

Stories from the Field

Editors' Note: *Stories from the Field* invites readers to share a story about young adult literature. This section features brief vignettes (approximately 300 words) from practicing teachers and librarians who would like to share their interactions with students, parents, colleagues, and administrators around young adult literature. Please send your stories to: jbach@lsu.edu.

The Power of Tears

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We've all had that student—the one who comes into our life for a short time and leaves an impression that will remain forever, the one who shows us that we can make a difference. For me, there was one student in particular; let's call him Juan. Juan was one of those seventh-grade kids who many pegged as a troublemaker. He was a 13-year-old Hispanic gang member. His numerous fights and school suspensions made it clear that Juan would rather be anywhere than in school.

The year Juan graced my classroom was the same year a mentor introduced me to *Tears of a Tiger* (1994), a young adult novel by Sharon Draper that focuses on the life of Andy, a teenage boy who finds himself responsible for the death of his best friend and subsequently facing the downward spiral of depres-

sion and guilt. I fell in love with the story and the characters. I knew I had to incorporate it into my curriculum. As we read the novel together, I noticed Juan appeared more frequently in class. He followed along in the text and was engrossed in the story. When we finished the novel, near the conclusion of the school year, Juan managed a passing grade and continued on into the eighth grade.

The following year, I was sitting in my classroom when the door opened. To my surprise, Juan came to visit me. Without wasting any time, he simply said, "You saved my life."

I was floored. "What?!"

"You didn't know this, but there was a time last year that I was really depressed. I was considering suicide. Then we read that book, *Tears of a Tiger*, and I saw myself. I saw that suicide wasn't the answer. I will never forget that book. I just wanted to say, 'Thank you.' Thank you for that book."

Nothing can ever take that memory away from me. One novel had the power to save his life. I thank God every day that it did.

Looking in the Mirror

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I vividly remember that Tuesday morning in March when young adult literature became real for my

students. We were beginning our study of Jay Asher's novel *Thirteen Reasons Why*. In this novel, Hannah reveals her internal and external conflicts in a series of narrative cassette tapes she leaves for a group of her peers. My class was fired up; they debated Hannah's decision to commit suicide. Although there were some students who questioned her fatal choice, others understood—or perhaps *accepted* is a better word—her motivation for taking such a tragic step. The class's discussion turned heated. Over the course of the debate, I noticed Pam (a pseudonym), usually quite vocal, sitting quietly and trying to conceal her tears. I hoped that she did not detect my watching her. I wondered what was going on in her mind.

As if on cue, Pam shouted over the back-and-forth of the class, "I was Hannah!"

Everything stopped. Utter silence. All eyes turned toward Pam.

"What?" Jane, another student, whispered into the open space.

"I was Hannah!" Pam choked as tears streamed down her face.

"No, you weren't," Jane responded, "because you are still here."

"I considered making the same choice as Hannah. Just like her, I had reasons for doing the same thing. High school was hard."

Of course, we wanted to know more. Pam looked around the room at all of us and took a deep breath. She didn't need to say any more. Her words that day have stayed with us, just as Hannah's words stay with those who received the tapes. The power of young adult literature is daunting, for it was through that book we were able to put a mirror up to ourselves and to one another.