

Stories from the Field

Editors' Note: Stories from the Field, a new feature in *The ALAN Review*, invites readers to share a story about young adult literature. This new section will feature brief vignettes (no more than 300 words) from practicing teachers and librarians who would like to share their interactions with students, parents, colleagues, and administrators around young adult literature. Please send your stories to: jbach@lsu.edu.

Reading to Promote Understanding and Compassion

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In the recent distinctively divisive political climate, I've noticed my students' responses to current issues becoming more extreme in nature. One of my goals as an educator has been to help students expand and balance their sources of information in order to understand the complexity of the major problems that face our world. Because of this goal, I was thrilled when my English department assigned the book *Three Cups of Tea* (Mortenson and Relin) for summer reading. I knew this book would challenge student thinking about America's relationship with Pakistan and Afghanistan, and I was amazed at how willingly these young readers applied the new information to their existing perceptions about the citizens of these nations.

During one activity, I asked pairs of students to discuss and respond to specific passages from the text

and was comforted by their maturity and insightfulness. Ashley and Tyler observed, "Syed is asking us not to judge them [citizens of Pakistan], but to see them as who they really are. They don't have education, so they are poor; the light of knowledge has just been lit, so they hope it will bring them to brighter days. We agree that education can bring people out of poverty, and that it can create light from darkness. We also think that we should judge people as individuals rather than use stereotypes."

Shannon and Sean also concluded, "When America pointed fingers and guns without asking questions first, it caused a rift between groups in America. Those pro-war people and even others, maybe without meaning to, discriminate and hate Muslims who have done nothing wrong. The hate definitely strengthened Muslim communities and united them against the source: America."

One of the most important lessons I have discovered as an English teacher is the ability that young adult literature has to teach students important life lessons and remind us of our common humanity. Greater compassion and understanding for our nation's "enemies" naturally arose from reading this book, arguably characteristics wanting in our society. An important task for educators is to encourage reading of meaningful, relevant texts that challenge students to examine the world in which they live.

Mortenson, Greg, and David Oliver Relin. *Three Cups of Tea: One Man's Mission to Fight Terrorism and Build Nations—One School at a Time*. New York: Viking, 2006. Print.

Nurturing Community: My Experience with Jay Asher's *Thirteen Reasons Why*

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Jay Asher's *Thirteen Reasons Why* has exploded in popularity since it was published in 2007. Currently one of the most popular titles in my young adult literature classroom, the novel has sparked discussions at conferences and social service agencies and has joined a growing list of titles that address teen suicide. I read it in the fall of 2007 and considered using it in my graduate YA Lit class that spring. Coincidentally, over the December/January break, our local newspaper featured a front-page story noting the anniversary of the suicide of a sixteen-year-old girl whose parents had become local advocates for teens suffering from depression and at risk for suicide. An only child, a popular cheerleader at a Catholic high school, and a girl who clearly had the support of her parents, teachers, counselors, and close friends, Melinda's tragic death seemed to challenge the previously held stereotype that teens who commit suicide are loners who are often bullied and/or rejected by peers. Like Hannah (Asher's protagonist), Melinda sent what were, in her case, uplifting messages to her friends just hours before she took her life, but she offered no clue that she was going to kill herself.

Like Clay, with whom Hannah leaves her box of tapes, Melinda's friends have been left with confusing questions and emotions, which they have explored in essays that appeared in our local newspaper in the months after Melinda's death. The day after their publication, I called the reporter on the story and asked her if she thought Melinda's parents would be willing to talk with my class. Being apprehensive myself, since I was unsure how this discussion might go, I decided to approach them through Hannah's "thirteen reasons"; by talking through a fictional character, the parents were afforded some emotional distance, a buffer that provided a sense of safety. After all, no one there knew their daughter, and they could funnel their comments through the less personal plight of a fictional, and thus emotionally removed, character. I

was still a bit anxious, however. In my long career as a high school teacher and now English educator, I had been bringing the community into my classroom for decades, but this was breaking new ground even for me.

The night that Melinda's parents came to our classroom and joined our reading community was magical. Eager to talk about their daughter but visibly suffering the pain of recounting their every memory to bring her alive for us, Melinda's parents joined our circle and led an extraordinary discussion. They urged my students to pay attention, really pay attention to the challenges their students may be facing in or out of school. Our classroom community grew a little closer that night. We came to understand, firsthand, that in young adult fiction, we can find opportunities for shared empathy and stronger connections to the real lives of our own students.

Blogger Classroom

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The whole world of children's and young adult book reviews exploded for me when I found book blogs. My Google Reader list grew quickly, and I instantly started to wonder how I could use blogs to inform my classroom practice. My quick favorites were and still are www.thereadingzone.wordpress.com, and www.readingyear.blogspot.com. I scoured sites on a daily basis for ways to improve my instruction as well as for new and upcoming books to put onto my classroom shelves. In short order, I had created my own book blog and used it in my classes in these ways:

1. **Writing Their Own Literary Criticism:** Students learn different ways book reviews can be created and used by looking at my short entries and longer ones. My own students write a Literary Log each week that consists of three paragraphs (minimum) of summary and their own visceral reactions to a text. They are encouraged to make connections, use literary terminology (theme, plot, mood, etc.), and explore their own likes and dislikes concerning novels.

2. **Finding Other Book Resources:** My blog also contains links to other great sites students can use to find more read-alike books, such as www.teenreads.com and www.guyslitwire.blogspot.com. These sites give students access to new titles as well as detailed summaries or descriptions of the novels.
3. **Publishing Their Reviews:** Additionally, I offer the opportunity for students to write for my blog at any time. At times, I will read a Literary Log that easily lends itself to becoming a blog entry. Last year, one of my students wrote a review of the book *Zombie*

Blondes by Brian James, and James commented on the entry. His response was: “Very well done! I’m glad your students like my book. She got out of it exactly what I intended. I hope you gave her an A ;) Brian James (author of *Zombie Blondes*).”

This kind of feedback gets much more mileage than my point value on a written response.

*Note: I understand *eclectic* is spelled incorrectly in the domain name; the other spelling was already taken as a domain name, but I really liked the name. The blog name is spelled correctly on the actual webpage.