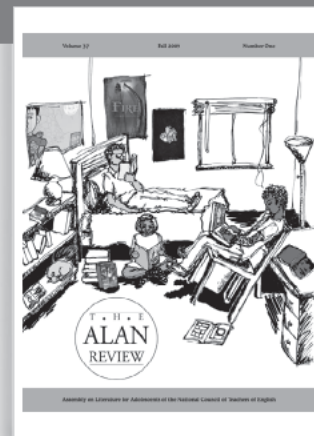


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## From the Guest Editor

*Editors' Note:* When we proposed the idea of having a themed issue on digital media in the world of young adult literature, James Bucky Carter, an assistant professor at the University of Texas at El Paso, immediately came to our minds as a guest editor. We all had read *Building Literacy Connections with Graphic Novels: Page by Page, Panel by Panel* (2007), a text that looks closely at the incorporation of graphic novels into the classroom, and Jackie immediately devoted a week to graphic novels in her university adolescent literature course. As author of the blog EN/SANE World, Bucky reviews recent graphic novels, reports on the news in this field, and examines teaching resources for those interested in using this genre with their students. We are pleased to have him introduce this issue and share his thoughts on the unique spaces graphic novels occupy.

\* \* \*

*Transmediation, multiliteracy, bloggage, managerealism, emoticons, technoscience, vooks, digi-novels, graphic novels, graphic narrative, documentaries, affinity spaces, "convergence culture"*—these are key words or concepts from the articles in this issue of *The Alan Review*, which focuses on film, new media, digital technologies, and the role of the image as they relate to young adult literature. It seems that keeping up with young adult literature and its place in education echoes what Steven, Jacqueline, and Melanie said in the introduction to the last issue of *TAR* (Bickmore, Bach, & Hundley, 2010): "There are only so many days." New terms, new theories, new modes, along

with repurposed ways of viewing and using older ones seem to barrage the scholar and teacher. Henry Jenkins (2006) may be right to purport a "convergence culture," and we may be right to embrace it, but let us not forget that convergence, defined as the act of coming together, is also what happens when an SUV swerves out of its lane and into oncoming traffic. How does one stay current without crashing? How many forms and genres does one have to love/pretend to stomach to keep up appearances these days? How are our students engaging, consuming, and interacting with these new forms? Young adult literature in the 21st century can be a dizzying experience, one in which the participant may swoon in the vertigo of reality and hyperreality, in the spaces between the real, the unreal, and something beyond or between both.

Describing the hyperreal, Jean Baudrillard (2000) asserts, "Everywhere we see a paradoxical logic: the idea is destroyed by its own realization. By its own excess. And in this way history itself comes to an end . . . history presents itself as if it were advancing and continuing, when it is actually collapsing" (2000, pp. 46–49). Iain Thomson, who has applied Baudrillard's theory to the graphic novel *Watchmen*, clarifies that hyperreality often takes the given, the known, the real, and moves it to its extreme, thereby allowing for the possibility of its disintegration at hyper-speed. Pornography destroys sex because it is "more sexual than sex"; obesity destroys the body because it is fatter than fat"; *Watchmen* destroys the hero with the superhero, "who is more heroic than any hero, but whose extreme 'heroics' are no longer recognizable as

heroics” (2005, p. 106). David Macey writes that Umberto Eco’s study of hyperrealism in visual arts and other forms suggests “the reality of such works is so real that they proclaim their own artificiality” (Macey, 2000, p. 193).

Readers and defenders of young adult literature are actually quite skilled at pondering the hyperreal, as efforts to get the texts accepted as worthy literature are ongoing in the face of those who see such literature as fake, or lesser than “more established” texts. An application of this, rooted in traditional cultural

literacy, might consider conventional print and the new modalities of accessing and creating it as the real vs. the hyperreal.

While the use of the visual as illustration or imagetext is actually *not* new, we are being told that we are becoming a more visual culture. Does this suggest that we are moving lightning quick to the kitsch or to fraud forms that “pass” for text? Are young adult titles and mediums indica-

tive of this? Blogs, gaming, and hypertextual interfaces might be viewed as “hyper” in the same sense as “hyperreality”—beyond the real, new, and thereby fake. “Now I have to pretend to like graphic novels too?” quips a *New Yorker* cartoon. “What the hell do I call *The Invention of Hugo Cabret*, and how can I discuss it if I don’t know how to label it?” “*The Storm in the Barn* won that award?” “How can they even call those things novels?”—I am sure all of us have heard peers utter similar sentiments.

While many of us are excited about the plurality in form and substance of young adult literature, there are those who may see this plurality as an affront. In truth, the hyperreal may be an *illusion* of decadence and decay and the faux, rooted more in the subjective mind of those who consider themselves cultural and textual gatekeepers than in the forms and genres they wish to suppress or leave unexamined. This, of course, suggests that the plurality found in contemporary adolescent literature may be moving toward something that doesn’t even exist!

So what is one to do? One answer from Steve, Jacqueline, and Melanie is to find reasonable ways of focusing on the *best*. They referred to the best young adult *books*, but the advice can apply to visual and hybrid forms as well. The implication is to embrace the plurality, but to understand that the bulk of anything produced in any form or medium will constitute the mediocre. Of course, one danger of hyperreality is that important exemplars of forms can move from relevant to kitsch, from important to only important in that they trope the real. I am not expert enough to say all the graphic novels, traditional print novels, Web interfaces, and films mentioned in this issue constitute “bests,” but I am certain that these articles will inform, expand, and challenge your conceptualizations of what is known, what is becoming knowledge, what is yet to come in reading and young adult literature, and what value new forms hold for us and the young people with whom we interact.

Sean Kottke immediately challenges the traditionalist’s sense of the academic article with “RSVPs to Reading: Gendered Responses to the Permeable Curriculum.” Crafted in comics style, Kottke integrates symbolic images and signified letters to detail his findings of the reading selections of sixth-grade girls and boys. Is his guest speaker, none other than John Dewey, real or hyperreal? As Kottke’s appropriated interpretation of the man’s image and words, Dewey connects the study to theories established and recent, and will challenge the reader to remember that he is, in actuality, an absent presence.

Meghan M. Sweeney’s “Rethinking Ugliness: Lynda Barry in the Classroom” focuses upon students’ responses to *The Good Times Are Killing Me*, a text she labels an illustrated novel. Sweeney examines student resistance to the “bleak,” which may be defined as the hyperreal of sadness, and explores how peritext can become meta-text (a text more real than text?) *and* traditional text. Jill Olthouse explores the tensions between schooling’s perceived realities and students’ lived realities regarding writing in “Blended Books: An Emerging Genre Blends Online and Traditional Formats.” Olthouse further examines the different realities of those favoring only cultural literacy perspectives and those attuned to multiliteracies before treating books—*ChaseR*, *serafina67 \*urgently requires life\**, *tmi, are u 4 real?*, *Click Here (To Find Out How I Survived Seventh Grade)*, *ttyl*, and *Entr@pment: A*

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**I am certain that these articles will inform, expand, and challenge your conceptualizations of what is known, what is becoming knowledge, what is yet to come in reading and young adult literature.**

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*High School Comedy in Chat* as cases, revealing how she sees each text as a blended book, one that is printed traditionally but melds hypertext, “textese,” and other digital forms into its borders and pages.

If blended books move us toward student realities while retaining binding and publishing qualities grounded in the real, tangible world, other young adult texts move us further beyond it. In “Young Adult Literature Goes Digital: Will Teen Reading Ever Be the Same?”, Susan L. Groenke and Joellen Maples make an important distinction between recent young adult books that have the *look* of “techno-text” worlds and those that actually engage them. The title suggests transformation, a move from the printed page to the screen, from text-to-self reader response to something akin to massive multi-reader response. However, as the authors draw our attention to the exciting elements of teens interacting in virtual communities built up around digital texts, they also reveal that the worries associated with their doing so are often the same as with traditional young adult literature: unchecked consumerism, equity issues, a lack of diverse voices, etc.

Elaine O’Quinn and Heather Atwell address the “So now I have to like x” attitude in “Familiar Aliens: Science Fiction as Social Commentary,” exploring books such as *The House of the Scorpion* and *Feed* alongside films such as *Avatar* and *Wall-E*. If good literature is supposed to challenge precepts from readers’ worlds, they argue, science fiction is a rich genre. Likewise, if readers focus too much on one genre or form, they run the risk of narrowing their realities. Perhaps a narrow focus is a good way to avoid hyper-realism, of course, but the authors (and I) feel this is not a desired solution.

Nathan C. Phillips and Alan B. Teasley argue for certain documentary films to be considered Young Adult texts in “Reading Reel Nonfiction: Documentary Films for Young Adults.” Phillips and Teasley’s approach is new and exciting, like so much in this issue, so it might make some readers do a double-take: “Are we really considering film as young adult literature now? And documentaries, too???” Phillips and Teasley offer well-cited, practical suggestions for teaching documentaries and, despite warning quite correctly that their article should be read as more than a list of suggested titles, provide an impressive list of films that might fit their category. With Michael Moore’s so-

called documentary films so engrained in culture that recent films and television shows have spoofed his techniques and possible agendas and, in the process, called him out for what may be highly politicized portrayals of reality, might Phillips and Teasley be setting the stage for discussion of a *hyper-reel* reading of young adult documentary film?

Columnists Stergios Botzakis, Sean P. Connors, and Gretchen Schwarz all write on graphic novels. Botzakis explores the recent Gene Yang and Derik Kirk Kim triptych *The Eternal Smile*, while advocating for the form in the classroom, with its shining exemplars that allow for serious,

multilayered reading experiences. Connors measures graphic novels as appropriate for more than just remedial readers, though some still believe this to be true, despite multiple articles and books revealing their use for multiple student populations, and Schwarz continues her work to convince readers of the critical literacy potential inherent in the medium. Their arguments are familiar refrains, echoing—though not always acknowledging—past voices that have made similar arguments. While perhaps not as well-cited (the guest editor slyly coughs into his fist, winking) as the Phillips and Teasley article, their columns cover a range of issues associated with young adult graphica and remind readers that it is a medium with a growing presence that should not be ignored. Indeed, as I write these lines, the graphic novel adaptation of Stephanie Meyer’s *Twilight* (ICV2.com2b, 2010) has hit a one-week sales record, surpassing 66,000 copies sold out of an initial print run of 350,000. A graphic novel with a 1,000,000 copy initial print run is scheduled for release in the near future. It will be a *Captain Underpants* (IVC2a, 2010) title. Real, unreal, or hyperreal?

Jennifer Miller reviews J. T. Dutton’s *Freaked* and interviews the author. Dutton answers questions regarding the inspiration for the text and reveals how she copes with reader response from young readers whose realities do not include prior knowledge of The

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**To disturb and unsettle—  
that is the duty of what-  
ever inhabits the space  
between what we call the  
real and the hyperreal, and  
that is the space wherein  
the contributors of this  
issue ask us to play.**

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Grateful Dead, a band that she calls “a piece of history that is just as interesting to remember as other pieces of history.” *And in this way history itself comes to an end . . . history presents itself as if it were advancing and continuing, when it is actually collapsing?* (I’ll let you decide on the relevance of my Baudrillardian juxtaposition.) Dutton also examines the ever-popular idea of writing for young adults versus *just writing* and how Jack Kerouac’s and Ken Kesey’s works, which question and trope realities and offer new ones, appeal to her.

But days ago, I read Neil Gaiman’s introduction to the newly released *Saga of the Swamp Thing, Book Two* (2010). Upon reading the collected edition’s stories when they first appeared back in the 1980s, Gaiman states that he “became hooked, discovering with amazement that comics had the same capacity to disturb and unsettle that the best prose and film had.” We are at a point where we can say the same about young adult literature, regardless of its form or interface, be it film, image, digital, or some hybrid form of new media or newly excogitated media. To disturb and unsettle—that is the duty of whatever inhabits the space between what we call the real and the hyper-real, and that is the space wherein the contributors of this issue ask us to play.

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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.

## 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.**

## Fall 2011 Theme: Converging Paths: YA Lit, The ALAN Review, and NCTE

This issue coincides with the 100th anniversary of NCTE, so it seems appropriate to consider the role of young adult literature, in particular *The ALAN Review*, and its relationship with NCTE. Which young adult authors or sessions have you seen at NCTE that inspired you or helped you reconsider how to incorporate YA Lit into your curriculum? What themes (social justice, issues of diversity, coming of age, to list a few) in YA Lit continue to speak to you or your students as they find books in your classroom or in your library? What direction should NCTE take in regards to our field? How do the NCTE conference and the ALAN workshop influence the place of YA Lit in the larger world of English education? How does your participation in these events influence how you teach young adult literature at the college level? This theme is meant to be open to interpretation and support a broad range of subtopics. General submissions are also welcome. Submission deadline: **March 1, 2011.**

## 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.



**ACTION RESEARCH COMIX  
PRESENTS:**

# **RSVPS TO READING: GENDERED RESPONSES TO THE PERMEABLE CURRICLLUM**

**BY  
SEAN KOTTKE,  
THE ROBERT B. MILLER COLLEGE**

**WITH SPECIAL  
GUEST  
COMMENTATOR  
JOHN  
DEWEY!!!\***



## **ABSTRACT**

**THIS COMIC REPORTS FINDINGS FROM A STUDY DESIGNED TO DOCUMENT, ANALYZE AND COMPARE THE TEXT SELECTIONS MADE FOR ACADEMIC PURPOSES BY A GROUP OF SIXTH-GRADE BOYS & GIRLS OVER THE COURSE OF ONE YEAR IN A PERMEABLE LANGUAGE ARTS CLASSROOM WITH THOSE THEY MADE FOR RECREATIONAL PURPOSES. THE EXTENT TO WHICH THE FULL RANGE OF STUDENTS' VERNACULAR LITERACY PRACTICES, PARTICULARLY THOSE INVOLVING NONPRINT MEDIA, BECAME VISIBLE WITHIN THE ACADEMIC SETTING IS DISCUSSED.**

## **PROLOGUE: LET'S HAVE A HAND FOR READING**

**WE COME TO LANGUAGE ARTS INSTRUCTION WITH THE BEST OF INTENTIONS ...**



**... THAT WITH THE POWER OF GREAT LITERATURE, WE WILL SPARK NEW LIFE IN OUR STUDENTS.**



**HOWEVER, MANY OF OUR STUDENTS, LIKE ADAM, HAVE A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE ON THIS SCENARIO ...**



**... AND LIKE ADAM, SOME STUDENTS MAY OFFER A LESS THAN ENTHUSIASTIC REACTION TO OUR EFFORTS.**



**AS A RESULT, STUDENTS' FAILURE TO EMBRACE THE LITERATURE WE OFFER MAY LEAD TO OTHER FAILURES.**



**IS THERE A BETTER WAY, ONE THAT STARTS WITH MEETING STUDENTS WHERE THEY ARE? READ ON ...**



**\* UNLESS OTHERWISE NOTED BY IN-TEXT CITATION, DR. DEWEY'S COMMENTARIES ARE CREATIVE EXPRESSIONS OF THE AUTHOR'S PROGRESSIVE CONSCIENCE, NOT DEWEY'S ACTUAL WORDS.**

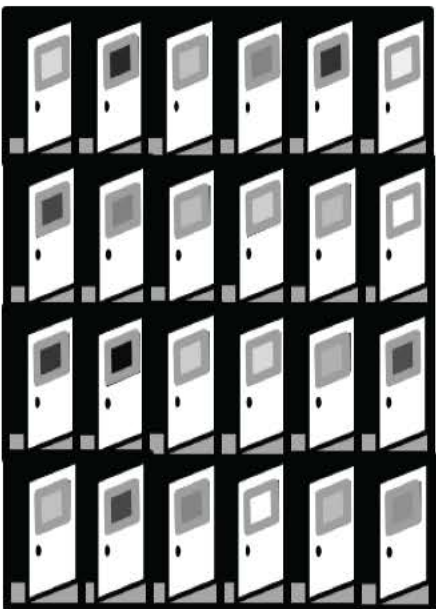


## I. DOORS

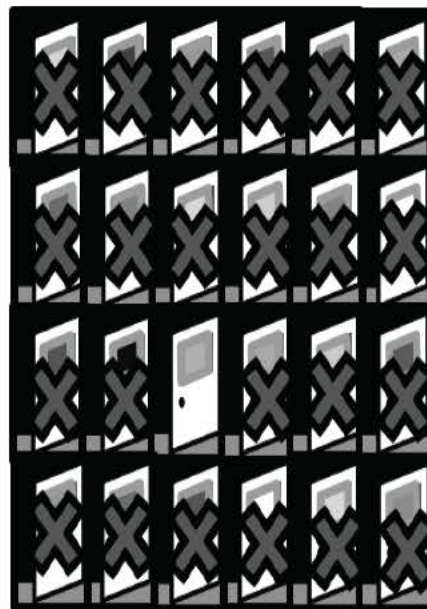


TRADITIONALLY, CLASSROOMS ARE PHYSICAL SPACES THAT HAVE JUST ONE DOOR. TEACHERS AND STUDENTS ALIKE COME AND GO THROUGH IT.

BUT CLASSROOMS ARE ALSO PSYCHOLOGICAL SPACES, ACCESSIBLE BY ANY NUMBER OF METAPHORICAL DOORS. TEACHERS AND STUDENTS MAY COME AND GO THROUGH POTENTIALLY LIMITLESS DOORS AS THEY TRAVERSE BETWEEN THEIR ACADEMIC AND EXTRACURRICULAR WORLDS.



HOWEVER, IN THE TRADITIONAL CLASSROOM, ALL BUT ONE OF THESE PSYCHOLOGICAL DOORS IS CLOSED, THE ONE REMAINING OPEN ZEALOUSLY GUARDED BY THE TEACHER TO ENSURE THAT STUDENTS TAKE A "PROPER" STANCE TOWARD THE CURRICULUM. THIS IS THE PEDAGOGY OF CONTROL (O'BRIEN, STEWART, & MOJE, 1995).

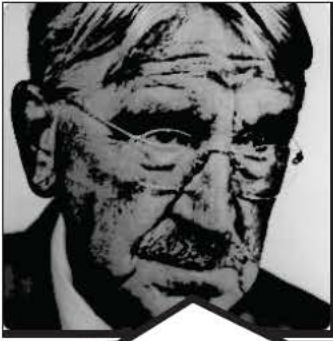


THIS IS BY NO MEANS A NEW OBSERVATION. IN THE BROTHERS KARAMAZOV, WE MEET KOLYA KRASSOTKIN, AN OUTSPOKEN SCHOOLBOY WHO HAS FIGURED OUT THAT THE SINGLE PSYCHOLOGICAL DOOR INTO THE 19<sup>TH</sup>-CENTURY RUSSIAN CLASSROOM MAY NOT BE GOOD FOR LEARNING LANGUAGE, BUT IS EFFECTIVE FOR ACHIEVING OTHER GOALS.



"IT IS SIMPLY A POLICE MEASURE . . . GREEK AND LATIN WERE INTRODUCED BECAUSE THEY ARE A BORE AND BECAUSE THEY STUPEFY THE INTELLECT." (DOSTOEVSKY, 1880/1952, P. 292)

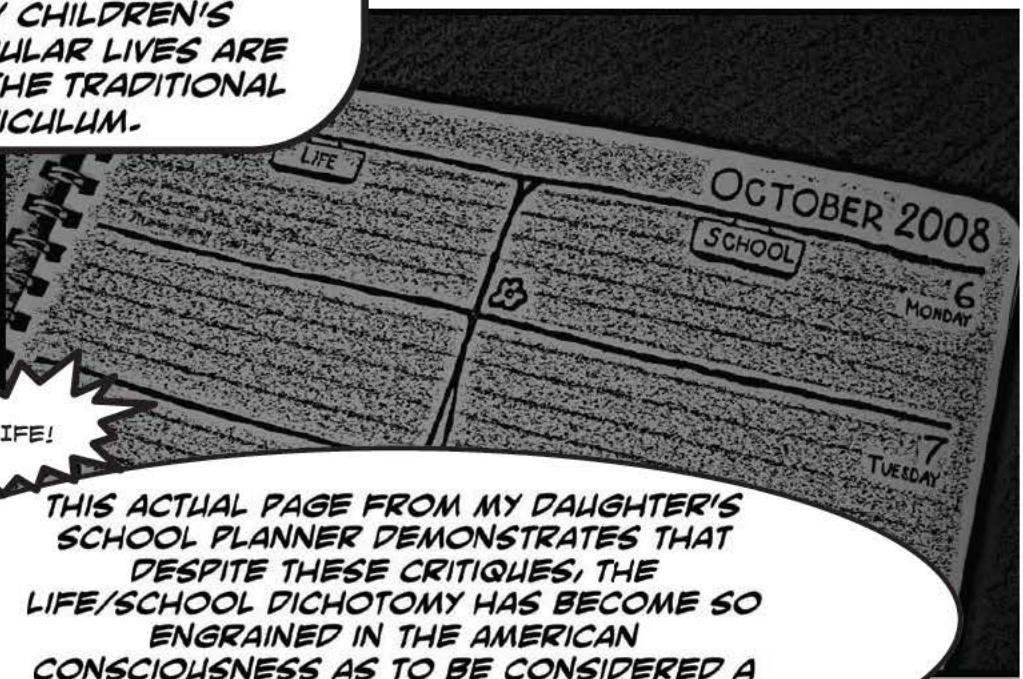




A FEW DECADES LATER, IN THE SCHOOL AND SOCIETY, JOHN DEWEY HAD A SIMILAR CRITIQUE, ARGUING THAT THE NOTION THAT SCHOOL IS SOME SORT OF PREPARATION FOR "REAL LIFE" CREATES AN ARTIFICIAL BARRIER BETWEEN SCHOOL AND SOCIETY THAT MAY ULTIMATELY UNDERMINE THE FOUNDATIONS OF DEMOCRATIC, PARTICIPATORY GOVERNMENT.

I DEEPLY OPPOSED WHAT LATER EDUCATORS WHO SHARED MY VISION WOULD CALL A PEDAGOGY OF CONTROL, IN WHICH SCHOOLS TAKE ON THE MISSION OF MANUFACTURING PRODUCTIVE CITIZENS BY STAMPING OUT STUDENTS' NATURAL INTERESTS AND INCLINATIONS AND GRANTING LEGITIMACY TO A NARROW RANGE OF DISCIPLINES AND TEXTS. IT WOULD BE ABSURD TO REGARD CHILDREN AS HEATHENS IN NEED OF CONVERSION TO THE ONE TRUE FAITH, YET THIS IS PRECISELY HOW MANY CHILDREN'S EXTRACURRICULAR LIVES ARE TREATED BY THE TRADITIONAL CURRICULUM.

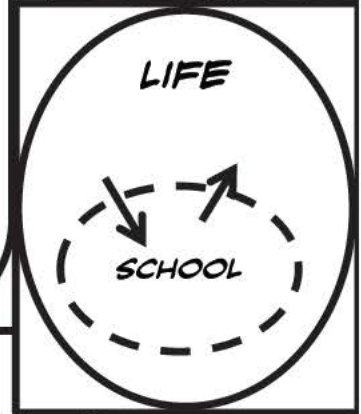
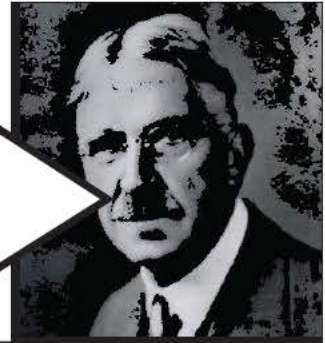
"THE CENTER OF GRAVITY IS OUTSIDE THE CHILD. IT IS IN THE TEACHER, THE TEXTBOOK, ANYWHERE AND EVERYWHERE YOU PLEASE EXCEPT IN THE IMMEDIATE INSTINCTS AND ACTIVITIES OF THE CHILD HIMSELF. . . - WHEN THE CHILD GETS INTO THE SCHOOLROOM HE HAS TO PUT OUT OF HIS MIND A LARGE PART OF THE IDEAS, INTERESTS, AND ACTIVITIES THAT PREDOMINATE IN HIS HOME AND NEIGHBORHOOD."  
(DEWEY, 1915/1990, P. 34)



THIS ACTUAL PAGE FROM MY DAUGHTER'S SCHOOL PLANNER DEMONSTRATES THAT DESPITE THESE CRITQUES, THE LIFE/SCHOOL DICHOTOMY HAS BECOME SO ENGRAINED IN THE AMERICAN CONSCIOUSNESS AS TO BE CONSIDERED A NATURAL FEATURE OF ADOLESCENCE. DEWEY WOULD NOT BE PLEASED.



HOWEVER, ALL IS NOT LOST! I HAVE BEEN EXCITED IN RECENT YEARS TO WITNESS A GROWING MOVEMENT TOWARD EMBRACING THE LITERACIES & PASSIONS THAT CHILDREN BRING WITH THEM TO SCHOOL. TALENTED EDUCATORS HAVE BEGUN TO RECOGNIZE THE POWER OF SCAFFOLDING INSTRUCTION ON CHILDREN'S STRENGTHS & INTERESTS, OPENING LIMITLESS PSYCHOLOGICAL DOORS ONTO THE CURRICULUM FOR THE TEXTS & TOPICS THAT MOST ENGAGE CHILDREN IN THEIR EXTRACURRICULAR PURSUITS. SUCH A PERMEABLE CURRICULUM HAS THE POTENTIAL TO BREAK DOWN THE WALL THAT STUDENTS PERCEIVE BETWEEN SCHOOL & THE "REAL WORLD," AS THE SCHOOL GRANTS LEGITIMACY TO THE PASSIONS THAT DEFINE WHAT COUNTS AS REALITY IN THE STUDENTS' WORLD.



THE MOST EXTENSIVE RESEARCH ON PERMEABLE CLASSROOMS HAS TAKEN PLACE IN EARLY LITERACY LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS. ANNE HAAS DYSON'S WORK (1993, 2003) DEMONSTRATES THAT AN OPENNESS TO THE NARRATIVES THAT EARLY WRITERS EMBRACE OUTSIDE OF SCHOOL PROVIDES AN EFFECTIVE SCAFFOLD UPON WHICH TO SUPPORT CHILDREN'S MASTERY OF ACADEMIC LITERACY PRACTICES. HOW PERMEABLE STRUCTURES MIGHT WORK IN MIDDLE & SECONDARY CLASSROOMS IS LESS EXPLORED IN THE LITERATURE.



I CAN'T WAIT TO WRITE ABOUT THIS TODAY IN MY DRAFTBOOK!



THOMAS NEWKIRK (2002, 2009) ARGUES THAT A PERMEABLE CLASSROOM MIGHT BE ESPECIALLY EFFECTIVE FOR SUPPORTING BOYS' ENGAGEMENT WITH READING. HOWEVER, WHILE THERE IS MUCH RECENT RESEARCH INTO BOYS & LITERACY, THE LITERATURE IS SILENT ON HOW BOYS & GIRLS MIGHT RESPOND DIFFERENTLY TO A PERMEABLE CURRICULUM. FINALLY, DONNA ALVERMANN & HER COLLEAGUES (2007) NOTE THAT IN ORDER FOR PERMEABLE APPROACHES TO WORK WITH ADOLESCENTS, TEACHERS NEED TO BETTER UNDERSTAND WHAT KINDS OF NARRATIVES CHARACTERIZE THEIR VERNACULAR LITERACY LIVES AS WELL AS HOW THEY ENGAGE WITH THOSE NARRATIVES.



## II. APPROACHES

WHEN I FIRST STARTED THINKING ABOUT THESE ISSUES IN THE CONTEXT OF AN INVESTIGATION INTO BOYS' READING PREFERENCES AS REVEALED BY THEIR BOOKSTORE BROWSING BEHAVIORS (CAVAZOS-KOTTKE, 2006), MY DAUGHTER WAS ATTENDING HARWELL MIDDLE SCHOOL,\* A 5<sup>TH</sup>- & 6<sup>TH</sup>-GRADE CAMPUS IN A SUBURBAN SCHOOL DISTRICT IN CENTRAL LOWER MICHIGAN. FOR LANGUAGE ARTS, SHE WAS PLACED WITH MR. ED CONNORS, WHO ALSO HAPPENED TO BE INTERESTED IN ISSUES OF PERMEABILITY.

INSTEAD OF TEACHING LANGUAGE ARTS THROUGH WHOLE-CLASS TEXTS, CONNORS STRUCTURED HIS CURRICULUM AROUND STUDENTS' SELF-SELECTION OF PERSONALLY INTERESTING READING MATERIALS THROUGH INDEPENDENT READING PROJECTS, REGULAR SUSTAINED SILENT READING, & READER'S WORKSHOP ACTIVITIES. CONNORS WANTED TO LEARN MORE ABOUT WHAT MOST ENGAGED MIDDLE SCHOOL READERS—PARTICULARLY BOYS—OUTSIDE OF SCHOOL IN ORDER TO CREATE MORE ENGAGING LITERACY EXPERIENCES IN SCHOOL. I PROPOSED A CASE STUDY TO SYSTEMATICALLY ANALYZE HIS STUDENTS' CHOICES OVER THE COURSE OF A FULL ACADEMIC YEAR.

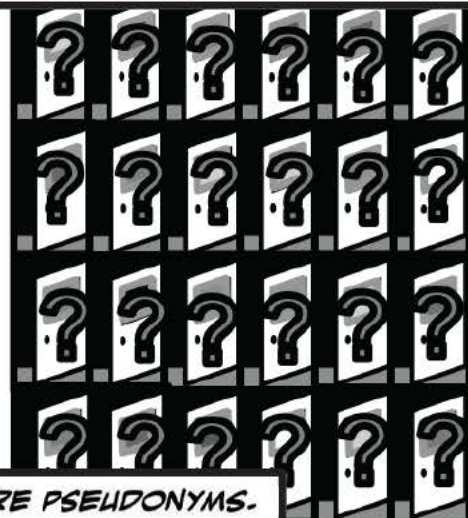
THREE RESEARCH QUESTIONS GUIDED THIS STUDY:

1. WHAT ARE THE VERNACULAR LITERACY PRACTICES OF A CLASS OF MIDDLE SCHOOL BOYS & WITH WHAT KINDS OF TEXTS DO THESE BOYS ENGAGE IN THOSE PRACTICES?
2. HOW & TO WHAT EXTENT DO THESE BOYS' VERNACULAR LITERACIES BECOME VISIBLE WITHIN A LANGUAGE ARTS PROGRAM STRUCTURED AROUND STUDENTS' SELF-SELECTED TEXTS?
3. HOW & TO WHAT EXTENT DO THE LITERACY PRACTICES OF THESE BOYS DIFFER FROM THOSE OF GIRLS WITHIN THE SAME CLASS?

THESE QUESTIONS ADDRESS A CENTRAL CONCERN FOR EVALUATING THE EFFICACY OF A PERMEABLE CLASSROOM WITH ADOLESCENT READERS: WHEN THE PSYCHOLOGICAL DOORS TO THE CLASSROOM ARE HELD OPEN FOR STUDENTS' VERNACULAR LITERACY PRACTICES, WHICH DOORS DO THEY TAKE, & WHAT DO THEY BRING WITH THEM?



\*ALL NAMES ARE PSEUDONYMS.





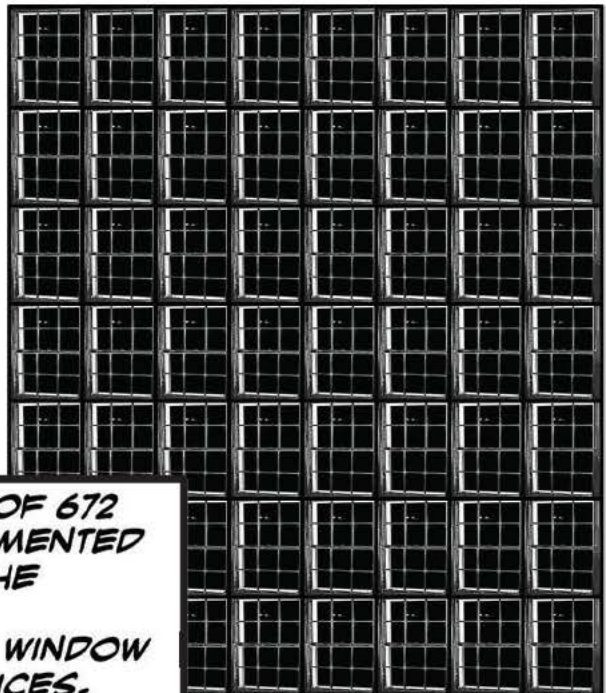
OVER THE COURSE OF THE 2004-2005 SCHOOL YEAR, THE TEXT SELECTIONS MADE BY 48 SIXTH GRADERS (24 BOYS, 24 GIRLS) FOR INDEPENDENT READING PROJECTS, DAILY "DROP EVERYTHING AND READ" (DEAR) PERIODS, AND READER'S WORKSHOP ACTIVITIES WERE DOCUMENTED AND ANALYZED. DATA WAS GATHERED THROUGH CLASSROOM OBSERVATION (MINIMUM OF TWO TIMES PER WEEK FOR THE FULL YEAR) AND ANALYSIS OF ARCHIVAL WORK (READING LOGS, BOOK REPORTS) SAVED BY CONNORS FOR INCLUSION IN STUDENT PORTFOLIOS.



IN SUBSEQUENT ROUNDS OF INTERVIEWS, PARTICIPANTS WERE ASKED TO DISCUSS THE TEXTS THEY HAD SELECTED FOR VARIOUS ACTIVITIES IN THE LANGUAGE ARTS CLASS AND THE TEXTS WITH WHICH THEY HAD BEEN INTERACTING OUTSIDE OF SCHOOL. IN THE FINAL INTERVIEW, SIX PARTICIPANTS (3 BOYS AND 3 GIRLS) FROM THE SUBGROUP OF FOCAL STUDENTS WERE OBSERVED BROWSING FOR PERSONALLY INTERESTING TEXTS AT A LOCAL BOOK STORE AND AT A SCHOOL-SPONSORED BOOK FAIR, FOLLOWING AN OBSERVATION & INTERVIEW PROTOCOL THAT I DEVELOPED IN A PRIOR STUDY.

THESE METHODS YIELDED A DATASET OF 672 TEXT SELECTIONS, WHICH WERE DOCUMENTED & ANALYZED OVER THE COURSE OF THE SCHOOL YEAR ACROSS ACADEMIC & VERNACULAR CONTEXTS, EACH TEXT A WINDOW ONTO ADOLESCENTS' LITERACY PRACTICES.

TO DOCUMENT TEXTS SELECTED BY STUDENTS FOR EXTRACURRICULAR, VERNACULAR PURPOSES, & TO GATHER MORE IN-DEPTH INFORMATION ABOUT THE TEXTS STUDENTS SELECTED FOR IN-CLASS ACTIVITIES, A SUBGROUP OF 22 FOCAL STUDENTS (11 BOYS & 11 GIRLS) WAS INTERVIEWED ON MULTIPLE OCCASIONS OVER THE COURSE OF THE SCHOOL YEAR. THE FIRST ROUND OF INTERVIEWS USED THE CONVERSATIONAL INTERVIEW PROTOCOL OF THE MOTIVATION TO READ PROFILE TO ELICIT GENERAL INFORMATION ON THESE STUDENTS' READING HABITS & ATTITUDES.

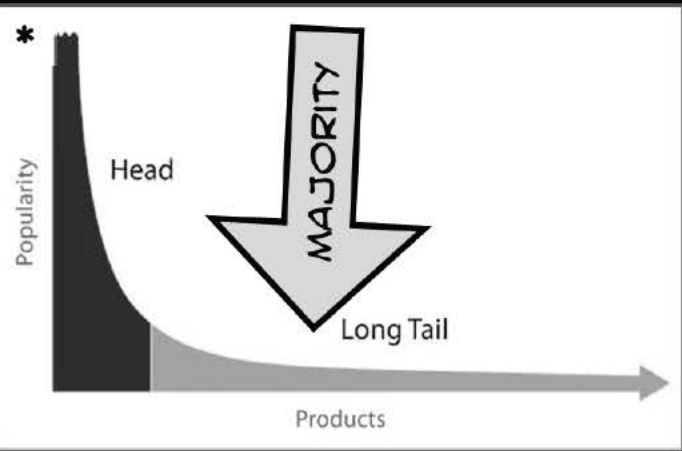




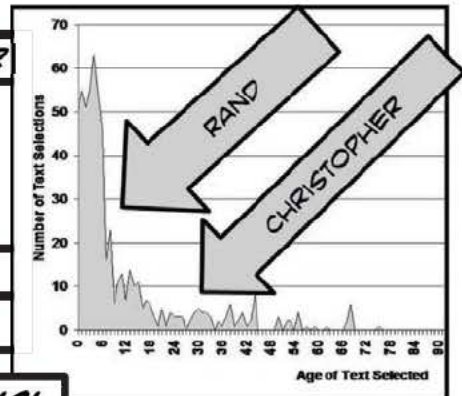
### III. WINDOWS

OF THE 672 OVERALL TEXT SELECTIONS, 368 WERE TITLES THAT WERE SELECTED ONLY ONCE, & THE MOST FREQUENTLY SELECTED TITLES WERE SELECTED BY NO MORE THAN SEVEN STUDENTS. THIS PHENOMENON, IN WHICH THE MAJORITY OF ITEMS ARE REPRESENTED BY SMALL NUMBERS OF SELECTIONS - AS OPPOSED TO THE MAJORITY OF SELECTIONS BEING REPRESENTED BY A SMALL NUMBER OF HIGHLY POPULAR ITEMS - IS CALLED THE "LONG TAIL" (ANDERSON, 2006), & IS A DEFINING CHARACTERISTIC OF MODERN MICROECONOMICS. THIS LOW LEVEL OF OVERLAP HELD AMONG BOTH BOYS & GIRLS, EXPANDING A FINDING FROM AN EARLIER INVESTIGATION INTO TALENTED BOYS' READING SELECTIONS (CAVAZOS-KOTTKE, 2006).

DIVERSITY OF TEXT SELECTIONS SHOULD NOT BE MISTAKEN FOR RANDOMNESS, HOWEVER. SEVERAL STRONG TRENDS WERE APPARENT IN THE TEXT SELECTIONS MADE FOR VERNACULAR PURPOSES BY THE FOCAL BOYS IN THIS STUDY. THE WORKS OF THE TWO MOST POPULAR AUTHORS WHO WERE EXCLUSIVELY SELECTED BY BOYS—JONATHAN RAND & MATT CHRISTOPHER—ILLUSTRATE THESE TRENDS.



AUTHOR	J. RAND	M. CHRISTOPHER
KNOWN FOR ...	SCI-FI/HORROR SERIES (AMERICAN & MICHIGAN CHILLERS)	SPORTS FICTION/SERIES
WRITTEN FOR ...	YOUNG ADULT	YOUNG ADULT
PUBLISHED IN ...	EARLY 2000S	1960S - 1980S

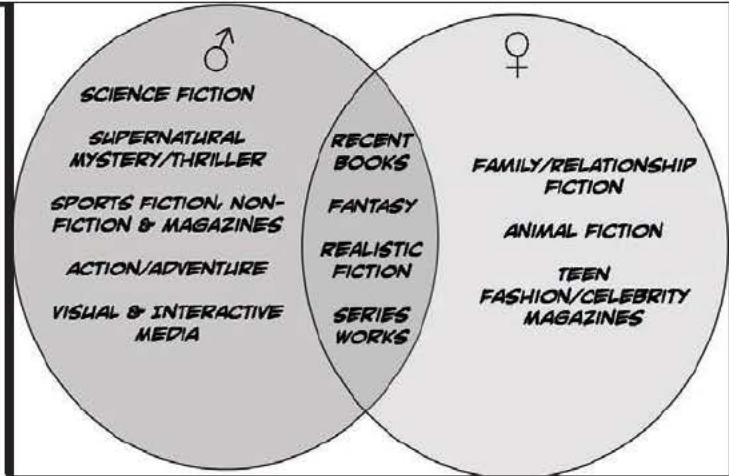


FOR VERNACULAR PURPOSES, 64% OF THE BOYS' TEXTS WERE FROM A SERIES. IMAGINATIVE FICTION & SPORTS-THEMED TEXTS WERE THE MOST POPULAR GENRE/SUBJECT MATTER CATEGORIES. TEXTS OF RECENT VINTAGE WERE OVERWHELMINGLY POPULAR.

\* IMAGE REPRODUCED FROM ANDERSON (N.D.), PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE GRANTED BY AUTHOR UNDER CREATIVE COMMONS LICENSE 2.0.



**COMPARED WITH GIRLS, BOYS ENGAGED WITH TEXTS REPRESENTING A WIDER RANGE OF GENRE, SUBJECT MATTER, & MEDIUM FOR BOTH ACADEMIC & VERNACULAR PURPOSES. WHILE BOTH BOYS & GIRLS WERE DRAWN TO RELATIVELY RECENT SERIES WORKS OF IMAGINATIVE & REALISTIC FICTION, GIRLS WERE DRAWN MORE NARROWLY TOWARD FANTASY NOVELS & STORIES ABOUT FAMILY,**



**SCHOOL, & FRIENDSHIPS. BOYS SELECTED TEXTS ACROSS A BROADER RANGE OF IMAGINATIVE FICTION GENRES, INCLUDING FANTASY, BUT ALSO SCIENCE FICTION & SUPERNATURAL THRILLERS, & THEIR REALISTIC FICTION SELECTIONS WERE PREDOMINANTLY SPORTS STORIES. MAGAZINE SELECTIONS ALSO REFLECTED THIS DIFFERENCE, & BOYS WERE MORE LIKELY THAN GIRLS TO PURSUE INFORMATIONAL TEXTS RELATED TO THEIR INTERESTS. WHILE THESE TRENDS IN BOYS' TEXT SELECTIONS ARE IN LINE WITH MUCH CONTEMPORARY SCHOLARSHIP ON YOUNG ADULTS' READING PREFERENCES (BLAIR & SANFORD, 2004; CAVAZOS-KOTTKE, 2006; COLES & HALL, 2002; FARRIS, WERDERICH, NELSON, & FUHLER, 2009; KNOWLES & SMITH, 2005; WORTHY, MOORMAN, & TURNER, 1999), THE FINDING THAT BOYS' PREFERRED READING MATERIALS CAME FROM A WIDER ARRAY OF GENRES THAN DID GIRLS' PREFERRED MATERIALS IS WITHOUT PRECEDENT IN THE RESEARCH LITERATURE. BOYS ALSO SELECTED TEXTS FROM A WIDER RANGE OF MEDIA THAN DID GIRLS. GIRLS' TEXT SELECTIONS WERE ALMOST ENTIRELY PRINT-BASED, CONSISTING**



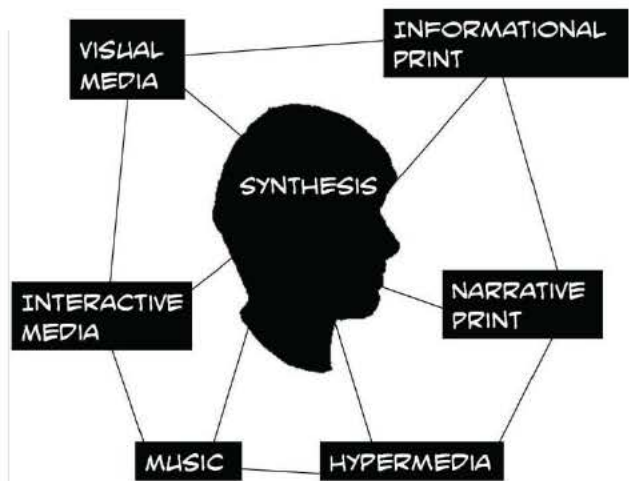
**PRIMARILY OF BOOKS & MAGAZINES. BOYS PURSUED THEIR READING INTERESTS ACROSS MULTIPLE MEDIA PLATFORMS, INCLUDING VIDEO GAMES, TELEVISION PROGRAMS, MOVIES & DVDS, AS WELL AS TRADITIONAL PRINT-BASED MEDIA LIKE BOOKS, MAGAZINES, & COMIC BOOKS. THIS IS NOT TO CLAIM THAT GIRLS HAD ZERO INTEREST IN NONPRINT-BASED MEDIA; THEY SIMPLY DID NOT REPORT SUCH INTERACTIONS IN THIS STUDY NOR DID THEY MAKE SUCH INTERESTS VISIBLE IN THE CLASSROOM ON OCCASIONS WHEN BOYS DID.**





WHILE BOYS' PREFERENCE FOR TEXTS THAT HAVE STRONG VISUAL APPEAL, BOTH IN TERMS OF VIVID LANGUAGE AND GRAPHIC ACCOMPANIMENT, HAS BEEN DOCUMENTED IN PRIOR SCHOLARSHIP (KAJDER, 2006; SMITH & WILHELM, 2002, 2006), THIS IS NOT TO CLAIM THAT THE BOYS WHO PARTICIPATED IN THIS STUDY PREFERRED VISUAL MEDIA OVER PRINT. THE MAJORITY OF TEXT SELECTIONS MADE BY BOYS FOR ANY PURPOSE WERE BOOKS, & BOYS AS A GROUP REPORTED MORE BOOK READING IN THEIR ACADEMIC & EXTRACURRICULAR LITERACY LIVES THAN DID GIRLS.

MORE CRITICAL TO UNDERSTANDING BOYS' LITERACY PRACTICES THAN THE PARTICULAR TEXTS THEY SELECTED IS THE TRANSMEDIAL ORIENTATION THEY TOOK TOWARD THEM. TRANSMEDIATION IS AN INTERTEXTUAL READING PRACTICE IN WHICH READERS SYNTHESIZE A KNOWLEDGE BASE FROM INFORMATION GATHERED IN MULTIPLE TEXTS (GOLDMAN, 2004; JENKINS, 2006; SEMALI & FUEYO, 2001). SEVERAL BOYS IN THIS STUDY PURSUED THEIR INTERESTS ACROSS CONSTELLATIONS OF TEXTS FROM MULTIPLE MEDIA, BUILDING ELABORATE SCHEMAS OF NARRATIVE & INFORMATIONAL WORLDS.



A CONCRETE EXAMPLE OF TRANSMEDIATION IN ACTION IS WARRANTED. ON THE LEFT, MEET

GATORADE, A FOCAL BOY WHO DESCRIBES HIMSELF AS "A MAJOR STAR WARS FAN." OVER THE COURSE OF THE SCHOOL YEAR, HE SELECTED GAMES, VIDEOS, MOVIES, & BOOKS RELATING TO STAR WARS TO ENGAGE WITH BOTH IN & OUT OF SCHOOL. HIS UNDERSTANDING OF THE STAR WARS UNIVERSE COMES NOT FROM INFORMATION FOUND IN ANY SINGLE TEXT, BUT FROM A PERSONAL SYNTHESIS OF EVENTS & IDEAS CONTAINED IN SEVERAL TEXTS ACROSS MULTIPLE MEDIA.









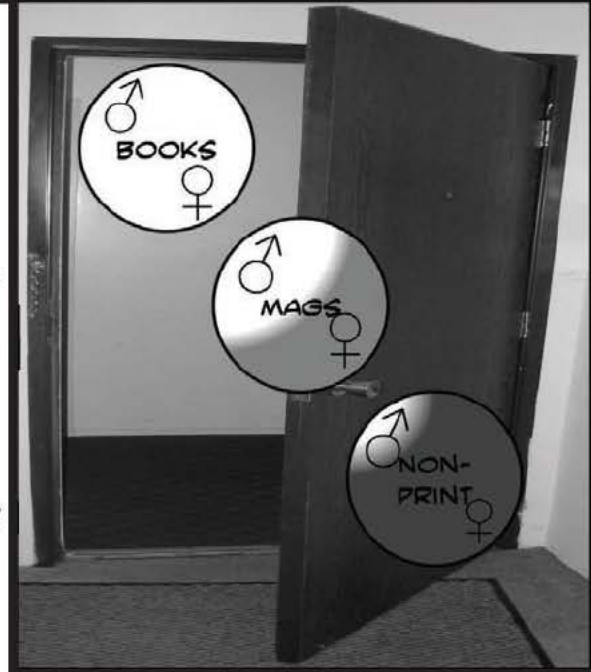


IT SEEMS TO ME THAT THIS TRANSMEDIATION BUSINESS WOULD BE QUITE A USEFUL CONCEPT FOR TEACHERS TO UNDERSTAND. IT APPEARS TO INVOLVE A SOPHISTICATED COORDINATION OF MANY OF THE READING COMPREHENSION STRATEGIES THAT WE SPEND YEARS TEACHING CHILDREN TO USE—INFERRING, VISUALIZATION, MAKING TEXT-SELF & TEXT-TEXT CONNECTIONS, QUESTIONING—YET THEY EMPLOY THEM ALMOST NATURALLY, WITHOUT HAVING TO BE TOLD HOW. FURTHERMORE, THEY EMPLOY THEM IN AN ENGAGING SOCIAL CONTEXT. WHAT A POTENTIALLY TERRIFIC SCAFFOLD THAT COULD BOTH RESTORE CHILDREN'S IMMEDIATE INTERESTS TO THE CENTER OF THE CURRICULUM & PROVIDE AN AVENUE FOR SUPPORTING MASTERY OF THE READING COMPREHENSION SKILLS WE WOULD LIKE THEM TO DEVELOP! I'M EAGER TO LEARN WHAT MR. CONNORS DID WITH THIS!

AH, WELCOME BACK TO THE COMIC BOOK, DR. DEWEY! YOUR PRAGMATIC PERSPECTIVE REMINDS US THAT OF THE THREE RESEARCH QUESTIONS POSED EARLIER, WE HAVE YET TO ADDRESS THE ONE MOST CENTRAL TO YOUR CONCERNS: WHAT CAME THROUGH THE OPEN DOORS OF CONNORS'S PERMEABLE CURRICULUM? HERE IS WHERE THINGS GET A BIT COMPLICATED...

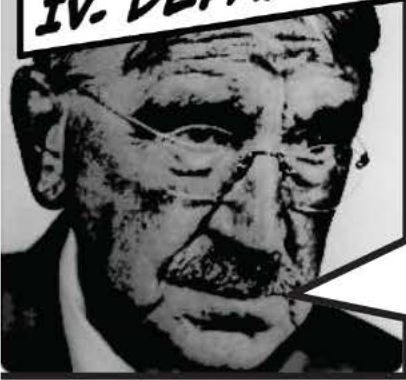
THE DOORS OF CONNORS'S CLASSROOM WERE FULLY OPEN TO THE BOOKS THAT MARKED STUDENTS' VERNACULAR LITERACY INTERESTS, & THERE WAS GREAT CONGRUENCE BETWEEN THE KINDS OF BOOKS THAT BOTH BOYS & GIRLS SELECTED TO READ IN & OUT OF SCHOOL IN TERMS OF GENRE. WHILE BOYS WERE OBSERVED READING MAGAZINES & COMICS THROUGHOUT THE YEAR DURING DEAR TIME & OTHER READER'S WORKSHOP ACTIVITIES, GIRLS WERE ONLY OBSERVED READING MAGAZINES DURING A SINGLE READER'S WORKSHOP ACTIVITY AND NEVER DURING DEAR TIME. WHILE FOCAL BOYS & GIRLS ALIKE DID REPORT AVID MAGAZINE & COMIC READING OUTSIDE OF SCHOOL, GIRLS APPEARED TO BE MORE RELUCTANT THAN BOYS TO MAKE THAT READING VISIBLE AT SCHOOL. LAST, THE CLASSROOM WAS RELATIVELY IMPERMEABLE TO NONPRINT

TEXTS; ALTHOUGH NO RESTRICTIONS WERE PLACED ON WHAT STUDENTS COULD BRING DURING DEAR TIME, THE CLASSROOM DID NOT OFFER THE MEANS FOR STUDENTS TO ENGAGE WITH SUCH TEXTS, & THUS NO SUCH TEXTS APPEARED DURING THESE PERIODS. FOR ONE READER'S WORKSHOP ACTIVITY, CONNORS EXPLICITLY INVITED STUDENTS TO BRING NONPRINT TEXTS, & A FEW STUDENTS—ALMOST ALL BOYS—RESPONDED WITH DVDS & VIDEOGAMES. ALTHOUGH NONPRINT TEXTS RARELY PERMEATED THE CURRICULUM, THOSE THAT DID WERE CONNECTED TO THOSE STUDENTS' VERNACULAR LITERACY PRACTICES. FOR EXAMPLE, B-RAD, WHO IDENTIFIED HIMSELF AS A FAN OF "BLUE COLLAR COMEDY," BROUGHT A LARRY THE CABLE GUY DVD FOR THAT READER'S WORKSHOP.





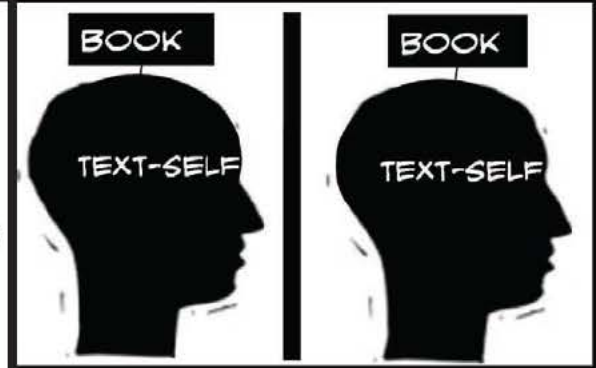
## IV. DEPARTURES



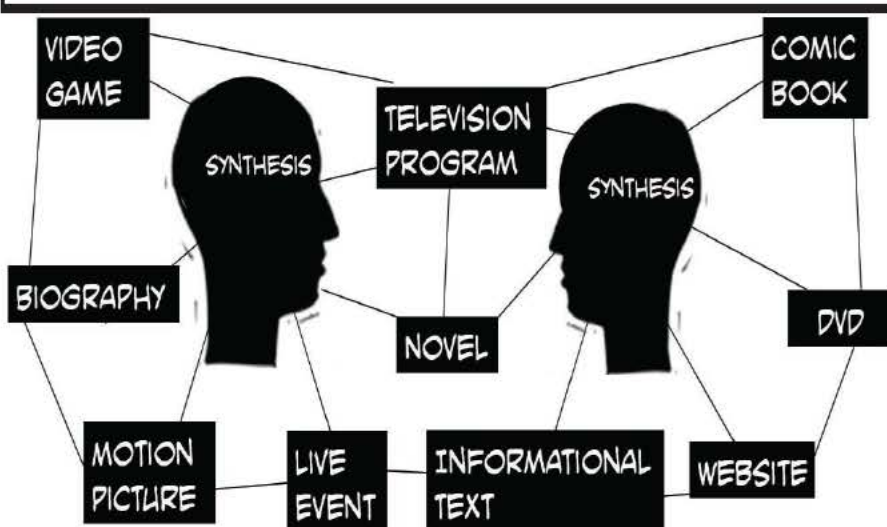
SO, WHILE IT APPEARS THAT THE TEXT SELECTIONS MADE BY BOYS & GIRLS IN THIS STUDY PROVIDE IMPORTANT WINDOWS ONTO ADOLESCENTS' VERNACULAR LITERACY PRACTICES, PLACING CHILDREN'S BOOK CHOICES AT THE CENTER OF THE CURRICULUM AS MR. CONNORS DID MAY BE A NECESSARY, YET NOT ENTIRELY SUFFICIENT MEANS OF OPENING THE PSYCHOLOGICAL DOORS OF THE CLASSROOM TO CHILDREN. MORE MAY BE NEEDED TO FULLY DISPENSE WITH THIS PERNICIOUS SCHOOL/LIFE DICHOTOMY.

WHILE THE DOORS OF THE PERMEABLE CLASSROOM ALLOWED STUDENTS TO EXPRESS THEIR VERNACULAR LITERACY PRACTICES THROUGH THE BOOKS THEY SELECTED FOR IN-SCHOOL ACTIVITIES, THEY REMAINED LARGELY CLOSED TO OTHER TEXT FORMS. THE POSSIBILITIES FOR TRANSMEDIATION, THE MOST ENGAGING LITERACY PRACTICE IN MANY BOYS' VERNACULAR REPERTOIRE & A POTENTIAL NEXUS OF LITERACY &

IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT, WERE THEREBY LIMITED. BECAUSE TRANSMEDIATION INVOLVES COGNITIVE NAVIGATION OF A CONSTELLATION OF TEXTS, CLASSROOM PRACTICES THAT ENGAGE STUDENTS IN THE CONSIDERATION OF ONE TEXT AT A TIME FURTHER LIMIT THE POSSIBILITIES FOR ENGAGING THIS PROCESS. ALL OF CONNORS' INDEPENDENT READING PROJECTS INVOLVED MAKING TEXT-SELF CONNECTIONS WITH INDIVIDUAL BOOKS. THE "READING CLUB" PROGRAM, PIONEERED FOR EARLY ELEMENTARY CLASSROOMS, OFFERS A STRUCTURE THAT MIGHT BETTER AFFORD TRANSMEDIAL READING THAN



THE MORE TRADITIONAL SINGLE BOOK PROJECT APPROACH (COLLINS, 2008). AN OPENNESS TO STUDENTS' SELF-SELECTED TEXTS MUST BE COUPLED WITH AN OPENNESS TO THE WAYS THAT STUDENTS ENGAGE WITH THEM (ALVERMANN, ET AL., 2007).







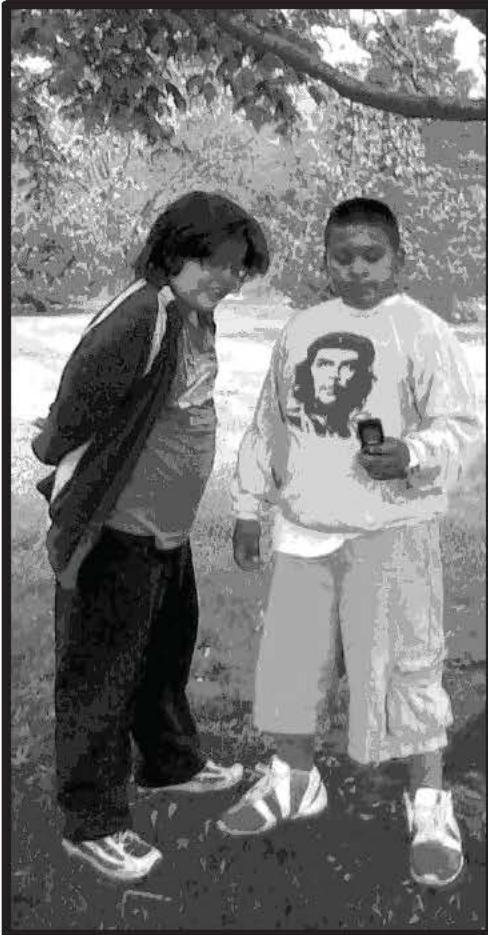
ANOTHER ESSENTIAL ELEMENT OF A PERMEABLE CLASSROOM THAT WAS ABSENT IN THIS STUDY & MAY HAVE HAD UNINTENTIONALLY IMPERMEABLE CONSEQUENCES IS SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT BETWEEN TEACHER & STUDENTS. WHILE THERE WAS STRONG EVIDENCE THAT SOME FOCAL GIRLS HAD AS DEEP AN INTEREST IN BASKETBALL AS DID ANY BOYS IN THE CLASSROOM, THAT INTEREST NEVER MANIFESTED ITSELF IN ANY ACADEMIC LITERACY EVENTS. WHY THESE GIRLS FELT LESS COMPELLED THAN BOYS TO BRING THEIR EXTRACURRICULAR SPORTING INTERESTS THROUGH THE CLASSROOM DOORS IS NOT CLEAR. WHAT IS CERTAIN IS THAT THESE GIRLS, QUIET & ACADEMICALLY SUCCESSFUL, NEVER DREW THEIR TEACHER'S ATTENTION IN THE TEXT SELECTION PROCESS. IF A STUDENT VISIBLY STRUGGLED IN SELECTING SOMETHING TO READ, THE TEACHER WAS QUICK TO INTERVENE WITH GUIDING QUESTIONS & THOUGHTFUL RECOMMENDATIONS. HOWEVER, STUDENTS WHO QUIETLY SELECTED BOOKS THAT SEEMED APPROPRIATE FOR THEIR ASSESSED READING LEVEL WERE LARGELY LEFT ALONE, & LITTLE SUBSTANTIVE COMMENT WAS MADE REGARDING THEIR CHOICES OR INTERESTS.



IT SEEMS TO ME THAT THE UNFULFILLED PROMISE OF THE PERMEABLE CLASSROOM PARADIGM AS ENACTED IN THIS CLASSROOM RESIDES IN THE RELATIVE LACK OF SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT WITH STUDENTS' INTERESTS. THIS IS INDEED A MISSED OPPORTUNITY FOR CREATING TRULY EDUCATIVE LITERACY EXPERIENCES. A SUCCESSFUL STUDENT'S LOVE OF BASEBALL OR THE CIVIL WAR COULD BE CAPITALIZED UPON TO ORIENT THE STUDENT TO MORE IN-DEPTH & ENRICHING LEARNING IN MULTIPLE DISCIPLINES. JUST BECAUSE THE GAME LOOKS GRACEFUL FROM THE NOSEBLEED SECTION DOES NOT MEAN THAT IT'S ENTIRELY EFFORTLESS OR COULDN'T BENEFIT FROM SUPPORTIVE COACHING.







**PERMEABLE CLASSROOMS OF THE PRESENT & FUTURE MUST CONSTANTLY ACKNOWLEDGE THAT ADOLESCENT LITERACY PRACTICES ARE A CONTINUALLY MOVING TARGET. WHEN DATA GATHERING BEGAN FOR THIS STUDY, FEW YOUNG PEOPLE HAD IPODS, YOUTUBE HAD NOT YET BEEN INVENTED, FACEBOOK WAS ONLY AVAILABLE TO SELECTED COLLEGE STUDENTS, & BARACK OBAMA WAS RUNNING TO BECOME THE JUNIOR SENATOR FROM ILLINOIS. AT THE TIME OF THIS WRITING, JUST FOUR YEARS LATER, ALL OF THESE ENTITIES HAVE BECOME VITAL COMPONENTS OF YOUNG PEOPLE'S LITERACY PRACTICES. WHAT KINDS OF TEXTS & LITERACY EVENTS WILL BE MOST COMPELLING TO ADOLESCENTS AS SOON AS THE END OF THIS VERY SCHOOL YEAR MAY EVEN BE DIFFICULT TO PREDICT. MY POINT IS THAT IF EDUCATORS ARE COMMITTED TO BREAKING DOWN THE SCHOOL/LIFE DIVIDE THAT CONTINUES TO ALIENATE SO MANY CHILDREN FROM THE CURRICULUM, WE MUST MAKE A STRONG EFFORT TO MAINTAIN DEEP ENGAGEMENT WITH THE CHILDREN WE SERVE, THE TEXTS THAT CAPTIVATE THEM, & THE LITERACY PRACTICES THEY UTILIZE TO MAKE SENSE OF THOSE TEXTS. TO DO ANYTHING LESS IS TO CONTINUE TO OSTRACIZE OUR CHILDREN FROM THEIR RIGHTFUL PLACE AT THE CENTER OF THE CURRICULUM. THEIR FUTURE COMPELS US TO DO BETTER.**



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## Rethinking Ugliness:

Lynda Barry in the Classroom

“I know I shouldn’t just come out and say it,” my student announced to the class, “but I really don’t like this book.” It was the third week of my undergraduate adolescent literature course, and we were talking about Lynda Barry’s illustrated novel *The Good Times Are Killing Me* (1988). I had told them on the first day of the semester that the words “like” and “dislike” often curtail productive conversation, and, mindful of this, my student was trying to find another way to convey her thoughts. “Okay,” she continued, “What I mean is, well, it’s just that the pictures are . . . ugly. Plus the book seems sort of unfocused. It meanders.” “And it’s so depressing,” a woman on the other side of the room chimed in. A few others in the class nodded their heads in agreement. As someone who loves this book, I felt a small pang. Ugly? Meandering? Depressing? How could they use such harsh words? Then the more reasonable part of me took over. Although these were not the descriptors I would have chosen, my students had a point. Yet the very qualities they considered flaws were the same qualities that made the book such a vital part of our classroom experience.

Lynda Barry’s books are not explicitly written as YA novels,<sup>1</sup> but many, including *Good Times*, are well suited for both college students who hope to work with teenagers and teens themselves. *The Good Times Are Killing Me* (1988) and Barry’s graphic narrative *What It Is* (2008) were both Booklist Young

Adult Choices, and *One! Hundred! Demons!* (2002), also a graphic narrative, won an Alex Award in 2003. The crossover appeal of these books brings her work to a demographic that may be especially primed to gain something from it, if not always immediately *like* it.

All of Barry’s illustrated novels, graphic narratives, and comics offer startling insight into childhood and adolescent fear and loneliness. As fellow comics artist and Eisner winner<sup>2</sup> Chris Ware says, “Lynda was the first cartoonist to write fiction from the inside out—she trusted herself to close her eyes and dive down within herself and see what she had come up with” (Borrelli, 2009). While many books describe the messiness and awkwardness of adolescence, Barry’s work seems to “dive down” deeper than most. Through darkly perceptive illustrations, an unusual sense of humor, and simple, yet striking prose, Barry enacts adolescence on the page. Lynda Barry’s books are never comfortable, but neither is being an adolescent.

*The Good Times Are Killing Me* (1988) is the book

I use to introduce Barry to students.

<sup>3</sup> Told in 41 short vignettes, it is the story of Edna Arkins, a girl growing up in the 1960s who must deal with apathetic or cruel teachers, vengeful relatives, her parents’ divorce, and bigotry. My students’ initial responses to this book—that its illustrations are ugly, that it meanders, and that it is depressing—can, with a little prodding, become

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**As someone who loves this book, I felt a small pang. Ugly? Meandering? Depressing? How could they use such harsh words?**

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productive questions: How might a book's illustrations frame our reactions to it? How do texts without conventional narrative arcs expand our understanding of storytelling? How might we interrogate our romantic expectations for growth in adolescent literature? I want to explore these questions in greater detail here in order to make the case that Lynda Barry deserves to be a part of a widely read, discussed, and debated group of writers who are invested in the adolescent experience, particularly the experience of the deeply troubled adolescent. By reading Barry in the classroom, and by putting her in the hands of teenagers, we emphasize that the offbeat and the seemingly ugly can productively shape our thinking about literature and the worlds it both describes and critiques.

### "Ugly" Illustrations

When we first discuss *Good Times* in my class, we begin with the book itself—that is, with its material existence. Students mention the Sasquatch paperback's unusual size (small and somewhat squat); its orange, black, and green cover; its illustrations; its hand-lettered chapter headings. We talk about the conventions of comics and the way that Barry reinterprets them. For example, comics artists typically lay out their images within panels of various sizes that have sharp, clear lines. Barry's illustrations in *Good*

*Times*, like her comics, are "boxed in" but not rigidly so. Her frame lines are drawn or painted without a ruler and appear uneven and wobbly. In a typical comic, the borders of a frame may not register with the reader, but Barry's work calls attention to them, foregrounding rather than denying imperfection and reminding us of the process of creation itself. Each short chapter begins with a decorated initial inside a small, cramped rectangular box that is hand painted with these wobbly lines. In with that first letter of the chapter's first word are illustrations of Edna, her family, or her teachers. Sometimes, it seems these people are posing for a camera. At other times, it is as if they are caught unaware, in an angry outburst or in a moment of unexpected joy.

There are a few larger illustrations at the beginning, and these cause the most consternation. They are unusually ugly, my students maintain, and they set the tone for the rest of the book. One illustration depicts Edna huddled in the right hand corner, looking out over her street (see Fig. 1). It has a heavy feeling, not just because it is, like the other images in the book, in shades of gloomy gray, but also because it fills just the bottom two-thirds of the page. Edna seems trapped by the railing of a balcony, which slices diagonally across the page, and by the vertical bars that make it resemble a prison. The picture on the next page (see Fig. 2) is, to some students, not only "ugly" but also "scary." In it, Edna holds her older cousin Ellen's unwanted baby. Her head lolls to the side, her mouth is open, and her nose appears triangular and shaded, almost clown-like. The illustration simultaneously evokes a Madonna and Child and a messy, awkward adolescent holding a baby. All of its lines, from Edna's stringy hair, to her shirt, to the swaddled infant cradled in her arms, are thick and frantic, conveying a sense—despite the fact that many lines are also gently curved—of tension.

Some students, when pressed to explain what they mean by "ugly," highlight the drawings' aesthetic immaturity, maintaining that, with their flattened or skewed perspective and their clumsy contour lines, they "look like something a kid would do." It is worth noting that this accusation has been levied at many artists who don't work squarely within a realist mode, but it's not inaccurate. Barry—channeling the manic intensity of Don Martin (who drew for *Mad* magazine), the lurid cartooning of R. Crumb, and the



Figure 1. Barry's heavy, dreary illustrations often trouble her readers.



**Figure 2.** Barry’s technique creates tension while appearing almost child-like.

off-kilter and kinetic illustrations of Dr. Seuss<sup>4</sup>—seems to relish the deliberately puerile. This provokes some readers, who have been known to send her “livid letters” about how much they are bothered by her work (qtd. in Grossman, 1999).

Such a strong reaction may seem surprising since, compared to something like Phoebe Gloeckner’s graphic narrative *Diary of a Teenage Girl* (2002), with its explicit depictions of sex and its hyper-realistic drawings of human anatomy, *Good Times* seems pretty tame, even gentle. Still, as I tell my students, the first time I came across one of Lynda Barry’s comics I was bothered, too. This strip featured two of her most beloved characters, Marlys and her little sister Maybonne. As usual, they both were depicted with spots on their faces, stringy hair, and large lips and teeth. Their bodies were little more than lumpy shapes with long, rubbery limbs, and their glasses obscured their eyes. The frenetic crosshatching and the amount of text crammed into each panel—so much so that characters sometimes seem forced off the page—made

the piece feel chaotic. I picked up the book, stared at it for a while, and put it down. For someone who was used to the goofy comics in the Sunday paper, the piece hit me almost physically, like a slap in the face. It wasn’t just ugly: it seemed almost an affront.

Eventually, I came to appreciate this visceral quality in Barry’s work for its insights into adolescent—and human—anxiety. In *Good Times*, adult figures are grotesque caricatures with enormous, wolfish teeth and faces so filled with anger that they collapse into themselves. Children and teenagers stand aloof or flash sickly, condescending smiles. In many of the pictures, Edna is by herself, slumped against the radio or sitting on the stoop. These images are palpable reminders of the fear, rage, and powerlessness of children and adolescents. They call to mind a kind of ugliness that words themselves cannot. And yet there are also moments of quiet joy in some these pictures, when Edna is dancing by herself or singing a song to her cousin’s baby. The absence of easy prettiness in these pictures can make the emotions being expressed seem all the more tender, fragile, and complex. Ugliness, in this sense, has the ability to plumb the beautiful.

### “It . . . Meanders”

As an increasing number of students are exposed to illustrated and graphic narrative (in classrooms or on their own), they will likely be less taken aback by “strange” or “ugly” drawings such as these. They themselves will have more to say about the extraordinary variety of tones and textures that the medium of comics has to offer. Yet despite comics’ growing popularity and despite the fact that many of my students are avid readers, I find that students who have encountered them before they arrive in my class are surprisingly rare. Some have read Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* (1991) in high school or in an early college course, but for the most part they have not encountered a wide variety of narrative forms or even a wide variety of genres. They prefer to stick with what they know: straightforward novels with linear narratives and conflicts that offer at least a partial resolution in the final chapter. Even students who appreciate unusual protagonists in unusual circumstances—the characters in Francesca Lia Block’s *Weetzie Bat* (1989), for example—still yearn for the comforts of normative narrative structures.



And, although it has chapters and seems to resemble a conventional novel, *Good Times* doesn't give its readers that. It is, however, a useful text for thinking about form: in particular, it leads us to ask questions about how chapters might function, what purpose plot serves, and to what extent voice might create a sense of continuity. For, instead of writing in a conventional mode, Barry flourishes in a *conversational* mode, creating books that value specific speech patterns. She has, as a reviewer for *The New York*

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**By swerving from subject to subject, backwards and forwards in time, *Good Times* feels less like a novel and more like a series of tales told to us by Edna as they occur to her.**

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*Times Book Review* says on the back cover of *Good Times*, “an impeccable ear,” and it is her ability to recreate the sound of one young adolescent’s voice with its peculiar cadences, word choices, and syntactical structures that make her novel memorable. Instead of capitulating to ideas about proper form, she lets the rhythms of Edna’s voice carry the book.

*Good Times* is certainly not the only book about children and adolescents to experiment with form in this way. It resonates with Sandra Cisneros’s lyrical 1984/1991 novella *House on Mango Street*<sup>5</sup> in its portrayal of harsh realities, in the compelling voice of its young protagonist, and in its use of short, nuanced chapters that function as stand-alone vignettes. Both texts are episodic rather than epic, emphasizing circular patterns and recurring motifs rather than forward movement. In this mode, digressions are valuable, even integral to the experience of the text (Tensuan, 2006, p. 950).

In her autobiographical prose poem, *My Life*, Lyn Hejinian (1991) also values the circular and the discursive, insisting that “what follows a strict chronology has no memory” (p. 13). Memory itself isn’t chronological: it darts ahead, loops back, and misses important facts. But Hejinian also seems to suggest that in following a strict chronology, such genres as a conventional novel, a tale, or a poem also have no memory. They fail to convey the permeability of the past and the way that our minds make connections. Likewise, not only is memory an important

theme of *Good Times*, it is also a part of the episodic book’s shape. By swerving from subject to subject, backwards and forwards in time, *Good Times* feels less like a novel and more like a series of tales told to us by Edna as they occur to her. We see that Edna’s cousin Ellen has become a teen mother before we hear about her junior high school days, and we learn that Edna’s father has left the family before we hear about a game she played with him when she was little, aptly called “Get Lost.” Thus there is not a sense of moving forward to an unexpected conclusion: the sad denouement (in particular, the unraveling of Edna’s friendship with her African American friend Bonna) is already intimated in the early pages of the book.

While many adolescent novels use flashback and many characters reminisce about their childhoods, the fluctuations in this narrative signal a stronger departure from traditional story structure. This departure feels organic—it doesn’t have the stagey flourishes of postmodern experimentation—but it nonetheless helps us think about the way stories are told and what we expect from endings. Like her illustrations, Barry’s narrative is also messy. If we go into it expecting tidiness, we’ll miss the very real pleasure of hearing the insights Edna offers.

### “It’s So Depressing”

Similarly, if we go into the book expecting a typically hopeful YA ending, in which the adolescent protagonists learn from difficult circumstances and emerge as stronger, more capable people, we will also miss learning important, less familiar lessons. My students tolerate (and even relish) trauma in YA literature—eating disorders, suicide, abuse—if they feel that the protagonist has begun to resolve his or her dilemmas by the final pages. They like to feel the vicarious catharsis that such endings offer. Many of the books that we read in class or that they have read on their own follow this pattern. In Laurie Halse Anderson’s (1999) *Speak*, for example, the protagonist Melinda takes an important step toward healing after her rape, saying, on the book’s final page, “I’m not going to let it kill me. I can grow” (p. 198). *Fat Kid Rules the World* by K. L. Going (2004) ends with Troy (a suicidal, obese teenager) on the road to self-actualization, thanks to the influence of a skinny addict who encourages him to play the drums. Even *Thirteen Reasons Why*

by Jay Asher (2007) concludes with the protagonist Clay, who has learned from his failure to connect with his classmate Hannah before she committed suicide, reaching out to another girl he has been afraid to talk to.

Most striking, particularly in the context of *Good Times*, is the ending of *The House on Mango Street* (Cisneros, 1984/1991), which offers a sense of hopeful growth. Even though Cisneros is careful to avoid an ending that might seem unduly optimistic, her protagonist Esperanza (whose name means hope), is already planning her escape. Like Edna, Esperanza has endured poverty and witnessed abuse, but she vows to leave her street, which she renders female: “I am too strong for her to keep me here forever” (p. 110). She also promises, in this poignant ending, to “go away to come back” for the “ones I left behind” (p. 110). This conclusion offers readers two types of comfort: the knowledge that Esperanza will leave behind her sorrows *and* do something to ameliorate the sorrows of her community. The book thus indicates that personal satisfaction and communal connection both may be possible, and by putting down her story on paper, Esperanza has begun her healing process.

*Good Times* does not offer the reader such comfort. Rather than emphasizing transformation or escape, this book, and the ending in particular, depicts Edna’s interpellation as a subject, as an adolescent who recognizes her place in a power structure. In the final chapter, Edna’s friendship with Bonna is pushed to its breaking point. For years they have been close, despite the fact that when they first met, Edna, who is white, was forbidden to allow “Negro kids” into her house (p. 48). Now, in junior high, everything has changed. Egged on by other African American girls, Bonna slaps Edna for being rude to her. Instead of blaming her former friend, Edna says, simply: “Bonna didn’t have a choice” (p. 130). When Bonna is faced with rigid expectations concerning race, power, and pride, it’s not that she *won’t* choose the right thing, it’s that she *can’t*. She can’t choose to acknowledge her friendship with Edna, even though Edna, through her tears, tries desperately to make Bonna remember their friendship by “naming everything in [Bonna’s] house—the lamps, the chairs, the TV, the color of the walls, the couch, the rug” (p. 130). Both girls have stock roles to play in the tragedy that is junior high during a time and place scarred by racism and pov-

erty. These roles are so powerful that everything else is washed away:

*In the vice principal’s office we acted like we had never met. Like all it was was any black girl slapping any white girl who had mouthed off to her, something that happened every single day and would just keep on happening world without end. When he called my mother to tell her, she never knew the girl was Bonna, just like Bonna’s father never knew the other girl was me.* (p. 131)

In these final words of the novel, Edna recognizes that her falling out with Bonna, so uniquely painful to her, is part of an age-old struggle, one that shows no sign (at least in the late 1960s) of getting better. While many teenagers in adolescent novels gain the ability to see their way out, Edna cannot seem to envision a real life different from the one she is living, and the ending doesn’t offer hope that Edna’s situation will improve. She won’t, unlike Troy, grow closer to her father, nor will she tell an art teacher her problems, as Melinda does, nor will she use writing as a means for escape, like Esperanza. Even though she has come to a new understanding of the world, it is not a particularly hopeful one.

In *Disturbing the Universe: Power and Repression in Adolescent Literature*, Roberta Seelinger Trites (2000) observes that many readers and critics object to adolescent novels that appear to be too bleak. For example, Anne Scott MacLeod argues that Robert Cormier’s novels “violate the unwritten rule that fiction for the young, however sternly realistic the narrative material, must offer some portion of hope, must end at least with some affirmative message” (qtd. in Trites, p. 15). Trites, however, suggests that, while Cormier’s now-canonical *The Chocolate War* (1974) may not be read as meeting “romantic expectations about growth,” it does provide at least one character with the opportunity to grow at the end and, through that, offers redemption (p. 15). She asserts, “All but the bleakest of YA novels [. . .] affirm the adolescent’s ability to grow at least a little” (p. 14).

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**Rather than emphasizing transformation or escape, this book, and the ending in particular, depicts Edna’s interpellation as a subject, as an adolescent who recognizes her place in a power structure.**

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Like *The Chocolate War*, *Good Times* may not seem to meet romantic expectations or provide a hopeful epiphany at the end. This, in itself, is important. As I tell my students, contrary to what many YA books would have us believe, not every teenager will find solace in art (or music or new friends),

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***Good Times* becomes, then, a complex register of the way that hope and hopelessness may be entwined throughout the course of a character's, or a person's, life.**

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and fiction should reflect this.<sup>6</sup> However, it seems equally important that *Good Times* does offer at least a modicum of hope in its final chapter. It does so by providing us with a sympathetic final image of Bonna. Although Bonna has remained mute throughout her fight with Edna, speaking only with her fists, afterwards Edna observes "wet streaks on her face" (p. 131). It may be a small consolation, but

it suggests that Bonna regrets her actions and wishes that their world were different.

There are other ways that Barry continues to provide "a portion of hope" amidst hopelessness throughout *Good Times*. For much of the novel, music is a way for those in positions of power to assert and maintain control. Edna's malicious cousin Ellen mocks Edna for having the "wrong" kind of records, and Edna is heartbroken to learn that "it doesn't matter if you like the records you have because there are only certain songs that are good to listen to" (p. 64). Even more distressing is the way that Edna's piano teacher and, later, her flute teacher, whom she calls "the most prejudiced person I ever met" (p. 90), use music as a weapon. They literally pound music into Edna, yelling at her to keep time and smacking her with their hands or their batons. Although her biting comments show that she has not fully internalized her teachers' warped perspectives, she becomes a body to be acted on, rather than an active agent. Playing music in these circumstances, it is clear, will not help Edna achieve emotional stability.

At its best, however, music allows Edna to imagine a more radiant world, where Elvis Presley sings plaintively in the moonlight and Julie Andrews twirls around on mountaintops. It allows her to connect

to Ellen's fretful baby, whom she must watch after school every day. Most important, perhaps, memories of music remind her that adults can nurture rather than oppress the children that they encounter. Mrs. Espere, Edna's second- and third-grade music teacher, acts as a kind of savior, one who literally helped her find her voice. Edna describes classes with her:

[I]t would suddenly be just your voice in the room, you singing a part alone and then the sound of the whole class singing back to you, and the feeling you would get from looking at Mrs. Espere, singing all by yourself, the way she would tilt her head back and smile, like she was holding you up in the air with her eyes, like you were the absolute best thing she had ever seen in her whole life, well, it made you just feel like you could take off flying. For that, even the shyest ones would raise their hands for a turn. (p. 80)

This teacher, whose name (like Cisneros's protagonist) means hope, provides Edna with the affirmation she craves. Her way of looking at Edna is not censorious, frustrated, or hateful, like so many others in the book. She feels buoyed by Mrs. Espere's belief in her and by the pure joy of singing. Significantly, this moment of empowerment is not just between teacher and student; instead, it involves all students singing a kind of call and response. They feel supported by the look of pride in their teacher's eyes and by the rest of the class singing back to them.

This could be a saccharine moment if it were sustained a moment longer, but Barry never capitulates to clichéd notions of the power of music to help us overcome adversity. Her book demonstrates that with every respite from childhood and adolescent woe comes a new fear or source of frustration. This sense of balance, far from diminishing the hopeful moments, makes them resonate all the more. *Good Times* becomes, then, a complex register of the way that hope and hopelessness may be entwined throughout the course of a character's, or a person's, life.

## **An Invitation**

With any text that seems so heartbreakingly personal, the specter of autobiography always looms. As they become more invested in the narrative, my students want to know how much of the novel is based on Barry's own life story. Did Barry have a music teacher who hit her? A teacher like Mrs. Espere who made her feel like she could sing? Such questions are not out of place, given that Barry's work, particularly her more

recent books, foreground ideas of fact and fiction. Using the term “autobifictionalography,” she writes herself into and out of her work, calling attention to the slippery nature of truth telling as well as genre.

But while it may be fascinating to speculate about which aspects of her writing are “true,” what is more important about Barry’s books are not how much they resemble her own life, but what they ask readers to do with their own. Ozge Samanci (2006) refers to Barry’s *One! Hundred! Demons!* as an example of “invitational rhetoric,” in which the speaker (or, in this case, writer/artist) invites the audience into her world (p. 192). It establishes a nonhierarchical framework for understanding issues and insists on the possibility of change. In *Demons*, Barry (2002) describes the tools she used to create her book and literally invites readers to paint their own demons (moments that have caused them grief), coaxing them with the words, “Come on! Don’t you want to try it?” (p. 219).

Barry’s other works also act as an invitation. *Good Times* begins with an open question, addressed to the reader: “*Do you ever wonder what is music? Who invented it and what for and all that? And why hearing a certain song can make a whole entire time of your life suddenly just rise up and stick in your brain?*” (front matter). There are no other words on the page, and these italicized sentences act as a kind of epigraph for the whole book. They invite us, as readers, to become a part of Edna’s story as we read it, and to think about our own experiences with music as we listen to hers. In addition to tapping into our aural awareness, Edna also invites readers to become visually involved in the novel, asking us to “[c]ome over here and look out this window” (p. 1) before she describes her neighborhood. By having Edna address the reader directly, Barry establishes an informal, intimate tone that works to break down the hierarchy of author/reader.

Throughout her books, Barry indicates how much she values the strange, isolated, off-beat experiences of children and adolescents, and she doesn’t paint them with a romantic gloss. Yet while Barry certainly doesn’t ask us to look at childhood through the scrim of nostalgia, she also believes that becoming an adult means reclaiming childish things in a way that is productive. In her book *What It Is* (2008), Barry asks readers to remember the pure pleasure they took in drawing as young children and to try to recapture the “strange floating feeling of being there and not being

there,” of letting one line lead to another without being consumed by self-doubt. Her last line in this chapter is almost a plea: “To all the kids who quit drawing . . . come back!” (p. 135). Her invitation to “come back” suggests a way of growing up that resists the forward thrust of many narratives of development. “Learning is not,” Barry writes, “a trajectory, but a slowly ascending spiral” (p. 156). We have to circle back in order to go (or grow) up.

This is what Barry’s narratives can bring to the classroom. Books like *Good Times*, as well as *What It Is* and *One! Hundred! Demons!*, not only validate the experiences of marginalized children and adolescents, they also provide a new way of learning and of thinking about learning itself. By emphasizing both the verbal and the visual, her work complicates our ideas about genre and what it means to read. And because Barry values mistakes, digressions, and the beautiful within the ugly, she can help us learn to appreciate these things, too. Through her very messiness, she helps us see beyond product to the process that led to it, a way of seeing that is valuable to the teacher—and the student—in all of us.

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**And because Barry values mistakes, digressions, and the beautiful within the ugly, she can help us learn to appreciate these things, too.**

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## Notes

1. In using the term *YA* (or *Young Adult*) novel, I refer to “Books Written Specifically for Adolescents,” in keeping with Roberta Seelinger Trites’s (2000) definition (p. 7). I use *adolescent literature* to refer to “Books Written for General Trade Market which Have Adolescent Heroes and Heroines” and/or “General Books of Interest to Young Adults” (p. 7).
2. The Will Eisner Comic Industry Award is a prize given for creative excellence in American comic books.
3. *Good Times* was also made into an off-Broadway play in 1991.
4. Barry cites these illustrators as influences on her work; she also mentions other eclectic points of reference, including Mrs. Piggie Wiggle, Hans Christian Andersen’s fairy tales, and the Broadway Musical *Hair* (Garden, 1999).
5. Theresa Tensuan (2006) suggests that *One! Hundred! Demons!* and *Mango* share certain features, although I would argue that *Good Times* has more in common with *Mango* than *Demons* does.



6. This connects to Barry's own life. In an interview with *Salon*, Barry has said that while her "struggles as a kid were a little like Edna and Bonna's," she "was much more troubled than they are" (Grossman, 1999).

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## Blended Books:

An Emerging Genre Blends Online and Traditional Formats

**W**rite an achingly heartsick poem on your blog. Compose an obtuse status update on your Facebook page. Co-opt a TV commercial and refashion it for your personal use. These are assignments you will never find on a state standardized writing assessment! Yet these are the types of literacy activities students engage in daily. Among online teenagers, 64% engage in some type of content creation, and blogging attracts 35% of all online teen girls and 20% of online teen boys (Lenhart, Madden, Smith, and Macgill, 2007). Some English teachers feel conflicted about all this online writing (Bromley, 2006). Is it enough that students are writing in any venue? Or do their online literacy habits threaten the development of more traditional literacy skills? For example, what are teachers to do when students use “textese” in school assignments, or when they pay more attention to the fonts and clip art than they do to the form and content?

Today’s English teachers must respond to their students’ varied literacies, but they walk tightropes reflective of the competing theories about what it means to be literate. *Cultural literacy* theorists posit that there exists a set of shared conventions and canonical texts, and that students need to understand these conventions and texts in order to accomplish their career goals, or indeed, communicate at all. *Multiliteracies* theorists disagree that these shared conventions exist at all. Rather, they believe that students need to learn how communication functions in a specific context and then use communication to change that context. For multiliteracies theorists, students who write in

new ways are to be encouraged. This might lead to the conclusion that blogs, text messages, and Facebook posts are a valid way to write in English class, and are valid texts to read and discuss.

In *serafina67 \*urgently requires life\**, a work of adolescent literature that is written entirely as a blog (but published in print form), the main character anticipates just this change occurring in her English class. “Because one day people will stop reading *Bloody Romeo and his Crap Dead Girlfriend* and they will all sit in classrooms watching YouTube from THE PAST that is now and reading BLOGGAGE instead and write essays about magnificent us” (Day, p. 51). In this passage, Day seems to be commenting on her own work; finding a publisher who will accept a novel that is written entirely in blog format can be seen as one step in the journey toward validating adolescent literacy practices as real literature. Day is not the only author who is reflecting teen life by incorporating current literacy practices into their fiction. There are a number of books for young adults that blend online and traditional formats.

This article presents a genre study of these types of books and attempts to answer the following research questions:

1. How are adolescent literacy practices represented in these books?
2. Do the books share similar themes or stylistic elements?
3. Could these books have a place in the English curriculum?



## The Novels

When searching for these blended novels, I originally limited my search to books that were composed entirely of online formats represented in print form. Finding only four of these, I expanded my reading to include novels that alternated between online formats and traditional narrative. I rejected a few of the titles I found because of poor reviews or because they did not incorporate online formats and themes to a considerable degree. The books I read include: *ChaseR* (Rosen, 2002), *serafina67 \*urgently requires life\** (Day, 2008), *tmi* (Quigley, 2009), *are u 4 real?* (Kadefors, 2009), *Click Here (to find out how I survived seventh grade)* (Vega, 2005), *ttyl* (Myracle, 2004), and *Entr@pment: A High School Comedy in Chat* (Spooner, 2009). (See Table 1 for full descriptions of these books.)

## Themes

Analysis of the seven novels was influenced by qualitative research and multi-case studies. Each novel was treated as one case. As I read each novel, I noted

unique stylistic elements that reflected online literacy practices. Examples of these include acronyms like OMG. I also noted general themes addressed in the novels. For example, a theme in *ChaseR* was animal rights. As I read each additional novel, I eliminated themes that were not shared in common with the other novels or themes that were not related in some way to the novels' portrayal of online literacy practices. I refined some themes by combining them or redefining them so that they were held in common by most of the novels. I made notes about how the themes were connected to the stylistic and structural aspects of the text. This method of analysis is also referred to as the *constant comparison method* (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Themes are determined inductively from the individual cases rather than being theorized ahead of time. The following themes were most prominent.

### *Playful Structures*

These books portray adolescents as very playful writers, creatively adapting traditional morphology, syntax, and genre structures. Many of these play-

**Table 1.** Blended Books

Title	Author	Narrative format	Plot
<i>ChaseR</i>	Michael J. Rosen	Emails from Chase to his friends	Chase has just moved from the city to the country. He discusses how this change, as well as the issue of local hunting, has affected him.
<i>serafina67 *urgently requires life*</i>	Susie Day	Blog entries accompanied by blog readers' comments	Sarah is recovering from her parents' divorce and an embarrassing incident at school. She discusses her daily life and her search for happiness on her blog.
<i>tmi</i>	Sarah Quigley	Blog entries blended with traditional narrative	Becca tries to curb her habit of sharing "too much information" by weaving a fantasy world on her blog. But when her veiled descriptions of her friends and family are revealed, she must deal with the consequences.
<i>are u 4 real?</i>	Sara Kadefors	Traditional narrative interspersed with email and chat logs	Kyla and Alex meet online and develop a friendship. But can their relationship stand the test of meeting in real life?
<i>Click Here (to find out how I survived seventh grade)</i>	Denise Vega	Traditional narrative punctuated with website diary entries	Erin struggles to manage her friendships as she transitions to seventh grade. Her outlet is her offline website. But when it becomes public, she must live with the consequences.
<i>ttyl</i>	Lauren Myracle	Chat logs	This book, the first in a series, tells of three friends who struggle to maintain their friendship and give each other much-needed perspective on the high school experience.
<i>Entr@pment: A High School Comedy in Chat</i>	M. Spooner	Chat logs	Two girls, along with two accomplices, develop an evil plot; they will create fake online identities and try to lure each other's boyfriends into virtual affairs as a test of these boys' devotion. Hilarity (and consequences) ensue.

ful aspects of teen online writing were no surprise: emoticons, abbreviated spellings, acronyms, a lack of capitalization (except for emphasis or “shouting”), and fragmented and run-on syntax. Action phrases such as \*clomps about in a flying rage\* (Myracle, p. 88) or \*looks soulfully into the distance\* (Myracle, p. 34), set aside in asterisks, add humor and drama. I also noticed some features I did not expect; what follows details some of those features.

Five of the seven books depicted teens who narrated incidents in their lives by adapting traditional genre formats. They turned their daily struggles into fairy tales, ORPG (Online Role Playing Game) logs, sonnets, scientific reports, romance novels, screenplays, and newspapers, all for humorous effect. Chase, in *ChaseR*, crafts an email newspaper with humorous stories as he records his relationship to his new life in the country. One issue of his newsletter includes a fictional advertisement for mail-order cicadas.

*serafina67* depicted a blogger who had a tendency to play with morphology to make up new words, e.g., “I know I should be all Yay Achieviness!” (Day, p. 25). Other examples include “adorkable” (Day, p. 101), “lardtastic” (Day, p. 3), and “head-breaky” (Day, p. 26). I did not notice this feature in any of the other books, but I am convinced that the author meant to portray this type of wordplay as characteristic of many teen bloggers in general.

Slang was abundant in these books. Within the “teen only” worlds created by their blogs and chat rooms, teens used language that might be censored in contexts governed by adults. Such slang may be playful or it may break boundaries for what is considered acceptable language. *serafina67* poses some small challenges to American adult readers, as it is chock full of teen slang, computer (or “l33t” slang), British English, and British slang all rolled into one. A surprising amount of the slang in these books was in the form of insults, such as “retarded,” “slut,” or “gay.” The insults ranged from mild and playful to vicious; often a verbal “crossing the line” theme came into play and created conflict between characters. By indicating that such name calling was common, hurtful, and a source of controversy amongst adolescents, these novels did not treat the topic lightly. However, such language may preclude some books from classroom use, depending on district policies.

In general, this playful disregard of conventions

seems to have a literary function. The acronyms and abbreviated spellings allow writers to type faster, thereby conversing in spontaneous bursts as they would if conversing in person. Those books written as chat log were akin to conversations, while those that incorporated email were more reflective and epistolary. The play of morphology and genre contributes to a humorous narrative hyperbole in describing daily events that might otherwise seem insignificant or mundane. The slang makes for an edgy, authentic read, and introduces conflict into the books. To summarize the general effect of the playful structures, an analogy can be made to stand-up comedy, which is conversational, edgy, hyperbolic, and funny. In contrast, a traditional, reflective, descriptive account focusing on the unfolding details of a lived experience reminds me more of an art house film.

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**Slang was abundant in these books. Within the “teen only” worlds created by their blogs and chat rooms, teens used language that might be censored in contexts governed by adults.**

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#### *Vented Honesty*

Another characteristic theme of these novels is what I call “vented honesty.” The adolescents in these novels feel that their everyday lives are false. Peer pressure and social mores limit their speech and behavior; they need an outlet for their true identity and emotions. Internet relationships and journals offer them a sanctuary for unfiltered discussion. *serafina67* makes a resolution regarding her blogging efforts: “Be brilliant and interesting and completely totally honest on here, daily” (Day, p. 3). All of the books incorporated the theme of vented honesty in some way. Even in *Entr@pment*, a novel about forming false identities online, there was some irony in the fact that the false identities allowed the teen writers to express feelings they would normally not express. Some of the secrets these characters discussed were their opinions of their peers, their self-consciousness, and revelations about friends’ sexual orientation.

Vented honesty is reactive, rather than reflective; it reveals the author’s perceptions “in the heat of



the moment.” The storytelling p.o.v. accompanying vented honesty is often first person or third-person limited. The writers provide very authentic representations of their emotional state, but their descriptions of events and others’ perceptions are often biased and unreliable. Through the course of the novels, readers are privy to the characters’ broadening understanding of the events of their own lives.

The theme of *tmi* centers on the problem of vented honesty. Becca tends to talk continuously, sharing observations that are awkward and inappropriate, which often leads those around her to protest, “Too much information!” Becca tries to curb her habit by venting her observations on her blog, but the blog is ultimately discovered by classmates. This discovery is also a common theme in these novels; it is the theme of “unintended audiences,” which I will discuss shortly.

### *Managed Identities*

It is a paradox that vented honesty is often accompanied by “managed identities.” Students who manage (fictionalize) their identity take advantage of the fact that life lived online is somewhat separate from daily life. This can be done in small ways, like the use of screen names to preserve Internet safety and anonymity, or in more elaborate ways, as seen in the plot of *Entr@pment*. Perhaps because they believe their identity is disguised, online writers are more subject to the phenomenon of vented honesty. This plot detail speaks to larger themes in these works, like what is our “true self”? *Entr@pment*, a book whose chat logs also mirror the structure of a Shakespearean comedy, offers rich reflections on the theme of managed identity by making an implicit parallel between the Shakespearean concept of “mask” and the taking of an online identity. For example, in the beginning of *Entr@pment*, the teen girls are discussing their plan to create false identities online, and through these personas, test their boyfriends’ devotion.

Ms. T: true, um, Annie? online? we make up identities and hit on them from there?

gothling: exactly

Ms. T: e-dentities

gothling: whole new personalities. like costumes and masks and foreign accents. see, bliss? (Spooner, p. 10).

### *Unintended Audiences*

Vented honesty on the Web is different from vented honesty in a diary, because on the Web, it is easier for writings to develop unintended audiences. In three of the seven books, the combination of vented honesty and the revelation of an unintended audience provided a major plot twist. These plot twists are parallel to real-life conflicts, such as those that occur when adolescent bloggers learn their parents have been reading their online journals (Kornblum, 2005).

In some of the books, the revelation of the unintended audience brings with it a moral subtext regarding Internet safety for adolescents. Couched in gentle humor, the message of “be careful out there” is reflected in words of parental wisdom or embarrassing social consequences for the book’s major characters. In *Click Here* (Vega, 2005), Erin’s parents explain to her that even after you delete something from the Web, it remains stored in a cache on Google for awhile. serafina67 writes a letter directly to her readers comparing the Internet to a conversation on a train full of strangers, all of whom are overhearing your conversation. For some listeners, the conversation may become a shared source of interest and spark a friendship. Other times, the conversation will be a source of embarrassment . . . for the listener *and/or* for the speaker. And on other occasions, it may be dangerous. This metaphor puts the concept of unintended audiences in a very concrete form.

### *Social Focus*

I was a somewhat solitary and bookish teen, and my high school life revolved around school, family, and church, but I found that these themes were not generally emphasized in these seven books. Rather, the focus was on social relationships with peers. While this is a feature of a great deal of adolescent literature, the cyber elements seemed at least tangentially connected to the social focus in these works. Many of the characters in these novels seemed to see cyberspace as “their domain,” reminding me of one journalist’s description of online journaling websites as “a kind of online breakfast club” (Nussbaum, 2004). This was especially true for serafina67, whose “ulife” account mirrored sites like myspace, xanga, and livejournal, sites populated largely by communities of adolescents. Within these online domains, peer relationships were generally tested without undue influence from adults.

Romance, unsurprisingly, played a major role in these novels. The temporal, fragile nature of teen romances was further complicated by the themes of managed identities (can teens be their true selves in romantic relationships?) and unintended audiences (what do you do when pictures of you kissing another girl are revealed online to your girlfriend and her friends?).

Friendships between teens were also a major theme. Characters learned who their true friends were, and these friends supported them through challenges with other relationships and with parents and teachers. The girls in *ttyl* supported each other and kept a friend from being seduced by her teacher. Loneliness, bullying, sex, eating disorders, and alcohol all played a role in these teens' relationships with each other. Of contemporary relevance was the theme of homophobia. In *tmi*, Becca accidentally "outs" a best friend. In *are u 4 real?*, Alex's peers assume he is homosexual because he is a ballet dancer. A summary of the

themes and the books in which they were reflected is presented in Table 2.

## Theory and Application

Luke (2002) has described today's classrooms as influenced by an era of "corporate managerealism"; this refers to standardized testing, a culture in which performance and accountability drive how and what we teach, giving rise to an acceptance and/or expectation that curriculum will be steered from a distance and will emphasize marketization. Many students' concept of good writing is distilled into the minimal requirements of following a predictable five-paragraph pattern and avoiding surface-level errors for the purpose of passing an exam. This lies in sharp contrast with the informal literacy

portrayed in these YA novels, which consists of social writing filled with humor, hyperbole, creativity, and disregard for conventions.

**Table 2.** Adolescent Novels and Their Themes

Title	"Textese": Emoticons, Acronyms, Abbreviated spellings	Personal Story Told in a Different Genre	Heavy Use of Slang	Morphological Play	Hyperbolic Humor	Vented Honesty	Managed Identities	Unintended Audiences	Social (Peer) Focus
<i>ChaseR</i>	x	x			x	x			
<i>serafina67</i> <i>*urgently requires life*</i>	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
<i>tmi</i>	x	x	x		x	x	x	x	x
<i>are u 4 real?</i>	x		x			x	x		x
<i>Click Here (to find out how I survived seventh grade)</i>	x	x	x		x	x		x	x
<i>ttyl</i>	x		x		x	x	x		x
<i>Entr@pment: A High School Comedy in Chat</i>	x	x	x		x	x	x		x



High school English teachers today are caught between two competing views of literacy. “Cultural Literacy” theory posits that a general knowledge base exists that is necessary for communication to occur (Hirsch, 1987). Standardized conventions and canonical texts are thus important to the curriculum. In contrast, “multiliteracies” theorists write that “there

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**Not only is the entire novel written as chat logs, but it contains the following elements of a Shakespearean comedy: masks, wise fools, monologues, sonnets, insults, allusions (to Shakespeare, of course), destiny, and even a marriage at the end.**

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is no single, canonical English that can or should be taught any more” (Cope & Kalantzis, 1999, p. 5). They posit that literacy is contextual, multimodal, and ultimately related to issues of social power (Cope & Kalantzis, 1999). In pedagogical terms, students would work with localized versions of English and nonlinguistic forms of communication to creatively adapt social messages. To my mind, this could translate into a variety of conventional literacy practices, but also expand to include practices such as *serafina67*’s blog-

ging or the re-imaging that appears in texts such as *Adbusters* magazine.

Even teachers unaware of the theoretical formulations are impacted by the practical applications of these theories. Teens surveyed about how their in-school and out-of-school literacies have intersected responded this way: 50% say they sometimes use informal writing styles instead of proper capitalization and punctuation in their school assignments; 38% say they have used text shortcuts in schoolwork, such as “LOL” (for “laugh out loud”); 25% have used emoticons (symbols like smiley faces ) in schoolwork (Lenhart, Lewis, & Rainie, 2001). Another interesting fact is that teen blogs have been banned by some school districts—not because of their nonstandard conventions, but because of the social conflicts they create between students (Kornblum, 2005).

I remember a conflict that occurred while I was teaching in a school in which curriculum was delivered online and the ratio of computers to students was

1:1. Students had spontaneously developed an online forum in which they posted and discussed movies, games, original poetry, and politics. While they were admirably engaged in writing, they were also writing on the discussion forum instead of doing their schoolwork, quickly minimizing the page when teachers walked by. The website was temporarily blocked by school administrators, but eventually a truce was reached in which students who were up-to-date with schoolwork and used “school-appropriate language” could use the site during school. This truce honored what the students had to bring to the table (their interest in writing) as well as what teachers had to bring to the table (knowledge of conventional discourse and belief in civil guidelines for discourse).

Literature, too, can offer such a truce or method of translating one’s experience and values into a form that outsiders can understand. *Entr@pment* is a perfect example of a YA text that serves this function. It clarifies for student readers the function of a Shakespearean comedy, while adult readers come to understand the comic, social function of online chat. Not only is the entire novel written as chat logs, but it contains the following elements of a Shakespearean comedy: masks, wise fools, monologues, sonnets, insults, allusions (to Shakespeare, of course), destiny, and even a marriage at the end. Because this book is written in the language of informal adolescent literacy, yet is unlikely to cause the censors much discontent, I can easily imagine either using it as a two-week unit before teaching a Shakespearean comedy for the first time or giving it to an AP class as a weekend read accompanied by the question, “Can chat logs be literature?” Even writing lessons might be inspired by such novels. For example, students could learn to switch between textese and Standard English by “translating” the dialogue in *tyl* or *Entr@pment* into Standard English, or rewriting a classical story in modern day, chat formats.

## Conclusion

There is some danger, though, in co-opting students’ informal literacy in the classroom and offering it up for deconstruction and analysis. Rather than co-opt, teachers can acknowledge and protect these literacy practices in small ways, such as housing these blended books in their classroom leisure reading

library, allowing students to write in their school journals in “chat speak” and “textese,” or teaching grammar by asking students to translate textese into conventional grammar while letting students challenge their teacher to decipher their textese. An NCTE position paper on technology and writing asserts that as culture and literacy change, so must English teachers and classrooms. This includes paying attention to issues of privacy and copyright, as well as developing composition assignments that blend hypertextual and visual forms of communication with print (Swenson, Rozema, Young, McGrail, & Whitin, 2005). But in order to teach these new literacy practices, one must become familiar with them. As a primer for teachers, I would recommend *serafina67*, which introduces the interactive, creative nature of teen blogging through a character whose voice is strong and authentic.

As adolescent literature adapts to reflect changing adolescent literacy practices, it is probable that the number of blended books will rise. Some may even begin to incorporate image, a hallmark of online literacy, though none of these seven did. An example of a contemporary novel that includes visual images is Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005). This novel is appropriate for older readers, and though it does not focus on online formats, it does incorporate varied forms of communication. And as these adolescents grow into adulthood, the genre may become more prevalent in literary fiction. For now, authors of blended books and teachers of adolescent literacy will continue their balancing acts, their bridge building, so that more *serafina67*s will appreciate Shakespeare, and more Shakespeare teachers will have their own blogs.

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## Young Adult Literature Goes Digital:

Will Teen Reading Ever Be the Same?

**W**e probably should have seen it coming, the young adult digi-novel, or “vook” (video-book). After all, we’ve witnessed the effects of new Internet technologies on young adult literature before. Emails abound in Schindler’s (2004) *An Order of Amelie*, Hold the Fries, Hrdlitschka’s (2005) *Sun Signs*, and Wittlinger’s (2005) *Heart on My Sleeve*. IM (Instant Messaging) or chat room language serves as a medium for adolescents’ stories in Draper’s (2001) *Romiette & Julio*, Myracle’s (2005) *TTYL*, and Lyga’s (2007) *The Astonishing Adventures of Fan Boy and Goth Girl*. Norris (2008) takes us into the blog world with *Something to Blog About*, and Mancusi (2008) propels YA readers into the online gaming world in *Gamer Girl*.

But until now, technological innovation in young adult literature has remained predominantly print-bound. In *TTYL*, *Something to Blog About*, or *Gamer Girl*, for instance, readers don’t actually go online to read or interact. Readers don’t enter chat rooms or send emails, visit (or create) character blogs or online gaming worlds. In fact, readers don’t ever have to leave the pages of the book to engage with the stories. Thus, outside of resembling or mimicking the *look* of the techno-textual worlds adolescents currently frequent (94% of teens are online, according to a recent Pew Internet report [Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010]), young adult novels haven’t really been doing anything new in that they haven’t required new ways of reading or interacting (although some could argue the novels do require readers be familiar with online genres).

Not so anymore. A new trend in young adult

literature—the digi-novel or video/book hybrid—now combines traditional print-bound text with true, interactive online components. Carman’s *Skeleton Creek* series (2009a and 2009b) and Lennon and Kantor’s *The Amanda Project* (2009) are two such examples. In this article, we provide brief summaries of the works and then describe their technological innovation using Jenkins’s ideas about “convergence culture” as a theoretical frame. We then describe what literacy and reading researchers have to say about such texts and the reading processes they entail. We end with critical questions raised as a result of the production of digi-novels.

### Meet Two Digi-Novel Series

#### Skeleton Creek Series

*Skeleton Creek* and *Ghost in the Machine* (author Patrick Carman and director Jeffery Townsend)

This two-volume series centers on the efforts of 15-year-old Ryan and his best friend, Sarah, to solve a mystery surrounding the abandoned gold dredge that gives their hometown of Skeleton Creek its name. An old miner named Joe Bush was killed in the dredge, and now Ryan and Sarah think his ghost might be haunting it. Their videotaped escapades to the dredge almost get Ryan killed. He is just home from a two-week stay in the hospital when the first book in the series opens. Ryan is a writer, and in his journal, he tells readers about himself and what led to his hospitalization. It is here where Ryan also reveals that he fears for his life; he worries his Dad, other townspeople, and a secret society might somehow be involved

in the mystery, and his journal is to serve as a record of events in case something happens to him.

Because Ryan's parents believe Sarah is the reason Ryan was hurt, they have forbidden Ryan and Sarah to see each other. In the age of the Internet, however, Ryan and Sarah can stay connected via the computer. Sarah is the film geek (described by Carman as "Nancy Drew with a camera" [Jasics, 2010]). She continues to look for clues and sends secret Web videos to Ryan when she discovers new information or makes connections. Readers access Sarah's videos intermittently throughout the novel by going to the website ([www.sarahfincher.com](http://www.sarahfincher.com)) and using the passwords provided by Ryan in his journal. Once Ryan has watched the videos, he reflects on them in his journal and makes connections between what Sarah finds and his own fragmented memories and dreams.

In our humble opinion, *Skeleton Creek* isn't great, sophisticated young adult literature in the vein of such Edgar® Award-winning young adult mystery writers as Sonia Levitin, John Green, or Nancy Werlin, but boy, is it fun to read. The story is well-paced, and readers will get hooked by Ryan's foreboding tone and paranoia. Sarah's videos are truly scary, but not in a gory, violent way—more like a you-know-there's-something-behind-the-corner-waiting-to-jump-out-and-scare-you-but-you-walk-to-the-corner-anyway kind of way. It's good, clean fun—emphasis on "fun" here—that readers of all ages (but especially middle schoolers and reluctant readers) can enjoy.

### The Amanda Project

*invisible i* (Book One) (author Stella Lennon [pseudonym] and Melissa Kantor)

This eight-volume mystery series (only the first book is currently in print) centers on three high school students (Callie, Hal, and Nia) who are looking for their missing friend, Amanda Valentino. Before Amanda mysteriously disappeared, she vandalized the vice-principal's car, made Callie, Hal, and Nia—all social introverts—believe she was their best friend, and planted strange and confusing clues all over town. As the search for Amanda begins, the unlikely trio uncovers more questions than answers: Who is Amanda, truly? Where is she, and why did she tell Callie, Hal, and Nia different stories about her background? What is the meaning of the clues she left behind? By the end of the book, Callie, Hal, and Nia are still searching.

They launch an interactive website ([www.theamandaproject.com](http://www.theamandaproject.com)) and ask readers to help them find Amanda.

Readers will become quickly engaged with the ambiguity and mystery presented in *The Amanda Project*, wondering, as the main characters do, who and where is Amanda? The plot is filled with near misses as the characters (along with the readers) try to piece together information based on clues Amanda leaves behind. We do think this series is a more complex read than the *Skeleton Creek* series, well suited for sophisticated readers in middle and high school.

## Convergence Culture and the Young Adult Digi-Novel

Jenkins, a leading cultural theorist (and admitted pop culture fan), describes media "convergence culture" as a phenomenon of the 21st century, in which "content flows across multiple media platforms, multiple media industries (e.g., music, film) cooperate with each other, and media consumers will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want" (2006a, p. 2). Some adolescent literacy researchers use Jenkins's ideas about media convergence culture to help make sense of what draws adolescents online. Jenkins explains one of the draws is the highly active—not passive—participation media that convergence culture requires.

We see *Skeleton Creek* and *The Amanda Project* as examples of this participant-heavy media convergence, albeit in different ways. To read the *Skeleton Creek* series, readers must go back and forth between the book and the [www.sarahfincher.com](http://www.sarahfincher.com) website. Carman has said in interviews that the idea behind the structure of the book/media hybrid was to create a "reading-plus experience" that would actually compel readers (especially resistant, adolescent male readers) to read:

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**Sarah's videos are truly scary, but not in a gory, violent way—more like a you-know-there's-something-behind-the-corner-waiting-to-jump-out-and-scare-you-but-you-walk-to-the-corner-anyway kind of way.**

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[Skeleton Creek] is probably the best attempt I can think of to give a young person a reason to want to read. They only have to read 20 or 30 pages and then they get to watch part of the story—and so that’s the idea, they go back and forth, and that’s why I structured it this way, because I want, particularly that age group—5th, 6th, 7th, 8th, 9th graders—to just be compelled to have to keep going. If you read the first 30 pages and watch the first video, it’s almost impossible not to keep going. You understand the structure, you’re right into the story, something scary is happening. (Jasics, 2010)

Carman has expressed that he sees kids drifting toward technology and away from books (Jasics, 2010), but explains that Skeleton Creek “is not an

attempt to bridge the gap between the technological world that kids live in and books,” but an attempt to “erase [the gap] altogether” (Jasics, 2010). Thus, in Skeleton Creek, Sarah’s videos and the print-based text (Ryan’s journal) work hand-in-hand, complementing each other: the book doesn’t work without the videos, and vice versa.

Jenkins explains that when multiple media platforms converge, the varying platforms provide opportunities to tell different parts of a story in

different ways. Media creators often must consider what different media platforms afford and use them smartly. Otherwise, the convergence can feel like a “gimmick” (Jasics, 2010). Sarah’s videos provide the atmosphere and mood (think *Blair Witch Project*) that give cause to Ryan’s foreboding tone in his journals, and they provide important clues that help to propel the mystery forward. Jenkins explains that media convergence requires active participation by media users, as they must “make connections among dispersed media content” (2006a, p. 3). Indeed, just as Sarah and Ryan follow clues and make sophisticated connections across multiple media, so must readers.

In contrast, the media convergence experienced in The Amanda Project doesn’t happen until the print-based reading experience is over. Readers don’t have

to go online while reading to understand the story (at least not in the first book, the only one published thus far). At the end of the novel, readers are encouraged to visit the website, where they can interact with the story, its plot, characters, and other readers in various ways.

For example, some areas on the website include “Our Stories,” “Clues,” “Zine,” “The Debate Club,” and “Gallery.” “Our Stories” is an interactive section where Callie, Hal, and Nia post news about the continuing search for Amanda every Friday at 3:30 p.m. After each post, readers respond to questions posed by Callie, Hal, or Nia. Readers help to figure out clues and offer advice on what the characters should do next. The Amanda Project authors have told readers and fans that the information gathered from the “Our Stories” section can influence the future books, as the writers consider what readers suggest for future story lines.

The “Clues” section portrays text messages, handwritten notes, artwork, and tangible objects that fans can use to solve the mystery of the disappearing Amanda. Readers are encouraged to send additional clues to the website administrators that might help others investigate Amanda’s disappearance.

Members can also go into the “Zine” section and post drawings, editorials, stream of consciousness, poetry, song lyrics, rants, advice, and other forms of self-expression. The “Zine,” much like the online fictional Harry Potter newspaper *The Daily Prophet* ([www.dprophet.com](http://www.dprophet.com)), is an online publication edited by a “student” from Amanda’s school, Endeavor High School. Each online issue has a suggested theme for readers to address in their postings. This section connects back to the text in which Amanda advocated for self-expression when she encouraged Hal to submit his artwork to a contest. Furthermore, Amanda had written editorials for the school newspaper that sparked controversy with other characters in the story.

The “Debate Club” is a place for readers to mingle and build a community with one another, posting comments and talking about the clues and the storyline. The “Debate Club” includes an orientation to the website and a miscellaneous section where members can discuss anything not related to the book. Readers can initiate new topics and create discussion threads, allowing onlookers to speak up (respond) or just read.

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**The Amanda Project authors have told readers and fans that the information gathered from the “Our Stories” section can influence the future books, as the writers consider what readers suggest for future story lines.**

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In the “Gallery,” readers can post sketches (much like Hal, who kept his own sketchbook in the story) or other graphic images through a variety of media (artwork, pencil sketches, photos, collages, etc.). Members can create the outfits that they think certain characters might wear or depict how they think Amanda might look. After the images are posted, members have the option to make comments about them.

All of these forums help to describe the participatory nature Jenkins says marks convergence culture. In a convergent media culture, the computer becomes a way of “linking media users’ own fixations to a broader social community that shares similar frustrations, fascinations, and fixations” about a TV show, book, etc. (2006b, p. 132). Jenkins explains, “Participating in the virtual community becomes a way of increasing the intensity and density of the media users’ predictions and speculations,” as users often use online fan spaces to discuss storylines, collect information, and help others answer questions (2006b, p. 132).

The virtual communities established around The Amanda Project become sites for collaboration, negotiation, and self-expression, as fans describe themselves and share their talents, pull together clues, and vet their speculations concerning central narrative questions. Jenkins describes the “collective intelligence” that emerges as fans work together in these virtual communities (2006a, p. 27). Just as neither Ryan nor Sarah have all the clues in *Skeleton Creek* and thus must rely on each other to solve the mystery, so, too, must Callie, Hal, and Nia pool their knowledge and expertise to begin to solve the mystery of the disappearing Amanda. Fans mimic this pooling of collective knowledge in the virtual communities they create as they also collaborate, and thus participate, in solving the mystery. Too, online readers become collaborative authors, taking part in constructing the character of Amanda as much as any “real” author does.

Thus, while technology does not supplement the storyline in *The Amanda Project*, it becomes an integral part of the reader’s extended experience of the text. Participating in the virtual community becomes a way of broadening and deepening the reading experience beyond the confines of the print-bound text. Jenkins suggests the exploration of fictional realms that occurs in such online communities can lead to richer understandings of both text and self (2006b, p. 132).

## So What Do Young Adult Digi-Novels Mean for Teen Reading?

It’s easy to see why series like *Skeleton Creek* and *The Amanda Project* are popular with adolescent readers (at last count, there were over 4,000 registered fans at *The Amanda Project* website, and over 3,500 fans at the “*Skeleton Creek Investigations*” Facebook site). The books combine mystery and adventure—preferred genres of teens (Clark & Rumbold, 2006). They’re series books, which some reading researchers say appeal to teens because of the “comfort of the familiar” and readers’ desires to “be a part of a community of readers who share delight in particular stories, characters, or language” (McGill-Franzen, 2009, p. 57). Ross (1995) explains reading is more often than not a “social activity,” and “series books have the cachet of something precious, to be collected, hoarded, and discussed” (p. 226).

The “social activity” of digital young adult series novels carries over into cyberspace, and literacy researchers have long said this activity is marked by sophisticated literacy engagement, rather than something that might displace traditional reading and writing skills. Black and Steinkuehler (2009) describe adolescents’ literacy engagement in digital worlds as a “constellation of literacy activities” that includes advancing, resisting, and negotiating a medium’s linguistic norms; writing and “performing” original stories and coauthoring collaborative stories; reading and navigating multiple textual genres; discovering and following inter- and extra-textual connections across multiple textual genres; and serving as “beta-readers” or peer-reviewers for writers and new virtual community members (p. 277).

Jenkins explains that to participate successfully in virtual fan communities such as those surrounding *Skeleton Creek* and *The Amanda Project*, media users must do multiple re-readings of texts and engage in dialogue with other group members as they flesh out speculations and predictions (2006b). Jenkins explains part of the appeal of such online fan communities is

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**The virtual communities established around *The Amanda Project* become sites for collaboration, negotiation, and self-expression.**

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the pleasure that comes in exchanging knowledge (what he calls “epistemophilia” [2006a, p. 139]) and the intellectual demand placed upon members, since they must tolerate ambiguity, defer narrative resolutions, and consider the multiple meanings that arise from group discussion and negotiation. Jenkins explains that in fans’ virtual communities, “meaning is a constantly renewable resource and its circulation can create and revitalize social ties” (2006b, p. 145).

James Gee (2004) might call these informal learning cultures “affinity spaces”—spaces that cohere around a common affinity for a certain topic, passion, or endeavor where participants learn more, participate more actively, and engage more deeply than they do in school or with traditional texts (2006a, p. 186).

## The New (Old) Reading Wars?

The 2004 National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) report entitled *Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America* (Bradshaw & Nichols, 2004)

warned of a marked decline in the American public’s engagement with literary texts and claimed that the young adult population showed the steepest decline for reading in recent years. The report contrasts books with “electronic media” such as the Internet, claiming that such media “often require no more than passive participation” and “foster shorter attention spans and accelerated gratification” (vii).

Leading neuroscientists have also jumped into the fray. Wolf, author of *Proust and the Squid: The Story and Science of the Reading Brain* (2007) worries about the evolution of the reading brain in today’s fast-paced technology-driven society. She says, “In music, in poetry, and in life, the rest, the pause, the slow movements are essential to comprehending the whole” (p. 214). She suggests that rapid technological changes affecting how and what we read will negatively impact our attention spans and the “range of inferential and reflective capacities in the present reading brain,” as

well as “our capacity to find insights, pleasure, pain, and wisdom in oral and written language” (p. 214). Ultimately, Wolf worries that technology will change our relationship(s) with language.

Still other reading researchers worry about the loss of the “transportive appeal” of traditional texts; since images of characters are immediately available to readers (Peters, 2009), they don’t have to rely so much on their own imaginations and visualizing processes while reading digital texts. Carman claims that Skeleton Creek “plays along with the way the [multitasking] young mind operates” (Jasics, 2010), but some neuroscientists suggest multitasking while reading (e.g., moving from print to computer screen) slows the brain down and increases the room for errors in comprehension (Hesse, 2010). Adult and young adult author Walter Mosley might agree: “Our cognitive abilities actually go backwards when we’re watching television or doing stuff on computers” (qtd. in Rich, 2009).

Black and Steinkuehler (2009) explain that much of the criticism of adolescents’ preferences for anything digital comes from long-standing fears and misunderstandings of technology and youth culture, as well as “a fear of *what* kids are reading and writing, not *whether* they are engaged in such practices per se” (p. 283). Research by Applebee (1989) over 20 years ago, and Stallworth, Gibbons, and Fauber (2006) more recently, shows that the most commonly taught texts in high school English classes continue to be canonical works like *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *Of Mice and Men*. When asked, English teachers explain that they teach such works because they feel responsible for preparing students for college and/or cultural literacy (Stallworth, Gibbons, & Fauber, 2006). Teachers might also associate adolescents’ online activities with entertainment and “fluff,” and view technology as something adolescents should “do” outside of school.

We worry about this growing divide between adolescents’ out-of-school and in-school literacies (as well as the divide between tech-savvy adolescents and their teachers). We think teachers might be well-served to consider bringing series like Skeleton Creek and The Amanda Project into the classroom. Indeed, we know that the novel itself (only 300 years old) has never been stable, and reading processes are always in flux (Hesse, 2010). We also know that adolescent

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readers are inventive, and that teachers must be flexible—willing to use new kinds of texts in preparing adolescents to be strategic readers of diverse texts delivered in multiple and varied mediums. We imagine this is the English teacher’s responsibility because young adult digi-novels may provide opportunities for teachers to transform the use of literature in English classrooms in such a way that adolescents will see relevance between the classroom, the technological worlds they inhabit, and their literacy futures (whether they go to college or not).

With that said, however, we offer some questions for reflection that we think the production of young adult digi-novels raises. First, we wonder about the readers ignored by digi-novels and “vooks”—the differently-abled, poor, English Language Learners (ELLs), and African American teens who Internet researchers say lag behind their White peers in computer Internet use (Lenhart et al., 2010). Do digi-novels and vooks widen the “digital divide” between rich and poor adolescents? Adolescents of color and their White peers? Historically, “digital divide” researchers have considered digital equity only in terms of physical access to computers, but Gorski (2009) explains the digital divide must also be considered in terms of the “opportunity to use technologies in ways that empower people to participate in society” (p. 352). Framed in this way, different questions about digi-novels become important: Who has the easiest, most consistent access to the technological resources digi-novels and vooks require for participation? Who are these books produced for? Who is the “implied reader”? With what student populations can we assume such books would be used? (Gorski (2009) would say White and affluent populations, as computers in schools serving high-minority/high-poverty students are often used for remediation, i.e., “digital flashcards” [p. 356]).

We also worry about the rampant consumerism digi-novels encourage. At The Amanda Project website, there is a “Shop” section where readers can purchase official Amanda gear (e.g., t-shirts, buttons). The website also links to Modcloth ([www.modcloth.com](http://www.modcloth.com)), an interactive site that allows members to design clothes. Readers can create Amanda’s “perfect outfit” through the Modcloth website, and then designs are actually created and available for purchase at the site.

The “Shop” section also connects readers to iTunes ([www.itunes.com](http://www.itunes.com)) where one can download Callie’s, Hal’s, or Nia’s playlists, as well as playlists by the authors of the upcoming books in the series. There is also an “Oracle” iPhone “app” available for purchase that gives fans either a tarot card or a reading by Amanda (in the book, Amanda uses Oracle cards to tell her friends about their personalities or paths in life). This section also offers posters related to the books and information about monthly contests that have cash prizes.

We worry that with convergence culture comes an under-criticized commodity culture, where marketers promote a sense of fan affiliation with fictional worlds and then exploit this affiliation through the marketing of consumable goods (Jenkins, 2006a). As Jenkins suggests, these goods offer the empty promise of deeper levels of involvement with the story’s content and other media users. At a time of worldwide economic insecurity, we wonder if young people should be getting different, more responsible messages about spending and consumption. As *English Journal* editor Kenneth Lindblom (2010) encourages, it’s time to critically challenge the 1980s mantra, “Whoever dies with the most toys wins” (p. 11).

Maybe digi-novels offer a way into conversations with adolescents about these kinds of questions in high school English classrooms. We know it can be risky to co-opt adolescents’ out-of-school literacy activities for classroom use, and we also know there’s a fine line teachers must walk as they critique (and encourage adolescents to critique) what adolescents find pleasurable. But it seems to us that, once again, adolescent literature—even (especially?) in digital forms—is doing what adolescent literature does best: offering English teachers opportunities to show adolescents that their out-of-school lives and interests matter in the classroom.

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<p><b>A Wish after Midnight</b> by Zetta Elliot Amazon Encore, 2010, 258 pp., \$7.99</p> <p>Fifteen-year-old Genna Colon makes a lot of wishes in a fountain at her neighborhood botanical garden—to move to a bigger apartment, to become a psychiatrist, to be with her boyfriend, to understand why her mom hates white people. When one wish sends her back to pre-Civil War Brooklyn, she awakes to find herself badly beaten and arrested as a runaway slave. After recovering, Genna is employed as a nanny by a white doctor with a bad-tempered wife; she befriends their cook, an Irish scullery maid, and the biracial son of a merchant. They all find themselves involved with brutal acts of racism, and Genna begins to learn about history in a personal way.</p> <p>Elliot explores life today and 1863 Brooklyn, depicting inequities found in both periods as a complex series of relationships and actions. Written for eighth grade and higher, a sequel is planned for this charismatic character.</p> <p>Jacqueline Bach Shreveport, LA</p>	<p><b>After</b> by Amy Eifaw Viking, 2009, 356 pp., \$17.99</p> <p>Teen Pregnancy/Moral Dilemmas/Justice ISBN: 978-0-670-01183-4</p> <p>Fifteen-year-old Devon is the last person anyone would expect to be in trouble. A role model for others, she makes good grades and is a soccer star. But Devon has kept her pregnancy a secret from everyone, even herself. Alone in her Tacoma apartment, she gives birth, stuffs the child in a garbage bag, and throws it—along with the trash in the place—in a dumpster. The police quickly arrest her for attempted murder, and she is sent to a juvenile detention facility while her fate is determined. Her attorney Dom, who wants her charged as a juvenile, not an adult, encourages Devon to peel off the protective layers to get to the truth. Told through a series of effective graphic flashbacks in which Devon distances herself by thinking of the newborn babe as IT, this book prompts much thought about guilt and conscience and our assumptions about others.</p> <p>Barbara A. Ward Tallahah, LA</p>
<p><b>Anxious Hearts</b> by Tucker Shaw Amulet Books, 2010, 272 pp., \$16.95</p> <p>Romance/Classic Literature Connection ISBN: 978-0-8109-8718-0</p> <p>Shaw modernizes the epic Longfellow poem “Evangeline” in this tale of two different eras. The first time frame is present-day Maine, where Eva Bell and Gabe Lejeune grow up together. Social standing eventually separates them, until Gabe decides to disregard his father’s wishes, and their understanding of one another blossoms into a binding love. However, Gabe’s life is fraught with trouble, and after the illness and death of his brother, he cannot stay . . . even for Eva.</p> <p>Their alternate story is told in the same locale, but 100 years earlier, through the writings of Gabriel Lajeunesse about his betrothed Evangeline Bellefontaine. Just as Eva narrates the modern reality of coping with the absence of her lost love, Gabriel writes of his continuing pursuit of his beloved Evangeline.</p> <p>Shaw’s creative telling of these dual sagas will keep the reader turning pages to discover how and when the lives of these characters will converge.</p> <p>Julee Phillips Nashville, TN</p>	<p><b>Attack of the Fluffy Bunnies</b> by Andrea Beaty Illustrated by Dan Santat Amulet Books, 2010, 192 pp., \$12.95</p> <p>Science Fiction/Humor/Multigenre ISBN: 978-0-8109-8416-5</p> <p>Twins Kevin and Jules Rockman come to Camp Whatsitooya armed for more than just an average summer camp experience. These young heroes use their curiosity and a lot of nerve, along with their knowledge of human nature, scary movies, and canned meat, to bravely face the fearsome Fluffs. Despite their gentle names, these giant and very hungry space invaders mean business, and world domination is at the top of their priority list. When the adult camp counselors start to disappear, it’s up to the kids to save the world from giant rabbit fangs, fiery burps . . . and mind-numbing middle school musical movies.</p> <p>Santat’s amusing and descriptive illustrations (sometimes in comic book format) tell a good portion of this tale. Although intended (and appropriate) for ages 8–12, Beaty’s witty sarcasm, delivered in the form of an unseen narrator, provides a quick and very enjoyable read for an older audience as well.</p> <p>Julee Phillips Nashville, TN</p>



<p><b><i>Choppy Socky Blues</i></b> by Ed Briant Flux, 2010, 264 pp., \$9.96</p> <p>Realistic Fiction ISBN: 978-0-7387-1897-2</p> <p>After fantasizing about girls he finds in his brother's magazine collection, 14-year-old Jay is smitten by a real girl for the first time—so much so, that he decides to turn to his father, whom he hasn't spoken to in two years, for help. You see, Tinga is going up for her blue belt in 21 days and has invited Jay, a green belt, to spar with her. The trouble is, Jay hasn't practiced in two years, hence the decision to get in touch with his father. And, to make matters worse, Jay finds out that Tinga and Malcolm, his friend, have been dating.</p> <p>With occasional frank discussions about sex, Briant's novel is a sort of Judy Blume meets Louise Rennison (it's set in Southern England) for boys. It's a humorous, touching book told from the point of view of a likeable male who is discovering the complexities of relationships for the first time.</p> <p>Jacqueline Bach Shreveport, LA</p>	<p><b><i>Breathless</i></b> by Lurlene McDaniel Delacorte Books for Young Readers, 2009, 176 pp., \$7.99 ISBN: 978-0-385-73459-2</p> <p><i>Breathless</i> looks into the lives of four teenagers living in southern Alabama: Cooper Kulan, a half-Korean, half-Hawaiian misfit; Travis Morrison, champion diver of his high school; Emily Morrison, Travis's younger sister; and Darla Gibson, Travis's girlfriend. Cooper lived with his alcoholic mother until he was taken in by Travis's family years ago. Both Cooper and Emily have feelings for one another but never express them. Darla lives with her abusive father.</p> <p>The novel begins on the first day of summer vacation when the four take Travis's boat out on the lake. Travis decides to dive off the edge of a cliff into the lake and ends up in the hospital. He finds out he has bone cancer. Each chapter takes the first-person perspective of one of the four main characters.</p> <p>Angelica Braaten Shreveport, LA</p>
<p><b><i>By the Time You Read This, I'll Be Dead</i></b> by Julie Anne Peters Hyperion, 2010, 198 pp., \$16.99</p> <p>Suicide/Bullying/Identity ISBN: 978-1-4231-1618-9</p> <p>Daelyn is a deeply troubled teen, attending a private Catholic girls' school in her parents' misguided attempts to salvage her by constantly switching schools. Daelyn cannot speak due to another thwarted suicide attempt, yet she writes her own painful story. This powerful, disturbing novel covers her ongoing efforts to kill herself as she follows the guidelines of Through-the-Light.com until she goes into the light.</p> <p>Daelyn is one of the lost souls who have been victimized by taunting classmates, originally because she was fat. Will she carry out her path of self-destruction despite hopeful alliances with Santana, the boy who battles Hodgkin's lymphoma, or Emily, a fellow classmate whose size is setting her up for bullying? Peters writes important, challenging fiction for young adults, and this novel's examination of bullycide offers uncomfortable insights into the world of those who feel like losers from birth and trust no one.</p> <p>Judith A. Hayn Little Rock, AR</p>	<p><b><i>Clone Codes</i></b> by Patricia C. McKissack, Fredrick L. McKissack, and John McKissack Scholastic, 2010, 192 pp., \$16.99</p> <p>Science Fiction/Historical Fiction/Identity ISBN 978-0-439-92983-7</p> <p>History repeats itself in this science fiction tour de force set in the United States in 2071. Leanna Deberry keeps a virtual diary to chronicle her dawning awareness of her status in a post-Cyborg-War world. Mixing history with fiction, the McKissacks (parents and son) document how humanity becomes its own worst enemy.</p> <p>At 13, Leanna discovers she is a dreaded under-being, a clone Her mother and mentor are jailed as dissidents for participating in the Liberty Bell Foundation, whose goal is to change the Cyborg slaveocracy system. The indomitable heroine uses her knowledge of the African slave trade; the Fugitive Slave Act; the Underground Railroad; the 13th Amendment; and proponents of freedom in her quest to save her loved ones. In a riveting tale, Leanna also discovers herself as a "sentient" biological being who has the same rights as everyone else, even though she is a clone.</p> <p>Judith A. Hayn Little Rock, AR</p>

<p><b><u>Contested Will: Who Wrote Shakespeare?</u></b> by James Shapiro Simon &amp; Schuster, 2010, 339 pp., \$26.00</p> <p>James Shapiro's <i>Contested Will: Who Wrote Shakespeare?</i> takes a fascinating tour through the facts and legends surrounding the authorship of Shakespeare's plays and sonnets. In addition to examining the texts, original documents, and writings that surround the "mystery" of Shakespeare's authorship, Shapiro looks at the questions of when and why people question the works. He works to clarify the nature of the debate around what exactly is being contested. The book raises questions about literary genius, art, and expectations.</p> <p>This readable book would work well for students who are interested in the debate around who wrote Shakespeare's plays. It provides a framework for understanding the nature of the debate, as well as a way to understand the primary sources used to defend the particular authors to whom the plays have been attributed over the years. The argument and text are complex but manageable for high school students.</p> <p>Melanie Hundley Nashville, TN</p>	<p><b><u>Cursing Columbus</u></b> by Eve Tal Cinco Puntos Press, 248 pp., 2009, \$12.99</p> <p>This follow-up to <i>Double Crossing</i> reunites the Altmans three years after Raizel and Papa's arrival. Eve Tal paints the realities of immigrant life in the early twentieth century in sharp contrast to the mirage that drew countless immigrants to the US. As the mirage dissolved, those once-hopeful newcomers began to curse Columbus for discovering the land that, as Tal puts it, "promised so much and brought them so little."</p> <p>This well-crafted novel does not, however, condemn false American ideals; instead, the double-voiced story explores the complex dynamics of a family forced to reimagine religious tradition, family loyalty, gender roles, and ethical codes in order to align with the expectations of a world that does provide opportunities—even if they are less than once imagined. Tal manages to resolve this tale of cultural, personal, and ethical dissonance in an uplifting and honest ending that honors both the struggles of the main characters and the real experiences of the immigrants whose memory it seeks to preserve.</p> <p>Nicole Barrick Renner Nashville, TN</p>
<p><b><u>Food, Girls, and Other Things I Can't Have</u></b> by Allen Zadoff Egmont, 2009, 320 pp., \$16.99</p> <p>Like flipping through your old high school yearbook, Allen Zadoff's novel is an awkward, yet refreshing journey back to the times of adolescent angst and forbidden pleasures. As a sophomore, Andrew Zansky simply wants to go through school without being noticed, which can be hard with his 306.4-pound frame. But when Andy meets love at first sight in the form of the new girl, April, his plans change. We soon find out that girls are just one of the many problems this "funny, fat kid" has. And in order to change his world, Andy must turn for help in the unlikelyst of places—the legendary quarterback and the guy who is everything Andy isn't.</p> <p>Whether you were the geeky bookworm, the cheerleader, the drama club leader, or the all-state athlete in your high school, you'll laugh and you'll cry as you pass Andy in the halls.</p> <p>Justin Garwood Nashville, TN</p>	<p><b><u>Green Witch</u></b> by Alice Hoffman Scholastic, 2010, 144 pp., \$17.99</p> <p>A horrific explosion has destroyed Green's city, and she is left an orphan, depressed and grieving for what she misses. Her idyllic world is destroyed, but she gradually begins to employ her gardening skills to create lush surroundings for her solitary hut. Green feels the pain of total bereavement; family and friends have disappeared, along with the young man she loved. Her belief in the future is challenged at every turn.</p> <p>Green undertakes a quest to tell the stories of the Enchanted, witches who live outside her village. She seeks those who are imprisoned on a lonely island and finds strength during the journey in magical assistance, charms, and advice from the witches. The power of women who persevere is foremost in this lyrical novel of a brave teen battling evil. This haunting fable will appeal to mature teens with a bent for soul-searching.</p> <p>Judith A. Hayn Little Rock, AR</p>



<p><b><i>Hannah's Touch</i></b> by Laura Langston Orca Books, 2009, 132pp., \$9.95</p> <p>Drama/Identity/Paranormal/Death ISBN: 978-1-55469-149-4</p> <p>Hannah is a 16-year-old still coping with the death of her boyfriend. Her average day consists of work, school, home, and thoughts of Logan. Everything is normal in Hannah's life until the day she is stung by a bee. The near-death experience gives Hannah the one thing she has been hoping for since Logan died—a chance to see him again. But that chance comes with a price: Hannah is given the unique power to physically heal people. It is a power that Hannah cannot take lightly. With the help of Logan's spirit, Hannah must choose whether or not she is going to use her power to heal the one person responsible for causing Logan's death.</p> <p><i>Hannah's Touch</i> is an emotional tale of forgiveness and learning to let go of one who has passed. Although the novel is a short and easy read, Langston realistically conveys the guilt and anger over losing someone special.</p> <p>Kim Coyle Nashville, TN</p>	<p><b><i>Heist Society</i></b> by Ally Carter Disney Hyperion Books, 2010, 304 pp., \$16.99</p> <p>Mystery/Suspense/Relationships ISBN: 978-1-4231-1639-4</p> <p>Katarina Bishop, born into a family of art thieves, wants to have a normal life, so she forges the documents necessary to get into a prestigious New England boarding school. She can't escape her past, however, and soon finds herself leading a team of young thieves. In this one caper, she will attempt to prove her father's innocence, return the property of a dangerous billionaire, and pull off the world's most impossible art theft. Katarina has been a part of some pretty intense family scams; however, pulling off this one will take all of her considerable talents.</p> <p>Betrayals, art history, and European cities provide a lush backdrop for this tale of family and thievery. Katarina worries about her father, deals with family members and family history, and juggles relationships with boys—all while planning complex heists. From the author of the Gallagher Girls series, this exciting story is a winner.</p> <p>Melanie Hundley Nashville, TN</p>
<p><b><i>How to Survive Modern Art</i></b> by Susie Hodge Tate Publishing, 2009, 126 pp., \$19.95</p> <p>Art/Contemporary NonFiction ISBN: 978-1-85437-749-4</p> <p><i>How to Survive Modern Art</i> acts as an indispensable guide to contemporary art and architecture, complete with glossary, timelines, guides to looking at modern art, contextual information, and quotes from artists. This book intends to introduce the reader to the world of modern, unique, thought-provoking, and truly bizarre pieces of art by carefully introducing and explaining each one in context with other similar works.</p> <p>This informational book displays full-color artwork alongside descriptions of the piece, its context, its artist, and various techniques used in the work. The "Art in Context" box on each page describes something unique or useful about the piece, such as references to historical events.</p> <p>Experts and novices alike will appreciate this useful overview of modern art, with its color pictures and easy-to-read format. By grouping pieces of art, digital art, and architecture in an organized format, Hodge makes the confusing subject of modern art accessible to everyone.</p> <p>Stephanie Mills Nashville, TN</p>	<p><b><i>Hidden Voices</i></b> by Pat Lowery Collins Candlewick Press, 2009, 345 pp., \$17.99</p> <p>Historical Romance/Identity/Music/Friendship ISBN: 978-0-7636-3917-4</p> <p>The orphans at the Ospedale della Pietà in Venice know only two things, Music and Prayer. The Ospedale is known for its extraordinary musical performances, provided by Antonio Vivaldi. But the three special young women in this story cannot find what they seek within the scores, the instruments, or the church. The expression and passion that they learn from the music initiates a yearning for love. However, with love comes dangers and heartbreak. Each chapter is narrated by one of the three girls, capturing the thoughts, emotions, and situations from the three perspectives. Like many of Vivaldi's scores, the novel is a little slow to start, but then builds into a grand tale of lust, disappointment, pain, and eventually acceptance. <i>Hidden Voices</i> is a rare insight into the life and works of Vivaldi and the many girls he helped become some of the best musicians in Italy.</p> <p>Kim Coyle Nashville, TN</p>

<p><b>Shadow Grail #1: Legacies</b> by Mercedes Lackey and Rosemary Edgehill Tor Teen, 2010, 320 pp., \$18.99</p> <p>Urban/Fantasy/Supernatural/Mystery ISBN: 978-0-7653-2707-9</p> <p>Fantasy writers Mercedes Lackey and Rosemary Edgehill join forces in the first novel of the Shadow Grail series. Oakhurst Academy, part orphanage and part school in rural Montana, is the home to an interesting mix of students with special and unique gifts. After an accident kills her family, Spirit White is sent to Oakhurst Academy. She discovers that her parents also attended Oakhurst and that she is a legacy. The other students at the school have manifested their magical talents, but Spirit hasn't. The teachers and administrators tell her that she will eventually show what her talent will be, but she isn't sure that she has a gift and, if she does have one, that she cares. As she begins to make friends with the other students, she realizes that something mysterious is going on at Oakhurst. Students are disappearing and no one seems to be stopping it. Melanie Hundley Nashville, TN</p>	<p><b>Meanwhile</b> by Jason Shiga Amulet Books, 2010, 80 pp., 15.95</p> <p>Alternative Format/Graphic Novel/Adventure ISBN: 978-0-8109-8423-3</p> <p>Chocolate or vanilla? Your answer to this question will set you off on one of 3,856 story possibilities in Jason Shiga's decidedly nonlinear graphic novel adventure. <i>Meanwhile</i> is one part Choose Your Own Adventure, one part video game-code ciphering, and several parts hypertext; it will engage the curiosity, persistence, and imagination of any reader willing to squint and flip pages long enough to get sucked into the twisty world of Jimmy and the mad scientist. After a few minutes of tentative exploration in this slim, multi-tabbed volume, you will find yourself furiously tracing storylines, flipping forward and backward, and crying out in frustration when you reach the disastrous ends of most of the book's paths. You'll try to resist starting over again, but you won't be able to. Share it with a friend and enjoy deep discussions of physics, philosophy, and which ice cream flavor is ultimately best. Nicole Barrick Renner Nashville, TN</p>
<p><b>Purple Heart</b> by Patricia McCormick HarperCollins, 2009, 202 pp., \$16.99</p> <p>Iraq War/Loss/Street Kids/Self-Discovery ISBN: 978-0-061-7309-0</p> <p>Eighteen-year-old American soldier Matt Duffy is haunted by the memory of a young Iraqi boy killed while he and a buddy were patrolling a city street. The bits and pieces of what may have happened become clearer as he recovers from his traumatic brain injury in a military hospital. As he comes closer to the truth, he is no longer sure whether he can even trust himself, much less his superiors, who seem reluctant to examine the incident too closely. Despite the betrayal he feels, he remains convinced that there is humanity in everyone—even his enemies. The book raises many questions about loyalty, war, and those left behind, as Matt ponders the difference between his own daily existence and need to be constantly on guard versus his high school girlfriend's life, in which the biggest worry is a biology test. Especially effective is the juxtaposition between the soldiers at play and at war. Barbara A. Ward Tallulah, LA</p>	<p><b>Riot</b> by Walter Dean Myers Egmont, 2009, 164 pp., \$16.99</p> <p>Self-Discovery/Civil War/Historical Fiction/Racism ISBN: 978-1-60684-000-9</p> <p>The announcement of a military draft in July 1863 did not go over well among poor Irish immigrants in New York City. They believed if the Union won the Civil War, freed blacks from the South would rush to compete for jobs. These Irish immigrants were also angry about a provision of the draft that allowed draftees with means to get out of joining the army. The Irish rioted, attacking blacks, rich "swells," and supporters of the war. The New York Draft Riots lasted from July 13—July 16, 1863.</p> <p>Myers portrays the events of that week in July 1863 through a fictional screenplay focusing on a biracial 15-year-old girl, Claire, her friends, and her family. In connecting to this unfamiliar story, I suggest beginning at the end of the book and reading the timeline of events leading to the riots, along with the author's note, historical photographs, map, and illustrations. Nate Phillips Nashville, TN</p>



<p><b><i>The Book of Dreams</i></b> by O. R. Mellling, Amulet Books, 2009, 696 pp., \$12.95</p> <p>Fantasy/Teen/Romance/Adventure ISBN: 978-0-8109-8418-9</p> <p>As a 13-year-old half-fairy and half-mortal being, Dana has the ability to teleport herself spiritually into Faerie, the land of the faeries, in order to escape life in the “real world” of Canada, where she lives very unhappily with her father and stepmother. In Faerie, Dana’s mother, the fairy queen, gives her the mission of finding the Book of Dreams in order to fulfill her destiny. With her shape-shifting powers, a flying spirit vessel, and her French classmate Jean, Dana embarks on a grand adventure where she encounters mythical creatures like dragons, trolls, and even Sasquatch.</p> <p>With actual maps included in the book, Mellling utilizes her descriptive writing skills to create a world of adventure and thrills for readers.</p> <p>Alfred Chan Boston, MA</p>	<p><b><i>The FizzyWhiz Kid</i></b> by Maiya Williams Amulet Books, 2010, 288 pp., \$16.99</p> <p>Humor/Television/Belonging ISBN: 978-0-8109-8347-2</p> <p>It’s hard enough to be the new kid in town. It’s even harder when you’re the new kid in Hollywood, and your family has never owned a television. Surrounded by kids whose parents are actors, screenwriters, and agents, Mitchell Mathis has never even seen “Star Wars.” Trying to understand his classmates a little better, Mitchell auditions at an open casting call and ends up getting cast in a series of popular soft-drink commercials that make him equally popular at school. Author Maiya Williams translates her years of experience in the entertainment industry into this lighthearted story of a kid just trying to fit in. The characters are believable and likeable (you’ll even feel for the “mean boy”).</p> <p>An accessible introduction for kids who are interested in the entertainment industry, the novel offers a range of opportunities for the magic-making business and related alternatives.</p> <p>Catherine McTamany Nashville, TN</p>
<p><b><i>The Girls</i></b> by Tucker Shaw Amulet Books, 2010, 224 pp., \$6.99</p> <p>Broadway/Relationships/Gossip ISBN: 978-0-8109-8991-7</p> <p><i>The Girls</i> is a quick and witty retelling of Claire Luce Booth’s 1930 Broadway tale into which Tucker Shaw weaves the story of five young women attending boarding school in Aspen. Peggy and Mary are best friends and roommates at Maroon Bells School for Girls. Peggy is torn between telling Mary about Mary’s cheating boyfriend or letting her find out on her own. At the moment when the gossip is revealed to Mary, a twisted story of love, pain, betrayal, and friendship unfolds. The story unfolds against the backdrop of the city of Aspen, filled with wealthy tourists, mountains to snowboard, and upscale restaurants.</p> <p>Peggy has a penchant for food, and whenever things get tough for her, she begins “cooking in her head.” Punctuated with rich and delicious recipes, readers will devour the gossip just as readily as Peggy’s imagined meals.</p> <p>Caitlin Rowland Nashville, TN</p>	<p><b><i>The Last Summer of the Death Warriors</i></b> by Francisco X. Stork Arthur A. Levine, 2010, 352 pp., \$17.99</p> <p>Friendship/Family/Relationships ISBN: 978-0-545-15133-7</p> <p>Pancho arrives at St. Anthony’s orphanage with a singular mission: to avenge the death of his beloved sister Rosa. As he secretly tries to identify the man responsible and plot his revenge, Pancho is enlisted to assist D.Q., an idealistic young man dying of cancer who hopes to use his last days to write the Death Warrior Manifesto and convert Pancho to the gospel of fully embracing life. However, a potential love triangle between D.Q., Pancho, and the beautiful Marisol threatens to disrupt the delicate friendship that grows between the two young men as they meditate on faith, doubt, and the value of ministering to the needs of others. As he did in last year’s <i>Marcelo in the Real World</i>, Stork uses his characters’ deepest pains, joys, and dreams to compose a beautiful psalm in this engaging YA retelling of <i>Don Quixote</i>, as seen through the eyes of Sancho Panza.</p> <p>Sean Kortke Lansing, MI</p>

<p><b><i>The Middle of Everywhere</i></b> by Monique Polak Orca Books, 2009, 200 pp., \$12.95</p> <p>Survival/Acceptance/Racism ISBN: 978-1-55469-090-9</p> <p>Noah's life is turned upside-down when his mother insists that he spend the school term with his father in George River, a small town in the far north of Quebec. Noah is trying to reconnect to his father and his roots, but he struggles with the fact that the town has no doctors, malls, or McDonald's. Most of all, Noah is one of a few Qullunaq (strangers) among the Inuit people—a tribe that was badly mistreated by the Canadian government. Noah is slowly falling into the vast whiteness of the arctic tundra . . . that is, until he goes winter camping with some of his classmates. Noah's view of George River changes when he starts to understand the hardships the Inuit people have endured and the lessons they teach about surviving in the wild. Noah's greatest adventure is discovering that the middle of nowhere can be the beginning of something new.</p> <p>Kim Coyle Nashville, TN</p>	<p><b><i>The Practice Room</i></b> by Susan Zeidler Wasteland Press, 2009, 250 pp., \$12.95</p> <p>Family Relationships/Music/Fantasy ISBN: 978-1-60047-365-4</p> <p>Life has been pretty good so far for 12-year-old Zoey, except that she has never known her father. She can't shake the feeling that her father is out there somewhere and that fate is waiting to bring her to him. She knows he was an amazing musician who was supposedly killed in a car accident before she was born. With the help of her best friend Tammy, Zoey tries to learn more about her father. But even with a lot of questioning and a little bit of plotting, their sleuthing doesn't provide the answers that Zoey is looking for.</p> <p>Zoey finds herself drawn to a legacy left by her father—her music. She gains more than just theory lessons as she visits some key moments in music history. She finds that music teaches her life lessons, while it bolsters her confidence in her own musicianship and herself.</p> <p>Julee Phillips Nashville, TN</p>
<p><b><i>The Popularity Papers</i></b> by Amy Ignatow Amulet Books, 2010, 208 pp., \$15.95</p> <p>Friendship/ Social Cliques/ Family Relationships ISBN: 978-0-8109-8421-9</p> <p>Lydia Goldblatt and Julie Graham-Chang are determined to discover the secrets to becoming popular. They dive headlong into a year of research on what "it" is that the already popular girls have. They record their thoughts and ideas in a joint journal that is meant for their eyes only. Should they consider changing their hair? Liking different boys? Trying out for sports? After close observation of the popular girls, Lydia and Julie apply some of these strategies to their lives in slightly different ways, creating more than slightly different outcomes.</p> <p>Young readers will enjoy this look at what true friendship really is, and what it means to put it at risk. Ignatow has created some very rich and endearing characters. Her illustrations, along with the font and photos used in the formatting of this book, create a visually captivating novel that appears to be the journal of two energetic, funny fifth graders.</p> <p>Julee Phillips Nashville, TN</p>	<p><b><i>The Strange Case of the Origami Yoda</i></b> by Tom Angleberger Amulet Books, 2010, 160 pp., \$12.95</p> <p>Mystery/Middle School ISBN: 978-0-8109-8425-7</p> <p>A lot of people wish they could predict the future, but for the kids at McQuarrie Middle School, there's help. Granted, the predictions come from an origami finger puppet and are mouthed by one of the weirdest kids in school, but they still seem to come true. The real question is whether Tommy should take the advice of a folded piece of paper when it comes to asking out one of the nicest girls in his class.</p> <p>Tom Angleberger delivers a creative, eye-catching story through Tommy's case file, with chapters told in each of the characters' voices, as Tommy tries to determine whether the origami Yoda is a fake. The voices are unique and believable, including the quirky (if curiously appealing) Dwight, the creator of the origami Yoda. Reluctant readers will be attracted to the characters' doodles on each page. A fun, light read, recommended for early middle school.</p> <p>Catherine McTamane Nashville, TN</p>





## Familiar Aliens:

Science Fiction as Social Commentary

**W**hile literature teachers have a reputation for reading everything from *War and Peace* to the backs of cereal boxes, the reality is that they sometimes fall into the common trap of many readers, which is to find a genre that gratifies and stick with it. Consequently, genres like science fiction may get little attention in the classroom beyond the classic Ray Bradbury or Jules Verne. Teachers unfamiliar with science fiction cannot offer their students its wealth of texts that deal seriously with a variety of complex, contemporary social issues, some of which have obvious tie-ins to technology. Not only does science fiction offer wonderful opportunities for the English classroom, but the possibilities across the curriculum also are immense. Science, math, computer technology, psychology, and even economics are possible discussion topics, and these subjects comment on how humankind's imagination can lead to the best and worst in its creations. Aliens are no longer unrecognizable monsters; they have become the scientific and technological avatars of a modern world.

Throughout history, the human race has developed ways to make lives longer, richer, and more convenient. Our expanding knowledge of the world is continually applied to advancements and devices that "improve" lives. Each generation sees new inventions and discoveries that previous generations could only imagine, or may never have imagined. Some inventions, like bombs and weapons, have nega-

tive consequences for the world, proving that humans have the capacity to unleash the powers of destruction in the name of progress; others, like vaccines and pacemakers, show our ability to imagine and create ways to preserve and improve human life. In other words, science and technology comprise a double-edged sword of destruction and preservation; as the two evolve, there will be questions of ethics and morality.

Teaching students to challenge and question the world around them should be one of the major goals of the literature classroom. If the intent is to encourage students to create meaning, then English curricula hold a wealth of opportunities for teaching such skills. To this end, teachers traditionally teach classic texts such as *Frankenstein* (Shelly, 1818), *The Invisible Man* and *War of the Worlds* (H. G. Wells, 1897, 1898), *Brave New World* (Huxley, 1931), and *I, Robot* (Asimov, 1950). These texts, and others like them, posed important questions about the nature and the future of science, society, and commerce for

many generations of students. From genetic manipulation to artificial intelligence, books that reveal the power of the human mind to imagine unlikely events and situations capture readers' attention. The interest in science fiction hasn't waned, and judging by the current number of texts that address these issues, interest may, in fact, be increasing.

The wonders of the field now

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**Aliens are no longer unrecognizable monsters; they have become the scientific and technological avatars of a modern world.**

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called “techno-science” have become an integral part of daily life in contemporary society. A generation of teens lives in a world in which knowledge is literally at their fingertips. Even the word “impossible” may be outdated. Through television, radio, movies, the World Wide Web, cell phones, iPods, digital downloads, GPS systems, global gaming, instant messaging,

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**While not specifically a science or technology issue, immigration, as imagined by Farmer, simply becomes a potential spoke in the wheel of a genetic conspiracy.**

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and online social networking, students commonly spend the majority of their day exposed to technology. Similarly, medical advances such as genetic testing, cloning, stem cell research, DNA identification, and the manipulation of human cells have become topics of daily discussions. No longer are such subject matters left only to the experts to debate; ethical

and moral challenges to progress become the province of everyone.

While classic texts remain powerful tools of discussion and historical relevance, Marc Aronson (2003) reminds us that “if adults want books to be part of teenagers’ lives, they must provide books that are equally attuned to the present” (p. 42). Young people need books that inspire them to question and challenge *their* world, much as the classic texts challenged former generations. Contemporary young adult science fiction approaches issues of techno-science to specifically appeal to adolescents and deal with problems they know are real. Many of these texts play off of the current technologies in which students participate and the public dilemmas of ethics that they hear about in the news, from family and friends, or experience for themselves. The genre is a natural for thinking about how closely good and evil are related.

### **Considering the Realities of *The House of Scorpion***

*The House of the Scorpion* (Farmer, 2002) is an excellent example of young adult science fiction that deserves to be in the classroom. Farmer addresses the issue of gene manipulation by creating a society in which drones or “eejits”—whose intelligence and

individuality is removed—perform all menial labor. In this society, the wealthy can extend their lives by harvesting the organs of their own living clones. When we consider who has access to the best health care in America, this concept is not farfetched.

The drug empire of Opium, set up between the United States and Mexico, is a solution to the immigration crisis, and the “eejits” who work there are the poor souls who have unsuccessfully tried to sneak across the border. They are turned into robot-like beings who do only what they are programmed to do—eating, drinking, and resting only when commanded to do so—and who are forced to live in the most inhuman of conditions. While not specifically a science or technology issue, immigration, as imagined by Farmer, simply becomes a potential spoke in the wheel of a genetic conspiracy. The seemingly ridiculous scenario highlights the current lack of a solution to the American immigration problem, and the menial labor the eejits must perform has a hauntingly familiar resemblance to the current lot of many immigrants who work long, hard hours for little pay. Students will no doubt see immediately the connection to two contemporary social problems—wealth distribution and immigration—and will most likely have strong reactions to and important questions about the long-term social consequences of each, as presented in Farmer’s story.

Like the eejits, the minds of the clones are also systematically destroyed, turning them into nonsensical beasts. Clones have no traditional mother and father; they are taken from an existing person’s genes and allowed to develop inside of a cow until they are harvested as infants. Locked up and isolated, they are generally detested as creatures less respectable than animals. Readers learn quickly that Matt, the main character of this book, is the one clone who is spared the “intelligence removal” treatment. That is because he is the clone of the lord of Opium, El Patron, who wants his clone to have a “normal” childhood until he needs to harvest his organs. Matt is an intriguing main character because, while he feels himself to be a human being as much as anybody else, he is treated like “a bad animal,” an “it” (p. 27). The reader cannot help but identify with Matt as he tries to define himself in the face of a society that tells him over and over again that he is less than human. Although he is a genetic copy of El Patron, he is still obviously living

his own life, has his own thoughts and desires, and develops his own personality, much to the chagrin of El Patron, who would have him be nothing more than a shadow in the world. Again, the parallel thinking by some about those who live in society's borderlands is frightening.

In the real world, human cloning is not something we have yet accomplished, although we are surprisingly close. Last year, there were reports in the news of the cloning of rhesus monkey embryos to produce stem cells, and, in fact, it has already been ten years since Dolly the sheep was cloned. Scientists are still a long way from actually being able to grow a human clone inside the womb to produce a baby, but they are certainly closer to it than ever. In fact, 15 American states already have laws pertaining to human cloning. It is not inconceivable that human cloning will be possible in our lifetime, and it is easily imaginable during the lifetime of our students. This and other medical possibilities have created a world in which the bioethics of medical advancement raises serious issues.

*The House of the Scorpion* takes these issues to extreme, but not in a way that completely surpasses possibility. Like all good science fiction, it raises important questions about humanity and what makes a human "human" after all? It also provides ample room for discussion about the best ways to handle our growing capacity to change, control, and create life. Students *will* face these challenging questions in their lifetimes; thinking and talking about them now can only be helpful for them later. Who will have access to the scientific wonder of cloning? Who will suffer because of it? Is it okay to create clones of ourselves in lieu of having children naturally? What makes medical science ethical or not ethical? These are not far-fetched questions.

Farmer's book forces readers to look at genuine problems requiring genuine solutions. Her text takes a strong stance against using fully developed human clones to meet the medical needs of others, but it raises important questions about embryos. By allowing students to research and see primary documents on the scientific issues in this book, huge connections can be drawn between English class and science class, as well as any class that studies social issues. Depending on the school and the level of science students are engaged in, what they learn or have learned about genetics could make the book even more critically

valuable. This book easily becomes a vehicle for interdisciplinary study. At the same time, reading *The House of the Scorpion* could add a level of interest to what students learn in science. Students who "hate" English but are interested in science will be drawn in by this book. Likewise, students who love literature but feel that science is not a subject to enjoy will find important connections between the story line and the world of science they inhabit every day.

Other texts that deal with scientific questions and issues include *The Angel Experiment: Maximum Ride* by James Patterson (2005), *Mergers* by Steven Layne (2006), and *Transplant* by Malcolm Rose (2003). Patterson's book raises interesting questions about the potential use of DNA; Layne's talks about a society of assimilated races; and Rose tackles another issue that has already been in the headlines—face transplants. One more text that forces relevant concerns about the possibilities of medical advances is Scott Westerfeld's *Uglies* (2005), which is the first in a popular trilogy. Again, the topic is one that has already found its way not only into the news, but into the everyday lives of teens: cosmetic surgery and its implications for the search for identity and articulated cultural notions of what it means to be pretty. Westerfeld's book offers a disturbing critique on some very real social conditions and opens a whole new conversation on unnecessary medical and "social" technologies. It is not to be missed.

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**By allowing students to research and see primary documents on the scientific issues in this book, huge connections can be drawn between English class and science class, as well as any class that studies social issues.**

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### **The Eerie Intimacy of *Feed***

M. T. Anderson's *Feed* shifts the focus from science to technology and may best fit into a category of science fiction known as *cyberpunk*. Movies like *Blade Runner* (Scott, 1982) and *The Matrix* (Wachowski & Wachowski, 1999) give a good visual of what the world of *cyberpunk* looks like. William Gibson and his famous *Sprawl* trilogy, of which *Neuromancer* (1984)



is the first novel, is probably the best-known writer in this subgenre. The category continues to evolve, and there are now *postcyberpunk* stories as well as stories that fall into the category called *cyberprep*. What all of these stories have in common is a combination of technological advancements that include some form of body modification (cybernetics would be an early runner) and computer intrigue. *Cyberpunk* is also popular in several anime and manga graphic novel series.

In *Feed*, everything is owned and controlled by large corporations (school is School™, fact is fact™,

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**Another important theme in *Feed* is the potential problems associated with the development of technology and the instant gratification it seems to bring.**

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and speech tattoos™—which cause the bearer of the tattoo to automatically say “Nike” in every sentence—are corporate examples), and most people have a computer “feed” from the Internet and television directly wired into their brains. People can instantly access any information they want, shop, chat with their friends, send memories and physical sensations

to one another, watch shows, and listen to music, all while the feed bombards them with advertisements personally catered to their buyer profiles. Television shows, music, and other forms of entertainment have been reduced to mere sensationalism (as illustrated by the popular television show “Oh? Wow! Thing!”), and fashion and hairstyles change by the hour.

The current fad for the main character, Titus, and his friends is to have “skin lesions.” Even though the lesions are the unsightly and dangerous result of the feed, consumers have been manipulated into believing that the lesions are the cool, must-have tattoos of their generation. It does not take long for readers to understand that while poverty and starvation continue for the less fortunate, the populations of highly developed countries are falling deeper and deeper into self-absorbed consumerism promoted by the feed. Upon reflection, readers will easily concede that the role huge corporations play in the characters’ daily lives is not nearly as removed from their own as they may have initially thought.

In this wicked satire, Anderson is able to tease out

the senselessness and destructiveness of a commercially driven society and does so in a number of ways, not the least of which is through language. Language and how it is used in *Feed* raises any number of interesting questions. The story is told through the voice of Titus, who speaks just as he thinks, using less than proper English and peppering his conversation with heavy doses of interjections (e.g., “like” and “um”), a good amount of slang, and a variety of obscenities. (The choice to allow characters to speak as authentically as they think exemplifies one of the components of “radical change” found in contemporary books for youth, as discussed by Eliza Dresang in her book *Radical Change: Books for Youth in a Digital Age* [1999]). Language that at first glance might be considered offensive and too vernacular is actually used to show how society has changed and what it values. “Curse” words are no longer considered inappropriate, and even adult characters speak quite informally. For example, Titus’s dad says of his wife “She’s like, whoa, she’s like so stressed out. This is . . . Dude . . . Dude, this is some way bad shit” (Anderson, p. 46). The sales representative from FeedTech™ who tells a character that her feed cannot be fixed says: “We have to inform you that our corporate investors were like, “What’s doing with this?” (p. 195). Clearly, it is not just the teenage characters whose language is in question.

Interesting discussion could arise in the classroom around how students respond to the language in this book. How do they feel when they hear adults speak so carelessly? Should there be a division between formal and informal language? Why and when? What are some similarities and differences between language now and language in this book? When does language cross borders and become unacceptable and/or offensive? Is language a reflection of something larger in a culture? If so, what?

Another important theme in *Feed* is the potential problems associated with the development of technology and the instant gratification it seems to bring. Just as *The House of the Scorpion* entertains the important question of science’s increasing power to “play God,” *Feed* illuminates the potential danger of excessive dependence on technology. Anderson depicts a society so dependent on technology that one of the characters dies when her feed stops functioning—with the feed wired directly into the brain, a malfunctioning feed

means a malfunctioning person. Indeed, the most disturbing aspect of this book may be the characters' apathy for their own well being. Ironically, Violet, the character whose feed finally kills her, is the only person readers meet who has the courage to think for herself and challenge what she sees happening around her. Near the end of the novel, she explodes at Titus, saying:

Do you know why the Global Alliance is pointing all the weaponry at their disposal at us? No. Hardly anyone does. Do you know why our skin is falling off? Have you heard that some suburbs have been lost, just; no one knows where they are anymore? . . . Do you know the earth is dead? Almost nothing lives here anymore, except where we plant it? No. No, no, no. We don't know any of that. We have tea parties with our teddies. We go sledding. We enjoy being young. We take what's coming to us. That's our way. (p. 214)

Throughout the novel, Anderson takes subtle and not so subtle stabs at the nature of American contemporary society—our unrelenting need to consume, our complicit relationship with corporate advertising (including Channel One), our growing dependence on technology, and our unthinking development of what constitutes “new” and “better.” He reveals society's widespread oblivion to the most pressing problems of the world, our unthinking approaches to everyday life, and the focus on immediate gratification without concern for the long-term effects of our actions.

*Feed* is futuristic enough for the reader to see the absurdities of the world Anderson creates, but it hits close enough to home to cause readers to take a second look at our world and the direction we are headed. While the novel warns readers about technological developments that go unchecked, it also challenges them to consider the role they play in how society ultimately embraces and uses those technologies. Students who read this book will certainly engage in enlightening discussions about the important questions it raises. It might be especially significant to study in relation to older books on this topic, such as *Brave New World* (Huxley, 1932) and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (Orwell, 1949). What has changed since these books were written? What has come true? Is one of the futuristic societies better or worse than the other? Why? Are we living already in an irreversible dystopia?

## Texts, Movies, and the Classroom

We have here explored just two books of science fiction that could be used in the classroom to touch on issues of science, technology, and the future of the human race, but there are many more available. Authors like Sonia Levitin, William Sleator, Terry Prachett, and Jeanne DuPrau, to name just a few, have written challenging and revealing stories that students will find interesting and relevant. From the *Double Helix* (Werlin, 2005) to *Z Is for Zachariah* (O'Brien, 1974), there is no shortage of applicable science fiction that calls on the critical thinking skills students will need as they navigate a future we probably cannot even imagine.

Indeed, students already do this through the many science fiction movies they watch and enjoy. Mention *Avatar* (Cameron, 2009) or *Idiocracy* (Judge, 2007) to them, and they will quickly note these are stories of social commentary and political statement. Though they may initially joke and say *Wall-E* (Stanton & Docter, 2008) is nothing more than an animated romance, it will not take them long to offer that it is also a dark story of the fate of mankind, as is the disturbing film *Children of Men* (Cuarón & Sexton, 2006). The desire to rid ourselves of anything we deem different or inexplicable cannot be avoided when discussing *District 9* (Blomkamp & Tatchell, 2009), and the cloning that occurs in *Moon* (Jones, 2009) is no harder to imagine than that which takes place in *House of Scorpions*. Students already think about issues of social consequence; all teachers need to do is pull such ideas into the classroom.

In an ever-changing world, it is crucially important to make school a place where everyone learns to look beyond the “now” into the world being created for the future. English classrooms can be places where students examine complex questions that, *in their lifetime*, will require thoughtful answers. If the

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**While the novel warns readers about technological developments that go unchecked, it also challenges them to consider the role they play in how society ultimately embraces and uses those technologies.**

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societies found in *The House of the Scorpion* and *Feed* are unacceptable, for instance, then students should be encouraged to think through what they can do to make science and technology work in more meaningful ways. By providing books from a wide range of science fiction that connect with students because of characters, age, and contemporary issues, you will help students engage more deeply with the world in which they live and are about to inherit.

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## Reading Reel Nonfiction:

### Documentary Films for Young Adults

**D**ocumentary films? Is this *The ALAN Review*? Yes. And yes. And please keep reading. Just as others have argued effectively that teens enjoy *reading* nonfiction (see Ed Sullivan’s “Some Teens Prefer the Real Thing: The Case for Young Adult Nonfiction” [2001]), they also enjoy *viewing* nonfiction. We have seen students enthralled in a documentary film, begging to keep watching when the class period ends (and even asking to see more documentaries). But that’s not the only reason to share documentary films with your students. Many state standards call for English teachers to provide students with multiple texts—fiction and nonfiction, written, spoken, and viewed. Documentaries can enhance instruction in nearly any content area. They offer a powerful, visceral, and visual complement to classroom instruction and reading. Add to that the recent box office success of theatrically released documentaries and the ease of acquiring films through online venues—which means there are more films available and easily accessible than perhaps ever before—and there couldn’t be a better time to introduce your students to documentary films.

But our purpose here is not only to argue that documentary films are worthwhile texts for the classroom, but also to point to some films that we have come to view as implicitly or explicitly

*young adult* and to explain why it’s worth categorizing them this way. For teachers, watching documentaries means thinking about how they might work as texts for viewing in our classrooms. And, over the years, as we’ve kept our eyes open for documentaries we could use in our teaching, we have realized that there are some documentaries that share characteristics with the young adult literature that we love. As with YA literature, there are documentaries with young protagonists and with thematic connections to teens’ lives. To be sure, there are differences between what we might term “YA films” and YA literature. One significant difference is that documentaries are almost never marketed specifically to teens. And *this* is why many teachers and teenagers may not realize that they exist.

We decided that compiling a list of quality YA documentary films would be a worthwhile project because they offer some things that teens can’t get elsewhere: compelling stories of real adolescents complete with all the complexities of life. We hope that putting together this list of documentaries will enable teachers and adolescents to find films they’ll enjoy and learn from. And while YA documentaries will certainly appeal to teens, using them in the classroom also allows teachers to integrate the films’ content into topics of study. Additionally, using YA documen-

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**We decided that compiling a list of quality YA documentary films would be a worthwhile project because they offer some things that teens can’t get elsewhere: compelling stories of real adolescents complete with all the complexities of life.**

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taries allows teachers and students to practice some important media literacy skills.

One thing we're *not* trying to do in this article is detail the best methods for teaching documentary films in the English classroom (although we'll share

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## What is the filmmaker's point? How is it being made? Am I convinced? Am I being manipulated fairly?

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an idea or two). For a comprehensive presentation of teaching strategies, you should read John Golden's essential *Reading in the Reel World: Teaching Documentaries and Other Nonfiction Texts* (2006). In fact, this article is not solely about documentaries we recommend for class-

room use. As with other works of literature, some of the documentaries we discuss would work well when shown to an entire class, while others would be more appropriate for group study or independent viewing. Some would be worth showing in their entirety, while others might work best for excerpted scenes. We trust teachers to make these kinds of decisions. We have simply compiled a list of films that can be categorized as YA. However, we're teachers, we've seen each film in its entirety, and we think they could work well in classrooms. (When there are concerns about content, we have noted that.)

### Strategies for Exploring Documentary Films in the Classroom

How do you get started teaching with documentaries? Before showing a documentary film in his class for the first time, Nathan always puts up on the overhead a provocative quote from *Time* magazine's film critic, Richard Schickel: "A documentary is an arrangement (or, if it includes historical footage, a rearrangement) of nonfictional film, structured to support the pre-existing ideas of the filmmaker. Only the terminally stupid or the childishly innocent imagine that anyone making a documentary film aspires to objective truth" (Schickel, 2003). Of course, no one wants to be thought of as terminally stupid or childishly innocent, but that's often how documentary films are used in classrooms—in blockheaded or naïve ways. Rather than teaching documentaries as "the truth," teachers should help students to recognize that these films are

works of art *constructed* by filmmakers to tell a story or present a particular point of view. Learning to read documentaries like this helps students to ask and answer the following questions: What is the filmmaker's point? How is it being made? Am I convinced? Am I being manipulated fairly?

To help students understand that documentaries are *constructed*, Nathan points to the 2003 PBS documentary *The Murder of Emmett Till* (Nelson, 2003, NR, 60 min.), directed by Stanley Nelson. The concluding scene in the film is breathtaking and powerful, but viewers should recognize they are being manipulated. Stanley Nelson has a point to make, and he makes it by skillfully editing historical footage and contemporary interviews together with music. One part of the scene is worth talking about in detail. Students who watch the film will understand, by the time they reach this scene at the end of the film, why it works so well as an example of the constructed nature of documentaries, but because we haven't watched the rest of the film together, here is some historical background.

In 1955, Emmett Till, a 14-year-old black boy from Chicago, was murdered while visiting his cousins in Mississippi. Two white men kidnapped Emmett and, after brutally beating and killing him, dumped his body in the Tallahatchie River. They did this because Emmett had supposedly whistled at one of their wives a few days earlier. The men, who later confessed to the crime, were acquitted at a trial that received international media attention. During the trial, two black men, Mose Wright and Willie Reed, risked their own lives to testify against the killers (both Wright and Reed fled Mississippi immediately after the trial). In the conclusion to *The Murder of Emmett Till*, Nelson focuses briefly on the heroism of these two men and on the idea that Emmett's death sparked the civil rights movement.

With that background in mind, here's how one moving moment in that final scene plays out. We see Mamie Till Mobley, Emmett's mother, speaking in a contemporary interview. She says, "When people saw what had happened to my son, men stood up who had never stood up before." As she says this, Nelson cuts to black-and-white historical footage of Mose Wright standing up in a cotton field. Mamie continues, "People became vocal who had never vocalized before." As she says this, Nelson intercuts more black-

and-white historical footage—a close up of Willie Reed, who is initially looking to his left. Then Willie turns and looks directly into the camera. In these few seconds, Nelson powerfully makes a point: these two men embody the kind of heroism that Mamie Till says drove the civil rights movement. And Nelson makes that point by carefully combining historical and contemporary footage with mood-setting music. In other words, he manipulates the footage, editing it in a certain way to make a lasting impression.

Alan has successfully used John Golden’s strategies in *Reading in the Reel World* with a variety of high school students. He especially likes Golden’s three-part viewing framework—having students focus

on the visual track, the audio track, and the text track one at a time. He uses a handout adapted from Golden’s book (see Fig. 1) to discuss part of a nonfiction film, and he has students practice with a compelling clip from either *The Heart of the Game* (Serrill, 2005, PG-13, 97 min.; see annotation below), the opening sections of *Tupac: Resurrection* (Lazin, 2003, R, 112 min.), or the school lunch scene from *Super Size Me* (Spurlock, 2004, PG-13, 100 min.). You can have all students look for what’s going on in all three tracks, or you can divide the class into three groups and have each group look at one of the tracks. Students get the idea pretty quickly—after all, they’ve been watching movies their whole lives! At this point, you just

<b>Three “Tracks” of a Nonfiction Film</b>	<b>Sample Clip</b>
<p><b>Visual Track:</b> All pictures seen onscreen</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Primary footage</i> (“A-roll”) like interviews, reenactments, action as it occurs</li> <li>• <i>Cut-away</i> (“B-roll”) to another scene being referred to in the A-roll, such as cutting to a quick scene of something being described in an interview</li> <li>• <i>Archival or found footage</i> shot by someone else. Can include news broadcasts, home movies, still shots, maps, charts, headlines, etc.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Title:</b></p>
<p><b>Audio Track:</b> The sound in the film</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Dialogue</i></li> <li>• <i>Narration</i> (on screen or off screen) by filmmaker or actor—happening “live” as it’s filmed, or recorded later and added. If the narration is by an unknown person (not a character or the filmmaker), it is sometimes called “<i>Voice of God</i>” narration.</li> <li>• <i>Music</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Diegetic</i> (could logically be heard by someone in the film)</li> <li>• <i>Non-diegetic</i> (music added after filming, intended for the audience; could not be heard by people in the film)</li> </ul> </li> <li>• <i>Sound Effects</i> (also diegetic and non-diegetic)</li> </ul>	
<p><b>Text Track:</b> All the writing added to the film</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Subtitles</i> that identify the person or the location.</li> <li>• <i>Subtitles</i> also translate dialogue in foreign languages.</li> <li>• <i>Title screens</i> (whole screen of text) are sometimes used to provide factual information or a quotation.</li> </ul>	

\*Adapted from John Golden, *Reading in the Reel World* (NCTE, 2006)

**Figure 1:** Parts of a Nonfiction Film (Documentary)\*



want to have them start to notice what they are seeing and hearing and to use the technical vocabulary to describe it.

If he is going to teach a whole film, Alan uses a viewing guide format based on Golden’s frame (see Fig. 2 for a generic version of this). You can leave the questions in the “reflection” box very general, or you can create specific questions you want students to think about with each chapter or group of chapters. Alan likes to combine a “reader response” approach (“What did you notice? What do you make it mean? How about the rest of you?”) with aspects of

“close reading” (“How did the filmmaker convey that meaning? What shots or sounds had you come to that interpretation?”).

We usually recommend stopping the film and talking about it. We aren’t necessarily advocating this after every DVD chapter, but often enough to make sure the students understand what’s going on and that they are thinking about the film rather than just glossing over it in a video daze. (Students will complain, so hang tough!)

After viewing the film as a class, there are a variety of activities students can do, depending, of course,

DVD Chapter	Visual Track	Audio Track	Text Track
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Primary footage</i> (“A-roll”)</li> <li>• <i>Cut-away</i> (“B-roll”)</li> <li>• <i>Archival or found footage</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Dialogue</i></li> <li>• <i>Narration</i></li> <li>• <i>Music &amp; Sound Effects</i> (<i>diegetic</i> and <i>non-diegetic</i>)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Subtitles</i></li> <li>• <i>Title screens</i></li> </ul>
	Notes:	Notes:	Notes:
<p><b>Reflection: What is the filmmaker saying here? What do you think about that? What questions do you have?</b></p>			
	Notes:	Notes:	Notes:
<p><b>Reflection: What is the filmmaker saying here? What do you think about that? What questions do you have?</b></p>			

Figure 2. Viewing Guide for Documentary Film

on your instructional objective: compare the film to a nonfiction print text, compare a theme or character from the documentary to one from a novel or short story, analyze the rhetorical strategies the filmmaker uses, debate an issue presented in the film, identify ethical issues faced by the filmmakers in creating the documentary, and so on. Again, the Golden book has a plethora of examples to choose from.

## Final Exhortation

In these days of “reality television shows,” “nonfiction novels,” and “docu-dramas,” the lines between fiction and nonfiction have never been less clear, but students still want to know “Did that *really* happen?” They are still captivated by the words “based on a true story.” Studying documentaries in a classroom—with a group of curious and opinionated peers and an inquiring teacher—can give your students critical tools they will use for the rest of their lives.

## Annotated Filmography: Recommended Films

[Note: Information provided for each film is title, country (if other than the United States), director(s), year of release, Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) rating, length. For films with R and PG-13 ratings, we include the MPAA justification for the rating. For films without MPAA ratings, we include content advisory notes, if necessary, at the end of each annotation.]

### ***The Education of Shelby Knox* (Marion Lipschutz & Rose Rosenblatt, 2005, NR, 76 min.)**

Shelby Knox is a 15-year-old self-proclaimed devout Christian who joins with other students in her Lubbock, Texas, high school to advocate for comprehensive sex education rather than the state-mandated “abstinence only” curriculum. In the process, she emerges as a courageous and principled activist (with somewhat baffled but loving parents). In the last third of the film, she also turns her attention to supporting the Gay–Straight Alliance at her school—because it’s the right thing to do given the development of her thinking. The film is a compelling story—both of a teen’s developing sense of morality and ethics and of civic engagement. It would be useful in a civics unit

focused on student rights, in a discussion of Kohlberg’s theory of moral development, or in conjunction with other works on the theme of heroism.

### ***The Heart of the Game* (Ward Serrill, 2005, PG-13 [“brief strong language”], 97 min.)**

Bill Resler is an unusual coach for the girls’ basketball team at Seattle’s Roosevelt High School—his day job is that of a tax professor at a local university—but he has some ideas about how to make these girls into champion ball players. During his second year with the team, Darnellia Russell, a ferociously talented player, transfers to the school, setting in motion a tense partnership for the next five years. This film has the scope and drama we more often find in fiction, with memorable characters, heart-stopping athletic action, and heartbreaking setbacks. Though it shares characteristics with fiction films like *Hoosiers* or *Breaking Away* or television shows like *Friday Night Lights*, the general “untidiness” of this real story invites discussion of teen pregnancy and its disproportionate affect on girls, on the differences between male and female athletic programs, and on the role of athletics in American schools (and, indeed, our society).

### ***I’m Still Here: Real Diaries of Young People Who Lived during the Holocaust* (Lauren Lazin, 2005, NR, 48 min.)**

Adapted from Alexandra Zapruder’s *Salvaged Pages: Young Writers’ Diaries of the Holocaust* (Yale University Press, 2002), this documentary presents a range of diaries belonging to teenaged victims of the Holocaust—male and female from several different European countries, some of whom survived and some didn’t. The fact that the diaries are presented one at a time allows teachers to select certain ones for inclusion alongside other Holocaust texts. When studied alongside any of the source texts—all of which are fairly short—the film provides opportunities for analysis of how a nonfiction text can be adapted into a film. Finally, this is one documentary that clearly has a “YA marketing” origin. The opening of the film addresses today’s young people, asking them to imagine themselves in a similar situation, and, on the DVD edition, there are several MTV promotional spots that draw comparisons between the Holocaust and the genocide in Darfur.

***Murder on a Sunday Morning (Un coupable idéal)* (France/USA, Jean-Xavier de Lestrade, 2001, NR, 111 min.)**

This 2002 Academy Award winner for Best Documentary Feature follows the trial of Brenton Butler, a 15-year-old black boy, who is accused of murdering an elderly white woman outside a hotel in Jacksonville, Florida. Although Brenton signed a confession and the woman's husband positively identified him as the killer, Brenton's public defender uncovers a shocking mishandling of justice by the Jacksonville police department. The film is as intense as any police-themed television show, but it also forces viewers to think beyond those fictitious depictions and come to grips with the realities of the American justice system that relies on the honorable efforts of people like Brenton's attorney to work properly—especially in the face of dishonorable efforts by others. (*Teacher advisory: Brief strong language, brief graphic images, adult smoking, sexual references.*)

***OT: Our Town* (Scott Hamilton Kennedy, 2002, NR, 76 min.)**

This intense, funny, and uplifting film follows a group of students and their two teacher directors as they prepare to perform Thornton Wilder's classic, *Our Town*, at Dominguez High School in Compton, California. It has been more than 20 years since the last student play was produced at Dominguez, a school students say is best known for its race riots and perennially powerful basketball team. The film won multiple awards, including Best Documentary at the Los Angeles and Santa Monica film festivals. (*Teacher advisory: Strong language, sexual references.*)

***Paper Clips* (Elliot Berlin & Joe Fab, 2004, G, 82 min.)**

Students at a rural Tennessee middle school initially set out to collect paper clips as part of a school project to help them better understand the number of Holocaust victims. They choose paper clips because they discover that the Norwegians used the paper clip as a symbol of solidarity against the Nazis during World War II. As their project grows, they receive donations of paper clips—along with stories of Holocaust victims—from around the world. The film deftly details not only the school Holocaust project, but also this small town's efforts to combat prejudice in its own

residents and in the world. The documentary—and the story it tells—is simple and moving.

***Spellbound* (Jeffrey Blitz, 2002, G, 97 min.)**

This engaging film profiles eight participants—mostly of middle school age—in the 1999 Scripps National Spelling Bee, both at home and during the competition in Washington, DC. It's surprisingly suspenseful and a deft portrait of American diversity at the turn of the millennium. In addition, the film explores the twin values of talent and hard work, of "making it," and of the role of competition in adolescent development.

***War Dance* (Sean Fine & Andrea Nix, 2007, PG-13 ["some thematic material involving descriptions of war atrocities"], 105 min.)**

Northern Uganda has been torn by civil war for 20 years. The rebel army, known for its brutality, abducts children and forces them to be soldiers, often after killing their parents. In 2005, children at the school in the Patongo refugee camp prepare to compete in the nationwide music and dance competition. Against the backdrop of the competition and the volatile political situation, the filmmakers focus on three teenagers—Rose, Nancy, and Dominic—who tell their stories directly to the camera. This film is beautiful, horrific, and heartbreaking, with many possible connections to literature about the effects of war on young people and to other books and films about contemporary Africa.

***Whiz Kids* (Tom Shepard & Tina DiFeliciano, 2009, NR, 80 min.)**

Three remarkable 17-year-old students compete in the Intel Science Talent Search over the course of a year. Ana Cisneros, from Long Island, studies botany and aspires for acceptance to an Ivy League university and the financial support it will take for her to do that. Kelydra Welcker, from Parkersburg, West Virginia, conducts her research with an activist's edge, confronting the potential damage of contaminants being dumped into the Ohio River by her town's largest employer—in spite of the fact that her father's pension depends on the company. Harmain Khan, from New York City, conducts original research in paleontology and seeks to rise above his family's early dependence on welfare. All three teens are brilliant, blessed with



supportive teachers, and nurtured by families that are alternately proud and baffled by the genius in their midst. *Whiz Kids* is the best kind of “competition” documentary: by the climax of the film, we realize that all of the students are winners, regardless of the outcome. The film provides a great opportunity for teachers to explore with students issues like the role of talent and hard work in achieving success, the motivations for academic excellence, high school students’ attitudes toward their “nerd and geek” peers, and the value of public support for programs for gifted students (all three students attend public schools). (Check for DVD availability at <http://www.whizkidsmovie.com>.)

## **Annotated Filmography: Additional Films**

### ***4 Little Girls* (Spike Lee, 1997, NR, 102 min.)**

Lee documents the 1963 church bombing in Birmingham, Alabama, by means of interviews with surviving family members, newsreel footage, and music by Joan Baez and Terence Blanchard (among others).

### ***American Teen* (Nanette Burstein, 2008, PG-13 [“some strong language, sexual material, some drinking and brief smoking involving teens”], 95 min.)**

Burstein spent the entire 2006 academic year following five seniors at Indiana’s Warsaw Community High School. Even though the five individuals represent certain stereotypical types—the artist/rebel, the jock, the wealthy alpha female, the band geek, and the handsome heartbreaker—it certainly captures the zeitgeist of the time.

### ***Anne Frank Remembered* (Jon Blair, 1995, PG, 117 min.)**

Winner of the Academy Award for Best Feature Documentary in 1995, this film contains vintage newsreels, photographs, and interviews with Anne’s surviving friends and family members, and home movie footage.

### ***Blindsight* (Lucy Walker, 2006, PG, 104 min.)**

Sabriye Tenberken founded Braille Without Borders to provide shelter and education for blind children in Tibet, where blindness is considered evidence of evil. Tenberken invites Erik Weihenmayer, the first blind man to climb Mt. Everest, to lead an expedition of

her students to climb a peak near Everest. Within a landscape of breathtaking beauty and life-challenging austerity, the filmmakers tell a suspenseful and inspiring story that challenges our definitions of adventure, success, and family.

### ***Born into Brothels* (Ross Kauffman & Zana Briski, 2004, R [“strong language”], 83 min.)**

Photographer Zana Briski teaches photography to children in the Calcutta brothels and tries to place them in boarding schools so that they can escape their current situation. The photography—her stills, their stills, and the cinematography—is gorgeous. The topic is disturbing, but the children are inspiring and heartbreaking. Winner of the Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature in 2004.

### ***The Boys of Baraka* (Heidi Ewing & Rachel Grady, 2005, NR, 84 min.)**

Each year, in an innovative project in Baltimore, 20 boys ages 12–13 are chosen to attend the Baraka School in Kenya, where they can develop academic skills, resilience, and self-esteem away from the poverty and violence of their old neighborhoods. This film focuses on four of the boys as they cope with homesickness, culture shock, and the thin line between hope and despair.

### ***Chiefs* (Daniel Junge, 2002, NR, 87 min.)**

Wyoming Indian High School, located on the Wind River Reservation in Wyoming, has a proud basketball tradition, and the Chiefs make it to the state championship game each of the two years covered in the film. In addition to following their on-court successes and failures, the film considers the off-court decisions that key Chiefs players must make as they prepare for life after high school. Winner of the Best Documentary award at the 2002 Tribeca Film Festival. (*Teacher advisory: Strong language, drug references, and teen drug use.*)

### ***The Children of Chabannes* (Lisa Gossels & Dean Wetherell, NR, 1999, 93 min.)**

During World War II, the town of Chabannes—in Vichy, France—sheltered 400 Jewish refugee children, many of whose parents had been sent to concentration camps. The teachers and townspeople risked their lives to provide the children with a semblance

of normal life. The film contains interviews with the children, now in their sixties, and their teachers, now in their eighties.

***Daughter from Danang* (Gail Dolgin & Vicente Franco, 2002, NR, 83 min.)**

In 1975, as American involvement in Vietnam was coming to an end, thousands of children—particularly mixed race children of American soldiers—were brought to the United States as part of “Operation Babylift.” Raised by a white family, Heidi Bub—real name Mai Thi Hiep—learns of her origin as a teenager. As an adult, she decides to visit Vietnam to be reunited with her mother.

***Devil’s Playground* (Lucy Walker, 2002, NR, 77 min.)**

Before making an unrevokable commitment to their church and way of life, Amish 16-year-olds participate in *rumspringa* (literally “running around”), a period of time that can last several years, during which they are allowed to leave the community and live an “English” lifestyle. This documentary chronicles several Amish teenagers who drink, do drugs, leave home, and wrestle with whether or not to be baptized into the church—each coming to different decisions. Although clearly focusing on teenagers with extreme behavior (according to the film, 90% of Amish teenagers join the church after *rumspringa*), Walker portrays them, their parents, and other members of their community sincerely. (*Teacher advisory: Strong language, drug use, underage drinking, and sexual references.*)

***Go Tigers!* (Kenneth A. Carlson, 2001, R [“language and a scene of teen drinking”], 103 min.)**

This film follows the three senior co-captains of the 1999 Massillon High School Tigers football team throughout the season (with plenty of great football action). It also chronicles the school district’s efforts to pass a levy in support of the schools, which it had failed to do the two previous years. Far more than just a documentary about sports, Kenneth Carlson focuses on the lives of these three boys while he also investigates the community of Massillon, Ohio.

***Hoop Dreams* (Steve James, 1994, PG-13 [“drug content and some strong language”], 176 min.)**

When they enter the ninth grade, Arthur Agee and William Gates have a dream: to play professional

basketball like their hero and fellow Chicagoan Isaiah Thomas. The film follows these two young men for their entire high school career and into college as they pursue their dreams. Winner of numerous citations for Best Documentary of 1994, including National Society of Film Critics and the National Board of Review.

***Jesus Camp* (Heidi Ewing & Rachel Grady, 2006, PG-13 [“some discussions of mature subject matter”], 87 min.)**

Nominated for an Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature in 2007, this film follows several children and their families as they attend a summer camp in North Dakota for evangelical Christian youth. Run by Pastor Becky Fischer, the purpose of the camp is to motivate and prepare a future generation of evangelical leaders.

***Scottsboro: An American Tragedy* (Daniel Anker & Barak Goodman, 2000, NR, 84 min.)**

In 1931, nine African American boys, ages 13–19, are accused—and convicted—of raping two white women in a small Alabama town. Although the allegations are patently false, the injustice is perpetrated for years and becomes an international cause célèbre. This documentary traces the history of the event, recreating compelling courtroom scenes using still photos and transcripts.

***Scout’s Honor* (Tom Shepard, 2001, NR, 57 min.)**

As a 12-year-old in Petaluma, California, Steven Cozza started Scouting for All, an organization devoted to ending the Boy Scouts of America’s ban on gay scout leaders. Steven’s story is interwoven with that of the elderly scoutmaster of Steven’s troop, who was expelled as a scout leader for his participation in Scouting for All. The film won both the Audience Award and the Freedom of Expression Award at the 2001 Sundance Film Festival. (DVD availability: Institutions should contact [www.newday.com](http://www.newday.com); individuals should contact Tom Shepard Productions, 611 Guerrero Street, No. 17, San Francisco, CA 94110.)

***Sons of Cuba* (Great Britain, Andrew Lang, 2009, NR, 88 min.)**

The world’s best boxers come out of schools like the Havana Boxing Academy in Cuba, which is at the center of this beautiful and touching film. At the Academy, nine- to eleven-year-old boys

train for hours each day to become what Fidel Castro calls “the standard bearers of the Revolution.” *Sons of Cuba* follows three boys and their coach as the boys prepare for the under-12 national boxing championships. (Check for DVD availability at <http://www.sonsofcuba.com>.)

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## A Book by Any Other Name?

### Graphic Novels in Education

**W**hat's in a name?" asked Juliet, "that which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet." The same might be asked about books, particularly graphic novels. In the eyes of some, these books are not held in high regard. Some even think that they stink.

The watershed moment for graphic novels in the US occurred in 1992 when Art Spiegelman's *Maus* won a Pulitzer Prize Special Award. For years afterward, people who read comic books and graphic novels pointed to the potential for the medium to produce affecting, meaningful, and complex works of art. Still, there is some amount of apprehension about the medium, as evident in a statement by Tony Long (2006) in *Wired* magazine. He questioned the worthiness of Gene Yang's *American Born Chinese (ABC)* as a nominee for a National Book Award. He opined that *ABC* was a comic book and went on, "This is simply to say that, as literature, the comic book does not deserve equal status with real novels, or short stories." Such a statement points out that the different media have different characteristics, but it also denigrates one over the other, with a bias against the text that has more visual aspects. Surely, writing words is an involved, complex endeavor, but so is drawing pictures that display a narrative and are simultaneously evocative.

Graphic novels' status as second-class texts is further held by current reading practices, where

students read more for testing purposes than they do for pleasure, encouraging thought, or as an otherwise meaningful activity (Gallagher, 2009). Under such a system, there is little or no regard for including students' choices, interests, or backgrounds in required texts. There is no apparent interest in creating lifelong readers, as reading is seen primarily as support for test performance. If students do not find themselves at least somewhat reflected in the curriculum, it becomes difficult for them to relate to lessons or to find much relevance in schooling.

The needs for reading to address multiple purposes and to be practiced using multiple types of texts are so important, according to the National Council of Teachers of English/International Reading Association's standards for English language arts (ELA), that they are listed in their first entry:

Students read a wide range of print and non-print texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classic and contemporary works. (NCTE/IRA, 2009)

Purposefully, they used the term *texts*, which can be applied to traditional print resources, such as novels and textbooks, but also to more contemporary, electronic works, such as websites and hypertexts. Texts also can refer to the medium of graphic novels.

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**Surely, writing words is an involved, complex endeavor, but so is drawing pictures that display a narrative and are simultaneously evocative.**

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## Not Just a Popularity Contest

Graphic novels have been in print since at least the 1950s, but they did not gain much traction in the marketplace or in schools until the last decade. The difference between graphic novels and comic books is that graphic novels tend to contain one single narrative by specific creators as compared to the extended, serial stories told in comic books. Currently, they are one of the most popular types of print text among young readers, as noted by library circulations (Schwarz, 2006) and the inclusion of large graphic novel sections in bookstores. Collections of comic books into books, called trade paperbacks, are included in the graphic novel category and are being used as source material for an increasing number of blockbuster movies.

Their recent popularity is certainly helpful for including graphic novels in instruction, as drawing on youths' interests can be a great motivational tool for teachers engaging reluctant readers, but they also provide substantive material for thinking and analysis. The combination of words and pictures in the medium offers a different examination of how authors make choices to convey meaning. Instead of dealing with nuanced or figurative language, readers can use the pictures to determine an author's message. Reading graphic novels involves inference-making (Jacobs, 2007), but in a manner that can be more intuitive or apparent to students who are more apt to understand or interact with visual texts. Reading pictures and words together opens up an avenue for involved textual analysis.

Such interactions offer stepping stones that may lead to more complex reading practices and an enjoyment of the printed word. I have done work with adults who read comic books and graphic novels to see why they chose and continue to choose to spend time with those texts (Botzakis, 2009), and what I found was that they had learned to read for a great number of purposes. Some read to follow their interests, to revisit favorite characters, or to relax. Others did so for more academic reasons: to learn about different people and cultures or to look for opportunities for reflection, which often involved the readers looking at the text and themselves in a philosophical manner.

I am not saying that reading comic books and graphic novels always leads to such elevated think-

ing, but my research does at least show that there is potential for such thought with these texts. Most of my participants had long been removed from school, but they read in ways that ELA teachers would like *their* students to read—actively, critically, and meaningfully. Instead of serving as a crutch for easy reading experiences, reading graphic novels can be seen as substantial meaning making between pictures and words. Translating the out-of-school reading practices developed over years into in-school reading that interests and involves students is a large part of my own educational work. In what follows, I will use one graphic novel to show how it may be used in school settings to get students thinking critically about their lives, their communities, and their worlds.

### ***The Eternal Smile***

Choosing which book to speak about, even in teaching situations, is largely a random activity. Sometimes we teach whatever text is available in the storeroom as a class set. Here, I am going with another common method—choosing established or award-winning authors. Gene Yang and Derek Kim's (2009) *The Eternal Smile*, a recent graphic novel publication, is a collection of three stories by the authors of *American Born Chinese (ABC)* and *Same Difference and Other Stories (SDaOS)*, respectively. Individually, their works have won much praise: *ABC* won the 2007 Printz Award and was nominated for a National Book Award, while Kim won the three major comics industry awards (the Eisner, the Ignatz, and the Harvey) for his work on *SDaOS*. *The Eternal Smile* brings together three separate stories that all focus on unstable relationships between fact and fantasy. Fiction especially acts as a great coping mechanism for hardships, trepidations, and ennui. It is quite redemptive, guiding uneasy or lost people to find hidden strengths and pleasures within themselves and their worlds. What follows is a short synopsis of each of the three stories.

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**In what follows, I will use one graphic novel to show how it may be used in school settings to get students thinking critically about their lives, their communities, and their worlds.**

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**“Duncan’s Kingdom”:** Duncan is a member of the Royal Guard who seeks vengeance for the murder of the king by diabolical frogmen. Also, he is motivated by the beautiful princess’s hand in marriage in exchange for the frog king’s head. Ostensibly set in a medieval setting, a few modern objects enter into the picture, and Duncan’s sense of reality is seriously questioned. In the end, we learn that Duncan is actually lying in a hospital bed in a coma.

**“Gran’pa Greenbax and the Eternal Smile”:** One part *The Truman Show* and two parts *Uncle Scrooge* comic, this story mostly follows the exploits of a Disneyesque character. An extremely wealthy frog

plots and plans ways to build even more wealth so that he won’t bump his head on the ground when he dives into his personal money pit. Events turn in strange directions after he decides to use religious beliefs and practices in a money-making scheme. It turns out that Gran’pa is

actually a real frog that has had a microchip implanted in its brain so that it can be controlled as an actor in a popular television show.

**“Urgent Request”:** Janet is an office worker who struggles to be noticed and rewarded for her efforts on the job. In response to feelings of uselessness, she participates in the classic Nigerian email scam, sending huge amounts of money to a prince who promises to repay her once his proper office and situation are restored. Even though she knows she is being bilked, she continues with the sham because it provides a bright counterpoint to her depressing routine.

Although these three tales are separate narratives, Yang and Kim tie them together visually and thematically. Objects, such as bottles of Snap Cola, appear in each, as do images of frogs and other features. Astute readers can catch these features, and they definitely add to a sense of cohesion in the book.

## Role of Fiction in Life

Although probably not intended as such, these stories cut right to the purpose of ELA education in general. One shared feature among them is how these stories

inform people’s lives and help them cope with their circumstances. In addition, they show different ways that fact and fiction relate in people’s lives. These sites of conflict and question in the book also can occur in classrooms. For instance, students often question why they have to read works of fiction—in other words, why things that did not really happen have a bearing on their lives. ELA teachers (or the standards they teach) frequently counter with the argument that fiction can provide a different way of viewing themselves or their world. Reading these stories can help bring these points to light.

Fiction can also provide a way to think through life’s problems. Duncan’s fictive medieval world provides a contrast to his reality. In his fictional world, everything plays out for the best, as in a fairy tale. He kills an evil king, wins the hand of the woman he loves, and is crowned. Through hard work and pluck, he makes a name for himself and establishes a great legacy. This fantasy world provides an escape from difficult situations in his reality: the death of his father and the abuse suffered at the hands of his mother’s new boyfriend. Additionally, this fantasy world serves to help Duncan transpose his real world into a different framework, partly to figure out what is happening to him. By the story’s end, we find that he has acted both heroically and spitefully toward his mother, and he begins to come to grips with what is happening to him. His dream world helps him begin to reconcile his life events.

Fiction may help a person understand the world better, but it can also help a person examine themselves, as happens in “Urgent Request.” This is the story of how Janet uses her fictional relationship with a Nigerian prince to examine herself and what she thinks she’s worth. In much of the story, she is shown as a diligent but underappreciated person who lacks confidence. Her actions seem irrational and misguided as she simply appears to be wasting money and paupering herself. What she is doing is trying on a new persona and escaping into another world, but in the process, she is learning more about herself and what she is worth. In the end, she is ready to take a stand and be more assertive.

Finally, the Gran’pa Greenbax story shows a different side of fiction, one that relies heavily on manipulation. In the course of the story, Gran’pa cre-



ates a religion to further his own agenda, churning out propaganda and false advertising to attract followers, which in turn results in substantial donations. Outside of that narrative, we see another where an enterprising corporation has created a product that they sell in various forms to their audience. Issues of media literacy and consumerism arise as we get a glimpse at the creation of a media phenomenon and its trappings.

## Textual Connections

One question that this book begs is why these stories are collected together here. It may be that it is a convenient place for publication, but authors sometimes arrange their works methodically. Two of the most common ways to look at such text connections are to examine the themes and the symbolism of each story and look for common threads.

## Thematic Connections

Yang and Kim could be said to have arranged their works thematically. The role of fiction in people's lives is a common thread that runs through these stories, of course, but there may be others. Although getting students to look at the connections between these stories may be easier because they are all between the same covers, this activity is one that ELA educators try to promote across multiple texts and multiple classes. Helping students to see the connections between these three stories could initiate a larger discussion about what connects the texts read throughout an entire course or even a lifetime.

Aside from the role of fiction, themes of audience and consumerism appear throughout the stories as well. In each story, media seems to offer something great to people, whether it be a way of looking at how life should be, as Duncan uses his fantasy, or the rewarding entertainment Gran'pa provides, or the fortune and friendship that Janet seeks from her Nigerian prince. Bundled within these promises are other questions, including whether or not these promises are realistic. Fairy tale stories promise a happy ending; material possessions offer good feelings; a stranger offers the potential for great reward. These stories invite readers to think about the messages around them, to examine them, and also to recast them.

The authors are also comparing emotional and

material needs throughout these stories, exploring how those needs are manipulated by outside forces. The role of business looms large, and readers could examine whether they are being critical of the business practices of corporations like Coca Cola or Disney, or even smaller businesses like the technology firm Janet works for. Readers could also turn a critical eye to persuasive techniques and look at the manipulations that advertisements and email messages use to elicit money from their audiences.

## Symbolic Connections

One of the other most common areas for making connections in ELA classes is symbolism. In analyzing texts, teachers and students frequently look at the author's use of certain symbols, such as eyes by Edgar Allan Poe or clothing by William Shakespeare. These symbols usually lie in language, but they also can be conveyed by visual images.

Yang and Kim provide plenty of shared imagery in these stories. For instance, bottles and cans of Snappy Cola appear sporadically throughout two of the stories. In Duncan's adventure, a Snappy Cola bottle is what causes his dream world to collapse and him to snap back to reality.

Also, we learn that his mother is an avid collector of Snappy Cola memorabilia. At the end of Gran'pa's adventure, he hops by Duncan and his mom and ends up swimming in a pond past a discarded Snappy Cola can. Readers may ask why the authors decided to include such details. Were they being clever? Were they trying to make a specific point? Does Snappy Cola represent something else? Readers could look at why Yang and Kim chose to include Snappy Cola in their stories and also to wonder whether it is a stand-in for another product, such as Coca Cola. This question could lead into thinking about how Snappy Cola is used in the story and what that says about the role of soda or other popular brand-named products in people's lives. There are plenty of avenues for discussion and analysis here.

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**Issues of media literacy and consumerism arise as we get a glimpse at the creation of a media phenomenon and its trappings.**

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## Creating Lifelong Readers

The questions and analyses above speak to how a particular graphic novel, *The Eternal Smile*, may be used in classrooms. I have shown how the combination of images and words may be fruitful for examination and discussion, and may even lead to students making connections between themselves and their worlds. Naysayers may find that I am cherry-picking an exceptional text and using my own academic experiences to create examples of how it is used, but I argue that educators do that all the time. Don't all teachers pick books they think are best for use with their students? Aren't they always on the lookout for the ideal book for teaching specific ideas or skills? Choosing books with a specific purpose is what they do as responsible, informed teachers.

My argument here is that the selection process should not exclude books just because they have a predominance of pictures in them. There are a great number of graphic novels that may not work well with students, but I would argue that there is an equal if not greater number of traditional print texts that would not work well, either. Much is dependent on the context, the teacher, and the students.

I should also note that the medium may be called graphic novels, but not all of them are fictional. Authors such as Jack Jackson write about historical events, Jay Hosler biology, Jim Ottaviani mathematics and science, and Larry Gonick on a great number of topics, including genetics, world history, and statistics. There is a huge selection for readers of all ages and circumstances.

Looking for a thoughtful and challenging book? Why not choose an interesting, topical, appropriate graphic novel?

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## “The Best of Both Worlds”: Rethinking the Literary Merit of Graphic Novels

The future of this form awaits its participants who truly believe that the application of sequential art, with its interweaving of words and pictures, could provide a dimension of communication that contributes—hopefully on a level never before attained—to the body of literature that concerns itself with the examination of human experience.”—Will Eisner, *Comics and Sequential Art* (p. 141)

To say that graphic novels have attracted attention from educators is by now axiomatic. Professional journals, like this one, routinely feature articles that extol their virtue as a pedagogical tool. Books attest to the creative ways teachers are using them to scaffold students as readers and writers. Sessions devoted to graphic novels at the National Council of Teachers of English’s annual convention are invariably well attended and seem to proliferate in number from one year to the next. By all accounts, it would seem that educators have embraced a form of text whose older brother, the comic book, was scorned by teachers in the not-so-distant past. Appearances, however, can be deceiving.

When Melanie Hundley, on behalf of the editors of *The ALAN Review*, invited me to contribute a column on graphic novels for an issue of the journal devoted to the influence of film, new media, digital technology, and the image on young adult literature, I was only too happy to oblige because it afforded me the opportunity to confront two assumptions that strike me as characterizing arguments for using graphic novels in schools: the first is that graphic novels are a means to an end, an assumption that usually results in overlooking their literary merit; the second assumes that students will embrace graphic novels enthusiastically, in spite of the stigmas attached to them.

### Literary Merit or Means to an End?: The Professional Debate

Consider, for a moment, some of the reasons educators are encouraged to embrace graphic novels—and, to a lesser extent, comic books—as a teaching tool. Graphic novels are said to:

- scaffold students for whom reading and writing are difficult (Bitz, 2004; Frey & Fisher, 2004; Morrison, Bryan, & Chilcoat, 2002);
- foster visual literacy (Frey & Fisher, 2008);
- support English language learners (Ranker, 2007);
- motivate “reluctant” readers (Crawford, 2004; Dorell, 1987);
- and provide a stepping stone that leads students to transact with more traditional (and presumably more valuable) forms of literature.

These are worthwhile objectives, and it is not hard to understand why a form of text thought to lend itself to addressing so many ends would capture the imagination of educators. At the same time, these arguments strike me as perpetuating—albeit unintentionally—a misperception that has plagued the comic book for the better part of its existence. Specifically, it regards works written in the medium of comics (be it comic books or graphic novels) as a less complex, less sophisticated form of reading material best used with weaker readers or struggling students.

It is tempting to interpret the enthusiasm literacy educators have shown for graphic novels as a sign of the field’s having moved toward a broader understanding of what “counts” as text—surely our willingness to embrace a form of reading material similar



to one our predecessors demonized is evidence of a more progressive, if not more enlightened, view. To be sure, there was no shortage of teachers and librarians who lined up to denounce the comic book when adolescents laid claim to it as a part of youth culture in the 1940s and 1950s. Less frequently acknowledged is that there were also educators who adopted a more tolerant view of the comic book and who sought to use students' interest in it as a foundation on which to develop their literacy practices and literary tastes.

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Parents and educators paid relatively little attention to the comic book when Superman made his debut in Action Comics in 1938. Within two years, however, the commercial success the character experienced, coupled with the legion of imitators he spawned, made it difficult

for them to do so any longer. David Hadju (2008) observes that the number of comic books published in the United States grew from 150 in 1937 to approximately 700 in 1940 (p. 34). While the connection adults drew between comic books and juvenile delinquency would gain traction in the early 1950s, much of the early criticism leveled against comic books focused on their perceived aesthetic value—or lack thereof. Sterling North, a literary critic for the *Chicago Daily News*, was one of the first to question the propriety of allowing adolescents to read comic books. In an editorial published on May 8, 1940, titled “A National Disgrace,” he chastised the comic book for, among other things, being “badly drawn, badly written and badly printed” (p. 56). In his opinion, parents and teachers were obliged to “break the ‘comic’ maga-

zine,” and he identified the antidote: it was necessary, North argued, to ensure that young readers had recourse to quality literature. “The classics,” he wrote, “are full of humor and adventure—plus good writing” (p. 56). Parents and teachers who neglected to substitute traditional literature in place of comic books were, in his opinion, “guilty of criminal negligence” (p. 56). That the newspaper reportedly received over twenty-five million requests to reprint North’s editorial is evidence of the extent to which his call-to-action resonated with the public (Nyberg, 1998).

Although the outcry over comic books dissipated in the face of World War II, professional and scholarly publications aimed at teachers and librarians continued to debate the influence they had on the literary habits of developing readers. Although there were educators who insisted that comic books were detrimental to reading, there were others who acknowledged the value students attached to them and advocated a more tolerant approach. One article, written by a high school English teacher and published in *English Journal* in 1946, is of particular interest, given the theme of this journal issue. Entitled “Comic Books—A Challenge to the English Teacher,” it opened by foregrounding a challenge its author felt “new” media posed for literacy educators:

The teaching of English today is a far more complex matter than it was thirty or forty years ago. It is not that the essential character of the adolescent student has changed, or that the principles of grammar or the tenets that govern good literature have been greatly modified, but rather that the average student of the present is being molded in many ways by three potent influences: the movies, the radio, and the comic book. (Dias, 1946, p. 142)

Rather than condemn comic books as a pernicious influence, he instead chose to appropriate them as a tool with which to foster student interest in traditional literature. Characterizing his efforts to do so as “missionary work among [his] comic-book heathens,” he explained how he engaged students in conversation regarding the comic books they read with the intention of identifying a genre that appealed to them (Dias, 1946, p. 143). Having done so, he recommended a traditional work of literature he thought might interest them. This approach, he argued, made it possible for him to build on students’ interests and use comic books “constructively as a stepping stone to a lasting interest in good literature” (p. 142).

Others took a similar tack. In 1942, Harriet Lee, who taught freshman English, observed that while teachers recognized a need to encourage students to evaluate their experiences with film and radio, they ignored comic books. Citing the success she experienced teaching a series of units that challenged students to critically assess the literary merit of their favorite comic books and comic strips—an approach that bears a faint resemblance to critical media literacy—she encouraged others to do the same. Two years later, W. W. D. Sones (1944), a professor of education at the University of Pittsburgh, foregrounded the instructional value of comic books and cited research that suggested they could be used to support “slow” readers and motivate “non-academic” students (p. 234), a population whose alleged lack of interest in school-based reading and writing appears to have established them as forerunners to the so-called “reluctant” reader of today. Having identified other ends toward which comic books lent themselves, Sones characterized them as vehicles with which “to realize the purposes of the school in the improvement of reading, language development, or acquisition of information” (p. 238).

Significantly, these educators were united by a shared belief—although they advocated using comic books for instructional purposes, they showed little regard for their aesthetic value. Indeed, much like those who criticized comic books, they were unable to recognize any degree of literary merit in them at all. Instead, they regarded them as a way station on a journey whose ultimate purpose was to lead students to transact with traditional literature. Comic books were, as one English teacher put it, “a stepping stone to the realms of good literature—the literature that is the necessary and rightful heritage of the adolescent” (Dias, 1946, p. 143).

It is not hard to recognize points of overlap between the arguments outlined above and those made for using graphic novels in the classroom today. By foregrounding these parallels, I do not mean to suggest that contemporary educators are entirely blind to the graphic novel’s literary merit. Anyone who attends conferences or reads professional journals knows that certain titles—*Maus* (Spiegelman, 1996) and *Persepolis* (Satriapi, 2003) come readily to mind—are frequently cited as warranting close study. Nevertheless, arguments that foreground graphic novels as tools with which to support struggling readers, promote multiple

literacies, motivate reluctant readers, or lead students to transact with more traditional forms of literature have the unintended effect of relegating them to a secondary role in the classroom; in doing so, they overlook the aesthetic value in much the same way as educators did in the past.

There is a difference between acknowledging (or, better yet, appropriating) a form of text and putting it to work in the classroom, and embracing it as a worthwhile form of reading material in its own right. At the current time, anecdotal evidence suggests that educators remain skeptical of the graphic novel’s literary merit. Hillary Chute

(2008), for example, points to “the negative reaction many in the academy have to the notion of ‘literary’ comics as objects of inquiry” (p. 460). Kimberly Campbell (2007), who taught middle and high school language arts prior to teaching college, recalls conversations with colleagues who expressed their “concern that graphic novels don’t provide the rigor that novels require” (p. 207). I have spoken to

high school teachers who were unwilling to use graphic novels with students in honors classes because they feared the ramifications. Asked to provide a rationale for teaching traditional literature—young adult or canonical—educators routinely cite its ability to foster self-reflection, initiate social change, promote tolerance, and stimulate the imagination. As those who read them know, *good graphic novels are capable of realizing these same ends*. As one junior in high school explained, “I love everything about them. I feel that they’re a beautiful painting mixed with an entertaining and thought-provoking novel. They’re the best of both worlds to me.”

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### **Acceptable In-School Literature?: The Students’ Debate**

That educators should continue to question the literary merit of graphic novels is understandable. Graphic

novels, like other novels, are not “value-free” texts, though we often seem to treat them as such. They have a history, and the stigmas that trail in their wake are capable of shaping our perceptions of them as a form of reading material. As John Berger (1972) observed, “The way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe” (p. 8). Acknowledging this, a decision to introduce graphic novels in a context that has traditionally privileged “high art” can seem radical. Those who write about graphic novels, myself included, consequently recognize a need to

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**While [my students] were willing to entertain the notion that young adult literature might warrant a place in the curriculum, they vehemently resisted the possibility that graphic novels might be of value as well.**

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persuade teachers—as well as parents—of their value. Yet whereas we acknowledge that teachers may question the graphic novel’s literary merit, we often seem to proceed under an assumption that students will embrace them unquestioningly, as if they were somehow impervious to the stigmas their elders recognize. My experiences working with students, both at the university and high school levels, suggest that teachers who are interested in using graphic novels may expect

to encounter a certain degree of resistance.

To support this assertion, allow me to share a personal anecdote. For the past three years, I taught an introductory course on young adult literature for undergraduates interested in pursuing a career in elementary or secondary education. One of the course assignments required them to compose three critical response papers in which they responded to works of literature they read over the course of the quarter. Two of the papers asked them to address traditional young adult novels, while the third invited them to respond to a graphic novel. While there were inevitably students who appreciated the opportunity to read a graphic novel, a surprisingly large number were critical of them. This was especially true of those who wished to teach high school. While they were willing to entertain the notion that young adult literature might warrant a place in the curriculum, they vehemently resisted the possibility that graphic novels

might be of value as well. One student wrote:

*It’s understandable to have pictures in elementary grade level books because children at that grade level are still learning about comprehension and formulation of their own ideas. Young adults are at an age where they are able (and teachers want them to) form their own ideas and think critically about books. I believe that providing pictures strips away the young adult’s creative and critical thinking about books.*

Another explained:

*The combination of pictures and text in novels, to me, seems childish and doesn’t allow readers to think critically.*

Still another student wrote:

*For my teaching goals, I want to include literature that will do at least one of three things—preferably all of them at once: encourage students to read, teach something, and broaden the reader’s world view and encourage critical thinking. I do not believe that graphic novels do these things. First, there simply is not enough text to make me believe that it significantly encourages reading.*

These are not extreme cases. Rather, I selected these excerpts because they are representative of the arguments I received from students who questioned the propriety of teaching graphic novels, particularly as a form of literature. It is interesting to note the negative manner in which they regarded the image, which they assumed precluded critical thinking. This is not the sort of response one might expect from members of a so-called “visual generation.” Yet conversations with colleagues at professional conferences indicate that this sort of resistance to graphic novels is not uncommon.

In conducting a study designed to understand how high school students responded to multimodal texts, Hammond (2009) found that the participants with whom she worked were cognizant of a stigma attached to reading graphic novels, the result of which detracted from their popularity (p. 126). My experiences working with six sophomores and juniors who participated in a case study that sought to understand how high school students read and talk about graphic novels yielded a similar finding. A recurring theme suggested that the students were aware of stigmas attached to graphic novels; one regarded them as a puerile form of reading material, and another saw those who read them as social misfits—or, to borrow their term, “nerds.”

These were not abstract arguments for one of the students, who took great pleasure in reading comic



books and graphic novels. A junior in high school, Barry was familiar with the emotional pain such stigmas can cause, and when he talked about them, an underlying sense of anger often permeated his words. Reflecting on the ease with which his peers dismissed a form of reading material he valued, he wrote:

*Why should I feel ashamed when I'm at track practice calling my pals to go to the comic book store while my teammates are around. [sic] It's just strange how they can look at something that I find so beautiful, and spit on it without giving a second thought.*

On another occasion, he suggested that the perception that graphic novels constituted a childish form of reading material was so prevalent, it dissuaded younger audiences from reading them, a fact he found ironic. "It's to the point now where even kids that read comics are persecuted by other kids," he explained.

It is worth noting that the students with whom I worked did not harbor a negative view of graphic novels. They volunteered to take part in an after-school reading group devoted to them, and in doing so, they evinced a willingness to explore a form of reading material that was new to some of them. That said, their cognizance of stigmas associated with graphic novels, coupled with the experience of the student who felt the disdain of his peers, suggest that these stigmas may constitute obstacles for teachers who choose to incorporate these texts into the curriculum. In short, we cannot, as educators, proceed from a belief that students will automatically embrace a form of reading material that has historically been stigmatized, especially when we ask them to interact with it in a classroom context. To become a member of what Rabinowitz (1987/1998) calls a text's authorial audience, one might assume that readers have first to regard it as a viable form of reading material, a supposition that, in the case of graphic novels, may not always hold.

## So What Now?

By challenging assumptions that underlie arguments for using graphic novels, I do not wish to detract from their value. Rather, I wish to suggest that it's possible to view graphic novels in another light, one that acknowledges them as a viable form of literature that warrants close examination in its own right. My experiences working with the high school students who participated in my study consistently suggested

that graphic novels are capable of inspiring high-level thinking, of stimulating rich discussion, and of fostering aesthetic appreciation—an observation the students shared. Sarah, a sophomore, explained:

*I think all of us have taken away just as much from like our graphic novel reading experience as we have from our classroom reading experience. Maybe more. And I think . . . there's just as much substance to graphic novels as there is to just regular literature, and I don't think teachers realize that.*

Another student remarked, "I didn't know they were going to have such a big impact on how I look at things in the world." Is this not the sort of thing we want students to say about their experiences with literature—indeed, about their experiences with art?

Good graphic novels, like good literature, are capable of moving readers to reflect on unexamined aspects of their lives. Not all graphic novels will, of course, but the same might be said of much of the traditional literature on bookstore shelves. To increase awareness of their literary merit and to gauge their potential complexity, it is necessary for professional and scholarly journals such as this one to call for articles that subject them to the same degree of critical scrutiny afforded traditional literature. Moreover, there is a need for reviews that acknowledge titles beyond the usual standards and that help educators keep pace with the multitude of graphic novels published each year. Finally, there is a need for a field-wide conversation that identifies the challenges involved in using graphic novels so that we might begin to address them and, in doing so, develop a sense of appreciation for their artistic merit.

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## Call for Proposals: NCTE Theory and Research into Practice (TRIP) Book Series

The NCTE Books Program invites proposals for its TRIP series (Theory and Research into Practice). These books are single-authored and focus on a single topic, targeting a specified educational level (elementary, middle, or secondary). Each book will offer the following: a solid theoretical foundation in a given subject area within English language arts; exposure to the pertinent research in that area; practice-oriented models designed to stimulate theory-based application in the reader's own classroom. The series has an extremely wide range of subject matter; past titles include *Genre Theory*, *Unlocking Shakespeare's Language*, *Code-Switching*, and *Writing about Literature*. For detailed submission guidelines, please visit the NCTE website at <http://www.ncte.org/write/books>. Proposals to be considered should be submitted through NCTE's Web-based manuscript submission and review system, Editorial Manager, at <http://www.editorialmanager.com/nctebp/>.

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# Graphic Novels, New Literacies, and Good Old Social Justice

“If literature is an art that brings about new understanding and insight—as I believe it to be—then comics certainly fit the bill.” *This Book Contains Graphic Language*, Rocco Versaci (p. 210)

Graphic novels, the new and longer comic books that transcend predictable superheroes and cute Disney characters, are part of the general buzz about new media and multiple literacies in school. With these new media—blogs, Facebook, YouTube, and even video games—anyone can access diverse kinds of information as never before. While these new media offer new kinds of connections and creativity, they also demand that more attention is paid to images, print, and sounds working together. The human condition, however, remains as it has long been—disturbing—with poverty, desperation, and violence much evident even in the nation’s schools. Perhaps, new media can serve the old purposes of helping adolescents learn about others, appreciate differences, identify injustice and intolerance, and become motivated to act for a better world. A tall order, but worth a try.

## Historical Context

The graphic novel is a natural choice for bringing ongoing social problems into question. Moreover, a number of fine graphic novels can introduce young readers to significant social issues while also teaching new or multiple literacies. The history of the graphic novel marks it as an “outsider” force or alternative medium in the United States. The comic book, out of which the graphic novel has grown, was long considered

“trash,” mere kids’ stuff, or, at best, the obsession of geeks. In truth, most comic books in the first half of the 20th century were cheap pulp material, quickly produced by committee, and not great literature. Yet, it is precisely this low status that allowed new talents like Will Eisner, considered the father of the graphic novel, into the field. Hajdu (2008) summarizes this way:

Comic books, even more so than newspaper strips before them, attracted a high quotient of creative people who thought of more established modes of publishing as foreclosed to them: immigrants and the children of immigrants, women, Jews, Italians, Negroes, Latinos, Asians, and myriad social outcasts . . . . (p. 25)

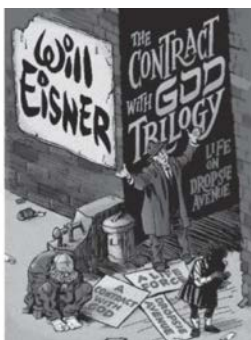
Michael Chabon writes about this outsider creativity in his Pulitzer Prize-winning novel based on the creators of Superman, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* (2000). Later in the century, when censorship of comics began, largely due to Fredric Wertham’s condemnation of comics in *The Seduction of the Innocent* (1954), a lot of rubbish—ridiculous horror stories, predictable romances, and so on—was still emerging. Yet, in 1955, EC Comics, under Bill Gaines and Al Feldstein, managed to produce a short story in *Incredible Science Fiction* that was an allegory about race. It was published among a number of other meaningful pieces (Hajdu, 2008, pp. 321–322). Comic art could be thought provoking.

On the road to graphic novels, comics took a major turn in the late 1960s as creators like Robert Crumb in San Francisco created the underground “comix.” Lopes (2009) describes comix as follows:



In the simplest of terms, comix were humor comic books geared to the counterculture reader, many basing their humor on some form of social satire. While they gained a reputation for their exaggerated portrayal of sex, drugs, and violence—and were criticized for their misogynistic and sadistic content—comix also articulated the antiauthoritarian and radical politics of the counterculture. (pp. 80–81)

Highly personal and autobiographical, self-produced, and sold out of small shops, these comic books took on social taboos and the Viet Nam War. They became an adult medium that could include quirky artistic styles as well as controversial content. While these comics may not be classroom useful or world changing, they did tackle meaningful subjects like war and peace. Moreover, the individual artist, rather than the committee producing mass entertainment, became the focus. As Hatfield (2005) notes, “[C]omix introduced an ‘alternative’ ethos that valued the productions of the lone cartoonist over collaborative or assembly-line work” (p. 16). Comic books were being taken seriously as art.



Unlike others, Will Eisner, who had worked in American comic books since the early days, long perceived comic art as a genuine art with great potential. He had created a respected crime comic book series in the 1940s, *The Spirit*, and after being drafted during World War

II, he produced comics related to vehicle maintenance for the army. In 1978, his *A Contract with God* was published in hardback, and he told the publishers to call it a “graphic novel.” Gravett (2005) describes this novel as “a quartet of sad, moving and disarmingly unglamorous vignettes of Jewish life set in New York in the ‘dirty thirties,’ curiously around the same time as the birth of the comic book” (p. 38). Gravett adds the following:

Eisner committed himself to reinvigorating the ambitions of comics, building on the adult themes pioneered in underground comix, and aspiring to emotional depth and literary seriousness. . . . Since the late 1970s, successive generations of graphic novelists have been exploring the human condition in comics with perceptive insights and intriguing symbolism. (p. 39)

One of the young rebel artists in San Francisco in the late 1960s was Art Spiegelman. In 1986, Spiegelman’s groundbreaking graphic novel *Maus I* came out; *Maus II* was published shortly thereafter. This account of the Holocaust, with Jews portrayed as mice and Nazis as cats, was based on the experi-



ences of Spiegelman’s own parents. The book clearly established the graphic novel as serious literature. *Maus* has been widely read, reviewed, studied, and taught in classrooms from middle school to college. As Hatfield (2005) notes, though, “A reinvigorating, recombinant approach to comic art, international in character but inspired by the American underground, came to the fore in the eighties, labeled ‘alternative’ or ‘the new comics’ but clearly indebted to the comix of yesteryear” (p. 20). Spiegelman demonstrated that comic art, the graphic novel, could do more than be outrageous, as it was in the 1960s, and for this achievement, *Maus* received a Pulitzer Prize.

Now major publishers produce graphic novels, the *New York Times* reviews them, and they have their own sections in bookstores. Nevertheless, the graphic novel retains much of its “outsider” or alternative status, offering unexpected topics, diverse views of the world, and a challenge to readers’ complacency. Creativity is still emerging from the marginalized and minorities, as early in comics history, and many graphic novel creators are still questioning society and the status quo, as during the 1960s. Many examine the human condition fraught with conflict, just as Eisner did in *A Contract with God*, and some explore important topics, as Spiegelman did in *Maus*. Thus, the graphic novel may prove an engaging text for involving secondary students in social issues while also teaching multiple literacies.

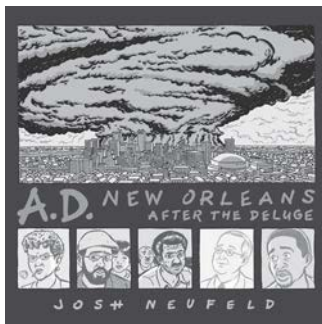
## Educational Relevance

The notion of new or multiple literacies is itself something of an “alternative” notion. For years, the

term literacy has been basically understood as the ability to read, the ability to decode print. With the rapid growth in new communications technologies and a growing interest in how students themselves experience literacies—both in the classroom and outside—the terms “new” and “multiple” literacies have become common in the professional literature. In addition, scholars and teachers of “critical literacy” position literacy in a dynamic social context, not as an abstract skill.

Literacy, then, is not a single, easily knowable quantity. “Multiple literacies” remains an elusive term that may include traditional, informational, visual, media literacy, and more. Kist (2005) acknowledges that “this field of new literacies is actually a rather large umbrella that encompasses many perspectives” (p. 5). One thing shared by those who teach and research new/multiple literacies, however, is the sense that “literacy” can no longer be contained in the narrow, standardized reading test scores cherished by NCLB. Kist (2005) summarizes, “The new literacies line of inquiry has been trying to catch up with these staggering changes in media choices that have occurred over the last 25 years and with what they mean for how to define *literacy*” (p. 3). Something nontraditional is evolving, an educational alternative to printed multiple-choice tests with one right answer.

A specific example illustrates how graphic novels may be used to teach both social justice and new/mul-



multiple literacies. *A. D. New Orleans after the Deluge* (2009) by Josh Neufeld recounts the experiences of seven real people before, during, and after Hurricane Katrina. Scenes include people abandoned on the roofs of houses, the sick seeking help, flooding sewers and water shortages, and the chaos at the Convention Center. This graphic novel reflects the destruction that befell mostly the poor and disenfranchised in New Orleans, shocking many Americans who didn’t believe that such things could happen here. Appropriate for the social studies or the English classroom, this work offers themes of social justice and conveys to the reader a visceral sense of the catastrophe, especially for those

trapped in New Orleans. Following are several discussion questions centered on the theme of social justice:

- Respond to the dialogue on pages 147 and 148 in which evacuees Leo and Michelle are discussing the radio news as they drive back into the city. Someone on the radio says, “All those folks in the Superdome and whatnot—why didn’t they just leave the city before the storm? What is wrong with those people?” Leo comments, “Yeah, when you take for granted that you can hop on a computer and make a reservation at a Hilton five hundred miles away—it’s pretty easy to forget what it’s like to be a have-not.” Do you agree with Leo? Why or why not?
- Leo ends up losing something very valuable to him. What? How does he feel about it? How would you feel in Leo’s position?
- Abbas and his fishing buddy Darnell spend one night on a house roof, eaten alive by mosquitoes and forced to beat off the rats swimming up to them. Who are these two men and why are they on the roof?
- Denise is an angry character. (You can perhaps tell by her street language.) What makes her angry? Is her anger justified?
- *A.D. New Orleans after the Deluge* actually began as a webcomic, an online magazine devoted to storytelling (see <http://www.smithmag.net/afterthe-deluge/about-2/>). Josh Neufeld, the author, was a Red Cross volunteer in Biloxi, Mississippi, for three weeks after the storm. He had self-published a graphic novel about his experiences called *Katrina Came Calling*; he was then contacted to write the New Orleans story. On the website is information that goes along with the graphic novel. For example, follow the hyperlinks to YouTube, which offers a video of the evacuation and interviews. Do you think the government acted too slowly, as the graphic novel implies? Why might this be?

Clearly, like most media today, *A.D. New Orleans after the Deluge* can be linked to a variety of other media. Jenkins (2006) describes this as the “convergence culture,” in which a book, for instance, does not stand alone, but will have a publisher’s website, podcasts from author interviews, and so on. Teachers thus have the opportunity to teach multiple literacies. For example, students could be asked to compare and

contrast different sources of information and ideas about the predicament in New Orleans after Katrina. The *Smith Magazine* website offers BBC coverage of the disaster and a variety of blogs. A Google search reveals reports from CNN, *USA Today*, Wikipedia, and a NOVA science show on PBS. There are even “stupid quotes” on a political humor site. Students should ask questions while comparing sources; here are a few examples:

- Who produced this report/message? Why?
- Who is the target audience for this message? How can you tell?
- How do you know if this is reliable information or ideas? Which information or ideas are left out of this piece?
- What messages do you find about social justice and Katrina?
- How might different people interpret these messages?

Information literacy is key in a convergent culture where messages proliferate so quickly.

Visual literacy involves a set of skills and understandings that can be taught with a graphic novel, as well. *A.D. New Orleans after the Deluge* is a rich source of images, and images are major communicators. The following classroom discussion questions indicate how *A.D. New Orleans after the Deluge* may engender learning in visual literacy.

- The first section of the book, “The Storm,” has only pictures except for the dates and places named. Why is there no character dialogue? What is the effect of this section on you?
- Until the last two sections of the book, “The Diaspora” and “The Return,” all sections display just one main color at a time, such as lavender or green. How does this affect you? Why do you suppose the last sections display multi-colors?
- Do the varied colors of the different sections seem “right” for the action? How so? What do the colors make you think of or feel?
- A number of the pictures are large, two pages, and have little or no dialogue—like pages 116–117. What impact do these have on you as you read?
- How would you describe the artistic style of this book—exaggerated, cartoonish, unusual in any way, realistic, something else? Why do you think the author uses this style?

Reading a graphic novel requires traditional literacy skills, but also more. Multiple literacies are essential in the new, digital age.

Student creation of graphic novels can facilitate the teaching of multiple literacies and social justice, too, and *A.D. New Orleans after the Deluge* could serve as a great model. The Comic Book Project at Teachers College, an arts-based literacy and learning initiative hosted by the nonprofit Center for Educational Pathways and directed by Michael Bitz, has already demonstrated the power of graphic novel creation to teach at-risk students new skills and how to express ideas about social issues. Bitz (2008) describes student graphic novels that reflect on AIDS, environmental degradation, and tobacco abuse. Similarly, researching and creating a nonfiction graphic novel of their own, individually or in groups, after studying *A.D. New Orleans after the Deluge* would make a great culminating project, allowing students to focus on racism, poverty, excessive consumerism, bullying, or similar issues. A number of books on how to make graphic novels have been published recently, such as Spilsbury’s *Comics and Graphic Novels* (2007), which explains the terms, and Davila’s *How to Draw Graphic Novels* (2004). Help is available online, too; one example is the Comic Creator at [www.readwritethink.org](http://www.readwritethink.org).

Educators can find many other excellent graphic novels that encourage thinking about social issues, especially among adolescents who do not have a clear sense of American history and the nation’s shortcomings. Following are just four more suggestions:

- *Satchel Paige: Striking Out Jim Crow* by James Sturm and Rich Tommaso (2007, Hyperion) tells about the famous pioneering ball player and the Negro Leagues.
- *The Castaways* by Rob Vollmar and Pablo G. Callejo (2002, Absence of Ink Comic Press) is a black-and-white story about a boy who leaves home to ride the rails during the Depression and is befriended by a Black man.
- *The Four Immigrants Manga* by Henry Kiyama and translated by Frederik Schodt (1999, Stone Bridge Press) is a humorous but moving insider account of four Japanese immigrants living in San Francisco from 1904–1924.
- *The Ride Together* by Paul Karasik and Judy Karasik (2003, Washington Square Press) tells the true story of two siblings (Paul and Judy) growing up



with David, an autistic brother. Chapters alternate between the sister's point of view told in regular prose and the brother's account in graphic novel form. One concern is patient treatment of people who cannot function, like David.

## Conclusion

The graphic novel is a relatively new medium that has grown out of comic books. This medium has a controversial history that is also creative and engaging. As Versaci (2007) puts it, "But the marginality of comics has also allowed comic book creators to take advantage of others' (dis)regard for them in order to create representations that can be both surprising and subversive. If one characteristic of good literature is that it challenges our ways of thinking, then comics' cultural position is such that they are able to mount these challenges in unique ways" (p. 12). Many titles offer great stories that can engage students in social issues while teaching new literacy skills. New media may well be useful in teaching old objectives: critical thinking, respect for diverse voices, empathy for fellow humans, regard for social justice, and even the incentive to work towards a different and better society.

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- Kist, W. (2005). *New literacies in action: Teaching and learning in multiple media*. New York: Teachers College Press.
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## Why Aren't We Laughing?

**W**hen the Oscars are given out, very few comedies win the Best Picture award. Doesn't it take significant talent to make an audience laugh?

When books are "lighter" in tone, readers have mixed reactions. Isn't it normal to recognize that each person has a different "funny bone"? One that gets tickled in its own way to produce a smile or laughter? Some people laughed out loud at the Three Stooges, and others were not amused at all. Some enjoy *Two and a Half Men* on TV, and others are turned off. So a person who writes humor has a most "interesting" task. Consider the various techniques and styles in books by Mark Twain, Woody Allen, Erma Bombeck, Dorothy Parker, James Thurber, to name just a few.

In discussing this genre with teachers, they tell me if some students comment, "This isn't funny," they consider the lesson is not going very well or this might be a waste of time. One teacher stated, "There is not much to teach when students read funny stuff." She went on to describe how much easier it is to teach when one reads about a character who is seri-

ously ill or is dying or is suffering physical or emotional abuse. High drama? Another teacher stated that there is not much you can talk about after reading an Ogden Nash poem. Can't one just have fun? In a Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert age, can't laughter be its own reward?

I don't always agree with critics who review plays, movies, TV shows, or books. I enjoy forming my own opinions and respect the rights of others to do the same. (Read Daniel Pennac's *The Rights of the Reader*, Candlewick, 2008. Fun and somewhat provocative.) Humor can make one laugh at absurdity one moment and stimulate critical thinking about an issue the next. As I grow older, I realize how much enjoyment I've gained through humorous writings.

Here are just a few books by children's and young adult authors that have enriched my life:

Choldenko, Gennifer. *Al Capone Shines My Shoes*. Dial, 2009.  
 Dahl, Roald. *The Vicar of Nibbleswicke*. Puffin, 1993.  
 Danziger, Paula. *The Cat Ate My Gymsuit*. PaperStar, 1998.  
 Kinney, Jeff. *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*:

*The Last Straw*. Amulet, 2009.  
 Korman, Gordon. *No More Dead Dogs*. Hyperion, 2002.  
 Prelutsky, Jack. *My Dog May Be a Genius*. Greenwillow, 2008.  
 Scieszka, Jon. *Knucklehead*. Viking, 2008.  
 Silverstein, Shel. *A Light in the Attic: Special Edition*. Harper, 2009.  
 Spinelli, Jerry. *Space Station Seventh Grade*. Little, Brown, 1982.  
 van de Ruit, John. *Spud*. Razorbill, 2007.

### The More the Merrier

When I visit schools or meet with teachers and/or librarians, they tell me about the many students who can't read, won't read, don't read. When I talked with some of their students, I got some interesting information. A number of students could read better than they let on. In fact, some admitted they enjoyed being in special reading classes because not much was expected of them or they got out of reading boring books.

At one point in my career, I was assigned to visit all of the high schools in New York City and to look at the records of students who were likely to drop out. I met with

a number of such students and listened to their stories. They were *not* critical of their teachers. They were extremely critical of the curriculum and the books they had to read. These did not seem relevant to them.

Many of these students could read very well. Some read magazines and often read what their friends recommended. Wouldn't it be a good idea to print out a quarterly journal with reviews by students, teachers, librarians? Why not give credit for such participation and recognize that whatever students read is a big step in promoting literacy?

With that in mind, here are a few suggestions in various categories. I welcome hearing the suggestions of others.

#### **Beyond Here and Now**

- Brennan, Herbie. *The Shadow Project*. Balzer & Bray, 2010.
- Collins, Suzanne. *Catching Fire*. Scholastic, 2009.
- de Fombelle, Timothee. *Toby Alone*. Candlewick, 2009.
- Farmer, Nancy. *The Islands of the Blessed*. Atheneum, 2009.
- Jones, Carrie. *Captivate*. Bloomsbury, 2010.
- Mahy, Margaret. *The Magician of Hoad*. McElderry, 2009.
- Yep, Laurence. *City of Fire*. Starscape, 2009.

#### **Beyond the Twilight series**

- Harvey, Alyxandra. *Hearts at Stake*. Walker, 2010.
- Jenkins, A. M. *Night Road*. Harper, 2008.
- Jinks, Catherine. *The Reformed Vampire Support Group*. Harcourt, 2009.

- Jones, Patrick. *The Tear Collector*. Walker, 2009.
- Lake, Nick. *Blood Ninja*. Simon & Schuster, 2009.
- Nayeri, Daniel and Dina. *Another Faust*. Candlewick, 2009.
- Smith, L. J. *Night World*. Simon Pulse, 2009.

#### **Family Relationships**

- Bauman, Beth Ann. *Rosie and Skate*. Wendy Lamb, 2009.
- Doyle, Eugenie. *According to Kit*. Front Street, 2009.
- Golding, Theresa Martin. *Niner*. Front Street, 2008.
- Korman, Gordon. *Pop*. Balzer & Bray, 2009.
- Sheth, Kashmira. *Boys without Names*. Balzer & Bray, 2010.
- Sweeney, Joyce. *The Guardian*. Holt, 2009.
- Weiss, M. Jerry, and Helen S. Weiss, Eds. *This Family Is Driving Me Crazy*. Putnam, 2009.

#### **Historical Fiction**

- Barell, John. *Surviving Erebus: An Antarctic Adventure*. Royal Fireworks, 2008.
- Cadnum, Michael. *Peril on the Sea*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009.
- Davies, Jacqueline. *Lost*. Marshall Cavendish, 2009.
- Elliott, Patricia. *The Pale Assassin*. Holiday House, 2009.
- McKernan, Victoria. *The Devil's Paintbox*. Knopf, 2009.
- Spillebeen, Geert (Terese Edelstein, Trans.). *Age 14*. Houghton Mifflin, 2009.
- Towell, Ann. *Grease Town*. Tundra, 2010.

#### **A Matter of Life and Death**

- Bray, Libba. *Going Bovine*. Delacorte, 2009.

- Frost, Helen. *Crossing Stones*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009.
- LaCour, Nina. *Hold Still*. Dutton, 2009.
- McCormick, Patricia. *Purple Heart*. Balzer & Bray, 2009.
- Nelson, Andy. *The Sky Is Everywhere*. Dial, 2010.
- Scrimger, Richard. *Me and Death*. Tundra, 2010.
- Strasser, Todd. *If I Grow Up*. Simon & Schuster, 2009.

#### **Mystery and Suspense**

- Abrahams, Peter. *Reality Check*. Harper, 2009.
- Chadda, Sarwat. *Devil's Kiss*. Hyperion, 2009.
- Ferguson, Alane. *The Dying Breath*. Viking, 2009.
- Peacock, Shane. *Up in the Air*. Tundra, 2009.
- Sorrells, Walter. *Whiteout*. Dutton, 2009.
- Suma, Nova Ren. *Dani Noir*. Aladdin, 2009.
- Wilson, F. Paul. *Jack: Secret Circles*. Tor, 2010.

#### **Nonfiction**

- Flannery, Tim, adapted by Sally M. Walker. *We Are the Weather Makers*. Candlewick, 2009.
- Giblin, James Cross. *The Rise and Fall of Senator Joe McCarthy*. Clarion, 2009.
- Ginsberg, Blaze. *Episodes: My Life as I See It*. Roaring Brook, 2009.
- Heiligman, Deborah. *Charles and Emma: The Darwins' Leap of Faith*. Holt, 2009.
- O'Brien, Anne Sibley, and Perry Edmond O'Brien. *After Gandhi: One Hundred Years of Nonviolent Resistance*. Charlesbridge, 2009.



- Osborne, Linda Barrett. *Traveling the Freedom Road: From Slavery and the Civil War through Reconstruction*. Abrams, 2009.
- Reef, Catherine. *Ernest Hemingway: A Writer's Life*. Clarion, 2009.

#### **School Life: Friends and Foes**

- Anholt, Ariela. *Freefall*. Harcourt, 2010.
- Baratz-Logsted, Lauren. *Crazy Beautiful*. Houghton Mifflin, 2009.
- Franco, Betsy. *Metamorphosis Junior Year*. Candlewick, 2009.
- Hyde, Catherine Ryan. *Diary of a Witness*. Knopf, 2009.
- Northrop, Michael. *Gentlemen*. Scholastic, 2009.
- Pearson, Mary E. *The Miles Between*. Holt, 2009.
- Woods, Brenda. *A Star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame*. Putnam, 2010.

#### **Sporting Events**

- Cochrane, Mick. *The Girl Who Threw Butterflies*. Knopf, 2009.
- Jones, V.M. *Out of Reach*. Marshall Cavendish, 2008.
- Martino, Alfred C. *Over the End Line*. Harcourt, 2009.
- Murdock, Catherine Gilbert. *Front and Center*. Houghton Mifflin, 2009.
- Peet, Mel. *Exposure*. Candlewick, 2009.
- Scaletta, Kurtis. *Mudville*. Knopf, 2009.
- Weaver, Will. *Super Stock Rookie*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009.

#### **Too Good to Miss**

- Alvarez, Julia. *Return to Sender*. Knopf, 2009.
- Chaikin, Andrew, and Alan Bean. *Mission Control, This Is Apollo*. Viking, 2009.
- Erskine, Kathryn. *Mockingbird*. Philomel, 2010.

- Kohler, Dean Ellis with Susan VanHecke. *Rock 'n' Roll Soldier: A Memoir*. Harper Collins, 2009.
- Metselaar, Menno, and Ruud van der Rol. *Anne Frank: Her Life in Words and Pictures*. Roaring Brook, 2009.
- Myers, Walter Dean. *Lockdown*. Amistad, 2010.
- Partridge, Elizabeth. *Marching for Freedom*. Viking, 2009.

#### **Special for the Teacher**

- Adoff, Arnold, and Kacy Cook, eds. *Virginia Hamilton: Speeches, Essays, and Conversations*. Blue Sky, 2010.
- Mortenson, Greg. *Stones into Schools*. Viking, 2009.
- Nilsen, Alleen Pace, and Kenneth L. Donelson. *Literature for Today's Young Adults* (8th ed.). Allyn and Bacon, 2009.

## *Freaked:*

Riding the Train to Freedom with Author J. T. Dutton

**Interviewer's Note:** I am fascinated by authors and the stories that they tell. Not only do I want to read their work, I also want to know where the stories come from, so I sat down with J. T. Dutton and talked about the development of her first book. *Freaked* is part journey novel, part young adult problem novel, and part historical fiction, even though many of us may shudder to think of 1993 as history. In this interview, Jen and I talked about how this book came to be, how she found herself in the world of young adult literature, and how this book is being received.



**JM:** *Let's tell the story of how this book developed from a creative writing assignment in graduate school to *Freaked*.*

**J. T. Dutton:** My first ideas for the story actually came before graduate school. I had finished college, I'd waited tables for a few years, and I was looking for a life purpose. I knew I liked to write, so I moved down to Connecticut and was taking classes at Columbia University. I was going in every day on a train. One afternoon, Jerry Garcia was playing at Madison Square Garden. I had an assignment in my creative writing class at Columbia on creating a voice, and so I was listening to the Deadheads talking on the train. I had had a project all worked out, but I threw it away and worked on this voice

because it was so distinct. When I handed it in to the class, people laughed. A few weeks later, somebody asked me if they could publish it in a student magazine, so a small bit of it got published right away.

I took it with me to graduate school in Alaska, where I used it to write a short story, and the same kind of thing happened—people enjoyed the voice. They also said that the story I had written was incomplete; they were looking for more details and more things to happen, so I expanded

the story into a novella. I prepared several short stories and the novella for my graduate school thesis defense and then thought, "What the heck, this is my last chance to write something big working with my mentors at the University of Alaska." So I expanded the novella into a novel and used that by itself as my thesis for my M.F.A. Then I did nothing with it for ten years; it just sat in a drawer. Later, when my husband Jeff was in graduate school and looking for a job, job prospects were grim. He had two or three interviews, and after seven years of school, we were feeling pretty desperate, so I wanted to do some writing that would actually pay. I was looking for freelance opportunities when Jeff said, "You know, you really ought to do one more draft of that book and send that out, too. Chances are maybe someone will be interested in it." As it turned out, someone was.

## Loveletter to a Deadhead

Parent's Weekend loomed over Scotty Loveletter at the Stillwater Academy for Boys. It loomed in part because of his name, Loveletter, the alias his sexy mother had adopted to enhance her persona as a famous sex therapist and *Playboy* centerfold. It loomed because his prep school peers were all salivating, waiting for his mother to appear, and it loomed because it coincided with the Grateful Dead concert at the Freedom Coliseum—Scotty's version of the Holy Grail, the place to record the ultimate bootleg tape. But Scotty is seeking more than just the ultimate bootleg concert tape. He is seeking connections with his fellow human beings, even though that thought can be terrifying to him. He uses drugs to both create those connections and hide from them. Drugs give him status with his roommate, Todd. They are his membership card as a Deadhead, and yet they help separate him from the elements of his world that he does not want to deal with. He does not want to deal with his peers who fantasize about his mother. He does not want to deal with his roommate who treats him like a sidekick and keeps him hanging on because he supplies his drug habit. He does not want

to deal with his endless string of stepfathers. He does not want to deal with the cookie-cutter future of prep school boys: the expected career path of the attorney or the corporate CEO. On the way to the concert in Freedom, Todd abandons Scotty in a bathroom in Grand Central Station, and Scotty is left to fend for himself. Alone, without a ticket for the show or a plan for getting there, he makes his way to Freedom and revels in the Deadhead experience.

Critics have tried to create a parallel between *Freaked* and J. D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*, but Dutton did not set out to write *Catcher in the Rye* for the new millennium. She set out to capture the voice and the experience of a Deadhead. Scotty Loveletter has a mission; Holden Caulfield did not. *Freaked* is the story of the fulfillment of Scotty's mission, to travel to Freedom, New York, to record the ultimate Grateful Dead concert tape. Both stories share a sense of cynicism. Both main characters see through the veil of prep school privilege. Those who enjoyed *Catcher* will enjoy *Freaked*. So will readers who enjoyed John Greene's *Looking for Alaska*, Stephen Chbosky's *Perks of Being a Wallflower*, or Ned Vizzini's *It's Kind of a Funny Story*.

**JM:** Tell me about some of the things that other people said along the way as this story has grown from eavesdropping on the train.

**JD:** Whenever I told people I was writing this book, the Grateful Dead fans among them would always tell me a Grateful Dead story. The Grateful Dead were present enough in people's consciousness, at least in the 90s, that they immediately knew who the character was and the kind of experience he had. Now we're a little more distant and more of these things have to be explained. I suppose I kept writing it because it was sort of like a favorite party joke that people got. I kept writing it because it seemed like people kept enjoying it. It is interesting that now that the book is finished, there's a little more dubiousness about whether or not Scotty's story is really funny, but for a time I think people found it that way. There was humor in this. It was a slice of life that we knew.

**JM:** Let's talk about the Grateful Dead. You mentioned the distance, so if this is meant for an audience of teenage readers, how does that work?

**JD:** Now I have the chance to take the story to high schools where the kids say to me, "I had no idea who you were talking about in the first pages. I had to go to Wikipedia and look up Jerry Garcia." This just amazes me! It's kind of funny, but there are metaphors from music and experience that I think transcend time. Kids will always connect to music, so the book has that quality that makes them able to share in it. I think for me to try to write about a current band would not ring true, but I *could* write about a band that inspired me when I was an adolescent and try to transfer that feeling to a younger audience. Whether I succeeded or not, I hesitate to say, but that was the goal. The Grateful Dead are a piece of history that is just as interesting to remember as other pieces of history.



**JM:** *So do you see this as historical fiction?*

**JD:** I do. It is historical fiction now, it really is. When I was doing the revision 12 years after the original writing in the 90s, I had to look up what was current in 1993 because I had forgotten. I had to make decisions about what needed to be in there and what had to go, because certain parts no longer seemed as important. I also made the decision not to do a lot of early explanation about the Grateful Dead and their history, but to just let that be something the readers had to catch up with.

**JM:** *And why did that seem like the right decision?*

**JD:** I wanted to stay true to the narrative voice. Scotty wouldn't necessarily be stopping to explain. It doesn't matter if anybody knows more about the Grateful Dead from reading this book. I want them to know what a fan of the Grateful Dead was feeling, so it's more about being a fan than about the Grateful Dead. It just seemed that adding that material was a digression.

**JM:** *You have admitted that you were new to YA literature when you started this book, so let's talk about how this became YA and how you perceive this genre. If it wasn't intended to be written for a younger audience in the beginning, tell me how all that came to be.*

**JD:** I wasn't thinking about *Freaked* as YA in graduate school. If I was, I think I would have written a different book because I had very narrow perceptions of what YA was before I started writing it. Now that I have written it and it's in this genre, I realize there's a lot of room to maneuver for a writer. My stereotype of YA was always that sooner or later, the adult worldview would overwhelm the child worldview. I thought, we can have rebellion, we can have bad behavior, but ultimately, the main character has to learn the lessons that parents want them to learn.

What I didn't realize is that these books are becoming a little more privately owned by the teens who read them, and there is less of that sense of parental influence on the outcomes. When I originally wrote the book, the ending was even a

little darker; the character was a little less transformed. I think there is transformation at the end of *Freaked*, but there's a quality to it that's perhaps uncomfortable. He's transformed into a more active rather than passive rebel, but he's not conforming; he's still probably going to live outside the boundaries of what we consider good social behavior, just not as a follower. In becoming more active, he's also growing up, moving toward adulthood, albeit a more controversial form of adulthood.

**JM:** *Controversial by whose definition?*

**JD:** I don't know. My anxiety is about how the book is being viewed. I see *Freaked* as being slightly disapproved of in certain critical circles. There's this sense in the reviews that we can't really approve of this; it's not being rubber-stamped as a great book. Is that due to flawed writing? Or is it because it doesn't deliver the ending that people are looking for? I think I understand what people want from the book; they are looking for this unpleasant character who abuses drugs to become a little less unpleasant. But what they get is a character who stays true to himself, not to somebody we think he should become. This is the way I wanted to write it, and I have to stick to my guns on that.

**JM:** *What about the role of adults in YA? My students and I talk about how the author has to get the adults out of the way in some construct to allow the teen to be the decision maker, to have the central role in the story.*

**JD:** Yes, we write about kids who are metaphorically orphaned, emotionally or through some sort of separation. It's easier to have characters take action if they are orphaned in some way. The evolution is that the child is outgrowing the adult, so in order to give themselves permission to do that, I think they do have to think of the adult as "lesser." This is a tough problem for a writer because the parents *aren't* really lesser. If the author concedes to pressure and makes the parents flatter, that author also risks making the story less real. In Scotty's case, his parents are removed physically. As a result, he doesn't necessarily need to diminish them, so neither do I, the writer, but that's the trope that we

see: the parents are somehow less important to the purpose of things. They are likely to be the ones that give the bad advice or offer the cliché—"Well, just be yourself," and the kid thinks "whatever."

**JM:** *Let's talk about truth. Other YA authors, such as Crutcher, Ritter, or Lipsyte, talk about their work and they talk about telling kids the truth. What is the truth in *Freaked*?*

**JD:** The truth is there are millions of teenage boys out there who like to smoke pot. They may get that they'll mess up their lives if they do drugs, and that it will be dangerous and it will be bad, but they do it anyway, and they find it funny. If they were to tell you their stories, those stories would sound adolescent like this and be full of the bravado of teens doing things that make their parents cringe. If drugs didn't have a side that was attractive, people wouldn't take them. Associated with that is this Grateful Dead culture of camaraderie and crazy confusion. There is an attractiveness to it that was alluring to me as an adolescent. Ultimately, we hope that people grow up and choose not to make doing drugs a full-time endeavor in their lives. But there is an adolescent fantasy with this kind of being lost that's very real, and to pretend it doesn't exist or it shouldn't exist or terrible things always happen when you encounter it is simply dishonest. It's more honest to say that drugs are out there, you're going to come into contact with them, you'll probably experiment with them at some point, but ultimately it's not a way of life. It isn't the journey, it's a piece of the journey. Eventually, you're going to have to say you want more out of your life than what's happening here.

**JM:** *You mentioned the word "bravado." I would never use that word to characterize Scotty.*

**JD:** He brags. He talks about being lesser than other people, but on the other hand, he tells you his glorious stories of how messed up he's been and how much trouble he's been in. There's a little bit of excessive self-pity in Scotty that's almost a form of showing off. Does that make sense?

**JM:** *I think so. That leads to my next question: where*

*is the reckoning between the guy who says things like ". . . but my real addiction was to my fellow human beings. I couldn't stop giving a damn about what they thought of me" (Dutton, 2009, p. 39) and using the word "bravado" to describe him?*

**JD:** He is a contradiction. That is part of who he is. He wants to connect. He wants to be part of the "in" crowd. He wants to be popular, but he also wants not to care. This is part of his boarding school culture; the less you care, the better you are. For a teenage boy in this environment, the less connected he is and the less he feels he needs other people, the better he fits in. His roommate Todd is sort of the perfect prep school boy. He's cool to the point of dead. He is numb and unfeeling. Scotty sees the desire to care as a flaw. He is striving not to care, and the easiest way not to care is to get more and more and more into the drugs, which helps him drift away from his emotions. It's easier for him when he doesn't care, but he *does* care. There's that piece of him that draws him back, and ultimately, one is going to win over the other.

**JM:** *Which one wins?*

**JD:** I can't answer that. That's the u-turn, the sequel. I think of fiction as a question, and here that question is, which is going to win out? But it's the question that's important, not the answer, so to answer the question is to un-tell the story in a way.

**JM:** *John H. Ritter said, "We expect novelists to tell us something we don't know or we haven't thought all the way through" (Sherbert, 2007, p. 14). What does *Freaked* tell us that we didn't know or we haven't thought all the way through?*

**JD:** The novels that I really liked when I was in my 20s were Jack Kerouac's and Ken Kesey's, written in the late 50s and 60s. There's an act of rebellion in their books, a challenging of social mores. I'd like to hope *Freaked* challenges something about how we envision teens and helps readers embrace the issue of the darker side of their confusion. That's the ideal, that's the goal. Did I achieve it? My own humility prevents me from knowing that, but that is what I wished for—that there would be

a cultural challenge in the issue of people saying this is not a good life for teens. I think maybe we are robbing teens of the time and space to live in confusion. We're making too many decisions for them and no, we don't want them to make all horrible decisions, but this character is going on a journey a lot of kids don't get to go on. He's suffering and deciding for himself, and I think more people should get the chance to do the same thing. I think mistakes are the road to adulthood.

**JM:** *Let's talk a little bit more about the craft of writing. I went to the 2008 Youngstown State University English Festival, and there were a number of featured authors that year. As I watched them interact with their audiences, it struck me that they were approaching the students not as readers, but as fellow writers. It fascinates me that a writer doesn't think about readers as readers, but as potential writers reading their work as a model for craft. Where are you in this scheme between reader and writer?*

**JD:** I read as a writer. I think there is a difference between how I read and how my husband Jeff, who is a literary critic, reads. He reads like a reader. He gets tropes and symbolism. I attack craft—what the author is doing, how he or she is creating this sense of tension, what details are included. So I might suggest that the authors talk to people like writers because they read like writers. Perhaps when they are talking to readers, they are assuming that those readers read like they do themselves, but maybe that's flattening it out too much.

**JM:** *Let's talk some more about Scotty as a character. What do you see as Scotty's redeeming qualities or positive attributes? What is his saving grace?*

**JD:** I actually think he's very creative. I know I am probably the only person in the world who loves him, but I do love him. I love him so! I think he's funny. He's got a really original world view. He's not buying it, so he's got a cynicism about the status quo that I share. He's going to follow his own path, he's going to follow his own dreams, and he has moments of compassion. They're not very deep or very long, but they exist, and they exist despite his best efforts to suppress them. So I think the

“deeper down Scotty” is going to be a very interesting adult someday. He's smart, I would say that, too, a smart young man.

**JM:** *Tell me about writing his voice. I must admit that my frustration with reading the book is that sometimes, by the time I get to the end of a sentence, I have lost where he started, and I have to go back to the beginning and read it over again. Part of that is his character. He's figuring it out as we read along, and sometimes he's figuring it out in the middle of the sentence. Talk to me about his voice and where that comes from.*

**JD:** Oh that's me, I'm sure that's me. My father has read *Freaked* a few times, different drafts, and every time he says it's still very bumpy. A little bit of the jumping around was an attempt on my part to create a voice that is believably under the influence. In my second book, I found my sentences were much shorter because my character was a much more practical person. She doesn't ramble, she doesn't describe, she doesn't whip off into metaphor because she doesn't have the overlay of the drug culture to extend her, and I missed the free-floating words when I moved away from it. It seemed less beautiful to suddenly have this ordered mind to work with. On the other hand, I got a little more clarity out of it.

**JM:** *Last big topic . . . in anticipation of this being in schools and classrooms, it's going to be challenged. People are not going to like their kids reading this book.*

**JD:** I'm already getting a little of that here and there.

**JM:** *What are your thoughts on that? What would you say to teachers? What would you say to parents or librarians?*

**JD:** Get over it. In my own teaching experience, I get a little nervous when we have to deal with controversial material. I don't want parents saying, “I don't approve of this, I don't like this.” Even at the college level, it makes me uncomfortable that someone would disapprove of what I present. A student once asked me, “Is this a glorification of



drugs?” I think that’s a very viable question, and I feel very defensive when I have to answer it, but I did put the subject matter out there to be wrestled with. I think that the point of reading anything is to be challenged—that quote by Ritter is a valid one. We read to be challenged.

I definitely intended *Freaked* to be a challenge, to be controversial. I knew telling the story of a wealthy, upper middle class teenage boy in 1993 who does drugs would freak some people out. There are all these books out there about African American or Hispanic boys living in the city doing drugs and being tough. But a very wealthy, very privileged boy who is completely amoral is an idea fewer people want to grapple with. Why? Why are we only writing about certain people in our culture or in a certain social class as immoral? I am saying, look here, the biggest druggies I’ve met in my life had trust funds, and that was a surprise to me when I discovered it. I don’t think we should go on pretending that it’s otherwise. So maybe there’s this sense of “let’s get real here” and let’s get real in the classroom, too. Kids are not as unsophisticated as we think; they are talking about sex and drugs and they are thinking about sex and drugs. When we pretend temptation doesn’t exist, when we choose not to share as much of the truth of this world as we can, we are not only being naïve, we are asking kids to be less fully rounded, less-informed adults.

**Editors’ note:** Look for J. T. Dutton’s second book, *Stranded*, coming in summer 2010. Someone in the small town of Heaven, Iowa, is keeping a terrible secret. In a cornfield on the edge of town, a farmer discovers an abandoned newborn wrapped in a sweatshirt. Fifteen-year-old Kelly Louise Sorenson must decide whether to tell the police all she knows, or protect her family from the scandal that will surely follow.

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