

## Island Hopping:

From *The Cay* to *Treasure Island* to *Lord of the Flies* to *The Tempest* . . . and Back Again

*I have wrought my simple plan  
If I give one hour of joy  
To the boy who's half a man,  
Or the man who's half a boy.*

—(Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Preface to *The Lost World*)

**M**ost people who are passionate about literature can probably look back and point to the book that launched them on a lifelong journey of reading. For me, it's easy to recall my first encounter with the novel that started me down a long, long path lined with literature: Theodore Taylor's *The Cay*. As a fourth-grader at Luther Burbank Elementary School in Oklahoma City, I stumbled onto Taylor's story of an unlikely duo shipwrecked on a deserted island and found it to be the perfect introduction to the magic of reading; it offered adventure and friendship and danger and, ultimately, a hopeful ending. These key ingredients drew me back time and time again to check that book out from the library, making *The Cay* both the first "real" book I can remember reading and the first real book I can remember re-reading—an important step in building my confidence as a young reader (Lynch, 2008/2009, p. 341). Looking back, this novel stands at the head of the line of hundreds of subsequent books that have become a part of me as a person and, certainly, as a part of my life as an English teacher.

Naturally, I left Philip and Timothy and their cay behind over time, turning instead to other books and other adventures. I moved on to meet up with Jim

Hawkins and Long John Silver during their tribulations on *Treasure Island*. I sailed on from there to a deserted tropical island, where I made the acquaintance of Ralph, Piggy, and the rest of William Golding's shipwrecked boys. From there, it was on to even more "mature" works, until at some point I found myself marooned by Shakespeare's tempest with Prospero, Miranda, and the others. And without being aware of the process, I had island-hopped my way well clear of Taylor's "simple" adventure story, summarily dismissing it from my bookcase; I had moved into "serious" literature, without giving any thought to the possibility that I might enjoy a round trip.

Pam Cole (2009) argues, however, that YAL "can spark interest in the classics and vice versa" (p. 513). While the idea that YAL might serve as a launching point that leads to more canonical works—to the classics—Cole reminds us that the relationship between YAL and the classics may be less linear and more recursive in nature. In the case of my own reading life, I unfortunately gave no thought to returning to my reading roots until I had the occasion to take, and subsequently teach, a course in young adult literature.

Anyone who has taken such a class can surely recall learning of the many qualities of YAL espoused

by its passionate proponents: Young adult literature has great breadth in terms of literary genre, offering its readers selections in fiction, creative nonfiction, poetry, graphic novels, short stories, and more (Nilsen and Donelson, 2008, p. 31). Young adult literature deals seriously with issues and emotions important to young readers (Nilsen and Donelson, p. 35). Young adult literature tackles social, cultural, and environmental

---

**I've been most surprised to find that I am now arguing just as strongly on behalf of young adult literature for *adults*, as well.**

---

issues that impact the lives of your readers (Bucher and Hinton, 2010, p. 10). Young adult literature offers stories that explore a wide range of ethnic and cultural groups (Nilsen and Donelson, p. 32). And, of course, young adult literature offers sophisticated, quality literary experiences for its readers. These famil-

iar arguments in support of YA literature strike me as quite reasonable and convincing, and I am now an unabashed supporter of the field. I consider it an invaluable resource and, in fact, a literary treasure chest sitting wide open, inviting any young reader inclined to reach down and grab hold of its contents.

More than that, however, I've discovered how important young adult literature has become to me as a teacher and as a reader who outgrew the adjective "young adult" more than 20 years ago. As an avid reader who became a high school English teacher and then a college English professor, I've traveled a professional path along which studying literature became an increasingly "serious" business. Somewhere along the line, stories became merely occasions for talking about literary terminology. Focusing our attention predominately (or even exclusively) on the literary elements that make up a story becomes an easy trap for many English teachers; it remains in both our own interest and the best interests of our students to remember that knowing literary terminology should serve us in our efforts to render better, more sophisticated readings, and learning it should serve as a means to a greater end—not an end unto itself.

If we're not vigilant on this point, plots became specimens to probe for critical events, such as the *rising action* and the *denouement*. Literary characters increasingly serve primarily as exemplars of terms such

as *flat*, *round*, *stock*, and *dynamic*. And analysis, close readings, and criticism edge further into the forefront of our thinking. At least, that was my experience, and I found myself becoming further and further removed from what had originally drawn me to reading in the first place: the love of a good story and the companionship of wildly interesting people doing amazing things in interesting places and times.

## Arguing YAL

My renewed acquaintance with young adult literature, however, has changed all that. While the arguments for YAL for *young adults* make perfect sense to me, I've been most surprised to find that I am now arguing just as strongly on behalf of young adult literature for *adults*, as well. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle clearly envisioned the model reader for *The Lost World* as either a youngster with a yearning to address serious questions about human nature or, alternatively, a mature adult who has held onto just enough of a childlike sense of wonder to love a good old-fashioned adventure story. In either case, Doyle's description of his ideal reader remains the most apt description I've ever read of the essential qualities required of a reader of young adult literature, and it certainly holds forth the possibility that adults can enjoy and appreciate the very same literary works loved and valued by younger readers.

So, while I have an easy time envisioning a loyal adult readership of YAL, I would suggest that a specific segment of the adult population might stand in a unique position to benefit from a healthy dose of young adult literature: English teachers. An occupational hazard of sorts exists for English teachers, some of whom find themselves put into the position of constantly analyzing and scrutinizing, and sometimes dissecting, that which they love. In "Introduction to Poetry," Billy Collins (2003) describes some young readers' confrontational approach to literature and reminds us that teachers may, unwittingly, pass that kind of clinical, dispassionate approach on to their students:

*But all they want to do  
is tie the poem to a chair with rope  
and torture a confession out of it.*

*They begin beating it with a hose  
to find out what it really means. (p. 3)*

And when enough time is spent forcing meaning out of literature, it may be easy to disconnect from that which initially drew us to the field in the first place: Amazing characters. Grand adventures. And serious ideas sharing space with a good story.

Reading young adult literature as an adult—and as a teacher—has afforded me the chance to be a young reader again, to reconnect with what first drew me into the pages of book after book. My renewed acquaintance with authors such as Gary Paulsen and Paul Fleischman and Lois Lowry and Sharon Creech has provided me with much of what I had unknowingly lost over the years . . . the feeling of great anticipation upon opening an unfamiliar book for the first time. The tactile satisfaction I get from the feel of cradling a book that fits snugly in my hand, as opposed to the unwieldy heft of a textbook. Finishing a book with, if not a happy ending, a sense of hopefulness and optimism that the lives of the characters I've come to know and care about might work out after all. The chance to reconsider my sadly entrenched thoughts about subjects like justice and freedom and independence and what it means to be in the never-ending process of growing up. And belonging to a loosely affiliated community of readers that genuinely loves its books and wants to talk about them with anyone who might be interested.

YA literature has given me back all of these things, a most important gift for an English teacher, a surprising and pleasant reminder of a time before analysis papers and exams and class discussions, affording me the unexpected opportunity to move back in time and enjoy literature in a way I had left behind long ago, without my even being aware of the loss.

When I reread *The Cay* today, I easily slip back into a literary landscape I vividly recall from my early days as a reader—a world filled with action and adventure and amazing characters that fascinated me as a fourth grader. However, I see much more going on in this little novel now that I'm a reader with a few more years of experience behind me: I appreciate Theodore Taylor's facility with language when he opens his novel and simultaneously grabs me squarely by the shoulders by writing, "Like silent, hungry sharks that swim in the darkness of the sea, the German submarines arrived in the middle of the night" (p. 9). I can see now that Taylor understands how important it is to think about how we come to

confront our own mortality, how important it is to recognize and celebrate not only our commonalities but also our differences, and how inevitable it is that we all are constantly in the process of developing our own unique identities. And, when I read this novel today, I can appreciate the fact that this is a book about much more than an old man and a young boy stuck in a precarious situation, but that it's an occasion for the author and his readers to wrestle with important cultural, social, and racial issues that are as important today as they

were when I first read the story in 1978. In short, this novel reminds me that all great YAL—indeed, all great literature intended for any audience—offers this same richness and complexity that I recognize and appreciate every time I return to *The Cay*.

## Renewal

I stand at the beginning, really, of my renewed reading life with young adult literature. In many ways, I feel just as I did when I was ten years old, had just finished reading *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe* (Lewis, 1950/2000), and realized I had six more books to go in *The Chronicles of Narnia*—that an entire world was waiting for me if I would just pick up the next book and open it. At that moment, I knew without any question that I was poised on the leading edge of a reading adventure full of promise and possibility, which is just how I feel now when I think about the vast field of young adult literature I've yet to explore.

My recent re-acquaintance with all that YAL lit has to offer not only changed my reading habits, but it has dramatically altered the landscape of my home library, resulting in a more accurate picture of just how I have made the journey from *The Cay* to *Treasure Island* to *Lord of the Flies* to *The Tempest* and back again. My many volumes of Kurt Vonnegut's work now share space with Richard Peck. Mark Twain has shifted just a bit to accommodate Carl Hiassen. Willa Cather now resides next to Lois Lowry. And William

---

**And when enough time is spent forcing meaning out of literature, it may be easy to disconnect from that which initially drew us to the field in the first place.**

---

Shakespeare finds himself shifting over to make way for Laurie Halse Anderson. Anyone who took the time to closely examine my bookshelves now would surely have a better understanding of how I came to be the reader I am with the tastes I have, and they would certainly get a crystal clear sense of why I started this journey toward a life filled with reading and teaching in the first place.

*Kevin Kienholz is an associate professor in the Department of English, Modern Languages, and Journalism at Emporia State University, Kansas, where he primarily teaches English methods and young adult literature. Prior to joining the faculty at ESU, he taught language arts for seven years at Stillwater High School in Stillwater, Oklahoma.*

## References

- Bucher, K., & Hinton, K. (2010). *Young adult literature: Exploration, evaluation, and appreciation* (2nd ed.). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Cole, P. B. (2009). *Young adult literature in the 21st century*. Boston: McGraw Hill.
- Collins, B. (2003). *Poetry 180: A turning back to poetry*. New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks.
- Doyle, Sir A. C. (1912/2004). *The lost world*. Franklin, TN: The Dalmation Press.
- Lewis, C. S. (1950/2000). *The lion, the witch, and the wardrobe*. New York: HarperCollins Children's.
- Lynch, T. L. (2008/2009). Rereadings and literacy: How students' second readings might open third spaces. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 52, 334–341.
- Nilsen, A. P., & Donelson, K. L. (2008). *Literature for today's young adults* (8th ed.). Boston: Pearson.
- Taylor, T. (1969). *The cay*. New York: Doubleday.

---

## 2010 Amelia Elizabeth Walden Book Award Winner and Finalists Announced

The Assembly on Literature for Adolescents (ALAN) of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) is pleased and proud to announce the winner of the 2010 Amelia Elizabeth Walden Book Award for Young Adult Fiction. Established in 2008 to honor the wishes of young adult author Amelia Elizabeth Walden, the award allows for the sum of \$5,000 to be presented annually to the author of a young adult title selected by the ALAN Amelia Elizabeth Walden Book Award Committee as demonstrating a positive approach to life, widespread teen appeal, and literary merit. The winner of the 2010 Amelia Elizabeth Walden Award is ***Fire* by Kristin Cashore** (Dial).

The 2010 Amelia Elizabeth Walden Award finalists are ***Marcelo in the Real World* by Francisco X. Stork** (Arthur A. Levine); ***The Monstrumologist* by Rick Yancey** (Simon and Schuster); ***North of Beautiful* by Justina Chen Headley** (Little, Brown and Company); and ***The Sweetheart of Prosper County* by Jill S. Alexander** (Feiwel and Friends).

All Amelia Elizabeth Walden Award titles will be identified by an award sticker—gold for the winner and silver for the four finalists. This year's winning title and finalists will be honored at an open reception on Monday, November 22, immediately following the 2010 ALAN Workshop in Orlando, Florida.

The 2010 Amelia Elizabeth Walden Award Committee would like to thank: the Amelia Elizabeth Walden Award Foundation; the ALAN Executive Council; the ALAN Board of Directors; past AEWA chair Dr. Wendy Glenn; NCTE; and last, but not least, the more than twenty publishers who submitted titles for consideration.

The 2010 Amelia Elizabeth Walden Award Committee considered 202 young adult titles throughout the process. The committee was comprised of ten members representing the university, K–12 school, and library communities. They are: Daria Plumb (chair), Erica Berg, Jean Boreen, C. J. Bott, Lois Buckman, Jeff Harr, Jeff Kaplan, Bonnie Kunzel, Teri Lesesne, and Barbara Ward. For more information on the award, please visit **ALAN Online: The Official Site of the Assembly on Literature for Adolescents** at <http://www.alan-ya.org/>.

---