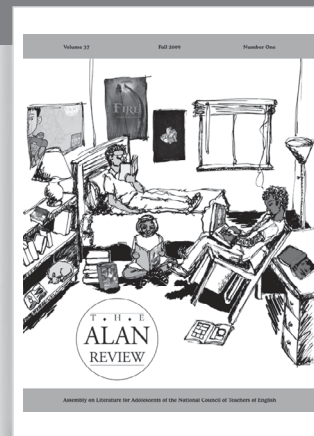


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## Instructions for Authors

**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 summer) 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 American Psychological Association (APA).

**SUBMITTING THE MANUSCRIPT.** Authors are to submit manuscripts electronically to alanreview@lsu.edu. In the subject line please write: **ALAN manuscript submission**. All manuscripts should be in a recent version of Microsoft Word and use APA format. Complete submissions include, as separate attachments, the following documents: (1) A manuscript without references to the author(s). (2) A separate title page with author's name, contact information, affiliation, and a 2-3 sentence biographical sketch. In the case of multiple authors, the author submitting the manuscript will serve as the primary contact unless stipulated otherwise. (3) A brief statement that the article is original, has not been published previously in other journals and/or books, and is not a simultaneous submission.

**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>MARCH 1</b>
<b>WINTER ISSUE Deadline:</b>	<b>JULY 1</b>
<b>SUMMER ISSUE Deadline:</b>	<b>NOVEMBER 1</b>

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## From the Editors

“Scattering Light” in the Lives of Young Adult Readers

**T**he theme for this issue of *The ALAN Review* and for the ALAN workshop last November in Philadelphia asks us to imagine what it means to “scatter light” using young adult literature. We are asked to consider which writers and what texts in our field have encouraged us to “scatter light” or have given “voice [to those who have] been pushed down hard” by school or society. I (Melanie) would like to offer some perspective as we introduce this issue.

Naomi Shihab Nye is a favorite poet of mine, and while the journal and conference theme was taken from her poem “Voices,” it is her poem “The List” that strikes me today as I look across the articles and columns for this issue. In the poem, the speaker listens as a man calculates how many books he should be able to read before he dies. The man has used a mathematical formula to calculate the number—expected life span multiplied by average books per month. As I read this poem, I see parallels to the way texts are calculated for the students in our schools. We have students for roughly twelve years, so we divide the number of texts (key, canonical, etc.) that we need them to read before they graduate into the number of years, or semesters, or courses. Our goal, we say, is to create lifelong readers, but we try to do this by formula—so many great books a year, divided by number of English/language arts classes, multiplied by

summer reading. We make lists of “necessary books,” just as the man did in Nye’s poem:

nonfiction mostly, history, philosophy,  
fiction, and poetry from different time periods  
so there wouldn’t be large gaps in his mind.  
He had given up frivolous reading entirely.  
*There are only so many days.*

The speaker in the poem questions the man’s plan. She wonders, “What about the books that aren’t written yet,/the books his friends might recommend/that aren’t on the list,/the yummy magazine that might fall/into his hand at a silly moment after all?” These are the questions that those of us who are passionate about young adult literature ask: What about the book that hasn’t been written yet? What about the texts that friends recommend to each other? What about those viral books that spread throughout the grade level or school? What about those books that grab the adoles-

cent reader? The ones that speak to them? The ones that “scatter light” in their worlds?

We, as editors of *The ALAN Review*, echo the idea that “there are only so many days,” but we believe we should dedicate those to the *best* books. And that’s where this journal comes in. This issue’s contents offer at least a few answers to the questions posed above; they help us with the see-

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**We, as editors of *The ALAN Review*, echo the idea that “there are only so many days,” but we believe we should dedicate those to the *best* books.**

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ing, thinking, and imagining that young adult authors, teachers, and readers do in a variety of contexts as they scatter light on their lives.

To begin the issue, sj Miller and Josh Slifkin scatter light on the use of young adult novels for the open question of the Advanced Placement examination. If, as many of us argue, the body of young adult literature has many fine novels of significant literary quality, then why couldn't a high school student select a young adult novel of similar literary quality to answer the question? We think their article opens a long-awaited discussion. Nai-Hua Kuo and Janet Alsup remind us that while the rhetoric about including multicultural literature remains constant, many teachers find it difficult to incorporate into their curriculum. First, they address the concerns of teachers as they teach multicultural literature. Second, they describe a classroom observation of a teacher using *Yang the Youngest and His Terrible Ear* with high school ESL students. To conclude, they offer pedagogical strategies for teaching *American Born Chinese*.

Scattering light also means revisiting the pioneers in our field who continue to influence authors of YA lit and our students. Referring to a recent national controversy about a book loosely based on J. D. Salinger's life, John S. Simmons recaps the reasons for teaching Salinger's novel and teaches us ways in which we might connect our readers to the themes found in Holden's life. As one of our students mentioned after reading *Catcher in the Rye* in a young adult literature course, "I was nervous and scared for Holden."

Turning to an emerging scholar in young adult literature, Rob Bittner closely examines the characteristics of the growing list of trans young adult novels and what readers might come to understand through these narratives. Jennifer Buehler discusses the work of Matt de la Peña and its roots in urban youth who often go unnoticed in our schools and neighborhoods. As light shines on the lives of the youth in both instances, we can see the beauty that emerges.

The four columns in this issue provide differing views on what it means to scatter light in the broad contexts of young adult literature. Teri and Haviland Holbrook provide a look into a teen reader's list of books that "scattered light" in her reading life. Alan Sitomer challenges teachers to consider a wide variety

of texts in order to reach the students in their classrooms. Both Jeffrey Kaplan and Cindy Welch offer interesting perspectives on research and young adult literature. Kaplan's column provides an overview of the dissertations that focus on young adult literature, while Welch provides readers with a history of the organizations and their journals that developed out of a group of committed teachers and scholars determined to let young adult literature scatter light in teens' lives.

Our two interviews in this issue feature two relatively new authors. In her interview with Isamu Fukui, Sara Schwebel traces the work of this young author and how his futuristic novels comment on how institutional schooling in the United States discourages children from thinking. Fukui began his trilogy—*Truancy*, *Truancy Origins*, and the forthcoming *Truancy City*—with his own scribbled notes about school written while in high school. April Brannon's interview with Emily Wang Smith provides insights into one author's path to the publication of her first novel, *The Way He Lived*. In this allegorical novel, six teens face the same tragedy and deal with it in the only way they can.

Finally, the three Stories from the Field feature teachers who took a chance and brought global concerns, parents' voices, and the Internet into their teaching practices, thereby creating unexpected connections with voices beyond the classroom. We hope you enjoy this issue and apply its ideas and perspectives to the thinking that began at the ALAN workshop in Philadelphia last fall. We also hope that the authors and novels highlighted here will continue to scatter light among young readers, teachers, librarians, and scholars.

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# Call for Manuscripts

## Submitting a Manuscript:

Manuscript submission guidelines are available on p. 2 of this issue and on our website at <http://www.alan-ya.org/the-alan-review/>. **Note:** *The ALAN Review* is adjusting its submission deadlines to allow more time for editing and production. *The January 2010 deadline below represents a change from previous versions of this call.* Beginning with the Fall 2010 issue, deadlines will be announced as follows: Fall issue, March 1; Winter issue, July 1; Summer issue, November 1.

## Winter 2011 Theme: Looking for the Real Me: The Search for Self in Young Adult Literature

An oft-cited reason for including YAL in the middle and high school curriculum is that YAL is literature in which young adult readers can see themselves. The theme of this issue asks us to consider questions of identity and self in young adult literature. How does this YAL literature address or not address the young adult reader's search for his or her own identity, for familiar issues and concerns, and for answers to questions about life and choices? How is young adult literature answering the call to be more inclusive? What role does YAL play in helping young adults shape and/or question their identities? Which novels, old and new, help young adults ask questions and challenge assumptions about their own identities? This theme is meant to be open to interpretation, and we welcome manuscripts addressing pedagogy as well as theoretical concerns. General submissions are also welcome. Submission deadline: **July 1, 2010**

## Summer 2011 Theme: What Does YA Literature Look Like in Spaces Other than the Classroom?

Young adult literature continues to permeate spaces other than the classroom: in libraries, bookstores, movie theaters, and the Internet. Consider the popularity of texts such as the *Twilight* series, the *Harry Potter* series, and *The Diary of a Wimpy Kid* (examples of books that have gone viral with young adults), and think about how these books and others like them develop communities of readers outside of the classroom. The theme of this issue asks us to explore the ways in which young adult literature functions outside of the classroom. In what spaces, other than the classroom, do you use young adult literature? What have you learned from book groups, especially those involving adults, that read young adult literature? How has cyberspace influenced the way you discuss young adult literature? In what way or ways does young adult literature become part of a young adult's life outside of school? This theme is meant to be open to interpretation, and we welcome manuscripts addressing pedagogy as well as theoretical concerns. General submissions are also welcome. Submission deadline: **November 1, 2010**.

## New Section

Got a story about young adult literature you'd like to share? We are starting a new section featuring 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 YA literature.

## “Similar Literary Quality”:

Demystifying the AP English Literature and Composition Open Question

**W**e share with many of our peers a love and passion for teaching young adult (YA) literature in AP (Advanced Placement) English Literature courses—where teachers *tend* to teach canonical texts. We echo Gallo’s (2001) concern when he writes: “It bothers me a great deal when high school English teachers or university professors condemn YA books because they believe they are shallow and poorly written. Those people are ignorant elitists who haven’t done their homework, haven’t read an adequate sampling of the novels, short stories, nonfiction, and poetry for teens that is available for classroom use and independent reading” (37). As experienced high school classroom AP English literature teachers, we have experienced the merit of teaching YA literature and encouraged students to write about it on question 3 of the AP English literature exam, the open question.

The value we place on YA literature, however, is not a commonly held value in all classrooms, or even amongst readers at the AP level, which led us to question the phrasing of question 3 on the AP Literature and Composition exam when the prompt reads: “You may choose a work below or another appropriate novel or play of *similar literary quality*.” The testing community and those it serves will benefit from a more clearly refined annotation about what *similar liter-*

*ary quality* means. The purpose of this article is to: (1) illuminate some of the controversy about the meaning of *similar literary quality* and how that meaning has changed over the years; (2) describe the importance of regarding YA literature as similar literary quality to the canon; and (3) offer suggestions to The College Board about creating an addendum about the meaning of *similar literary quality* on the exam.

### Defining Literary Quality

#### Voices from the Front Lines of Education

We contacted a number of people from various parts of the country, including those from rural, suburban, and urban settings who represent a wide demographic, in order to gain a holistic view on similar literary merit. Among those contacted was a representative from the American Library Association, who explained that literary merit is often displayed by award-winning texts (see <http://ala.org/ala/yalsa/booklistsawards/outstandingbooks/policiesprocedures.cfm>). Some qualifying YA titles were suggested, such as *Monster*, *Feed*, *Push*, and *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*; also mentioned was the graphic novel, *Persepolis*.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, a librarian in the Midwest echoed this sentiment and added that they should also be well written, using

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**As experienced high school classroom AP English literature teachers, we have experienced the merit of teaching YA literature and encouraged students to write about it on question 3 of the AP English literature exam, the open question.**

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prescriptive forms of grammar; she added, “[A] quality story will appeal to more than one of the many categories we use to divide ourselves; for example, race, age, gender, or class.”

Unlike librarians who considered literary merit based on prestige, grammar, and writing style, English professors stressed the importance of layered texts that allowed for various levels of interpretation (see Figure 1 for tips on choosing titles for AP courses). The only level of consensus amongst these voices was that literary merit means that texts must be layered—including multiple narratives, themes, and levels of interpretation. Don Zancanella, past chair of the Conference on English Education, says that:

It’s that *merit* [emphasis added] has been socially constructed in and around the English classroom and that AP classes draw upon that construction in a way that (because of the tests and AP’s tracking role) is especially conservative. For the AP test, most students (and teachers) try to reduce the amount of unpredictability, so they avoid selecting texts that aren’t obviously part of the category—*Heart of Darkness* rather than a YA novel by Crutcher (Email communication, July 22, 2008).

We agree with Zancanella that “merit” is socially constructed, but point to the research that suggests that literary merit can also include texts from YA literature (Gallo, 2001; Spencer, 1989), graphic novels (Mooney, 2002; Schwarz, 2006; Weiner, 2002), and multigenre literature (multiple narrators, multiple voices, multiple points of view) (Christenbury, 2000; Gillis, 2002; Ruggieri, 2002).<sup>2</sup> These YA texts contain multiple narratives and themes and provide levels of interpretation.

### The College Board Weighs In

The College Board (through its AP Services) replied to our query about what similar literary quality means by stating: “The primary purpose of including the ‘literary merit’ wording in the open question is to encourage students to select works that are rich and complex enough to provide them with the best opportunity to show how well they have developed the skills emphasized in their AP English course” (Email communication, July 26, 2008).<sup>3</sup> In fact, the *English Literature and Composition Course Description* (College Board, 2008) claims that “the actual choice is the responsibility of the AP teacher, who should consider previous courses in the school’s curriculum” (52). The

AP Literature Test Development Committee provides a descriptive, not a prescriptive, list of culturally diverse authors in *The Course Description* in the genres of fiction, nonfiction, poetry, and drama, and reminds teachers that they “may select authors from the names below or may choose others of comparable quality and complexity” (54). But the list they provide is so broad that the idea of literary merit remains vague.

From the moment teachers begin to consider what texts best fit an AP English Literature and Composition course, and therefore which books will best prepare their students for the accompanying exam, they enter undefined territory. The College Board’s own AP website (AP Central) and its most recent *English Literature and Composition Course Description* (2008) illustrate this point: The reading should build from previous English courses; it should encompass works from “several genres and periods—from the sixteenth to the twenty-first century” (51). Further, The College Board states that although most works in the course are originally written in English (even if they were written by authors of non-English-speaking countries), pieces in translation are readily acceptable for the course, too. However, what teachers seem to miss altogether is that YA literature can and does also qualify as quality literature.

1. Check the ALA website for the Michael L. Printz Award, The Alex Award, the Margaret A. Edwards Award, or the top ten books each year: <http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/yalsa/booklistsawards/bestbooksya/09topten.cfm>
2. Scan for content appropriate for your students that provokes layered readings on several topics at once, such as but not limited to: gender, social class, ethnicity, weight, sexuality, gender expression, religion, national origin, (dis)ability, eating disorders, cutting, drug/alcohol abuse, divorce, violence, hate crimes, sexual/physical/emotional abuse, and oppression/discrimination.
3. Scan for variety of genres, such as: graphic novels (*Persepolis*, *American Born Chinese*), poetry (*Poet Slave of Cuba*), prose (*Crank*, *Cut*), multigenre (*Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*).
4. Look for pairings of books based on similar themes or that consider different points of view (for suggestions, see sidebar, p. 9).
5. Talk with peers and academics in the field for their recommendations.

Figure 1. Tips on choosing YA novels for AP courses

## “Great Books” and the Concept of Literary Quality

Perhaps this representative list results from the concept of a literary canon—a collection of works that best represents and has helped shape what we teach and how we teach. Applebee (1996) provides an insightful history of how the English curricula, based on the notion of a literary canon, developed and where it has led us as educators. He finds that the English curriculum arose in the 19th century when literature was justified as a “reservoir of cultured values” and a

“source of moral strength” (pp. 22–23). Indeed, it was Harvard University that helped to popularize the notion of an English department in 1872. Harvard, and then other universities, began to provide lists of “required reading” for its incoming college freshmen. Applebee adds that “authors and titles that formed the high school

curricula were soon determined by college entrance exams” (26). He notes that from 1874–1883, American colleges required students to have a reading knowledge of authors like William Shakespeare, Lord Byron, William Thackeray, Samuel Johnson, John Milton, George Eliot, and Nathaniel Hawthorne (26).

These selections became an almost hegemonic force as this list helped to standardize high school curricula over the next 120 years. Applebee (1996) notes a sense of stability in how high schools have created English curricula over that time. He references two studies, one from Smith in 1932 and his own in 1992/1993. Smith found that over 50% of all schools in the United States had English curricula that merely listed the “classics” as required reading (27). In fact, she noted in a later study (1941) that students in New York schools were more familiar with these classics than with any works of the “present century” (27). Applebee’s own study found similar results. At the end of the twentieth century, high school English classes were still “defined by tradition,” with texts like *Romeo and Juliet*, *Julius Caesar*, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *The Scarlet Letter*, *The Great Gatsby*,

*To Kill a Mockingbird*, and *Hamlet* topping the lists of required readings. In fact, these lists showed that 98% of the authors were white, 81% male, and 99% of European stock (28). Although several of these texts still remain as part of the dominant choices on question 3, we have seen a shift to include more multicultural texts.

Bloom (1994) notes that “The Canon, a word religious in its origins, has become a choice among texts struggling with one another for survival,” no matter how that choice is being made (19). These are books that someone, somewhere, somehow decreed as important and contained a sense of “quality” that other texts did not possess. Of course, Bloom is a defender of the notion of the Western Canon, which he notes “exists precisely in order to impose limits, to set a standard measurement that is anything but political or moral” (33). He claims that academics have politicized the notion, bringing these time-tested texts “founded upon severely artistic criteria” (21) into a battle that he believes has no place in our society or our schools. Bloom believes that there must be a canon—better books among lesser titles. A quick look at his list of texts reveals *Paradise Lost*, Shakespeare’s tragedies, *The Canterbury Tales*, *The Divine Comedy*, the Torah, the Gospels, *Don Quixote*, and Homer’s epics to be the most important works in Western literature, works that all others may be placed against when defining what comprises a literary canon.

Adler (1988), one of the founders of the Great Books program at the University of Chicago, provides an expansive definition of what makes a book truly “great.” In fact, he uses Scott Buchanan’s 1937 definition of “great books” as being 1) largely read, 2) have a wide variety of interpretations, 3) contain unanswerable questions, 4) are considered fine art, 5) are masterpieces of the liberal arts, and then adds that great books must also 6) deal with basic ideas, 7) be read many times to be fully understood, 8) “be written by a generalist and written for the curious,” 9) are from all literary genres, and 10) can still be written by white Europeans ( qtd. in Adler 333). Although many of the above features appear mostly objective in nature, teachers may begin to ask what constitutes “fine art,” what makes a book a “masterpiece of the liberal arts,” and what defines Adler’s “basic ideas”?

This is exactly the problem that classroom teachers have with deciding how to prepare their students

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**These are books that someone, somewhere, somehow decreed as important and contained a sense of “quality” that other texts did not possess.**

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## Potential Pairings for AP Literature Study

<i>Annie on My Mind</i> <i>The House You Pass along the Way</i>	<i>Keeping You a Secret</i>
<i>Black Boy</i> <i>To Kill a Mockingbird</i>	<i>Monster</i>
<i>Catcher in the Rye</i>	<i>Looking for Alaska</i> <i>Nothing but the Truth: A Documentary Novel</i> <i>Perks of Being a Wallflower</i>
<i>The Chocolate War</i>	<i>Boy Meets Boy</i> <i>The Geography Club</i> <i>Rainbow Boys</i>
<i>Crime and Punishment</i>	<i>Shattering Glass</i>
<i>Diary of Anne Frank</i>	<i>The Book Thief</i> <i>Maus</i>
<i>Go Ask Alice</i>	<i>Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes</i> <i>Parrot in the Oven: Mi Vida</i> <i>We All Fall Down</i>
<i>Hamlet</i>	<i>Jellicoe Road</i> <i>Killing Mr. Griffin</i>
<i>Heart of Darkness</i>	<i>Astonishing Life of Octavian Nothing, Volumes I and II</i>
<i>I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings</i> <i>The Color Purple</i>	<i>Speak</i> <i>Inexcusable</i> <i>Push</i>
<i>Love Medicine</i> <i>The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fist Fight in Heaven</i>	<i>The Absolute True Story of a Part Time Indian</i>
<i>1984</i> <i>Anthem</i> <i>The Handmaid's Tale</i>	<i>Feed</i>
<i>Obason</i>	<i>American Born Chinese</i>
<i>The Outsiders</i>	<i>Chinese Handcuffs</i> <i>Whale Talk</i>
<i>Native Son</i> <i>Written on the Body</i>	<i>Tyrell</i> <i>Luna</i> <i>Define Normal</i>

for the AP exam in Literature and Composition. We are left with a choice of 1) time-tested titles that may or may not still hold social relevance to our students or 2) contemporary authors whose work may not yet be placed in the academic canon of good literature. A quick look around the Web showed us that schools

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**We noticed . . . classic texts remain good for in-class discussions, while contemporary literature, no matter how good, remains marginalized on independent reading lists.**

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that have posted their AP English Literature and Composition curricula online are still caught up in the exact same kind of reliance on the classics that both Smith and Applebee found in their studies. After viewing online course descriptions for a variety of schools—including those in Georgia, Kentucky, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania—we noticed that the same texts kept appearing on the

lists.<sup>4</sup> In these states, the most popular “great books” included the following titles: *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, *The Canterbury Tales*, *Antigone*, *Hamlet*, *Oedipus Rex*, *Crime and Punishment*, the Homeric epics, and selections of poetry from various Modernist and Romantic writers. It was only when schools provided independent reading lists that we found more contemporary and less “classic” choices, including *Invisible Man*, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, *Life of Pi*, *Sophie’s World*, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, and *Angela’s Ashes*. It seems that schools (and perhaps school districts) cannot escape the hegemonic forces of 19th-century values that helped to shape our educational systems. Classic texts remain good for in-class discussions, while contemporary literature, no matter how good, remains marginalized on independent reading lists.

Perhaps Adler’s (1988) reference to Mark Twain’s comment that “Great books are the books that everyone wishes he had read but that no one wants to read” (332) is the most relevant description of the notion of literary merit or quality. One look at the sample texts The College Board includes on the Open prompt for the English Literature and Composition AP Exam seems to reflect this very notion. We reviewed the Open prompts for exams from 1999–2008, which included Form B exams, and seventeen different prompts (these are the examples that are available

on The College Board’s AP Central website). After inspecting the “data” that The College Board provides its educators, it becomes evident that we might begin to view the notion of “literary quality” or “merit” with a slightly biased perspective.

An initial look at the list of 216 titles shows that The College Board has put quite a variety of literature out there as examples for students to write about. Indeed, there are titles from all over the world, from ancient Greece to modern-day Africa, from writers of Asian heritage to those of Eastern European ancestry. There are a good number of female authors listed, too. Students have had a chance to write on both popular (canonical) titles as well as some that have been marginalized or that appeal to a specific type of reader. In fact, there were a number of texts that coauthor Josh Slifkin had to research; even as a former English major who likes to keep up with contemporary and sometimes post-modern fiction, he had no idea who wrote the book or its publication information.

Still, in the 10 years of exams (and 17 prompts), we found that 10 texts appeared on the list 7 or more times out of a possible 216 total titles that the AP provided students. These texts were: *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (8 times), *Crime and Punishment* (9 times), *Great Expectations* (9 times), *The Great Gatsby* (7 times), *Heart of Darkness* (9 times), *Jane Eyre* (7 times), *King Lear* (7 times), *The Scarlet Letter* (8 times), *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (8 times), and *Wuthering Heights* (7 times). Although there were a wide range of other titles, including both classic and contemporary, these texts consistently showed up as texts on which students could write.

What kinds of literary messages are we sending to our students, teachers, and the public when these titles show up almost every year on the Open prompt for the AP English Literature and Composition Exam? Of these ten titles, seven were written by white men, two by white women, and one was authored by an African American woman. Even more telling is the publication dates for these texts. From this sample, six were published in the nineteenth century (*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *Crime and Punishment*, *Great Expectations*, *Jane Eyre*, *The Scarlet Letter*, and *Wuthering Heights*), one was published in the seventeenth century (*King Lear*), one was published at the turn of the twentieth century (*Heart of Darkness*), and two were published in the early part of the twentieth

century (*The Great Gatsby* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*). Finally, of the ten most popular titles, five authors are British (including Conrad, who became a British citizen), four are American, and one is Russian. We believe that seeing these same titles over and over again on the AP exam may lead to their being prioritized over other comparable and deserving texts. Many teachers new to teaching AP Literature or those who have not updated their AP Literature courses accept the preferences of the exam as a template for teaching the course. We would posit, however, that unless the exam is revised based on careful research, the continued emphasis on these same time-valued texts—the ones that have left an indelible stamp on the traditional fabric of what translates into success on the exam—may actually devolve the notion of what constitutes literary merit.

It's no wonder, then, that most AP courses list these very titles as required reading. One understands that these texts contain "literary quality" or "merit," but the hidden side-effect is the exclusion of other texts. Although the likes of *Invisible Man*, *Catch-22*, and *Beloved*, relatively recent novels, show on various AP reading lists for high school classrooms, more often than not they appear as independent reading choices. The same goes for some of the more "controversial" titles that were only listed once or twice, like *Brave New World*, *All the King's Men*, *A Gathering of Old Men*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, and *The Kite Runner*. Some of these seem to show up as a kind of "flavor of the month" listing (*Push*, for example), while others may appear to fit some kind of unwritten quota (*The Joy Luck Club* and *The Woman Warrior* each appeared once and were the only evidence of Asian American literature.)

We have no doubt that The College Board means well when it provides teachers and students with these lists. In fact, they definitely tend to help writers as they try to connect that year's prompt with a title appropriate for analysis. Unfortunately, these lists also provide an unspoken bias as to what is good literature. One might ascertain that literary "quality" or "merit" may have something to do with a text's ability to stay in the canon, or at least join the canon without much fuss. It appears that the notion of literary quality does reflect a very traditional sense of "great books" that we all know so well. Indeed, this list of "masterpieces of the liberal arts" (as Adler noted

above) is, for the most part, a collection of worthwhile texts. Yet, we can't help but think that The College Board has provided teachers and the students who take the English Literature and Composition Exam a kind of biased approach when the lists of suggested texts always focus on a certain kind of literature—mostly pre-twentieth century, white, European, and more than half of the time, written by a man.

## The AP Literature and Composition Exam

After sj's recent return from scoring the 2008 AP literature exam in Louisville, KY, the question about what "similar literary quality" means and how YA literature might be used to answer question 3 remained fresh. As a reader for the AP literature exam for seven years, and a table leader for two, sj noticed other readers struggle with this same question. sj discovered that most high school AP literature teachers who are also readers and table leaders for scoring the exam did not deem YA or graphic novels as examples of "similar literary quality." Yet these teachers did use such texts in the classroom, often pairing them with "classic" literature. Many of their students who took the exam revealed that notions of "similar literary quality" stem from how they had been taught to think and read. While some students appeared aware of the social construction of "similar literary quality," others still noted that "similar literary merit" was reflective of a text's genre, which once again reflects their schooling.

Unfortunately, this disparity carries through to the scoring of AP exam and the conversations that circulate amongst readers. At the reading, readers are told to score students based on what they do well, and if they are able to effectively write a sustained analytical essay, then it should be awarded a 5 or higher. In keeping with that instruction, sj has given students 5's and higher for writing competent and sustained essays using YA texts and graphic novels. The issue at hand

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**One might ascertain that literary "quality" or "merit" may have something to do with a text's ability to stay in the canon, or at least join the canon without much fuss.**

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is that we as readers, and indeed, as members of the profession, lack a common definition for “similar literary quality.” In failing to articulate one (for both exam readers and students who would be taking the exam), The College Board has abdicated responsibility for that definition, which in turn has led some table leaders to

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**Readers are coached to understand that they are not graders, but readers, which coaxes them to adjust their thinking so as to align with a predetermined scoring guide that is distributed at the reading site.**

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instruct readers to use the leader’s definition—a role that is beyond the scope of their responsibilities.

The unfortunate outcome is that students’ essays are not given the fair assessment they deserve and their scores suffer.

Reading and assessing the AP Literature and Composition Exam is a fascinating and rigorous, yet highly exhausting experience. The College Board, the organization that is responsible for overseeing the exam (Educational Testing Services calculates

the scores), invites readers to score the written portion of the exam. This past year, over one million essays were scored (including the overseas exams), which accounts for 330,000+ exams, so over 1200 readers were invited to score. The reading is quite hierarchical. There is a chief reader over the entire exam, who is appointed by The College Board, three questions leaders (selected by the chief reader) for each of the three primary questions on the exam, an overseas question leader, and a question leader for the alternate question. Approximately eight readers and a table leader, who also reads, are then placed at tables in any of the five different rooms. Typically, there are eight tables to a quadrant to which a quadrant leader, who also serves as one of the table leaders, is assigned. At each table, there are four college English professors and four high school English teachers who are purposefully placed at tables based on their geographical region, gender, years reading, ethnicity, and teaching level.

There are three primary questions on the AP Literature and Composition Exam. Students have two hours to write—about forty minutes to compose each

essay. Question 1 is the poetry passage, question 2 is the prose passage, and question 3 is the Open. There is also a multiple-choice section that lasts for one hour and is scored through computers at a location separate from the reading site. The chief reader, quadrant leaders, and table leaders travel to the reading site prior to the reading; this allows them to engage in *calibration*—the process by which readers assimilate and come to understand how the scoring guide aligns with student essays.

### How Essays Are Scored

Readers are coached to understand that they are not graders, but readers, which coaxes them to adjust their thinking so as to align with a predetermined scoring guide that is distributed at the reading site. There are three separate scoring guides, one per question, each of which is developed by a select pool of readers prior to the exam. Essays are scored on a— (dash) to 9 scale (see <http://apcentral.collegeboard.com/apc/Controller.jspf>): each score has a well-articulated criteria that explains why a paper should be assigned a specific score (papers in the 5–9 range are considered upper-half or passing papers that have successfully answered the prompt with varying degrees of analysis, while dash to 4 are considered lower half papers and tend to rely on plot summary and lack the development of upper-half papers). Readers and table leaders carefully review the scoring guide a number of times and revisit it throughout the week.<sup>5</sup>

Student sample essays are chosen by a select pool of readers prior to the reading. This pool of readers searches out what is called an “anchor set.” The anchor sets are then used to train table leaders and readers. Table leaders need to be able to understand and clearly articulate and help their readers see papers through the criteria of the scoring guide. Should any discrepancies arise—and they always do—table leaders are responsible for redirecting any misreadings and for answering questions.

Question 3, the open question, has some particular elements that make it unique unto itself. Unlike questions 1 and 2, which each have text provided in the exam and are textually driven, question 3 asks students to tap into their memories and recall a text that is most suitable to the prompt. A common criticism of the essays shared at the exam is that students retell the plot of the text rather than carefully address

the prompt itself. Unlike the other two questions, this question always asks, in one way or another, how some element of the text contributes or illuminates the text as a whole. The prompt also admonishes students to avoid plot summary and to select a novel or play of “similar literary merit.” The latter is what we, the authors, challenge, because students are not given any directive about what “comparable literary merit” or the like means.

A common question among test-takers and readers stems from the ambiguous nature of the paragraph directly following the Open prompt. On the Open passage, students are to reflect on the question in the prompt and then, depending on the wording of the sentence directly after, select a text, play, or sometimes even a novella in order to best answer the question (see Figure 2).

Examinees may infer that what The College Board *means* when the prompt reads, “You may choose a work from the list below or another appropriate novel or play of similar literary quality,” is that most novels and plays are deemed appropriate. What isn’t listed are YA literature texts, graphic novels, and novellas, let alone other multigenre texts. However, students *do* write using these texts, although it is not specifically stated that they may select from these other genres.

### Recommendations to The College Board

Based on our research, we would like to offer suggestions to The College Board for the Open question.

- John Beynon, the one university English professor who participated in our survey, said, “Get rid of the loaded terms ‘quality’ and ‘merit,’ especially as these terms have the potential to disqualify already marginalized works of literature” (email communication, July 24, 2008).
- Barring that, we think it would benefit all parties involved if a disclaimer, denoted by an asterisk, spells out what is meant by “similar literary quality” or “similar literary merit.”
- Finally, The College Board must acknowledge research in the English language arts that reveals that literature is more expansive and includes new genres. The NCTE and IRA Standards 1 and 2 (1996) recommend that “Students read a wide range of print and nonprint texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world”; they also sug-

gest that “Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience” (3).

Since teachers have great influence over the ways students read and come to interpret texts, we take issue with the notion that a text’s “similar literary quality” is even the heart of the matter. After all, students are evaluated on their ability to interpret a text, not on whether or not the text has literary merit. It seems to us that when we “blame” a text or critique its merit that the heart of the critique should lie within the pedagogy of how teachers are approaching literature. There are myriad ways to teach literary analysis that include lessons about critical lenses and levels of allusion. On this, Gallo (2001) concurs, “[T]each the same

In a literary work, a minor character, often known as a foil, possesses traits that emphasize, by contrast or comparison, the distinctive characteristics and qualities of the main character. For example, the ideas or behavior of the minor character might be used to highlight the weaknesses or strengths of the main character.

Choose a novel or play in which a minor character serves as a foil to a main character. Then write an essay in which you analyze how the relation between the minor character and the major character illuminates the meaning of the work.

You may choose a work from the list below or another appropriate novel or play of similar literary quality. Do not merely summarize the plot.

<i>The Age of Innocence</i>	<i>Huckleberry Finn</i>
<i>Alias Grace</i>	<i>Invisible Man</i>
<i>All the King’s Men</i>	<i>King Lear</i>
<i>All the Pretty Horses</i>	<i>The Kite Runner</i>
<i>Anna Karenina</i>	<i>The Misanthrope</i>
<i>Billy Budd</i>	<i>The Piano Lesson</i>
<i>The Brothers Karamazov</i>	<i>Pride and Prejudice</i>
<i>Catch-22</i>	<i>Pygmalion</i>
<i>Cold Mountain</i>	<i>Reservation Blues</i>
<i>The Color Purple</i>	<i>The Sound and the Fury</i>
<i>Don Quixote</i>	<i>A Streetcar Named Desire</i>
<i>Emma</i>	<i>Sula</i>
<i>Equus</i>	<i>A Tale of Two Cities</i>
<i>Frankenstein</i>	<i>Their Eyes Were Watching God</i>
<i>Glass Menagerie</i>	<i>Tom Jones</i>
<i>Henry IV, Part I</i>	<i>Wuthering Heights</i>

\*(taken from the 2008 English Literature and Composition Exam)

Figure 2. An example of a prompt from question 3

literary concepts and develop the same analytical skills . . . [and] there are still too many teachers who kill *any* [sic] book by the way they teach it . . . ” (18). From our students’ voices, we infer that when our students are *really* reading, it is when they are reading about situations and characters to whom they can best relate. Happily, the literary canon continues to expand as genres evolve and morph, changing our definition of classic literature. We owe it to our students to question the ambiguous meaning (and recognize the social construction) of the phrase “comparable literary merit.”

We are aware that using some of these suggested genres may pose concerns for classroom teachers because they have yet to be included in standardized tests. However, we are not suggesting that we should abandon classic texts, but rather that we should supplement classroom materials with YA texts. In this way, we hope that as students and teachers read more diverse texts, our community will demonstrate the value of an evolving canon, and The College Board will recognize the inherent merit in these emerging literacies and include such voices and genres on the AP Literature and Composition exam.

## Notes

- 1 There are a six known types of graphic novels: superhero stories, human-interest stories, adaptations or spinoffs, manga, satire, and nonfiction (Weiner, 2002). We do not suggest that all of those texts be included in every curriculum, but we do advocate that nonfiction graphic novels and some manga texts should be, as they may offer important stories about actual events through layered narratives. Teachers should always review texts before using, as some contain examples of profanity and may not be classroom-appropriate.
- 2 Several others with doctorates corroborated Zancanella’s comments, while those without terminal degrees aligned more with the librarians’ views.
- 3 In an email to the authors, The College Board notes that one of the first uses of “literary merit” was on the 1969 exam— “by one of the authors listed below or by an author of comparable literary excellence.” Other wordings used over the years included: “any work of comparable literary excellence, acknowledged literary merit, work of recognized literary merit, work of literary merit, distinguished novel or play, acknowledged literary merit, comparable literary quality, comparable quality, comparable literary merit, comparable merit, similar literary quality, [and] similar literary merit”— all phrases that we feel remain vague and undefined.
- 4 We found these examples from Google search of “AP English

Literature and Composition Syllabus.” Many other examples shared similar results.

- 5 Generally speaking, if a student earns a 5 on each of the three essays and earns fifty percent correct on the multiple choice, the student will receive a 3 overall, which most colleges and universities accept in lieu of freshman composition (check [www.apcentral.collegeboard.com](http://www.apcentral.collegeboard.com) to determine which schools accept what score).

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### **Notice from the Editors: Moving to APA Format**

To date, *The ALAN Review* has followed the guidelines of the Modern Language Association (MLA) for its Works Cited lists and in-text references. Beginning with the Summer 2010 issue, we will move to the guidelines set forth in the sixth edition of the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (APA). If you plan to submit an article for consideration in *The ALAN Review* from this date forward, please be sure your citation style matches APA.



# “Why Do Chinese People Have Weird Names?”

The Challenges of Teaching Multicultural Young Adult Literature

The importance of including multicultural literature in U.S. secondary classrooms has been increasingly recognized in the recent decade. Preparing teachers to instruct culturally and linguistically diverse students is a popular concern in teacher education, and a great quantity and quality of literature can be found centering on the applications of multicultural literature in U.S. schools. Some commonly discussed issues include the enhancement of teachers’ cultural awareness so they can better address that of their students (Athanasios; Gove & Benjamin; Lowery & Sabis-Burns; Stallworth, Gibbons, & Fauber; Zygmunt-Fillwalk & Clark), take advantage of the various pedagogical approaches or theoretical backgrounds important to teaching literature from diverse cultures (Appleman; Cai, *Multicultural Literature*, “Transactional Theory”; Dong; Ernst-Slavit, Moore, & Maloney; Hunt & Hunt; Langer; Rogers & Soter; Simmons & Deluzain), and be familiar with the myriad criteria for selecting quality multicultural literature for classroom use (Gates & Hall Mark; Hinton; Landt; Loh; Louie; *How to Choose*).

These discussions and debates concerning the role of multicultural literature in the secondary school curriculum have deepened understandings of literature from diverse cultures and the benefits it brings to the education of all students.

However, as literature teachers, English educators, and researchers, we have noticed that integrating multicultural literature in actual

classrooms seems easier said than done for many practitioners. Many teachers find it challenging to weave multicultural literature into the curriculum for various reasons, including lack of time, curricular restraints, lack of community support, and lack of interest among students. Without doubt, new perspectives and ideas about the benefits of teaching multicultural literature continue to be of interest to researchers and theorists; however, the question remains: how does the high school teacher “in the trenches” translate these ideas into day-to-day classroom practice?

In this article, our goal is to address the concerns of teachers with whom we have worked who teach in a predominately rural, Midwestern region of the US and who struggle with integrating multicultural young adult literature into their largely homogenous classrooms of White, middle class, American-born students. First, we will describe the concerns of these teachers as they were expressed in various informal interviews with us. Then, we will describe a classroom observation in a very different kind of instructional setting—a high school ESL

class containing students from five different countries and at least three different continents—in which a multicultural young adult novel, *Yang the Youngest and His Terrible Ear*, by Lensey Namioka, is effectively used. We believe analysis of this classroom observation sheds light on the concerns of the teachers with whom we’ve worked, providing possible solutions to

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**However, the question remains: how does the high school teacher “in the trenches” translate these ideas into day-to-day classroom practice?**

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the challenges they face when sharing multicultural literature and associated cultures with their students. Finally, we will share additional theoretically and philosophically consistent pedagogical strategies for teaching another multicultural YA text, *American Born Chinese*, by Gene Luen Yang.

## Common Obstacles to Teaching Multicultural Literature

### “I’d Love to Teach Multicultural Literature, but . . .”: Challenges from and Guidelines for the Classroom Teacher

As mentioned earlier, despite the many theoretical and research-based arguments for including multicultural literature in the secondary school curriculum, specifically multicultural young adult literature, carrying out such curricular integration can be a challenge for many teachers. The most widely self-reported and

discussed issue is teachers’ lack of knowledge of works from different cultures. Based on their own past schooling experiences, many middle class, White school teachers have a profound knowledge about literature in the European canon (Gove and Benjamin; Hunt & Hunt; Stallworth, Gibbons, and Fauber), but limited experience with literature from other cultures. A large population of these teachers, therefore, either holds on to the belief that only

books written from a Western perspective are worthy of study, or they confess to not knowing the criteria for selecting quality multicultural literature.

For teachers who lack such a sense of cultural awareness, Zygmunt-Fillwalk and Clark suggest that people need to understand their own cultural selves before recognizing and understanding the cultures of others. This type of reflection could begin by examining one’s own cultural heritage, values, and beliefs and recognizing them as part of a multifaceted teacher identity, including multiple personal and professional subjectivities. (See Appendix 1 for a checklist for en-

gaging in such reflection.) As for how to select literary works by diverse cultural groups, we have assembled some scholarly advice (Cai, *Multicultural Literature*; Landt; Loh; Louis; *How to Choose*):

- ✓ Check the background of the author. It takes sufficient knowledge and experience within a culture to present its beliefs, customs, and values accurately and authentically.
- ✓ Look for appealing plots and characterizations. After all, a good storyline and well-developed characters are what catches readers’ attention.
- ✓ Make sure that at least some of the characters representing diverse cultures are portrayed in a positive light. Characters from diverse backgrounds should be empowered to solve problems of their own instead of only playing subservient roles while Whites serve dominant roles.
- ✓ Select works in which realistic social issues and problems are depicted frankly, without oversimplification.
- ✓ Assess whether cultural features and icons are depicted truthfully in texts and illustrations—not only the physical characteristics like clothing, but relationships among people within and across cultures.
- ✓ Browse websites of award-winning multicultural children’s and YA books to maintain timely knowledge of available first-rate literature.

We feel confident that teachers who follow these suggestions will find a rich supply of resources. Notable awards given for quality children’s and young adult multicultural literature are listed in Appendix 2.

### “I Feel Very Tied to Teaching the Standards”: What Nine Real Teachers Had to Say about Teaching Multicultural Literature

In a continuing effort to explore the challenges real teachers face when implementing multicultural YA literature in their classrooms, we interviewed nine middle school and high school teachers in the winter of 2009 about their experiences teaching multicultural literature. We asked them several questions focusing on their teaching context, their preparation to teach, and their experiences teaching multicultural literature, both successful and challenging.

The ethnic identities of the nine teachers were either White or Asian. Their students came from a variety of backgrounds, but they were predominately White and middle or working class. These teachers

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**Based on their own past schooling experiences, many middle class, White school teachers have a profound knowledge about literature in the European canon, but limited experience with literature from other cultures.**

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cited many challenges when teaching or attempting to teach multicultural literature, which we have organized into several thematic categories, such as “lack of cultural knowledge,” “creating relevancy for the text,” and “lack of parental support.” We have summarized the challenges they described in the Figure 1 and included some key quotations from their interviews.

The most commonly cited challenges were lack of parental support/understanding, lack of time, creating relevancy for the text within a classroom of students who may not be able to easily “identify” with diverse characters, censorship or the possibility of censorship, lack of personal background knowledge about the culture portrayed in the book, feeling restricted in their teaching by curricular and state standards, and the limiting nature of literature anthologies. Representative comments include the following:

“What I find most challenging when using multicultural literature is working it into our strict curriculum. Since the vast majority of students are White and from middle class families, they find it difficult to identify with characters who do not live similar experiences and/or have similar belief

systems” (interview, February 23, 2009).

“I feel very tied to teaching so many standards that I must use a lot of what is in the literature book, and that leaves little time for reading novels and other outside sources. Not to mention all the standardized testing, ISTEP twice this year and a new acuity computer-based program, three times this year. When I do get to read a novel with my class, I have to look at the 6th-grade corporation’s reading list and choose from it. Then, I try to take into consideration what they [students] will relate to” (interview, February 23, 2009).

These teachers clearly experience multiple challenges when thinking about teaching multicultural young adult literature. For the purposes of this article, we will focus primarily on the challenge of building relevancy and interest for multicultural books among students from homogenous, often White, middle class backgrounds.

### Putting Students at the Center: A Case Study

As we analyzed the interview data, we realized one of the teachers interviewed was quite different from

Category	Challenges	Description	Examples
Teacher	Lack of cultural background	Teachers don’t always have a well-rounded knowledge about a culture.	“I was also afraid I might have conveyed to students information or feelings irrelevant to the culture we were studying.”
	Create relevancy of the text	Teachers find it challenging to help students see the relevance of the text introduced.	“Since the vast majority of students are White and from middle class families, they find it difficult to identify with characters who do not live similar experiences and/or have similar belief systems.”
Parents	Lack of parental support	Parents are not familiar with literature that is not part of the traditional Western canon.	“Often, the parents must be convinced that multicultural literature is valuable, useful, and a necessary aspect of their children’s education.”
School	Time/Curriculum	Tight curriculum schedule makes it hard to squeeze in extra materials.	“It is difficult to find multicultural pieces for which I can do justice in a short span of time.”
	Teach to the standard	School and educational policy restrict teachers’ choice of extra materials.	“I feel very tied to teaching so many standards that I must use a lot of what is in the literature book, and that leaves little time for reading novels and other outside sources.”
	Censorship	The school board gives restrictions on teachers’ choice of materials.	“Censorship is an issue, though, at the school where I taught. They were very traditional and conservative and would prefer to avoid any controversial texts.”

Figure 1. Challenges faced by teachers using multicultural literature in the curriculum

the others. Gloria reported very positive experiences teaching multicultural literature in her 9th- and 10th-grade classroom. She stated,

I'm not sure these were "successful" experiences, but every time I taught multicultural literature in my classroom, my students seemed to be interested. Sometimes we would put stories to dramas/plays and act out. Sometimes we drew pictures about the stories. Sometimes we would watch films of the same titles of the books (interview, February 11, 2009).

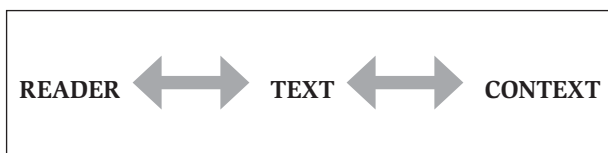
One difference between Gloria's class and the classes of the other eight teachers is that her class was truly multicultural itself: she had students from at least five different countries and three continents. Perhaps this difference alone was enough to increase the students' interest in multicultural literature. However, students were not always reading literature from their own cultures; they often read literature that depicted experiences quite alien from their own lives, just as the students in the other small, midwestern schools near our university. Nonetheless, Gloria reported great success teaching diverse books to her students.

In our continuing effort to discover novel ways for teachers to approach the teaching of multicultural young adult literature, particularly with resistant adolescents, we decided to observe Gloria teaching a YA novel about an Asian pre-teen. *Yang the Youngest and His Terrible Ear* tells the story of a young boy, Yingtao, who moves to America with his musically talented family only to discover that he himself does not possess the musical gift. Yingtao's experiences trying to integrate into a new culture while also trying to fit into his own family are depicted with humor and insight by author Lensey Namioka, who was herself born in China and later emigrated to the U.S. as a child.

To more closely examine the teaching of this multicultural YA book in Gloria's class, we observed and videotaped a class session in which students discussed Chapter 4 of Namioka's book. We also read Gloria's written reflections on the class after it was completed, as well as students' response journals. The varying sources of information helped us to see how an experienced teacher might successfully integrate multicultural literature into the high school curriculum in ways that make the text relevant for a diverse group of student readers, none of whom share the same cultural identity as the novel's protagonist.

When teaching this novel, Gloria made a great deal of effort to connect her students' lives to that of Yingtao, even though many of them had never been anywhere near China (students were from the Philippines, Burma, Mexico, Sudan, Vietnam, Haiti, Thailand, and Guatemala). In a classroom that seemed open, friendly, and nonjudgmental, Gloria engaged students in a discussion of Chapter 4, in which Yingtao visits the home of his new friend Matthew. During this visit, Yingtao struggles with many American expressions and cultural realities, including part-time jobs, being "laid off" from work, what it means to be a "nerd," and the difficulty with foreign names. Gloria's class discussed all of these aspects of the chapter while trying to connect them to their own experiences. At one point in the class discussion, a student from Africa asked an important question: "Why do Chinese people have weird names?" Instead of silencing this question and chastising the questioner, Gloria used this as an opportunity to explore language difference: "It is true that anything new to you might seem weird. Wouldn't it be possible for a Chinese man to think African names are weird and hard to pronounce?" The student agreed that this was a possibility.

Belinda Louie, in "Guiding Principles for Teaching Multicultural Literature," lists several guiding principles for helping students respond to multicultural literature, including several related to building empathy for others unlike yourself and seeing the world through the perspectives of the characters (439). Gloria seems to build her literature curriculum around this idea of empathy building by consistently asking her students to simultaneously consider the text from both their own perspective and the perspective of the characters. When thinking about why her class might be having such a positive experience with multicultural literature, we began to view her approach to the teaching of literature as a variation on the traditional reader-response-based strategy of asking first for student personal response, then moving to interpretation and analysis. In this case, however, Gloria does not see personal response as the first stop on a linear road to having a literary experience; instead, she perceives it is an ongoing part of the reading process that places the text in the center, as a mediator between the student reader and the culture he/she is reading about. This concept is made visible in Figure 2.



**Figure 2.** Text as a mediator between the reader and an unfamiliar culture

In this model of the reading process, the multicultural young adult text not only mediates between an adolescent’s dual experiences as “adult” and “child,” it also introduces the teen reader to other cultures and peoples (i.e., context) by acting as a focus of conversation and reflective thought. As happened when we observed Gloria’s class, the novel was always the center of the discussion; however, Gloria constantly used the text as a bridge to discussions about other cultures and the students’ own lives. When she could demonstrate connections between the reader and the context through the YA text, she succeeded in building student interest in the novel as well as an understanding of its relevancy to their lives. Selected quotations from the students’ reader-response journals demonstrate such bridge building at work. In these writings, Ying-tao’s experiences learning about aspects of American culture—part-time jobs and the importance of sports, for instance—made it possible for students to connect with similar experiences of their own:

Jose writes, “For me, playing soccer is so important. When I have to go to another place to play and when I tell my dad sometimes to get me there, he will say, ‘I have to do something more important,’ and he says playing soccer is not so important.”

Taran writes, “Even if someone offers me a part-time job, I will not take it now. I think the part-time job will be in the shops or restaurants, or haircutting or doing nails, and they will not pay me much money.”

Clearly, these students are making intimate connections between the novel and their own lives.

After such analysis of Gloria’s teaching, we began to wonder if what we learned from her classroom might be applied to other secondary school classes in which students read multicultural YA novels about settings and characters very unlike themselves. Therefore, we took what we learned and imagined how a similar teaching philosophy might look when applied to another popular multicultural YA text, *American Born Chinese* by Gene Luen Yang.

## Keeping Students’ Lives at the Center: American Born Chinese

*American Born Chinese* differs from other books by and about Chinese Americans. Not only is it a graphic novel, but it is also the *first* graphic novel to both win the Michael Printz Award (in 2007) and be nominated for the National Book Award (also in 2007). Gene Luen Yang is of Taiwanese origin, although he grew up in the U.S, and he incorporates his personal life experiences as a Chinese American into the plot of *American Born Chinese*. His struggles with cultural identity, fitting in at school, coming of age, and relationships with the opposite sex will resonate with teenagers from many backgrounds.

### Suggested Pedagogical Activities for *American Born Chinese*

Reader-centered teaching is consistent with the goals of constructivist education (Appleman 26). Students are the creators of meaning through their transactions between personal background and the text; these transactions also help to change the power dynamics of the classroom (Rosenblatt 40). With this in mind, we can envision introducing this book in the following ways.

#### Activity I

Before having students read the book, give them a book talk. Start a discussion about the genre of the book (a graphic novel) and its cover layouts. Then introduce students to the structure of the book, which contains a juxtaposition of three storylines. Ask about students’ previous knowledge of the Chinese culture, either from their own experience or what they’ve learned from the media. Introducing the main characters that appear on the cover pages can give students a sense of what to expect.

Also depicted on the book’s cover are a melancholy, black-haired boy holding a transformer; a bucked-tooth, slant-eyed, yellow-skinned Chinese man in traditional costume; and an irritated monkey buried under a huge pile of crushed rocks. By introducing them as major characters in the three stories, the teacher can then ask students to predict what might happen to these characters based on the visual clues (facial expressions, their poses, the title, the settings, etc.).

#### Activity II

When students are reading the graphic novel, ask

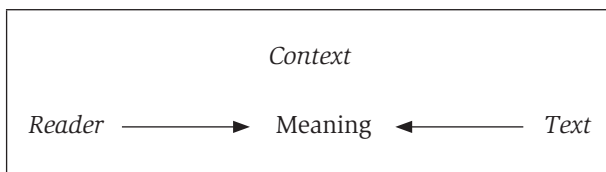
them to keep track of the cultural icons depicted throughout the book. This can be used later as the basis for a discussion about the cultural features of the text and the difficulties students might encounter as cultural outsiders reading this piece of literature. In addition, it would be a good way to gauge students' sensitivity to cultural difference. Later, they could be divided into groups and asked to write on the board the visual and textual cultural icons they found in the novel. After students list all these features, the teacher can intervene to determine if students can distinguish between an *icon* (positive representation) and a *stereotype* (negative image). For instance, one of the main characters, Cousin Chin-Kee, is the concoction of all the negative stereotypes associated with Chinese characters. Through the stereotyped Cousin Chin-Kee, we can see how Yang deals with racism and stereotypes in an ironic, and often humorous, way. Quoting his explanation of the creation of this controversial character, Yang (*Gene Luen Yang*) maintains:

There is always the danger, of course, that by making a comic book about Cousin Chin-Kee I'm helping to perpetuate him, that readers—especially younger readers—will take his appearance in *American Born Chinese* at face value. I think it's a danger I can live with. In order for us to defeat our enemy, he must first be made visible. Besides, comic book readers are some of the smartest folks I've ever met. They'll figure it out.

In fact, the uneasiness or disturbance students might have while reading about this character can serve as a superb opportunity to discuss such cultural stereotypes (Yang, n. d.).

### Activity III

Next, a teacher might utilize Appleman's Reader-Response Diagram (see Figure 3) as a tool to investigate students' reflections on the story and the meanings they constructed from reading.



**Figure 3.** Reader-response diagram (Appleman 35)

On the “reader” end, students are to consider what personal characteristics, qualities, or elements of their

personal histories could be relevant to their reading of this specific graphic novel. For example, “I have (have not) read the Monkey King tale before. I have (have not) eaten Chinese food before. I’ve read stories about Chinese/Chinese Americans in . . .” Such reflection helps the students to see which parts of their past experiences are contributing to their responses to this novel. Then on the “text” end, they might be asked to discuss the textual/visual aspects of the novel that could affect their reading or response. For instance, “It’s in a comic format. Texts are mostly dialogues. Chinese words are included,” etc. Such characteristics of the literary work also play a part in affecting a reader’s responses to the novel. For the “context,” it would be interesting for students to reflect on *where* and *how* they are reading the story. Is it out of school? Is it in school? During any specific emotional condition or experience? Did they read it in one sitting? Finally, as to the “meaning” section, students could record their strongest responses to the novel in writing. After reading all the responses from students, the teacher might lead a more comprehensive class discussion about the impacts of personal experience and textual representations on a reader’s understanding of a particular literary work.

We believe that activities such as these that focus on how texts can reflect and affect the lives of student readers have the potential to help teachers feel more comfortable and confident using multicultural literature in their classrooms.

## Mediating the Ongoing Challenges of Multicultural Education through YA Lit

We hope that this article has given practicing teachers some ideas about how to ameliorate the very real challenges of teaching multicultural literature in the secondary classroom. We have found that using young adult literature to introduce our often homogeneous students to diverse cultures can be quite effective—particularly when coupled with literature pedagogies, such as those above, that place texts at the center of a literary experience connecting the student reader with a world he or she has not experienced firsthand. In this way, reading YA lit can become part of a personal-cultural transformation that can help student readers become more empathetic, thoughtful, and communicative citizens in, as Friedman refers to it, our “flat” globalized world.

We have focused on two wonderful multicultural texts, *Yang the Youngest and His Terrible Ear* and *American Born Chinese*. However, we know there are many more examples of multicultural YA texts that a secondary teacher might incorporate into the curriculum, so we have included a few of our favorites in Appendix 3. No matter what book or books teachers choose to use, we encourage them to always see the literary experience as a way to transform the adolescent reader.

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## Appendix 1

### How Does Our Own Cultural Perspective Shape Our Thinking, Actions, and Teaching?

1. Where were you born?
2. What language(s) or dialect(s) were spoken in your home?
3. Where did you grow up?
4. What are people in your neighborhood like? Where are they from?
5. What is your ethnic or racial heritage?
6. Was religion important during your upbringing? If yes, how?
7. Who makes up your family?
8. What traditions does your family follow?
9. What values does your family hold dear?
10. How do the members of your family relate to each other?
11. Has racial difference ever impacted your life? When?

(Adapted from Hinton, 2006 p. 52)

## Appendix 2

### Multicultural Children's and YA Book Awards

Award Title	Focus
Americas Award for Children's and Young Adult Literature	Latin Americans
Pura Belpre Award	Latin Americans
Tomás Rivera Book Award	Mexican Americans
Carter G. Woodson Award	Ethnic Minorities
Coretta Scott King Book Award	African Americans
Batchelder Award	Outstanding Foreign Language Children's Books Translated into English
Jewish Book Council Children's Literature Award	Jewish
Sydney Taylor Book Award	Jewish
Asian Pacific American Award for Literature	Asian/Pacific Americans
AsianAmericanBooks.com	Asian Americans
Amelia Bloomer List	Women in all Ethnic or Social-Economic Backgrounds
Great Graphic Novels for Teens	Graphic Novels and Illustrated Nonfiction for Ages 12-18
Native Writers Circle of the Americas	Native Americans (not limited to YA literature)

## Appendix 3

### Additional Multicultural YA Novels for Classroom Use

- Curtis, Christopher Paul. *Elijah of Buxton*. New York: Scholastic, 2007. Print.
- Myers, Walter Dean. *Street Love*. New York: Amistad, 2006. Print.
- Alexie, Sherman. *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. New York: Little, Brown Books for Young Readers, 2007. Print.
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- Frost, Helen. *Keesha's House*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003. Print.
- Nelson, Marilyn. *Carver: A Life in Poems*. Honesdale, PA: Front Street, 2001. Print.
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- Na An. *A Step from Heaven*. Honesdale, PA: Front Street, 2001. Print.
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and narrative inquiry. Her first book, coauthored with Dr. Jonathan Bush, is titled *But Will It Work with Real Students? Scenarios for Teaching Secondary English Language Arts (NCTE, 2003)*. Her second book, *Teacher Identity Discourses: Negotiating Personal and Professional Spaces (Erlbaum/NCTE)*, was published in 2006 as part of the *NCTE/LEA Research Series in Literacy and Composition*.

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## Holden Caulfield—Alive and Well

Editors' Note: *The ALAN editorial team would like to join the many voices throughout the world who lament the passing of J. D. Salinger. Whether or not it was his intention to write a young adult novel, he certainly did.*

In June 2009, a venerable work of 20th-century American fiction became the focal point of a legal squabble and, in so doing, rekindled an argument about the place and value of J. D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* in American culture. First, the controversy: on June 16th, 2009, the *New York Times* reported that once again, Salinger was suing "to protect his privacy and the sanctity of his work" (Schuessler). The suit involved the publication of *60 Years Later: Coming through the Rye*, by J. D. California—the nom de plume of a 33-year-old humor writer from Sweden—and portrays characters that can only be Salinger and his fictional protagonist Holden Caulfield. In fact, the copyright page includes the description, "An Unauthorized Fictional Examination of the Relationship between J. D. Salinger and His Most Famous Character."

Four days later, the *Times* reported that a judge had granted a temporary restraining order against publication of the book in the US, thus sparing readers a reunion in which Caulfield is "a lonely old codger who escapes from a retirement home and his beloved younger sister, Phoebe, [who is] a drug addict sinking into dementia" (Schuessler). The article didn't stop with the facts of the issue. It went on to raise the question of whether or not this once highly popular, critically esteemed, and oft-censored novel was losing its appeal for the young people of this new century. Teachers interviewed about this phenomenon confirmed that most students now find Caulfield passive, immature, even "whiny." In fact, the once-daring language was described by some as "grating and dated."

One teacher from Illinois summed it up this way: "Holden's passivity is especially galling and perplexing to many present-day students. . . . In general, they do not have much sympathy for alienated antiheroes; they are more focused on distinguishing themselves in society as it is presently constituted than in trying to change it" (Schuessler).

The contention that *Catcher* is passé brought a few fighting rejoinders from the *Times* readers, who chose to overlook the dated language and attitudes and focus instead on the book's universal themes—grief after the loss of a loved one, the search for meaning after tragedy. To no one's surprise, many of the Letters to the Editor were written by teachers.

As an English teacher/teacher educator who entered the teaching profession in 1957 and who was a late teenager during that late 1940s–early 1950s time-frame, I discern that the question of Holden's continuing relevance touched a nerve. For the record, I taught this novel to 11th and 12th graders in Minnesota and Florida for eight years. Later on, I used it as an example of the theme "Initiation into Adulthood" in teacher education classes. Do I believe it still has value in the early years of the 21st century? You betcha!

A frequent claim that the language Holden uses in describing himself and his world is obsolete and irritating to today's young people demands consideration. Of course the kid's patois is not that of today's teenager. We need to keep in mind that (a) the novel was published in 1951 and (b) its author was trying to imitate the linguistic habits of the young people of *that era*. In that sense, Salinger "failed," in that any author trying to depict the environment of *his/her* time will attempt to recreate the language of that time. And for those who haven't noticed, those linguistic patterns and styles *change*. With kids, they change rapidly. Authors who deal with the world of the imagination

make a vital choice: they must attempt to create the world from the contemporary view, or they must choose to create one from another epoch, either earlier or futuristic. Authors who choose the latter make a pact with their audience: you must take on faith (since neither the writer nor the reader was there) that they are recreating the speech patterns, dress, and other habits of those who lived at that time. Thus, Arthur Miller, in writing *The Crucible* in 1953, would have us believe that his characters used the argot of early 17th-century residents of Salem, Massachusetts. Salinger chose the former route.<sup>1</sup>

Of particular concern is the widespread use of profanity in the novel—by Holden and just about all of the supporting cast of characters. Once again—and I am speaking as a young person of that era—the frequent use of “goddams,” “fart,” “asshole,” “Chris-sake,” and “bastard” was part of the discourse. It’s up to teachers of literature to put those aspects of youthful discourse in perspective; avoiding or condemning them won’t make them go away and will actually distort the realistic portraits they paint. The use of such language in recreating characters in post-war fiction is part of the styles developed by John Updike, Saul Bellow, Sloan Wilson, Philip Roth, Nathaniel West, John Cheever, and other prominent writers of the time.

One final reflection on the language issue in *Catcher*: it is Salinger’s choice of profane/obscene utterances that has made his novel one of the most frequent targets of censorship complaints and challenges over the past 55+ years. In summarizing the most censored books of the period from 1982–1986, the authors of *Attacks on the Freedom to Learn*, compiled by People for the American Way, identify this novel as the second-most attacked (behind John Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men*) during that quarter century (Simmons & Dresang, 2002, p. 72). To “merit” this attention, Salinger added a real no-no—the F-word—no fewer than six times in the text. Those readers/critics who were somewhat more forgiving cite the *context* of the word use: Holden’s reading of “F-you” expressions

on the walls of his sister Phoebe’s grade school, and his anger at its very appearance, was of redeeming importance; to some parents, however, its presence on the pages was enough to raise objections.

So the language in *Catcher* has resulted, over the years, in a double-barreled attack from its readers. I would maintain, however, that if literature is truly to reflect life as real people of another era live it, then the language those people use must be consistently recreated; i.e., it does have redeeming social, political, cultural, and literary value. And the teachers for whom I have developed the greatest respect over the past 52 years (I still supervise student teachers for my university) recognize its nature and place, and they work with their students to establish that perspective.

Beyond the language issues, there remains much in this novel that thoughtful teachers can use with students in secondary grades, and not only with “college-bound” students. There exist in *Catcher* a number of themes that are of general and continuing significance and that should be of concern to young adults everywhere. A crucial element in these strategies is the establishment of classroom environments in which students draw inferences, make judgments, and/or make relevant comparisons and contrasts through the subtle guidance, and not the overt pronouncements, of their teachers.

Here are several of the possible themes that attuned critical readers can discern and assess through the study of *The Catcher in the Rye*:

1. The loss of a beloved, older sibling: Throughout the novel, Holden mourns the passing of his older brother Allie, the only role model he has followed during childhood and early adolescent years. Holden has retained possession of Allie’s baseball mitt and even writes a theme on it when a classmate asks him to write “on anything descriptive.” Portrayed as a confused, immature, and vulnerable young person, Holden has obvious trouble coping with the loss, a problem with which numerous teenagers can empathize. This theme can also be found in the poetry of E. A. Robinson, Robert Frost, John Crowe Ransom, Karl Shapiro, and a host of other renowned American poets, thus offering the teacher many opportunities for comparisons and contrasts.
2. The desire to protect younger siblings from harsh realities: His sister Phoebe is the one living in-

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dividual to whom Holden is genuinely devoted. He risks detection by his parents when he sneaks into his home late at night to visit with Phoebe and confess his latest expulsion from yet another pricey private school. The next day, he goes to her school to continue the serious dialogue they had initiated the night before. It is while waiting for her that Holden sees a “F-you” written in crayon on a school wall. He erases it and another, but the third inscription has been engraved on the wall with a knife, thus making its erasure impossible. It is this discovery that leads Holden to realize he can’t shield her from “F-you’s” as well as a host of other harsh realities. There is pathos in his fruitless attempts to protect Phoebe and his realization of this incapacity. As with many struggling young adults, the world presents a formidable adversary to their quixotic reform efforts.

3. Frustration and fear in dealing with predatory adults: Holden’s skepticism about the attitudes of adults toward him is well founded. He is confronted with the bullying of a crude adult in Maurice, the bellboy whose offer of a prostitute’s services results in the violent extortion of cash. His encounter with a former dormitory proctor, Carl Luce, only reinforces his feelings of ineptitude and lack of maturing.

Perhaps most damaging of all is his meeting with Mr. Antolini, an English instructor from another school from which Holden has been dismissed. Exhausted, hopeless, and feverish, Holden goes to Mr. Antolini’s Manhattan apartment as a possible haven. Befriended and soothed by this married adult, Holden falls asleep only to awaken when he feels the caresses of his host. In a panic, he escapes this apparently manipulative pedophile, who has only corroborated Holden’s suspicions of allegedly concerned, kindly adults. Their world offers Holden Caulfield some distinctly perverse role models.

4. Parental absenteeism: Certainly a theme of this novel that will resonate with young people of today is that of parental neglect and/or insensitivity to the true needs of their children. Seeing Holden as not meeting their expectations, his parents shunt him off to the care of others. Caught up in their life as New York socialites, they enroll him in one expensive private boarding school after another and then scold him when he fails to achieve at

each of them. They mourn the loss of the favored Allie, show pride in their Hollywood writer D. B., and adore their beautiful, precocious daughter, darling little Phoebe. To them, Holden is the ugly duckling, incapable and unwilling to take advantage of the opportunities they have bestowed on him. They buy him off with expensive clothes and accessories and allow his grandmother to “reward” him with large sums of spending money. Nowhere in the text do they demonstrate any attempt to show genuine love for him or concern for his confused, vulnerable state of mind. And don’t think that Holden is unaware of this lack of parental affection or the disdain with which they regard him.

5. Loneliness: Closely related to #4 above is the abject loneliness felt throughout the novel by its protagonist. One beloved older brother is dead, another is 3,000 miles away and preoccupied with his career. Phoebe is his only friend, and the distance between them is reinstated each time Holden is consigned to another boarding school. Throughout the novel, he expresses his fear and unhappiness at being alone. Ironically, his negative outlook on life makes it difficult for him to establish meaningful, lasting relationships with fellow students or other peers. Couple this with his confusions about sex and his fear of females, and you have a young person who does much to create his lonely status. As partial compensation for his isolation, he lashes out at siblings, classmates, and most adults, branding them as “phonies.” The ultimate irony of this miserable state can be seen in his profession to Phoebe, late in the novel, that he sees himself as one destined to save vagrant children from a calamitous fate; i.e., that his goal in life is to be a “catcher in the rye.” The fact that the entire story is a flashback, told by Holden while being treated in a California sanatorium, adds a further ironic touch to this tale of loss of self-identity.

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6. Initiation into adulthood: Arguably the most significant aspect of Salinger's text is the manner in which it portrays the theme of initiation into adulthood (also called the *Edenic archetype*, *loss of innocence*, and *rites of passage*). In doing so, the novel takes its place among others who portray an archetypal pattern in their reflections on the human predicament.

In the latter half of the 20th century, the work of the renowned psychologist C. G. Jung, in his description of the *collective unconscious*, provided the groundwork for a new approach to literary criticism, one called the theory of archetypes. Jung describes his theory in the brief summary that follows:

I have chosen the term *collective* because this part of the unconscious is not individual but universal; in contrast to the personal psyche, it has contents and modes of behavior that are more or less the same everywhere and in all individuals. It is, in other words, identical in all men and thus constitutes a common psychic substrate of a suprapersonal nature which is present in every one of us. (Jung, 1959, pp. 3–4)

Thus, to Jung, all mankind throughout human history is affected by and shares in all that has gone before: the good and the evil, the angels and the beast. He contends that this nature is primordial and eternal: that we all share in these collective myths:

(The unconscious) is the deposit of all human experience right back to its remotest beginnings. Not, indeed, a dead deposit, a sort of abandoned rubbish-heap, but a living system of reactions and aptitudes that determine the individual's life in invisible ways—all the more effective because invisible. (Jung, 1960, p. 157)

Some major figures in mid-20th-century literary criticism seized on the archetypal theory and used it to characterize one way of looking at meaning and stylistic nuance in modern literature. Among these scholars, Joseph Campbell, Lionel Trilling, Northrop Frye, and Maud Bodkin are especially significant. As related to the archetypal themes in *The Catcher in the Rye*, the work of Ihab Hassan in *Radical Innocence: Studies in the Contemporary Novel* is particularly relevant. Hassan defines the initiation into adulthood as “a process leading through right action and consecrated knowledge to a viable mode of life in the world.” He then identifies the three phases of this process:

1. Separation—from the childhood phase. This is considered by some to be a symbolic death.

2. Transition—from childhood to adulthood. This includes a time in which the initiate ingests the “right actions” and “consecrated knowledge” of the tribe.

3. Incorporation—in this climactic phase, the initiate is accepted as an adult by tribal elders, a symbolic rebirth. (Hassan, 1961, p. 41)

In modern society, Hassan feels, the transition phase is often flawed. The actions and knowledge often reflect corrupt and questionable values, the actions/knowledge often convey mixed messages, and the role models are often suspect. Thus the incorporation phase often produces a young person like Holden Caulfield, who is alienated, misled, and skeptical of his membership in the “club.”

A brief review of certain key works of American fiction, written over the past 115 years, will serve as prime examples of the initiation process in general and the flawed nature of incorporation in particular. (This is not intended to be an exhaustive list.)

1. Huck in Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884). Having been through a series of tumultuous, frightening experiences during young adulthood, Huck chooses to reject membership in the adult world of his area and to “light out for the territory.”
2. Nick Adams in Ernest Hemingway's *In Our Time* (1925). In another related series, the young Nick witnesses, and is revolted by, the violence, the cruelty, and the double standards practiced by a number of adults with whom he closely associates and whose wisdom he comes to doubt.
3. Mick Kelly in Carson McCullers's *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* (1940). This early adolescent female protagonist seeks to rise above her poverty-stricken family circumstances in a deep South community during the Great Depression. Her unrealistic goals and frequent fantasies lead her to a series of disillusioning setbacks, one of which is the loss of her virginity. At the novel's end, she continues to despair about her new life as an adult.
4. Conrad Jarrett in Judith Guest's *Ordinary People* (1976). Born into an upper middle class family in a posh Chicago suburb, Conrad is a bright, handsome, athletically gifted and ambitious teenager whose life begins to unravel with the drowning death of his older brother, who was also his role model during his senior high years. He, like his father and mother, is incapable of coping with the

disaster. This eventually leads to his attempted suicide and the gradual estrangement of his mother.

5. Harry Potter in British author R. K. Rowling's seven-novel series named for its protagonist (1997–2007). Harry must come to grips with the death of his beloved parents, his own peculiar gifts, and the insidious evil that is omnipresent in his fantasy world and lodged in many of the elders with whom he associates. The young Harry provides readers with situations that (1) highlight the nasty results of intolerance and (2) encourage the resistance of any authority that appears to be deceitful or immoral. That this series has been wildly popular among today's young people is evident by its success; more than 400 million copies have been translated into 67 languages, making these the fastest-selling books in history. What sets Harry Potter apart from the novels described earlier is its reliance on fantasy, magical events, supernatural encounters, occult characters, etc. The aura of realism that is the staple of the initiation novels from *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* to *Ordinary People* is totally absent from the Harry Potter saga. And it is this exploitation of the world of imagination to the nth degree that has caught the fancy of young readers, surrounded as they are with video games, TV science fiction extravaganzas, and tech-laden commercial films that boggle the earthbound mind ubiquitously. (It is also worthy to note that, in the past decade, the Potter series has been the target of censorship complaints and challenges raised primarily from the Christian Right. These defenders of orthodoxy based their opposition on the use of witchcraft and wizardry throughout all seven novels.)

As Holden Caulfield represented the *zeitgeist* of his generation, so Harry Potter represents his: obsessed with supernatural fantasies and beset with the potential of magical powers to do good things. That latter predilection should not be surprising in a generation so totally immersed in the blogosphere, cell phones, text messages, iPods, Twitters, Facebook, and the rest of the constantly morphing harvest of the high-tech revolution. The critical factor in dealing with the need to reclaim their students' attention to serious issues and truly reflective thinking is the role of today's teachers. Their backgrounds, their ability to teach critical reading/thinking skills, and their

determination to establish a classroom environment in which those skills can be introduced, practiced, and reinforced are all vital if their students' awareness of themselves and the world around them are to become more than superficial; our students need to understand that the latest text message or Facebook comment does not provide a substantive understanding of what is going on in the global village.

I do believe that young people are concerned about the political, social, and cultural milieu in which they find themselves. Witness their interest in the Presidential election of 2008. To tap into this interest, the classroom must once again become an environment where deliberate, reflective reading takes place; where responses are articulated orally and/or in writing, and not just summarized electronically; and where the experiences of adolescents, depicted in certain imaginative texts, are given room to grow and develop. Teachers who commit to establishing such a learning atmosphere must always keep in mind the warning offered by Marshall McLuhan some 45+ years ago: "the medium is the message" (McLuhan, 1964); i.e., they must keep in mind the effects of current technology on the perceptions of their students. If those teachers can swing it, maybe someday Huck, Holden, *et al.* will join Harry in the pantheon of young readers' favorite literary characters.

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#### Note

- <sup>1</sup> One criticism I failed to find in the negative treatment of the teenage behavior of the time was the attire they wore. On several occasions, Holden expresses contempt for the "phony Ivy League" clothing of his peers: their dark gray flannel suits, their "flitty tattersall and figured vests," their dirty white bucks. I can corroborate, as a college student, 1949–1953, that those *were* features of the fashion of the day.

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**The classroom must once again become an environment where deliberate, reflective reading takes place.**

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## Proposal Call for the 2010 CEL Annual Program

Whether you're a veteran or novice educator, you have experiences to share to help us become better leaders in our diverse society. We invite you to submit a proposal to tell your story, share your strategy, demonstrate your lessons, or report your research. Our interactive workshops are designed to give our conference attendees insight into ways they can better serve the communities in which we live and work.

Our 2010 theme, "Reclaiming Creativity," will give us an opportunity to look at English language arts leadership in light of multiple intelligences, differentiated instruction, gender issues, cultures, race, languages, and different kinds of schools—private, parochial, charter, and public; urban, suburban, and rural.

Submit your completed proposal to the 2010 CEL Program Chair, Scott Eggerding, at [seggerding@lths.net](mailto:seggerding@lths.net), or mail your proposal to Scott Eggerding, Lyons Twp HS, 100 S. Brainard Ave., La Grange, IL 60525-2101 **by May 1, 2010**.

# The Trouble with Normal:

Trans Youth and the Desire for Normalcy as Reflected in Young Adult Literature

Literature for young adults is a literature of fluidity, conforming to the experiences of young people in specific contexts and shifting with changes in sociopolitical ideologies. For young adults, this literature is an escape as well as a comforting reflection of life, as it covers a broad landscape of topics while providing examples of how characters are able to cope and heal. Kathy Cline, in “Bonding in the Broken Places,” points out that “[t]hrough problems and conflicts, literature allows young adults the catharsis for healing, rebuilding, and changing” (par. 1). This validates young adult novels as having a practical application. These fictional accounts can be seen as a form of therapy that will aid young people in developing healthy self-acceptance: they provide a mirror for society and self; serve as a framework for what trans young adults need from society; reveal the need for trans youth to be *normal*.

Queer sexuality—or trans sexualities in this specific case—is a much under-represented topic within YA literature. The novels that do deal with characters’ non-heteronormative sexualities need to be considered in terms of their evolution within the history of YA young adult literature as well as in terms of their value for young people who are developing gender and sexual identities. At the same time, these narratives ask the audience to reevaluate previously assumed notions of gender and sexuality.

Michael Cart and Christine Jenkins, in *The Heart Has Its Reasons*, define YA literature as the “quintessential literature of the outsider who is too often rendered invisible by society . . .” (1). Novels for young adults have a very detailed and specific role to play for teens and for society in the larger sense. There

are three components that I would argue are necessary in order for young adult literature—specifically novels dealing with trans issues—to truly speak to and for young people. The first of these is that the novel needs to be a mirror of society and of self. Cart and Jenkins assert that “there is . . . the need to see one’s face reflected in the pages of a book and thus to find the corollary comfort that derives from the knowledge that one is not alone . . .” (1). In order for this component to work, then, the second requisite component of the novel is a reflection of the needs and desires of the young trans person. The third component works with the first two by showing that a young trans person has a legitimate desire to be considered *normal*. Whether this normalcy means completely fitting in with society or simply being able to get out of bed in the morning without fear of rejection is not the point; the point is simply understanding that the desire is a healthy one and is not cause for shame.

## The Evolution of Trans Narratives

The body of work dedicated to queer content has been on the rise over the last two decades, though until late in the twentieth century, it was often characterized by poor treatment of characters and issues (Cart 128). Many queer protagonists suffered misfortune of some kind due, in part or whole, to their sexual orientation. In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, authors finally began to address the sexual identity of main and secondary characters with an increasing sensitivity, providing role models for young people to aid in their own identity development, but these texts still remain limited in number. Smaller still than this subgenre of queer young adult literature is that of

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## Poignant and sensitive portrayals of teenage transsexuality are extremely difficult to come by.

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trans young adult narratives. The trans young adult novel came into being with the publication of Julie Anne Peters's *Luna* in 2004. But even since then there have been very few novels published for young adults on the topic of trans characters, even when compared with gay or lesbian texts in general. Transgendered characters are easier to find than transsexual characters; however, characters like these are often stereotyped as the bitchy drag queen or the *confused* teenager who can't decide between liking boys or girls. This could be due in part to the general structure of transgender and transsexual narratives as compared to other queer novels. Trans literature tends to be more of the *bildungsroman* narrative pattern than other queer literature, which focuses more often on specific instances at one point in the characters' lives. The large scope of trans texts can be better understood by looking at the history of the transsexual memoir.

The trans young adult novel is strongly connected to the genre of the transsexual autobiography. These accounts were originally a powerful way for transsexuals to search through their histories and understand themselves while also inviting the larger world of readers to participate in the journey. Jay Prosser, in *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality*, states that "[t]he layers of concealment attributed to the disingenuous transsexual are none other than the layers of narrative itself: a layering that does not invalidate transsexual subjectivity but makes it possible" (132). Transsexual narratives, then, work as both a literary genre and a tool in the transitioning process. The young adult transsexual and transgender or trans novel works in much the same way, with a biographical sketch of the protagonist's development to a stage where he or she can more easily understand his or her sexual identity.

### Getting Familiar with the Genre

#### Understanding the Terms

When dealing with sexuality and gender expression, it can be difficult to define or understand all the terms necessary to cover all contexts. For young people,

these labels can be frustrating and infuriating, but they are still necessary in literary criticism in order to capture certain ideas and bring more focus to the works themselves. Riki Wilchins writes, "the term *transgender* . . . arose in the mid 1990s as a way to distinguish people who cross sexes by changing their bodies (transsexual) from people who cross genders by changing their clothing, behavior, and grooming (transgender)" (26). With these definitions in mind, it is easier to understand the difference between the struggles of teens in each of these situations. Between these two categories, however, there are still problems of definition and discrepancies that should be addressed.

#### Working the Theory

Both Riki Wilchins and Viviane Namaste have written works regarding trans people: their rights, goals, and, of course, obstacles. Wilchins writes, in *Queer Theory, Gender Theory*:

Transsexuals face a unique array of institutional inequities in medicine, legal identity, insurance, child custody laws, and sex-change laws. It may be that transsexuals are such a singular case that it will take a movement based solely on their needs to get the job done. (30)

This is very true, but it is also not the only way to approach trans issues. Namaste argues, in *Sex Change, Social Change*, that "[i]t is not about challenging the binary sex/gender system, it is not about making a critical intervention every waking second of the day, it is not about starting the Gender Revolution." Instead, she posits, "[t]ranssexuality is about the banality of buying some bread, of making photocopies, of getting your shower fixed" (20). It is this quotidian approach to trans characters' lives that is scarce in young adult literature. Poignant and sensitive portrayals of teenage transsexuality are extremely difficult to come by.

#### Reading the Mirrors

Three major works have surfaced in the early twenty-first century that deal with growing up as a trans person without focusing on the insidious parody or loose theory about confusion surrounding the teenage years. The first of these works is *Luna* (2004), by Julie Ann Peters. The story follows Liam, as seen through the eyes of his sister, who wants to become Luna, as he begins the journey to let people—friends, family, and the general public—see her in public life. The next is



*Morgan in the Mirror* (2004), by C. C. St. Clair. This follows Morgan as he begins a new life after breast-reduction surgery and falls in love with a woman whom he has just met. The most recent of these novels is *Parrotfish* (2007), by Ellen Wittlinger. This narrative follows Grady, formerly known as Angela, as he navigates the murky waters of high school and tries to blend in while still being able to express his sexuality without fear.

Each of these novels follows a similar path, both necessary and beneficial for those readers unfamiliar with trans issues, though each novel reveals characters at different stages of understanding and development. The authors include interior monologues or exterior dialogues in which the protagonist—and sometimes a secondary character—has the opportunity to explore what it is that makes a person a man or a woman. While this is helpful to the reader—the author can use this as a way to spell out certain constructs of masculinity and femininity—the protagonist also has the opportunity to understand and explore societal influences on his or her thinking about gender and sexuality. The introspective nature of these fictional accounts is tied in with the transsexual autobiographies that preceded them, lending a more credible aspect to the self-examinations of the protagonists.

Prosser describes mirrors within transsexual narratives as revealing the “body image (projected self) and the image of the body (reflected self)” (100). Morgan, in *Morgan in the Mirror*, has a dialogue with a mirror, and ultimately with himself, revealing both his confusion about gender as well as how patriarchal social constructions have influenced his views of men and women. To the mirror he asks, “What is a man, huh?” to which his reflection replies, “whoever has facial hair and walks leading from the shoulders” (31). This isn’t a bad definition per se, though it is definitely lacking in substance and meaningful context. It is the definition of woman that is rather disturbing, as it reveals a certain hyper-masculine viewpoint through which Morgan is viewing his abandoned womanhood. He asks, “What is a woman, then?” and again his reflection replies, “someone who packs boobs we, men, get to play with. Oh yeah!” (31). This chauvinistic understanding of women shows a patriarchal social influence that affects his thinking as he develops as a transsexual.

Grady, in *Parrotfish*, ponders the things that make

a boy and a girl different. Rather than only looking at the biological, however, as Morgan did, Grady looks at both the biological and the performative aspects of femininity and masculinity. Here he looks at the actions associated with gender constructions:

But was [guy stuff] what made me a boy? Charlie was a boy too, and he didn’t give a damn about cars or carpentry projects. I was pretty sure he’d never held a hammer in his hands. So what did it mean that I felt like a boy? If I couldn’t really put it into words myself, was it fair that I was making Laura and Mom and Eve suffer for it? (105)

While later he searches for understanding through the biological, it is just as confusing and discouraging for him as he struggles to come to a conclusion of his own: “What made a person male or female, anyway? The way they looked? The way they acted? The way they thought? Their hormones? Their genitals? What if some of those attributes pointed in one direction and some in the other?” (131).

For the characters in Peters’s novel, it is less about discovering what makes a man or a woman than about what a conflict it is, both personally and socially, to feel stuck in the wrong body. Regan, Liam’s sister, tries to explain this concept to a friend:

I know this is hard to understand. It’s even harder to explain, but Liam feels like a girl. He is a girl, really. Problem is, she’s a girl who was born with a boy’s body. I don’t know how it happens, or why. Luna says it’s hard-wired into her brain to be female. It’s who she knows she is, same way you and I know. It’s instinctive. Natural. (191)

Liam’s struggle is less about the social constructions of gender and more about the gender repression evident in society that leaves little room for variation or challenge.

Through these three mirrors, it is possible to see the coherent and unanimous expression of the challenges faced by these protagonists as they attempt to be themselves and still associate with friends and family and survive in society. The main point to keep in focus here is that none of these authors is attempt-

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**For the characters in Peters’s novel, it is less about discovering what makes a man or a woman than about what a conflict it is, both personally and socially, to feel stuck in the wrong body.**

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ing to make a revolutionary out of the protagonist, but instead they choose to show the internal struggle for understanding and the external struggle to simply fit in to society. Peters makes this struggle clear through Liam as he laments, “Every day, the same old thing. Hiding, lying, holding [Luna] in. It’s too hard. I can’t do it” (20). The struggle, at times, is just too much for these young adults who want to stop hiding their self-identified genders.

## The Trouble (or Not) with Normal

At this point, it is helpful to go back to Viviane Namaste and her statement that “[t]ranssexuality is about the banality of buying some bread, of making photocopies, of getting your shower fixed,” (20) in order to tie together theory with fictional accounts. Each of these three protagonists desires to pass, to go unnoticed in everyday situations. For Morgan, it’s about dating; for Grady, it’s about using the bathroom; for Liam/Luna, it’s about going to the mall. The sentiment is painful and at times difficult to read. Each young person is struggling to simply live as they feel they should be able to, without having to make a huge statement or revolutionize societal understandings of sexuality and gender.

Morgan is attempting a relationship with a woman whom he has met since his chest reconstruction surgery. Everything is going fine until she begins to wonder why he won’t take his underwear off. She gets annoyed, and he finally has the opportunity to spill his pent-up emotions about the situation:

“I pass, Christen. I pass! That’s my fucking reward. No, not a reward! It’s my right, my . . . my compensation for having been born wrapped up inside the wrong envelope! Hey! Look at me. I’ve always been a man in here and in there!” He raps his knuckles against his head and hits his fist against heart before grabbing at his crotch. “The only place I haven’t been a male . . . ever, not for real . . . is here!” His tone is bitter. “Only fucken *there!*” (83)

His frustration is evident, as well as his overwhelming desire to be seen as *normal* and to have a relationship without the interrogations and without being told that he is *only* a passer, a fake, and a con (85).

For Liam, the desire is to simply be able to go to the mall and be Luna without people giving her a disgusted look. The intensity of his desire shows up in a few statements made during his first time out at the mall as Luna. He asks his sister, “Okay, how do

I look?” to which she replies, “Really good . . . You look . . . ordinary” (88). It is the ordinariness that is important here. He wants to be seen as everyone else is seen, without anything to differentiate him from the average young woman looking for clothes. This excitement is even more evident as he declares, “Nobody’s reading me . . . This is such a rush” (90). Unfortunately, shortly after this statement, a bunch of teenage boys notice something is not quite as they think it should be and attempt to attack Luna as she is browsing through CDs. This highlights the difficulties—both internal discomfort and external forms of violence and hatred—for the trans youth living in a society intolerant of almost anything that is not *normal*.

Wittlinger brings up the most banal and yet one of the most difficult places in society for a transsexual to go—the bathroom:

The whole bathroom issue was a much bigger problem than I’d imagined it would be. Before this I probably never used a school bathroom more than once a day, if that, but now, suddenly, I felt like I had to pee all the time. So even though Ms. Unger’s office was way the hell on one end of the school and most of my classes were on the other end, it was comforting to know that at least there was someplace I could urinate—or hide out—without fear, even if it meant being late to my next class. (75)

In Grady’s case, he is only able to use a bathroom that his gym teacher lets him use. It is impossible for him to use any other bathroom in the school because he won’t correspond to the sign on the door.

What good are these novels, then? What do they say to their audiences? They tell their audiences that transsexuality and transgenderism are not simply adult issues. Each of these authors wrote a young adult novel, which in itself illustrates the necessity for positive and sensitive examples in literature for young people. As a literature of change, young adult literature is a necessity for teens to glean information in an interesting and less intrusive or insensitive way than through negative institutional discourse or research books. Each novel is something that a particular young person will be able to identify with and possibly find answers in. The trouble at the moment is that there are so few novels reaching out to the trans young adult audience.

Judith Halberstam wrote an article entitled, “Oh Bondage Up Yours! Female Masculinity and the Tomboy.” While I am not focusing on tomboyism, the idea of female masculinity does fit into this narrative

frame, as two of the novels are dealing with FTM (female to male) transsexuals. Halberstam addresses the issues of transsexuality and their treatment in the majority of novels:

. . . it is troubling in the way [novels] resolve the problem of intersexuality or transsexuality by abjecting gender ambiguity. It is in-betweenness (not androgyny but the active construction of new genders) here and elsewhere in the history of tomboys that inspires rage and terror in parents, coworkers, lovers, and bosses. (210)

This statement speaks to Luna's aforementioned situation at the mall when confronted by the gang of teens who see something that does not quite fit their socially constructed view of gender: they sense something in-between about Luna and feel threatened. While this does slightly overflow into the field of gender expression, it is difficult to differentiate the two, especially when dealing with societal reactions within these texts.

While this negative reaction to trans characters in the novels may seem unfair, the authors are both portraying and speaking to a society that exists. So while the "abjecting" of gender ambiguity is not a good thing, it can be transformed into a tool in these novels, used to demonstrate to non-trans readers the turmoil that trans youth go through in daily life. Halberstam later states that there is still a necessity for novels that "offer an alternative model of the tomboy, one that rejects androgyny and binary gender systems, revels in girl masculinity, and encourages queer adult-hoods . . ." (211).

## In Conclusion

The young adult novel that deals with transsexual and transgender youth has a number of purposes for coming into existence. The first of these is to mirror society and self. Without mirrors to reflect self and others, problems can remain unseen for long periods of time. These novels reflect the negative implications of societal expectations of gender representation and also show the perceived reflections of trans youth through a mirrored image of themselves. The second purpose of these novels is to show what the transsexual and transgender youth needs from society. Trans young people need support and nonjudgmental acceptance, regardless of gender expression, especially in settings such as school or religious institutions. The third, and

probably most important, aspect of these novels is to show trans youths' need—desire—to engage in the quotidian activities of life, whether going to the mall, dating, or simply using the washroom at school. All of these aspects work together in the young adult novel to help create a template that society and those not educated in trans issues can use to aid in the development and overall care of the transsexual and transgender teen throughout adolescence and the high school experience.

**Robert Bittner** is an undergraduate student at Simon Fraser University. In 2008, he completed an honors essay tracking the influences of religious institutions on protagonists in queer young adult literature during the last decade. He is currently studying queer and trans young adult literature and plans to attend graduate school next year. He will present at the SWTX PCA/ACA Conference in 2010.

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<p><b>Alligator Bayou</b> by Donna Jo Napoli Wendy Lamb Books Random House, 2009, 281 pp., \$16.99 ISBN: 978-0-385-74654-0 Historical Fiction</p> <p>Fourteen-year-old Calogero lives in Tallulah, Louisiana, in 1899 with his hard-working Italian family. Providing produce for their neighbors, his self-reliant immigrant uncles struggle with the new language and encounter bigotry in surprising places. Having seen unexpected prejudice in New Orleans, they stick to themselves and try to earn a living. Nevertheless, there are neighbors who resent their self-sufficiency and their ignorance of the town's social mores regarding race mixing, and even their trust in one of the town's leading citizens proves misguided.</p> <p>Misunderstandings escalate into mob violence, and being innocent means nothing when the livelihood of others is threatened. The anger grows gradually, juxtaposed against Calogero's own dreams of the future and his budding affection for Patricia, a black girl who lives near town. Expanding readers' understandings of the causes and results of prejudices, the author describes effectively the earthy Louisiana bayous and the emotional tempests that sweep the small town.</p> <p>Barbara Ward Richland, WA</p>	<p><b>Art for Art's Sake: Meredith's Story</b> by Barbara Clanton Art, Gay/Lesbian, Siblings Regal Crest Enterprises, LLC, 2009, 192 pp., \$15.95 ISBN: 978-1-935053-14-9</p> <p>This story of acceptance, discovery, and understanding introduces the reader to high school senior Meredith Bedford, a social outcast who can't wait to graduate. Meredith doesn't know what having friends is like and spends most of her time caring for her younger brother, Mikey, who has Down Syndrome. That quickly changes when Dani Lassiter, president of the senior class and captain of the lacrosse team, asks to work with Meredith on their history project. The girls investigate an old Victorian house and quickly befriend Esther and Millie, the older women who own the house, but no longer live there. As they grow closer, Dani models for Meredith's portfolio, which eventually gets her accepted to Syracuse, where Dani will play lacrosse.</p> <p>When Dani reveals to Meredith that she is gay, Meredith begins to question her feelings. Why does being with Dani make her feel warm, happy, and content?</p> <p>Sarah Nickow Nashville, TN</p>
<p><b>Bait</b> by Alex Sanchez Simon &amp; Schuster Books for Young Readers, 2009, 239 pp., \$16.99 Relationships, Family Problems, Sexuality ISBN: 978-1-4169-3772-2</p> <p>Diego MacMann gets good grades, takes care of his little brother, is fascinated by sharks, and even has a weekend job to save money for college. Everything, even down to his crush on Ariel, seems normal, but Diego is hiding secrets, too. After his stepdad commits suicide, his mom has to work two jobs and doesn't notice the changes with Diego. However, after he punches one guy at school for looking at him the wrong way and another guy at the mall for calling him gay, it's impossible for anyone to not see that something is wrong.</p> <p><i>Bait</i> is a story that exposes the internal turmoil some teens face in dealing with sexual abuse and the impact it has on their lives. The story shows how Diego confronts his problems by talking to someone who can help, but in the meantime reveals graphic content. This is for mature readers.</p> <p>Amanda Graham Manhattan, KS</p>	<p><b>Ball Peen Hammer</b> by Adam Rapp and George O'Connor First Second, 2009, 144 pp., \$17.99 ISBN: 978-1-59643-300-7 Graphic Novel</p> <p><i>Ball Peen Hammer</i>, a graphic novel by Adam Rapp and illustrated by George O'Connor, depicts a gruesome, dying world. Not for the faint of heart, this story is unrelenting in its despair and loss. Welton hides in his basement room to avoid the plague that has killed or infected most of the world. He fears leaving the safe space, but that isolation causes its own damage to his life.</p> <p>The story, filled with the suffering of the characters, is not for readers with weak stomachs, as the visuals of devoured bodies, inhumane acts, and violence are heart-wrenching. The characters feel as if there is no hope in their dying world, and they sometimes participate in violent acts, often out of apathy.</p> <p>The graphic novel provides a gruesome view of a world where characters feel intensely their loss of hope. It is eerie in its storytelling and its vision.</p> <p>Melanie Hundley Nashville, TN</p>

<p><b><i>Beautiful Creatures</i></b> by Kami Garcia and Margaret Stohl      Fantasy/Romance          Little, Brown, 2010, 628 pp., \$17.99      ISBN: 978-0-316-04267-3</p> <p>When the niece of his small town's shut-in enrolls in school, Ethan Ware rejects the idea of ever being friends with her. Lena Duchannes, however, is more than Ethan bargained for—beautiful, different, and unexpectedly powerful. She is a caster—possessing the power to instantly transform her natural surroundings. Ethan discovers a strong attraction to Lena, sharing her dreams, seeing into her mind, and learning a secret about their family histories that connects them. But Lena's time in Gatlin, SC, is short: She has six months until her sixteenth birthday, where she'll learn her fate as a caster—to be dark or to be light, to be evil or to be good, to have Ethan or to lose him forever.</p> <p>The authors weave Southern history and charm with Gothic sensibilities throughout the story. Boasting a strong male narrator, <i>Beautiful Creatures</i> is a fresh, pleasantly enjoyable take on the YA thriller/romance.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Lacy Compton Austin, TX</p>	<p><b><i>Bugboy</i></b> by Eric Luper      Horse Racing/Ethics          Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009, 256 pp., \$16.99      ISBN: 978-0-374-31000-4</p> <p>“Shabby?” Jack Walsh is only fifteen years old and has just hit the big time in horse racing. The Great Depression has hit everyone and everything except the ponies. People still flock to Saratoga to try and make a buck. Jack just wants to work with the best horses. He's already led a very hard childhood, what with being sent away from his family because they couldn't afford to feed him and his sister. Sleeping in the barns is much better for Jack anyway, he thinks. Bigger trials await Jack, though, when he's tempted to fix the biggest race of his life.</p> <p>Even at the very young age of 15, Jack leads a very adult life and has to make adult choices. He must decide what is more important in the horse business—winning the big race or winning at life.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Mary Schmutz Junction City, KS</p>
<p><b><i>Catching Fire</i></b> by Suzanne Collins      Fantasy/Dystopias          Scholastic, 2009, 391 pp., \$17.99      ISBN: 978-0-439-02349-8</p> <p>World-weary after her historic victory during the Hunger Games, Katniss Everdeen finds her life forever changed. She and her fellow District 12 tribute Peeta Mellark embark on the requisite Victory Tour, where there are hints of rebellion in several of the districts. Inspired by her earlier example of defiance, citizens have taken to wearing the mockingjay pin Katniss wears. There are twists, turns, and unexpected developments as Katniss faces possible betrayal at every turn.</p> <p>The action in this sequel to <i>Hunger Games</i> never lets up, with hints of things to come and wrongs to be righted. All of the secondary characters are fleshed out effectively. President Snow's palpable hatred for Katniss oozes throughout his plans for the Seventy-fifth Hunger Games. Readers will groan in frustration at the book's conclusion, since there are so many loose ends. The tantalizing hints of a possible District 13 guarantee more surprises for readers.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Barbara Ward Richland, WA</p>	<p><b><i>Daniel X: Alien Hunter</i></b> by James Patterson and Leopoldo Gout      Graphic Novel          Little Brown Books for Young Readers, 2008, 128 pp., \$9.99 ISBN: 978-0-316-00425-1</p> <p>Daniel X looks just like any other human being, eats like any other human being, sleeps like any other human being, except, well, he is not like any other human being; in fact, he is not even human. Daniel X is a humanoid from the planet Terra Firma, and he is an Alien Hunter. As a child, his parents were killed by THE Most Wanted Alien criminal of that time. Years later, Daniel goes back and finds the List, an artifact created to hold the knowledge of Terra Firma and each Alien Hunter before him. With the list, it is time to continue what his parents started.</p> <p><i>Alien Hunter</i> is the newest installment in the Daniel X series; Daniel is hunting Alien Number 7 on the list. Through some unexpected turns of events, Daniel becomes the hunted. The story carefully combines the narrative, dialogue, and illustrations.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Isaac Gabella Femey-Voltaire, France</p>

<p><b><i>Death on the River</i></b> by John Wilson Orca Book Publishers, 2009, 224 pp., \$12.95</p> <p>Historical Fiction/ War/ Redemption ISBN: 978-1-55469-111-1</p> <p><i>Death on the River</i> is a story about a young Union soldier who is captured and placed in a Confederate prison camp at Andersonville. While there, he meets Billy Sharp, a man who teaches Jake how to survive the hardships of war life, but only at the cost of others. The end of the Civil War allows Jake to make his way home, only to discover more heartache and death. The imprisoned Union soldier is not a point-of-view typically encountered when reading about the Civil War.</p> <p><i>Death on the River</i> is a book that forces its readers to venture beyond the vacant facts of war toward the turmoil and guilt experienced by those who are “the one who lived.” Jake’s retelling of his final year as a soldier is both grotesque and heart-wrenching as the reader follows Jake in a world filled with starvation, death, violence, greed, and ghosts. Kimberly Coyle Nashville, TN</p>	<p><b><i>Deep Down Popular</i></b> by Phoebe Stone Scholastic Paperbacks, 2008, 288 pp., \$16.99</p> <p>Friendship/Popularity ISBN: 978-0-439-80245-1</p> <p>Conrad Parker Smith defines popularity at Cabanash County Elementary School, and Jessie Lou Ferguson has silently loved him since second grade. When Conrad shows up to school with a metal brace on his leg, Jessie’s teacher selects her to help make sure he gets home safely. This time together, combined with Conrad’s injury-induced decline in popularity, paves the way for an unexpected friendship filled with laughter and adventure. They discover abandoned houses, old barns, unknown machinery, and get involved in a plan to save the town hardware store.</p> <p>When Conrad decides to undergo surgery, Jessie fears that his recovery will mean the return of his popularity and the end of their friendship. As sixth-grade graduation approaches, Jessie tries to figure out how to fill the empty self-portrait hanging on the classroom wall. Phoebe Stone creates a loveable character with a kind heart and a poetic soul. Sarah Nickow Nashville, TN</p>
<p><b><i>Elf Realm: The Low Road</i></b> by Daniel Kirk Amulet Books, 2009, 544 pp., \$8.95</p> <p>Fantasy/Adventure ISBN: 978-0-8109-4084-0</p> <p>Fourteen-year-old Matt McCormack doesn’t know what he’s getting into when he convinces his sister to explore their father’s new real estate development. Trudging through the construction site, Matt cuts his foot on a tiny, silver shoe. What first appears to be a curious trinket left behind in the mud turns out to be a clue to another realm all around Matt and Becky. Matt inadvertently uncovers the elf realm, always present but rarely seen, and pulls his sister and himself into the middle of a battle between the magic worlds. Although <i>Elf Realm</i> offers a well-detailed imagining of an expansive fantasy world, its characters and storyline are far less developed. Matt seems at times as surly as the evil creatures he’s trying to outwit. The human relationships are cold, challenging the reader’s sympathy and attention. Catherine McTamane Nashville, TN</p>	<p><b><i>Elf Realm: The High Road</i></b> by Daniel Kirk Amulet Books, 2009, 488 pp., \$18.95</p> <p>Fantasy/Adventure ISBN: 978-0-8109-4075-8</p> <p>Book Two of the Elf Realm trilogy, <i>The High Road</i> offers in complexity what it lacks in character, introducing multiple new characters and increasingly menacing threats to the realm. Matt and Becky are again trying to preserve the Cord, the connection between the elf realm and the human world. In this installment, their quests are separate, providing more adventure but, unfortunately, more opportunity for the story to go awry. Attentive readers will notice when the magical rules of the elf realm contradict each other. Although the complex, multiple plots require the concentration of an older reader, the simpler, more predictable characters are more appropriate for younger readers. Falling short of the coherence of well-crafted fantasy, <i>The High Road</i> is most appropriate for readers who prefer traditional battle books. Catherine McTamane Nashville, TN</p>

# Clip & File YA Book Reviews

<p><b><i>Emily the Strange: The Lost Days</i></b> by Rob Reger, Jessica Gruner, and Buzz Parker HarperCollins, 2009, 264 pp., \$16.99</p> <p>Multigenre, Mystery, Magic, Fantasy ISBN: 978-0-06-145229-1</p> <p>What would you do if you found yourself in a tiny beige town with no memories and eleven pages missing from your diary? If your answer includes setting up shop in a refrigerator box and soliciting the help of four black cats and a brainless barista to uncover the mystery of your identity, then you might get along with Emily Strange.</p> <p>Fans of counterculture icon Emily's unique brand of clever snark will love the whimsical blend of magic, myth, and science fiction in <i>Emily the Strange: The Lost Days</i>, but you don't have to know Emily to love her in this off-kilter adventure story where the paranormal is totally normal. Anyone with a stubborn, independent, or alternative streak will appreciate this witty, self-sufficient girl genius who embodies her creator's motto: "Be yourself, think for yourself, do it yourself."</p> <p>Nicole Renner Nashville, TN</p>	<p><b><i>Fell</i></b> by David Clement-Davies Amulet Books, 2009, 544 pp., \$8.95</p> <p>Supernatural, Fantasy, Adventure ISBN: 978-0-8109-7266-7</p> <p>Fell is a black wolf who has been shunned by his pack because of a wrongful accusation concerning the death of his stark white sister, and he now must travel alone, a "Kerl." Alina is a 15-year-old human girl who has been fated to save her people and nature itself. In the rugged and dark terrain of Transylvania, Fell and Alina team up to fulfill their combined destinies. They have both been gifted with the Sight, which enables them to communicate with each other and all animals. Fell and Alina must save their world against the evil Lord Vladeran and his arsenal of spirits, which includes Morgra, a devious wolf who exercises dark powers over Fell.</p> <p>This sequel to <i>The Sight</i>, <i>Fell</i> is an epic animal fantasy full of detailed wolf lore, action, intrigue, and enough back-story to allow the reader to jump right into the adventure.</p> <p>Stephanie Sefcik Nashville, TN</p>
<p><b><i>Finally</i></b> by Wendy Mass Scholastic Press, 2010, 304 pp., \$16.99</p> <p>Growing Up/Humor ISBN: 978-0-545-05242-9</p> <p><i>Finally</i> introduces Rory, a spunky and clumsy preteen who finds herself in awkward social situations. Rory's story is sparked when she finally turns twelve, and can do all the things her parents promised that she could do at that age. On B-Day, Rory finally gets to work on her goals.</p> <p>Get her own house key. Check Shave her legs. Check Get a cell phone, wear makeup, and get a pet. Check, Check, and Check.</p> <p>If only accomplishing her list was so easy! Along the way, Rory gets into some scary situations and always seems to land in a less than graceful manner. Rory's family and friends keep her laughing and teach her that turning twelve means more than just checkmarks on a page.</p> <p>Mass's writing style is witty; she gets into the mind of a twelve-year-old girl spinning a humorous story that makes readers laugh out loud.</p> <p>Chantelle Pritchett Derby, KS</p>	<p><b><i>If I Stay</i></b> by Gayle Forman Dutton Books, 2009, 196 pp., \$16.99</p> <p>Family/Choices/Relationships ISBN: 978-0-525-42103-0</p> <p>Seventeen-year-old Mia has a great life: she has a close-knit family, her band-playing boyfriend is loving and devoted to her, and her talent as a cellist has almost certainly earned her a place at Juilliard, her dream school. The only decision Mia really has to make is which path she wants to follow. At least, she <i>thought</i> that was the only decision she had to make. One ride with her family during a school snow day, however, changes everything.</p> <p>Suddenly, there's only one decision Mia has to make—a critical decision that she has to make as she watches the paramedics work on her body. It's the most important decision of all, and she has to make it all on her own: stay, or go?</p> <p>Christine Halkovic Ansonia, CT</p>

<p><b><i>In the Woods</i></b> by Robin Stevenson Orca Book Publishers, 2009, 124 pp., \$9.95</p> <p>Cameron's twin sister Katie is practically flawless. This straight-A student never gets into trouble, rarely makes a mistake, and wouldn't dare keep secrets from her friends and family. Or would she?</p> <p>When Cameron finds a baby alone in the woods, he realizes his sister may not be perfect after all. Could this newborn baby be Katie's or was it just a coincidence? If Katie did abandon her child in hopes that Cameron would find her, what will he do with this knowledge? What will he say to his sister?</p> <p>Cameron's discovery provokes a series of difficult decisions involving sibling trust, concern for others, and identity. This fast-paced story concludes with no decisive moral, leaving readers to reflect on these issues on their own. Much like adolescence itself, Robin Stevenson's <i>In the Woods</i> is wrought with moments of humility, satisfaction, and uncertainty.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Caroline McCoy Nashville, TN</p>	<p><b><i>Intertwined</i></b> by Gena Showalter Harlequin Teen, 2009, 440 pp., \$15.99</p> <p>Fantasy/Relationships/Supernatural ISBN: 978-0-373-21002-2</p> <p>At sixteen, Aden is different from other teens. Other teens have friends, but Aden has four souls living inside him. These four souls can do magical things—raise the dead, travel back and forth in time, predict the future, and possess another person. All Aden wants is to be left alone. Mary Ann is Aden's opposite. She's friendly, outgoing, has friends. The voices are also quiet when she is around. Their friendship is unexpected but provides Aden with a sense of peace.</p> <p>That sense of peace is threatened by a werewolf shape-shifter who is interested in Mary Ann and a vampire princess who is interested in Aden. The four of them get pulled into a dangerous situation that threatens their survival. This story combines vampires, werewolves, ghosts, and the paranormal.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Melanie Hundley Nashville, TN</p>
<p><b><i>Last Night I Sang to the Monster</i></b> by Benjamin Alire Saenz Cinco Puntos Press, 2009, 239 pp., \$16.95</p> <p>Zach is an alcoholic. He has many secrets that he keeps hidden in the confines of his sadness. Instead of attending his senior year of high school, Zach finds himself in a rehab facility having to face his monstrous memories of drugs, alcohol, abuse, and death. The only problem is Zach doesn't want to remember, because with remembering comes excruciating pain. Together with the help of his therapist and his fatherly roommate, Zach is able to face his monsters and break through the chaos of his internal world. Zach struggles through the labyrinth of addiction, ending up in a circle of hope and love.</p> <p>Saenz's novel artfully depicts the delicate world of the addict—the struggles, the setbacks, and the moments of light that create a path toward healing. This powerful and emotionally demanding story will resonate in teenage minds for a long time.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Kimberly Coyle Nashville, TN</p>	<p><b><i>March toward the Thunder</i></b> by Joseph Bruchac Speak, an imprint of Penguin Group, 2009, 298 pp., \$8.99</p> <p>Civil War/ Irish Brigade/Native American ISBN: 978-0-14-241446-0</p> <p>Through the summer of 1864, Grant's Union army mounted a campaign that taxed Lee's Confederate troops to the limit. Lee's army inflicted severe casualties, but suffered from the inability to resupply and recruit more soldiers. Grant pushed forward, assured of a continued source of supplies and troops. In this context, fifteen-year-old Louis Noyette, an Abenaki Indian, accepts a payment bonus to join the Union army. This money allows his mother to buy and maintain land in New York. Louis is assigned to the Irish Brigade, one of the Union's most decorated units.</p> <p>Bruchac's historical novel depicts the tragedy of war in the midst of courage, brotherhood, sacrifice, racial strife, and death. Louis's first-person narrative of a boy in battle reminds us not only of the horror of war, but of the ever-present role that Native Americans have played in the unfolding story of American history.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Steve Bickmore Baton Rouge, LA</p>



<p><b><i>Monstrumologist</i></b> by Rick Yancey Simon &amp; Schuster Children's Publishing, 2009, 448 pp., \$17.99</p> <p>Horror/Thriller ISBN: 978-1-4169-8448-1</p> <p>Twelve year-old-orphan William James Henry serves as an apprentice to Dr. Pellinore Warthrop—a monstrumologist. In this thrilling tale, Will assists Dr. Warthrop, who is an official monster hunter, track down a group of anthropophagi—those creatures of mythology and lore with no heads and shark-like mouths in their stomachs.</p> <p>Set in a small New England-type town in 1888, Dr. Warthrop and Henry travel to gruesome crime scenes, cemeteries, and an asylum in search of the answers behind the mysterious appearance of this pack of man-eaters. Just as mysterious are the circumstances behind Will's parents' deaths and his complex relationship with the doctor who relies on him so much.</p> <p>Yancey's novel, with shades of Sherlock Holmes and forensic thrillers, will excite those who appreciate horror novels with a medical twist and delight those interested in gothic gore. I look forward to Will's next adventure.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Jacqueline Bach Baton Rouge, LA</p>	<p><b><i>N.E.R.D.S.</i></b> by Michael Buckley Amulet Books, 2009, 306 pp., \$14.95</p> <p>Adventure/Spy/Friendship ISBN: 978-0-8109-4324-7</p> <p>Jackson Jones is the focal point of Nathan Hale Elementary; as a star athlete and the most popular kid in school. He is struck down by middle school superficiality when he gets braces and a head harness: he loses his friends and even has to give up sports. During this time, Jackson finds consolation in learning all he can about other people. His curiosity leads him to a group of five "nerds" who have something to hide. Upon further investigation, he discovers that they are here to save the world.</p> <p>Michael Buckley tries to challenge common social perceptions while entertaining his reader. Though there are some intriguing aspects and cool details, the writer fails to execute the idea that the primary job of a book is to immerse the reader into a world that, although a product of the writer's thoughts, still needs coherent rules, laws, and consistencies.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Isaac Gabella Ferne-Voltaire, France</p>
<p><b><i>Rapunzel's Revenge</i></b> by Shannon and Dean Hale Illus. Nathan Hale Bloomsbury, 2008, 144 pp., \$14.99</p> <p>Adventure/Growing Up/Self Discovery ISBN: 978-1-59990-070-4</p> <p>If you loved <i>The Goose Girl</i> and <i>Book of a Thousand Days</i>, you are in for another treat. In <i>Rapunzel's Revenge</i>, author Shannon Hale partners with Dean Hale and Nathan Hale to retell the Grimm's classic as a graphic novel.</p> <p>This is definitely not your grandmother's Rapunzel—the quietly submissive, long-suffering princess, waiting for the prince to rescue her. The Hales's updated teenager-in-a-tower has a big heart, strong braids, and a swashbuckling, high-energy, big-adventure story to tell. This Rapunzel is "WANTED DEAD OR ALIVE for horse thieving, kidnapping, jail breaking, and using her hair in a manner other than nature intended!"</p> <p>While <i>Rapunzel's Revenge</i> is definitely the stuff of high adventure and the old West, it is very much a story about growing up female, taking chances, negotiating potentially dangerous landscapes, confronting cruelty and loss, and re-finding the nurture and comfort that can be had in love.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Phyllis Thompson Johnson City, TN</p>	<p><b><i>Rebound</i></b> by Bob Krech Marshall Cavendish, 2006, 271 pp., \$6.99</p> <p>Adolescence, Sports, Racial Issues ISBN: 978-0-7614-5543-1</p> <p>Polish American kids from the Greenville working-class, rustbelt neighborhood don't play basketball; they wrestle. Ray Wisniewski doesn't want to buy into the idea that black kids play hoops and white kids wrestle. Ray is determined to overcome this.</p> <p>Krech's story of "teenager tries to make good" is another reminder that subdivisions, barriers, and bigotry can pollute a school. Ray learns a hard lesson when he couldn't make the basketball team under the white coach for two seasons. When a new black coach arrives his senior year, Ray is suddenly talented enough to make the 22-man squad. The only problem with making a varsity team is that it brings on unasked-for responsibilities and treatments . . . and makes those barriers even worse.</p> <p>What should Ray do when there are conflicts between his white friends and his new-found black friends? Or when some of his teammates see him as a detriment to the team?</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Cord McKeithen Baton Rouge, LA</p>

<p><b>Salt</b> by Maurice Gee Orca Book Publishers, 2009, 272 pp., \$18.00</p> <p>Quest/ Fantasy/ Romance/ Revenge ISBN: 987-1-55469-209-5</p> <p>Hari's only goal is to rescue his father from the depths of Deep Salt, a terrible place from which no one returns. The beautiful Pearl hopes to escape her privileged world and her loveless, arranged marriage. In their separate worlds, Pearl and Hari are enemies, but when these two characters' lives collide, a whirlwind of an adventure unfolds.</p> <p><i>Salt</i>, the first in Maurice Gee's Salt Trilogy is a fantastical tale filled with magical abilities, a corrupt regime, and unspeakable terror hidden in a deadly cave. Pearl and Hari's whimsical quest begins in this exciting adventure that gives the reader a hunger for more. A warning to all: once you enter Gee's magical world, there is no turning back until the journey is complete.</p> <p>Kimberly Coyle Nashville, TN</p>	<p><b>Surviving the Angel of Death: The Story of a Mengele Twin in Auschwitz</b> by Eva Mozes Kor and Lisa Rojany Buccieri Tanglewood, 2009, 129 pp., \$15.99</p> <p>Biography/Holocaust ISBN: 978-1-933718-28-6</p> <p>Eva Mozes Kor wanted her self-published memoir of her experiences as a survivor of Dr. Josef Mengele's twin experiments in Auschwitz to be adapted for young adult readers. Rojany Buccieri wrote a masterful, searing, and mind-numbing account of two sisters who, at age 10, entered the Nazi camp of horror and evil and emerged as survivors. Eva's only goal was to keep herself and her sister alive, but it is her first-person narrative voice that lends powerful credence to the power of the human spirit and the strength of the will to live despite incredible odds.</p> <p>Eva provides details of Mengele's experiments and camp conditions, while family pictures before and after the camp provide additional documentation. The text not only honors Eva and her courage, but also offers a compelling argument about forgiveness and tolerance. The reader will not want to stop reading until the last page.</p> <p>Judith A. Hayn Little Rock, AR</p>
<p><b>The Brothers Story</b> by Katherine Sturtevant Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009, 275 pp., \$16.99</p> <p>Historical Fiction/Family/Growing Up ISBN: 978-0-374-30992-3</p> <p>A young boy faces love, sadness, and coming to terms with his own sexuality. Kit's mother implores him to fill the "head of the house" duties after his father dies; these duties include providing the daily basic essentials during a difficult winter, which often requires him to fabricate, beg, and steal.</p> <p>Kit and his twin brother Christy, born into extreme poverty in an Essex village, are close, but Kit's love for his "simple" identical twin is often challenged. Is he his brother's keeper? Kit both involves Christy in schemes and ploys and protects him from others taunting his ignorance.</p> <p>Kit abandons his brother to find a new life in London, a place he believes is filled with jobs, money, and rich soil. He becomes an apprentice, but can he, in good conscience, continue to stay away from his codependent, suffering family?</p> <p>Montika Allen-Atkinson Junction City, KS</p>	<p><b>The Silver Blade</b> by Sally Gardner Dial Books, an imprint of Penguin, 2009, 362 pp., \$17.99 ISBN: 978-0-8037-3377-0</p> <p><i>The Silver Blade</i>, the sequel to <i>The Red Necklace</i>, is historical fantasy set during the French Revolution. It centers on Yann, a young gypsy with the power to move objects and read people's minds, and Sido, the young daughter of an aristocrat.</p> <p>After rescuing Sido from the evil Count Kalliovski, who wished to capture Sido for his own bride, Yann flees to England, making secret journeys back to France to smuggle out refugees. He and Sido fall in love, but she is again kidnapped. He needs all his courage and skill to rescue her a second time. Even then, the young lovers are not safe, for our hero learns his true identity. With this knowledge, how can Sido marry him? The horrors of the French Revolution make a dazzlingly vivid setting for a tale of high adventure that is also a touching love story.</p> <p>June Newman-Graham Baton Rouge, LA</p>

<p><b><i>The Poison Eaters &amp; Other Stories</i></b> by Holly Black Big Mouth House, 2009, 256 pp., \$17.99</p> <p>Fantasy/Short Story ISBN: 978-1-931520-63-8</p> <p>Holly Black's <i>The Poison Eaters &amp; Other Stories</i> takes readers on an entertainingly outlandish journey replete with vampire and werewolf infiltration, souls sold to the Devil, faeries and unicorns striking up deals with humans, and young girls bred to have poisonous skin. In the world Black creates, magic itself is not fantastical or otherworldly; it is organic, natural, never out of place. This collection of short stories takes elements of a dark world, often decried as “humanity’s underbelly,” and thrusts them all too convincingly into a position of normalcy. Neither people nor stories are constrained by what is routine or plausible.</p> <p>Readers must shuck off reality, like clothes before a shower, because inside the stories, “magical things seemed like they could be ordinary and ordinary things were almost magical” (108). Recommended for a mature adolescent and imaginative audience, <i>The Poison Eaters</i> will not fail to entertain.</p> <p>Whitney Hewell Nashville, TN</p>	<p><b><i>Tiger Moon</i></b> by Antonia Michaelis, translated by Anthea Bell Amulet Books, 2009, 480 pp., \$8.95</p> <p>In early twentieth-century India, a wealthy merchant named Ahmed Mudhi is on a journey when he sees a young girl daydreaming under a tree. Captivated by her beauty, he immediately finds the girl’s family and arranges to marry her that evening. Thus Safia becomes the eighth wife of a man she has never met. Safia knows it is only a matter of time before her husband finds out her secret, a secret that will surely mean her death. As she awaits her fate, Safia tells the story of Farhad, a clever thief turned hero on a quest to save a beautiful princess from marriage to the demon king.</p> <p>Like a Hindu Scheherazade, Safia weaves her tale of magic, adventure, and romance in an attempt to save herself. As the two stories intertwine, Safia and Farhad learn about courage, love, and what it means to be a hero.</p> <p>Lindsey Bollinger Nashville, TN</p>
<p><b><i>Touch</i></b> by Francine Prose HarperTeen, 2009, 262 pp., \$16.99</p> <p>Friendship/Truth/Divorce ISBN: 978-0-06-137517-0</p> <p>High school freshman Maisie Willard has been through plenty already—her parents’ divorce, trying to adjust to new stepparents, and moving between households to decide where she feels most welcome.</p> <p>When she returns to her father’s home, she’s reunited with her three best friends—three boys who’ve been best buddies with her as long as she can remember. But something’s changed. And soon, a touching incident with the boys in the back of a school bus becomes a communitywide issue, further shattering Maisie’s world. But, as the “truth” comes out, stories change, and even Maisie’s not sure what really went on.</p> <p>Students will be able to identify with the ambiguity of perceptions—and defining what truth really is. Prose provides a realistic portrayal of a teen’s life made uneasy following her parents’ divorce, only to be escalated when rumors build about the incident on the bus.</p> <p>Lori Atkins Goodson Manhattan, KS</p>	<p><b><i>Publishers who wish to submit a book for possible review should send a copy of the book to:</i></b></p> <p><b>Melanie Hundley</b> 1021 Delmas Ave. Nashville, TN 37216-3630</p> <p><b>To submit a review for possible publication or to become a reviewer, contact Melanie Hundley at <a href="mailto:melanie.hundley@vanderbilt.edu">melanie.hundley@vanderbilt.edu</a>.</b></p>

## “Their Lives Are Beautiful, Too”:

How Matt de la Peña Illuminates the Lives of Urban Teens

**A**s an author who writes about the experiences of urban teens, Matt de la Peña understands that there’s a clear line separating the haves from the have-nots in America. Having grown up poor in a Mexican American border town (National City, California), the son of a white mother and a first-generation Mexican American father, Matt knows first-hand that skin color and income level play a powerful role in urban teens’ perceptions of the world—and in the world’s perceptions of them.

That’s why Matt’s novels—*Ball Don’t Lie* (Delacorte, 2005), *Mexican WhiteBoy* (Delacorte 2008), and his newest book, *We Were Here* (Delacorte, 2009)—take such an unflinching look at the role of race and class in urban teens’ lives and identity formation. Whether his characters are talented athletes or teens in the juvenile justice system, they see the privileges conferred on kids born into white middle-class homes, and they recognize how much less they themselves have been given by virtue of their birthright. For Matt’s characters, coming of age is integrally tied to the process of developing race and class consciousness—that is, deciding who they can be in a world that expects so much less of them than their white middle-class peers.

“I’ve always wanted to write about the other side of the tracks, the have-nots,” Matt said, “maybe because that’s who I was.” Getting readers to see those have-nots is the goal that drives all of Matt’s work. “I’ll never forget this epiphany I had when I lived in L.A. I saw this kid sitting alone on a bus stop bench, hood up, headphones on, holding a basketball. People pulling up to the stoplight were oblivious to his

existence. Folks in nice cars like BMWs and Mercedes and Jags just didn’t see him. I tried to figure out what that meant to me. And then I said to myself, ‘Man, I want to write about kids like him. I want to show how his life is just as beautiful as the lives of the rich folks sitting in those nice cars. I want to make people see him for three hundred pages.’ And I guess that’s what I’m still shooting for.”<sup>1</sup>

### Writing about the Forgotten Kids

The image of the kid with his hood up resonated deeply with Matt, in part because of his own experiences as a teenager. Noticing how kids in school were implicitly sorted into groups on the basis of social class and skin color made a powerful impression on him. Though Matt conceded that some of that sorting was self-imposed, the result was that some kids had a real chance to succeed and were encouraged to go to college, while others were basically forgotten. Eventually the forgotten kids expected nothing more for themselves than their teachers did.

“I was in that [forgotten] group,” Matt said. “But my cousins, who were darker than me and did worse in school, they were *deep* in that dismissed group. I think the world sort of looks to the kids who have potential. These are the kids who are going to do something with their lives, who are going to do something for the world. I don’t think it’s malicious, but the other kids get lost from that point on. I was lucky enough to get a basketball scholarship. And once I arrived on campus, my thinking started to evolve. My self-perception evolved. But most kids like me aren’t so lucky.”

Matt admitted that he went to college mostly for basketball and girls. Once he arrived, however, he quickly realized that college was his ceiling for basketball—he knew he was never going to play in the NBA. For the first time in years, he started wondering what else he could be good at. “I had an interesting moment where I was like, okay, well, what am I going to do now? All along I’d been writing street poetry, never showing anyone. And then I started to see a parallel between grace in basketball and grace in street poetry.”

But it was only when Matt won a big writing contest during his junior year that his self-perception changed significantly. Winning shocked not only him, but most everyone around him, because so few people knew that he wrote. Having professors recognize his talent helped Matt see himself differently. “That validation, those professors picking *me*, it completely changed the way I viewed myself. For the first time in my life I thought, man, maybe I *am* smart.”

As the first person in his family to go to college, Matt was motivated to succeed academically, in part because he wanted to make his mom proud. “She was so happy I made it to college. And I wanted to see her like that always. A lot of sons have this, I think. She’d given so much to her kids and I wanted to reward her somehow. So I invested everything in school and books.”<sup>2</sup>

And yet the privilege of attending college could be fraught at times. “A lot of my family were full Mexican—my cousins, my uncles, my aunts—and so I felt like I was a little bit less than, in terms of the culture. However, on the flip side, those same people sort of built me up as the hope of the family, you know, like Matt’s going to go to college, and he’s going to do this. And so that leaves you feeling both proud and incredibly guilty at the same time.”<sup>3</sup>

Despite the recognition he’d received for his writing, as college graduation neared, Matt still hadn’t become his own advocate. Perhaps he’d been one of the forgotten kids in school for too long. Convinced of his talent, Matt’s *professors* filled out applications to graduate MFA programs for him, knowing that Matt wouldn’t have believed such a thing was possible. He got into two of them. Soon his street poetry gave way to short stories, which gave way to novels, and the kid he’d seen at the bus stop with his hood up became the protagonist of his first book, *Ball Don’t Lie*.

But even after he’d made it to graduate school at San Diego State University, Matt had more catching up to do. “I didn’t know my POVs, my tenses,” he explained. “I was writing with my heart, not my head.” In time, Matt learned his craft. When he finished *Ball Don’t Lie*, he sent it to five agents. Four of them wanted the book, which was eventually published by Random House and released as a movie last fall starring Rosanna Arquette, Ludacris, and a young streetball player named Grayson “The Professor” Boucher.<sup>4</sup> (Matt himself had a bit part as the referee in the big game, and his dad played the school janitor.<sup>5</sup>) *Ball Don’t Lie* also earned literary accolades when it was named a Best Book for Young Adults by the American Library Association, as was Matt’s second novel, *Mexican WhiteBoy*—which was also named to the ALA’s Top Ten list.

Since those early successes, Matt has continued to keep his focus as a writer on the forgotten kids. When talking about his work, he often still mentions the boy with the hood up, how his life is beautiful, too.<sup>6</sup> But at the same time, representing the complexity of urban kids’ experience requires Matt to paint honest portraits of impoverished urban neighborhoods and the dangers they contain—including fights, hustles, drug and alcohol abuse, and occasional acts of theft or vandalism. Born into the urban environment, Matt’s characters are both perpetrators of violence and victims of it. They talk and behave in ways that may offend middle-class sensibilities, but those practices allow them to survive.

Matt’s books give the real kids who live in low-income urban communities a voice, and they give middle-class readers a glimpse into lives very different from their own. His novels also offer readers insight into the *motives* behind characters’ decisions, even when the decisions they make are bad ones. Matt goes to great lengths to explore the nuances of urban teens’ emotional lives, including their fears and yearning, the hurts they’ve experienced, and the poignancy of their

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**Representing the complexity of urban kids’ experience requires Matt to paint honest portraits of impoverished urban neighborhoods and the dangers they contain.**

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goals and dreams. In light of the social and material obstacles they face, the fact that his characters are still trying to do right, albeit on their own time and in their own ways, is no small achievement—and that’s what Matt wants the world to see.

“I’ve always thought it was super important, out of respect, that I *show* the forgotten kids, the group with ‘less potential.’ Because I really think there is beauty there, too. And grace. And dignity. Sometimes the growth these folks show is amazing. Maybe they don’t become doctors, but their growth should still be highlighted.”<sup>7</sup>

### Highlighting Injustice and Inequality: *Ball Don’t Lie*

Pieces of Matt’s personal story and ways of thinking about the world are evident in each of his novels, as is his desire to cast light on the role that race and class play in urban teens’ identity formation. For example, the pivotal scene in *Ball Don’t Lie*, Matt’s first novel,

isn’t a moment on the basketball court. Instead, it’s a moment where the main character, Sticky—a white foster kid who spends all his spare time playing basketball with homeless guys at Lincoln Rec, an all-black gym—is forced to confront his position in a society

that’s structured to preserve inequality. Though Sticky has phenomenal talent and dreams of playing in the NBA, the poverty that oppresses him on a daily basis turns something as seemingly simple as getting a birthday present for his girlfriend into a complex challenge. Panhandling enables him to raise some of the money he needs, but it’s not enough to buy the gold bracelet he has his eye on at Macy’s department store, so he plans to steal it.

Sticky spends days plotting his theft, rationalizing that he’d never rob a rich person on the street, but that gold from Macy’s is ripe for the taking. When Dante, an older player at Lincoln Rec and a mentor to Sticky, hears this logic, it triggers something in him. He feels compelled to challenge Sticky’s reasoning, arguing that moral distinctions like Sticky’s make no sense in a world where the laws are set up by the

people who have everything in order to protect them from the people who have nothing (228).

But Dante can’t stop at this point. Reflecting on how his own life has been shaped by his skin color and his poverty, he urges Sticky to recognize the full depth of his disenfranchisement. Dante lays a series of three stones on the ground outside the back of Lincoln Rec to illustrate his message:

*See that wall in front a you? he says. In America, life’s like a race to that wall. That’s the way I see it. He sets the first stone less than a foot from the wall, points and says: If you born white and got money then you start the race way up here. Ahead of everybody . . . .*

*But say you ain’t white and ain’t rich. Say you poor and black. Or you Mexican. Puerto Rican . . . . You may not even have enough food to eat a balanced meal every night . . . . In this case you startin the race of life way back here. He points to the second stone. Only a fool would think someone who starts here has the same opportunities as cats startin at the first stone . . . .*

*And let me tell you something. If you some scrubby white boy who’s been moved in and out of different foster homes since you was little, then you off the charts, boy . . . . Dante snatches up another stone and puts it even further back. Points at it. Moves Sticky’s face so he has to look at it . . . . You startin out way back here. You three stones back. (229–230)*

Sticky doesn’t want to hear these ideas. In fact, he can barely stand to think about them. But in the aftermath of Dante’s speech, the driving question for Sticky becomes, what is he going to do about his situation? Where will Sticky draw his own moral line?

In a telephone interview during July 2009,<sup>8</sup> Matt explained that a big aspect of his experience growing up was sorting out his feelings about living in poverty. “I used to be so angry about the kids that had stuff,” he said. “Like the kids that had cars, the kids that had money to go get lunch every day off campus. I used to feel so slighted. I was like, hey man, why do they have stuff and I don’t? And I used it as a defense mechanism. I hated them before they could judge me. I wanted to punch first, if that makes sense.”

In giving his characters a similar awareness of social and economic inequality, Matt allows them—and perhaps some of his readers—to feel a bit of that same anger. As a writer, however, Matt is careful never to present his characters as victims who are trapped by their circumstances. Instead, he portrays them as people who are faced with a series of choices.

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**Sticky doesn’t want to hear these ideas. In fact, he can barely stand to think about them.**

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It's up to them to decide how to respond to the injustices they face. "I think it's really fun to watch kids figure out where they draw the moral line," Matt said. "Because the truth is, you know, there is no set-in-stone line . . . it's all set by others, and usually by people who have everything. So I think it's interesting to watch kids realize that and then figure out where they're going to put their line."

Matt related his stance on teens' negotiations with morality to his reading of Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil* in graduate school. "I'll never forget when he was breaking down the definition of good and bad, how he said it was merely a product of who's looking at it. So if the aristocratic society is looking down at the proletariat and they're saying, 'Well look, they're trying to take our stuff, or they're poor and they're making the street dirty, they're bad.' But then, you know, the working class people are looking at the aristocrats and saying, 'But they have all the money and they're hoarding it, so they're bad.' I think bad depends on whose point of view it is. And with kids like these that I like to work with, they're not necessarily *bad*, but they're trying to figure out where to fit their sense of morality into the world."

Matt raises ideas like these in his novels—issues of inequality, and morality, and personal choice—because he's seen how young people's responses to the injustices they face can have life or death consequences. One of Matt's own cousins had a boyfriend who, like Sticky, tried to steal money to get her a gift. Unlike Sticky, the cousin's boyfriend was shot and killed.

For Matt, writing novels provides a space for figuring out how and why such things can happen, and exploring what they mean. "A lot of people ask me, 'Are you born a writer?' And I don't think it's necessarily true. I just think what you either have or you don't is this ability to see something that's complex and worth talking about."

## Exploring Racial Awakening and Race Consciousness: Mexican WhiteBoy

During an interview with Amy Bowllan in August of 2009,<sup>9</sup> Matt reflected on his body of work so far. He said that the most prominent recurring theme is the search for racial identity and racial awakening—although he conceded that class also plays an important role. Even before he became a novelist, Matt used

writing to explore the role that race and racism often play in young people's identity formation. "In everything I've ever written—even the stupid poems I used to write in high school to try and get girls—elements of racism and racial identity and racial consciousness color the world."

Like Sticky, Matt was a racial outsider at the all-black community gym in Balboa Park where he played basketball day and night during high school.

The racial alienation he felt when he first arrived at the gym was so strong, it caused him to question his talent for the game. "I'll never forget the first day I showed up and tried to play. The regulars laughed

at me and said I'd come to the wrong place. 'Yo, Mexicans don't play ball,' one of the guys announced, and all his guys busted up. 'Yeah,' another guy said. 'What you need to do is get yourself a soccer ball, Pele. Kick it around in the grass outside.' They all laughed and laughed. I wasn't allowed to play that day. The next day, either. In fact, I spent the entire first week up in the bleachers, watching. I wondered if they were right. Maybe I would never be good enough to play in college because I was Mexican."

Of course, it turned out that Matt was good enough to play in college. By the time high school was over and he was offered a basketball scholarship, a few of the guys from the gym even showed up at Matt's school on the day he signed his letter of intent. Looking back, he counts those men as some of the most important people in his life. But his first experience with them was uncomfortable—and profoundly racialized.

Therefore, it makes sense that in all three of Matt's novels, characters engage in an ongoing process of reading each other racially. They form understandings of who other people are, at least in part, on the basis of ideas they have about those people as members of different racial groups. But just as important, Matt's characters read *themselves* racially. This is especially true for Danny, the biracial protagonist of Matt's second novel, *Mexican WhiteBoy*:

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**For Matt, writing novels provides a space for figuring out how and why such things can happen, and exploring what they mean.**

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And Danny's brown. Half-Mexican brown. A shade darker than all the white kids at his private high school, Leucadia Prep. Up there, Mexican people do under-the-table yard work and hide out in the hills because they're in San Diego illegally. Only other people on Leucadia's campus who share his shade are the lunch-line ladies, the gardeners, the custodians. But whenever Danny comes down here, to National City—where his dad grew up, where all his aunts and uncles and cousins still live—he feels pale. A full shade lighter. Albino almost. Less than. (2)

It was in a Blogtalk Radio interview with Cyrus Webb<sup>10</sup> that Matt acknowledged how closely Danny's struggles with race mirror his own experience. "I think Danny was the hardest character I've written so far

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**Matt's aim in raising these issues is to help readers appreciate the substance and the significance of urban teens' thoughts.**

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for one simple reason, and that is, he's probably the closest to me in terms of the stuff he's dealing with. I was a biracial kid—father Mexican, mom white, just like Danny."

Matt's connections with Danny gave him plenty of insights as a writer dealing with the

tensions of being biracial. In other ways, however, he struggled while writing Danny. "I was really mean to him in the first draft," Matt explained. "I was a little bit hard on him, because I kind of *blamed* him for not fitting in and not being Mexican enough. And then in the revision, I had to pull back, because I don't think the writer should ever blame any character. And so I had to pull back and just let him exist and sort of study him in a way, kind of like he's studying Kyle [the white pitcher Danny admires on the Leucadia Prep baseball team]. But that's actually where he came from, was from a lot of issues I felt growing up."

Danny's talent as a baseball player offers him a way to become somebody, to escape the poverty he finds in National City during the summer he spends there with his relatives. But it's different for his cousin Sofia and his friend Uno, a biracial kid with a black father and a Mexican mother. The connections they see between race and poverty—in the form of the limited life chances available to the majority of dark-skinned people in their community—make it hard for them to imagine any other way of living. And yet that doesn't stop them from actively thinking and wondering about the future.

At times their view is cynical. When Uno asks Sofia if she's ever thought about college, she reveals the low expectations she has for herself. "What do I know about college?" she replies. "Nobody I know's ever been there. Nobody in *my* family, that's for sure" (210–211).

But Sofia doesn't stop there. She keeps thinking, going on to recall the memory of watching a little Mexican girl play with her parents at the neighborhood playground. Sofia tells Uno how the little girl sat for a moment at the top of a slide, laughing and clapping, before calling out to her parents down below, 'Here I come.' Watching that little girl prompted Sofia to reflect on what she herself had lost in the process of growing up poor and Mexican in National City:

It was like she was saying it to more than just her parents . . . She was saying it to everybody around her that day. To the whole world even. "Here I come." And I kept thinking, Man, I bet I was like that when I was little, too. What's happened to me since then? We all start out believing we can do anything. Even Mexican kids who grow up here. But at some point we lose it. It totally disappears. Like me, for example. Why is that? (212)

Despite their awareness of the very real disadvantages that correlate with their social class and skin color, Matt's characters don't give up. Sofia and Uno continue to talk about and imagine what their future lives could be. They hold onto the hope of achieving some form of success, and they take small steps toward getting there.

Matt's aim in raising these issues is to help readers appreciate the substance and the significance of urban teens' thoughts, no matter where their conversations occur or how their ideas get expressed. "A lot of people look at characters from working class families, and they don't know how much thinking these kids do. And they're not just thinking about small things. Sometimes they're going to talk about big things. And maybe the language isn't perfect, it's not proper English every bit of the way. But they *are* going to discuss [weighty issues, like structural inequality, or religious faith], and it may come up when they're just watching this kid [Danny, in *Mexican WhiteBoy*] throw the ball alone. You know, like what does all this mean?"<sup>11</sup>

Matt cultivates this quality of thoughtfulness in his characters because he grew up seeing it in the people around him. During our telephone interview,<sup>12</sup> he



explained what he noticed about conversations at the gym back in Balboa Park where he played basketball as a teenager. “I remember just listening, because I never spoke. I would just listen. And I was amazed at how intelligent the dialogue can be at times between a guy who works at a gas station all night and a guy who sells drugs. It’s amazing. At times you will hear some things that are smarter than anything you would hear at school.”

As a novelist, Matt learned to capture that kind of intelligence through dialogue, embedding profound insights about the world into ordinary street dialect. “A lot of it is metaphor, you know, ways of comparing one thing to another, that’s like a really cool connection. And that maybe the middle class reader might not expect. But I think it’s amazing. The truth is, yes, there are different speech patterns, but there’s intelligence in *every* kind of speech pattern.”

Matt continues to find evidence of this intelligence—and material for his books—in his everyday life in New York, where he now teaches creative writing classes at NYU and Gotham Writers Workshop. He explained how a conversation he overheard on the train between a father and his son led to the character of Senior, Uno’s father in *Mexican WhiteBoy*. “One day I was on the subway riding from Brooklyn to Manhattan, and I was just minding my own business with an iPod on. This Puerto Rican father got on with his son, and his son I could tell had just done something wrong. I think he had been caught with marijuana at school. And the dad was working class, I think he worked for MTA [Metropolitan Transit Authority], and he was trying to tell his kid that this wasn’t right. And he started saying all these crazy things, like literally he was saying, ‘Man is his own best doctor, and you fake it till you make it,’ and all these crazy things that didn’t really make sense. But I was like, he’s trying. He’s trying to talk to his son.

“And then he literally came up with that spaghetti line about, ‘If I cook spaghetti for you every single day, that’s the same, but if one day I put meatballs in it, that’s a change, and that change is in you, son, and that change is God.’ And he said that word for word, and I turned down the volume on my iPod and wrote it down. Every single word of it. And then he became Senior.

“So I just love [that], because, I mean, you could sit there and say, ‘Hey, this guy is not that smart, and

this is making no sense, he’s not helping this kid.’ But in my mind I was like, I grew up with this guy, and the thing is, he’s looking at his son, and he’s talking to his son, and that’s the most important thing. The language is kind of secondary.”

## No Kid Is Born Bad: We Were Here

Matt’s newest book, *We Were Here*, explores the lives of three teenagers who meet in a group home where they’ve been sent after serving time in juvenile detention. Like all the other kids in the group home, Miguel, the main character, has committed a horrible crime—but unlike the others, his crime was an accident. Still, nothing can assuage the grief and self-loathing he feels, or the stigma of being a group home kid. Beneath his hostile attitude toward the counselors and other residents, Miguel is terrified of spending the rest of his life weighted down by guilt over what he’s done.

In order to pass the time and escape the burden of his emotions, Miguel spends part of each day in the group home reading, but the only books available to him are the classics. Miguel doesn’t mind; he actually likes reading. It’s just that where he’s from, it isn’t cool to read a book unless a teacher’s making you. The first book he pulls off the shelf is *The Color Purple*. The sadness and the beauty of the story blow him away.

Matt said he gave Miguel *The Color Purple* to read because of the impact the book had on him after going through high school as a reluctant reader. “I had a professor my freshman year [in college at University of the Pacific] who said, ‘Hey Matt, I want to give you this book, and I know you’re on the road all the time, and I don’t even want to give you a due date on this. But I want you to respond to this novel by the end of the semester.’ And at first I was reading it and I was like, hey what’s going on, why would she give me this book? This woman can’t even speak proper English.

“But for the first time in my life, I finished a book

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**As a novelist, Matt learned to capture that kind of intelligence through dialogue, embedding profound insights about the world into ordinary street dialect.**

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in two days. That character moved me so much, I couldn't believe it. I was about to cry at the end. And I always tell people, I grew up in the kind of family where you don't cry as a male, like to the point where if you get hit by a car and your arm's laying across the street, still your dad will look at you and be like, you better not cry. So the fact that I was moved by a novel shocked me. And so *The Color Purple* is still—to this day, I feel like I owe so much to that novel. It totally changed my way of looking at books. And it made me a reader. So that was kind of fun, too, to have him discover literature.”<sup>13</sup>

Matt also linked Miguel's decision to begin reading to the story of Malcolm X. “I thought of Malcolm X, when he's in prison. You want to get something out of that time that you have to serve. And so I felt like hey, Miguel, he wants to be alone. He also wants to gain something from this time. So instead of socializing with other kids, he gravitates towards books and being alone with them.”

Reading may help Miguel to pass time in the group home, but it doesn't help him to come to terms with his grief, or figure out how he can ever make amends with his family. So when a crazy, violent Chinese kid named Mong invites Miguel to break out of the group home and run away to Mexico, Miguel figures that starting a new life is really his only option. He doesn't trust Mong, but he doesn't particularly care what happens to himself, either. When Miguel's roommate Rondell, a big black kid who doesn't appear to be very smart, asks if he can come along, too, Miguel doesn't care enough to say no.

Not only does Miguel agree to run away; he makes the situation worse by stealing all the group home's petty cash. He also steals his official file, along with Mong's and Rondell's. It's not something he thinks about; he grabs the files on impulse, perhaps because his relationship to his own file is so tormented. When Jaden, the counselor at the group home, first invites him to talk about what's recorded in the file, Miguel reacts defiantly:

You bring people in here and talk and talk and talk. You open up their stupid-ass file and act like it has all the answers about 'em, and then you talk some more. But you don't know me, man. You don't know the first thing about who I am or where I come from. (50)

Jaden concedes that this is true, but he insists that he wants to help.

Miguel thinks about his file again after he and Mong and Rondell have run away from the group home and find themselves stranded in San Francisco. When they suddenly realize that they have no idea what they're going to do next, Miguel picks a fight with Mong, the person he blames for their circumstances. After the fight, Miguel stands at Fisherman's Wharf, watching the sea lions and worrying about who he's becoming in relation to his file:

They had no clue who I was or how something inside me was changing by the minute, getting more and more angry and confused. They didn't know how I was becoming what people probably thought if they ever read my file, saw what I did . . . Maybe it's a waste of damn time to fight what's in your file. Maybe you're destined to end up being that person no matter what. (100–101)

A few days later, after the three of them have spent the evening drinking and talking around a campfire on the beach, Miguel stays up late reading Mong's and Rondell's files. The impact on him is far more profound than he expected. In fact, he's stunned and horrified to learn about the traumatic experiences Mong and Rondell have had. “How's that even fair?” Miguel wonders. “To have so many bad things happen in one life” (136).

Matt's understanding of the role that juvenile offenders' files can play in their perceptions of themselves and in other people's perceptions of them arises from his own experience working as a counselor in a group home for a couple of years after college. Like Miguel, reading kids' files gave Matt a very different and far deeper understanding of who those group home kids were.

“I remember thinking, oh, this kid right here, he's just a little asshole, you know, he's a bad kid. And then that night, I would go in and read his file and find out that he'd had a stepfather who had raped him, or something amazingly difficult for any kid to ever deal with.

“And then you start to think about this and you say, wow, there's no kid that's born bad. Or, you know, if there are, maybe just a couple. Most kids have something happen to them that moves them in this direction, and it's almost like, it's easier for them to be bad because they feel like that's the way the world defined them. It makes more sense.”<sup>14</sup>

Because of the bad things that Miguel and Mong and Rondell each have done, they struggle mightily to

believe that their lives can still matter. Their recklessness, their detachment from adults who want to help them, and their tendency to fight are all manifestations of the underlying fear and sadness they live with each day. Consequently, there's more at stake in their journey from the group home to Mexico and beyond than the desire to start a new life. What they need to know is that they haven't been erased as human beings because of their crimes.

Matt put it this way: "Ultimately, that's all these kids want, that's their ultimate motivation, is for people to know they're there. For Rondell, he wants God to know he's there, because he thinks that God's important. But then Mong, when he carves [a saying] into the rock, he just . . . he understands that he's gone, and he just wants people to know that he existed. And Miguel, he was watching that, and he was taking all that in, and for him it's like, he would love nothing more than for his mother to acknowledge him, [to have his] family remember that he's there, and that he still exists. I think in the book in general, it's wanting to be seen. And wanting people to know that they existed."<sup>15</sup>

## The Desire to Be Seen

Young people's desire to be seen is at the heart of all of Matt's work, and it's something Matt understands personally. He talked about what being seen meant to him in relation to the book *Mexican WhiteBoy*.

"Danny wants to be a great baseball player so that his dad will see him. And me, I think I wanted to become a writer so that my family would see me. But the interesting thing is my evolution in terms of that. I don't expect them to read [the book] anymore. I just expect that it's out in the world. It's on a bookshelf. It exists. They exist in that book, or I should say, we exist in that book, and that's enough."<sup>16</sup>

For urban teens who feel that their voices have gone unheard and the significance of their lives has gone unrecognized, Matt de la Peña's novels provide a powerful space of affirmation. The very existence of Matt's work is testimony to the fact that these teens' lives and voices matter. But Matt's novels don't just speak to urban teens. They also challenge readers whose lives have been shaped by race and class privi-

lege to consider how the world looks to people who have less and live differently. As Matt reminds us, their lives are beautiful, too.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Interview with Shon Bacon, All the Blog's a Page, 2 September 2009.
- <sup>2</sup> Personal email, 2 October 2009.
- <sup>3</sup> Blogtalk radio interview with Cyrus Webb, 27 August 2009.
- <sup>4</sup> Gotham faculty profile page.
- <sup>5</sup> Telephone interview, 10 July 2009.
- <sup>6</sup> Blogtalk radio interview, 27 August 2009.
- <sup>7</sup> Personal email, 2 October 2009.
- <sup>8</sup> Telephone interview, 10 July 2009.
- <sup>9</sup> Interview with Amy Bowllan, Bowllan's Blog, 31 August 2009.
- <sup>10</sup> Blogtalk radio interview with Cyrus Webb, 27 August 2009.
- <sup>11</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>12</sup> Telephone interview, 10 July 2009.
- <sup>13</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>15</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>16</sup> Blogtalk radio interview with Cyrus Webb, 27 August 2009.

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## Scattering Light over the Shadow of Booklessness

**L**ook, if I walked into my class dreamily thinking, “Today, I am going to scatter some light,” quite frankly, well . . . I’d get eaten alive by my kids. I mean these are teens. Urban, multicultural, reluctant-to-read, video-game-playing, hormone-surg-ing, iPod-toting, MySpace-on-my-mind teens. Any-one walking into a classroom striving to accomplish philosophical, think-tank literacy ideals that sound as if they were plucked from an erudite academic journal is going to have their bubble burst more brutally than the American housing market.

Then again, if you don’t walk in with a plan to scatter some light for your kids, they—and you—are going to be swallowed by the darkness.

Entirely.

So let’s call it like it is for a moment. The shadow of booklessness lurking over the lives of young adults in America today is a frightening, we-need-to-be-freaking-out-about-it problem. (Not that I have any strong opinions about the manner or anything.) So what’s my answer? My tool? My weapon to eradicate the plague of this contagion and replace it with white streams of hope, inspiration, passion, literacy, and enthusiasm?

YA literature, of course.

Real books! The fact is, I am one of YA literature’s most unabashed, biggest fans.

Look, sometimes in this world you just gotta put your stake in the ground and make a claim. For me, as a teacher, as a writer, as a parent, as a citizen of this country and the world, my stake is staked. I believe in using real books to reach real kids to impact real lives

in a very real, very tangible, very gainful, productive, and positive way.

Happily, I can also report I’ve banked a wee bit of success abiding by this philosophy. And others can replicate it as well. The fact of the matter is, scattering light begins by applying some common sense, not being afraid to point the finger, and remembering the needs of the kids we are trying to serve with our best efforts.

To begin, let’s get a couple of things on the table that are being swept under the rug. The textbook industry is fleecing America’s schools, in my opinion, and I have no idea how they hoodwinked so many smart people into buying into the idea that watered down, disengaging, tired, and oh-so-20th-century literary anthologies need to be the center of America’s academic curricular wheel, while real books—books that kids *love*—are being purposefully left on the periphery.

Or on the shelf entirely.

It’s hogwash!

Real books are not a luxury in the modern-day classroom. Real books are critical. They are essential. They are oxygen to the pulse of literacy! The fact is, every great language arts teacher I know uses real books in the classroom. Every last one of them.

Which books? I’ll get to that in a minute, but first, let’s face a few truths about incorporating a one-size-fits-all approach to literacy instruction. It’s nonsense. And scripted curriculum is buffoonery. (Not that I have any strong opinions on the matter or anything.)

The fact is, I’d move off of this point right now,

too, if it weren't for the fact that American schools are currently spending hundreds of millions of dollars a year buying textbooks, scripted curriculum programs, and other resources of like ilk. Do I need to rehash the war stories about frustrated teachers in the trenches being mandated to use materials their kids inform them are loathsome? Do I need to retell the tales of how some teachers are being prohibited outright from using novels in the classrooms so that their instruction can be paced, controlled, legislated, and micromanaged from locations that aren't even on the same physical school site? Have you heard about the teacher who had to photocopy a short story from the textbook onto copy paper just to get her kids to read it because they simply refuse to engage with 5-pound, 1,300-page, deflavorized doorstops?

I will go to my grave believing that textbooks, as they currently exist, are just flat out not the best, most awesome, most excellent tool at our disposal if we want to make kids 1) more literate, 2) more interested in school, or 3) lifelong readers.

Textbooks are expedient. Textbooks are sanitized. Textbooks are ubiquitous. But textbooks are not our finest option. Not if we really want to elevate the literacy levels of America's kids.

Not if we really want to scatter light.

Oh, by the way, textbooks are also expensive. Egregiously so. Just imagine if we spent hundreds of millions of dollars every year buying kids real books?

It's a delicious thought, isn't it? However, to the corporate monsters that profit so exceptionally well off of the status quo, it's an outright nightmare scenario, and trying to change the current system seems to me like a fight akin to trying to change the way the insurance companies have a lock on American health care. However, as a real teacher, I know that not even my best students buy into the fact that on page 1124 of the *blankety-blank* textbook (no need to call out specific company names . . . or use obscenities here), there is something riveting that they absolutely can't wait to dive into deeply and read. And knowing *that* has made me realize that, for the most part, strong, college-bound students endure language arts textbooks, mediocre students survive language arts textbooks, and low-skilled students blatantly tune out and hate language arts textbooks.

Yet bust out *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* . . . or *Twilight* . . . or *Speak* . . . or *Crank* . . . or *Ender's Game* . . .

or *The Outsiders* . . . or *Monster* . . . or *Go Ask Alice* . . . on and on and on (just fill in the blank; there are scores of great titles) and reading becomes a different experience entirely for our students.

The research proves it, the practitioners know it, and the kids, well, they are pretty much dying for us to step up and get it. Real kids will read real books. That's been proven. And our schools are not offering these to them. It's comically tragic.

Essentially, we have backed ourselves into a dark, dysfunctional curricular corner in our schools whereby what's best for the people

we are supposed to be serving is being sacrificed at the altar of good ol' fashioned myopic greed. How about if we stop feeding the corpo-

porate gravy train that generates Wall Street-style money for companies that poorly provide for the literacy needs of our kids and start using real books to reach our real students? It's not like they won't read 'em. Matter of fact, it's clear as day that kids today are reading in spite of school, not because of it.

Did you hear what I just said? I've said it about a thousand times in my life but it bears repeating: kids are reading in spite of school, not because of it. I mean we've got teens lining up at midnight outside of bookstores (at midnight, for goodness sake) to get their hands on new titles that they are starving to read. Not for academic credit. Not for improved AYP and API scores in the land of No Child Left Behind. They are reading these books because they find them meaningful, relevant, interesting, and riveting. They find them to be of genuine value, and yet, our schools are doing virtually nothing to take advantage of this fantastic opportunity. It's like being in a golf tournament and not partnering up with Tiger Woods when the chance to do so is staring you in the face. (And by the way, it's a golf tournament where Tiger Woods would love to have you bring him on the team!)

No, reading is not dead. But it certainly seems that common sense is suffering from some sort of head trauma. Want research to back it up? Check out Kelly Gallagher's book *Readicide*, take a gander at the work of Nancy Atwell, read some Thomas Newkirk or Donalyn Miller. So many of the best, brightest minds in education are speaking to this point in an eloquent and articulate manner.

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## Kids are reading in spite of school, not because of it.

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**Engagement leads to motivation. Motivation leads to comprehension. Comprehension leads to performance. That's my light-scattering recipe.**

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Maybe you want data to support how fantastically important literacy is to the lives of young adults? Go ahead and check the WalMart-sized warehouses of information about this very point, freely available

on the websites of NCTE, IRA, ALA, and on and on and on. Look, I could cite texts and footnote studies and reference article after article about this point, but the fact is nobody is disputing the monumental importance of getting kids to read.

It's lynchpin.

And nobody disputes that people like Stephanie

Meyer, Laurie Halse Anderson, Walter Dean Meyers, S.E. Hinton . . . the list goes on . . . seem to be doing a pretty good job of getting kids to really read.

It's self-evident.

Yet our schools, instead of acting like a matchmaker between kids and literacy by marrying them up with real books that they want to read is acting almost as a buffer to that which is so reasonable a strategy. The mantra of schools today is virtually steeped in a dogmatic, "You will read what we tell you, when we tell you, for how long we tell you" mentality.

"And then we will bludgeon you with bubble tests!"

*Sheesh*, no wonder kids are tuning out. It's belittling, it's totalitarian, and it's causing great, if not irreparable harm to one of the core "mission statements" we perpetually see in our schools, like some kind of political sloganeering: *We will create lifelong readers and critical thinkers.*

Goodness gracious, the emperor has no clothes!

If you want to create lifelong readers then you must instill a sense of the joy of reading. It's not rocket science. Lifelong readers read because they find personal worth and fulfillment in doing so (*D'uh!*), and yet there seem to be beves of PhD folks who don't grasp this very plebian, very simple, very obvious idea.

Now being a mere commoner on the front lines, I know I must come across as a fella with a heck of a lot of chutzpah to challenge those who dwell comfortably in the white towers high on the hills—and in

the halls—of academia. Yet, I'd like to offer my own Einsteinian theory on how to scatter literacy light with real books.

Okay, brace yourselves, because I am going to go out on a far-reaching, stretch-the-limits-of-quantum-physics type of intellectual limb with this next idea: Teens will try harder when they actually care about what they are doing. Yes, I know, the Nobel Committee should be ringing me on the phone any day now. I mean, I just illuminated the groundbreaking notion that when kids care about what they are doing—particularly in school—they will try harder than when they don't give a poop. Engagement leads to motivation. Motivation leads to comprehension. Comprehension leads to performance. That's my light-scattering recipe. It's also why I believe so deeply in using real books.

Because kids love 'em!

This idea about engagement being so fundamental to achieving literacy success became spectacularly clear to me while watching a TV special about a group of high society ladies participating in a very heated Rose Bush Growing Competition. I mean, these women were nuts! They were doing things like meticulously examining the texture of flower petals and other such "stuff" (at least to me it was stuff; to them it was erudite and meaningful). Essentially, while watching these white-hat-wearing women, I clearly recognized that no one grows award-winning rose bushes unless that person is *really, really, really* into growing award-winning rose bushes. To be a champion, to be excellent, to be outstanding, notable, or remarkable in any such manner, you must be engaged. You must find the work meaningful. You must care.

Same with kids and books.

If the students aren't *really, really, really* into reading the books that we are asking them to read, why in the world should we expect them to respond to the literature in a way that shows any semblance of excellence, thoughtfulness, dedication, or commitment?

They won't.

When students don't care about the work they are assigned to do or the books they are assigned to read, they will often respond in a "give the least minimal possible effort" way just to get the teacher off their back—and how much intellectual growth are you ever going to get out of a person who approaches things from a "give the least amount of effort" mindset?

Not much. After all, what's the most frequent classroom reply a student often gives when asked to write a response to something they just read?

"How long do you want it to be?"

They rarely ask, "How much quality would you like it to have?" They almost never concern themselves with, "How introspective would you like me to get?" They don't ever raise their hands and bellow out, "How deeply would you like me to plumb the depths of character?"

We see this play out day after day after day in our classrooms. However, kids who adore the books they are reading will go over and above to respond creatively, critically, exceptionally. Don't believe me? Look at all the writing being done online by teens today about their favorite books. I mean, kids will stay up into all hours of the night writing fanfiction and such. Why? Because to do so is personally meaningful to them.

Once again, I have to rhetorically ask, how much of the literature being used in schools today is personally meaningful to the students? And why isn't it? See, that's the thing that rankles me most about our current approach to the literary material we use in our classrooms: the specific choice of text itself is pretty much superfluous. Our job in the world of being classroom educators is, first and foremost (according to the state), to teach the content standards.

Theme, figurative language, symbolism, characterization, denotation versus connotation—these are the elements that comprise the core content standards we have been hired to teach, and these are the literary elements upon which all our current "data" and "test scores" are being generated. (You know, the ones that accuse our nation of being a country highly populated by low-level kids.) Whether a teacher uses Ralph Ellison to teach theme or Walter Dean Meyers is irrelevant. The tests that measure the abilities of our students are not text-specific; they are standards-based. This means that as long as you are teaching the standards, you are, at least by the state's definition, "scattering appropriate light."

But I'll tell you this. It's a lot easier to improve the literacy skills of students and teach things like theme with a Walter Dean Meyers book that kids will read than with a Ralph Ellison book they won't. That might make me sound like a panderer, it might make me appear as a literary heretic, it might even incur the

wrath of the establishment, but guess what? The proof is in the statistical pudding that what we are currently doing is not working.

Face it, kids would rather take an F on an assignment and be left alone than have to navigate some of these incredibly dense texts we are "mandating."

By remaining obstinate in our ways and by continuing to use materials (like textbooks) that kids find blatantly boring, we lose an opportunity to become literary bridge builders, which, to my way of thinking, means starting with books that kids find personally meaningful as a bridge to the "great works" of literature. In other

words, by maintaining the status quo, we are doing a spectacular disservice to everyone.

How does one become a more proficient, more dedicated, more refined, more nuanced, and "better" reader? By reading. This we know. So why don't we allow kids to work with real books that genuinely speak to their own hearts and minds instead of solely to ours? Look, Jane Austen is gonna survive whether *Pride and Prejudice* gets shoved down the throat of a 17-year-old boy in Detroit or not. But is that 17-year-old in Detroit going to survive if he doesn't leave school with authentic literacy skills? Well, he might, but will he prosper?

Chances are not so hot, that's for sure.

Therefore, is the writing of Tookie Williams or Iceberg Slim really so bad a place to begin if that's what it takes to get a kid started on reading? Once the student is open to engaging with these more sophisticated texts, can a line not eventually be drawn to books like *Crime and Punishment* by Dostoevsky or *The Count of Monte Cristo* by Dumas? Can't one similarly discuss criminality, oppression, injustice, societal hypocrisy, tyranny, and self-determination utilizing the text of any of these authors anyway? (After all, we would be covering Reading Comprehension Standard 3.7: Relate literary works and authors to the major themes of their eras.) But remove Tookie Williams or Iceberg Slim and you are, in a way, removing a walkway. A bridge. A means to gain access, especially for

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**This means that as long as you are teaching the standards, you are, at least by the state's definition, "scattering appropriate light."**

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students who are reluctant to embrace the act of reading because all too often it's been nothing more than a minefield littered with "I don't get it/This is boring/Why do I have to read this stuff?"

There's a book out there for every kid. A real book. We all believe this. That's why I feel that as a teacher or librarian or a school, our job ought to be to find it, use it, and leverage it to create a path from one book to another book. Kids will find their way to great literature only after they have been empowered with the capacity to comprehend the nuances of great literature. Before that happens, there is no pathway of access. After all, as one who doesn't drink wine, I would have a very hard time intelligently illuminating why a bottle of Château Lafite is so spectacular. And just because someone tells me that it's so doesn't necessarily make it so for me. Yet warm me up with an introduction to Italian table wine, take me on a journey to the reds being poured in the South of France, crack open some of Napa Valley's cabernets, and walk me through a sommelier's class suited to my own particular palette, and then when you ask me to sample the Château Lafite and offer a response, I might not come off sounding like such an inarticulate ignoramus.

Dickens, Joyce, Hawthorne, and that crew, they are literature's Château Lafite, and the fact is, our system needs an overhaul. There's an immense

power laying dormant, the power of allowing kids to read real books, especially ones that they self-select. So as a front line soldier in an inner-city, Title I classroom, I think my own experience in applying this strategy warrants a bit of consideration. For me, the textbooks sit in the closet. But that doesn't mean we don't read. We read like fiends in my class. We read "old" winners. We read "new" favorites. We read "more obscure" delights. And my students, year after year after year, tell me they really dig the books they get to explore. Look, there is no one single book that is going to be the magic pill for all kids, so I don't even try to look for such a thing.

To scatter light, one must first light the torch. Isn't it time we finally made an effort to do so?

*Alan Sitomer is California's 2007 Teacher of the Year and author of six books, including Homeboyz, The Hoopster, and The Secret Story of Sonia Rodriguez. Visit [www.AlanSitomer.com](http://www.AlanSitomer.com) for more tools and resources on how to bring real books back into our classrooms.*

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### **NCTE Literacy Education Advocacy Day 2010: April 22**

Join NCTE members from across the nation for NCTE's Literacy Education Advocacy Day on Thursday, April 22, 2010. NCTE members will meet for a morning of briefings, an afternoon of visiting legislative offices, and a debriefing get-together at the end of the day. See <http://www.ncte.org/action/advocacyday> for details.



## Pushing Back the Shadows of Reading:

A Mother and Daughter Talk of YA Novels

**W**e start this column with two literacy memories, located about 10 years apart, both featuring a well-worn den sofa as a site of reading. The first was very recent, a few months ago as the two of us—mother and teenage daughter—sat knee-to-knee on the sofa, recalling the YA books that had made the biggest marks on us. Haviland, a high school senior, frowned as she recalled some of her middle and high school reading experiences.

“School never asks us to read interesting books,” she said. “They shove *The Great Gatsby* in our faces and tell us it’s one of the best pieces of literature ever written, and then, we’re like, ‘If this is the good stuff, what’s the bad stuff . . .?’”

Her voice lilted upward in the way of her YouTube generation, hands extended in exasperation. Teri chuckled. As a teen, she had enjoyed *The Great Gatsby*, but it was because the movie came out the year she read it, and she was old enough to remember when Robert Redford was more hot than distinguished.

But for all the *Great Gatsbys* and *Huckleberry Finns* Haviland didn’t enjoy reading, there were others that she did: Lowry’s *The Giver*, Golding’s *Lord of the Flies*, Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. We spent an enjoyable afternoon making lists of books she loved and reminiscing about their stories.

Leap back to ten years earlier, when, as a eight-year old, Haviland sat on the floor watching television while Teri read on the sofa. A public service announcement came on—something about how books freed the imagination. Haviland abruptly shifted her position and muttered an audible *hmpf*.

“What is it?” Teri asked.

“I don’t know why they say books are the key to the imagination,” she answered.

“What do you mean?”

Haviland shifted again and paused before answering. “Well, let’s say my imagination is a field and the only way I can cross it is with books. It will take me a whole lot longer to cross that field reading and writing than if you’ll just let me go.”

In many ways, the narrative of our family is the journey between those two memories—the frustrated second-grader who saw books as a shackle that limited her imagination and the frustrated twelfth-grader who saw school as a too-frequent shackle that limited her access to meaningful reading experiences. If we had to categorize our family narrative as a genre, it would be an adventure tale, one in which a family—encouraged and frequently led by a plucky child—navigates treacherous terrain to find its place in the world. In first grade, Haviland was identified as having dyslexia. When she described books as a chain that held her back from the fertile grounds of her imagination, she wasn’t merely deploying a metaphor. She was articulating the conditions of her world. Reading—or at least the kind of reading that she was instructed to engage in during school—enslaved her. Her narrative is how she battled back against a narrow definition of school texts to become a young woman who not only loves to read, but is a 21st-century scripiter of texts.

The key, she says now, was being given the opportunity to read “actual, good books,” not the simplistic “preschooler” books that dominated much of

her early school years or focused on phonics to the exclusion of quality writing. The first books she remembers enjoying were Dahl's *The BFG* and *The Witches*, well-written texts that appealed to her sense of humor. She read books in a variety of ways—at bedtime as read-alouds with her parents, in shared readings with her tutor, on her own, and sometimes with CDs or tapes. When available, she often watched in tandem the book and film versions of the same story; the

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**In discussing these texts, we realized that most of them have a common element: an emphasis on visual means of communicating story.**

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Harry Potter books were enjoyed in this manner. By engaging in multiple narrative forms, she developed a keen critic's eye (and ear) for storytelling and an awareness of the affordances and constraints of each media and their impact on creative decision making. This rich narrative environment proved fertile ground for a love of story

and a curiosity about the world that drove her desire to read.

In retrospect, she's come to believe that this passion for story was key in diminishing the implications of her dyslexia. "I never saw dyslexia as really stifling, at least not in my later school years," Haviland noted. "Once I actually learned how to read and how to enjoy reading, it wasn't a big deal. I read all the time."

And indeed, she does. Stacked on the floor beside the sofa are the spoils from her most recent trip to the bookstore: Austen and Winters' *Sense and Sensibility and Sea Monsters*, Wasserman's *Crashed*, Brown's *The Lost Symbol*. *The Education of Little Tree* might have been a book she endured as a class requirement, but these self-selected texts are waiting to be savored.

For this column, Haviland identified YA novels that were pivotal in her personal reading experiences, the ones that throughout her teen years pulled her into the stories and impelled her to reflect upon and—at times—to revise her thinking about texts, reading, and ways of making meaning in the world. Of the books we discuss here, one was an assigned class reading; the others came from recommendations by YA book aficionados, Internet exchanges with readers who share our regard for graphic novels and manga,

and our own ramblings through bookstore aisles. In discussing these texts, we realized that most of them have a common element: an emphasis on visual means of communicating story. This characteristic is displayed through formats that combine image and print; through highly imagistic or visual language; and through an attention to the appearance of print text on the page, including typography and layout. It isn't surprising to us that a 21st-century creator of text would find appeal in books that transgress 20th-century assumptions about what forms novels should take. In addition, these books are just flat-out good reads.

*Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson

Anderson's book, published ten years ago, deals with the large societal topics of racism, violence, ostracism, of being silenced versus choosing silence, and of learning when and how to speak, all within a high school context. The protagonist Melinda is smart, troubled, and socially withdrawn; she finds high school a difficult and inexplicable space as she struggles to make sense of her experiences. Part of the book's appeal rests in its depiction of resistance—on the part of both teens and adults—to imposed constraints. While it is well-written, the characters sometimes skid over the line into stereotypes: Mr. Neck, the Social Studies teacher, is almost one-sidedly obstinate; Mr. Freeman, the art teacher, is rebellious and nontraditional. But in Melinda, Anderson has created a strong first-person narrator with an appealing voice. Her disaffection plays out in the quick and observant sketches she makes of her world. The writing is engaging, and while this book does not incorporate visual elements, as do many of the other texts on this list, the depiction of art as an outlet for emotional expression that has a place in school is a welcomed stance.

*Abarat* by Clive Barker

*Abarat* is the first of what Barker plans as a series of five books; so far, only the second, *Abarat: Days of Magic, Nights of War*, has been published. The appeal of Barker's series is two-fold: first, the story of restless Candy Quakenbush who, tired of living in a town most famous for its chicken-rendering plant, sets out on a fantastical journey that takes her to the islands of Abarat with its curious inhabitants and requisite dangers; second, the accompanying illustrations, also cre-

ated by Barker. As a protagonist, Candy is engaging; she is someone readers want to journey alongside. But the written story is only one part of this developing series' attraction; the paintings are a vital part of the intrigue of *Abarat*, both from a reader's and a writer's standpoint. To the reader, the paintings, done in oil and printed in color, add a bold layer to the text. Careful readers will spend time studying the lines and textures of the illustrations. But the paintings also add to the intrigue of Barker as a writer. Readers whose own creative impulses start with image may find Barker's work doubly stimulating.

*Crank* by Ellen Hopkins

Hopkins, who also authored the gripping *Burned* and *Impulse*, is an appealing author because of her ability to present very serious topics in visually and lyrically compelling ways. *Crank* is the story of a troubled, drug-addicted teen who becomes pregnant as the result of a rape. Such heavy material typically would be conveyed as conventional prose, but Hopkins breaks form by telling her story in a series of poems. The effect is highly visual on two levels: the imagistic poetic language focuses the reader's attention with sharp, succinct writing, and the visual arrangement of the poems on the page emphasizes elements of the story that might otherwise be lost in the flow of prose. If this book had been written in prose, it might have risked being just another angst-ridden teenage story. However, Hopkins's decision to tell it in verse increases its intensity and emotional pull.

*You Don't Know Me* by David Klass

From the first page, the reader knows that the narrator, 14-year-old John, is provocative, sarcastic, funny, wickedly smart, and probably wounded. Many of John's daily struggles are common to the high school experience—his desire to impress the beautiful girl, to get through algebra class. But John also struggles with abuse from his mother's boyfriend and the consequences of being an outsider in school. The well-developed and personable voice of the narrator is behind the appeal of this book. Through John, Klass effectively plays with language and the reader/writer relationship. The book does feature some stereotypical characters—the sweet but unattractive girl, the stern principal—but given the narrator's strong voice, it nevertheless works.

*Castle Waiting* by Linda Medley

This book combines into one volume Medley's Eisner Award-winning comic book series that takes up the question of what happens to all the people living in a fairytale castle once the prince and princess ride off to the accompaniment of birds and choirs. The series is both humorous and wise. When Sleeping Beauty, oblivious to the 100-year slumber her subjects have endured on her behalf, leaves to find her destiny, the castle inhabitants stay behind and play host to a string of guests with their own wild and involving tales, most notably Sister Peace, the bearded nun who once worked at a circus. The characters are complex, and the stories are imaginative and well planned. As genres, comics and graphic novels are still dominated by male authors, and female characters are often under-realized and over-sexualized. Medley's post-modern feminist work is welcome fare.

*The Host* by Stephanie Meyer

Although not promoted as a YA novel, this book will find plenty of young adult readers courtesy of their attraction to Meyer's *Twilight* series. *The Host* is a better-written and slightly more intellectual narrative than the author's vampire saga. While the *Twilight* characters can be two-dimensional, the characters in this science fiction text are more realistic, easier to relate to, and part of a more suspenseful plot. The "host" refers to humans whose bodies and minds are taken over by space creatures; in this way, the book references *The Body Snatchers* films. As humans begin to understand the danger, they go into hiding, but have to stay alert to the possibility of infiltrating aliens among them. As is common to the genre, the book can serve as the impetus for a variety of sociopolitical conversations.

*ttyl* series by Lauren Myracle

Myracle's *ttyl* books ask readers to consider how narrative might look if instant messaging is accepted as a creative and viable storytelling format. Written entirely as a lengthy set of IMs between three girls (complete with the visual depiction of a computer screen), Myracle's series manages to create accessible, entertaining characters and a captivating plotline. The books are funny and a bit transgressive in both the humor and the format. Part of the books' allure

is the author's ability to paint portraits of the characters through dialogue, punctuation, and the layout of the texts. Despite the conceit that the characters are continually seated in front of computer screens, the reader is able to envision the events they describe to each other. As nontraditional texts, the books nevertheless serve as a testament to the power of good storytelling: even in IM form, compelling stories shine through. The characters—zoegirl, mad maddie, and SnowAngel—play off each other well as they confront such topics as sex, relocation, and rebellion.

*Death Note* by Tsugumi Ohbi and Takeshi Obata  
Manga doesn't always have the reputation for complexity, but this series goes beyond easy depictions of good and evil. The plot revolves around supernatural notebooks used by gods of death to organize their final plans for people on earth; the persons whose names are inscribed in the notebooks are condemned to die. When a high school student named Light finds one of the notebooks, he decides to use his new power for good by killing murderers and other unredeemable criminals. Questions of right and wrong and good and evil form the series' moral narrative. A major shortcoming, however, is the lack of substantive female characters; the only significant female character is used primarily as comic relief. Despite this serious drawback, the series allows for a contemporary reframing of the "power corrupts" discussion.

*Bone* by Jeff Smith

For this review, we refer to the 1300-page single volume edition of Smith's long-running comic book series. But to call *Bone* "a comic book series" assumes a certain understanding of comic books that this work upends. Smith treats in comic style a narrative suitable for an adult novel. The book follows two sets of protagonists—one group is comprised of the three exiled Bone cousins; the other consists of Thorn and Grandma Rose—all of whom are engaged in a battle with an evil lord. The story is both humorous and intricate; not even the mischievous Rat Creatures, who serve as comic relief, are throw-away characters. Smith smartly combines drawing styles that develop the nuances of the narrative. Thorn and Grandma Rose, who are humans, are drawn in a more realistic style, while the Bone cousins could have stepped from Walt Kelly's Okefenokee Swamp. Both Thorn and

Grandma Rose are portrayed as strong, resourceful, and complete female characters who are intrinsic and necessary to the story.

*Uglies* series by Scott Westerfield

In *Uglies*, *Pretties*, *Specials*, and the related *Extras*, Westerfield has created a series that appeals to teenage interests in science fiction, dystopias, resistance to authority, and the tension between wanting and not wanting to be part of the beautiful crowd. The series is set in a society in which plastic surgery at 16 to achieve physical perfection and conformity has become a required and much-anticipated cultural rite. However, as the female protagonist Tally discovers, being perfect comes with its own set of controls. This book works as a suspense story and as social commentary, in part because both the characters and the futuristic details seem plausible. Tally is rendered as a believable teenager; her responses to situations are credible. Interesting connections can be made between *Uglies* and *The Great Gatsby*—both deal with societies in which abundance and beauty are prized over an awareness of complexity and consequences.

\* \* \*

As we reflected upon the list, our conversation turned from what it was like to be a reader of these books to what it was like to be a young writer who used these books as mentor texts. Like teenage writers a generation ago who drew inspiration from the works of others, Haviland noted that her generation also looks to books when they craft their works. "In the case of reading traditional books, I sometimes borrow a style of writing or a voice. And when I'm reading manga, I might try to mimic a certain layout. These books become references for me."

But unlike teenage writers a generation ago, who wrote with pencils and typewriters, Haviland's generation has the option to draw from an assortment of media to craft narratives.

"We are 21st-century students with 21st-century taste in reading styles and books," she added. "We are making movies on YouTube. We put our work on Deviant Art. We go out and make our own stuff; we are no longer bound by other people's books or television shows for our ideas. We can go to conventions and create our own plays. We can draw and write and put it out there for people to see. We have a worldwide audience. That's how we communicate now."

In retrospect, Haviland would revise the har-  
rumphing statement she made when she was eight—  
books *can* be a key to the imagination. But it might  
be that it is a different kind of imagination, one that  
works in multiple genres and media and acutely  
appeals to the visual sense of the reader as well as  
the literary. And it just might be an imagination that  
makes it easier to transgress the bounds of learning  
labels.

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hood Education department at Georgia State University  
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## Call for 2010 Halle Award Nominations

The NCTE Richard W. Halle Award for Outstanding Middle Level Educator honors a middle level educator who has consistently worked to improve the quality of middle school education and middle school educators, especially in the English language arts. Originally established in 1996 by the Junior High/Middle School Assembly, this award pays special tribute to the person who has worked to improve schools and schooling for the middle level—teacher, principal, college faculty, curriculum specialist, or supervisor.

Nomination packet information can be found on the NCTE website at [www.ncte.org/awards/halle](http://www.ncte.org/awards/halle) and must be postmarked no later than **June 1, 2010**. Results will be announced in September, and the award will be presented at the 2010 Annual Convention in Orlando, Florida, during the Middle Level Get-Together.

## Doctoral Dissertations (2008–2009): A Review of Research on Young Adult Literature

**D**espite the onslaught of young adult novels in the last fifty years and the abundance of teachers and scholars interested in young adult books, there still remain few academic papers that deal directly with young adult works—either fiction or non. In fact, a quick review of recent entries in Dissertation Abstracts (2007–2009) reveals few doctoral dissertations that deal directly with the study of books for young adults. Those that do exist, though, are substantial, informative, and remarkable for their depth and understanding in revealing how the study of books intended for young adults—works designed to appeal to adolescents—contributes directly to developing lifelong readers, critical thinkers, and book lovers everywhere.

Curious as this may be, young adult literature scholars, though few in number, do stand alone for their unique perspective that recognizes the critical element in all good instruction—the ability to persuade teenagers to see the world through different eyes. What these dissertations have in common is their concentration on the remarkable insight that literature intended for young adults brings to the conversation about what matters most to young people. It is not *Hamlet*. It is not *Huck Finn*. And it is not *David Copperfield*. Instead, it is a contemporary recognition that books for young adults speak with a voice that is honest, open, and real about what it means to be a “kid in the modern world.”

What follows are reviews of only 11 doctoral dissertations from 2008 and 2009 that concentrate solely on the purview of the study of books intended for young adults. No attempt has been made to as-

sess their quality, but simply to underscore their importance in contributing to the depth and breadth of understanding the significance of books intended for young adults. Let us hope that these good papers inspire others to do the same.

### Dissertations: 2009

In “**Chatting about Books: Online Discussions about Young Adult Multicultural Literature in a Course for Pre-Service and Practicing Teachers**,” Jacqueline Arnold (University of Minnesota, 2009) presents a qualitative case study of an online young adult multicultural literature course for pre-service and practicing teachers. Findings revealed that online discussion proved to be just as effective and in-depth as face-to-face instruction, providing another indication that technology is transforming the instruction of young adult books.

Using ethnographic methods to analyze course transcripts, Arnold (2009) found that elements of effective face-to-face discussion were evident in online discussions. Critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2003) and features associated with curricular conversations (Langer, 1995; Applebee, 1996; Nystrand, 1997) were engaged to demonstrate how readers interact in discussions about multicultural literature for young adults. Arnold learned that two types of discussion, asynchronous and synchronous, offered students many opportunities to examine multiple reader perspectives and peer understandings. Moreover, Arnold noted that online interaction provided more instances for open discussion than were typical

in known face-to-face classrooms. Finally, some study participants indicated a better appreciation for the act of reading overall as a result of online discussions in the course.

**“Cutting to the Heart of Things: A Novel of Adolescent Self-Injury”** is a unique dissertation (Alliant International University, 2009), as Courtney de Blicke documented the preparation and writing of a young adult novel dealing with self-injury (cutting oneself) from an adolescent female perspective, including the social ramifications of this stultifying crime against oneself. Self-injury, as de Blicke underscores, has become in the past two decades (1980–2000) a significant problem among adolescent and young adult women. Despite this pressing problem, little attention has been addressed as to why teen girls are practicing self-mutilation. Thus, the primary objective of this dissertation was to write a book for young adult women that both explores the notion of self-injury and creates a compelling fictional narrative for teen readers.

Semistructured interviews were conducted with 6 women, ages 23 to 31, who had engaged in self-injury beginning in adolescence. The interviews were conducted to gain a fuller understanding of self-injury and why adolescent girls are predominantly affected. The results were incorporated into a fictional book for young adults (written by the researcher) that explored issues of body dissatisfaction, victimization, and powerlessness, incidents associated with a feminist perspective. By using a novel to explore the reasons for a teenage girl’s self-cutting, the author was able to make sense of self-injury and the steps required to save young girls from their self-destructive behavior.

## **Dissertations: 2008**

Maria Dulce Perez Castillo (University of San Francisco, 2008) has written a most interesting dissertation, **“African Heritage in Cuban Literature for Children and Young Adults: A Participatory Study with Nersys Felipe and Teresa Cardenas.”** Her study explores the voices and reflections of two female Cuban authors who represent two different generations—those who came of age at the beginning of the Cuban revolution and those who are still working today. This provocative paper analyzes how both of these Cuban female authors addressed coming of age issues during and after the Cuban revolution—through the lens of Cuban children and young adult literature.

Using a qualitative study design, Castillo’s research consisted of two processes. First, she interviewed the young adult authors, Nersys Felipe and Teresa Cardenas, about their lives and their young adult books on Cuban life. Second, she analyzed their young adult novels. The process of methodology, dialogic retrospection (her author interviews), and text analysis (critical interpretation of their young adult novels), were combined to explore how the literary works of the authors highlight significant issues central to Afro-Cuban voices and the African heritage in Cuban literature for children and young adults.

Castillo’s work focuses on an often-neglected minority of adolescents—adolescents of both Cuban and African American heritage. Her findings suggest that these authors are raising awareness by portraying adolescent Afro-Cuban characters as protagonists in their own stories for young people. Their literary works for children and young adults emphasize the many affinities among children of different races and strive to illuminate their unique natures while maintaining the universality of their experiences.

In **“A Literary Analysis of Young Adults with Multiple Narrative Perspectives Using a Sociocultural Lens”** (University of Illinois at Chicago, 2008), Melanie Koss systematically categorizes the types of multiple narrative perspectives existing in current young adult literature. Her purpose for this categorization was to ask these three questions:

- How can multiple narrative perspective books best be defined?
- Why are there so many contemporary young adult novels told from multiple perspectives?
- What are the challenges faced by editors and publishers who produce young adult novels told from multiple perspectives?

A literary analysis of 205 young adult novels was undertaken. Each novel was examined for its distinct

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**What these dissertations have in common is their concentration on the remarkable insight that literature intended for young adults brings to the conversation about what matters most to young people.**

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features and for its use of multiple perspective narration. In addition, students and teachers were studied to gauge their understanding of young adult novels told from multiple perspectives and to record their hypotheses for its increasing popularity and use. Data were collected through teen literature discussion groups, questionnaires, and interviews.

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**Results indicated that the prevalence of contemporary young adult novels told from multiple perspectives is a direct reflection of the changing dynamics of adolescent life.**

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Results indicated that the prevalence of contemporary young adult novels told from multiple perspectives is a direct reflection of the changing dynamics of adolescent life. More and more, young people are multitasking. At increasingly early ages,

their level of sophistication rises—in their personal and academic lives, their face-to-face and technological worlds, and their implicit and explicit exposure to world events and social phenomena—all of which only reinforces the notion that contemporary young adult novels reflect the inherent complexity and multiplicity of their lives. Simply, young adult books will always reflect what is.

Finally, Koss's dissertation includes not only vivid characterizations and descriptions of young adult literature told from multiple perspectives, but it also provides useful and practical suggestions for using these novels in the classroom. Koss underlines the significance of using multiple perspective young adult books in teaching and clarifies its presence as a direct corollary to our fast-paced, highly technical and ever-changing world.

In "Archetypal Images in Young Adult Baseball Fiction, 1988–2007," David Pegram (Arizona State University, 2008) examined twenty-one contemporary young adult novels published between 1988 and 2007 with baseball-related plots. His purpose was to identify common archetypal images that are generic to young adult novels and are appealing to primarily male readers.

Pegram's study followed a three-step process. First, Pegram defined the common archetypes that he would expect to find in young adult novels. Sample

archetypes included the Seeker, the Warrior, the Sage, and the Trickster. Second, he sampled all twenty-one young adult novels, selected for age appropriateness and quality, and analyzed these works for the existence of the sample archetypes. Finally, he drew conclusions as to what archetypes existed in each of the twenty-one young adult novels.

Results of the study revealed that at least one archetype image could be found within each young adult novel and that these archetypal images contained attributes that were most germane to stories involving baseball. Such knowledge, Pegram asserts, will prove most useful in helping educators make sound choices in helping struggling readers find connections between their interests in sports, particularly baseball, and high-interest books involving baseball.

Robin Moeller's dissertation "No Thanks, Those Are Boy Books: A Feminist Cultural Analysis of Graphic Novels as Curricular Materials" (Indiana University, 2008) examined how a group of mid-western high school students read gender into three graphic novels. The graphic novels came with the Young Adult Library Services Association recommendation and were shared with the students in a classroom setting.

Using a qualitative framework, Moeller spent four months observing and interacting with high school students and teachers in a particular high school setting. She and a male research assistant conducted unstructured focus group interviews and individual interviews with eight female and seven male participants who had read each graphic novel selected for this study. Analysis of the data included a coding process on the transcribed interviews and on the researcher's fieldnotes.

Participants revealed that they 1) enjoyed the graphic novels they read, and 2) did not feel they were "boy books." Still, the students, both male and female, did respond that they felt that their teachers and their peers did not consider graphic novels to be legitimate pieces of literature. Graphic novels were not regarded as "real books" (as compared to chapter books) or as viable curricular material. In addition, the male readers had a different reaction to the graphic novels than the female readers. Male participants found graphic novel reading to be a very rewarding experience, whereas female participants felt that graphic novels did not sufficiently challenge their



imaginative and analytical skills. The author concludes her dissertation with suggestions for legitimizing graphic novels within the context of the school curriculum.

**Thomas Bryan Crisp's dissertation "Rainbow Boys': Romance, Repression and Representation,"** (Michigan State University, 2008) analyzes the popular series about gay youth, Alex Sanchez's *Rainbow Boys*. Sanchez contends that the contributions made by this series are overshadowed by its portrayal of stereotypes, both heterosexual and homosexual, that may actually perpetuate homophobic attitudes toward gay sexuality.

Drawing primarily on critical reading and feminist and queer theory, Crisp identifies the three protagonists of the *Rainbow Boy* series as characters that only reinforce conventional homosexual stereotypes. Moreover, Crisp describes how the world in which these characters live is equally problematic. These homosexual male figures are tormented deviants who find solace only when isolated from the abusive heterosexual "mainstream." Crisp maintains that this vivid depiction of abuse and discrimination—though valid in and of itself—is probably a gross exaggeration of what is. Crisp argues that future authors of young adult literature depicting both straight and gay teens should strive for more fully developed and rounded presentations.

In **"Teaching Young Adult Literature to ESL Students: An Experiment,"** Yongan Wu (University of Oklahoma, 2008) explores the teaching of young adult literature to advanced English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESL) students. Wu analyzes how teaching young adult literature to ESL students can help develop literacy skills, foster critical thinking, and cultivate student learning.

Using a multiple case study approach, Wu studied the participants enrolled in an intensive English training center at a midwestern university. After much observation and analysis, Wu learned that the ESL learners favored young adult novels, specifically those that were short, had short chapters, were written plainly, discussed current topics, and were nonfiction. Wu also found much good can be gained from employing reader-response theory and scaffolding when instructing ESL learners using young adult books.

**"Within, Among and Outside of the Texts: Pre-service Teachers Reading Young Adult Literature,"**

by Kelly Byrne Bull (University of Virginia, 2008) is a qualitative inquiry investigation into the ways a sampling of preservice teachers related to two young adult novels, Robert Cormier's *The Chocolate War* and Chris Crutcher's *The Ironman*. Using the instructional strategy Think Aloud, Bull examined the impact of reader response and reflection on how they perceived the two selected young adult novels.

Analysis of Bull's qualitative inquiry revealed that the preservice teachers experienced a multidimensional response to the novels in question. More important, the study demonstrated how valuable using Think Alouds was in producing this complex and interactive approach to the participants' reading experience. Describing in great detail, Bull examines the responses made by four preservice teacher-participants. Her findings reveal both how involved the readers became in their respective reads and how their involvement, in turn, influenced their perceptions of their fellow preservice teachers. Clearly, Bull concludes, the inquiry had great meaning for all who participated.

Linda Rosanne Rabinowitz's dissertation (Fordham University, 2008), **"Adolescent Dyadic Talk around a Young Adult Novel: Developing Understandings and Relationships,"** reveals the findings of a qualitative case study that involved six adolescents discussing Walter Dean Myers's *Monster*. Transcripts of the conversations were analyzed to examine participant's perceptions and use of language.

Findings indicated a multiplicity of levels and interactions among the six adolescents participating in the book talks during in-school discussions. Rabinowitz's analysis revealed that the participating students related to the text from a primarily personal point of view. Moreover, frequent conversational meetings about the novel resulted in a more purposeful, yet casual flow of conversation. Finally, the teacher proved to be a supportive player, helping to structure and scaffold conversations about the text and its relationship to her students' lives.

Finally, Stephanie K. Hopkins's dissertation, **"The Reading Writer: Reinventing the Language of Fiction,"** analyzes her own writing of a young adult novel using her close analysis of two popular young adult novels, Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak* and Cecily von Ziegesar's *Gossip Girl*, as guides. Her thesis demonstrates how a writer might draw on other works to help develop a more reflective and experimental

writing process.

Hopkins demonstrates in her thesis how writing a novel, particularly a young adult novel, involves self-examination of one's perceptions and developing one's own language to express the sense of investigation and curiosity involved in writing for young adults. In her dissertation, she models ways of looking closely at other texts and one's own text-in-progress to demonstrate personal writing goals and voice.

## Conclusion

The dissertations discussed in this review are significant, critical, and vital to the scholarship of young adult literature. These papers contribute to a growing realization that the study of young adult literature merits its own level of understanding, one that supersedes book reviews and papers on instructional strategies.

A quick review of these dissertations reveals that much still needs to be written about the use of young adult literature with adolescents in real classrooms in real time. Much can be said about the importance of young adult books, their contribution to the general welfare of young people and classroom practice, and their significance as a leading proponent in underlying and augmenting social change. This is all well and good.

What is needed, though, are papers and research studies that examine the use of young adult books, both fiction and nonfiction, in actual classrooms, so that teachers and teacher educators alike can appreciate the breadth and depth of understanding that adolescents bring to young adult books. With this, the study of young adult literature will gain an even greater foothold in the minds of classroom teachers, school administrators, and curriculum theorists. Indeed, these papers will inspire others to write the same.

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## Dare to Disturb the Universe: Pushing YA Books and Library Services—with a Mimeograph Machine

Library Connection Editor's note: *English and reading teachers today often coordinate with their local librarians in promoting books and reading to their students. Booktalks, booklists, special programs, and more are offered to get teens turned on to literature. How did librarians first begin to leave their mark on teen clientele—the same teens we find in our classrooms? Cindy Welch reveals an interesting “library connection” that helped to make it happen, as she shares a little-known bit of important YA history. —Diane Tuccillo*

In the same way that the maturing body of YA literature in the 1970s provided insights, affirmations, and beacons of light for teens, there were fledgling professional publications that performed a similar service for teachers and librarians who worked with those teens. You might not know that one of those early publications was the mimeographed *News of ALAN*, which eventually became the *ALAN Newsletter*, and which finally evolved into this journal, *The ALAN Review* (Nilsen).

You might not also know that

in the 1970s, in a similar fashion to *News of ALAN*, there was another mimeographed marvel that set the stage for teen library services and the associated promotion of YA literature for young adult librarians: the *Young Adult Alternative Newsletter (YAAN)*. This served as the YA librarian's parallel to *News of ALAN*, and provided much of the foundation for the successful library programs, collections, and related promotion of literature to teens that we see today—book-talking, the creation of booklists, afterschool library activities, and more.

YAAN was a reality check in a changing world, a conversation with friends near and far, and a chance to re-think—or even outsmart—the “Establishment.” From 1973 to 1979, YAAN focused on YA services (programming, outreach, professional development, etc.), and it was an inspiration for progressive librarians who wanted to extend their traditional role and to become points of light for the teens they served.

Then, as now, public libraries and schools were deeply embedded in the communities and societies that surrounded them. What hap-

pened in the streets found its way into the literature and into libraries. The widespread social unrest that characterized the 1970s American “scene” was evident in professional debates about the nature and scope of library work. Federal funding from the 1960s, most notably the 1964 Library Services and Construction Act (LSCA), had spurred tremendous growth in public library buildings and collections. As part of that growth, librarians reexamined their shelves and their service philosophies, and sought new ways to reach out to minority and other underserved groups, creating (among other things) more specific services and collections for teens.

The heyday of this stimulus funding coincided with the first young adult literature “golden age,” when books such as Alice Childress's *A Hero Ain't Nothin' but a Sandwich* (1973), Robert Cormier's *The Chocolate War* (1974), and Judy Blume's *Forever* (1975) made their appearance. There was strong motivation to be socially conscious, the legacy of the turbulent and politically active 1960s. High schools were experimenting with the concepts of open classrooms, nongrad-

ing, and creative elective classes. YAAN was very much a publication in and of its time.

## Addressing a Gap in the Literature

In 1973, at the American Library Association (ALA) Midwinter Conference in Washington D.C., a group of librarians sat late into the night discussing their work. Their main consideration was how they could improve services and collections for teens. This conversation was precious because, in these pre-wired days, collaboration and contact with other YA librarians was limited to biannual conferences and combing through mainstream publications, such as *School Library Journal* (SLJ) and *Wilson Library Bulletin* (WLB), for the few articles and stray columns dedicated to work with teens. Author and former YA librarian Patty Campbell called it a “very lonesome business”<sup>1</sup> working with teenagers in public libraries.

Carol Starr, at that time the YA librarian from Menomonee Falls, Wisconsin, returned from the 1973 ALA conference, powered up her IBM Selectric typewriter, wrote three pages of single-spaced text about conference news, YA programs, and membership in the Young Adult Services Division (YASD). She consulted a directory of public libraries in the United States, and a few short weeks later mailed the first issue of YAAN to approximately 300 YA librarians in “any city of any major size whatsoever.”<sup>2</sup> From 1973 to 1979, YAAN appeared an average of five times a year and was virtually the only nationally distributed publication

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**Contributors were often first-time authors, something that energized and affirmed practitioners who discovered they had valuable information to share with their peers in the wider world.**

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that focused specifically on service to teenagers in public libraries. The only other teen services-specific journal came along in 1978, when *Voice of Youth Advocates* (VOYA) started, and practitioners could read both periodicals through November 1979, when YAAN ceased publication.

YAAN, much like Alleen Nilsen’s dittoed, press-on-lettered beginnings of *The ALAN Review*, was a homemade labor of love (Nilsen 331). It was mimeographed on its trademark legal-sized gold-enrod paper, had approximately a thousand subscribers, and was known from Nova Scotia to New Mexico.<sup>3</sup> Mary K. Chelton, noted YA services expert, declared that, “until [Starr] started the *Young Adult Alternative Newsletter*, I never realized what a national community of practitioners would mean intellectually or politically . . . [she created] a vehicle for an entire generation of YA librarians to communicate with each other” (32).

## The Content That Rocked

Starr’s newsletter was a feast of YA programs, free materials, success

stories, and affirmation. Over the years, the content evolved from bite-sized news bits to a mixed bag of shorter and longer announcements, articles, book award lists, and conference program information. Every issue included reports of or ideas for programming, updates on YASD division news, recommended professional resources and free materials that could be sent for or shared between readers. In contrast to most youth publications of the time, there was also a decidedly feminist leaning and the occasional curse word. According to Chelton,

There was an idiosyncrasy to YAAN that gave it a personality all its own. You didn’t have to write in a box, there wasn’t a style manual necessarily, and as long as you weren’t screaming obscenities, you could say anything you pleased . . . you felt like you were talking over the back fence to people.<sup>4</sup>

Material came from conference attendees, friends, acquaintances, and subscribers. Contributors were often first-time authors, something that energized and affirmed practitioners who discovered they had valuable information to share with their peers in the wider world. They became part of a larger, reflective community of practice, and much of the material in YAAN was an exchange of “here’s how I did it; how did you do it?” correspondence.

## YA Services Reborn

Experimentation and reform, signs of the turbulent times, were particularly welcome among young adult librarians, whose client group was actively pushing for change. Patty Campbell observed that teen librarians “were in sync with what was happening that decade. We

were ‘with it,’ and we were looking at the kids to find that out.”<sup>5</sup> Just as a new breed of YA literature was bursting onto the scene with its unflinching look at reality—à la *Go Ask Alice* (1971), Piers Paul Read’s *Alive* (1974), and Katharine Patterson’s *Bridge to Terabithia* (1977)—YA librarians were itching to tune in and turn on high-powered programming options that were firmly seated in teens’ real lives. But change wasn’t welcome in all library quarters. At one point, a colleague told Campbell they didn’t want “any of that circus stuff in here.”<sup>6</sup>

The “circus stuff” was actually a different model of teen services. No longer were active YA librarians content to dwell on literacy and homework help. Miriam Braverman, in her 1979 title, *Youth, Society and the Public Library*, indicated that the “developments in the 1970s reflected the youth movement of the 1960s,” as YA librarians “sensitive to the culture and concerns of youth, broke through the constraints of the ‘conventional wisdom’ in young adult work, and developed exciting and original programs and services” (ix). Teens had become an identifiably distinct cultural group, and YA practitioners wanted to reflect the range of needs displayed by their teen patrons.

## **YA Librarians Come into Their Own**

The Age of Aquarius called for consideration of the whole teen, as well as materials and services that spoke to larger social issues. Scandalized library staff came face to face with YA librarians who wanted to have water “couches”—

they weren’t allowed to call them beds—in the teen rooms and who collected films with titles such as *About Sex* and *Invasion of the Teacher Creatures* (Starr, “Selected Films” 4), along with educational comic books about sexually transmitted diseases.<sup>7</sup> Innovative programming topics included filmmaking and rock music, and there were sessions about health issues (VD, acne, diet) and drug abuse. School visits were likely to include booktalks and information about astrology, drug abuse, films, and the library’s growing popular (vinyl) record collection.

Former YA librarian and noted booktalking expert Joni Bodart described YA librarians this way, “We were all outrageous and it was hard to convince average librarians that we were worth something. . . . We were very proud of the fact that we were unconventional; that we were different, free.”<sup>8</sup> According to Chelton,

Those of us who had not come out of children’s services . . . were desperate to free ourselves of the sort of hidebound excessive deference kind of crap you got in children’s . . . [they] wouldn’t know a real kid if they fell over them. They loved children’s literature and that was it, and it drove us crazy. No matter what we did, we

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**The Age of Aquarius called for consideration of the whole teen, as well as materials and services that spoke to larger social issues.**

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were always seen as irreverent non-deferential outcasts.<sup>9</sup>

It may sound from the comments as though literature was not a part of the scene for teen librarians of the 1970s, but YAAN routinely published award lists, solicited booklists (on behalf of readers), and notified librarians when books were being converted into films or television shows.

## **Fighting Tradition**

Chelton’s comments highlighted an ongoing friction between children’s librarians and YA librarians. Fresh approaches to services (and literature) related to sex, drugs, and rock ‘n roll made for uneasy coexistence. The fact that both children’s and young adult services sprang from a common root, and still shared custody of the 12–14-year-olds, also contributed.

Membership in either the Children’s Services Division (CSD) or the Young Adult Services Division of ALA included a subscription to the joint member journal, the *Top of the News (TON)*. YA librarians, however, felt that *TON* favored children’s literature and services. An analysis of ten years of *TON* content, conducted by YA librarian Lisa Naef, revealed striking differences in coverage of children’s and YA subjects. Between 1962 and 1972, *TON* ran 279 YASD items as compared to 595 CSD items, including articles, news bits, and booklists (Starr, “TON” 1). This disparity left many teen librarians feeling as though they were operating in a solitary universe.

Other professional development periodicals available to YA librarians in the early 1970s were

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## Handbooks, standards, and guidelines were also few and far between.

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about the youth services profession as a whole (for example, *American Libraries*, *Library Journal*, and *WLB*), or like *SLJ*, in that their focus was first children's literature and, to a lesser extent, services, and then teens—again, literature first and then, finally, services. Even when content appeared, journal production time was as much as a year to 18 months, making even the freshest material stale by its delivery date.

Alternative library publications such as *U\*N\*A\*B\*A\*S\*H\*E\*D™ Librarian* (1972), *Booklegger* (1973), and *Emergency Librarian* (1973), had plenty about literature and authors, but only occasional material on service work with teens. There were a few regional publications, such as *Gambit*, a collection of programs published by the Maryland Library Association, and Boston Public Library's *Idea Sourcebook for Young Adult Programs*. Interestingly, although the concern was about service, programming and outreach were often anchored by and to the literature. In a *YAAN* cover article from September 15, 1975, noted YA advocate/activist librarian Margaret Edwards commented:

It is good to see that, while there are many *activities* featured that appeal to teenagers, *books* are never forgotten. [Italics added] One community filled a bulletin board with snapshots of the teenagers whose annotations of a favorite book appeared on shelves with the books themselves. The an-

notations were then collected in an attractive booklist. (Edwards, "YA Garden" 1)

Handbooks, standards, and guidelines were also few and far between. YA librarians of the early 1970s could consult *An Ample Field*, written in 1950 by Amelia Munson, *Young Adult Services in the Public Library*, published by ALA's Committee on Standards for Work with Young Adults in 1960, or *Guidelines for Young Adult Services in Public Libraries*, published in 1966 by YASD. Edwards's seminal *Fair Garden and the Swarm of Beasts* appeared in 1969. In terms of practitioner resources, this was a short list.

### YAAN Stands Alone

It was within this gap in the professional literature that *YAAN* was born, and response was swift and affirmative. Editor Starr noted that the first issue generated an additional 300 names for her mailing list. One delighted reader gushed, "Isn't it nice someone knows I exist?" (Gushikuma).

*YAAN* was deliberately informal in format and style. Throughout its run, it kept a homemade appearance and contributors were lightly edited. Starr admitted she liked the idea of a somewhat radical approach to YA services, and *YAAN* was the literary embodiment of the "anything goes" YA services in the 1970s. "Rather than go through ALA [as a publisher] and have it run by people in their 40s, entrenched in their ways . . . we could publish it ourselves and we owned it."<sup>10</sup> Starr borrowed format and attitude from the underground press movement that started in

the 1950s in America and gathered steam through the mid-1960s. Librarians came on board for the movement in 1967 with Celeste West's journal, *Synergy*, which scholar Toni Samek said "defined an alternative library culture that worried less about the library as keeper of the cultural record, and more about the library as an active agent for change" (Samek, "Unbossed" 134). That approach was at the heart of the 1970s model of YA services and was reflected in *YAAN* content.

*YAAN* was celebrated by reviews and recommendations in professional journals, both alternative and mainstream. In the winter 1976 joint issue of *Booklegger* and *Emergency Librarian* that focused on library education, Carole Leita listed *YAAN* among titles of the "library free press . . . a network of free-speaking library periodicals which you can use to keep in touch with reality—and hope." Readers were encouraged to "take a walk on the wild side" (Leita 24). *Emergency Librarian*, in another issue that same year, called *YAAN* . . .

Gold! YA librarians (and others) have certainly struck pay dirt when they start reading this newsletter. It is crammed with what is happening in YA services and what you can do to make them happen in your library . . . Articles on new approaches to service as well as lists of books loved best by YAs make this newsletter irresistible to those struggling in an attempt to serve YAs. ("Small Mags" 24)

*Wilson Library Bulletin*, a mainstream journal, called *YAAN* a "lively alternative . . . [a] peppy informative newsletter . . . written in good socko style" ("Librarians Monthly Almanac" 356).

TON did an extended review of the newsletter in 1974, a year after YAAN first appeared, and reviewer Jana Varlejs managed to sound complimentary and disapproving at the same time.

The tone is not necessarily evangelical, but it is certainly upbeat . . . It is of course unreasonable to expect YAAN to be all things to all YA librarians, and it is clearly unreasonable to expect it to be truly “alternative” while its editor personifies—simply by virtue of her office! [sic]—the YA establishment<sup>11</sup> . . . It is, however, a measure of YAAN’s success that it has already done more to generate ideas and reinvigorate the mutual supportiveness which has always characterized the YA field. It has also raised the expectations of many librarians who have felt the need for the newsletter on YA services, and who now hope that YAAN will not only continue to meet this need, but that it will also expand and become a forum for the debate of issues as well. (Varlejs 436–37)

## Increasing the Presence of YA Training Materials

As the 1970s progressed, more resources became available for librarians working with teens, but YAAN continued to inspire a new generation of YA librarians. Chelton used it as a resource in her YA service classes at Rutgers and as a model for an internal newsletter in her day job with the Westchester County (New York) library system. YASD distributed YAAN in a 1976 packet of basic materials it marketed as the YASD Survival Kit. Professor Larry Amey, who along with his students created the Canadian library publication *Young Adult Hot Line*, declared:

The *Young Adult Alternative Newsletter* (YAAN) pointed the way toward a new model for youth service . . . the

yellow-colored, long-format newsletter was packed with descriptions of exemplary and original YA programs, tips for practicing librarians, and avant-garde advocacy for teens. YAAN was outspoken, hard-hitting, and committed. (Amey x)

YAAN’s emphasis on service, through which teenagers could connect to literature, and its fresh and contemporary tone made it unique and essential. It was timelier and more specific than the mainstream publications, and new ideas and best practices circulated much more quickly and efficiently than through mainstream channels. In fact, one 1978 article identified YAAN readers as “the vanguard in young adult services” (Kingsbury 22).

Over the seven years of its existence, YAAN was arguably one of the most important professional education tools in the young adult librarian’s arsenal. Diane Tuccillo calls YAAN a predecessor to modern YA-centric blogs and websites, describing it as “one of the earliest forms of networking . . . a real foundation for what we ended up with now” (12).

In our world of point-and-click instant information and connection, it is difficult to conceive of a time when practitioners could be so united by their love of YA literature

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**YAAN’s emphasis on service, through which teenagers could connect to literature, and its fresh and contemporary tone made it unique and essential.**

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and dedication to service for teens, but so separated by distance and time. This exploration of a “little-newsletter-that-could” shows us from where we have come and reminds us of the direction in which we are still moving as we work toward making libraries better and more relevant places for our teen clientele.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Patty Campbell interviewed by Cindy Welch, May 25, 2009.
- <sup>2</sup> Carol Starr interviewed by Cindy Welch, January 22, 2005.
- <sup>3</sup> Starr, interview.
- <sup>4</sup> Mary K. Chelton interviewed by Cindy Welch, June 4, 2009.
- <sup>5</sup> Campbell, interview.
- <sup>6</sup> Campbell, interview.
- <sup>7</sup> Joni Bodart interviewed by Cindy Welch, May 25, 2009.
- <sup>8</sup> Bodart, interview.
- <sup>9</sup> Chelton, interview.
- <sup>10</sup> Starr, interview.
- <sup>11</sup> Starr was then serving a one-year term as president of the Young Adult Services Division of the American Library Association.
- <sup>12</sup> Diane Tuccillo interviewed by Cindy Welch on May 22, 2009.

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# The Intersection of Meaning:

A Conversation with Emily Wing Smith

Interviewer's note: *The story behind the publishing of Emily Wing Smith's first novel, The Way He Lived, is the dream of many aspiring writers. As an English major in college, Smith showed promise, winning multiple essay and fiction contests. She knew she wanted to be a novelist, but it wasn't until she read the work of M. E. Kerr that she was sure she wanted to write specifically for young adults. She enrolled in graduate school at Vermont College, where she wrote The Way He Lived as her M.F.A. thesis project. At less than thirty years of age, she sold her book three months after she graduated and is now completing her second young adult novel.*

*The Way He Lived presents six seemingly simple perspectives of teenage life through six different characters. Set in the small Mormon town of Haven, the characters' stories spin from the tragic death of sixteen-year-old Joel Espen. Between passing periods, first dates, and driving lessons, the seemingly ordinary moments of these characters' lives weave a complicated tapestry of human experience that is both jarring and gentle. The Way He Lived leaves readers questioning who they are and who they want to become.*

## A Conversation with Emily Wing Smith

This interview was conducted at the ALAN workshop in San Antonio in 2008 and over the phone. You can learn more about Emily Wing Smith and see a trailer for *The Way He Lived* on her website at [www.emily-wingsmith.com](http://www.emily-wingsmith.com).

**TAR:** *My first impression of The Way He Lived is that*

*it is a book that questions, rather than answers. The title could be considered definitive, yet, as a reader, I am still deciding how Joel lived and who he was. Talk about why you left so many instances of ambiguity in the novel and if there is significance to the title.*

**ES:** I got started writing this book because I moved to a new city as a teenager, and when I got there, I was looking at everything through hyper-aware eyes. I really noticed how my school and my new community were different than what I was used to. Also, not long before I moved there, there was a tragic death of a boy my age. I was surprised at the diversity of the types of people who knew him—the stoners, the honors kids, the gymnastics team. People of all different walks of life knew him and loved him. I was interested to hear the stories about him, but because I never really got to know him, it was all very one-sided. I couldn't piece together any real character, and that experience was the real springboard for the story.

My book works with the idea that unless you actually *are* someone and in that person's skin, you can know a million different stories about that person from a million different people, you can even know that person yourself, but you will really never know him or her. The only person who can really know you is yourself. That was when I knew I wanted to write a book that had more questions than answers, not a book that lays things out in terms of what actually happened. I wondered if we really know other people as well as we think

## **Who Are the Voices in *The Way He Lived*?**

*The Way He Lived* is about sixteen-year-old Joel Espen, who died of dehydration on a camping trip. Told from six different points of view, the characters in this novel try to construct an understanding of Joel—and themselves—in the wake of tragedy.

*The Way He Lived* invites readers to examine the interconnectedness of a community, the impact one individual can have, and issues of sexuality and politics. The seemingly simple organization of the novel is deceptive. The characters' stories intersect in meaningful ways, ultimately creating a captivating and nuanced portrait of grief that portrays both sorrow and redemption. What follows is an overview of the characters and their struggles.

### ***Monday's Child Is Fair of Face***

Always known as the Smart One, Tabbatha got perfect grades, scored a 35 on her ACT, and had a nervous breakdown. When her brother dies, she is left with only a shaky sense of self. To cope, she begins writing a blog and takes a creative writing class at the local university. Ultimately, she realizes that her intellectual achievements don't define her and that she is beautiful and interesting, just as Joel always said she was.

### ***Tuesday's Child Is Full of Grace***

Debate is Adlen's thing. Her brother plays football. She debates. And she is good at it, or she was when she had Joel as her partner. But there are more than just high school debates on Adlen's mind. She questions the way her faith is practiced and the logic behind her community's beliefs about homosexuality. She uses her razor sharp reasoning abilities to analyze the circumstances of Joel's death and wonders whether he made an intentional choice to die. She suspects he felt trapped by social expectations and realizes that she, too, feels trapped by expectations she has imposed on herself.

### ***Wednesday's Child Is Full of Woe***

Miles is from the wrong side of town. He doesn't live in a fancy house or have tons of money, but it never mattered to his best friend, Joel. He is so angry that Joel is gone, he can hardly cope and is slashing tires and planning violent attacks. But Miles doesn't want to be a bad kid, and he remembers when he was good, reading to his grandmother and hanging out with his friends. All he wants is a sense of peace.

### ***Thursday's Child Has Far to Go***

Claire's world is shattering. She doesn't have many real friends because she always relied on her family, and now her family is falling apart. She escapes the loneliness of her life by running away to New York, and only by leaving her community is she able to return and find a place in it.

### ***Friday's Child Is Loving and Giving***

Norah's life is pregnant with responsibilities. She runs her house by cooking dinner, doing laundry, and taking care of the young children. She also has to worry about her brother, Miles, whose grief has put him on a dangerous course of self-destruction. She barely has a minute alone, and when she does, she is left with her own sadness and confusion over Joel's death. Joel kissed her, and for no reason, rejected her. Then he died, leaving her confused and sad. Now a new boy is interested in Norah, and she has to find a way to let Joel go in order to become the person she wants to be.

### ***Saturday's Child Must Work Hard for a Living***

Her boyfriend, Miles, lost his best friend, and then Lissa lost her boyfriend. It is as if Miles is punishing her for his loss, and Lissa doesn't know how or if they can move on as a couple. Then she meets a new guy who helps her realize that it is time for her to let go of the past and search for a better future.

we do. Is it presumptuous of us to assume that we know other people because of what they portray to the world? Teens are dealing with those issues even more than other segments of the population. They question whether the person they are is the person that they portray to the world in order to fit into high school society.

The original title was *Sunday's Child* from the framework of the nursery rhyme structure. The publisher and I decided to change it because having the word *child* in a young adult market might not work.

I do like *The Way He Lived*; it is sort of open-ended because you can come to many conclusions about the way Joel lived and the way he died.

**TAR:** *How did you know that your own experience in a similar situation would be enough to complete a novel?*

**ES:** I didn't know it would be enough, which is probably why I graduated from high school almost ten years ago, and the book just came out. When I was younger, I thought that my one experience in this situation may not be strong enough to carry a whole book. There aren't many books that look at how one tragedy can affect many lives or at the aftermath of what a tragedy like this can do.

The characters, like most young adults, seem to be searching for identities. For example, Tabatha defines herself as the smart one and Norah as the good girl, yet as they deal with their grief, they all seem to find that they are more than just one thing.

**TAR:** *How, if at all, do you think tragedy shapes or reshapes individuals?*

**ES:** It is easy to get locked into a role, especially as a teenager, when everybody is looking for a place to fit. Sometimes it takes something like a tragedy to shake up people's ideas about who they are and who their friends and family members might be. I also think that in the face of tragedy, we start examining ourselves. We question if we like who we are and who we've become. I think in Joel's tragedy, many of the characters are wondering what would have happened if it had been them.

**TAR:** *How did getting to know these characters change you? How did writing it affect you personally?*

**ES:** I definitely think it was a hard book to write because I had to go through grief six different times from six different characters' points of view. Even though Joel was an imaginary character, I had to lose him six times and in six ways. I found out how writing it changed me in my writers group. I was reading several segments of the book, and people would comment that the voices were so distinct. I thought, "Yes, but they are all like me. How can they all be so distinct and all be me?"

In each of the characters, there are pieces of me, but many of them say or do things I am uncomfortable with. For example, when I was writing from Miles's point of view, his voice kept coming into my head and saying, "You don't know shit." I don't talk like that at all. I am actually pretty religious and careful with my language, so I was thinking that I couldn't put his exact words in the book. I wanted to find a way to clean up Miles's language and still be true to his voice, so I wrote a few different drafts. It just didn't sound authentic if I didn't use his voice in the way it came into my head, so I wrote a draft of exactly what I heard from him. That's the draft that ended up in the book. Writing about these characters changed me in that I accept who they are. I quit worrying about what people think about me because I used swears in my book. I just put that aside and let the characters speak for themselves.

**TAR:** *Do you have a favorite character?*

**ES:** No. I do feel like each one is a piece of me. In that way, I love and hate each of the characters. They have many of the same flaws and strengths that I do. Someone once asked me if my favorite character was Adam, someone we know very little about, and maybe I do have a crush on him.

**TAR:** *Why use a child's nursery rhyme in a book for young adults?*

**ES:** When I was hearing all these voices and thinking about all the people who had known this kid, I tried to come up with a framework that I could

use to tell these stories, and the nursery rhyme just kind of popped into my head. I thought about how knowing all these different people showed the complexity of Joel's own personality. As a kid, I had always liked the rhyme because it stated exactly who you were. Each child represents the day of the week he was born on. It sort of reminds me of a horoscope or the Chinese zodiac. For the book, I liked how the nursery rhyme could bring together lots of different stuff and different characters. When the idea came to me, I thought that it was perfect because it was the kind of thing Joel would love. Joel would love a nursery rhyme he had become attached to as a kid, and he wouldn't be the type of person who was ashamed or embarrassed because he still liked a kid's nursery rhyme. That's not the person he was.

**TAR:** *The adults in this book have a minimal role. When mentioned, their shortcomings are at the forefront. Why is that? Was it a conscious decision?*

**ES:** It was a conscious decision. In classes and workshops on writing for young adults, the advice has always been to get rid of the parents. I think that sometimes it can seem almost contrived if you do it knowingly, like if the parents go on a long vacation or if the whole story happens the day the parents are gone. But if you rely too much on the parents, or any adults for that matter, it really isn't a teen's story. It is more a story about how this grown-up helped this teenager, and while I do think that might be true in some cases, that isn't what people, teens especially, want to read about. Teens don't want to be helped by some all-knowing person who rescues them, so I knew I didn't really want the adults to be in the story because that wasn't their role.

**TAR:** *This book is set in a Mormon community with many customs that are unique to that faith, yet it is a book for all audiences. Talk about your decision to use this setting.*

**ES:** I am from Utah, and as a teenager, I moved to a city like Haven. I had already lived in an area where I knew a lot of members of the LDS church and was pretty familiar with the religious aspect of

that culture, but not to the same extent as after I moved. My new town was overwhelmingly populated by members of the Mormon Church, probably over ninety percent, and I was just amazed by the way religious beliefs shaped the face of the community as a whole. I thought it would be a fascinating way to tell this story. It couldn't have taken place anywhere else because of the quirks that seemed very normal to the inhabitants of the community, and the setting made the story what it was. It made it believable that Joel's death could be accepted as both tragic and plausible.

Many people outside of Utah, or those who aren't familiar with LDS culture, don't know that most Mormon boys become Boy Scouts. Initially, when I'd tell some of those people about my book, their reaction was: "Well that couldn't have happened. That's crazy, scout leaders being unprepared. It is too farfetched." But people in Utah say, "Oh yeah, something like that happens every summer." Most Boy Scout troops in Utah are nontraditional groups because they are led by members of the church, not traditional scout leaders, and that's why the story needed to take place where it would be thought of as tragic and sad, but not unbelievable.

**TAR:** *This book is ultimately about dealing with grief. What does *The Way He Lived* bring the reader that other fiction that deals with grief does not?*

**ES:** I wouldn't say that this book says anything new about grief to the young adult literary community, nor would I go so far as to say that I have anything new to contribute to the young adult canon about grieving. I think what the book does do is provide a very specific look at how others grieve, and that may be universal about the way we all grieve.

I remember emailing one of my Vermont College advisors, and I told her I had just heard David Almond speak. He told us that the more specific a setting, the more universal its appeal. She wrote back to me, "Well, it is not really David Almond who can take credit for saying that. I believe the first person was Aristotle." I was sheepish and thought, "Oh yeah, I don't know my philosophers, but yeah, that's true."

What I was trying to achieve in this book was

to create very specific stories that would, in turn, be universal enough to resonate with all of us. Even if you've never visited a small Mormon community where people define where they live by saying what ward they live in, when you've learned about a world and know a character and how they think, you can find a greater truth. That was definitely where I was going in this book. I wanted to speak about a very universal theme by using a very specific culture and setting.

**TAR:** *Let's talk about you as a new voice in young adult literature. What were you doing prior to *The Way He Lived*?*

**ES:** I finished the book as my thesis for a Vermont College Masters of Fine Arts in writing for children and young adults. I sold the book probably about three or four months after I graduated. Before that, I was a college student who still enjoyed reading YA literature. I took lots of young adult literature classes and just sort of worked on my writing. I always knew I wanted to write novels, but after all that reading and all those classes, I came to realize that I wanted to write young adult fiction. After I got my bachelor's degree in English, I just knew that was where I wanted to go.

**TAR:** *Was there a point where you were discouraged?*

**ES:** I can't say exactly where it was, but there was a point when I didn't know if all of the stories were going to coalesce and tell a greater story. I knew what I wanted to do and what I wanted the stories to do, but I wasn't always sure how to get there. There was a point when I said to my husband that I didn't think I could tell this story as well as it needed to be told. And he said, "This is your story. You are the only one who can tell it." He is not a writer, I should point out, and I was sort of frustrated by his comments. I was thinking that it was not my story, it was the characters' stories, and I needed to tell them right. It was discouraging, but never

to a point where I thought I wasn't going to finish. I always felt like I needed to write it, and I never doubted that the story could be told. I sometimes doubted that I was the right person to tell it, but in the end, it all came together.

**TAR:** *How long did it take you to write it? How do you work?*

**ES:** About a year. I started working on it and there was one point when I thought I needed to take a break. I took a break and wrote a middle grade novel. The break was good because it gave me time to let *The Way He Lived* sit and gel.

I am a stay-at-home writer, and I'm blessed to be able to write full-time. I don't have children, so that makes it easier to write. I am also a homemaker, so I like to get up and put the house together. I am weird about clutter; I like to make sure everything looks neat. I guess I have to feel a state of Zen or something—because then I can write for a couple of hours, take a break, and write for a few more hours. I have a couple of other writer-friends, and we write together sometimes. We meet about once a week at the public library. It is nice to meet with them because writing can be sort of solitary, and it's good to get out of the house every once in a while. It's good to have colleagues because most of the time, as a writer, you are in a business where you don't have many colleagues.

**TAR:** *Who are you reading right now?*

**ES:** I just finished *Kitty Kitty* by Michelle Jaffe. I am a fan of hers. And I finished E. Lockhart's *Fly on the Wall*. I am a big fan of hers, too. I mainly read young adult fiction, and usually stuff that is relatively new. I like to keep up on the market.

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## Truant Teaching:

A Conversation with Isamu Fukui

Interviewer's note: *On September 24, 2009, in Columbia, South Carolina, I sat down with Isamu Fukui and talked about his writing, his motivations, and his perspective on YA lit.*

**TAR:** *This summer you completed the manuscript for the final volume of the Truancy series. Can you tell me about Truancy City?*

**IF:** *Truancy City* takes place a year after *Truancy*. Although the Educators still control a sizeable chunk in the center, the Truancy controls most of the City. Tack is now, obviously, the leader of the Truancy. We're not seeing things from his perspective anymore, though; we see things through the eyes of his enemy. What I really love about *Truancy City* is the perspective shift. *Truancy* was written from a Truant's perspective. *Truancy Origins* was written from a neutral perspective. *Truancy City* is written from the perspective of the Student Militia. A good chunk of the book covers the war between the Militia and the Truancy from the perspective of Edward's successor, the new captain of the Student Militia.

**TAR:** *Do you think your readers are ready for that switch? Many of your high school fans are attracted to the Truancy's rebellion against school, right?*

**IF:** Umasi, who is a familiar character, is a kind of bridge [for readers] because he is struggling against both sides. Something very interesting happens to Umasi in *Truancy City*. . . . And not everyone in the

Student Militia is fighting to save school. The protagonist, Cross, Edward's successor and the leader of the Militia, is not one of what I call the True Believers. I always thought of Cross as the ultimate, or rather, *model* student because he's so tractable. He was Edward's second-in-command because he was so good at following orders. He didn't come to that post by demonstrating ingenuity. Thanks not just to the Educators' education, but also to Edward's, he doesn't think for himself. So [in *Truancy City*], you're not really seeing the story through the eyes of someone who thinks school is wonderful, but more from the perspective of someone who doesn't think for himself.

**TAR:** *What do the True Believers stand for? Are they capable of independent critical thought?*

**IF:** The Student Militia is not as ideological as the Truancy. Some [members] are just horrified by the violence and want to protect their families and friends. Others are in it for themselves; they want the instant graduation that comes with [joining the Militia]. But you also have the True Believers, who genuinely want to prove that they're not Truants and that the Truants don't speak for them. I felt that one of the weak parts of *Truancy* was that I didn't explore the Student Militia—you never get to see what's going on in their heads, you just see them as sell-outs. *Truancy City* addresses this.

**TAR:** *It seems that you are interested in exploring your fictional creations in very three-dimensional ways.*

**IF:** Yes, especially in a book like *Truancy*, where conflict is the central theme. If you ground [the narrative] in one perspective permanently, I don't think you do justice to either the characters or the story. I'm very mindful of the fact that in every conflict, there's always two sides. Each side will always believe that they are correct. I find that fascinating.

**TAR:** *You've made clear in previous interviews that you identify strongly with the Truants' frustrations with school and with their desire to rebel against "the system." How have you approached the process of understanding how the Student Militia thinks?*

**IF:** During my senior year at Stuyvesant, there was a sort of rogue student organization called "Stuy-watch." They wanted some freedoms returned [to them] that the students had lost, so they worked to organize and rally the students. Something I found really interesting and fascinating is that an alternative group, "watch-Stuy" popped up. "Watch-Stuy" was infuriated that this group ["Stuy-watch"] presumed to talk for all students. I expanded from there to create the perspective of the Student Militia.

**TAR:** *Both of the published Truancy books offer a strong critique of the way schools as an institution infantilize teenagers. Throughout the novels, though, the narrator refers to teenage characters as "children." Obviously, this creates reader sympathy for teenagers' plight at the hands of Educators and Enforcers. But the language choice doesn't always sit well with the books' larger critique. Can you explain your thinking behind referring to the characters as "children"?*

**IF:** Other people have asked me that, too. I wanted to redefine the word, to shatter expectations of what you think of as a "child." When you think of "child," you think of something immature. But you could show a world where in fact the opposite is true, where children are the only ones who understand.

**TAR:** *That's interesting! Beverly Lyon Clark (Kiddie Lit: The Cultural Construction of Children's Literature in America, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003)*

*discusses the notion of children (and hence their literature) being associated with "immaturity" during the course of the twentieth century. Your books are published by Tor Teen and marketed as children's, or rather Young Adult, literature. What do you think of that?*

**IF:** I've had a lot of arguments about labels. There's no science in my fiction, so why call it "science fiction"? All these labels are ultimately for marketing purposes.

**TAR:** *Do you think there's an advantage to having a book for teens actually authored by a teen?*

**IF:** Well, people can't accuse you of being out of touch, even though people have, anyway. I believe that what age you are doesn't matter one way or another. Some people are really good at writing from perspectives other than their own (straight to gay, women to men, etc.). I don't think who you are in reality says anything about your ability to write anything. Really, if you're approaching a book [based on] the author first, I think you're doing wrong.

**TAR:** *Did you read YA literature in high school?*

**IF:** I just read books that I thought were interesting: the Artemis Fowl series, Anamorphs series, and when I was younger, the Redwall Series—that was the first novel I read, actually, in kindergarten.

**TAR:** *Your books are also very cinematic . . .*

**IF:** Yes, nothing has happened on that front yet. I would love to see it [adapted into a movie]!

**TAR:** *Were video games also an influence for you? Are you a gamer?*

**IF:** I'm an avid gamer. You name it, I've probably heard of it if I haven't played it. I think videogames are a very interesting storytelling medium. Some people knock it because it's interactive, but that has strengths. The choices you make in the game really affect your entire experience. One of the important themes I like to explore is the idea that

## Portrait of the Author as a Young Man

Isamu Fukui, the 19-year-old author of *Truancy* (2008), *Truancy Origins* (2009), and the forthcoming *Truancy City* (all Tor Teen), is many things: a native New Yorker, a child of immigrants, an NYU student, an avid video-gamer, and an author, both published and aspiring.

In 2004, after a miserable middle school experience during which he was beaten up by students and not infrequently removed from class by teachers, Fukui began high school at Stuyvesant—the elite New York City exam admissions school—hopeful that things would improve. They didn't. Or at least, not enough. As Fukui has explained, he discovered that his problem was less with an individual school than it was with the institutional nature of public schooling itself. Despite his considerable academic gifts and intellectual curiosity, Fukui neither enjoyed nor excelled in the classroom. Rejecting his teachers' assertions that certain books (*Robinson Crusoe*) or subjects (pre-calculus) were important, Fukui rebelled against the monotony of homework assignments, freedom-restricting rules, and a daily routine that stifled creativity and thwarted individuality.

During class, Fukui began scribbling notes in the margins of homework assignments as he tuned out “boring” lectures and class discussions. Whenever a teacher said or did something that particularly “ticked him off”—announcing, for example, that students must turn in their test papers immediately, instead of at the end of class as expected—Fukui meticulously recorded the event. These field notes became the germs of *Truancy*, his 429-page debut novel about a group of Truants engaged in guerilla warfare to overthrow the Educators, men who control both the schools and the City in a dystopian world resembling contemporary Manhattan. The interactions between teachers and students depicted in the novel, Fukui readily admits, are largely based on his own experiences. (The water-torture scene? Written, Fukui reported, “after a particularly miserable day at school.”)

*Truancy* was composed at break-neck speed. During the summer following his freshman year in high school, Fukui wrote a chapter a day on his brother's laptop computer, completing the manuscript in a month. “Back then I had no idea where I was going,” Fukui told me. But he found the writing process both

enjoyable and empowering. In the fictional world he created, this fifteen-year-old author could speak out about the hypocrisies he saw in the American school system: federally mandated testing policies that ensured little curricular space for higher-order thinking or creative development; Zero Tolerance policies that increased rather than diminished school violence and made students feel like prisoners in their own schools. Most of all, he had an opportunity to process the anger and frustrations he felt toward both teachers and tyrannical peers.

As Fukui typed away his summer vacation, refusing meals and sleeping erratically, his parents started to wonder what so engrossed him; the next thing Fukui knew, he discovered his father hastily concealing the laptop containing his manuscript. Nobu Fukui, a prominent New York artist, recognized the book's potential and, without his son's knowledge, passed it on to a friend with a literary agent. The teenage Fukui began working with an editor and the book sold, first in Europe, then in the States. By his senior year of high school, Fukui was not only conducting interviews for major news outlets, but had also earned enough through advances and foreign royalties to pay his way through college. After he got in, that was.

Like Nobu, Fukui's father, I first discovered *Truancy* on a laptop. Two years ago, shortly after I joined the English Department at the University of South Carolina, I began constructing a syllabus for the Adolescent Literature course I was assigned to teach. Having settled on a selection of classic Young Adult texts for the first unit, I began researching recently-released adolescent books to complement these. I was seeking books that startled, novels that through their subject, language, and form asked penetrating questions about what it meant to be human—and more specifically, an adolescent—in today's world.

I came across Fukui's NPR interviews in a Google search and was astonished by the author's ability to articulate his frustrations with the public school system in a manner that forced adults to take him seriously. I immediately thought of S. E. Hinton. In 1967, at the age of seventeen, she had published *The Outsiders*, a novel now widely credited as launching the YA genre. Was Fukui starting a similar revolution, I wondered? I immediately ordered a copy of his book.

When *Truancy* arrived in the mail, I read it straight through. I soon found myself talking about the



novel to everyone I came in contact with: my neighbor, who taught middle school science; my mother, a retired kindergarten teacher; my younger cousin, a disaffected high school student; my colleagues, professors, and graduate students of English, history, and education. Several ordered copies for themselves, and the conversation continued.

Could I teach this book, I wondered? What would my Carolina students—many preparing to be middle or high school teachers and deeply committed to public education—think of Fukui’s message? Would they be offended by his depiction of sadistic teachers? Horrified by the violence students commit in the story? I had laughed out loud at Fukui’s depiction of the over-eager student of the New York City prep school variety; would my South Carolina students be able to relate to the landscape—both physical and emotional—that the New York teen had captured?

As I pondered, I began searching back issues of the *New York Times* in an attempt to contextualize Fukui’s critique and the urban world in which he was raised. How was this young author affected by Columbine? By 9/11, the Patriot Act, and the war in Afghanistan? By public debates about the appropriateness of torture as a political weapon? How had Fukui’s educational experiences been colored by No Child Left Behind? Did he know about the United Nations’ increased attention to the Rights of the Child? Had he studied the student protest movements of the 1960s?

Adolescent angst might be universal, student frustration with school timeless, but this novel, it seemed to me, spoke poignantly to our contemporary moment.

As I read, I marveled at the “modernity” of Fukui’s novel—the way multicultural characters were a given, girls fought alongside boys in hand-to-hand combat, and cinematic forms merged with ceramic swords that harkened back to medieval codes of knighthood. The book reads like a videogame, even as the carefully crafted language of certain passages make clear that the young author is an aspiring intellectual, a teenager who values ideas and isn’t afraid to ask the big questions.

I decided to teach the book. After I read *Truancy* with my Adolescent Literature class in the fall of 2008, I discovered students talking about the novel every time I walked into the classroom. This year, I invited Isamu Fukui to campus. As my students are quick to point out, there are both gains and losses when a novel is the product of a fifteen-year-old’s imagination and sixteen-year-old’s editing skills. But it is impossible not to recognize Fukui’s tremendous accomplishment. And his audacity. We have heard innumerable critiques of No Child Left Behind and Zero Tolerance over the past few years. Fukui, however, has done something about it. Too young to vote, too level-headed to drop out of school, he wrote a book that forces adults to sit up and listen.

your enemy might view you completely differently than you expect. That realization I actually got from a videogame (“Tales of Phantasia”) when I was very young.

**TAR:** *Have you tried writing video games?*

**IF:** That’s how I started writing—fanfiction. It levels the playing field because no one knows how old you are. So if they tell you something is good, you know it’s good.

**TAR:** *One of the really exciting aspects of Truancy is its critique of No Child Left Behind, Zero Tolerance, and the culture of bullying (both among students and between teachers and students) in high schools.*

*If you had the power to reform the American school system, where would you start?*

**IF:** First of all, I can imagine a system that works.

I think our colleges work very well. Our higher education institutions are the best in the world. But American high schools are really a joke. My experience in college has been so much, much better than high school. Some of it is actually very simple. In college, you’re treated as an adult, a young adult, but an adult. People treat you with respect. There’s mutual respect going on. In high school, teachers don’t respect students and students don’t respect teachers. Maybe it’s cultural, or societal. Kids are treated as if it’s natural that they are miscreants, so of course, they’re going to behave that way.

**TAR:** *You're now a sophomore at NYU, double majoring in English and Political Science. How do you think your studies and experience in college will affect the issues you want to explore in your writing?*

**IF:** I set a goal for myself to finish the Truancy series while still a teenager. If I had waited until I was out [of high school], I would have never been able to do it. The urgency isn't there anymore. Even after spending a year or two out of high school, you forget the bad things. I did sort of forget how I was treated, but [my high school English teacher invited me back to Stuyvesant to speak]. The security guards didn't realize I wasn't a student. I had my headphones on when I walked in and the woman at the front [desk] was screeching at me, "Take your headphones off!" That was really shocking because no one is that rude to you out in the real world. She was *screeching!*

**TAR:** *Truancy City is now with your editor. What's next?*

**IF:** I'm tossing around several ideas. [One] is a sort of ghost story but with a twist that the ghosts can't survive without taking over a host; they have to possess someone. Either they have to stick in the darkness or inhabit a human body. My idea is that the main character would be a woman who would not really be possessed, but who would have a symbiotic relationship with a ghost; they share control, and they hunt bad ghosts.

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### **CALL for the Secondary Section High School Teacher of Excellence Award**

Each NCTE affiliate is at liberty to select a person for this honor in the manner of its choice. An affiliate's governing board might acknowledge someone who has previously won an award within the affiliate, thus moving that person's recognition to a national level, or the affiliate might advertise for applications for nominations before choosing a winner.

**Deadline:** Documentation should be sent to the Secondary Section Steering Committee administrator/designee by **MAY 1** of each year. Materials should be sent to the address on the current nomination form. For more information, go to [www.ncte.org/second](http://www.ncte.org/second).

## 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

#### Patricia Serre

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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*

**Karen Stearns**

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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

**Jennifer Walsh**

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www.ecclecticreader.blogspot.com\*

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](http://www.thereadingzone.wordpress.com), and [www.readingyear.blogspot.com](http://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](http://www.teenreads.com) and [www.guyslitwire.blogspot.com](http://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.