Eva **Gold,** Ruth **Caillouet,** and Tom **Fick**

Teaching (W)holes:

Wordplay and Reversals in Louis Sachar's *Holes*

> Books are the best of things, well used; abused, among the worst. What is their right use? What is the one end, which all means go to effect? They are for nothing but to inspire.
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> —Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The American Scholar" (57)

> What pretty oracles nature yields us on this text [self-reliance] in the face and behavior of children, babes, and even brutes! That divided and rebel mind, that distrust of a sentiment because our arithmetic has computed the strength and means opposed to our purpose, these have not. Their mind being whole, their eye is as yet unconquered, and when we look in their faces, we are disconcerted.
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> —Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance" (260)

Emerson, like many Romantic writers on both sides of the Atlantic, is the champion of childhood and youth, and like every teacher, he knows that children not only read texts, they are themselves texts who have lessons to teach adults. Louis Sachar's classic novel, *Holes,* might be read as a gloss on Emerson, and particularly on two of his most influential essays, "Self-Reliance" and "The American Scholar." The hero of this novel, Stanley Yelnats, is a boy who, like characters in so much young adult fiction (and in real life as well), must find themselves and learn to recover that wholeness which Emerson sees as the natural condition of childhood and the goal of the healthy adult. In fact, the title of the novel is a play on words that points us towards its message. *Holes*, we believe, is an implicit pun on "wholes," and in the course of the novel Stanley moves from the divided and rebel mind Emerson mentions toward self-reliance and integrity, until—to adapt Emerson once again—his mind being whole, his eye ("I") is as yet unconquered.

Holes, therefore, is a novel about the opening of minds: the creating of wholes out of holes, of an unconquered "I" out of proper seeing. If Emerson is right that books are for nothing but to inspire, then *Holes* is an extraordinarily useful book, because it contains so many elements that can be used to spark students' interests. One of the most significant is implicit both in Emerson's comments and in our own introduction to this essay: wordplay. Even if students are not as immediately taken with the pleasures of the text as their teachers are, we all know that playing with words is a part of young adult culture—from rap lyrics to "playing the dozens" or "signifyin'"—and tapping into this interest in wordplay can make reading a mind-opening and inspiring activity. Wordplay initiates and structures the novel's themes of identity, justice, and fortune, and further allows teachers to introduce students to a complex sense of literary structure and characterization while engaging their imagination and sense of play. As teachers in different areas—British Literature, American Literature, and English Education—we have found that this novel helps students find a sense of play in classic

literature through the study of an adolescent text. In short, it can serve what Emerson, in "The American Scholar" sees as the one true use of books: to inspire. What follows are some of the approaches that we have found useful for opening young readers' minds—the kinds of discoveries that students can be prodded to find themselves and those more literary ones that they will need a teacher to help them find.

Wordplay in Holes

Holes, Louis Sachar's acclaimed young adult novel, is based in wordplay. Its title, as we have indicated, is an implicit pun on "wholes." The holes of the novel are, of course, the holes that Stanley and the other boys of Camp Green Lake must dig, ostensibly to effect their rehabilitation but actually to search for the fortune buried by Kate Barlow. Holes may connote emptiness and nothingness, yet in the course of the novel, Stanley becomes "whole." The secondary character Zero, the symbol for whose name links him with holes (0) and who is described as having a head with "nothing" in it (19), also becomes whole. Indeed, all the apparently disconnected plot elements from past and present are revealed, by the end, to form a "whole" as Stanley undoes the curse laid on his great-great-grandfather when he carries Madame Zeroni's great-grandson Zero up the mountain and sings him a song. Even the main character's name is a play on words. Early on, we are told that Stanley Yelnats' name is the same backwards and forwards: it can be read both from left to right and in reverse (9). While amusing in itself, this bit of wordplay is key to the structure and thematic development of the novel. Everything in the book works one way and in reverse: the plot goes back and forth between the past and the present—from Latvia where the curse begins, to Sam and Kate in the town of Green Lake of the late nineteenth century and forward to the present life of Stanley and the other characters.

The two bits of wordplay work through opposites. Everything in the book turns out to be its own opposite: What is lost is found, what is bad luck becomes good luck, injustice becomes justice. The pedantic counselor Mr. Pendanski utters a sentence that both articulates the clichés of reformation and encapsulates the structure of the book: "I'm going to help turn your life around" (17). Stanley's mother (who believes Camp Green Lake is a camp complete with activities on the lake and not an abusive reform school) says in a letter, "Maybe something good will come of this" (75); this is yet another cliché, albeit sincerely meant (unlike Mr. Pendanski's) and one that proves to be true. Life for Stanley and Zero is "turned around," and, in spite of the evil intentions of the Warden and her subordinates at Camp Green Lake, in spite of the injustice that characterizes Stanley's conviction for stealing the sneakers, justice is at the end restored.

There are other significant reversals in the novel as well. The experience at Camp Green Lake does turn Stanley's life around. Green Lake is not a lake; it is a wasteland (as declared on the first page), that at the end will once more become a lake. Camp Green Lake is not a camp, but rather a place of cruelty and injustice; as the boys are repeatedly told "This isn't a Girl Scout camp" (14). Yet at the end, the land is sold and "will become a Girl Scout camp" (229). Elya Yelnats goes away from Madame Zeroni, yet their descendants are brought together at Camp Green Lake to effect the undoing of Madame Zeroni's curse.

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The most important reversal has to do with Stanley, consigned to an institution presided over by abusive authority figures. Stanley, though innocent of the crime of stealing the sneakers donated by a sports celebrity to a charity auction, is in need of reform, though not of the sort offered by Camp Green Lake. Stanley begins as an unhappy character—overweight, bullied, and friendless. He must undergo a reversal, a change for the better in this book. Although this scenario will probably be familiar to young readers, who will have found versions of it in so much adolescent literature, the idea of transformation is also central to many of the most famous quest narratives of the western tradition—Homer's Odyssey, Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress. Holes,* accessible as it is to students,

can thus be used to introduce the genre of quest narrative, which in many of its classic examples can seem to students remote from their own experience. In these works, as in *Holes,* the hero must undergo a transforming quest that involves both the recovery and discovery of identity in a plot that involves a reversal.

Camp Green Lake, of course, is not really set up for reformation: The Warden, Ms. Walker, a descendant of the evil Trout Walker, is in search of the treasure buried in the desert by the outlaw Kate Barlow. But, in another reversal, digging the holes makes Stanley stronger physically, strong enough to carry Zero up the mountain and hence to complete the task left undone by his great-great-grandfather Elya Yelnats. When Stanley follows Zero in his escape into the desert, the characters reach a low point, thereby participating in a movement familiar within quest narratives—reformation involving reversal, and characters reaching a nadir, a spiritual low point, before they can go up. Stanley and Zero's climb up the mountain can be linked to the reversals experienced by such heroes as Odysseus, who journeys to the Underworld, Dante, who journeys through Hell, and, in a modern rendition, Malcolm X, whose ascent comes after his imprisonment. Stanley and Zero's return to camp is also marked by a series of reversals. The plot concocted by the Warden to protect the camp from an inquiry about Zero works in reverse. The Warden, assuming Zero will die in the desert after he runs away, orders Mr. Pendanski to destroy Zero's records, which has the effect of making them a "hole in cyberspace" (222). This effort to make Zero nothing, a person with no identity and no record, enables Stanley's lawyer simply to take Zero out of the camp. Even the concept of the law undergoes a reversal as Stanley and Zero are rescued by a lawyer and the Attorney General of Texas, representatives of the institution that unjustly sent the boys to the camp in the first place.

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With its connections to traditional quest narratives, the novel can introduce students to the ways literary texts can allude to and speak to other texts. *Holes* provides a very specific example of literary allusion. On the very first page of the book, we are told that Camp Green Lake has no lake; it is a "wasteland." Later, we find out that rain stopped falling on the town after the Sheriff and Trout Walker and other townspeople killed Sam, the black Onion Man, for the "crime" of kissing the white Kate Barlow. With the term "wasteland" comes an allusion to T.S. Eliot's classic and complex poem *The Waste Land*, which can be read as a quest romance. Eliot's poem presents a dreary and fragmented landscape, where the desire for rain signals a desire for growth and rebirth, themes we see also in *Holes*. Indeed, the plot of *Holes* follows that of *The Waste Land*. Eliot writes of his wasteland, "Here is no water but only rock/ Rock and no water" (lines 334-5; 1303), yet in the last section, "What the Thunder Said," there is at least the promise of rain, just as toward the end of *Holes* there is thunder (127). When Zero and Stanley are wandering in the desert they find water beneath God's Thumb, the "giant rock" (171) that dominates the landscape, just as barren rock dominates Eliot's poem. And, finally, though there is no rain at the end of Eliot's poem, a drop of rain falls on Camp Green Lake (225), signaling redemption not only for Stanley and Zero, but also for the town of Green Lake, which, in another reversal, will once again be a place of growth. With this promise, language is redeemed as well. Green Lake no longer means "wasteland": it will mean Green Lake, a tautology rather than an opposite.

Through all the reversals of this book, beginning with simple wordplay and extending to plot, structure, and character, in the end *Holes* celebrates wholeness of character and family with a sense of justice restored. Stanley's completion of his quest leads to recovery and good fortune in many senses. Stanley recovers his identity; Zero (the only "camper" who has no name) gets both his name and his mother back. In another piece of wordplay, the novel also ends with recovery of fortune. All the bad fortune of the Yelnats family turns to good fortune, as the family recovers the "fortune" made by the first Stanley Yelnats in the stock market; the treasure stolen by Kate Barlow, searched for by the Warden, is in a suitcase labeled Stanley Yelnats. Stanley's father, an inventor

plagued by bad luck, becomes "lucky" as he discovers the "cure" for foot odor (no doubt a favorite detail for adolescent readers). This discovery helps Clyde Livingston, the celebrity donor of the stolen sneakers, with his foot odor problem. Thus the smelly sneakers that sent Stanley to Camp Green Lake for stealing and were actually "stolen" by Zero, who was in need of shoes, lead to the integration of Clyde, famous for "stolen bases," (22) into the Yelnats-Zeroni community at the end of the novel. Zero is revealed not as absence but as a circle, what Emerson, in his essay "Circles" calls "The highest emblem in the cipher of the world" (403), and which stands for the transformed (w)holes of the camp. As Emerson writes, "Our life is an apprenticeship to the truth, that around every circle another can be drawn; that there is no end in nature, but every end is a beginning; that there is always another dawn risen on mid-noon . . ." (403).

Classroom Activities

While teachers can find numerous classroom ideas for enriching the study of *Holes*, we have chosen activities that center our discussions on identity, wholeness, and opening minds. Through three areas of study—the concept of naming, the venture toward a quest, and the issue of fortune—students develop journals and projects that allow them to explore individuality, identity, and independence while also opening their minds to new possibilities.

What's In a Name?

What exactly *is* in a name? Why would a name make any difference in a life? Early in Stanley's stay at Camp Green Lake, the boys introduce themselves with their chosen/given names and present Stanley with his new identity, Caveman. To the boys at Camp Green Lake, the choosing of a name for each new member may seem like a teenage trifle, but in truth the ritual is an act of rebellion for adolescents who have very few freedoms in life. Mr. Pendanski refuses to use their nicknames, saying "I prefer to use the names their parents gave them—the names that society will recognize them by when they return to become useful and hardworking members" (18-19). His statement denies the society that the boys have created for themselves as well as their present usefulness. The giving of names like X-ray, Zero, Barf Bag, Zigzag, and Caveman is a process by which these young men stake a claim in self, but it is also a time-honored tradition in young adult fiction as well as classic literature.

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Books such as Karen Cushman's *Catherine, Called Birdy* and Christopher Paul Curtis's *Bud, Not Buddy* highlight the importance of a precise name in a young person's identity while Lois Lowry's *The Giver* presents the ceremony of names in which children are given a name unique within the community but not unique in identity. In Cushman's *The Midwife's Apprentice,* when the young girl who has been labeled Beetle decides to name herself Alice, she begins to find an identity and a place in the world. Esperanza of Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street* wants to change her name to Zeze the X, while Jerry Spinelli's *Stargirl* protagonist, Susan, names herself Stargirl and then back to Susan, taking on a different personality with each name. Joe, from James Howe's *The Misfits*, experiments with names like JoeDan and Scorpio as he explores his own individuality, while the larger issue of name calling as society's habit of using labels to brand individuals is central to the novel. In classic literature, the question of what's in a name has plagued adolescents from Shakespeare's Juliet to Carson McCullers' Frankie to Toni Morrison's Milkman Dead and Alice Walker's Dee Wangero. Over and over, names have been an adolescent's connection with identity, self worth, culture, and independence.

To help students see this importance of names in connection to identity we have used a variety of journal prompts and activities. Giving students the chance to write about their own names is, of course, a good place to start. Students tell the story of their names by answering a series of questions designed to lead them through the connection between a name and one's identity. We begin with some investigation into personal history with the following questions. "Why were your names chosen? What does the name

mean? Is there a family heritage or cultural symbol in the name?" Students can also write about the choosing of a name for a pet or younger sibling. We pull in the many name books that are on the market so that students can look for roots and meanings. We ask them to think of names which, like Stanley Yelnats, are palindromes. They also write about nicknames, their own or those they have heard in the community. The newspaper obituary is a great resource to pull into the classroom for discussing nicknames. We talk and write about the nicknames we endured as children and the stories behind those names. And then they are asked to rename themselves like the characters in *Holes*. "What name would you choose if you wanted to change your personality? What name would you give yourself if you were to become a superhero?" Of course, not all of the names given to us are positive and not all of them are chosen by us, so it is important to discuss the negative connotations of name-calling too.

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The naming discussions lead into the next activity from *Holes*, digging into family history. Woven into the story of Stanley Yelnats is the tale of Stanley's "no-good- dirty-rotten-pig-stealing-great-great-grandfather" and the family heritage and theft that influences Stanley's life. We all have colorful ancestry and family stories, so this gives students the chance to do some of their own digging. Although encouraging students to research their own families is the goal, we have learned to be flexible in allowing those who are uncomfortable within their own family stories to choose someone else's family or even tap into community agencies and retirement centers. The project begins with further research in names as students attempt to understand more about their own ethnicity and culture. Students use the internet and family histories to examine the roots of their ancestry. They also interview the oldest willing member of the family and gather stories. The interviews are always fascinating with stories of World War II paratroopers or mistresses of the first schools in the community one-room school houses, and a wealth of history. We also talk about Stanley's luck and pose questions about the unluckiest member of the family. Students gather pictures and artifacts to present to the class as they share the stories and complete the research. These projects are not only fascinating histories, but they also serve to connect students with their own family stories, many that they have never heard, and better understand another bit of their own identity.

What Is Your Quest?

The family history projects are also a nice lead into discussions of the mythic hero, since Stanley Yelnats, an ordinary boy from an ordinary family, finds himself in the unlikely position of hero in his escape from Camp Green Lake and rescue of Zero. Students find his move toward the self reliance and integrity of Emerson inspirational and are eager to discuss his connection to other heroes. In the continued effort to link *Holes* with other classic literature, we discuss Stanley as he relates to characteristics of the mythic hero. One common factor in the life of the hero, especially the adolescent hero, is some mystery surrounding the hero's ancestry. From the ancient tales of King Arthur and Robin Hood to the popular culture stories of Batman, Spiderman, and Elektra, the young hero is often raised by a foster family and many times becomes a hero at a young age in order to revenge the death of one or both parents. Adolescent fiction is filled with adventure stories of young people who are removed from the supervision of one or both parents. Both of Harry Potter's parents are dead, so he is raised by his aunt and uncle, as is Dorothy. Scout and Jem have the freedom and pain of a deceased mother, while the children of Narnia are sent away to the country during wartime, away from both parents. Whether the hero's parents are dead or simply missing, the adolescent hero must complete his quest away from adult supervision. While Stanley's parents are both alive and well, his adventure begins when he is sent to Camp Green Lake, away from their protective environment, and his true quest starts as he sets off on his own to find Zero and reach God's Thumb. As in the case of much adolescent fiction, Stanley's individuality and self-discovery comes from independence and missing parents. Although Stanley is not avenging his parents' deaths, the reason he finds himself in trouble is because he wanted to take the

sneakers home in his desire to help his father find luck. He also refuses to leave Zero behind when his lawyer comes to the rescue, and it is this act that leads to the discovery of Zero's mother and the end of her mysterious disappearance.

Another common factor in stories of mythic heroes is the sidekick or companion. The sidekick helps in battle, supports the hero at all times, and very often is the witness to the hero's death in the end. Robin Hood has Little John, Arthur has his knights of the round table, and even Beowulf has Wiglaf in the end. In modern popular culture, students are quite familiar with the sidekick through characters like Batman's Robin and Xena's Gabrielle. Because of these relationships, the hero often learns lessons of compassion, sacrifice, and character. Stanley completes the sacrifice of carrying Zero up the mountain and learns about his own strengths—strengths that might even be considered super human.

Writing about heroes and their mythic qualities gives students the chance to connect Stanley's stories with other great legends of film, television, and fiction. It also serves as a way to get students thinking about their own character traits. We begin this discussion by brainstorming a list of heroes with students and try to list all of the television and film superheroes that they can remember from the Ninja Turtles to Spiderman to Xena to Buffy. Then we list the literary heroes such as Arthur, Odysseus, Robin Hood, Britomart, Beowulf, the Redcrosse Knight, and others. From there we begin to look for similar characteristics and common storylines. Students write about childhood heroes and explain the difference between a hero and a role model. Then we discuss Stanley and his qualities to see whether he fits the definition of mythic hero. Students are asked to write about sacrifice, those made by legendary heroes but also their own personal sacrifices. We also ask them to think about strengths and, like Stanley, to look within themselves for their own strengths. The journal prompt is a simple question, "What is your greatest strength?" Stanley is sent to Camp Green Lake to build character, so it is only fitting to use his story to help our students with this same lesson.

We also discuss the importance of the quest in heroic tradition and how the journey of the quest is the real story, not the completion of the mission. I turn this into a reflective writing prompt with the question, "What is your quest?" To get them thinking about their own desires, we use the poem by Langston Hughes called "Harlem" so that they too can think about the damage of dreams that are not fulfilled. To tie in other disciplines of study, students can also use Zero's spatial drawings to understand geometry and map skills. Students are asked to draw a map to their home and then write the directions as a way to show that connection between words and pictures. Using a map quest might be another way to demonstrate the power of the journey. This would also be a fun time to talk about compasses and survival skills and bring in speakers to give students tips.

Is It Fortune, Justice, or Luck?

The story of *Holes* is filled with coincidences and luck. Stanley blames his fate on his "no-good-dirty-rotten-pig-stealing-great-great-grandfather" and claims that the family was cursed with bad luck because of those mistakes. The list of coincidences is quite long. Stanley is sent to Camp Green Lake, the same place where his great-great-grandfather met with Kate Barlow and the same place where Zero, the descendent of the gypsy who cursed his great-great-grandfather, was sent. Stanley is sent there for the crime of stealing the shoes taken by Zero. Zero survives by taking refuge under the boat built by Sam and eating the peaches jarred by Kate. The questions to pose to students about these coincidences are designed to help students think through their own beliefs. The journal prompts include, "Do you believe in luck or fate?" "Do the boys find success because of fortune, justice, or luck?" "Is justice served, and is that due to the legal system or good luck?" These are questions that can lead to a variety of projects. Students can perform mock trials or visit a court room or investigate the juvenile legal system of their area. This is also a good time to discuss ancient systems of justice and talk

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about the belief of right versus might in the legends of King Arthur. A good question for this discussion is, "Is Stanley's father's successful invention due to hard work or luck?" We discuss his invention strategies and the results.

These questions lead into the invention project. Students investigate inventions which came about due to mistakes. They research everything from chocolate chip cookies to catapults to post-it notes, and we discuss the concept of luck and coincidence in many great discoveries. Students then get a chance to design their own inventions. They first write about something that they wished existed and then work in teams to design drawings, packaging, and a sales pitch for their new product. The inventions are then presented to the class, and students vote on the best of the bunch. The project allows for creativity, as well as a host of learning styles, and is always great fun. These projects lead students to understand that what some perceive as luck might really just be hard work and ingenuity and the ability to keep an open mind about possibilities.

If Only, If Only

Our study of *Holes*, like the novel, comes full circle. At the end of the book, the characters are all "whole." Zero has regained his identity and his mother, the Yelnats family has achieved good fortune, and even Clyde Livingston has found a cure (thanks to Stanley's father) for his smelly feet. Our discussions come back to our opening lessons on Emerson's self-reliance. Each of the characters finds the integrity and wholeness that Emerson suggests as central to the discovery of identity, but each also must keep an open mind to accepting help from another in order to find wholeness. Through this discussion students understand the significance of helping one another on the journey to self-reliance.

One of the best metaphors for this discussion is the lullaby that threads its way through the story. Students enjoy comparing the different versions of the lullaby, but they also enjoy sharing their own childhood songs and explaining the importance of music and memory. The many voices of the novel add variations on the old song beginning on the bus trip to Camp Green Lake with Stanley's memory of his father's gruff voice and passing back in time to the wife of the pig stealer who was the first to translate the song into English. It is Stanley who completes his great-great-grandfather's broken promise by carrying Zero up the mountain and singing the lullaby once again. The book ends with a new variation of the "If Only" lullaby, this time sung by Zero's mother. The song comes full circle as each of its singers provides comfort for loved ones through the magic of its words. Like the descendants of Elya Yelnats and Madame Zeroni, the original lullaby, as passed through the families, took two paths and ended up transformed through translation into two versions, related but different. The final verse sung by Zero's mother, "Fly high my baby bird, My angel, my only," echoes the strength and independence of Emerson's self-reliance. At the end, Zero and Stanley are transformed, yet together and looking back to their common origin. At the end, *Holes*, like the name of its main character, connects endings to beginnings.

Eva Gold *is a specialist in British literature and Tom Fick is a specialist in American Literature. Both are professors of English at Southeastern Louisiana University and have directed summer institutes for teachers through the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities. After twenty years of teaching grades 7-12 in Louisiana public schools, Ruth Caillouet now directs the English Education program at Southeastern Louisiana University. Her passions include teacher education, the novels of Toni Morrison, Buffy the Vampire Slayer, and escaping into adolescent literature.*

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