

Stories from the Field

Editor's 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.

A Hunger for *Homeboyz*

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"This book is not for the weak," I seriously exclaimed, as I held a shiny new copy of Alan Sitomer's *Homeboyz* in front of the class (Hyperion, 2007). When I had the opportunity to speak with Sitomer in the summer of 2010, I was introduced to this book and knew it would be one of the first ones I presented to my 8th-grade students.

Selling a book is not always an easy task, and middle schoolers are a tough crowd, but my sincerity was apparent. I gave a brief synopsis of the book and read the first page. I also spoke passionately of my online discussion with Sitomer and how real he was as an author of YA lit; how his classroom experience enabled him to write about teens so accurately. They were hooked.

Kids wanting to check out this book were so numerous that I had to write a list just to keep track! I

immediately went to Barnes & Noble to buy all of their copies in stock, so each class had at least one to share. On a day when one book was returned and impatiently waiting kids pounced, I had a classroom guest, a parent observing me for college credit. I had taught all three of his children. Imagine my surprise when the next day, he brought in four copies of *Homeboyz* that he had purchased the previous night!

Homeboyz has become so popular that students I don't even have are seeing their friends with it and borrowing it from me. You know a book is amazingly engaging when an 8th-grade male reads it willingly, simply for fun, and declares that it is the first book he's read completely since 4th grade.

Journal Joy

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I first taught Ross, a preservice social studies teacher, in an undergraduate literacy course. He did fine work, though he was a bit skeptical about my enthusiasm for using young adult literature in the secondary history classroom. I saw him sporadically after that semester. I discovered that we attended the same church: he was studying to become a Catholic. I heard about his marriage. In the spring of 2011, Ross appeared in my graduate course, "Literature, Art, and Media." His enthusiasm for historical fiction, biographies, and informational trade books was growing. At one point, he mentioned his wife was pregnant. In early summer,

he took my Young Adult Literature course as an elective; by this time, he was giving me recommendations and creating book trailers; you know how passionate converts can be.

One July night, I was leaving mass when I realized Ross was galloping toward me, waving his arms; it looked like he might leap over a few pews to reach me. “It came yesterday!” he called, beaming. I was confused. Why was he telling me and not others? Was his wife’s due date this soon? And why was he calling his baby “It”?

“*The ALAN Review!* It came in the mail yesterday!” Ross shouted. Oh, *The ALAN Review*. Everything fell into place for me. When I teach the young adult literature course, I require students to get a student membership in ALAN. During the 6 weeks we’re together, we read many young adult books, and I lend out my older copies of the journal so we can discuss issues being written about young adult literature by practitioners in the field. On our last day, I give a homework assignment, telling students I want to hear from them when they receive their first copy of *The ALAN Review*. Ross complied.

I can’t wait to see him the first day he brings his new baby to church.

You Just Never Know

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In the undergraduate Young Adult Literature course I teach, I am often confronted with my students’ gendered beliefs about the reading practices of the K–12 students they will encounter in their future classrooms. As a result, we talk throughout the course about these assumptions, exploring conventions of genre and evaluating the complexity of the characters

we encounter, the themes present in the assigned texts, and the choices the authors make as they construct their respective narratives. In our discussions, I encourage the class to consider the possibility that their future students may surprise them—that a particular student might respond powerfully to a book that, at first glance, might not seem an obvious choice.

As an example, we read author Michael Dorris’s essay “Trusting the Words” (1993, *Booklist*, 89 (19/20), pp. 1820–1822) in which he revisits his childhood love of Wilder’s Little House books. As a “mixed-blood, male, only child of a single-parent, mostly urban, fixed-income family,” Dorris acknowledges that he was not the “likely target audience for the Wilder books.” However, it just didn’t matter. Despite his eventual critique of the series, the books “hooked” him as a child.

In order to make this point personal, we talk about my students’ reading preferences and their amazement when they enjoy a book they expect to dislike. Judd Winick’s graphic novel, *Pedro and Me*, is a good example. In the case of Winick’s text, my students, most of whom are young women, have never read a graphic novel (“for boys”), nor have they read a text, Young Adult or otherwise, with any LGBTQ content. Despite their genre apprehensions and the fact that the text has little to do with their own experience (they’re not reality TV stars or AIDS activists, and most self-identify as heterosexual), this book touches them deeply; it hooks them.

What I hope becomes apparent to my students is the need to move beyond their gendered assumptions about genre and story in order to make better, broader recommendations to the students they will eventually teach. When it comes to powerful reading experiences, you just never know. In my most recent class, it was the moment a 20-year-old young man earnestly professed his love for *Out of the Dust*, Karen Hesse’s Newberry-award-winning verse novel about a 14-year-old girl living through the Great Depression, that helped to drive this point home.