

Preservice Teachers' Suggestions for Summer Reading

The 24 preservice English language arts teachers who were enrolled in my spring semester (2009) Young Adult Literature (YAL) course completed assignments quite similar to those required in many such courses focused on contemporary YAL. For instance, they read novels from the *Young Adult Library Services Association* (YALSA) booklists and created annotations from selected titles. Additionally, they:

- reflected on articles, textbook chapters, and class discussions on topics like censorship and the benefits/challenges of incorporating YAL into the curriculum;
- crafted teaching ideas and designed standards-based lesson plans integrating YAL;
- presented studies of contemporary YAL authors; and
- booktalked self-selected titles from YALSA's reading lists.

Moreover, many of these preservice teachers entered the course with the typical skepticism about young adult literature (Nilsen & Donelson, 2008) because it was inconsistent with their traditional views of "quality" literature in which they were well versed. In fact, during the very first class meeting, Corrine (all names are pseudonyms), one of these outspoken skeptics, was quite frank about the "uselessness" of several popular contemporary young adult novels, including *Twilight*. My attempt to counter by suggesting that such books have attracted millions of new teens into reading and by paraphrasing Hipple (1997), ". . . the

that of teen reading is important," had no effect on Corrine. I will return to her later.

In contrast, some of the preservice teachers had read YAL during their young adult years and were familiar with current titles. These perspectives can be summed up by Judy who said, "I loved reading young adult novels when I was in school. I still enjoy them." All of the students were majoring in English language arts education, and most were completing this required course during their junior or senior year; one student was in the alternative master's degree program. Four of the undergraduates were also completing their student teaching internships during that semester. Among the student teachers, three were placed with cooperating teachers who incorporated YAL into their reading curricula.

The Course

My YAL course has undergone several reinventions over the 13 years I have taught it because of my efforts to ensure the course maintains relevancy and currency. Over that time, I have come to believe that the course should serve as a space where preservice teachers can purposefully practice strategies for developing a balanced reading curriculum through a process of ". . . talking, reading, critiquing, and sharing as a community of learners" (Stallworth, Gibbons, & Fauber, 2006, p. 487). Most specifically, I use a workshop approach in the class where we read *about* the genre and its subgenres and study different literary approaches to teaching YAL. However, the majority of the semester is spent on reading, booktalking, and

responding to contemporary titles. At a minimum, we read eight new titles. However, they also complete projects that require reading additional titles (see syllabus <http://bama.ua.edu/~jstallwo/syllsp09.pdf>).

Effective Booktalks

Booktalks can be highly effective strategies for sharing titles and encouraging students to read from a wide variety of genres (Keane, 2009). Certainly my students found each other's booktalks overwhelmingly beneficial. As noted in the syllabus calendar, each of us presented a short booktalk of three to five minutes for one of the eight novels from the required reading list. Presenters highlighted major themes, insights, feasibility for teaching, reactions, and other issues they deemed important. The most important rule of our booktalks was that presenters could not deliver boring plot summaries. They were encouraged to consult <http://nancykeane.com/booktalks/> and the textbook to find guidelines for presenting excellent booktalks. The complete booktalk assignment is located in Appendix A, and the Scoring Rubric is in Appendix B.



Teacher booktalking *Stargirl*

After a productive four months of reading, studying, debating, booktalking, and engaging with YAL, I ended the course with a challenge to the preservice teachers: continue reading widely and deeply by developing your own personal summer reading lists

from the titles you learned about but did not have the opportunity to read during the semester. Summer allows us more time to think, enjoy, and reflect on what we read, so summer is a good time to make independent reading choices (Williams, 2003).

In an effort to support their work on these lists, I incorporated steps toward that goal into their final examination, where they reflected on and reviewed:

- the booktalks and annotations (see sample annotation in Appendix C) presented by their classmates and by me;
- new authors to whom they were introduced during class discussions, author spotlights from the textbook, and Internet YAL author podcasts and interviews (e.g., Charlie Gibson's interview with Markus Zusak from *ABC News Video on Demand* at <http://abcnews.go.com/Video/playerIndex?id=1737821>);
- new genres and formats from which they had not previously read (e.g., graphic novels); and
- titles that teens in their lives suggested to them over the semester (e.g., the students in middle and high schools where they were completing clinical placements for their various teacher education field courses).

Based on those directives, they developed realistic summer reading lists consisting of at least 10 titles with rationales, if there were compelling reasons that led them to particular selections. These titles and the preservice teachers' reflections are explored next.

The 10 titles most often cited reflect diverse genres and formats, from graphic novels to a long-time favorite among young adult novels. See Figure 1 for the titles and selected comments from the preservice teachers that illuminate their reasons for including these novels.

Explanations and Observations

The titles listed most often for summer reading by the preservice teachers certainly reflect the persuasiveness of the booktalkers, as several members of the class commented on the quality and effectiveness of the booktalks and annotations. For example, Morgan commented, "The books I chose [for summer reading] are not necessarily the highest rated or even my preferred genre. But all of the books I listed are the ones that stood out to me during the booktalk presentations."

<i>The Top Ten Reading List</i>		
Title	Number of Times Cited	Relevant Comments from the Preservice Teachers
1. <i>The Chocolate War</i> by Robert Cormier	14	“I would like to read more classic YA literature.” Trevor “I originally did not like it, so I stopped reading. I’d like to give it a second chance.” Jenny
2. <i>Son of the Mob</i> by Gordon Korman	13	“This book is being read by my students [in my student teaching placement], and they recommended it to me.” Natasha “This was my favorite booktalk! I just thought it sounded like a really fun read.” Meghan
3. <i>Looking for Alaska</i> by John Green	12	“I enjoyed the John Green podcast and like the fact that it is set in Alabama.” Margaret
4. <i>Coraline</i> by Neil Gaiman	11	“I didn’t know this was a book! I saw the previews for the movie, so now I want to read it before I see it.” Wendy
5. <i>Breathing Underwater</i> by Alex Flinn	8	“Teenage relationship abuse is very real, and this book sounds like it is a good exploration of the problem.” Ted
6. <i>Luna</i> by Julie Anne Peters	8	“I believe teachers must read books with controversial content.” Judy
7. <i>Push</i> by Sapphire	8	“This book would be painful to read, but teachers have to know that incest can happen to our students.” Jada
8. <i>Sold</i> by Patricia McCormick	8	“Mary gave a great booktalk, and I want to read this since I haven’t read much international YAL!” Gary
9. <i>The First Part Last</i> by Angela Johnson	8	“According to the survey I gave my students, this was their favorite.” Natasha
10. <i>The Book Thief</i> by Markus Zusak	7	“The author interview was fascinating, and I think this book would be excellent in a unit on the Holocaust.” Maggie

Figure 1. Preservice teachers’ Top Ten list for young adult novels they look forward to reading

Charlotte concluded, “The booktalks offered wide perspectives and approaches to a variety of novels for the classroom and those not so appropriate . . . they were beneficial to our knowledge and understanding of the effects of young adult literature and its place in the classroom.”

The summer selections also reflect these preservice teachers’ understanding that they must read beyond their comfort zones. That is, many of them were not initially enamored with genres such as science fiction, fantasy, adventure, and the supernatural. Rather, they saw realistic fiction or the problem novel as “the genre in young adult literature” (Nilsen & Donelson, 2008, p. 150), and titles from this genre were most often cited. However, there is something of a trend among young adults toward preferences for other genres (Koss & Teale, 2009). Even these 20-somethings selected some fantasy and historical fiction for their summer reading.

Discussion of Specific Titles

The overwhelming choice to read *The Chocolate War* was not surprising because only two members of the class had read this classic YAL title. As Trevor concluded, he wanted to know something about YAL from its early days. Further, at the outset of the semester, the class listened to an audio presentation from Cormier where he explained his motivations for writing *The Chocolate War*. Cormier’s commentary prompted Carl to select this novel for a booktalk, which was an outstanding presentation using music and a “late night radio disc jockey” format. Carl’s approach and his interesting critique piqued others’ interests in this story. As a result, 14 members of the class planned to read Cormier’s classic during the summer.

Another title that created much curiosity was *Sandpiper*, a book that was at the center of much

local controversy because of a grandparent's attempt to have it removed from a Tuscaloosa, Alabama, high school library in 2007. Sexually explicit language constituted the grandparent's objection. Ultimately, but reluctantly, the school board voted (<http://www.schoollibraryjournal.com/article/CA6513724.html?nid=2413>) to allow the book to remain on the shelves. *Sandpiper* was listed four times as several class members wanted to know what prompted so much censorship concern from this grandparent and many other members of that school community. Their collective sentiment was summed up by Corrine: "I have to admit, I'm curious to see what the controversy was all about."

After watching an *on demand* television interview (Gibson, 2009) with Markus Zusak, many of the preservice teachers became intrigued with *The Book Thief* and how the novel could powerfully impact the way English and history teachers design units on the Holocaust. Additionally, two graphic novels—*American Born Chinese* by Gene Luen Yang and *Watchmen* by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons—were each mentioned five times. Preservice teachers who had never read graphic novels and did not understand their structure gained an appreciation for the format and were committed to reading these novels along with titles from other less popular genres in order to expand their reading repertoire. For instance, Maria commented, "I have a newfound appreciation for/obsession with graphic novels." Their desire to read other selections like *Son of the Mob*, *Coraline*, *Looking for Alaska*, and *Push* resulted from opportunities to learn how these different books could match the interests and needs of 21st century teens, and, as Bushman and Haas (2005) concluded, reading such books may increase young adults' understanding of themselves and their worlds. Overall, the preservice teachers took ownership of their projects by providing comprehensive information on a wide array of novels through creative and critical approaches.

Class project presentations also influenced the preservice teachers' summer reading choices. Students had several options for their final project (see Appendix A), and three groups chose to study adolescents' reading interests by surveying groups of middle and high school students. The overwhelming finding from these projects was that teens wanted more diverse and interesting choices in their reading curriculum. Ac-

ording to the teens who participated in the surveys, *Son of the Mob* and *The First Part Last* were their favorite leisure reading novels. As a result, these titles were selected by the preservice teachers for summer reading (*Son of the Mob* was cited 13 times, and *The First Part Last* was cited 8 times) because they believed that they had a responsibility to read novels that are popular with contemporary teens.

Beyond informing their summer reading choices, these survey projects were also particularly helpful as the preservice teachers came to realize that teachers need ". . . to find ways to link students' out-of-school reading interests with content requirements rather than replace one with the other" (Ivey & Broaddus, 2001, p. 369). Similar to conclusions from Bott (2008), the preservice teachers were able to articulate why teachers and librarians must be as knowledgeable as possible in order to match teens and books in a variety of different ways beyond whole-group reading in the classroom. For example, they identified options such as summer reading lists with extensive choices, school book clubs, self-selected titles for free reading and sustained silent reading, and literature circles. Finally, in addition to these ideas for increasing students' motivation to read independently, they also were adamant that teachers must read widely from a plethora of different genres and be committed to engaging *with* young adults in authentic ways that support and scaffold the students' independent reading and thinking (White & Kim 2008; Reeves, 2004; Williams, 2003).



Stallworth and middle school students discussing *Ties That Bind*, *Ties That Break*.

While their grades have long been submitted, and thus they had no responsibility for reporting their progress to me, several of them routinely updated me on their reading progress over the past academic year. During these face-to-face or email discussions of their summer reading, we have investigated topics such as ways to integrate specific titles that address state and local curricular standards. Three examples from the preservice teachers in the class who completed their student teaching internships this past academic year illustrate these conversations. In an email with the subject, “Reading widely and deeply,” Jenny shared with me that she taught a graphic novel during her student teaching. She went on to say, “I thought about you when I volunteered to teach it because I would have never taught a graphic novel if it had not been for your YAL class!” Wendy emailed me that she read eight new YA novels this spring semester. Finally, Meghan, who is also a university honors student, was required to complete independent research with a faculty advisor. She invited me to work as her advisor to transform the summer reading “assignment” into a project to fulfill this honors program requirement. By integrating what she learned in the course with her independent research during the summer and our exchanges, Meghan developed an intriguing unit plan that paired Shelley’s *Frankenstein* and Stahler’s young adult novel *Doppelganger* to explore themes such as the duality of human existence. These kinds of opportunities allow us as teacher educators to have sustained conversations with preservice teachers, and that dialogue becomes an avenue to support their uses of YAL in authentic and meaningful ways as they prepare to become new classroom teachers.

Summary

Working purposefully and intentionally to integrate young adult literature into the curriculum increases the likelihood that young adults will become confident, mature, and lifelong readers (Stallworth, 2006). That perspective continues to inform my practice and approach to teaching the young adult literature course. Reading deeply and widely with our preservice teachers facilitates a natural process of their understanding, appreciating, and respecting titles that they, for the most part, have not read. Our classroom conversations must include topics like managing censorship, locating

resources, developing critical approaches to reading, and designing standards-based and literacy-rich strategies for teaching these novels. Preservice teachers might enter the YAL course with the notion that such works cannot be “serious literature,” but when teacher educators facilitate such idea exchange and dialogue, those students exit the experience excited about creating opportunities for their future students to enjoy and learn from these books.

I end with my original skeptic Corrine’s statement in her final reflection, which showed a significant change of perspective:

I have to say that the booktalks, author spotlights, discussions, and projects really helped open new genres and potential books to me. The class really opened up new doors of reading to me. I was pleased and surprised that we covered all of the genres that we did; it proved that we are a group of diverse learners with diverse tastes. These books are great!”

I invite readers of this article to experience some of the titles from these preservice teachers’ *Top Ten Reading List*.

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Reading deeply and widely with our preservice teachers facilitates a natural process of their understanding, appreciating, and respecting titles that they . . . have not read.

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Appendix A: Explanation for Book Annotations and Booktalks

- We will all read (and/or listen to **unabridged** CD/digital) **eight contemporary** young adult novels from the **reading list below**. You must compose short annotations for each book that would inform other teachers/librarians looking for books to use in their classrooms/libraries. Note additional guidelines for some of the choices on the list.
- Discuss possible classroom uses, list awards the novel has won, censorship issues, brief plot summary, genre, character list, personal reflection, etc. Click Stallworth Annotation (or see Appendix C) to see a sample. Turn in hard copies of your annotations. These annotations should be in the same form as the samples on the Web link above.
- You must choose **one** of the novels to present to the class during scheduled booktalks. Make enough copies of your annotation for the class when you present. Sign up for a booktalk slot on the first night of class.
- Each booktalk must be a **three- to five-minute INTERESTING and CREATIVE presentation** of the novel you present. You should discuss the book's major themes, insights you gained from reading it, feasibility for teaching, your reaction, and other issues you deem important. **DO NOT** give us boring plot summaries. Consult <http://nancykeane.com/booktalks/> and the textbook for guidelines on presenting excellent booktalks.

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Reading List

I. Read one title from **ONE** of the following authors:

Gary Paulsen	Mildred Taylor
Robert Cormier	Karen Cushman
Lois Duncan	Avi
Lois Lowry	Chris Crutcher
Walter Dean Myers	M. E. Kerr
Robert Lipsyte	Virginia Hamilton
Cynthia Voigt (other than <i>Homecoming</i> or <i>Dacey's Song</i>)	Caroline B. Cooney

II. Read any **SIX** from the ALA 2009–2010 Top 10 Best Books for Young Adults. The lists can be accessed at <http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/yalsa/booklistsawards/bestbooksya/bbyahome.cfm>.

III. Choose **ONE** of the following:

- A. Read a contemporary young adult novel that would appeal to the modern male teen. Discuss whether or not you agree with this statement from Robert Lipsyte: "I think boys don't read as much as we'd like them to because (1) current books tend not to deal with the real problems and fears of boys, and (2) there is a tendency to treat boys as a group . . . which is where males are at their absolute worst. . . instead of as individuals who have to be led into reading secretly and one at a time."
- B. Read a contemporary YA novel with a female as a main character. How is the girl portrayed? How will girls ages 12–18 react to it? Why would you teach or *not* teach this book in a whole-class setting?
- C. Listen to an unabridged YA **award-winning** novel on CD/digital. Would students enjoy audible books? Why or why not? What are the benefits and challenges of using audio books with secondary students?
- D. Read a graphic novel. What is the special appeal of this genre to teenagers?
- E. Read a biography or autobiography for young adults. Use the suggestions in our text.
- F. Read a book from either the science fiction or fantasy genre. Use the suggestions in our text. What is the special appeal of this genre to some teenagers?
- G. Read a book by an international author and discuss any differences in setting, diction, tone, plot, etc., as compared with novels by American authors.
- H. Read a book that is part of a several-novel series. Discuss how the novel fits into the series and the number and kinds of books available in the series.

For a total of EIGHT novels

Appendix B: Booktalk Scoring Rubric

Name _____

Book Title _____

Date _____

Criteria	Possible Points	Points Earned
The booktalk was interesting and creative.	5	
The presenter highlighted themes and insights.	5	
The presenter discussed teaching ideas.	5	
The presenter shared his/her reactions.	5	
The booktalk was between 3–5 minutes.	5	
Total:	25	
Grade:		
Comments		

Appendix C: Sample Annotation

Title:	<i>The Earth, My Butt, and Other Big Round Things</i>
Author:	Carolyn Mackler
Publisher and Date:	Candlewick Press, 2003
Reading Level:	6.8
Interest Level:	Grades 8 – Up
Genre:	Realistic Fiction
Awards:	Printz Award Honor Book ALA Best Book for Young Adults New York Public Library Book for the Teen Age YALSA Teens' Top Ten Book <i>Publishers Weekly</i> Cuffie Award for Best Book Title
Main Characters:	Virginia, Shannon, the Shreves Family, Mrs. Crowley
Setting:	New York City, Present Day
Censorship Issues:	Teen Body Perceptions; Some Sexuality
Major Themes:	Insecurities, Self-Discovery, Teen Relationships, Renewal

Brief Summary:

Fifteen-year-old Ginny (Virginia Shreves) is not a *model* Brewster High School student (i.e., MBS) and doesn't aspire to be. Yet she desires to be simply noticed as a worthwhile human being at Brewster and in her family. When readers meet Ginny, her best friend has moved thousands of miles away, she is unseen at school, and she believes that she is an outcast among her "beautiful and fit" family of two perfect older siblings and successful parents. Ginny is overweight, has a very poor self-image, and has determined the best way to manage life is to withdraw and become "numb."

When her brother Byron is involved in an "ordeal" at Columbia University, Ginny is emotionally impacted and cannot understand why everything in her family is "brushed under the carpet and [her parents] never deal with what's really going on" (p.158). This way of life is particularly troublesome because Ginny's mother is a therapist specializing in adolescent behavior. The incident at Columbia, while tragic, serves as a catalyst for change in the Shreves's house of denial and simultaneously ushers in a new way of thinking and doing for Ginny as she learns that ". . . outside appearances can be deceiving and sometimes people aren't all they're cracked up to be" (p. 184).

Classroom Uses:

I do not think this book is a whole-class read, although one teacher with whom I work uses it as a whole-class read. If read in class, teachers and librarians can find many ways to use this novel, from analyzing the title of the book to creating occasions for teens to discuss social issues and health issues. Teachers can also incorporate music and current events. Further, teachers can find many opportunities to teach literary elements, especially plot and characterization.

Personal Reflection:

I enjoyed this book, and I believe it is an accurate characterization of the lives of teenagers today. I would recommend *The Earth, My Butt, and Other Big Round Things* to teachers, counselors, librarians, parents, and teenagers.

Reviewed By: B. Joyce Stallworth

For more information on *The Earth, My Butt, and Other Big Round Things*, go to:

<http://www.carolynmackler.com/The-Earth-My-Butt-and-Other-Big-Round-Things-by-Carolyn-Mackler.asp>

http://aol.teenreads.com/guides/earth_my_butt1.asp