



Teachers and Librarians Working Together for Teens and Their Reading

Keynote delivered at the ALAN Workshop, "Young Adult Literature: Key to Open Minds." Nashville, Tennessee, November 20, 2006

Welcome, ALAN's record-breaking audience of 480. Who knew that YA lit had become *this* hot? If it's your first ALAN workshop, you're about to discover *the* place to be if you're a language arts teacher, an English educator, a librarian, an author, a publisher, or just a plain old fan. We wouldn't be here if we didn't believe that young adult literature changes young people's lives.

Today, I'm asking you to consider how teachers and librarians can collaborate to bring this meaningful reading to teens. Having reflected on my work with schools as a public YA librarian for twenty years and having scoured *VOYA*'s pages for advice that I gathered for the next ten years from many in our professions, I was ready to make suggestions. Or was I?

Our workshop theme declares that young adult literature is the key to open minds. Naomi Shihab Nye's book, *A Maze Me*, ends with this poem:

*My mind
is always
open.
I don't think
there's even
a door.*

At the ALAN Breakfast on Saturday, Naomi was the perfect speaker to remind us that we are one human family on this planet. Every child is born with an open mind, which this unstable world is all too ready to close. What could possibly be a more important role for teachers and librarians than to cultivate young minds to remain open?

Let's examine three challenges that threaten young minds:

First, if you're an educator in a public school, No Child Left Behind is a barrier between you and your students and the books. You can't teach reading and writing when you're teaching to the test. Obviously you're here today *despite* NCLB, determined to bring teens and YA lit together anyhow.

I prescribe some excellent anti-NCLB therapy: read Edward Bloor's YA novel, *Story Time*, a wicked satire in which a magnet school boasts a "Test-Based Curriculum." Its library has actual demons living in books that *do* deserve to be burned. I can't wait to hear, when Edward Bloor speaks this afternoon, how healing it was to skewer such absurd fictional administrators! And to put the truth out there for students themselves to recognize—if they find time to read the book between tests.

How *are* students doing in reading? A September 2006 report from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) gives a 22-year comparison of U.S. high school sophomores' reading proficiency from 1980 to 2002. There are messages in these figures. Increasing personal challenges are affecting students' mastery of what they read. For example, since 1980, native English-language speakers declined from 95 to 86 percent, and students living with a biological or adopted parent declined from 70 to 57 percent. Yet the percentage of sophomores planning for college or postgraduate degrees nearly doubled, from 41 percent

in 1980 to 80 percent in 2002. Does their reading achievement show this majority—80 percent—of students capable of the college-bound track?

Unfortunately reading proficiency has descended in our new century. In three groups it declined substantially: sophomores in college prep programs, or in Catholic schools, and sophomores whose parents have graduate or professional degrees—some of the students most likely to be college bound. Might such declines be evidence of parents' heavy pressure on students to achieve?

The next challenge: More teenagers than ever—even the high achievers—are at risk.

My October 2006 editorial introduced Susie Vanderlip, who has reached more than a million people in schools across the country with her "Legacy of Hope" program. Since 2000, her teen audience reports "exceptionally high levels of emotional problems" from depression to self harm—and high achievers' severe stress.

Teachers' and librarians' strong tools of reading and writing can help. In the '80s and '90s, my public library groups included alcoholics, expectant mothers, abuse victims, bullied students, and homeless teens, drawn together by their love of reading. Without library guidelines about involvement in teens' lives, I winged it. I helped sometimes *and* sometimes made mistakes; could I have prevented one girl from running away? Teachers and librarians discuss these crises among ourselves, but we often don't know what to do.

VOYA offers counsel in an article series called "How Can We Help?" In its October 2005 debut, public YA librarian Amy Alessio asked an adolescent psychiatrist all the questions that we ask ourselves. In October 2006, ALAN past president Joan Kaywell built on her 1999 ALAN workshop, "Saving Our Students' Lives Through Literature and Laughter" with "There's Hope in a Book," an article describing her projects as an English educator that help us to offer that hope to at-risk teens. Echoing Susie Vanderlip, Joan points out that "twenty-five percent of today's teenagers have inordinate emotional baggage beyond the normal angst of adolescence." Joan's forthcoming book, *Dear Author: Letters of Hope: Top Young Adult Authors Respond to Kids' Toughest Issues*, explores the healing of such angst when teens write to authors whose books have deeply touched them—and authors write back.

VOYA's December 2006 issue contains the third series piece, "The School Library as Sanctuary," by Lynn Evarts. May it convince every teacher and school librarian to see their library as Lynn does. Lynn looks out for isolated students who don't feel safe or welcome anywhere—the peer-isolated, often bullied students and the self-isolated loners, and finds subtle ways to let them know they have a home in the library. Simply by allowing students to eat lunch in her library, Lynn helps them avoid "the scariest place in any school—the cafeteria at lunchtime."

Another VOYA project that brings teachers and librarians together recognizes the best high school summer reading lists—but we're not receiving enough worthy entries. Our committee chair, Linda Williams, has researched many schools' lists and is determined to encourage their inclusion of more YA literature, fewer dead white males, and better assessment. We're interested in any strategies you suggest.

Now for the technology challenge, a challenge which is changing our landscape even faster than global warming.

When we talk teens and reading, we usually mean books. We long to inspire young people to love books as much as we do. We're worried that teens' attraction to technology interferes with reading. Yet, Gene Luen Yang, whose *American Born Chinese* was the first graphic novel ever nominated for the National Book Award—and who speaks tomorrow in this workshop—says: "Technology is changing what it means to be literary, how we read and write." I've been facing my own technophobic tendencies this year, realizing that I cannot do my job without the expert counsel of VOYA's technology columnists—who appear only on *e-VOYA* on our Web site (www.voya.com), not in print.

Joyce Kasman Valenza and Linda Braun share the column "Tag Team Tech: Wrestling with Teens and Technology"—an apt description of what they do. When Joyce—a cutting-edge school librarian—attended her state conference last summer, a librarian in her twenties spoke out. Having seen school libraries range from traditional bookish enclaves to totally wired, this young woman wondered: "What does a twenty-first-century librarian look like?" That question inspired Joyce's latest column, "You Know You're a Twenty-First-Century Teacher-Librarian If . . .," in which she logs twenty technological twists to the

standard job description, such as promoting reading with downloadable audiobooks and digital booktalks.

Our other “Tag Team”-mate Linda Braun, a technology consultant for libraries who also teaches online library courses, finds herself playing “Dear Abby” for librarians overwhelmed by trying to keep up with warp-speed innovations. For *VOYA*, she manages to produce a column about each emerging technology—blogs, podcasts, RSS feeds, You-Tube, you name it—about five minutes before everyone is talking about it. Meanwhile young people absorb each new technology effortlessly—including young teachers and librarians. Cyberspace is their habitat, and if we in older generations don’t join them there, we will be superfluous. Discounted. Quite literally out of it.

So we must do what we have *always* done when working with youth. Consult them. Learn from them. Young virtual-world natives don’t see the boundaries that older immigrants experience; they simply integrate their online and real-world lives.

If you live with a teenager, you have witnessed this behavior. When my 19-year-old niece, Liz, stayed with me last summer, we listened to audiobooks together, passed books back and forth—including graphic novels, went to the movies, and watched DVDs. She copied half my CD collection onto her laptop, where I laughed over 500 funny photos of her friends. While blogging and using both *My Space* and *Facebook*, Liz also filled one hardback journal per month with handwriting, drawings, photos, and souvenirs. Before she returned to college, she informed me that if I didn’t join *Live Journal*, it would be hard to stay in touch. She was right. Now that e-mail is for old people, she doesn’t always answer my messages. When I phone her dorm room, she’s distracted by roommates and boyfriends. *Must* I add blogging to my insane schedule? What does an Empty Nester do?

We must accept that exploring a Web page or a blog *IS* reading. Blogging or posting comments *IS* writing. Chatting and instant messaging are reading *AND* writing, as is online social networking on

MySpace. Video gaming is a form of storytelling in which you star in the story. As in those old *Choose Your Own Adventure* books, the outcome is affected by your actions, which require skill and strategy—also known as “thinking.” Most of these electronic activities are *also* communication—give-and-take responses across time zones and cultures and age ranges. If we teach safe conduct online, cyberspace offers astounding opportunities for creativity, learning, and development.

Most exciting in our field are online writing communities and author Web sites, blogs, and chats. Young people’s literary landscapes are fertilized when they communicate directly with authors. Their writing skills sharpen with ready access to readers, critics, and mentors for their own work. Frankly I’m in awe of how confident and advanced young writers are, from the benefit of sharing or co-creating their work online. For several years, *VOYA* has published “Notes from the Teenage Underground,” an occasional column in which teens tell us what they want adults to know. Since April 2005 when the column featured high school senior Elisabeth Wilhelm’s *Ink for Blood*—which listed her top ten teen writing sites along with a rant about how condescending adults can be when critiquing teen writing online—*VOYA*’s “Underground” submissions have increased in quantity and quality. (They’re finding us on the Web.) So the April 2007 *VOYA* will be devoted to teen writing. For an enervat-

ing example of an international online writing community run by teens, check out Elisabeth’s United Nations award-winning site, *Absynthe Muse*.

Although a 2005 Kaiser Family Foundation study shows that 86 percent of youth aged 8 to 18 have a computer at home, 74 percent with Internet access, and they spend 6 hours and 21 minutes daily using a mix of media—TV, DVDs, movies, videogames, audio, computers, and print—other studies show that most teens lack the critical thinking skills and expertise to use electronic resources effectively. Online at home without the guidance of teachers or

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librarians, they need us! That's why YALSA—the Young Adult Library Services Association of ALA, the American Library Association—is debuting Teen Tech Week from March 4 to 10, 2007, to bring teens into libraries for technologies from DVDs to databases. Says Teen Tech Week Chair (and VOYA columnist) Linda Braun: "Technology is key to successful teen development."

Books remain one choice of media. To connect teens with books, many public YA librarians not only have Web pages for teens, but blogs and a *My Space* presence. In VOYA's latest *YA Clicks* online column, public librarian Rebecca Purdy and her teen Web Surfers review librarians' blogs. The Web Surfers are amazed to find them very cool, covering music and pop culture as well as "library stuff." One teen reviewer complains that one blog doesn't mention enough books. (Let *that* warm the cockles of your literary hearts!)

Your school or library site *must* at least offer links to lively resources that recommend YA books, such as librarian Jennifer Hubert's *Reading Rants*, which has won teens' seal of approval. Link to YA author sites and chats as well as Don Gallo's superb author interviews at *Authors4Teens*. While struggling with school reading lists, VOYA just discovered that the excellent *TeenReads* site has concocted a list of 250 titles with the input of their online community of teachers and librarians.

And there's YALSA's Web site itself, containing Best Books for Young Adults, Quick Picks for Reluctant Readers, Printz Award-winning titles of literary excellence, and more. YALSA's Teens' Top Ten Books is a perfect example of teen reading online and off. Since 2003, these recent titles are chosen via national online voting during Teen Read Week each October—individuals or entire classrooms can participate. Using publishers' advance copies, selected library teen book groups make nominations which appear on YALSA's Web site so teens across the country can vote for their favorites. More than 5,000 voters chose the 2006 Teens' Top Ten, just announced last week. Its only title by an author appearing in this workshop is ranked at number 2: Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight*. Stay until

Librarians can be teachers' greatest allies. School librarians (often called media specialists) exist to support your classroom endeavors.

ALAN's bitter end tomorrow to hear her speak. In September at the National Book Festival in D.C., her legions of teen girl fans were screaming! Can you guess the only title that outranked Meyer's vampires at number 1? (*Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*).

Hundreds of teachers and librarians are together in this room. Yet we don't always understand each other's jobs. Let's survey our audience:

—If you're a teacher—middle or high school, college or graduate school, please raise your hand.

—If you're a school librarian, raise your hand.

—Now public librarians, YA or otherwise.

You have an assignment at the next break. Teachers, introduce yourself to the librarian sitting closest to you. Librarians, find a teacher. Tell each other one thing about what you do that the other might not know.

Librarians can be teachers' greatest allies. School librarians (often called media specialists) exist to support your classroom endeavors. Besides purchasing materials for the school library's collection and helping students to find and use these items (both paper and electronic), school librarians offer services that teachers might not realize.

Here are three school librarians to challenge your assumptions:

- Alison Follois declares in her new book, *Reviving Reading: School Library Programming, Author Visits, and Books That Rock!*, that school libraries are "underutilized havens." Alison partners with her middle school teachers to engage even the most reluctant readers. Her entire school collaborates in a year-round reading program with "highly readable" titles. Alison also runs weekly readers' workshops in the library for each class, reading aloud a book that is discussed and journaled about, followed by a visit from its author. When Janet McDonald speaks to us later this morning, you'll see why she was an unforgettable author guest at Alison's school. Alison even coordinates a teachers' reading group with YA books. Her article about reading aloud will appear in VOYA's February 2007 issue.

- Rebecca Moore describes imaginative contests and games in an August 2006 *VOYA* article, making her school library a place where students learn because it's fun.
- Past ALAN president Teri Lesesne teaches school-librarians AND teachers-in-training at her state university. As you'll see this afternoon in the audiobook session, Teri is an entire resource in herself: book blogger, prolific presenter, and a force to reckon with in teachers' AND librarians' organizations. Her two valuable professional books, *Making the Match: The Right Book for the Right Reader at the Right Time*, and *Naked Reading: Uncovering What Tweens Need to Become Lifelong Readers*, help us to connect books and teens.

Another excellent resource is *VOYA's* sister journal, *Teacher-Librarian* or *TL*, which focuses on school librarians. More research oriented than *VOYA*, it often features collaborations between librarians and teachers. *TL* borrows the teacher-librarian job title from Canada, where *TL* was founded by school library visionary, Ken Haycock.

In the public library, young adult or YA librarians—often called teen librarians—are expected to develop relationships with local middle and high schools. They visit classrooms to booktalk the latest YA books not only to promote reading, but to introduce themselves to students who need a friendly face at the public library, whether for homework help or fun programs. When school is closed all summer, teen librarians help students locate school reading list titles and also run exciting teen reading programs. If you ask them, they'll even help schools compose summer reading lists, order extra copies of its titles, and send your students back to school prepared to discuss them. When teachers send assignment alerts, public librarians reserve materials so all students can share access.

Stylish and appealing new teen spaces—both high-tech and comfortable—are multiplying in public libraries across the country. *VOYA* has profiled one in every issue's "YA Spaces of Your Dreams" since 1999. You *want* your students to gravitate to such teen spaces after school, among books, music, and computers, finding support for their study and social needs. Teachers, your first step is to visit your public library's teen space and introduce yourself to its librarian.

Some noteworthy school/public library partnerships covered in *VOYA*:

- A California YA librarian helps an ESL teacher to use audiobooks to improve students' language skills.
- An Ohio YA librarian asked teachers to send their students to her Banned Books and Pizza program; the discussion continued in classrooms the next day.
- A Kansas YA librarian and a Web developer offer trainings in schools about using cybertools such as RSS feeds, blogs, and wikis (forthcoming).
- Seattle teen librarians built an ongoing cooperative relationship with their school system, including a joint summer reading program and trainings for teachers on using the public library. Discovering the reason that schools don't always welcome relationships with public libraries—"School librarians don't want their administrations to get the idea that public libraries can replace their services"—these public librarians insisted on changing schools' perceptions.

When I was a YA librarian, I made a lifelong friend when a middle school librarian invited me to booktalk even though she booktalked beautifully herself. When her students got to know me, they became involved with my teen advisory board and my fantasy book group. As high school students, they returned to their old middle school library to present booktalks themselves! That school librarian, Nancy Moore, is here today. We stay in touch with our mutual "library kids," now in their late twenties. It was booktalking guru Joni Bodart who trained our kids to outbooktalk us—and she's here as well.

Every October *VOYA* announces *VOYA's* Most Valuable Programs (MVPs) of the year. Our top 2006 MVP, Ocean County Library's "We Empower Teens" in New Jersey, is the finest example I've seen of school and public library partnership, revolutionizing the entire county's approach to young people. First, the library hired more teen librarians, built staff awareness of teens' developmental needs, and added teen advisory boards (TABs) to most branches. Our ALAN President, Diane Tuccillo, trained their teen librarians to run TABs, based on her *VOYA* book, *Library Teen Advisory Groups*.

Next, county library staff and administrators met

with educators from *all* county middle and high schools. Teachers were amazed at the insights gained when speaking with local public librarians about their shared students. In September 2005, the library and schools joined in a Teen Summit, “Empowering Teens as Community Partners,” with more than 200 teen representatives from every school, along with teachers, librarians, local government officials, and community partners. Dynamic keynote speaker/activist/poet Kevin Powell not only spoke about leadership but listened to the teen audience’s ideas. Now everyone in Ocean County partners with teens themselves. NO teen is left behind.

In VOYA’s December 2006 issue, National Book Award finalist Patricia McCormick describes the agonizing process of re-searching, in Nepal and India, and writing her shattering novel *Sold*, about thirteen-year-old Lakshmi who is sold into prostitution. Its teen readers want to know what they can do about human trafficking. “If a book has done its job,” says McCormick, “it asks something of you. Some books . . . demand that you take action. . . . [T]eens . . . may need help from the adults in their lives: teachers, librarians, and parents. It is up to those adults to show young people how: how to invite speakers to their schools, how to plan a viewing of a film about the human rights of children, how to raise money, or how to put their creative talents to use to express their reactions to world news.”

We teachers and librarians know that such books spark action and insight in young readers. Here in the ALAN Workshop, we learn directly from authors why they write books that they trust *us* to put into teens’ hands. Combat testing by introducing your students to Lakshmi in *Sold*. You’ll be hearing Will Hobbs in a moment; bring them illegal Mexican immigrant Victor in Will’s *Crossing the Wire*. Later you’ll hear Nancy Garden; your students’ lives might depend on meeting Gray in her *Endgame*. And so on in our troubled world. YA author Julian Thompson believes that YA

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novels must be full of hope—he spells hopeful as hope-full. It is in our power—teachers and librarians together—to bring the hope in YA books to the youth who need it.

Cathi Cunn MacRae served as a young adult specialist in Maryland and Colorado public libraries for twenty years before becoming editor-in-chief of Voice of Youth Advocates (VOYA) in 1997 (www.voya.com). From 1988 to 1995, she was YA critic for Wilson Library Bulletin, writing “The Young Adult Perplex” review column in which she also interviewed authors who write for teens. Cathi is active in the American Library Association (ALA) and is an official trainer for library professionals in “Serving the Underserved” workshops run by ALA’s Young Adult Library

Services Association (YALSA). She served on the Board of Directors of ALAN from 1999-2003, chairing the ALAN Author Award Committee during that term. She won the 1995 Econo-Clad/ALA/YALSA Award for Outstanding Achievement in the Development of a Literature Program for Young Adults, and has won two state library association intellectual freedom awards. Cathi is the author of Presenting Young Adult Fantasy Fiction (Twayne/Macmillan Reference/Gale, 1998). She lives in Annapolis, Maryland, with her Scots writer husband and their cats, Archie and Agnes.

A shortened version of the speech previously appeared in the December 2006 VOYA editorial. The items in the works cited list, along with hyper links, can also be found at http://www.voya.com/whatsinvoya/web_only_articles/resources.shtml.

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