper. When the brave newspaper publisher agrees to print her innocent yet powerful viewpoint, the Ku Klux Klan is provoked. The publisher tells Darby, "You do realize that this is going to cause a certain amount of uproar?" And Darby responds, "Saying the truth is what newspaper girls do." Later, the publisher has a brick thrown through his window, and Darby's family finds a burning cross on their front lawn. Darby asks her mother if she is afraid. Her mother tells her no, that "in lighting that cross, they didn't push me down. They stood me up." Although Darby is only 9, the intensity of the story make it appropriate for middle grade and junior high readers.

A variety of voices speak of the fear instilled by the Ku Klux Klan in a 1924 Vermont town, including that of a young African American girl and a young Jewish girl, in Karen Hesse's *Witness*. In verse novel form, which Hesse popularized through her Newbery

winner *Out of the Dust*, she brings forth the startling and sad insight that the KKK was active in other places besides the southern United States at that time.

## Other Voices and Perspectives

Two decades after *Witness*, on the opposite side of the world, 14-year-old Sorry Rinamu's fictional voice, in Theodore Taylor's *The Bomb*, focuses on the 1946 atomic testing by the United States on Bikini Atoll. Like Rose Lee in *White Lilacs*, he sees the injustice, inequity, and danger surrounding the plan to displace his people, and he sets off on a deadly mission to attempt recognition of and response to his voice of dissent.

Farther north in the Pacific, during World War II, Hawaiian eighth-grader Tomi Nakaji enjoys playing baseball with his friends and tries to live the life of a normal American teenager in *Under the Blood-Red Sun*, by Graham Salisbury. However, his Japanese heritage often triggers prejudicial behavior by others toward him. After witnessing the bombing of Pearl Harbor, Tomi sees his father and grandfather arrested simply because they are Japanese, and Tomi finds himself on a mission for justice, risking his own life for his family. Tomi also learns to stand up for himself, finally declaring to a man taunting him: "You got it wrong, mister. I was born here. I live here, just like you do. And I'm an American."

In the Newbery-winning *Kira-Kira* by Cynthia Kadohata, another American family of Japanese heritage moves from Iowa to Chesterfield, Georgia in the late 1950s. Sisters and best friends, Katie and Lynn Takeshima, realize quickly that people in their new town do not treat them as equals. Their parents get jobs in a poultry processing plant, where they work in deplorable conditions, have no time off for emergencies, but refuse to support the union in fear of being fired. When Lynn gets cancer, the family has no money to pay for the medical treatment she desperately needs, and Katie sees her sister's health fading away. After the ordeal with Lynn, their parents realize what matters in life, and finally stand up for what is right. Lynn had taught Katie the word "kira-kira," which means "glittering," and in her open and accepting way Katie herself learns what is important, when her quiet voice reflects: "My sister had taught me to look at the world that way, as a place that

glitters, as a place where the calls of the crickets and the crows and the wind are everyday occurrences that also happen to be magic."

Chris Lynch's *Gold Dust* is set in Boston, where undercurrents of racial prejudice still fester in 1975. In the middle of the school year, Richard Riley Moncrief, who is white, befriends his new classmate, Napoleon Charlie Ellis, a dark-skinned boy from the island of Dominica. Napoleon is bright, interesting, and wears forthrightness like a shield against the bigotry around him. Even though Richard professes to be his friend, Richard is oblivious to Napoleon's sensitivity to the racially oriented comments and situations surrounding him. He also dreams of molding Napoleon into a huge baseball fan and dedicated player like he is. However, that's not Napoleon's dream. He would rather play cricket, be in a choir, and not have to deal with racial intolerance. It is the quiet voice of their friend Beverly who sees and wakes Richard up to the truth when she says, "Did you ever wonder, Richard, what Napoleon's dreams are? Did you ever even ask him?"

Another kind of intolerance comes to light when readers experience books about the plights and the controversies surrounding people coming across the southern border of the United States seeking a better life. A book that gives insights into their desperation, and that portrays realistically what life is like once they get here, is *Journey of the Sparrows* by Fran Leeper Buss. It was written with the assistance of Daisy Cubias, a native of El Salvador, and a poet, educator, and human rights activist. *Journey of the Sparrows* is beautifully told in the first person voice of sweet, heroic Maria, a 15-year-old Salvadoran who crosses the border in a crate, determined to earn enough money to help her family survive. Despite the harsh and cruel treatment she receives in Chicago, Maria manages to scrape by, and soon learns she must risk going back across the border to rescue her baby sister.

A pertinent concluding title, *Crossing Jordan* by Adrian Fogelin, takes a contemporary look at a close friendship between two girls in Tallahassee, Florida. Seventh-grader Cass Bodine, who is white, watches her father putting up a big fence one day during the summer, and learns it's because an African American family is moving in next door. He tells her "Good fences make good neighbors," and "If they stay out of our business and we stay out of theirs, we'll get along

## An Interview with Laura Malone Elliott on *Flying South*

**Diane Tuccillo:** What was your inspiration for writing *Flying South*?

**Laura Malone Elliott:** I had long had the character of a curmudgeonly but loveable gardener rattling around in my head. The character of Doc is actually based on a sketch I started in high school of an elderly man I knew and loved as a child. I always tell students to keep their journals and writing notebooks, because there will be the seeds of stories in them no matter how badly written they might have been originally! In journalism we call that “saving string.”

But the concept of *Flying South*'s story was born in sadness, when my father died. As I so often have as a parent when my children faced a difficult issue, I looked for a book to help my children deal with the loss of their grandfather. There are many gentle picture books and thought-provoking YA novels on the subject—but not as much for the middle reader. And so, I felt pushed to write one. My purpose was to reassure young readers that even though a loved person is gone, the influence and lessons shared remain as profound talismans.

As all pithy characters should be, Doc is an amalgamation of inspirations—people I have known, people I have read about, people I'd like to see on this earth. In Doc, there is definitely a bit of the old, rather crusty gentleman who was my friend; a dollop of some demanding and philosophic teachers I had; and a strong dash of my father who raised award-winning roses and so loved and celebrated the natural world.

There are many “messages” I hope *Flying South* shares—about friendship, the life force, the wonders and solace of nature, the gift of elderly wisdom, and the importance of a young person making his/her own decision about what is right and wrong, no matter what peers or society say. The civil rights movement provided the perfect test for the final theme.

All these concepts were inspiration that prodded me to write *Flying South*.

**DT:** For what reason did you choose to set the story in the late 1960s?

**LME:** Part of the reason rests in the fact I was about Alice's age during 1968 and when I've talked to my children about that time period, they often look at my blankly! One of the nicest reactions to *Flying South* is that mother-daughter book clubs choose to read it together. So, the 1968 setting was a way to expose children to that decade, to humanize the individual choices that have to be made during sweeping social change. A line from a critic I really appreciate: “*Flying South* shows how national movements, though they may seem distant today, were very real—and very personal—to the people who lived through them.”

The late 1960s was such a pivotal time in American history in terms of attitudes and respect for the rights of others. Although laws were changed to demand equality and access to things as fundamental as a bus seat or public toilet, a subtler racism continued to permeate daily life. As Bridget—the voice of the status quo—says, “*Allowed* and *wanted* are two different things.” The only way for that difference to change is for people like Alice to have the courage and decency to speak up for it. Those smaller, day-to-day choices—which perhaps bring about a deeper, more permanent change—are not made on the Senate floor with inspiring oratory but at the lunch counter and the school playground facing down the intimidating disapproval of neighbors and classmates.

Setting *Flying South* in the late 1960s also allowed me to slip in some other social realities that are quite startling to young people today, especially to girls. That topic, of course, is discrimination based on sexism. While civil rights were finally becoming legal reality, women still had many battles ahead of them. The concept that women would be barred from state universities, or paid less for doing the same job as a man, or were frowned upon for having a career, or would tolerate—even expect—bullying by their spouse is quite shocking to our middle-grade readers. Thank

goodness! But these are advances they should realize are relatively recent. These were topics I had written about as a journalist. Quite frankly, they slipped into Alice's narrative as themes without my really planning on it.

Finally, 1968 was a frightening, unpredictable year—assassinations, rioting, a bloody war that divided the country—not unlike the turmoil and uncertainty our children have faced since 9/11. I hope seeing Alice survive her challenges helps steel today's preteens to face their own with confidence and a commitment to doing what they know is right. As Doc says, "Life is going to test you. How you deal with those tests is the measure of what kind of a person you are."

**DT:** Alice is such a sweet and innocent, yet realistic and perceptive, character. Why did you choose the voice of such a preteen girl to demonstrate the folly of discrimination in our society?

**LME:** Those preteen years are so critical in terms of a young person learning to be true to himself, to hang on to an inner compass. The desire to belong and to fit in is so strong. Preteens are tested constantly in terms of having to choose between what they know is right and what those seemingly all-important social cliques want them to do. And so often, what cliques perpetuate is discrimination—ostracizing a child because he or she doesn't have popular clothes, music, or attitudes. Alice risks her "status" with Bridget, with her community, to stick to her love and respect for Edna, her mother, herself. And, of course, she falters at first under Bridget's influence. She hurts Edna. I hope Alice's faltering but ultimate success helps readers her age understand that each day offers a chance to begin anew and to break away from the pettiness and discrimination often perpetuated by "popular" kids.

**DT:** Doc says, "The more you challenge something, the more it produces . . . If you ignore them (the roses), they won't amount to nothing . . . sort of like children." Tell me about the symbolism of the roses, and why you included that element in the story?

**LME:** I have to admit that the symbolism of the roses was quite an organic and magical experience for me. They became a symbol as I wrote. The roses were there initially as backdrop because they are beautiful, I love them, and it seemed a natural thing for Doc to grow and cherish. My husband and I were married in my father's rose-garden.

I hadn't *pre-planned* the thorns and the blossoms to be a metaphor for the pain and the joy life brings us. And yet, as I wrote those paragraphs, it happened. I could hear my father's voice telling me that for a rosebush to thrive and continue to bloom, a gardener must prune away the dead to make way for new life. That roses needed careful and constant tending and were well worth the effort because what could be more breath-taking than a rose garden in full glory? And what could be a better analogy for the miracle and thrill of raising children? Or a better message for young people—that things worth doing require hard work and personal challenges?

I felt my fingers fly across the keyboard. I have to tell you that such spontaneous moments at the computer make a writer want to jump up and dance afterward!

That being said, I had very much planned on Doc's garden being a symbol of the life cycle, of rebirth, a clear reassurance of life going on, even after a loved person dies. I worry that so many of our children grow up as "hot-house" adults now, unused to witnessing a seed turning into a plant, stretching up toward the sun, blooming, "dying" during the winter, only to reappear the next spring. I think trusting in the earth's life continuum lends a perspective that builds resiliency and a deep appreciation of each moment we have here on earth. "Things have their time of beauty," as Doc says, and the trick is recognizing that and relishing it when it's happening.

I wear a bracelet with a prayer from the author Jane Austen inscribed on it: "Teach us that we may feel the importance of every day, of every hour, as it passes."

**DT:** The friendship between Alice and Doc, and the warm relationship between Alice and Edna, are exceptionally loving and beautiful. Why did you

choose these intergenerational relationships to help fulfill the story's purpose?

**LME:** I was blessed to know a number of witty, wise, and vibrant elderly people as I grew up. In fact, someday I need to write a story inspired by my surrogate grandmother, who was a lawyer with the State Department back in the 1920s—talk about a ferocious and demanding intellect!

I made the relationship between Edna and Alice, Doc and Alice, as loving and strong as I did for a number of reasons. Mostly, it is a statement about friendship.

Young people need to know that friends—true friends—can come in all colors, sizes, and ages. They don't *have* to be peers.

Older people bring such a wonderful perspective. As I grew up during Vietnam, the assassinations of the best and brightest of our nation, and the sordid details of Watergate, my hope in the prevailing good intentions of mankind was preserved by knowing people who had survived the Depression, deadly outbreaks of polio and influenza, World War II, the "Red Scare," and horrendous discrimination. They had a kind of matter-of-fact faith, knowing full well that change was brought about by courage and sacrifice but that man was completely capable of such bravery. They expected it of us, just as Doc and Edna expect it of Alice. By osmosis, their faith shored me up. Doc and Edna guide and lead Alice to what she knows in her heart to be right.

In our mobile culture, so many of our children grow up without consistent contact with older relatives. It's such a shame, especially because it puts so much pressure on the short visits they do have. Reaping the benefits of a relationship with older people requires a little patience—they move a little slower, want to tell metaphorical anecdotes that at first seem boring, or can be short-tempered because their joints ache. I hope readers will heed what Alice says about Doc: "You can't have your whole opinion about someone wrapped up in a bad moment. Give a person like Doc long enough and he might just say something wonderful."

Finally, living in a metropolitan area just outside Washington, DC, I witnessed a great many of my children's peers grow up with long-term nannies in their homes, replicating in many ways the relationship between Edna and Alice. Like Edna, many of these caregivers are devoted and loving, augmenting parental nurturing in ways extended family-members once did. Often, today's caregivers are recent immigrants, with limited English and different ethnic backgrounds. Sadly, I have seen some of these wonderful people treated with the same kind of disdainful haughtiness that Bridget displays toward Edna. I hope Bridget's snobbish, disrespectful conduct will prompt some soul-searching among more privileged children who might make similar mistakes. In that regard—civility and respect for all people no matter class or education—I still see parallels between 2005 and 1968.

**DT:** Alice is both innocent and wise. How does that combination make her a perfect channel for the BIG message?

**LME:** Remember that old saying: "Out of the mouth of babes . . .?" Wisdom born of innocence is often the most clear-eyed because it is instinctive and uncorrupted. Alice has not yet been inculcated to what 1968 society held to be "correct." Preteens can be in that wonderful stage in life—smart and mature enough to consider more difficult questions, yet still relatively free of prescribed, traditional attitudes. Alice sees straight to the heart of things because she is not sophisticated enough to look at the trappings. When Bridget corrects her for inviting the African American mother and daughter into the all-white restaurant, saying "allowed and wanted are two different things," Alice doesn't understand the ugly, legal nuance of Bridget's argument. She misinterprets Bridget's statement, replying the mother and daughter *did* want to come in, she could tell. And that was the crux of the matter, wasn't it?

**DT:** It was. It was a very powerful and moving point in the book.



**LME:** Doc tells Alice: “Stand up for yourself and what you know is right. Grown people come to believe a lot of foolish things because of money, status, old prejudices that their class of people tells them are proper. They’re afraid of losing their place at the top of the hill.”

I’ll never forget my daughter’s reaction to a book on the Underground Railroad when she was in first grade. She couldn’t grasp what it was about. When I explained, she looked at me with complete horror and incredulity, “You mean, people owned people?”

**DT:** Near the end of the story, Grace (Alice’s mother) stands up to Bill, saying, “It is time I follow her lead and stand up for myself and for her.” How do you see this situation connecting to the bigger picture of the importance of civil rights in the story?

**LME:** I hope it shows that standing up for what is right is contagious! And that children can affect adults and lead by example. I think young people sometimes feel their actions, their voices, their beliefs will be ignored simply because they are children. They need to believe that taking a stand with conviction will inspire others to be brave as well.

**DT:** Have you heard from young people who have read your book? Have they expressed that they have gotten the BIG message from this quiet but powerful story?

**LME:** I haven’t received as many letters about *Flying South* as I have for other YA novels, *Under a War-torn Sky* and *Annie, Between the States*, which are both much more of an adventure story. Those two I hear about constantly. As you say, *Flying South*, is a quieter, more contemplative story. What I have heard and thrills me is readers actually quoting pieces of the text to me. One child told me that she tells her mother: “Give me a real hug not one of those quick for-show ones.” Another reader giggled over the line: “Bright red on a scowl is scary,” a description of Grace’s vibrant-colored lipstick.

Those are reactions to craft, of course, not comment on thematic content—but you can understand a writer’s delight in them!

Still, I have been very gratified when asked to speak to schools on *Flying South* to hear students’ insistent questions about why Bridget was the way she was, why were people so opposed to the African American mother and daughter entering the restaurant? They really get stuck on that, which is a terrific springboard for me to ask them why *they* think people believed race mattered. Then I can challenge them further, asking why they exclude their peers sometimes. All those disquieted “how-come” questions, as Alice calls them, tells me that they “get the big message” because it’s as if they have an itch they can’t quell. Also, one teacher laughed in telling me how she had cried as she read the ending to her classroom. Evidently, her emotional candor prompted a wide-ranging confession among her students to all the times they had behaved badly to people of other color or socio-economic class.

I don’t know that readers feel hit in the face with the “big message” of Alice’s story. But I can see that her questions linger and prompt some soul searching. Sometimes it is the quiet but persistent thoughts that most affect us.

Early on in my writing career, my editor at the *Washingtonian* magazine gave me a simple but profound piece of advice: Remember that readers think. Allow them to digest and react to the meaning of scenes I painted or quotes I collected. In other words, show rather than tell, illustrate rather than preach. And look for inspiring stories rooted in everyday life, in adversity readers themselves might face so they can truly feel and understand it.

I’ve always tried to remember that, especially when writing for young people. They hate being lectured—a sure way to turn them off to any message you’re trying to convey! My hope is that *Flying South*’s themes are like a sweet, subtle tune that gets stuck in one’s head and ends up being a permanent companion.

fine.” Cass doesn’t agree with that, especially when she meets one of the new neighbors, a girl named Jemmie who is her age, also loves running, and is as determined as she is to read *Jane Eyre*. As their friendship grows, the girls’ families try to keep them apart, and they worry what the other kids in school will think about their relationship, but the girls decide to stand together proudly and fight for their friendship as a team. When they do, there is no fence that can hold them back, and perceptive readers will understand that if more fences of bigotry were torn down, the world would be a better place.

## Many More Voices to Be Heard

There are numerous quiet, but clear, voices in young adult literature that convey messages against racial, ethnic, and other forms of social intolerance. The titles represented here are just a selection of fine examples. To discuss a wider variety of YA books addressing the folly of humans treating one another with hatred, inequality, or unkindness, and the various kinds of discrimination that is the result, while featuring young adult characters who speak up for what is right, would take a whole book rather than an article! However, the titles represented here are a good start for exploring those important topics, and getting readers to think about and discuss an array of related, many-faceted issues.

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*Laura Malone Elliott is the author of the acclaimed World War II novel Under a War-torn Sky (Hyperion, 2001), for which she is currently researching and planning a sequel. Her other notable books are Annie, Between the States (Katherine Tegen, 2004), and Flying South. In 2006, her forthcoming book, a Revolutionary War story set in 1775, will be published. Ms. Elliott lives in Virginia with her husband and their two children.*

*Diane Tuccillo is the author of Library Teen Advisory Groups: A VOYA Guide, Scarecrow, 2005. She was the Young Adult Coordinator at the City of Mesa Library in Arizona for almost 25 years, frequently contributes book reviews and articles to the professional literature, presents workshops on teen library participation, and is an adjunct instructor at the University of Arizona teaching “Young Adults & Libraries” and has taught the “Adolescent Literature” course at Arizona State University. Diane has presented at ALAN Workshops, is the Library Connection column editor for The ALAN Review, served on the ALAN Board of Directors, and is currently ALAN President.*



<p><b><i>Caught in the Act</i></b> by Peter Moore  Viking Penguin, 2005, 256 pp., \$16.99</p> <p>When high school honors student Ethan Lederer begins to struggle with class and his family's high expectations, the new student, Lydia Krane, a semi-gothic and seductive sophomore, lends a helping hand. By causing Ethan to get dumped by his steady girlfriend first and then helping him blackmail a teacher who caught him cheating, Lydia has a twisted way of trying to reach her goals. Despite this, Ethan finds himself falling for Lydia, a fellow theater junkie, when they share the lead roles in the school play, a modern version of <i>Macbeth</i>. The book ends with a surprising and dark final scene of <i>Macbeth</i>.</p> <p><i>Caught in the Act</i> is a page-turning book with a strong message and stronger, deeper characters. I would give it my highest recommendation.</p> <p>Chris Goering  Manhattan, KS</p>	<p><b><i>Day of Tears</i></b> by Julius Lester  Hyperion Books for Children, 2005, 177 pp., \$15.99</p> <p><i>Day of Tears</i> is a most provocative novel. Written in dialogue, different characters are used to divulge to the reader the story of slaves' lives both past, present, and future. From the white master, his children, house slaves and field hands to the auctioneer, everyone speaks. Seen through these different perspectives, the reader experiences the auction block, the separation of families, and the dehumanizing slavery brought to both white and black people. The format the author uses makes the story real. The deluge of rain in the story symbolizes God's tears as He looks down on His creation. This is a compelling story.</p> <p>Joy Frerichs  Chatsworth, GA</p>
<p><b><i>Defiance</i></b> by Valerie Hobbs  Farrar Straus and Giroux, 2005, 116 pp., \$16.00</p> <p>Deceptively simple, <i>Defiance</i> is an exercise in growth. Toby finds another lump in his battle with cancer and befriends a cow and a crazy/sane woman all in the same summer. The title <i>Defiance</i> might come from any number of sources: the poetry the woman has Toby read, the cow's decision about death, Toby's changing relationship with his parents, and Toby's own decision concerning his mortality.</p> <p>This story ranks as a shining example of a gloriously powerful book that will be impossible to book talk to anyone, that will be hard to get in boys' hands, and that will be difficult to get out of girls' minds.</p> <p>Jennie Dutton  Athens, OH</p>	<p><b><i>A Dog's Life: The Autobiography of a Stray</i></b>  by Ann M. Martin  Scholastic, 2005, 244 pp., \$16.99</p> <p>A dog named Squirrel and her brother Bone are followed from their birth until their separation. In portraying stray dogs, Newbery Honor winner Ann M. Martin also discusses and shows the various ways people treat strays, from ignoring them to trying to kill them to treating them well. Squirrel understands many things that a dog probably cannot, including human speech, so readers will have to suspend their disbelief in reading this book.</p> <p>Martin's writing is elegant and insightful. The story is realistic, though at times disheartening because of how we often treat stray animals. Squirrel stays away from feral dogs when she can, but she is injured and is lucky to have a family take her to a vet for surgery. Still, these people leave her behind. Eventually she finds a home with a woman who treats her as a companion.</p> <p>John Jacob  Oak Park, IL</p>

<p><b><i>Double Crossing: A Jewish Immigration Story for Young Adults</i></b> by Eve Tal Cinco Punto Press, 2005, 261pp., \$16.95</p> <p>Historical Fiction/Immigration ISBN: 0-938317-94-6</p> <p>It's 1905 in the rural Russian countryside, and Raizel Balaban loves helping her mother with her younger siblings and telling stories. The last thing she wants to do is go with her father to America. But the threat of pogroms and conscription into the Czar's army force her and her father Benjamin to undertake an arduous, risky journey across Europe and the Atlantic. They survive seasickness, near drowning, and hunger (as orthodox Jews, they will only eat kosher food) only to be turned away at Ellis Island because of Benjamin's poor health. Exceptionally and powerfully told, this story is historical fiction at its finest, treating important (though often neglected) issues of immigration and belonging, pride and faith.</p> <p>Melissa Moore Jackson, TN</p>	<p><b><i>The Dragon Throne</i></b> by Michael Cadnum Viking, 2005, 212 pp., \$16.99</p> <p>Historical Fiction ISBN: 0-670-03631-5</p> <p><i>The Dragon Throne</i> is the final book in Cadnum's trilogy that takes its readers back to the Middle Ages and the turbulent era of the Crusades. This novel follows two squires, Edmund and Hubert, who rise to knighthood and are immediately thrust into perils accompanying their new titles. The pair of new knights, along with two seasoned knights, are ordered to escort a young lady of the Queen's court on a pilgrimage to Rome. Along the way, the story focuses on young Sir Edmund as he encounters danger in many forms and wrestles with the clash of morals being a man of war presents.</p> <p>Cadnum's novel takes an interesting perspective as it reveals the important role religion played in the daily lives of the people and juxtaposes it with the cruelty of life in a war-torn age. <i>The Dragon Throne</i> is full of historical detail that will delight those with interest in the Middle Ages, but contains advanced vocabulary that may frustrate some readers.</p> <p>Emily Pauly Hewitt, TX</p>
<p><b><i>Dread Locks</i></b> by Neal Shusterman Penguin Putnam, 2005, 176 pp., \$15.99</p> <p>Coming of Age/Friendship ISBN: 0-525-47554-0</p> <p>A modern day telling of the medusa myth, this fantasy thriller is sure to engage readers and leave them with an unfamiliar, unforeseen ending.</p> <p>As the protagonist Parker Baer dredges through upper class suburban life, he meets a mysterious new neighbor—Tara—in his bedroom, uninvited, one afternoon. The two become fast friends, but something doesn't add up for Parker. Several people who have come in contact with Tara seem to be dying as noted by their pale, almost gray, complexions and physical rigidity. Parker begins a detective style search for the truth but is he too late?</p> <p>Readers from seventh grade and up will happily read this page-turning book and make connections to the medusa myth and common fairytales.</p> <p>Chris Goering Manhattan, KS</p>	<p><b><i>Far Traveler</i></b> by Rebecca Tingle G. P. Putnam's Sons, 2005, 228 pp., \$17.99</p> <p>Self-discovery/Exploration/Historical Fiction ISBN: 0-399-23890-5</p> <p><i>Ælfwyn's</i> story is an educational and captivating foray into tenth-century Britain in the time of the West Saxon ruler, King Edward. When <i>Ælfwyn's</i> mother dies, the Mercian territory under her rule by King Edward refuses to relinquish all loyalty unto the King, and Wynn is thrown into politics though having always been more comfortable with books and poetry. When Wynn is faced with her uncle's ultimatum of either marrying one of his allies or becoming a nun, she takes the first risk of her sheltered life, fleeing under the guise of a boy. With her new identity as a traveling storyteller, she finds inner-courage using the Old English poetry she has loved all her life; <i>Far Traveler</i> includes literary references to such Old English works as <i>Beowulf</i> as sources for Wynn's self-discovery. King Wilfrid wants Wynn's help in a plot against her uncle; her budding courage must sustain her in a decision between what her heart wants and what her royal upbringing demands.</p> <p>Katherine Harder Manhattan, KS</p>



<p><b>The Fashion Disaster that Changed My Life</b> by Lauren Myracle      Friendship Dutton Children's Books, 2005, 135 pp., \$15.99      ISBN: 0-525-47222-3</p> <p>Finally, Allie has made it to seventh grade—the year that will change her life for the better! A fresh start brings hopeful promises of increasing popularity, new boys to consider, and fresh gossip to chat about in the lunchroom. But somehow, Allie finds herself in sticky predicaments that cause her to question the real value behind popularity and what true friendship is.</p> <p>When Rachel, Mika, and Hadley invite Allie to join their elite friendship, Allie loses sight of her former friends, Kathy and Megan. Jealousy and deception surround the daily occurrences of Allie's life. Throughout her encounters with the popular crowd, Allie begins to discover her real identity and questions the significance of climbing the social ladder.</p> <p>Readers will be immediately drawn in by Allie's character. Her humor, honesty, and fresh wit will allow many teenage girls to relate to the drama she endures. Myracle's fresh style of writing will enchant middle school readers and force them to keep turning the pages.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Julie Zaderaka Elgin, IL</p>	<p><b>The Foretelling</b> by Alice Hoffman      Coming-of-Age/Adventure Little Brown, 2005, 176 pp., \$16.99      ISBN: 0316010189</p> <p>There comes a time when traditions must change. In Hoffman's newest novel for young adults, Rain is a young girl who is disturbed by her tribe's coda of violence toward men. She is chosen to succeed her mother, Queen Alina. But, her mother treats Rain as an outcast because she was born out of rape.</p> <p>As Rain becomes more involved in battles, she finds her conquests revolting instead of pleasing. She develops an alliance with Io, daughter of her mother's companion. Rain also finds comfort in the arms of a young boy. Her actions go against the rigid, Amazon-like regime of her people. But, none of those forbidden relationships can suffice for the yearning of affection from her mother.</p> <p>When her mother dies during childbirth, Rain is faced with a hard decision to make. Should she risk her life to save her baby brother or maintain her tribe's laws? Hoffman's writing style makes this an adventurous tale that will definitely engage adolescents.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Anjeanette Alexander-Smith Jacksonville, FL</p>
<p><b>Guys Write for Guys Read</b> edited by Jon Scieszka      Adolescent Males Viking-Penguin Group, 2005, 272 pp., \$16.99      ISBN: 0670060070</p> <p>Scieszka's latest just might be the miracle cure for struggling adolescent male readers.</p> <p>The book is a compilation of entertaining memoirs, short stories, and novel excerpts from authors like Chris Crutcher, Walter Dean Meyers, Gary Paulsen, and Jerry Spinelli. Each selection is unique, entertaining, and aims to lead our boys to books.</p> <p>It is rare that such a variety of young adult literature is represented in a single work, and makes for a quick read—an excellent choice for guys who have yet to finish their first book. In addition, teachers and librarians will find each chapter a useful tool for getting students hooked on particular authors and novels.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Curtis Chandler Wamego, KS</p>	<p><b>Hook, Line, and Sinker</b> by G.P. Guarente      Coming of Age/Pets Penguin, 2005, 198 pp., \$7.99      ISBN: 1595140115</p> <p>Fiona has the busiest schedule this side of school. Besides her studies, she keeps an exotic fish tank. The fish are named for boyfriends who have rejected her in the past. She is secretary of Student Council and a tutor; most recently she has tried out for an off-campus production of the musical <i>Grease</i>, landing the role of Sandy against her current flame, who plays Danny. But he is romantically involved with another girl that Fiona doesn't like, despite the girl's nice personality. Of course lurking in the wings is the boy that Fiona really should be with. That only becomes clear to her in the last pages of the book.</p> <p>Each of the relationships portrayed by her fish is explained in flashbacks. Fiona is probably one of the highest energy characters in recent young adult fiction. She makes a great Sandy, especially when she dons her black leather for the finale.</p> <p><i>Hook, Line, and Sinker</i> is a page-turner, and Fiona is a great character.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">John Jacob Oak Park, IL</p>

<p><b><i>The Hunter's Moon</i></b> by O.R. Melling Amulet Books, 2005, 284 pp., \$16.95</p> <p>Friendships/Love/Discovery ISBN: 0-8109-5857-0</p> <p>This comical yet touching fantasy adventure will keep the reader engaged. The main character, Gwen, is always obsessed with food, which provides comic relief. Findabhair, Gwen's cousin, acts as a foil for Gwen, adding further humor. The relationship between the two cousins is heartfelt, especially the lengths Gwen goes to in trying to save Findabhair. Against the backdrop of Irish folktales and culture the adventure is played out. The characters undergo a transformation as they fight against the evil forces of the isle. Every Hunter's Moon a sacrifice is required of the mortals by this evil force. The faeries must offer up this sacrifice, until the heroines come along. Female readers will appreciate the fact that this book has a heroine who is fully human yet strong and adventurous. Hopefully a new addition to this series will be soon forthcoming, as the author is quite talented in her descriptive skills.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Kenan Metzger Muncie, IN</p>	<p><b><i>An Innocent Soldier</i></b> by Josef Holub; translated by Michael Hofmann Arthur A. Levine Books, 2005, 240 pp., \$16.99</p> <p>Courage/Adventure/Historical Fiction ISBN: 0-439-62771-0</p> <p><i>An Innocent Soldier</i> tells the story of an unusual friendship between an aristocrat and a peasant in Napoleonic Europe. Forced to enlist under his master's son's name in Napoleon's <i>Grande Armée</i>, Adam Feuchter is instantly terrorized by the horrors of war and is desperate to escape until he witnesses the consequences of desertion. Adam's lot takes a turn for the better, however, when a young lieutenant requisitions him as his personal servant, and the surprising friendship that grows between them is ultimately what gets them through the terrible war alive. Adam's gratitude to Konrad Klara for taking him under his wing results in a great bond of loyalty, and his fear and insecurity evolve into great bravery and courage as the two of them fight to survive the Russian campaign. The war that introduces Adam to so many terrible things also rewards him with true friendship and the possibility of a happier life afterward.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Katherine Harder Manhattan, KS</p>
<p><b><i>The Last Domino</i></b> by Adam Meyer G.P. Putnam's Sons, 2005, 229 pp., \$16.99</p> <p>Adolescent Violence/Isolation ISBN: 0-399-24332-1</p> <p>The school shootings that have made recent headlines have left many wondering what pushes these students to resort to such violent measures. Meyer's novel is an examination of the events that compound and eventually cause its main character, Travis Ellroy, to break and seek final revenge from those who have been nudging him closer to the edge for too long.</p> <p>Living in a family broken after his brother commits suicide, Travis searches for a place to feel significant and finally realizes a sense of worth through a friendship with Daniel—a new student at his high school. Unfortunately, this sense of worth and friendship urge Travis to make those who have hurt him pay, revealing truths about both boys and their friendship in the process.</p> <p>This dark, yet gripping novel, leaves its reader with much to think about as Travis' violence erupts on the pages. With its mature themes and language, care is suggested when recommending <i>The Last Domino</i>.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Emily Pauly Hewitt, TX</p>	<p><b><i>Learning the Game</i></b> by Kevin Waltman Scholastic, 2005, 224 pp., \$16.95</p> <p>Basketball/Juvenile Crime ISBN: 0439731097</p> <p>Nate has been spending the summer working on his basketball game, often joined by friends and teammates from his high school's varsity team at a little park with decent hoops. One day the "enforcer" for his team, the guy who makes the dirty fouls and is not liked much, shows up. The scrimmage continues in spite of his dirty play.</p> <p>The enforcer, Branson, brings his van to the park one day and jimmies open the lock to a local fraternity. In a scene that stretches one's imagination, he convinces all team members—except one player who goes home—to steal the entire contents of the fraternity, which is empty for the summer. Team members stress their innocence when the coach calls them in, but eventually Nate gives in and confesses. That causes the entire team to be suspended for the season; they watch the one varsity player, substitutes, and freshmen fight through the season.</p> <p>This basketball book features a good guy who makes a bad choice and then rights it.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">John Jacob Oak Park, IL</p>

<p><b><i>The Minister's Daughter</i></b> by Julie Hearn Atheneum Books for Young Readers, 2005, 263 pp., \$16.95 ISBN: 0-689-87690-4</p> <p>Grace, a minister's daughter with high expectations to live up to, conceives a child out of wedlock and must hide her sin. Nell is a merrybegot, a child of nature, and has been raised with knowledge of herbal remedies and paganism to become the next healer of the village after her grandmother passes away. When a recognition-hungry "witch finder" moves into town to get to the bottom of the minister's daughter's secret, will the village people believe the witch finder as evidence against Nell piles up?</p> <p>Written in third person, <i>The Minister's Daughter</i> follows each major character's perspective as paths cross and conflict occurs. Julie Hearn has done her research well regarding the motives behind the Salem witch trials. Hearn also adds a unique fantasy element, Nell's healing ability, which may hold appeal or provide distraction for some readers. This fictional look at Salem is appropriate for the early high school audience.</p> <p>Kate Siscoe Elgin, IL</p>	<p><b><i>Naughts and Crosses</i></b> by Malorie Blackman Simon and Schuster, 2005, 386 pp., \$15.95 ISBN: 2004016564</p> <p>Callum and Sephy grew up together, though they had vastly different lives. Callum is a Naught, the disenfranchised white minority, while Sephy is the privileged class of Crosses, those of African American descent. The two classes are forbidden to mix, but expectedly Callum and Sephy fall for each other in this complicated tale of racism and romance.</p> <p>Flipping the sides of racism make for an interesting set of possibilities, and the parallels to modern racism and its ever-present power make this a great book for discussions with teenagers. With all of the complicated racial overtones, the love story between Callum and Sephy reminded me in many of ways of Romiette and Julio by Sharon Draper, though Blackman's novel is more appropriate for an older audience. This disturbing and powerful story reminds readers how hard growing up can be.</p> <p>Jennie Dutton Athens, OH</p>
<p><b><i>Never Mind the Goldbergs</i></b> by Matthue Roth PUSH—Scholastic, 2005, 360 pp., \$7.99</p> <p>Hava Aaronson speaks her mind—"when you're a seventeen-year-old Orthodox Jewish girl with purple-and-burgundy-streaked hair . . . and death rock T-shirts—you don't look like you're holding back" (p. 1). During the summer before her senior year, Hava learns some of the ramifications of speaking her mind when she's cast in a network television sitcom and spends the summer in California. Hava must reflect on a relationship, the choice to be Orthodox, and her life in the limelight of temptation while filming. After several poor choices, Hava's pictures appear on television and her electronic diary has been quoted. Roth portrays the Jewish communities in New York and California with authenticity and respect. Readers can connect to Hava's struggles with her religion, parents, and peers while learning about the complexities of the Orthodox Jewish culture.</p> <p>Faith H. Wallace Kennesaw, GA</p>	<p><b><i>Pinned</i></b> by Alfred C. Martino Harcourt, 2005, 272 pp., \$16.99 ISBN: 0-670-06007-0</p> <p>Martino's <i>Pinned</i> is a carefully crafted glance at the harsh realities imbedded in high school wrestling. The novel is a quick, engaging read for those interested in sports, but also anyone else struggling to survive the teenage years.</p> <p>Ivan Korske and Bobby Zane are protagonists whose dissimilar worlds will inevitably collide on the mat as each struggles to reach and win the New Jersey state finals. In addition to the rigor of training and making weight, each wrestler finds himself engulfed in a storm of personal demons. Themes include divorce, first romances, death of loved ones, and adolescent struggle for autonomy.</p> <p>Martino gives us a crescendo of action and teenage drama that builds from the first to final page and leaves us gasping for more. Touches of profanity and promiscuity make the novel a better choice for high school than middle school.</p> <p>Curtis Chandler Wamego, KS</p>

<p><b><i>Sandpiper</i></b> by Ellen Wittlinger Simon and Schuster Books for Young Readers, 2005, 225 pp., \$16.95</p> <p>Dating/Interpersonal Relations/Walking ISBN: 0-689-86680-2</p> <p>As the school year wraps up, Sandpiper Hollow Ragsdale is alone and confused. Facing a summer sweltering with change, she sneaks away on occasion and captures her thoughts and feelings in poetry. The pressure of her mother's wedding, new family members, and a biological father with wandering eyes are only the beginning.</p> <p>Upon ending her long streak of shallow relationships, Piper forms a peculiar bond with Walker, a complete stranger. How are they to know that in finding each other, they will find themselves? As the ex-boyfriend begins to threaten Piper and her family, the odd connection to Walker proves to be life saving.</p> <p>Ellen Wittlinger innovatively touches a variety of current issues through the eyes of Piper using a rare but necessary honesty. Piper's poetry grips the emotions and latches onto the reader. While young readers may be shocked by the occasional explicit detail, older readers will find themselves holding their breath, captivated by the authenticity of the characters and events.</p> <p>Wendi Brown Hoffman Estates, IL</p>	<p><b><i>The Secret Blog of Raisin Rodriguez</i></b> by Judy Goldschmidt Penguin/Razorbill, 2005, 202 pp., \$12.99</p> <p>Fiction/Coming of Age ISBN: 1-59514-018-2</p> <p>Raisin, uprooted first by divorce, her mother's sudden remarriage to a stranger, then a cross-country move from Berkeley to Philadelphia, finds herself beginning seventh grade without friends, except for the son of her stepfather's business associate and he "doesn't count." Sounds serious, but Raisin recounts her adventures in a blog to her two best friends back home in the witty manner (well beyond the range of the usual twelve-year-old) of a born raconteur. Her travails include (but are not limited to), the dog swallowing the padded bra she's been "borrowing" from her new stepsisiter, mistakenly assuming the most popular girls in school are singing happy birthday to her, starting her period in a public place, and having her secret blog published throughout the school which hurts the nice boy she's overlooked while seeking popularity. Raisin must make amends, and in doing so, learns the value of offbeat friends over those with star quality. The novel is funny and entertaining without being entirely believable.</p> <p>Myrna Dee Marler Laie, HI</p>
<p><b><i>Sleeping Freshmen Never Lie</i></b> by David Lubar Dutton Children's Books, 2005, 279 pp., \$16.99</p> <p>Family-Friend Dynamics ISBN: 0-525-47311-4</p> <p>Scott Hudson's life is busy enough—avoiding lunch-money-stealing upperclassmen, finishing loads of homework on time, and impressing an old kindergarten pal turned hot; the last thing he has time to deal with is a baby. Unfortunately, there's not much he can do: his mother is expecting a child who will be fifteen years younger than Scott. How's a guy to deal?</p> <p>Scott takes the reader humorously through his freshman year of high school, recording his thoughts, fears, and wisdom in a "journal" he plans to give to his new sibling. Little does he know that in the process of trying to get by, he is learning what it means to be a friend, an honorable man, and a brother.</p> <p>Through an uplifting story, David Lubar shares a true teenager's perspective. The familiarity and honesty of the characters allows the narrative to unfold with startling realism. <i>Sleeping Freshmen Never Lie</i> is a recommended read for those searching for laughs and a genuine voice in young adult literature.</p> <p>Rebecca Aicher Algonquin, IL</p>	<p><b><i>Stonewolf</i></b> by Brenda Seabrooke Holiday House, 2005, 231 pp., \$16.95</p> <p>Mystery ISBN: 0-8234-1848-0</p> <p>Seven-year-old Nicholas was thrilled to leave his unhappy orphanage life, but soon realizes his new guardians are holding him captive to unlock secrets from his past. Nicholas must be shrewd in keeping his returning memory, much of it information gleaned from his scientist parents, hidden from his captors, as well as his escape plans.</p> <p>The number of characters is burdensome, but one eventually becomes engrossed in the mystery of Nicholas' hidden knowledge. As he tries to escape his captors and takes increasingly dangerous and daring chances, his predicaments push the boundaries of imagination. It is implied that Nicholas is related to Nikola Tesla, the Serbian-American scientist. The ending leaves numerous unanswered questions and the reader must imagine what Nicholas', fourteen at the novel's end, future holds. This will be enjoyed most by middle level science buffs, with perhaps some teacher assistance.</p> <p>Susan Capp Vermillion, SD</p>



<p><b>Summer's End</b> by Audrey Couloumbis G.P. Putnam's Sons, 2005, 182 pp., \$16.99</p> <p>Grace can't stand the fighting. Since her brother burned his draft card, there's been nothing but fighting at home. Having to cancel her first boy/girl birthday party is the last straw. Looking for an escape, Grace sneaks a ride in the bed of Uncle Milford's pickup, hoping to find comfort in the routine chores of her grandma's farm; instead, she finds that even her cousins are fighting—about <i>their</i> brothers' involvement in the war.</p> <p>As days pass, Grace and her parents come to an understanding—about her brother, the war, and birthday parties. After a tragic accident, Grace's challenge of finding safety and the importance of family rise to a whole new level.</p> <p>Couloumbis' uses vivid dialogue, and the down-to-earth, yet intricate narrative offers an excellent glimpse into the mind of a thirteen-year-old girl struggling to find her place in a changing world. Young adults are sure to connect to Grace as they walk with her through <i>Summer's End</i>.</p> <p>Rachel Lance Elgin, IL</p>	<p><b>Surprising Cecilia</b> by Susan Gonzales Abraham and Denise Gonzales Abraham Cinco Punto Press, 2005, 230 pp., \$16.95</p> <p>Cecilia Gonzales has big dreams of leaving her family's farm, going to the big city after graduating from high school, and getting an office job. The sequel to the award-winning <i>Cecilia's Year</i>, this tale continues Cecilia's adventures as she embarks on her freshman year at the modern (for the 1930s) high school. Her mother still disapproves of Cecilia's dreams, so the 15-year-old goes out of her way to help out at home. The year holds many surprises, including a new baby at home and a love interest. The book chronicles the journey of discovery as Cecilia makes important decisions about family and responsibility.</p> <p>Hispanic phrases and proverbs are sprinkled throughout, lending authenticity. Cecilia is likeable, and her struggle toward independence is heartfelt. While not as strong as <i>Cecilia's Year</i>, nor as inspiring as <i>Esperanza Rising</i>, this quiet story will find an audience with readers who have outgrown the <i>Little House</i> books.</p> <p>Melissa Moore Jackson, TN</p>
<p><b>The Telling Pool</b> by David Clement-Davies Amulet Books, 2005, 362 pp., \$19.95</p> <p>Experience magic, deceit, trust, love, and friendship as Rhodri seeks his destiny to save King Richard and his land from a long-ago curse that was cast by an evil enchantress, Homeria, when Guinevere and Sir Lancelot betrayed King Arthur. Homeria ensnares both Rhodri and his father in her own quest to possess Excalibur, Arthur's fabled sword.</p> <p>Rhodri encounters Wiccan ideas and pagan practices that challenge his beliefs about Christianity, but is strengthened through visions and messages received by gazing into a magical pool. Readers will be swept up by the adventures that lead to Rhodri's discovery of his identity. Characters are well developed, especially Rhodri, and readers will relate to the many emotions portrayed. Some sections, especially those involving Rhodri's daily life, seem over-long and distracting. While there are many Arthurian novels available, this one incorporates interesting and unusual approaches to the legend, making it an enjoyable read for mature genre fans.</p> <p>Susan Gapp Vermillion, SD</p>	<p><b>Ulysses Moore #1: The Door to Time</b> by Edizioni Piemme Scholastic, 2004/2006 (trans.), 240 pp., \$12.99</p> <p>Argo Manor, an old, mysterious mansion on the coast of England, sits atop a cliff and offers the perfect place for exploration. With their parents returning to London for the weekend to finalize the purchase of the manor, the twins, Jason and Julia, are left under the watch of the old caretaker, Nestor. He seems to know more about the mysteries of the old house than he lets his young charges know. Along with their new school friend, Rick, the twins find clues that lead them on a scavenger hunt as they try to uncover the findings of the previous owner, Ulysses Moore. The children discover another world that exists within the reality of Argo Manor.</p> <p>With a well-crafted plot line and believable characters, <i>The Door to Time</i> proves to be an infectious beginning of a series. I recommend this novel to young readers (ages 9-12) who enjoy a quick-paced read that takes them through secret doors and hidden passageways.</p> <p>Roger Caswell Wamego, KS</p>



<p><b><i>Under a Stand Still Moon</i></b> by Ann Howard Creel      Coming of Age/Anasazi Indians Brown Barn Books, 2005, 192 pp., \$8.95      ISBN: 978-0-9746481-8-3</p> <p>Echo, an Anasazi Indian girl, grows up during the dissolution of the Anasazi civilization. She lives a carefree life until she is 12, when she catches a baby falling from a cliff—considered a miracle. One of the High Priests takes her for a wife and agrees to teach her the secrets of the stars and planets.</p> <p>Echo lives with the old man in a high cliff. Then problems start to occur: Vandals raid the village several times and kill tribe members. The sun seems to be eaten by the clouds; this bad sign forces the Indians to ask the High Priests to intervene, but they cannot. Eclipses are known only to the High Priest married to Echo, and only as a myth. Then there is a drought. They have overused their land, but she cannot get anyone to stop, and the Indians start to leave in great numbers.</p> <p>Echo learns about their religion and becomes the only girl who can hunt game; there is hope some Indians will return to join Echo in raising crops and hunting.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">John Jacob Oak Park, IL</p>	<p><b><i>Where I Want to Be</i></b> by Adele Griffin Putnam, 2005, 150 pp., \$15.99      Fiction/Mental Illness ISBN: 0-399-23783-6</p> <p>Two narrative voices tell this story: Lily, a pretty, popular teenage girl, and Jane, her slightly older, schizophrenic sister. The telling is non-linear, and at first, the two story lines don't seem to converge, which might be off-putting to teen readers demanding a strong story line. Eventually, it becomes clear that Jane is dead, perhaps a suicide, and Lily is guilt-ridden, hiding from her friends, and depending too much on her boyfriend Caleb. Jane must resolve her jealousy and bitterness. Lily must resolve her guilt at being the normal one and let Caleb go. The writing is imagistic, evocative, and appropriately haunting. The excitement in the story comes more from figuring out how the pieces of the narrative puzzle fit together than from large plot developments. The front cover announces that the novel is a National Book Award Finalist, which suggests the story will be valued more by mature and thoughtful readers than reluctant ones.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Myrna Dee Marler Laie, HI</p>
<p><b><i>Worlds Apart</i></b> by Lindsay Lee Johnson      Mental Health/Parent/Child Relationships Front Street, 2005, 164 pp., \$16.95      ISBN: 1-932425-28-4</p> <p>Winnie May is suddenly uprooted from her shallow-but-real-life in Chicago to move to rural Minnesota, where her father has taken a position as a doctor in residence at a state mental health facility. Winnie tries to adjust, but she's the new kid in school, and her only friend is Justice Goodwater, who lives on the reservation. Complicating matters is her mother's spiral into depression.</p> <p>Winnie relates more easily to the residents than most 14-year-olds would, but her acceptance of, and affection for, them is believable. The friction caused by her friendship with Justice is palpable and relevant and adds complexity to the story. Set in 1959, this novel explores Winnie's evolving maturity and changing relationship with her parents. Johnson may be trying to accomplish too much in this slim volume, and consequently some issues are only hinted at, but the story strangely does not suffer. Instead, it serves as a window on Winnie's life, with the realization her story will continue.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Melissa Moore Jackson, TN</p>	<p><b><i>Publishers who wish to submit a book for possible review should send a copy of the book to:</i></b> <b>Lori Goodson</b> <b>409 Cherry Circle</b> <b>Manhattan, KS 66503</b></p> <p><b><i>To submit a review for possible publication or to become a reviewer, contact Lori Goodson at <a href="mailto:lagoodson@cox.net">lagoodson@cox.net</a></i></b></p>



# Dissertations on Adolescent Literature: 2000–2005

**N**o research column would be complete or responsive to the needs of young adult teachers, researchers and enthusiasts without a review of the wealth of recent dissertations involving the study of young adult literature. Thus, the theme of this column is to bring to readers of *The ALAN Review* an informative summary of significant masters and doctoral dissertations completed in the last five years (2000-05) “of” and “about” young adult literature.

The dissertations of *young adult literature* concern papers that study the use of young adult novels in a classroom setting. These researchers examine the practice of using young adult literature as a pedagogical tool and its effect on the perceptions, attitudes, and understandings of adolescent readers.

The dissertations *about young adult literature* comprise research that analyzes young adult fiction as a literary genre. These literary scholars devote considerable time and effort to revealing the characteristics of plot, structure and style in the works of young adult fiction

and its implications for both adolescent and adult readers.

As no summary of all the works cited can be totally complete, apologies to those who dissertations are not represented or to those whose study is misrepresented. The intent of this columnist is to cull the archives for the thesis listed in dissertation abstracts within the last five years and to produce a representative summary of the good work accomplished. My hope is that young adult teachers and readers everywhere will benefit from the plethora of interesting and provocative research being accomplished in the name of young adult literature and in turn, these rich studies might spur investigations of your own. Enjoy.

### Dissertations Of Young Adult Literature

Ching-hsien Chiu’s dissertation “New Immigrant Readers: The Role of Young Adult Literature in Literacy Development and Academic Confidence (North Carolina State University, 2005)” investigates how reading young adult literature

might affect new immigrant adolescents who are in the process of developing their English literacy and making the transition to academic confidence. Chiu’s primary question is “if reading young adult literature has a positive effect on literacy development and academic confidence for English as a second language (ESL) middle school students?” Using a qualitative framework for study, the researcher triangulates the data derived from observation, interviewing, and document analysis of five recent immigrants to America, ranging in time frame for coming to the United States from one year and eight months to five years. All five students attended the same middle school with a large number of other ESL students who came from the same region in Mexico. These Mexican students were bilingual, speaking more often Spanglish, an English/Spanish mix. Initial findings show that young adult literature plays a significant and vital role in student literacy success. All indicators for positive intellectual growth—academic performance, reading fluency and

flexibility, and social growth and development—are rated high in this qualitative study, indicating that even more time is needed for emerging immigrant learners to spend more time with young adult literature that speaks to their immediate experiences.

Jennifer Claiborne's dissertation "A Survey of High School English Teachers to Determine Their Knowledge, Use, and Attitude Related to Young Adult Literature in the Classroom (University of Tennessee, 2004)" examines the young adult literature books that teachers use in the classroom. Using information gathered from a mailed survey, the researcher explores three questions—what young adult novels are used in secondary classrooms; what are teachers' opinions about using young adult novels in secondary classrooms; and whether or not teachers belong to professional affiliations dealing with the study of young adult literature. The researcher mailed 138 surveys to secondary English teachers in 12 different schools in the state of Tennessee. Of the 138 surveys mailed, 93 responses were received, netting a response rate of 67%. The results showed that of the 93 respondents, a majority, 73%, did not use young adult literature in their classes, and of those who did use young adult novels, only the classics of young adult literature are represented. Teachers, although reluctant to use young adult novels in their instruction, did indicate an awareness of contemporary YA literature, but were reluctant to use it for a variety of reasons—most notably, they did not feel it was relevant or worthy enough to use in

their curriculum. Finally, out of the 93 responses, 38 belonged to the National Council Teachers of English and only one, to the Assembly on Literature for Adolescents.

Teresa Wilson's dissertation "Bringing Memory Forward: Teacher's Engagement with Constructions of 'Difference' in Teacher Literature Circles (University of Victoria, Canada, 2004)," explores the impact of teacher literature circles on the development and construction of meaning in study of young adult literature. Between January and June 2003, the researcher studied eighteen practicing teachers, comprising both elementary and secondary levels, who were invited to discuss multicultural children's and young adult literature in monthly book clubs, write their own literary biographies, and engage in monthly interviews with the researcher. The result is that teachers reveled in non-authoritative, self-revealing discussions about children's and young adult literature, learning that instructional methodologies with young people that emphasize indirect, constructivist teaching approaches are far preferable than direct, authoritative instructional designs. Simply, when young readers read what they want, they learn best.

Janet Hill's dissertation "An Interactive Study of Teachers' Online Discussions of Young Adult Literature (Kent State University, 2003)" is a qualitative study, examining the conversations of teachers as they engaged in on-line discussions of young adult literature. The qualitative study is framed within the theories of reader

response and dialogic professional development (the analysis of a conversation to understand a professional issue). This case study uses a small nationwide online mailing list, or listserv, of 22 middle school teachers who volunteered to engage in online discussions about the young adult literature that they teach. Using a grounded theory analysis, the researcher Hill cites that as a result of the online discussion, the participating middle school teachers increased their knowledge of the subject matter, gained insights in their understandings of pedagogical practices, and experienced personal and professional growth. Also noted is that the on-line discussions tended to be monologic, rather than dialogic in nature, and that discussions adhered to conversations about the young adult books themselves, and not toward social-cultural issues and ideologies about the books read in their respective classes.

Sue L. Jacobs' dissertation "Artistic Response of Incarcerated Male Youth to Young Adult Literature (Kansas State University, 2003)" examines ways in which incarcerated youth respond artistically to young adult literature. Four males, ages ranging from 13 to 17 years old, were chosen from a secured facility. For the four young boys, the inquiry sessions included listening to three young adult literature books being read orally, writing an artistic response to the books read aloud, and participating in a follow-up interview session upon completion of their respective artistic responses. Employing a qualitative research approach, the researcher Jacobs' data includes an interest inventory, a pre- and post-

attitude survey, field notes, artistic response, and interviews. Results indicate an initial reluctance on behalf of the four males to discuss the young adult literature in question, but after time, these four young boys do open up about the books they heard read to them. This study is more fascinating for its descriptive analysis of the four young men in question, than, given the small sample size, for any generalization towards any other study or large group constituency

Evelyn Marie Eskridge's dissertation "Teachers Taking the Aesthetic Stance While Practicing Discussion of Young Adult Literature (Oklahoma State University, 2002)" is a study that is theoretically framed in Rosenblatt's theory of reading (1978) in which the reader acts as the central focus between the author and the text. Participants in this study are six female white teachers—one elementary, three middle, one high school, one college—with teaching experience ranging from five to twenty-five years. Meeting nine times over ten weeks, each session lasting from one to two hours, this qualitative study with the researcher acting as a participant observer reveals that teachers revel in weekly participatory discussion about the value of young adult literature in their own classroom practice. By building on multiple perspectives, the participating teachers gained greater insight and respect for the use of young adult literature in their respective teaching and serve as a model for teacher development.

Rebecca Denice Garrett Hunt's dissertation "An Examination of Attitudes, Interests, and Levels of

Response to Young Adult Novels versus Classic Novels (University of Toledo, 2001)" investigates the attitudes, interests, and levels of response to a young adult novel and a classic novel in a high school English class of an urban school district in the Midwest. Using an intense qualitative research design, Hunt recorded the reactions of both teacher and students during an eleven-week observation where both a young adult novel and a companion classic novel were taught. The results indicate that students demonstrate a better interest and higher attitude in the young adult novel in contrast to the classic novel. Students found the young adult novel a more appealing and intriguing genre, revealing the challenges of using classic novels in a high school curriculum.

Julia L. Johnson-Connor's dissertation "Seeking 'Free-Spaces Unbound': Six 'Mixed' Female Adolescents Transact with Literature Depicting Biracial Characters (University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, 2004)" explores the female biracial adolescents' transactions as they read and transacted with selected biracial literature, including young adult literature, in and out of a school book club, both individually and in small groups. Her findings indicate a need to broaden the definition of multicultural education and the role of multiethnic and multicultural literature in the lives of adolescents, particularly a previously neglected group of young people, biracial children.

Celiamarie Narro's dissertation "Students' Perception of a Relationship Between Young Adult Fiction and Science Literacy (The Univer-

sity of Texas, El Paso, 2004)" examines the relationship between young adult fiction and middle school scientific literacy. Using a statistical analysis of pre- and post scientific knowledge and attitude surveys, Narro concludes that introducing science fiction literature into an eighth-grade student's science curriculum has a significant impact on that student's scientific literacy level.

## Dissertations About Young Adult Literature

Lori Ann Atkins Goodson's dissertation "Protagonists of Young Adult Literature and their Reflection on Society (Kansas State University, 2004)" is an in-depth study which employs context-sensitive text analysis techniques developed by Huckin (1992) to examine characteristics of protagonists in randomly selected young adult novels appearing on the International Reading Association's (IRA) Young Adults Choices lists from its inception in 1987 through 2003. Goodson's central thesis question is "to what extent do the protagonists of recent popular young adult literature reflect diverse characteristics?" As defined in the thesis, the meaning of diverse characteristics includes ethnic background, gender, and socio-economic status. Also, Goodson indicates the dominant multiple intelligence trait (based on Howard Gardner's Multiple Intelligences) of the protagonist represented in the young adult novels selected to study. Three books, or 10 percent, from each year's IRA Young Adult Choices list (1987-2003) were selected for review, yielding a total of 51 novels. An

independent scholar specializing in young adult literature and multiple intelligences verified Goodson's analysis. Results, not surprisingly, show that typical protagonists in contemporary young adult fiction are predominantly upper/middle class white girls who are linguistically intelligent. Thus, the implication of this study is whether these books appeal to non-reading adolescents? As Goodson concludes, classroom teachers trained to use young adult novels to engage reluctant or disinterested readers need to be cautioned that most young adult novels are geared to students whose interests are most dissimilar from the characters they might encounter in their readings.

Holly Wagg's master's thesis "Producing (In(Visible)) Girls: The Politics of Production in Young Adult Fiction with Adolescent Lesbian Characters (Concordia University, Canada, 2004)" examines the increase in the publication of homosexuality-themed young adult literature and concludes that novels that feature adolescent lesbian characters account for fewer than one-quarter of all published titles. Based upon interviews with seven authors regarding their novels published between 1978-2003, the author uses a socioeconomic research model to understand how the politics of book publishing, particularly novels geared for young adults, yields works whereby the adolescent lesbian is an invisible/visible girl in adolescent literature. This literary duality is best exemplified by the presence of adolescent lesbian on the pages of young adult novels, but her near absence on book covers and marketing strategies. At

times, her role is minimized and at others, her presence is erased.

Carrie Nishihira's dissertation "Fantasies and Subversions: Reworking of Fantasy in Young Adult Literature" explores contemporary young adult re-workings in novels, short stories and films of fairy tales and fantasy sources from a feminist and psychoanalytic perspective. The researcher examines the image of women as portrayed in archetypal stories throughout the ages and how these images are manifested in contemporary young adult novels. By examining the role of sex, power and violence as portrayed through patriarchal romance narratives and then how they are reinterpreted in YA literature, the researcher demonstrates how reinterpretations in young adult fiction are linked to changing cultural conceptions of adolescence, gender, romance and sex. A range of literary works from nearly every genre and era is introduced to substantiate the findings of this intricate and involving study of gender theory as applied to young adult literature.

Eric Tribunella's dissertation "Disposable Objects: Contrived Trauma and Melancholic Sacrifice in American Literature for Children and Young Adults (City University of New York, 2005)" illustrates the ways in which American children's and young adult literature turn repeatedly to a narrative in which a child is compelled to sacrifice or renounce a loved object. The author concludes that such a literary device is used repeatedly and compellingly to show a demonstrable catalyst for character maturation. The symbolic representation of living without the object

surrendered is regarded as a sign of accomplished adolescent maturity. Thus, the loss of a parent, a friend, an animal, an object, or even virginity, is regarded as a first step towards becoming an adult. Novels studied include *Johnny Tremain*, *Old Yeller*, *A Separate Peace*, *Bridge to Terabithia*, *My Brother Sam in Dead*, *Number the Stars*, *The Upstairs Room*, *The Outsiders*, and *That Was Then, This Is Now*.

Janet Merle Wossum Hilburn's dissertation "Walking in the Light: The Role of Protestant Christianity in Young Adult Modern Realistic Fiction (Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey, New Brunswick, 2005)" is a study that looks at the intersection between increased religious fervor in society (the emergence of the Religious Right in American public life) and its reflection in young adult literature. Results of the study show that there has been an increase in the number of books published with some sort of content pertaining to Protestant Christianity since 1990. In these novels, religion frequently becomes an area of conflict—both internal and external—for the protagonist with the resolution at best, ambiguous. Characters question their beliefs, but ultimately embrace a faith, if not in the specific religious tenets, at least, in a beneficent God.

Marnie Kristen Jorenby's dissertation "About Face: The Transformation of the Hero in Post-War Japanese Literature for Youth (The University of Wisconsin, Madison, 2003)," examines the themes prevalent in children and adolescent literature written for young Japanese prior and after the second World War. Traditional Japanese literature—prior to the



Asian Pacific War (1940-45) paints a clear portrait of the Japanese hero, loyal, patriotic, and determined war hero. With the Japanese defeat in the war, many literary leaders began to question the validity of showing the traditional Japanese war hero as a role model for young children. In the post war era, a new generation of authors began to write stories depicting alternate visions of heroism, courage and responsibility.

Jorenby's thesis analyzes a selection of Japanese children's and young adult literature for its vision of heroes in post-war Japan. Hill concludes that indeed the images of Japanese hero in the novels she examines has changed; the Japanese soldier is depicted as a reluctant war hero, more vulnerable and cautious than previously imagined in pre-war Japan.

Elizabeth Ann Younger's dissertation "How to Make a Girl: Female Sexuality in Young Adult Literature (Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College, 2003)" analyzes representations of female sexuality in more than fifty young adult literature texts. The researcher examines these young adult novels in relation to each other and in terms of historical development, demonstrating in clear and vivid terms how young adult literature has and continues to play a significant role in the social construction and perception of femininity and female sexuality. Sample topics studied include teenage romance, gender roles, body image, sexual responsibility, heterosexuality, lesbianism, teenage pregnancy, and peer pressure. Younger concludes that of the more

than fifty young adult novels analyzed, the results are decidedly mixed. True, although many young adult novels reinforce traditional gender roles for young women, there are many more texts that challenge perceived ideas about female identity and provide alternative visions of what it means to be young and female in a patriarchal culture.

Rebecca Platzner's dissertation "The Functional Value of Story In Young Adult Literature about Incest (Walter Fisher) (Rutgers The State University of New Jersey, New Brunswick, 2002)" employs [Walter Fisher's \(1978, 1984, 1985, 1987, 1995\)](#) narrative paradigm as a method of examining 18 realistic fictional narratives about incest, published for an audience of young adults, in which a young adult female is the victim of incest by her father, stepfather, or uncle. Results of the study demonstrate that stories about female victims of incest can serve as methods of coping, telling, sense making, and relationship building—especially stories that are essentially autobiographical narratives.

Julie Ann Robinson's doctoral thesis "Charting the Hero's Journey in Coretta Scott King Award Contemporary Young Adult Novels (Arizona State University, 2002)" examines twenty young adult novels selected for the "Coretta Scott King Award." The young adult novels are examined using the three components of Joseph Campbell's literary analysis entitled "hero's journey"—separation, initiation and return. Using an adapted theoretical model for content analysis developed by Clifford Geertz, combined with Molefi Kete Asante's revised

approach to Campbell's hero journey, the results of the study indicate that these award-winning books depict with relative degree of authenticity and accuracy the life of young African-American adults are of immense aid in helping young African-American readers cope with issues of developing self and group identity.

Amy Jo Lantinga's dissertation "A Study of the Novels of Harry Mazer and Norma Fox Mazer and their Place in Young Adult Literature (University of Tennessee, Knoxville, 2001)" analyzes the Mazers' individual and collective works according to psychologist's Robert Havighurst's adolescent tasks found in "Developmental Task and Education" (1972). The Mazers novels are found to readily comply with Havighurst's adolescent list of physical, social and emotional developmental tasks. The resulting benefit is that the Mazers' work makes perfect vehicles for classroom use and discussion.

Myrna Dee Marler's dissertation "Representations of the Black Male, His Family, Culture and Community in Three Writers for African-American Young Adults: Mildred D. Taylor, Alice Childress, and Rita Williams-Garcia (University of Hawaii, 2001)" asserts that since the end of the civil rights movement, African-Americans as a group have moved away from the goal of integration to promoting a distinct African-American culture worthy of equal status in a pluralistic environment. Marler traces the development of the African-American culture within the context of the American mainstream, using young adult literature as a representative example of this profound and

significant change in the depiction of a cultural and racial identity. Focusing, in particular, on three African-American writers for young adults (Mildred D. Taylor, Alice Childress, and Rita Williams-Garcia), this researcher examines each author's contribution towards the representation of a black identity. Mildred D. Taylor depicts a strong and positive African-American culture which resists white oppression with dignity; Alice Childress underscores the problems created by poverty and racism; and Rita Williams-Garcia examines the destructive forces of modern life that work against cultural family and unity.

Dirk Patrick Mattson's dissertation "The Portrayal of Religious Development in Young Adult Literature: An Analysis of Contemporary Works (Fritz Oser, Paul Gmunder) (Arizona State University, 2001)" is a qualitative study of fifteen contemporary young adult novels which portray the religious developmental experience of its protagonist. Using the stage development theory of religious judgment as proposed by Fritz Oser and Paul Gmunder, Mattson found that the portrayal of the protagonists in these fifteen young adult novels—average age 16.7 years—was consistent with Oser and Gmunder's developmental theory of religious judgment in its essential characteristics and realistic in its portrayal of young people wrestling with their religious identity.

Rosalind Faye Carmichael's dissertation "Educating African-American Youth: Reflections of Historical Knowledge and Cultural Values in African-American Young Adult Literature (Temple University,

2000)" explores the extent to which African-American authors of young adult fiction incorporate historical knowledge and traditional African-American cultural values in their works. Using twenty randomly selected young adult novels written by African-American authors and published between the years 1966 and 1996, Carmichael examines these works for authenticity, consistency and poignancy in depicting the African-American experience. The researcher uses three specific analytical instruments—the African-American Cultural Values Survey, the Afrocentric Behavioral Assessment Instrument, and the Family Environment Survey—to analyze the textual contents for its representation of African-American life. The result is that these young adult novels demonstrate with clarity, resonance, and authenticity the African-American experience and thus, serve as exemplar literature for young adults to learn more about the life of African-Americans in the United States.

Amy Beth Maupin's dissertation "The Five Best Novels for Adolescents in the 1990s: An Evaluative Study (University of Tennessee, Knoxville, 2000)" attempts to answer the question "what traits or characteristics are typical of the best adolescent novels of the 1990s?" A survey conducted by Ted Hipple (University of Tennessee, 2000) reveals that the five novels were *Ironman* by Chris Crutcher, *Make Lemonade* by Virginia Euwer Wolff, *Holes* by Louis Sachar, *Out of the Dust* by Karen Hesse, and *The Giver* by Lois Lowry. In the study, these novels are evaluated according to seven

yardsticks of value designed by Walter Blair and John Gerber. Those criteria are clarity, escape, reflection of real life, artistry in details, emotional impact, personal beliefs and significant insights. All five best novels scored highly on each of Blair and Gerber's evaluative characteristics for judging the value of a work of fiction. In particular, this researcher notes that a novel's ability to appeal to a reader's emotions and offer conceptual insights will determine its popular appeal and critical acclaim.

Walter Dean Roof's dissertation "Poststructural Feminist Power: A Thematic Analysis of Female Protagonists in Adolescent Literature, 1942-1946, and 1992-1996 (University of South Carolina, 2004)" is a descriptive investigative study which thematically analyzes adolescent literature, twenty novels with female protagonists, from two time periods, 1942-1946, and 1992-1996. Employing the concept of power in poststructural feminism, researcher Roof examines the changes, if any, in the portrayal of female protagonists that occurred during the fifty-year interim (1946-1996). He compares eight adolescent novels from 1942-1946 with twelve written during 1992-1996. The findings of this study suggest that the young heroines in the works of these two eras maintain certain spirited demeanor, regardless of when the novel was written. Still, findings also suggest that in the earlier works, females exhibit a greater signs of independence and less dependence on males, than their female protagonist counterparts in the earlier era (1942-1946). In the young adult novels written between 1992-1996, women appear

more assertive and adventurous.

Jean Ann John's dissertation "Teaching Citizenship: Civic Values in the Young Adult Novels of Chris Crutcher (Oklahoma State University, 2002)" explores the notion of civic values as portrayed or not portrayed in the novels of Chris Crutcher and whether the consequences of the demonstration of civic values resulted in positive or negative consequences for the characters portrayed in Crutcher's novels. Using a rating scale and four different raters, researcher John found a strong presence of civic values (tolerance, compassion, honesty, respect, and reflective decision-making) in all seven young adult novels by Chris Crutcher and his main character most frequently displayed all categories of the aforementioned civic values. The study's results indicate that Crutcher's novels may serve as a useful tool for teaching civic values to adolescents.

Wendy Jean Glenn's dissertation "Alternatives for Adolescents: A Critical Feminist Analysis of the Novels of Karen Hesse (Arizona State University, 2002)" analyzes eight of Hesse's novels for adolescents using the critical feminist lens of authentic realism. Authentic realism is a reading approach, as described by Sarah Mills, that values and encourages a reader's personal connection with the text. In each of her young adult novels, Hesse, as researcher Glenn reveals, explores the notion of gender identity, questioning the traditional definition of what it means to be female or male in a society dominated by patriarchal values. The resulting vision is adolescent stories where teenage girls display an

independent spirit formally reserved for males, and adolescent boys exhibit a nurturing and caring demeanor usually associated only with females. This reversal of stereotypes encourages readers of Hesse's young adult novels to become the people they wish to be—regardless of the stereotypical roles for male and female gender as expected by society.

Gael Elyse Grossman's dissertation "The Evolution of the Vampire in Adolescent Fiction (Michigan State University, 2001)" examines the appearance of vampires in young adult novels to assess the recent popularity of vampires in fiction and to highlight its distinction as a genre of fiction, separate from horror or shock. To research this intriguing topic, both novels using vampires as lead figures and readers of vampire fiction were studied. Using a cultural coding research design developed by Linda Christian-Smith, researcher Grossman's findings demonstrate that vampire fiction is filled with male and female characters who are independent, empowered individuals who defy traditional male and female roles. Readers react strongly to the characters, identifying with many of the strong traits exhibited by male and female characters. Thus, as a result of her study, Grossman urges researchers to study this complex genre closely, imploring that its recent popularity among young adults demands our attention.

Mary Ann Cappiello's dissertation "Tricksters and Rescuers, No Damsels in Distress: Female Protagonists of Historical Novels for Young People Set during the American Revolution (Columbia

University Teachers College, 2004) examines the construction of teenage female protagonists of historical novels, specifically those written for young people, set during the American Revolution and written between the years 1860-1998. This literary study spans several years and many genres of fiction for young people, including the dime novel, the junior novel, and the young adult novel. The resultant findings indicate that female protagonists—as displayed in historical novels during this wide and expansive time period—are always strong and independent figures who defy convention and stereotype to achieve goals for the greater good.

Cynthia A. Nicholl's dissertation "Rites of Passage in Young Adult Literature: Separation, Initiation and Return (Beverly Cleary, Katherine Patterson, Jerry Spinelli, Avi, Lois Lowery) (California State University, 2002)" outlines the thesis that in the late twentieth-Century, young adult literature has evolved to represent the rite of passage experience for teenage readers. Nicholls examines five representative young adult novels (one from each author cited in the title) to demonstrate that in each book, a young protagonist experiences the separation, initiation, and return of the rite of passage—or coming of age journey—so typical of young adolescents in the throes of growing and maturing.

Mei-Ying Wu's dissertation "What Fantastic Creatures Boys Are: Ideology, Discourse, and the Construction of Boyhood in Selected Juvenile Fiction (University of Idaho, 2005)" explores the notion of boyhood as portrayed in

adolescent novels, particularly J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, Gary Paulsen's *Brian* books, Lois Lowery's *The Giver* and the Jerry Spinelli's *Wringer*. The result is a multi-faceted demonstration of "boyhood" highly dependent on the author's construct and definition of maleness. Boyhood, as Wu demonstrates, is not static, immobile, unitary and/or universal; but, highly dynamic, divergent, socially and historically contingent, and ideologically contestable.

Shwu-yi Leu's dissertation "Struggles to Become 'American': Historical and contemporary experiences of Asian-American Immigrants in Children's and Young Adult Fiction, 1945-1999 (University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, 2002) discusses how contemporary Asian-Pacific Americans and their experiences are depicted in books for young readers and adolescents. Using both quantitative and qualitative data, researcher Leu concludes that there is a paucity of literature that portrays contemporary Asian-Pacific Americans and of nearly 300 hundred analyzed, only a third detail the richness of growing up both Asian-Pacific American and American.

Kristina Peterson's dissertation "The Gifted Child in Children's Literature, 1955-1995 (University of Minnesota, 2001)" explores the portrayal of gifted children in both children and young adult literature from 1955-1995. Titles were limited to works of fiction, originally written in English, intended for children and young adults, which feature at least one character identified as intellectually gifted or talented. Resultant data reveals no homogenous portrait of the gifted

child, but a composite picture of young people who are aggressive, bright, and often, conflicted.

JaNae Jenkins Mundy's dissertation "Best Books for Young Adults: An Analysis of the Structural, Stylistic, and Thematic Characteristics of the 1998 Best Books for Young Adults and 1998 Quick Picks for Reluctant Young Adult Readers" analyzes the characteristics of books of each respective list to determine the criteria for selection. Mundy concludes that books selected reluctant readers were more plot driven, whereas books selected as best books for young adults were generally more complex in structure, style, and theme. Nonfiction books, though, revealed no distinct characteristics for either list.

## Conclusion

A cursory read of this column reveals two things—1) young adult novels are studied and studied extensively in dissertations across the country and 2) dissertations "of" and "about" young adult literature have only begun to scratch the surface of what is required for a thorough and extensive study of a literary genre that is relatively new in style and content. Moreover, the relatively small number of dissertations that examine the use of adolescent literature in the classroom warrants the attention of young adult scholars everywhere for only then will adolescent teachers and readers begin to develop a full appreciation for the use of young adult novels as a viable instructional tool to motivate both reluctant and highly-skilled readers.

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## Venturing into the Deep Waters:

The Work of Jordan Sonnenblick

As the 2005 National Council of Teachers of English roared to life in an expansive convention hall at the Pittsburgh Marriott Convention Center Hotel, Frank McCourt, Pulitzer Prize winner for *Angela's Ashes*, took the entire audience of several thousand in the palm of his hand, regaling them in his charming, lyrical voice, with funny and poignant stories of students and schools. Punctuating with the occasional tirade against the powers-that-be who impose their ill-informed will on schools and teachers in the alleged name of school reform (did he actually name *No Child Left Behind*?!), Frank recalled his 26 years of experience as a high school English teacher in New York.

Mr. McCourt's emotions often came to the surface and, like all great teachers, his love for his students was palpable. Very early in his talk, Frank couldn't resist acknowledging a former student of his any longer, and pointing to a young man sitting in the front row, he proclaimed, "and one of 'em's sittin' right there in the first row, Jordan Sonnenblick, and he owes everything he knows to me!" The audience roared with laughter. A quick tip of his cap to Jordan's overnight success in the world of young adult literature—*Drums, Girls and Dangerous Pie* continues to receive accolades around the nation—and Mr. McCourt moved on, moving the crowd to tears and titters. We laughed until we cried, and sometimes we just cried unashamed tears as he plucked at our heart strings.



As proud as Frank McCourt may be of his former student, Jordan Sonnenblick, the relationship almost never was; in fact, the two might very well have never shared the teacher-student experience—unless you count homeroom at Stuyvesant High School, where Jordan pleaded with Mr. McCourt to let him into his class for two years:

"Please, please, please Mr. McCourt. Let me into your creative writing class!!!"

"And what can you do that 770 others students can't do? Besides, there's not going to be a seat for you."

"I don't need a seat; I'll stand if you'll let me in."

And so it began, although Jordan did get to sit down.

Like the best of teachers, Frank McCourt had expectations equal to his students' potential, not just their comfort level. He saw something in Jordan, a very special talent, and he would be satisfied with nothing less. As Jordan himself remembers,

I wrote like a madman, but I really only ever wrote funny things. I was writing for that audience of one, to make my friend Kate laugh. And when it would be my turn to read in writing workshop, I would sit on the reader's stool and read, and everyone would laugh, and then I would slowly and painfully look up at Mr. McCourt, and he would always have this look on his face as if he had swallowed something horrendous, and he would say:

"That's very *witty*, Jordan. You're a very *amusing* writer."

And I would just wilt. But once he took me aside and told me that “one day [I] would venture into the deep waters.” That was his expression.

And Jordan’s senior year rolled along and came to an end, but as it ended and Jordan attended his graduation ceremony in Manhattan’s Avery Fisher Hall, he found out, much to his surprise, that Frank McCourt had chosen him as the recipient of the creative writing award. Afterwards, in Jordan’s yearbook Frank McCourt signed his name and wrote:

“Yes, you have an awesome comic talent, but there is deeper stuff waiting to come out. You’re a born writer. Love, Frank.”

Thus began Jordan Sonnenblick’s fifteen-year quest to “venture into the deep waters.” Frank McCourt’s prediction that Jordan would one day move beyond humor was underscored by the example of his own writing. Jordan credits *Angela’s Ashes* with showing him that wit and humor need not be abandoned in meaningful story-telling; in fact, “The saddest times of life are also when you laugh the most hysterically. There’s a leavening that takes place when you balance the sadness with the laughter. I’ve thought about this a lot.” From *Angela’s Ashes* Jordan learned that the best of writers plumbed the depths of the human experience and included it all, the sad and noble, the troubling and triumphant. As Jordan now realizes, “It was very much like a final lesson from my guru. I had learned so much from him and all that remained was to meet the right person to give me the subject matter.”

That person did indeed arrive: one of Jordan’s very own middle school English students, someone whose misleading appearance concealed great pain underneath. Jordan quotes Frank McCourt as often saying, “a teenager’s job is to fool the adults around them,” and Jordan found himself duly fooled by this young woman who seemed to be coping so bravely and well with one of life’s most difficult trials, the terminal illness of a sibling. “She’s such a trooper; she’s handling this awful thing so well,” Jordan told her mother. As it turned out, however, nothing could have been farther from the truth, and as the loving mother explained: “She’s not handling it well, she’s hiding it well.” Jordan thought that just the right book might help and he offered to find it—a book about a young person in similar circumstance attempting to

make sense of a world come unglued. But the right book never appeared.

Necessity really is at times the mother of invention and once again, Jordan Sonnenblick found himself writing for an audience of one, but this time it was his student and others like her, and this time his goal was much more than to be “amusing.”

I saw a void, I loved this kid, and I wrote the book that wasn’t there for her. People say they climb Mt. Everest because it’s there, well I wrote this book because the need was there.

And that was the genesis of *Drums, Girls and Dangerous Pie*, the story of eighth-grader Steven Alper, whose five-year-old brother Jeffrey is dying of leukemia.

Writing a novel that has the terminal illness of a child at its center is a task fraught with hazards and pitfalls. Sonnenblick was determined to avoid “Hallmark card” triteness, or to hack out some saccharine piece of fiction that kids would reject as a lie. “I didn’t think that would be comforting to my student or anyone truly experiencing similar events. Readers won’t believe the message if you don’t give them the truth and they will abandon a book without even finishing it.” And telling the truth included being accurate with the details. For help with the details, Jordan called on B.J., a lifelong friend, now a doctor, who would provide him with the needed authentic information: specific medicines, dosages and timetables of symptoms. As youngsters, Jordan and B.J. had

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**Thus began Jordan Sonnenblick’s fifteen-year quest to “venture into the deep waters.”**

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**And telling the truth included being accurate with the details.**

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proclaimed their life dreams: B.J. to become a doctor and cure cancer, Jordan to write a famous book. B.J. is now researching cures for cancer, and Jordan is among the most popular of new young adult novel authors. Back to that audience of one:

Again, I wasn't writing this for the general public but for people who had experienced it and in particular for my student. It was that important to me to be steeped in the medical fact of a condition that my intended audience was living through. It needed to be perfect. A very special reader was trusting me to tell her the truth, and when someone hands you the ball of their trust, you don't drop the ball.

Authenticity also called for calling out the usual suspects that families of terminally ill patients must endure, such as the afore-mentioned complements for heroically dealing with the situation when nothing could be farther from the truth, or attempting to make the right secret deal with God (has anyone faced with a dying loved one *not* attempted this?), the horrible toll of chemotherapy, the strain on family relations and the five stages of grief. For young readers, wandering into this minefield of hurt and suffering in real life, seeing these experiences in print, recognizing their own situation, seeing themselves in the story, helps them to cope, acting, as acclaimed young adult author Chris Crutcher often says, as "powerful medicine." Jordan also uses a medical analogy:

Flu inoculations give you a weakened, non-lethal dose of flu germs, which makes you better prepared to handle the real flu. You can better handle the real sadness of life having experienced it in a non-lethal dose combined with humor in your reading, helping you survive what might otherwise feel like unbearable pain in real life.

Why and how has this book, written for an audience of one, become such popular reading for so many (a recent trip to amazon.com and barnesandnoble.com showed very impressive sales ratings)? The topic alone might easily have exiled it to counseling offices and hospice bookshelves; in fact, when Jordan was writing the book, his older sister, whom he acknowledges as a "sometimes, somewhat-cynical observer of his said, 'Oh, good! You're writing a book about leukemia! It sounds like a real blockbuster!' (Sarcasm might be a family trait [we might add that Jordan's main character, Steven Alper, has a similar talent for sarcasm])." And when he told friends and associates what the book was about, they said, "You

must be crazy! No one is going to want to read this book. It's going to be such a bummer!"

But the real-world response has been quite the opposite. Among the messages from flattering fans, at least one email a day arrives on Jordan's computer that is from a reader or parent of a reader who suffered through a similar experience, saying, "Thank you for this book, my son never talked about this when his brother died from cancer years ago, and he started talking today." And for the author, this has proven to be the greatest reward: writing a meaningful book that helps young people actually living through this awful hardship. The book's popularity, however, is obviously universal and not merely among those who have experienced similar stories to that of Steven and Jeffrey Alper in the book. John Mason, winner of the 2004 ALAN Ted Hipple Service Award and Director of Library & Educational Marketing, Trade Books Group, for Scholastic explains, "In literature, the specific becomes universal because the specifics are true. General readers sense the book's accuracy, even though they may not know from experience, and it makes it that much more real to them, too." Jordan says, it's a sort of paradox that it was for an audience of one, "I wrote it for this one person I cared about" and it became that much more universal through its accuracy.

The initial publishing of this wonderful book did not prove to be too difficult, but keeping the book in print was a story in and of itself! *Drums, Girls and Dangerous Pie* might have been called terminally ill itself at times due to events unrelated to the book's topic or the quality of its writing. Eventually, its genius would be recognized (Don Gallo recommended it to *The ALAN Review* when its first publisher was going out of business), and Scholastic would pick it up, thus ensuring the publicity needed to get it in the hands of hundreds of thousands of readers (maybe more), but at first there were moments when the book could easily have died a natural death. After finishing the book in April of 2003, Jordan signed a contract for its publication on July 1, 2003, with a "lovely, small, literary press" who subsequently went out of business in June 2004, just three weeks after *Drums* had rolled off the presses.

The saving grace here was probably the book's nomination for a Fall 2004 Book Sense Children's

Award and an American Library Association 2005 Best Books for Young Adults Award, ironically, just a few days after the original publisher's closing. In order to remain in the running for these awards, the book had to be available, and Jordan self-published enough copies to prevent its demise long enough for publishing giant Scholastic, Inc., to take notice and pick up not only *Drums* but also Jordan's next book, the soon to be released *Notes from the Midnight Driver*.

From Jordan's perspective:

There were a series of serendipities in my life that brought me to the point of writing the book and surviving the folding of my small publisher. I wasn't completely, strictly buffeted by fate, I have done some things to make this happen, but I do look back and marvel because I have had a lot of luck, too.

To which John Mason replies: "and you were ready for those serendipities when they came."

Jordan Sonnenblick is truly a talented writer, but his background was uniquely suited to telling the story of a 13-year-old at school and at home, as well. Jordan has been a middle school English teacher for 10 years at Phillipsburg Middle School in Phillipsburg, New Jersey, and so is steeped in the atmosphere and environment of middle school culture. He comes from a long line of teachers, as well as mental health professionals. His mother is an educational psychologist, and his grandfather, a man whom Jordan credits as having a tremendous influence over his life, was a high school biology teacher whose relationship with Jordan looms large in his second book, *Notes from the Midnight Driver*. Jordan's late father, a psychiatrist and great Freudian, held that humor is the breakthrough of the unconscious, a belief that may very well find purchase in *Drums*.

Not unlike *Drums* circuitous route to success, Jordan's route to teaching was somewhat roundabout. Having been a camp counselor, working as a high school tutor in his mother's tutoring center, and having grown up with teaching and schools as a regular part of daily family life growing up, education courses did not seem a necessity for success in the classroom to Jordan. In addition, his grandfather, out of a desire to see Jordan have the best of advantages, insisted on paying for coursework on the path to medical school but not for education methods class. And so Jordan entered his middle school classroom, a

soldier in Teach for America (Mr. McCourt mocks Teach for America, Jordan smirks to point out). The Peace Corps also called to his sense of duty to humankind, but why travel to the other side of the world when kids needed his help right here at home?

Although it was not his first choice for his grandson, Jordan's grandfather was forced to accept the highest of praise, imitation:

He was determined that I would be a doctor, but all I ever wanted was to be like him—a teacher. While I wrote the first book [*Drums*] for one person, I wrote the second book *about* one person; I was trying to immortalize my grandfather. When my protagonist in *Notes* is convicted of drunken driving as a minor, he is sentenced to 100 hours of community service in a nursing home, and his mom pulls strings behind the scenes to get him assigned to Sol, the most cantankerous old man in the home. I took a walk and while I was on the walk, most of the story came to me, and when I returned from the walk, I got a call that my grandfather, probably the most formative person in my life, had pneumonia and was in the hospital and I should come now, and even if I left immediately, I might not get there in time to see him. After having spent all day generating this plot based on my grandfather, it was an eerie experience. When I got there the next morning, he was sitting up in bed singing at the top of his lungs to the nurses in Yiddish and everybody was laughing. The intravenous antibiotics had facilitated a miraculous recovery.

Jordan is not only a remarkable writer but a remarkable teacher, as well, one who walks the walk in regard to teaching writing. He describes his instructional approach in class as "somewhere between a pure reading and writing workshop ala Nancie Atwell and a more traditional approach with a little more structure." He not only appeared as an author at the 2005 NCTE Convention in Pittsburgh, but also presented in a concurrent session on techniques for teaching writing. Jordan's session was brilliant and included innovative strategies for eliciting quality writing from students. Like any good teacher, he not only *told* the group how to implement these strategies, but also *showed* those in attendance by leading them through the activities. Again, like most good teachers, he used illustrations from his own writing, one of which was really quite fascinating and brought the group full circle from Frank McCourt to Jordan Sonnenblick and back to Frank McCourt again. Jordan described a writing activity that Frank had taken students through at Stuyvesant High School in which

they are to imitate a famous author or attempt to write in the voice and style of a certain genre of creative writing, imitating (even parodying if they so chose) the syntax, word choice, plot devices and so on of that author or genre. Jordan showed how in so doing, a young writer would be covertly facilitated in recognizing all the nuances that go into writing and in the process of adopting and adapting a famous writer's style to his own (the young writer's) intended story, their own writing would grow tremendously. Those of us who remember the lovely movie *Finding Forrester* (Sony, 2000), starring Sean Connery, Rob Brown and F. Murray Abram, may remember Forrester using a similar activity to mentor Jamal—imitate a piece of writing by a famous author but make it your own. Jordan even showed us an example of an exercise in this he had done himself. The very first page of *Notes from the Midnight Driver* is a tribute in form, although completely different in content, to the very first page of *Angela's Ashes*.

Jordan also credits his loving and supportive wife, Melissa, and their beautiful and energetic children, Ross and Emma, who are all on Team Sonnenblick. After writing right through a weekend, sometimes for hours upon uninterrupted hours, "I finish a draft and my words are all used up. I'm totally aphasic, and Melissa says, 'honey, what do you want for supper?' And I struggle to even answer: 'Uhhhhhhhhh, uhhhhh, the red thing in the freezer?' I say. And my wife says, 'Beef, Jordan, you mean beef? You mean the roast in the freezer, honey? OK.' She understands."

All in all, it is no surprise that when asked the secret to his success as an author, Jordan attributed it to writing about "love and humor. Nobody on the planet can ever get enough of either." Jordan, thanks for taking us with you into the deep waters.

*Jim Blasingame is an assistant professor of English at Arizona State University, where he teaches methods courses and supervises student teachers.*

## A Message about the ALAN Speakers Bureau from Catherine Balkin

Dear ALAN Member:

Since the purpose of ALAN is to promote the reading, teaching, and appreciation of literature for adolescents, the Board has created an ALAN Speakers Bureau to advance the reading and use of young adult literature in schools, libraries and other settings.

We are currently collecting speakers' names for a posting on the ALAN website. If you are interested in becoming a guest speaker at school, library, or university functions, or if you already do a lot of speaking, a mention on the ALAN website could generate a number of requests for you.

If you would like to be included, please provide us with your name, address, phone number, and email address, and tell us your honorarium range, how many presentations you are willing to do each day, your audience preference (YAs only, adults only, both), what kinds of subjects you are comfortable with and how far you're willing to travel. On the ALAN website, we will publish only your name, school or university affiliation, city and state. All requests for speaking engagements will be filtered through the Speakers Bureau.

In return for this service, we ask that you pay ALAN a finder's fee of 15% of the honorarium you receive from each speaking engagement. The money that ALAN receives from this service will go back into the membership by way of grants, programs, etc., to advance our stated purpose. A satisfaction survey will be sent to each school or university after the speaker program, and upon request, we will be happy to share the results of the survey with you.

If you are interested in joining the ALAN Speakers Bureau, or if you have any questions, please contact Catherine Balkin at telephone 718-857-7605 or [Catherine@BalkinBuddies.com](mailto:Catherine@BalkinBuddies.com). Also, if you were previously on the ALAN Speakers Bureau and wish to continue to be on it, please contact Catherine Balkin with the above mentioned details. We look forward to working with you on this enterprise.



## 'Join and Escalate':

Chris Crutcher's Coaches

In Chris Crutcher's young adult novels, the main characters are advised (or abused), supported (or undermined), guided (or misguided) by official and unofficial athletic coaches. Through his carefully crafted portraits of good and bad coaches, Crutcher gives his readers a detailed outline of what he thinks it means to be a responsible role model for young people. The coaches who are the heroes in his books teach their young charges about the elements of the game in question (of course), but they also help teens find strength and determination. What they *don't* do—at least the good ones—is try to make sports about patriotism, respect for authority, piety, or loyalty to one's school (or coach). They also refuse to tell kids what to do—or what to think—about the lives they've been given. The best coaches in Crutcher's novels give adolescents the tools to figure out the world for themselves.

Crutcher is concerned about the role that coaches play in the lives of young people because, as he says in his autobiography, *King of the Mild Frontier* (2003):

I look back and wish my athletic mentors had been able to present a larger picture and had celebrated the sport relative to the ability of the individual athlete. I wish they had made it clean, wish they hadn't made it patriotic, religious, moral. A sport has its own built-in integrity, doesn't need an artificial one. Athletics carries its own set of truths, and those truths are diminished when manipulated by people with agendas. So, in my stories, I let my characters try to find the purity, the juxtaposition of mind, body, and spirit that I discovered in athletics at a much later age. (256)

Crutcher's best coaches do just that: help the young adults in their care find "the purity, the juxta-

position of mind, body, and spirit" in sports, and in their lives. His worst ones reveal how destructive, angry, hypocritical, domineering, and/or racist adults can be. Still, they, too, are not without value: Crutcher believes that learning how to resist such bullies positively and creatively is a necessary life skill.

Even well-intentioned adults can do damage, however, especially if they try to shield children from the difficult truths about life. Crutcher reaffirms in his autobiography what he has said in numerous interviews and emphasizes in every novel—the importance of honesty:

If I have any complaints about my youth . . . one is that many well-meaning adults lied to me. Not spiteful lies with malicious intent but lies designed to prevent emotional and psychological pain, lies told by the people who cared about me most: my parents, teachers, relatives. They were lies designed to prevent disappointment, lies about the virtues of love, hard work, and any number of terms around which clichés blossom like desert flowers after a flash flood . . . And I believed them, and became disillusioned when life turned out to operate by a different set of rules. (233-4)

Ideally, Crutcher believes, adults should tell young people the straight (and sometimes painful) truth about life—and about themselves. His many years as a child and family therapist have taught him that people are healed *only* by telling and hearing the truth, no matter how difficult, accepting responsibility, and reaching out to others for help and support. Terry Davis, novelist, critic, and Crutcher's long-time friend, says:

In the world Chris Crutcher creates in his stories the fact of human ghastliness doesn't negate the fact of human glory.

Both qualities are indeed “facts” of life. Humanity is flawed, to be sure, but there is no fatal flaw in the human character, like the idea of original sin, that creates the necessity for divine intervention. There is no divine intervention. The people in Crutcher’s world rise and fall, are saved or lost, by the degree to which they are connected to the humanity in themselves and others. (39-40)

Adults on and off the field, Davis and Crutcher agree, have the responsibility to connect to the children in their care and teach them to reach out to others.

As well as making these connections and being honest about the good *and* bad in life, the wisest adults also learn when to let go. Crutcher tells interviewer Betty Carter, “It’s risky business letting people have their own lives, particularly if they are our children. It’s risky business giving up ownership, which, by the way, we never had in the first place” (“Eyes”). Even our biological children, Crutcher says, don’t belong to us; they aren’t our property. This doesn’t mean ignoring what kids need and love, though. He comments to Joel Shoemaker: “There are lots of ways to help someone stretch other than by setting expectations too high to achieve. [Adults] will get a lot more ‘stretching’ mileage out of a kid by discovering that kid’s passion and joining with him or her in it. [T]he primary strategy is to join and escalate” (97).

The adults in Crutcher’s novels with the best opportunity to “join and escalate” are often coaches, but these men and women are not the perfectly wise and inhumanely patient creatures of earlier sports fiction for teens. In *More than a Game*, young adult novelist and critic Chris Crowe says that although Crutcher admires fictional athletic heroes like Clair Bee’s Chip Hilton, he decided to make his athletes (and their coaches) more flawed than the superhumanly talented—and unbelievably nice—Hilton in order to have them “discover truth in more subtle ways” (40-1). Crutcher’s novels are filled with portrayals of *very human* adults—kind but misguided, tortured and torturing, challenging and supportive—along with realistically-drawn young people who resent, resist, and sometimes even follow their advice (or at least learn from their mistakes).

This complex relationship between mentor and student seems to undercut Roberta Trites’ position that the underlying purpose of the adolescent novel is to prepare young adults to acquiesce to the demands of

the adult world. “Much of the genre,” Trites says, is “dedicated to depicting how potentially out-of-control adolescents can learn to exist within institutional structures” (7). This doesn’t square with what appears to be happening in Crutcher’s novels. Young adults in his works are *not* successfully indoctrinated (no matter how hard adults try); they remain, for the most part, outside of the ideological systems that surround them. They learn that many adults, even those specifically appointed to take care of children, are not to be trusted, and they are drawn to those who challenge the status quo. Crutcher’s heroes, more often than not, are confirmed in their stubborn resistance to the often-bullying authority of adults.

For example, in Crutcher’s first novel, *Running Loose* (1983), main character Louie Banks confronts his aggressive and racist football coach, the appropriately-named Mr. Lednecky. In order to win a particularly important game, Lednecky tells his players to disable the star (and only black) player on the opposing team. Louie refuses to comply and is kicked out of the game, off the team, and eventually out of all high-school athletics for cursing the coach after his teammates seriously injure the player. Clearly, Lednecky represents the kind of coach Crutcher’s kids must use as a cautionary tale.

Opposed to Lednecky is assistant football Coach Madison, who, as a new teacher, is initially unwilling to put his career in jeopardy by standing up to for Louie. However, Madison soon encourages Louie to participate on the track team, a diversion he desperately needs after the death of his girlfriend, Becky. When Lednecky insists that Louie should continue to be banned from playing sports, in order to teach him humility and build his character, Madison exemplifies Crutcher’s ideal of good coaching. “I’m not building young men; I’m building athletes,” Madison says. “What they do with that is their own business. . . . We can show them the ways to live their lives, but we can’t tell them” (176). Coach Madison, Louie says, is “bound and determined to coach me in track and leave the rest of my life to me” (205).

With help from Madison, Louie is able to join the track team, in spite of the resistance from Coach Lednecky and the even “scarier” (88) former coach and principal, Mr. Jasper. As Madison says about Jasper, “A man’s position only allows him so much room. After he uses it all and grabs for more, it has to

be brought to someone's attention" (180). Louie takes this attitude to heart, and near the end of the novel, he smashes the principal's self-aggrandizing monument. The reader is left with a picture of a Louie Banks who has refused to accept "institutional structures," as Trites calls them. Instead, he has learned from Madison that he can "always take one more step" (187) and should "[r]un loose like always" (210). Louie has discovered how to push himself to achieve what he wants, to stand up for what he believes, and to distance himself from people who are trying to hold him back.

Chris Crowe says about the novel:

[R]eading about Louie's experiences in *Running Loose* will help teenagers realize that not all adults deserve their trust. As readers follow Louie through his story, they will learn with him how to distinguish truth from hypocrisy, reasoned actions from irrational actions, and good adults from bad adults. And, by "listening" to Louie's friends and mentors, especially Coach Madison . . . teenage readers will realize that despite the fact that young people lack adult status and authority, teenagers do have the power—and the responsibility—to resist adult hypocrisy and unethical behavior. (Crowe, "Running With" 362-3)

Louie not only *can* resist his principal and coach—he *must*. He learns through experience that "there's no use being honorable with dishonorable men" (215).

Throughout the novel, Coach Madison, his father, and other benevolent adults all support Louie. As Davis says: "It's probably more a comment on young adult literature than on *Running Loose* itself that so many reviewers mentioned the 'supportive' characterization of Louie's parents and other adults. Such supportive adult characters are relatively few in YA literature" (Davis, *Presenting* 59). What Crutcher manages to do so well—from his first novel on—is to carefully differentiate between good and bad adults and show when resistance is pointless and when it is truly warranted.

*Stotan!* (1986), Crutcher's second novel, features Max, a tough but insightful "Korean cowboy" (3) coach who pushes his swimmers to their limit physically and teaches them to triumph psychologically, as well. The novel centers on a week of intensive training during Christmas break for members of the swim team. The team members are Nortie, Jeff, Lion, and the narrator, Walker "Walk" Dupree. Each of them is troubled in one way or another, which is a typical

state for Crutcher's main characters. Nortie is physically abused by his father and quits his job at a day-care center when he hits a child, fearing he is repeating the cycle. Jeff gets leukemia and is dying at the end of the novel. Lion's parents were killed in a boating accident, and he now lives alone above a tavern. Walk's older brother uses drugs and hangs out at a biker bar, much to Walk's distress.

Reflecting on life, Walk says, "I think if I ever make it to adulthood, and if I decide to turn back and help someone grow up, either as a parent or a teacher or a coach, I'm going to spend most of my time dispelling myths, clearing up unreal expectations. For instance, we're brought up to think that the good guys are rewarded and the bad guys are punished; but upon close scrutiny, that assumption vanishes into thin air" (181). This position is consistent with Crutcher's own view of life: Responsible adults should not lie to children about harsh realities. This novel shows that the challenge of the sport and the boys' team spirit can pull them through their troubles, but it neither turns away from those difficult issues nor provides a happy ending. Their coach is a stern taskmaster, but he knows that pushing them to the limit will teach them how much strength (and stubbornness) they really have, and he is fully aware of how much they will *need* those attributes.

In *The Crazy Horse Electric Game* (1987) main character Willie Weaver is a star pitcher, who, after being injured in a water skiing accident, suffers permanent motor-skill damage. As if that is not bad enough, Willie's family has also lost a child to AIDS, and consequently his parents have limited emotional resources with which to cope with his devastating injury and slow rehabilitation. His father, a former college football star, is especially angry at his son's apparent lack of progress, and at himself for contributing to the accident.

Fed up with his parents (and himself), Willie leaves home without telling anyone where he is going and ends up in Oakland, CA, where he encounters a benevolent (if sometimes violent) pimp and attends the One More Last Chance (OMLC) high school. Modeled after the alternative school where Crutcher taught, OMLC provides a space where administrators and teachers (especially Lisa, the P.E. coach) can help Willie regain his physical and psychological strength. Teaching him to find his "center" (168) and to take

responsibility for his injury and recovery, Lisa, like all Crutcher's good coaches, doesn't lecture him about life. Instead, she uses sports to show Willie how to manipulate (and accept) his altered body and find his path to adulthood.

After more than a year, Willie returns home to Montana to find his family home sold, his parents divorced, his father a drunk, and his mother remarried. He stops there long enough to visit his mother's new family and then heads back to California. The ending is elegiac, with everyone longing for a past untouched by accident and death. In this novel adults are caring, if sometimes seriously flawed, but as in all of Crutcher's work, characters are saved by their connection to others and their dedication to athletics. At his graduation from OMLC, Willie sums up what he learned there:

Nobody here preached at me. Nobody told me everything would be okay, or that I should go back home to my parents and work things out when I knew the time for that wasn't here yet. They let me figure it out for myself; *demand*ed that I figure it out for myself; but they never deserted me. (266)

This seems to be the essence of Chris Crutcher's good coaching: Let kids figure out what they need for themselves, and provide them with all the backup they need to make those discoveries.

In what is probably his most controversial work, *Chinese Handcuffs* (1989), protagonists Jennifer Lawless and Dillon Hemingway warily circle each other for the entire novel. Jennifer is a star basketball player and is being sexually abused by her stepfather. Dillon is a triathlete and is coping unsuccessfully with his brother's suicide, his devastated family, and the uncomfortable romantic feelings he has for his brother's girlfriend, Stacey. The novel has both dramatically bad and heroically good coaches, monstrous as well as well-meaning (but troubled) parents.

Principal John Caldwell (*another* former coach) has, according to Dillon, "been so busy finding different ways to tell me what is and isn't good for me he never hears me" (7). Quickly, Dillon realizes that although Caldwell says that he wants Dillon to respect him, in reality he wants the young man to *fear* him. Calling fear respect, Dillon says, is "like fool's gold" (84). Once again, Crutcher faults adults for not telling the truth, for not calling things by their right names. When talking about Caldwell, Dillon expresses one of

Crutcher's core beliefs about sports: "[Caldwell] and his followers—and they are legion—have somehow confused athletic commitment with patriotism and human spiritual values, among other things" (85). As in *Running Loose*, Crutcher shows in this novel that athletics should never be turned into a metaphor for something else; it has its own inherent value.

Girls' basketball coach Kathy Sherman, unlike Caldwell, "knows what athletics is about better than anyone in the business. Her teams win and lose with grace and dignity, and her players never walk away empty-handed, never walk away without a lesson" (18). This, of course, infuriates people like Caldwell, who

hat[e] that she was by far the most successful coach in town—probably in the state—and that she accomplished that without the win-at-all-costs philosophy he considered so important in sports, and in life for that matter. She was always giving her kids a *voice* as she called it, and that just didn't make sense. (101)

The lessons Sherman teaches are about hard work, grace, and personal dignity *on the court*, not about God, country, or defeating one's enemies in the larger world. While she is teaching those lessons, she is creating a safe place to be heard. In fact, Sherman's dedication to "giving her kids a voice" is what prompts Dillon to tell her about Jennifer's abuse and what leads her to shelter Jennifer while Dillon takes on her smart and dangerous stepfather. Sherman exemplifies what Crutcher thinks is best in an adult role model: She doesn't turn away from hard truths, and she is willing to put herself on the line for her kids.

*Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes* (1993), Crutcher's fifth young adult novel, features Eric "Moby" Calhoun, a larger-than-average swimmer and friend of Sarah Byrnes, who at three years old was severely and deliberately burned by her father. At the beginning of the novel, Sarah has simulated catatonia to escape her increasingly deranged father: She is not speaking or responding and is in the psychiatric ward of a local hospital. Moby tries to bring her back to life.

He is helped by Ms. Lemry, his English teacher and swimming coach—a "thinking man's coach" (4). Like Kathy Sherman, Coach Lemry is intelligent, tough, and caring. When Moby and his family decide to take on Sarah's father, Lemry at first hides Sarah and eventually adopts her. At the end of the novel,

Moby says, “Part of me wishes life were more predictable and part of me is excited that it’s not. I think it’s impossible to tell the good things from the bad things while they’re happening” (215). Again readers see Crutcher’s message: Life is unpredictable, unfair, and sometimes downright bad, but coaches like Lemry can help kids stand up to evil and even be excited by the challenge.<sup>1</sup>

*Ironman* (1995) alternates between main character Bo Brewster’s first-person narrative and his letters to talk-show host Larry King. English teacher and coach Keith Redmond has it in for Bo after he quit the football team because he didn’t like Redmond’s humiliation-as-motivator coaching style. Bo’s anger, which he directs at Redmond and the principal, keeps getting him suspended, and he winds up in anger management class with Mr. Nakatani, an Asian cowboy like Max, who “talks like Slim Pickens and dresses like his fashion guru is the Marlboro Man” (26). Mr. Nak, as he is called, takes on the role of mentor in this novel, while Bo becomes his own coach and trains for a triathlon.

Bo is also engaged in a power struggle with his dad, who always has to be right and is certain he knows what is best for his son. While Bo trains, his father buys a state-of-the-art bicycle for a competitor to teach Bo an ill-advised lesson in humility. (For Crutcher, *all* lessons in humility that adults give to children are ill advised.) However, Bo’s fellow anger management students materially and emotionally support him during the race, and he performs well.

Mr. Nak says at the end of the novel:

“Ya know, I’ve heard folks say ‘Life’s not fair’ in this group a lot. I’ve even said it myself when the occasion seemed to call for it. But that ain’t correct. Life is exactly fair. *People* ain’t fair, but life sure as hell is. Most of us just ain’t willing to accept it. Life has Ironmen an’ Stotans an’ American Gladiators, an’ Charles Mansons an’ Jeffrey Dahmers. Life has every kind of holy man an’ devil. If you’re ever gonna beat all the anger an’ hurt inside you, you’re gonna have to learn to offset the awful with the magnificent. But that requires allowin’ for both to have their place en the world. An’ whether you allow it or not, it’s there. The truth don’t need you to believe it for it to be true.” (180)

Like all positive adult figures in Crutcher’s novels, Mr. Nak isn’t afraid of telling the truth and empowering Bo and the others in his class with that truth.<sup>2</sup> By the end of the novel, the members of the anger management class, Bo included, have truly become a

team, in large part because of Mr. Nak’s brusque support and honest advice.

The protagonist of Crutcher’s most recent (and arguably his best) work, *Whale Talk* (2001), does more than just coach himself; he assumes the responsibility of training others. In this novel, The Tao (“T.J.”) Jones puts together a team of extremely unlikely swimmers to humiliate a football-player bully and an equally obnoxious coach. T.J. wants all of them to earn letter jackets and gain some confidence and pride, but he also wants to pop a few inflated egos. He chooses the kids to be on his team *because* of their mental disability, excessive weight, abusive parents, hyper intelligence, and/or physical handicaps. In spite of vigorous opposition by the football coach, who (correctly) recognizes that T.J. is in some way mocking the athletic department with his unconventional team, everyone but T.J. eventually earns a jacket.

Mr. Simet, an English teacher and swimming coach, aids T.J. in his quest. (The English teacher/coach is a familiar Crutcher character.) Simet, T.J. says:

is a guy who always teaches you something, and it’s not always about English or journalism. He *was* a hell of a swimmer himself in his younger years, when dinosaurs roamed the planet, and he seldom lets his classes forget what a spiritual experience it is to test yourself against that particular element. (12)

Simet, like Crutcher’s other good coaches but clearly in the minority, is willing to step back and let the boys teach themselves and learn from each other. Many coaches, T.J. has learned the hard way, “always have to have it their way. They seem to listen, but in the end they make the rules and to hell with the people who have to follow them” (183). Like Kathy Sherman, Simet knows the value of giving kids a voice.

With the help of Simet and the other unlikely “Mermen” on his team, T.J., who has deliberately sabotaged his letter jacket prospects in a gesture of solidarity with his team members, comes to realize that:

[I]n the end I live[d] up to my name. The Tao—the *real* Tao, that knows and *is* everything—celebrates irony. Nothing exists without its opposite. I didn’t earn a letter jacket because I could, and all my friends did because they couldn’t. Some things really don’t get any better. (204)

This is the lesson of all Crutcher’s novels: There



are no successes without failures, no good without the bad, no caring coaches and parents without equally damaging ones. Still, kids do manage, with the help of others, to outrun, out swim, and outplay most of the bad—most of the time.

Throughout Crutcher's work, his adolescent main characters learn to overcome obstacles, both physical and psychological, come to terms with hard realities, and confront bullying and dangerous adults in their lives. They do this often under pressure from difficult home lives, personal challenges, and adults who should be guiding them, not deliberately setting up roadblocks. Most importantly, though, as Davis says, Crutcher "makes help available to his characters—all the time" (*Presenting* 40). His young people don't have to do it alone: They have coaches like Simet and Nak, Lemry and Sherman, Lisa, Max, and Madison to inspire, challenge, and push them toward the finish line. Teachers and coaches outside of novels would do well to follow their example: tell the truth, give kids a voice, and, most importantly, let sports be simply about sports.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Roberta Trites says that in *Staying Fat*, Lemry "communicates indirectly but explicitly a key ideology in this novel of ideas: adults are responsible for protecting children" (81), but the novel actually shows that, for the most part, kids have to take care of themselves, ideally with some help from the adults. Perhaps the better way to put it is, as Davis comments, that the end of the novel is "a powerful example of a soul saved—or a longer stay in this world, at least—by human intervention and human love" (Davis, *Presenting* 43). There is no divine intervention in this novel, just caring adults and children's iron will.
- <sup>2</sup> Trites, however, says speeches like this assert the authority of adults over children. "When Mr. Nak communicates *in loco parentis* with an air of authority about how Bo can manage his anger," she says, "Nak is an adult narrator temporarily displacing the adolescent implied reader" (74). Yes, but Mr. Nak uses speeches like this to lead Bo and his classmates toward independence. In fact, Bo takes over the role of parent, suggesting that he and his father attend counseling sessions as a graduation present, and their relationship seems to be improving at the end of the novel.

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## Interpreting Latino/a Literature as Critical Fictions

*To la memoria of Gloria Anzaldúa. Con respeto.*

*Readers of critical fiction cannot approach work assuming that they already possess a language of access, or that the text will mirror realities that they already know and understand. Much critical fiction dynamically seeks to deconstruct conventional ways of knowing.*

—hooks, 1991, p. 57

**R**eading Latino/a children's literature has become a great passion and an important component of my work as an educator. The journey began while looking for children's literary texts that somehow speak about aspects of my Puerto Rican/Latina identity and those communities close to mine. I was looking for personal and literary growth but also for ways in which I could share a different literary experience from the mainstream with children and teachers.

Getting access to the literature was quite challenging, but once I developed some familiarity with awards such as the Américas Award, the Pura Belpré Award; publications such as Nieto (1997) and Barrera & Garza (1997) and several on-line resources, accessibility became an easier process. As I continued reading more Latino/a literature and engaging in conversations around these texts with teachers and children, I realized that access to the literature was not the biggest challenge I would confront. Instead, what I found unsettling were my own interpretative lens, as well as those used by teachers and students to mediate our responses to the books. These lenses seem to be mostly centered in solely our personal responses to the literature without an in depth

analysis of the authors' stances and the social, political and cultural ideologies represented in the texts. Like hooks suggested in the opening quote, I felt that I did not fully understand or possess the language to "deconstruct [my/ours] conventional ways of knowing" in the interpretation of the literature. The type of responses to the texts seemed monologic in nature in that they focused only on the reader's responses and excluded the examination of Latino/a literature as culturally situated and ideologically constructed.

As a children's and adolescent literature educator, I struggle with the same tensions raised by Cai (1997) and Rabinowitz & Smith (1998) in terms of my beliefs about Reader's Response Theory and the ways in which authors' stances could be explored. Beyond imposing a set of themes to a literary text, I am more interested in better contextualizing this literature in a way that becomes more meaningful and active for the readers especially from a sociopolitical perspective. As theories on critical literacy suggest (Comber & Simpson, 2001; Lewison, Flint & Van Sluys, 2002) it is important to challenge readers' beliefs and disrupt commonplaces to look at the ideological aspects of texts and move authors out of neutral positions.

Approaching authors and texts as neutral leads to a form of colonized literacy where the literature is integrated to the curriculum but remains critically unexamined.

In order to explore the complex nature of the Latino/a experience in literary texts, I found that something more than just the intentions of bringing a text to the classroom was needed. This is particularly significant because many Latino/a writers both for young and adults speak about their social, political and cultural experiences as participants of the United States society<sup>1</sup>. Latina literary critic [Rebolledo \(1990\)](#) believes that the issue of Latino/a cultural locations and how those are represented in literary texts is an area of research that has not been fully developed. She asks us look across the literature to contextualize and theorize *from within* but also to decolonize our ways of looking at the literature outside of a mainstream perspective.

Rebolledo's concern is also relevant for young adult and children's literature. Based on this idea I use notions of critical fictions ([Mariani, 1991](#)) to present the results of a study that examined a set of Latino/a literature. The purpose was to create a culturally relevant framework to situate, explore and contextualize the literature while trying to avoid falling into an imposition of a "fixed" meaning of the texts. The process was to look at the kind of metaphors and symbols authors' construct "imagining" aspects of Latinos/as' experience, looking for "places" to situate and unpack authors' ideologies. In order to develop the study I specifically looked at three texts that center on the theme of immigration. The criteria for selecting this texts was the vast amount of Latino/a literature available that portrays the complex nature of the immigrant experience. These three texts represent diverse and interesting perspectives on immigration and Latino/a literature in general. After this analysis I suggest further explorations around other critical themes such as gender, class and language among others.

## Critical fictions and the Latino/a literary imagination

[Mariani \(1991\)](#) defines "critical fictions" as those literary texts that speak about the political, social and cultural experiences of the authors and the communi-

ties they represent. Critical fictions often feature the voices of those authors from underrepresented and marginalized communities where their writing works as an agent of liberation to claim a space in society, including a literary community that has been dominated by white male perspectives. The significance of this form of liberation according to [hooks \(1991\)](#) derives from the fact that "Globally, literature that enriches resistance struggles speaks about the way the individuals in repressive, dehumanizing situations use imagination to sustain life and maintain critical awareness" (p. 55). Writing critical fiction is not just a form of sharing a narrative with a reader for its multicultural or cross cultural value. Multicultural theory works as the point of entry for these authors to gain visibility and access multiple audiences. However, their writing is a way for them to reflect and maintain a critical perspective that is first "inner" within the author and then becomes "outer" as readers access the story and make sense of it from their own cultural locations and positionalities ([Enciso, 1997](#)).

This notion of reflection is in a sense a form of "inner liberation" ([Anzaldúa, 1987](#)) and it is found in many examples of Latino/a literature. Mexican American feminist writer and literary theorist Anzaldúa, who has published both for children and adult audiences, argues in her explorations of writing that the struggle is first inner: "[A]wareness of our situation must come before inner changes, which in turn come before changes in society. Nothing happens in the 'real' world unless it first happens in the images in our heads" (p. 87). Latino/a writers for young audiences create and share images that many times are representative of the resistance and struggle in their own lives and the communities they belong to ([Author & Enciso, 2002](#)). It is interesting that many Latino/a writers for children and young adults are indeed established authors for adult audiences as in the case of Latina feminist writers such as [Anzaldúa, \(1987\)](#); [Mora, \(2002\)](#); [Cisneros, \(1983\)](#); [Mohr \(1990/1979\)](#); [Alvarez, \(2002\)](#); [Ortiz-Cofer, \(1995\)](#) and also male writers such as [Jiménez, \(1997\)](#); [Herrera \(1995\)](#); [Soto \(1995\)](#) and [Anaya \(1997\)](#) among many others. Their writing is part of a larger literary community that does not work in isolation. There is a history of Latino/a literary works that is diverse and complex in nature and that also informs the literary community.

Therefore, when looking for meaningful frameworks to read Latino/a children's literature, one powerful strategy is to read across texts to get a sense of multiple representations and various perspectives presented by Latino/a authors. At the same time it is also important to consider the author's unique literary style and locations to understand the diverse voices that compose a complex literary community.

## **Border Images and symbols: Latinos/as immigration**

In order to illustrate the ideological nature of Latino/a literature I engaged in what Latina literary critic [Rebolledo \(1996\)](#) called a "descriptive thematic analysis" across the literature to analyze, describe and understand the multiple ideological forms of representation and themes within the literature. A powerful text set to review and use as an example of the analytical process, was to examine immigrants' representation across exemplary literature. The text set was examined around questions such as how is the immigration experience represented in Latino/a young adult literature? What kind of metaphors and symbols do these authors construct "imagining immigration"? What kind of personal stories and ideological representations are the authors sharing? What are the continued realities of immigration? What can a story convey?

The literature chosen was representative and speaks about the Latino/a experiences with immigrating to the United States and was reviewed as exemplary by the Américas Award Committee. The texts selected were *The Circuit* ([Jiménez, 1997](#)); *Esperanza Rising* ([Muñoz, 2000](#)) and *Before We were Free* ([Alvarez, 2002](#)) (Other possible texts on immigration are included on [Table 1](#)). The selection of literature provided a diverse range of immigration experiences that conveys the heterogeneous essence of Latino/a identity in literature.

## **Multiple nationalities, gender, racial and socio economic status**

One significant aspect of reading the immigrant experience and any other Latino/a literature is to understand that Latina/o is an umbrella term that encompasses people from multiple Latin American countries from Central and South America and also

the Caribbean. Latinos/as emigrate from multiple countries making "border crossing" a powerful and diverse set of images in the literature. Immigration from Mexico is found in many texts including *The Circuit* and *Esperanza Rising*. Immigration from the Caribbean is found in texts such as *Before We were Free* a story from the Dominican Republic.

Within the diverse nationalities one also finds diverse racial and socioeconomic representations. In *Before We were Free* the characters living in the Dominican Republic seem to belong to a more privileged middle class where children attend American private school and the family can afford a housekeeper from Haiti. In *Esperanza Rising* two of the main characters, Esperanza and her mother, come from an affluent class in Mexico. The girl, Esperanza, attends private school and lives in a *hacienda* with her family and house keepers. In the story, Hortensia and Alfonso, two house employees immigrate with them to the United States. They are from a lower socioeconomic status and somehow guide Esperanza and her mom through their new life in the United States.

Latino/a authors explore diverse ideological constructions of gender, race and class in the literature as it relates to the previous reality before coming to the United States. Furthermore, they also explore how those constructions acquire new ideological meanings and are among the factors that situate the characters in different contexts once they arrive in the United States. Rather than a homogenous perception of Latinos as one race and one social class the reader encounters a range of representations. Reading across the literature helps one understand the complex gender, social and racial identities of Latino/a immigrants in the United States.

## **Critical fictions: Authors' identity embedded in the story**

Using the notion of critical fictions ([Mariani, 1991](#)) allows one to see how the authors' identity and social, political and cultural locations are embedded in the stories they narrate. Those personal locations are represented in multiple forms such as genres and literary language. For example, one way in which Latino/a authors create critical fictions is by authoring texts that tell personal and community stories that represent the multiple circumstances of immigration.

In *The Circuit*, Jiménez narrates his personal autobiography crafting a literary text written in an evocative language that incorporates significant Spanish words in the author's life intertwined in the narrative. The chapter titles are strong metaphors of their lives such as "to have and to hold", "moving still" and "learning the game". In addition, the powerful and realistic ending leaves the reader wondering what the future holds for this family.

The reader has access to the author's life experiences as the child of migrant farm workers including the moment they cross the U.S./Mexico border, experiences in labor camps and being deported back to Mexico. The author shares a personal reality that is representative of the life, hopes and struggles of many undocumented immigrants in the United States. In an interview (Barrera, 2003) Jiménez shares that writing his personal story is a form of catharsis where he discovers new aspects of his identity and his work as a writer.

They [his experiences] were not necessarily unique to me, but common to many, many people in the past and the present. As I reflected on and began to write about them, I learned this was a deeper purpose for having gone through these experiences (p. 2).

Like in Anzaldúa's notion of "inner liberation" Jiménez creates a powerful reflection of his life that becomes a form of inner empowerment.

Authors also create critical fictions by sharing family stories. In *Esperanza Rising* for example the author, Muñoz, crafts a fictional tale using her grandmother's story about a young girl who used to be rich but also who lost everything after her father died. Esperanza, her mother and two house employees had no choice but to immigrate to the United States and become farm workers. Furthermore, the story took place during the time when César Chavez and the farm worker unions were starting to add to the narrative a layer of political activism and social justice. Muñoz looks into her past to tell a story that speaks to life and reality faced by previous generations and passes it to new ones.

In *Before We were Free*, Alvarez tells a fictional story based on her family's persecution living in the Dominican Republic during Trujillo's dictatorship. Her father, who was committed to the country's liberation, is in danger of being caught by Trujillo's military forces. Written in a diary form by the young girl Anita,

the author writes a novel "imagining the life of those who stayed behind, fighting for freedom" (p. 166). She creates powerful images and metaphors of a historical and political reality that is an important part of the life of many people who emigrate from the Dominican Republic. This is a fictional but personal account about political repression, justice, the search for democracy and the power of the imagination as a tool for liberation.

### **Crossing "la frontera": Multiple realities faced in a new country**

As part of the authors' narrative there is a critical reflection of what happens once Latinos/as arrived in the United States. In Latino/a literature and literary criticism one can find multiple images and metaphors to describe the social, physical, ideological and psychological space Latinos/as navigate while living in the United States (McKenna, 1997; Herrera-Sobek & Viramontes, 1996). Images such as the "borderland," the place where multiple aspects of Anglo and Latino/a identity coexist in tension and harmony (Anzaldúa, 1987) or Neplanta (Mora, 1993), "the land in the middle," have been created by authors to describe the complex realities and identities of Latinos/as in the United States. Among the many ideological and socio-cultural realities found are the notion of the American Dream, citizenship and language, literacy and culture.

The search and hope for the "American Dream" is one of the complex realities portrayed by authors in their literature. From the first chapter in *The Circuit*, Jiménez states the reason to move to the USA is to get out of poverty. However, the reality encountered by the family once they crossed the border was one of extreme poverty and instability as they moved from one labor camp to another, living most of the time without running water or electricity. Like the title of the book suggests, the family was stuck in the "circuit" of migration, poverty and marginalization. In addition to the hope for a dream there are also issues of citizenship and acquiring legal status. In the author's case, only his father had a green card and the rest of the family lived in the United States undocumented and under the fear of being caught by the immigration authorities. Access to social services such as health care were inaccessible to the family, and this almost costs the life of one of the Jiménez children. Despite the labor contribution of his father, mother,



brother and eventually himself for less than a minimum wage, his family lived in the margins and were denied a fair life.

Language, schooling and identity are other aspects of the reality confronted by the characters in *The Circuit*. In the story Jiménez, now a professor of Modern Languages in California, includes his literacy narrative based on the schooling experiences in his life. Moving from one labor camp to another he had multiple experiences in schools as an English language learner. Even though he was constantly moving from one school to another he was committed to learning and succeeding. Many of the chapters focus on the author's experiences in school and his development of a biliterate identity.

A somewhat similar but also counter narrative is presented in *Esperanza Rising* when the characters crossed the border to move to the United States. Esperanza and her mom left a past of wealth to begin a new life as migrant workers. Given their upper class status in Mexico they were able to obtain legal documentation to come to the United States. Crossing the USA/Mexico border is not a contested issue like in other narratives such as *The Circuit*. However, while the legal status made the process of coming much easier for them, the reality faced in the labor camps was still one of poverty and marginalization.

Esperanza, a girl who came from a highly literate family and who attended a prestigious private school, found herself in a labor camp babysitting instead of attending school. And while her Spanish language was very sophisticated, she struggled in her new home to learn English.

*In Before We were Free* the perspectives on freedom are very different. Anita and his family escaped the Dominican Republic under political asylum. Other members of the family who immigrated first, welcomed them to the United States. Anita, her mom and brother moved to United States without their father who was kept prisoner by Trujillo's military forces. The mother believes they will be going back as soon as her husband is liberated and the political situation changes. Anita's mother asks a nun to let Anita sit in a classroom temporarily until they go back home and even though she is twelve years old and attended American school in the Dominican Republic, she is placed in the second grade classroom. The characters in this book eventually realized that

they were not going back and they had to begin a new life in a new place. This is a form of what sociologists called "involuntary immigration." The reader gets a sense of how the Dominican Republic's past political history has impacted the growing immigration to the United States.

## **Testimonios: Implications and further ideas**

There is a tradition of *testimonios* or testimonies in Latino/a culture where according to Alvarez (2002) "It is the responsibility of those who survive the struggle for freedom to give testimony. To tell the story in order to keep alive the memory of those who died" (p. 166). The composition of Latino/a voices from the narratives presented here constitutes part of the multiple *testimonios* available for children. These literary pieces are not just about those who came before us and/or have died, but also about the present reality and experiences faced by many Latinos/as. These texts are critical fictions and help us understand a unique set of experiences.

Even as a Puerto Rican/Latina person who is considered many times as an insider to Latino/a culture, I found it useful to read and unpack the ideologies presented by these authors. It is after this process of looking closely at the complexity of Latino/a literature that I feel better prepared to read and mediate it with children and teachers (See Medina, 2004). Perhaps I have gained a language of access that helps me deconstruct my relationships to these texts (hooks, 1991) and it now informs my mediations of the literature using a literary and cultural context situated in the multiple locations from where authors speak. As I mentioned at the beginning, this is not an attempt to give fixed meaning to the literature but a way to understand the authors' literary, social and cultural complexity. The purpose is to broaden our literary imaginations, questioning both authors' and readers' ideologies. While the reader will always construct a unique interpretation of a text, this kind of cultural and ideological reading helps us move beyond looking at Latino/a literature as a generic cultural experience that is neutral or homogenous. As African American author Morrison (1993) stated:

Readers and writers both struggle to interpret and perform within a common language shareable imaginative worlds.

And although upon that struggle the positioning of the reader has justifiable claims, the author's presence—her or his intentions, blindness, and sight—is part of the imaginative activity. (p. xii)

I suggest similar explorations could be done through the creation of other Latino/a literature text sets (See table 1 for suggested titles). The text sets could be arranged to take a closer look at literacy and schooling experiences for Latinos/as in the United States, Latina writers and the construction of gender identities, the experiences of second generation Latino/a immigrants or an exploration of Latino/a authors who write for adults and children. The idea is to understand Latino/a literature as an existing body of literary texts and not as isolated pieces of literature.

By looking at it from broader perspectives, we will move the reading of this literature out of the neutral place in the curriculum to develop culturally visible literacy experiences in the classroom.

### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> For a good example on how Latino/a author's identity get constructed in texts see [Anzaldúa \(1987\)](#).
- <sup>2</sup> Many of the books fit in multiple categories. This table is meant to be a beginning place and not a fix set of categories.

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**Table 1: Reading across Latino/a literature: Suggested Text Set <sup>2</sup>**

TEXT SETS	SUGGESTED LATINO/A LITERATURE AND AUTHORS
Other immigration titles	<i>Tonight by the Sea</i> —Frances Temple (C.B.) (Haiti) <i>Behind the Mountains</i> .—E. Dandicat (C.B.) (Haiti) <i>The super cilantro girl/La niña del supercilantro</i> —Juan Felipe Herrera (P.B.) (Mexico)
Literacy, language and schooling	<i>Tomás and the Library Lady*</i> —Pat Mora (P.B.) (Mexico) <i>La Mariposa*</i> —Francisco Jiménez (P.B.) (Mexico) <i>The Circuit *</i> —Francisco Jiménez (C.B.) (Mexico) <i>My Name is Maria Isabel*</i> —Alma Flor Ada (C.B.) (Puerto Rico)
Latina writers and the construction of gender identities	<i>Cuba 15</i> —Nacy Osa (C.B.) (Cuba) <i>The Meaning of Consuelo</i> —Judith Ortíz Cofer (C.B.) (Puerto Rico) <i>Friends From the Other Side/Amigos del otro lado</i> —Gloria Anzaldúa (P.B.) (Mexico) <i>My Diary From Here to There/Mi diario de aquí hasta allá</i> —Amanda Irma Pérez (P.B.) (Mexico) <i>Before We were Free</i> —Julia Alvarez (C.B.) (Dominican Republic) <i>Me in the Middle*</i> —Ana Maria Machado (C.B.) (Brazil)
Second generation experiences	<i>Felita</i> —Nicholasa Mohr (C.B.) (Puerto Rico) <i>Going Home</i> —Nicholasa Mohr (C.B.) (Puerto Rico) <i>An Island Like You: Stories From El Barrio</i> —Judith Ortiz Cofer (C.B.) (Puerto Rico) <i>Finding Miracles</i> —Julia Alvarez (C.B.) (Dominican Republic)
Adults authors writing for children	Gloria Anzaldúa Nicholasa Mohr Francisco Jiménez Pat Mora Julia Alvarez Sandra Cisneros Rudolfo Anaya

\*Spanish versions available

P.B.—Picture Books

C.B.—Chapter Books

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# Literary Theory and Young Adult Literature:

## The Open Frontier in Critical Studies

Ever since the enormous publication success of J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter series, contemporary Young Adult (YA) literature has seen a rise in its appreciation by those who, in the past, might not have given YA literature a second glance. This is not to say, of course, that significant works categorized as YA have not been out there, only that contemporary works that have been labeled as YA tend to be ignored by many serious literary critics. Some still believe that YA literature is merely a secondary category of child-like storytelling—didactic in nature—and unworthy of serious literary evaluation, when, in fact, it is really an overlooked and underappreciated literary genre that has only recently begun to attract the critical attention that it deserves.

Many people have argued that YA literature, which is often grouped as a sub-division within the category of children's literature, isn't worth much attention because it doesn't offer enough substance to be included within the traditional literary canon. Deborah Stevenson, in her essay "Sentiment and Significance: The Impossibility of Recovery in the Children's Literature Canon or, The Drowning of *The Water-Babies*" goes so far as to argue that the "academic curriculum, which is based on a canon of significance, may rediscover the historical significance of a children's author but can never truly recover it to the literature's dominant popular canon" (112-113). She contends that there are too many other factors that disallow critics to view the literature as literature, even while she acknowledges that "children's literature scholarship is by no means invalid; it sheds much light on literature as a whole as well as the genre it

discusses" (113). Unfortunately, many people working in literary theory and criticism are foregoing the opportunity to explore this phenomenon because they mistakenly believe that works labeled as YA should only be analyzed in terms of the connection—whether that be historical or psychological—to the supposed "intended" reader. They see the phrase YA, and they tend to dismiss the work as disconnected to the literary community.

The problem, of course, is exacerbated by the actual labeling of the genres: it should be readily apparent that YA literature is not the same thing as children's literature—in the same way that short fiction is not the same genre as the novel. Yet contemporary critics often speak of the two as if they were one and the same. What would help in this regard would be not only for critics to recognize the difference between the genres, but to simply acknowledge that *regardless of genre*, both children's and YA works *are* literature.<sup>1</sup>

In fact, the idea that YA works are truly literature is what lies at the heart of the "theory barrier" problem, even though in reality the problem is not of a literary nature. Terry Davis, in his article "On the Question of Integrating Young Adult Literature into the Mainstream," reminds us that:

Although a few books do cross over and become literature for both young people and adults—*To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Ordinary People* are two examples—most young adult books can't cross the boundary into grown-up literature for the following reasons: 1. because publishers present most of the books in a package that an older teenager or adult wouldn't want to pick up and carry around, let alone read; and 2. because many of us who write about these books

and teach them and have charge of them on behalf of young readers refuse to hold the books to real literary standards. (5)

If we, as scholars and as readers, don't bother to hold the YA work up to the light of crucial literary standards, then it is no wonder the works are not being taken seriously. Critics, as the experts in literary analysis, need to take charge. This includes the idea of separating YA literature from children's literature—not to classify one as better than the other—but rather to acknowledge the differences in the literary craft itself, which in turn will lead to a greater understanding of the works themselves. For example, Stevenson's article mentions several texts that she includes in the body of children's literature, including Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are*, Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, and Katherine Patterson's *Bridge to Terabithia*. What Stevenson fails to realize, though, is that *Wild Things* is of the children's literature genre; *Alice* is classic YA literature (just as *The Scarlet Letter* is classic literature); and Patterson's work is contemporary YA literature (just as Richard Ford's *Independence Day* is contemporary literature). If these works must be categorized, then the least we can do is categorize them appropriately.<sup>2</sup>

Davis takes this idea a step further when he suggests that “publishers need to create a specific category for books that can be read by adults and youth, books that have both literary and teaching merit” (5). The heart of this suggestion is what is truly important because while publishers may not be willing to start yet another marketing category, critics can, through individual analyses of works, reveal exactly which titles belong in this area, just as they do with other ‘adult’ contemporary works.

Of course, this is not a new idea. James Steel Smith in his 1967 text *A Critical Approach to Children's Literature* points out that of the “five ways of thinking about children's reading—historical, subject-centered, by types, psychological, and application-oriented, or utilitarian—all have one very important characteristic: None of them examines and analyzes the children's literature itself with any seriousness and care” (3). His text, even as early as 1967, called for a reconsideration of this problem. The difference today lies in the burgeoning attitude of respectability that YA literature is receiving in the present day, thanks in no small measure to the success

of J. K. Rowling and her creation of Harry Potter, the quintessential main character of her series of novels. It seems that Harry Potter has opened up a whole new arena of respectable scholarly debate.<sup>3</sup>

One text centered on the Harry Potter phenomenon that proves the point that significant literary analysis can be undertaken successfully with YA literature is Giselle Liza Anatol's collection of essays titled *Reading Harry Potter: Critical Essays*. The critical analyses include titles such as Veronica L. Schanoes “Cruel Heroes and Treacherous Texts: Educating the Reader in Moral Complexity and Critical Reading in J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter Books.” Clearly, Harry Potter has inspired many a critic to jump on the YA literary bandwagon, so why not examine other contemporary YA texts in the same way? After all, it's not just J. K. Rowling's work that is worthy of study. “Serious writers don't condescend in terms of style or any other way. They try to perceive human life as deeply and clearly as they can every time they tell a story, and every time they tell a story they try to present their perceptions in the best—the most vivid—prose they can craft. That's why we call it art and that's why serious writers deserve to be called artists” (Davis 7). And there are many YA authors out there who are literary artists.

Furthermore, if, as David L. Russell states, “Literary criticism is the discussion of literature undertaken in order to interpret its meaning and to evaluate its quality” (48), and it is also true that “the purpose of criticism is to promote high standards in literature and to encourage a general appreciation of literature among readers” (48), then there is absolutely no reason to avoid the serious scholarly study of YA literature. These are works that have significance to all of us, regardless of which age category we fall into, because they speak to the human condition. After all, as Davis asserts, “If we're going to call it literature, whether or not we preface the word with the young adult qualifier, then . . . we should hold it to the standards of literature” (6). This is good advice, and if we followed it, would go a long way in bringing the light of recognition to the genre. In fact, those interested in exploring critical analysis of YA literature need to be particularly adept scholars because to date there has not been a large body of work created that explores the genre, so there is plenty of opportunity for original scholarship.<sup>4</sup> Deborah Thacker, in her



article “Disdain or Ignorance? Literary Theory and the Absence of Children’s Literature” concurs. She writes:

The transformation of critical theory over the last few decades has meant that theory *needs* children’s literature. As theorists move from a textual emphasis toward the interplay between reader and text and the social and political forces that mediate those interactions, so the part played by texts written primarily for children and the ways of reading available to children, within a web of discourses that both encourage and control interactions with fictional texts, need to be included and examined. Thus, we, as specialists, must contribute to a broader picture of the social constructedness of readers and the implications of the discourses surrounding fiction in the development of response. (1)

We do, however, need to keep one simple viewpoint in mind: If we want YA literature to be recognized and appreciated as literature, then we should utilize the same theories with it as we use with other literatures, including those pointed out by Jonathan Culler, in his exemplary short work titled *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction*:

Three theoretical modes whose impact, since the 1960s, has been the greatest are the wide-ranging reflection on language, representation, and the categories of critical thought undertaken by deconstruction and psychoanalysis (sometimes in concert, sometimes in opposition); the analyses of the role of gender and sexuality in every aspect of literature and criticism by feminism and then gender studies and Queer theory; and the development of historically oriented cultural criticisms (new historicism, post-colonial theory) studying a wide range of discursive practices, involving many objects (the body, the family, race) not previously thought of as having a history. (121)

For example, the genre of YA literature can be examined as a way to analyze the underlying class ideology of a work, without the text being specifically “about” class conflict. The genre itself, the form itself, could contain ideological messages within the structures of its conventions.<sup>5</sup> In any case, utilizing theoretical modes such as the ones mentioned would go a long way in legitimizing a genre whose position on the fringe is undeserved.

It is interesting to note that since the burst of power demonstrated by J. K. Rowling in the writing of YA literature, other well-known literary writers have started to explore the form. Joyce Carol Oates’ *Big Mouth and Ugly Girl* and *Freaky Green Eyes* are two such works. Here we have a major literary figure who finds the form fascinating and worth her talent. Other known literary writers include Gary Soto (*Buried*

*Onions*) and Ursula K. Le Guin (The Earthsea Cycle books, in particular).

Best of all, in addition to these major names from the traditional literary “adult” world, though, there are other writers, firmly ensconced in the YA genre, whose work begs to be explored theoretically. One such writer is the well-known Brock Cole. His works include *The Goats* and *The Facts Speak for Themselves*, both of which would stand up to an intense gender-based analysis. In *The Goats*, a boy and a girl, attending summer camp, are stripped of their clothing and abandoned by their campmates on an island. What is supposed to be a harmless prank turns to an exploration of the expectations of males and females when the two of them run away from the island in order to escape their ostracism.

*The Facts Speak for Themselves* is probably one of the most explicit novels about sexual molestation ever to be designated “young adult.” In this powerful work, Cole lets the main character, Linda, tell her own story, and it is one that readers will not soon forget. Linda, in a voice that has become as hollow and emotionless as her inner life, lets the facts speak for themselves, as she reveals her attempt to take over the ‘expected’ role of an adult woman. There is much to examine here, including the psychological aspects of a young woman facing situations far beyond her comprehension, and a class system that has conveniently allowed her to slip between the cracks.

Another notable author is Louis Sachar and his work *Holes*. Sachar’s plotting strategy within this work is exemplary; there are stories within stories that ultimately fit together like a set of stacking boxes. The story itself can also be explored as a satire that speaks to such issues as juvenile delinquency, moral character, and redemption. Critics could not find a better novel to explore both structurally and thematically. In this same vein is *Monster* by Walter Dean Myers, a novel that would appeal to structuralists as well as to race theory critics. This novel is written from the point of view of a young black man on trial for murder who decides to tell his story by writing a movie script. This combination of forms (first person narrative and scriptwriting) is highly original and effective, speaking volumes about the influences in this young man’s life, as well as revealing the actions of the plot.

Race theory critics would also delight in reading Christopher Paul Curtis’s *The Watsons Go to Birmingham-*

ham—1963. Of particular note is his use of humor in a story that explores the heart of racism. And then there is *Armageddon Summer*, a novel co-written by Jane Yolen and Bruce Coville that explores the religious sentiments of our society as viewed through a female protagonist, Marina, who believes in a God of power and omnipotence, and a male protagonist, Jed, whose skepticism is in stark contrast to Marina's outlook. As the story progresses, in alternate chapters from Jed and Marina's viewpoints—from Yolen's and Coville's viewpoints—the spectrum of belief in the sacred is revealed and challenged in a way that leaves no easy answers.

In fact, the list of writers and works worthy of critical exploration would be much too long to include here, but others of particular note are Robert Cormier<sup>6</sup> (*I Am the Cheese*; *The Chocolate Wars*), Sharon Creech (*Walk Two Moons*), Jerri Spinelli (*Wringer*; *Stargirl*), Laurie Halse Anderson (*Catalyst*; *Speak*) and David Almond (*Kit's Wilderness*; *Skellig*).

With contemporary artists like these waiting to be explored, theorists should feel genuine excitement about the uncharted territory of YA literature. In this field, there awaits an opportunity to not only expand our knowledge of the young adult genre, but also to expand our knowledge of literature as a whole and to challenge the restrictions of the traditional canon. This is really what literary theorists are striving to accomplish in all of their works, and young adult literature offers another avenue for exploration. In fact, there are great writers and great stories out there simply waiting to be discovered by the literary community. Let's hope we're up to the challenge.

## End Notes

- <sup>1</sup> An article titled "The Limits of Literary Criticism of Children's and Young Adult Literature" published in *The Lion and the Unicorn* written by Hans-Heino Ewers, explores the issue of whether or not children's literature should be regarded as art. He references Heinrich Wolgast's essay "The Misery of Our Children's Literature"—a classic article published in 1896 that calls for the valuing of children's literature—in the first half of his own article, analyzing this call in contemporary terms.
- <sup>2</sup> Frances Fitzgerald's "The Influence of Anxiety" published in *Harper's* points out the problems inherent in young adult fiction by closely examining the various types, including fantasy, historical, science fiction, and problem

novels. The article also examines the historical publication record of young adult texts, pointing out the differences between British and American novels, and it mentions several prominent authors of the young adult genre, and their influence on the American market.

- <sup>3</sup> Lauren Binnendyk and Kimberly A. Schonert-Reichl's article titled "Harry Potter and Moral Development in Pre-Adolescent Children," published in the *Journal of Moral Education* begins by announcing the radical shift children's literature has experienced since the publication of J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter novels stressing the point that these works are much more than simply escapism and fantasy. They argue that the books themselves can be a significant factor in the moral development of children—that the books contribute to children's development and understanding of life.
- <sup>4</sup> The second part of Hans-Heino Ewer's article addresses the idea that there is an increasing literariness to be found in children's literature. He cautions readers, though, that one has to be careful because of the variables inherent within the genre, including the fact that children have one view of a text, adults another, and that critics must always be aware of which side they are on. Critics must be careful, in other words, that they are critiquing a work using the same criteria they would use for an adult work, rather than as a critique of the suitability of the text for children.
- <sup>5</sup> For other literary perspectives regarding YA literature, consult the following sources: Yearwood, Stephanie. "Popular Postmodernism for Young Adult Readers: Walk Two Moons, Holes, and Monster." *ALAN Review* 29.3 (Spring-Summer 2002): 50-3.; Kidd, Kenneth. "Psychoanalysis and Children's Literature: The Case for Complementarity." *The Lion and the Unicorn* 28.1 (2004): 109-130.
- <sup>6</sup> For an excellent discussion regarding Cormier's view of YA literature see: Myers, Mitzi. "No Safe Place to Run to": An Interview with Robert Cormier." *The Lion and the Unicorn* 24.3 (2000): 445-464.

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## Transcending the Group, Discovering Both Self and Public Spirit:

Paul Fleischman's *Whirligig* and Jerry Spinelli's *Stargirl*

**A**n unabashed free spirit, *Stargirl* declares herself equal to the universe—and immerses herself in doing good for others. Brent Bishop clings to a stifling and demeaning peer group, but only until a fatal traffic accident forces him to turn inward; then, he discovers the power of his individual imagination—and learns to dance with all of humanity.

As a long-term resident of Japan, I am struck by these two fictional characters as near perfect exemplifications of Takeo Doi's theoretical model of the Western psyche. In *The Anatomy of Dependence*, Doi's discussion of Japanese and Western psyches focuses on the Japanese verb *amaeru*: to forge relationships with others in a way that allows one to indulge, like an infant, in passive dependence. Doi argues that Japanese culture encourages individuals to *amaeru* throughout their lives, whereas Western culture encourages them to outgrow the desire to *amaeru* as quickly as possible—the end result being an emphasis on the group in Japanese society and on the individual in the West. Public spirit can flourish in the Western world, Doi concludes, because the individual is not stifled by restrictive group loyalties.

To what extent Doi's theory applies to the American mindset is certainly open to debate, but the pattern of individual psychological growth in Western culture that he outlines—freedom from a suffocating conformity, discovery of self, the subsequent development of a larger sense of connectedness with humanity as a whole—was the prime focus of the nineteenth century American Transcendentalists, and that the

pattern still looms large in the American imagination is clearly demonstrated by the two novels with which this paper is primarily concerned: Paul Fleischman's *Whirligig* and Jerry Spinelli's *Stargirl*.

As *Whirligig* opens, high school junior Brent Bishop has just moved to Chicago and enrolled in the private and elite Montfort School. He feels inadequate and only hopes he can somehow weasel his way into his classmates' good graces. He is more than willing to "wear" their values, whatever they may be. Conformity is his religion. Discovering what radio stations are considered cool and making sure his earring is in the correct ear are, to him, "as vital as maintaining a sacred flame" (*Whirligig* 6). Sometimes he is irritated by his own weakness—as when the "de facto leader" seizes upon his family name, Bishop, and manipulates him, physically, like a chess piece, for everyone's bemusement (11); but essentially, Brent is willing to accept others' standards, submit to their judgments, and comply with their wishes—as long as they offer him what he considers love in return. In fact, he has primed himself to *amaeru*.

In "Self-Reliance," Emerson wrote that "imitation is suicide," and Brent comes an eyelash away from proving these words true. At his first big Montfort social event, he hopes to win a certain girl's heart, knowing it "would mean instant respect" (12). Unfortunately, she screams out her rejection of him, for all to hear, and he immediately realizes the implication: "He was a leper now. No one would go near him" (16). Liquor in his bloodstream, he leaps

into his car, flies onto the expressway, takes his hands off the steering wheel, and closes his eyes. His failure at imitation has left him nowhere, and he is ready to kill himself.

Brent survives the accident he causes, but takes the life of another, an 18-year-old girl named Lea. Lea's mother tells Brent that her daughter had "a very caring soul" and "would have spread joy all over the country" (40). As a way of keeping Lea's spirit alive in the world, her mother asks Brent to travel alone to all four corners of the country and to erect whirligigs, each with Lea's image as a part of the design. In fact, she is giving him a chance at redemption and re-birth, a chance to be alone with his thoughts and contemplate spirit—the opportunity, as Emerson put it, to "enjoy an original relation to the universe" (*Nature*).

Thoreau felt there was never a companion "so companionable as solitude," and Brent, freed from peer pressure, comes to feel much the same. As he travels alone on a cross-country bus, he begins to see everything from a new perspective—and to see things that he never could before. A host of his very own thoughts provides him good company. Now, "he saw everything from the outside. Much that he'd taken for granted before now struck him as curious: handshaking, the Pledge of Allegiance, neckties on men, sport teams named for animals . . ." (49).

Soon he begins to see connections that he never could before. On the bus, he "marveled at how naturally some people spun lines of connection, turning a world of strangers into family" (43). He remembers the word *krass*, from a Vonnegut novel he had read, "a term for a disparate group of people linked together without their knowledge" (48). And he begins to understand that "[e]verything we did—good, bad, and indifferent—sent a wave rolling out of sight"; he begins to wonder "what his own accounting, generations later, would look like" (70-71).

His world expands in ways he could have never imagined a year earlier. In Seattle, he meets a Canadian who introduces him to *go*, a Chinese board game—"Wheaties for the brain" (48). In San Diego, he meets a German who gives him a copy of *Two Years Before the Mast*, a work published by Richard Henry Dana in 1840, just fourteen years before *Walden*. Dana and Thoreau, it happens, both graduated from Harvard in 1837—the very day before Emerson appeared on campus to give his Phi Beta Kappa

speech, "The American Scholar" (Lauter 605). Dana's two years at sea—and *away* from Harvard—were not too unlike the two years Thoreau spent at Walden Pond, and though Thoreau chose to explore nature by taking walks in the woods and growing beans, he was not incapable of a sailing metaphor himself: "be a Columbus to whole new continents and worlds within you, opening new channels, not of trade, but of thought." This seems to be what Brent is learning as he works his way through *Two Years Before the Mast*.

In a park on Puget Sound, the site for the construction of his first whirligig, Brent feels ignorant of nature.

He looked up at the stars, glinting silently, a movie without a soundtrack. Or was he simply deaf to their music? He realized he knew no constellations. Likewise the names of trees, flowers, rocks, birds, insects, fish. He was a foreigner here. He wished he knew some names. (49)

As he settles into his solitude, however, he begins to understand what Emerson proclaims in *Nature*—that "[t]he stars awaken a certain reverence," and if a man "would be alone, let him look at the stars." The more Brent educates himself, especially regarding the heavenly bodies, the more he sees how essential his individual viewpoint is in understanding his place in the universe.

Brent moved to a seat across the aisle so as to scan the darker eastern sky, waited through a long stretch of trees, then thought he spotted it: Deneb, in the constellation Cygnus, the swan. [. . .] He grinned in the darkness, unknown to those around him. He spoke the word *Deneb* in his mind and felt himself to be Adam, naming the new world around him. (63)

Before long he has grown "accustomed to feeling separate from the other passengers" on the bus, and when he looks out the window, he can tango privately with the trio of stars known as the summer triangle; he can believe they "shone for him alone" (64). The summer triangle becomes "a familiar face" (72), and his high school peers, "who'd once loomed like giants," become "barely visible" (74). The stars enlarge his perspective, give him a new measure by which to determine what is important, and in their honor, he determines, humbly, to master "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star" on his harmonica.

For the Transcendentalists, symbols of the interconnectedness of nature were commonplace. Thoreau could recall observing a railway bank of



thawing sand and clay and declare “that this one hillside illustrated the principle of all operations of Nature.” The symbol that seizes Brent’s imagination is, of course, the whirligig. As Brent sets up his first one near Puget Sound, he is no longer worrying about impressing others; now he can believe that he is only watched when the wind blows life into his whirligig, blowing life into Lea’s spirit, dispersing her spirit everywhere. Intentionally, he sets up this first whirligig in a public park, so that anyone and everyone can enjoy it. In San Diego and Miami, he contemplates more ambitious projects. The “much more complex system of rods and pivots” (93) he employs in Miami mirrors his growing understanding of the complex connections in nature, and after completing his final whirligig in Weeksboro, Maine, he can consciously think through the idea of his whirligigs as symbols of the workings of all nature.

The breeze off the water ruffled his hair and made the whirligig flash in the distance. He’d interlocked some of the blades so that one would pass its motion to the others. In his mind, his whirligigs were meshed the same way, parts of a single coast-to-coast creation. The world itself was a whirligig, its myriad parts invisibly linked, the hidden crankshafts and connecting rods carrying motion across the globe and over the centuries. (133)

Emerson and Brent’s statures may differ vastly, but when, in “The American Scholar,” Emerson declares, “It is one light that beams out of a thousand stars. It is one soul which animates all men,” and Brent comes to believe that the human spirit blows through his whirligigs, they are fairly well in tune with each other.

Finally, when a woman he has only just met tells him that he is “a good person, not a bad one” (129), Brent realizes that though he may have done something horrible in causing Lea’s death, he cannot banish himself permanently from his rightful place in nature and in humanity. He can now listen to “his own wind surging in and out, and [feel] at one with the whirligig” (126). After completing this final whirligig, he walks back to Weeksboro to discover a lively country dance taking place in the Town Hall. He pays his money, goes in, and recognizes that the dancers are “a human whirligig” (130). A young woman asks him to join in. “It was exalting to be part of the twining and twirling,” he discovers, “and strangely thrilling to touch other hands and to feel them grasping his” (131). Brent has overcome petty

worries and peer pressure, experienced a journey all his own, and discovered for himself a legitimate place in humanity. It occurs to him that he may want to spend his lifetime building whirligigs. He is ready to make a positive contribution to the nation of men.

Whereas *Whirligig* is the story of one boy breaking free from suffocating group pressure and heading out on a solitary journey, a search for self and the place of self in a larger communion, *Stargirl* is the story of a girl already secure with her individuality, oblivious to peer pressure, whose sudden entry into a public high school throws into jeopardy the status quo of the entire student body.

As the narrator of *Stargirl*, junior Leo Borlock tells us, Mica Area High School (MAHS) is “not exactly a hot bed of nonconformity.” Students are so scared of being anything but mediocre—or different—that if they “happened to distinguish [them]selves, [they] quickly snapped back into place, like rubber bands.” They “all wore the same clothes, talked the same way, ate the same food, listened to the same music” (*Stargirl* 9). The role model for most boys is Wayne Parr, an attractive but extraordinarily ordinary and boring boy who is admired “because he [is] so monumentally good at doing nothing” (20).

Into this environment walks Susan “Stargirl” Caraway. Homeschooled up until then, she is unconcerned with fashion trends and wears whatever she likes: a 1920 flapper dress one day, a kimono another. Unlike the other girls, she wears no make-up. She recites her own personal version of the Pledge of Allegiance. She brings a pet rat to school. She joins the cross country team, but when the course bends right, she goes left. When the P.E. teacher calls everyone in from the rain, she stays outside and dances. Most perturbing to her new classmates, she is not fazed at all that they think she is crazy.

A consummate individual not beholden to any small group, Stargirl has been free to develop an enormous sense of public spirit. Her days are consumed with doing good for others, without the slightest concern for receiving credit or payback. She scours the newspaper and bulletin boards for information about people’s wants and needs and sends them cards and presents. She somehow discovers the birthday of all her schoolmates and sings “Happy Birthday” to them in the cafeteria. She takes pictures of the little boy down the street, believing a scrapbook

of candid shots will bring him and his family great joy a few years down the road. Knowing what a thrill finding a penny can be for a small child, she leaves small change everywhere she goes.

At first, the MAHS students consider Stargirl a quirky freak. However, when she becomes a cheerleader, her enthusiasm is so inspiring that it dawns on everyone that individualism might just be interesting, and Leo is amazed to watch “the once amorphous student body separate itself into hundreds of individuals” (41). He also notes how their new individualism leads to public spirit.

It was wonderful to see, wonderful to be in the middle of: we mud frogs awakening all around. We were awash in tiny attentions. Small gestures, words, empathies thought to be extinct came to life. For years, the strangers among us had passed sullenly in the hallways; now we looked, we nodded, we smiled. (40)

Ironically, as we discovered and distinguished ourselves, a new collective came into being—a vitality, a presence, a spirit that had not been there before. (41)

The novel’s focus, though, is on Leo and his feelings toward Stargirl. Her arrival affects him more than any of his schoolmates, for he falls head over heels in love with her. At first, Leo is confused by his feelings, and he pays a visit to the neighborhood guru, Archie Brubaker, a retired archaeologist whose opinion is highly respected by Leo and his friends. When Leo’s buddy Kevin suggests that Stargirl is of a different species, Archie quickly disagrees: “On the contrary, she is one of us. Most decidedly. She is more us than we are. She is, I think, who we really are. Or were” (32). Immune to peer pressure, Archie means, Stargirl has been able to create and maintain her original relation to the universe. She is just like Emerson’s “great man,” who “in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude” (“Self-Reliance”). All this really hits home with Leo. He has felt himself drifting in a malaise and senses the opportunity for an awakening.

Soon Stargirl is leading Leo into her “enchanted places,” especially the desert at the edge of their town. She knows in her heart what Archie later explains to Leo: the stars “supplied the ingredients that became us, the primordial elements” (177). For a while Leo has sensed that her voice came “from the stars” (74), and now she tells him: “The earth is speaking to us, but we can’t hear because of all the racket our senses

are making. [. . .] The universe will speak. The stars will whisper” (91). She advises Leo to tune out the trivial chatter in his life and tune in the universe. When *she* tunes in, she explains, “[T]here is no difference anymore between me and the universe. The boundary is gone. I am it and it is me” (92). Here, she is the quintessential Transcendentalist.

Under Stargirl’s Transcendentalist tutelage, Leo’s vision clears. “She was bendable light: she shone around every corner of my day,” he tells us. “She saw things. I had not known there was so much to see. [. . .] After a while I began to see better” (107-108). As she points out things she sees, things he had never noticed before, he understands from where her public spirit has sprung. For a brief while, they are “two people in a universe of space and stars” (95).

Unfortunately for Leo, he is an apprentice Transcendentalist at best, and when the student body turns against Stargirl again (because she insists on helping and cheering for *everybody*, including players on the opponents’ teams), he is left in a terrible bind. He does not want to lose her, but “the silent treatment” (97) that descends upon the two of them, “the chilling isolation” (99), causes him great emotional pain. Doi suggests that, in Japanese society, the indulged desire to *amaeru* leads to such a strong dependence on a particular group that “to be ostracized by the group is the greatest shame and dishonor” (53). This is exactly what Leo experiences. He is terribly ashamed of being shunned by his schoolmates—those who have liked him and comforted him even though he has done nothing of any particular merit—and his loss of their indulgent acceptance proves more than he can bear.

The only solution that comes to him is ill-conceived: he will change Stargirl. He will make her understand that she must bend her will to that of the group’s. Their discussions on the matter, though, reveal how different their deep-rooted ways of thinking are.

This group thing, I said, it’s very strong. It’s probably an instinct. You find it everywhere, from little groups like families to big ones like a town or school, to really big ones like a whole country. How about really, really big ones, she said, like a planet? Whatever, I said. The point is, in a group everybody acts pretty much the same, that’s kind of how the group holds itself together. Everybody? she said. Well, mostly, I said. That’s what jails and mental hospitals are for, to keep it that way. You think I should be in jail? she said. I think you should try to be more like the rest of us, I said. (137)

Leo, though more understanding of Stargirl's individuality and altruistic sense of public spirit than any of his schoolmates, ultimately finds himself valuing the comfort of the group over the self-actualizing energy and love that she can give him. Finally, he chooses the group over her.

*Whirligig* and *Stargirl* are novels, not empirical sociological studies, so we must be careful in suggesting how much they represent an American mindset. Still, it is interesting to compare how Brent and Stargirl fit into their local societies with how Emerson and Thoreau fit into the nineteenth century. In his introduction to the nineteenth century in *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*, Paul Lauter describes, basically, the irrelevance of the Transcendentalists to their contemporaries (614-615). Their ideas may have held sway in certain literary circles, Lauter writes, but their "immediate effect on their time was not extensive." Their journal, *The Dial*, only had a circulation of about three hundred, and Thoreau's publisher had to return him most of the copies of his first book. Emerson was considered a heretic by the church, Thoreau a crank by his neighbors. According to Michael Meyers (9), one reason Thoreau liked speaking of himself as a Transcendentalist was it greatly dismayed the people around him.

Stargirl also dismays those around her. Her classmates at MAHS can revel in a spontaneous moment with her, as when they join her in the Bunny Hop at the school dance, but most of them are likely to remember her as they first saw her: "weird," "strange," and "goofy" (11). While Leo's memory of their relationship will color his outlook for the rest of his life, most of the others seem unlikely to absorb and retain significant amounts of her Transcendental vibrations.

*Whirligig* is constructed in such a way that Brent's schoolmates appear briefly, then move offstage. We are not privy to many of their thoughts, but as the theme for the party they have organized is chess, and the guests that come are required to take their roles as pawns, Fleischman does not leave us with the impression that many of them are cultivating strong leanings

toward individualism. And while Brent may encounter a lot of like-minded "Transcendentalists" on the road (though ironically, many are not Americans), we have to acknowledge that as Brent embarks on his journey, his classmates stay right where they are.

In the world of these two novels, then, the western psyche that Doi describes seems alive and well in Brent and Stargirl, but it is hardly observable—or *fleetingly* observable—in other characters. Both Fleischman and Spinelli seem eager to encourage their readers to think and act transcendently, while seeming to recognize that most of their readers' peers will only occasionally, and many of their readers' peers hardly ever or not at all. Thus, while *Whirligig* and *Stargirl* demonstrate that Transcendentalist ideas still thrive in the American imagination—they also seem to express Fleischman's and Spinelli's belief that the spiritual void felt by Emerson and Thoreau is still in need of filling.

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## About Series Books

**A**s a youngster, I discovered the Hardy Boys, Nancy Drew, the Bobbsey twins, and other series books and wanted to read them all. I could hardly wait until the next volume was published. Then I would rush to the library and eagerly sign up for the next available copy, or my parents would give me a copy as a present. I owe my love of reading to these books. Mystery and suspense books are my passion.

It is no wonder that *Harry Potter and the Half-blood Prince* (Scholastic, 2005) has proven to be such a success. It is filled with magic and intrigue. Harry is quite a bit more somber, and he is placed in more dangerous situations. Readers are not sure what to expect next. Who can Harry trust? What does Harry find out as he goes on strange journeys with Dumbledore? Surprise ending.

Other books in series that young adults and I have found enjoyable are:

- Alex Ryder series by Anthony Horowitz (Philomel).
- Charlie Bone series by Jenny Nimmo (Orchard)
- Pagan Chronicles series by Catherine Links (Candlewick)

- The Edge Chronicles by Paul Stewart and Chris Riddell (David Pickling Books)
- Artemis Fowl series by Eoin Colfer (Hyperion)
- Warriors series by Erin Hunter (Harper Collins)
- Cirque Du Freak series by Darren Shan (Little, Brown)
- Inkheart series by Cornelia Funke (Chicken House)
- A Series of Unfortunate Events series by Lemony Snicket (Harper Collins)
- Young Wizards series by Diane Duane (Harcourt)
- The Immortals series by Tamora Pierce (Simon Pulse)
- The Spiderwick Chronicles series by Tony DiTerlizzi and Holly Black (Simon & Schuster)
- Divide series by Elizabeth Kay (Chicken House)
- Misfits, Inc. series by Mark Delaney (Peachtree)
- Eragon series by Christopher Paolini (Knopf)

One way of using series books effectively in the classroom is having reading groups. Students can choose a series and can continue to read in that group and discuss each sequel. Then once a month, representatives from each

group can do “a sell your series” presentation to the entire class. This lends itself for a wide range of writing activities. The class can “publish” a journal of responses to various books in a series; each group can design ads. Students might write to the authors of the series and publish the responses from the authors.

### Times Present and Past

Suzanne Fisher Staples has created a brilliant story with *Under the Persimmon Tree* (Farrar Straus Giroux, 2005.) Afghanistan and Pakistan are the settings for this battle with the Taliban. Najimah, a young Afghan girl, who watches the Taliban seize her father and brother, also witnesses the death of her mother and younger brother in an air raid. She then makes her way to Pakistan and meets Nusrat, an American woman, who married an Afghanistan doctor. He is running a field operation elsewhere. Nusrat is not sure where he is and awaits letters or messages about his whereabouts. Nusrat finds solace in teaching a few people in her home. She worries about her husband in this war-ravaged world, but she has hopes he will return. Najimah is



biding her time, determined to find her brother and father. She is sure he is nearby. Nusrat says she will help her in her endeavors. Dangers lurk everywhere as we meet characters we wonder if we can trust. The writing is brilliant and fast moving. Staples knows this part of the world well. She understands their customs and emotions. Must reading.

Another war novel, *The Eyes of the Emperor* (Random House, 2005) by Graham Salisbury takes readers back to Pearl Harbor just before and during World War II. Eddy and his Japanese family who live in Hawaii and their friends witness the attack on Pearl Harbor by the Japanese. Eddy has enlisted in the United States Army and is a devout American; however, because he and his friends are Japanese-Americans, there are those in the Army who can't overlook their ethnicity. Can they be trusted? This is a nightmarish part of U.S. history that is based on real facts.

Maria Testa's *Something about America* (Candlewick, 2005), a story told through poems, involves an immigrant family from Kosovo who escaped from the hatred and prejudices and landed in America. While the young daughter manages to adjust to the new environment over the years, her father and mother have very mixed feelings. They miss their old home and their country. They wonder about returning there now that the war is over. An incident in a nearby community involving immigrants stirs the family, and they realize "all the world's sadness is in America." Poignant and provocative.

## Add a Dash of Mystery

Carl Hiaasen's *Flush* (Knopf, 2005) is a mystery that involves a casino boat owner who might have authorized flushing waste into ocean waters. How can young Noah get the proof he needs? Fast and fun reading.

In *In the Night on Lanvale Street* by Jane Leslie Conly (Henry Holt, 2005), we learn that at night a Baltimore neighborhood can be extremely dangerous, especially with gangs and drugs around. Then thirteen-year-old Charlie and her younger brother, Jerry, become involved in solving a neighborhood murder

In Richard Scrimger's *From Charlie's Point of View* (Sleuth, 2005) Charlie's dad has been accused of being a bandit. Charlie and friends are determined to prove his innocence. This involves a number of weird experiences. Exciting and funny.

Anthony Horowitz is creating a new series, and it opens with *Raven's Gate* (Scholastic, 2005). Fourteen-year-old Matt, an English lad, is accused of a crime he did not do. He has two choices: go to jail or go live with an old lady in a remote town. He chooses the latter. Then he discovers his troubles are really beginning.

Rick Yancy, in *The Extraordinary Adventures of Alfred Kropp* (Bloomsbury, 2005) has Alfred find himself a victim of a robbery in which his uncle is involved. The uncle is killed. Alfred now is picked up by strangers who want him to help get the stolen object back. It is a very special object that has most unusual powers. Fun and nice twists and turns.

Carl Deuker in *Runner* (Houghton Mifflin, 2005) introduces readers to Chance, a seventeen-year-old who lives on a run-down boat with an alcoholic father. To survive Chance becomes a "runner." But for whom? At what personal risk? Exciting. Fast moving.

In *Devil's Footsteps* (Delacorte, 2005) by E. L. Richardson readers have a chance to enter a world in which the children are disappearing. Meet the Dark Man and watch the horror begin. What can thirteen-year-old Bryan do? Don't let the young age of the protagonist fool you.

Leslie Connor's *Dead on Town Line* (Dial, 2005) is a murder mystery told through poetry. Cassie Devlin, the victim, is watching things unfold, and she discovers another mystery guest. Can be read in one sitting and should surprise readers.

## Short But Not Always Sweet

New collections of short stories are flourishing. I have found a few collections that should meet a variety of tastes.

Mary Lanagan's *Black Juice* (Harper Collins, 2004) reflects facets of life and death which provoke vivid imagination and much thought. For example, how would you feel watching a family member sink to her death in a tar pit in one story; or in another, following a "lost" young lady on her way to a "wedding school blessing" in a church? This book is filled with unusual characters and events. The author is Australian and puts an interesting turn on storytelling.



David Lubar's *Invasion of the Road Weenies* (Starscape, 2005) is fun and "fantastic." These weenies are joggers who never smile and are rather weird, and some would say creepy. In one story, for example, word has it there is an old woman who gives out large bars of chocolate at Halloween. Each bar feels like it weighs ten pounds. Amy and Wendy wonder how the old lady can afford to be so generous as they carry their bags of goodies home. But as they were on their way home. . . .Who would ever believe them?

Gary Soto's *Help Wanted: Stories* (Harcourt, 2005) tells the stories of young Mexican-Americans as they go through a variety of experiences. What's Caroline going to do about her bratty six-year-old brother? About her family? Are they ever going to learn proper etiquette? Caroline had written Miss Manners for advice. Miss Manners was her heroine. Things were not only sad at home, but also at school. Things had changed between Elena, her best friend, and her. Then there were other incidents. Only if Miss Manners would answer. Then what?

## A Nice Mixture

Jon Scieszka's *Guys Read* ((Viking, 2005) a collection of stories, pictures, essays, etc., written by male writers, illustrators, and editors. Boys who went to the Guys Read Web site listed the authors and illustrators they most enjoyed. Jon contacted these people and had them contribute to this book. Boys should enjoy the

collection. Chris Crutcher, for example, tells about his experiences in high school in Cascade, Idaho, and the mysteries of the "C" Club initiation. Of course, to be able to join the club, you had to be an athlete, good or bad. Ask the students, before they read the article, to tell what they think the initiation might be and would they like to join. Surprise! Daniel Handler (Lemony Snicket) has a strong, and funny, statement on "Principals and Principles." Other writers include: Chris Lynch, Jack Gantos, T. A. Barron, Walter Dean Myers, Stephen King, to name a few.

Paul Volponi's *Black and White* (Viking 2005) is the story of two outstanding athletes, Marcus, who is black, and Eddie, who is white. Together they are super strong on any basketball court. Then one night they do something that really affects their lives. This is a great story with a haunting ending.

Francis Chalifour's *After* (Tundra, 2005) is the story of a young teen's struggle to understand his father's death and the sadness he feels for quite some time. His relationships with his friends suffer. The school psychologist tries to help. His mother does all she can to bring him out of his doldrums. A moving and poignant tale.

Martin Sandler's *America through the Lens: Photographers Who Changed the Nation* (Henry Holt, 2005) is a remarkable book of text and photographs. Each essay about the photographer reflects a focus on a particular segment of what was happening in America at

a particular time. Mathew B. Brady photographed every living president from John Quincy Adams to William J. McKinley, including Abraham Lincoln. Brady and some assistants took many pictures during the Civil War, and "were the first to record a major event in the nation's history." James Van Der Zee, many years later, had a studio in Harlem and photographed many African-American leaders and events. Other photographers include: Dorothea Lange, Toni Frissell, NASA, Lewis Hine, and Margaret Bourke White.

Neal Shusterman's *The Schwa Was Here* (Dutton, 2004) is an unusual tale involving a maybe-you're-here and then maybe-you're-not fantasy student called Schwa. He is sort of invisible. Who is he? Why does he do what he does? Anthony Bonano, who is telling this story, wants answers also. Schwa has a way of showing up at unexpected times and then. Lots of fun and says much about friendships.

Troy Blacklaw's *Karoo Boy* (Harcourt, 2005) takes place in South Africa. After the death of a twin brother, Douglas is taken by his mother into this small town and makes friends with two other young people, Marika and Moses. This novel of growing self awareness has a perfect setting. Strong stuff; invigorating.

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