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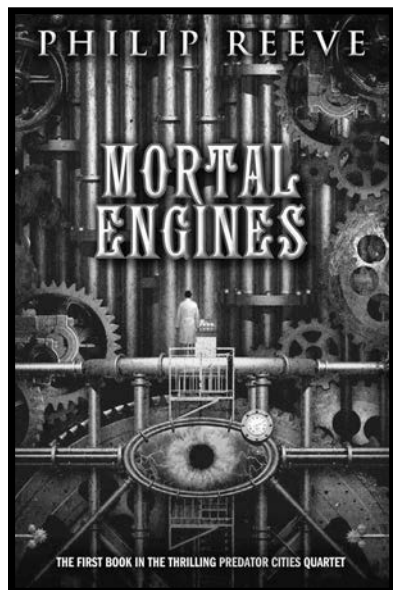
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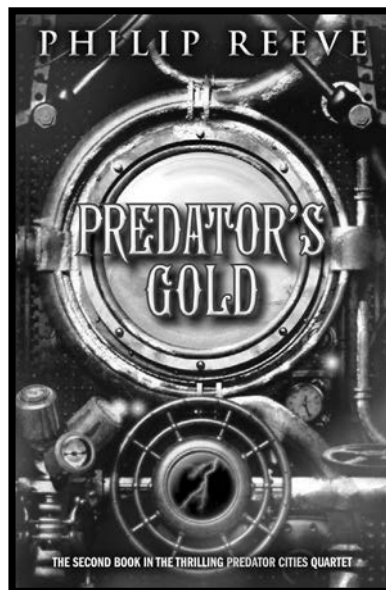
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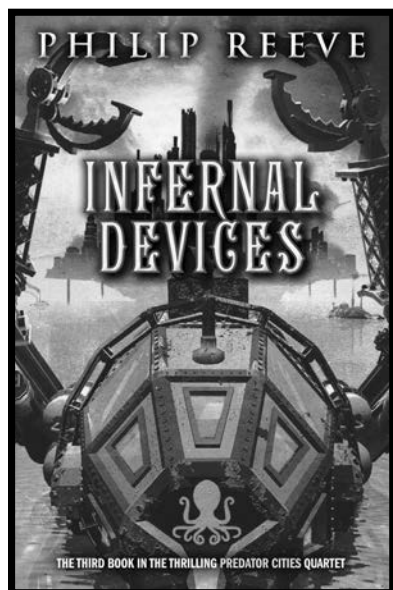
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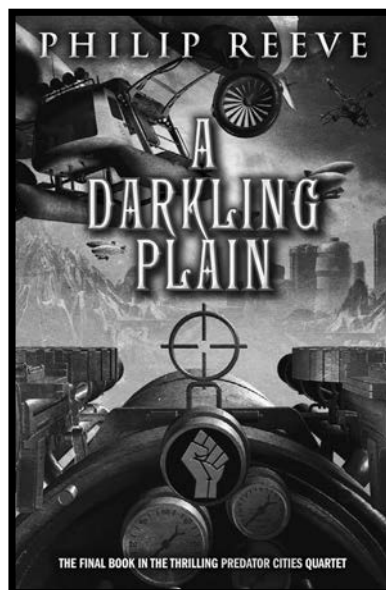
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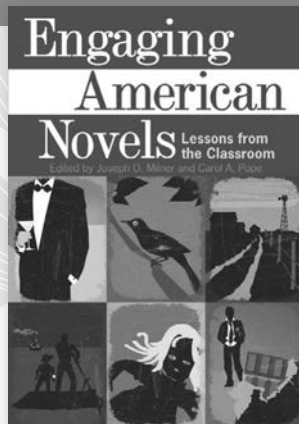
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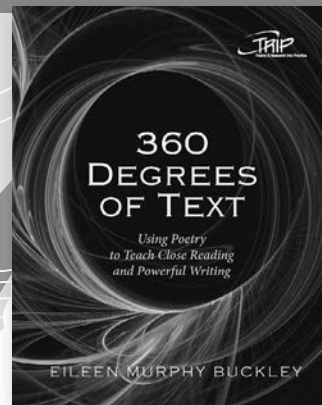
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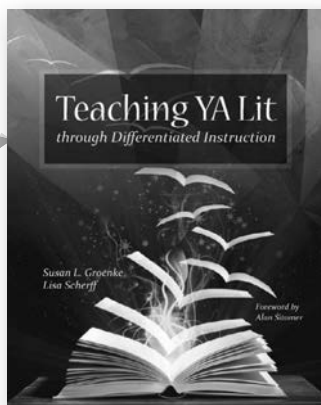
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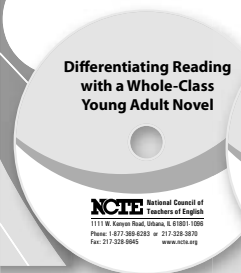
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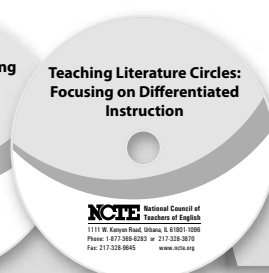
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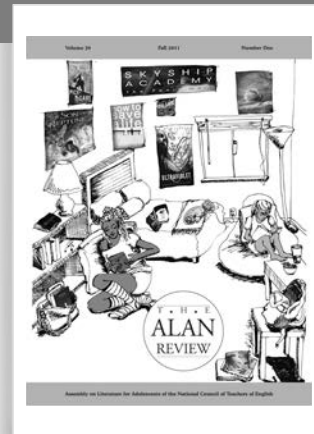
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**ABOUT THE ALAN REVIEW.** *The ALAN Review* is a peer-reviewed (refereed) journal published by the Assembly on Literature for Adolescents of the National Council of Teachers of English. It is devoted solely to the field of literature for adolescents. It is published three times per academic year (fall, winter, and summer) and is sent to all members, individual and institutional, of ALAN (The Assembly on Literature for Adolescents of NCTE). Members of ALAN need not be members of NCTE.

**THE ALAN REVIEW** publishes reviews of and articles on literature for adolescents and the teaching of that literature: research studies, papers presented at professional meetings, surveys of the literature, critiques of the literature, articles about authors, comparative studies across genre and/or cultures, articles on ways to teach the literature to adolescents, and interviews of authors.

**AUDIENCE.** Many of the individual members of ALAN are classroom teachers of English in middle, junior, and senior high schools. Other readers include university faculty members in English and/or Education programs, researchers in the field of adolescent literature, librarians, authors, publishers, reading teachers and teachers of other related content areas. ALAN has members in all 50 states and a number of foreign countries.

**PREFERRED STYLE.** Manuscripts should usually be no longer than fifteen double-spaced, typed pages. A manuscript submitted for consideration should deal specifically with literature for adolescents and/or the teaching of that literature. It should have a **clearly defined topic** and be scholarly in content, as well as **practical and useful** to people working with and/or studying adolescents and their literature. Research studies and papers should be treated as **articles rather than formal reports**. Stereotyping on the basis of sex, race, age, etc., should be avoided, as should gender-specific terms such as "chairman."

**MANUSCRIPT FORMAT.** Manuscripts should be **double-spaced** throughout, including quotations and bibliographies. A **title page** with author's name, affiliation, address, and a short professional biographical sketch should be included. The author's name should not appear on the manuscript pages; however, pages should be numbered. Short quotations, as permitted under "fair use" in the copyright law, must be carefully **documented within the manuscript** and in the bibliography. Longer quotations and complete poems or short stories must be accompanied by **written permission** of the copyright owner.

Author interviews should be accompanied by **written permission of the interviewed author** to publish the interview in *The ALAN Review*. Interviewers should indicate to authors that publication is subject to review of an editorial board. The title of *The ALAN Review* should not be used to gain an interview.

Original short **tables and figures** should be **double-spaced** and placed on a **separate sheet** at the end of the manuscript. Notations should appear in the text for proper placement of tables and figures.

*The ALAN Review* prefers the use of the Publications Manual of the American Psychological Association (APA).

**SUBMITTING THE MANUSCRIPT.** Authors are to submit manuscripts electronically to alanreview@lsu.edu. In the subject line please write: **ALAN manuscript submission**. All manuscripts should be in a recent version of Microsoft Word and use APA format. Complete submissions include, as separate attachments, the following documents: (1) A manuscript without references to the author(s). (2) A separate title page with author's name, contact information, affiliation, and a 2-3 sentence biographical sketch. In the case of multiple authors, the author submitting the manuscript will serve as the primary contact unless stipulated otherwise. (3) A brief statement that the article is original, has not been published previously in other journals and/or books, and is not a simultaneous submission.

**REVIEW PROCESS.** Each manuscript will receive a blind review by the editor and at least two members of the editorial review board, unless the length, style, or content makes it inappropriate for publication. Usually, authors should expect to hear the results within eight weeks. Manuscripts are judged for the contribution they make to the field of adolescent literature, clarity and cohesiveness, timeliness, and freshness of approach. Selection also depends on the manuscript's contribution to the overall balance of the journal.

**PUBLICATION OF ARTICLES.** *The ALAN Review* assumes that accepted manuscripts have not been published previously in any other journals and/or books, nor will they be published subsequently without permission of *The ALAN Review*. Should the author submit the manuscript to more than one publication, he/she should notify *The ALAN Review*. If a submitted or accepted manuscript is accepted by another publication prior to publication in *The ALAN Review*, the author should immediately withdraw the manuscript from publication in *The ALAN Review*.

**Manuscripts that are accepted may be edited for clarity, accuracy, readability, and publication style.**

Upon publication, the author will receive two copies of *The ALAN Review* in which the article appears. Publication usually occurs within 18 months of acceptance.

**DEADLINES. Please observe these deadlines if you wish to have your article considered for a particular issue of *The ALAN Review*.**

<b>FALL ISSUE Deadline:</b>	<b>MARCH 1</b>
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## From the Editors

The theme of this issue asks us to consider the influences and intersections of race, class, gender, culture, and sexual identity in young adult literature. We posed questions authors might consider: What roles do adolescents feel trapped in or empowered by? How are issues of race, class, gender, culture, and sexual identity explored or challenged in YAL? Who is silenced or marginalized by an aspect of their identity? Which novels help students explore or try on different identities? Those questions (as well as the censorship actions that are directly related to identity that are currently going on in Arizona) made me (Jackie) think about my own identity as an advocate for young adult literature.

Coincidentally, two of this issue's articles not only focus on Kluger's 2008 novel *My Most Excellent Year: A Novel of Love, Mary Poppins, & Fenway Park*, but also include the same quote from the novel—a line from Steven Sondheim's musical *Merrily We Roll Along*: "Here's to us./Who's like us?/Damn few." Sometimes, that's how I feel about being part of the young adult literature community. We are committed not only to reading these texts but also to using them with readers in a number of ways, including as bridges to canonical texts, to increase (or begin) a lifelong love of reading, to explore ideas of social justice, and to improve reading comprehension skills. While some of our future tasks include demonstrating YAL's potential roles within the new Common Core State Standards, this issue examines what we have always known about the power of a young adult text—that the many ways in which readers identify with the characters can be powerful catalysts to self-understanding.

I hope the reader forgives me. I'm going to group articles together in terms of similarity rather than introducing them in order of their appearance in this issue. I'll start with the articles that provide provocative ideas for using YAL to discuss identity with students. First, in her yearlong study of an adolescent book club funded by a Gallo Grant, Lisa Scherff considers the intersections between James Gee's theories of identity and the graphic novel *Yummy: The Last Days of a Southside Shorty*. In their article, "Locating Queer Community in Award-Winning LGBTQ-Theme Young Adult Literature," Katherine Mason, April Brannon, & Elle Yarborough demonstrate how they use titles featuring LGBTQ characters from the past five years with their students in young adult literature courses. They point out that there has been a shift in this literature and that more YAL exists today "that depicts LGBTQ characters who are part of welcoming, supportive communities of LGBTQ people and their allies." Beth Buyserie and Crag Hill consider the wider identity issues addressed in Kluger's novel *My Most Excellent Year*, which they argue presents a wide variety of identities for readers to try on.

Two articles deal with the importance of incorporating the visual element into the English classroom—one with *teaching* visual texts and the other having students *respond to texts visually*. Nathan C. Phillips's work always gives me great ideas, and his column "Helping Students Respond Visually to Young Adult Literature" on how to teach visual texts is not to be missed. It's clear, concise, and contemporary. Jennifer S. Dail's article written with Tony Giles, "*The Hunger Games* and *Little Brother* Come to Life on Voice

Thread,” is an exciting look at ways students might “appropriate technology” to fight for a cause.

Three of our articles ask educators to seek out titles to use with their students that contain various representations of adolescents’ identities, but to do so equipped with knowledge of how to identify quality literature that addresses the potential audience or the experiences depicted in the text. Drawing from Alfred Tatum’s work on enabling texts, Casey H. Rawson and Sandra Hughes-Hassell’s article, “Rethinking the Texts We Use in Literacy Instruction with Adolescent African American Males,” urges educators to provide students, especially African American adolescent males, with texts that contain African American male characters with a variety of experiences and/ or backgrounds. In “A Critical Analysis of Language Identity Issues in Adolescent Literature,” Nancy L. Hadaway, Terrell A. Young, and Barbara A. Ward examine how the identities of adolescents who are English language learners are represented in 20 recommended and/ or award-winning YAL novels. Finally, Kristen B. Harris’s article on the missing representations of dating violence in YAL provides a close reading of Dessen’s *Dreamland* alongside real events of dating violence in order to point out the troubling, realistic representation found in this novel.

Sharon Kane’s article, “To Thine Own Self Be True: But First, Write Your Way to That Self,” and Donna Miller’s “Young Adult Literature as a Hu-

manitarian Core” both deal with the depiction of the humanities and the arts in YAL. Kane points out and categorizes the many types of writing that protagonists employ in order to work through or just deal with issues of identity(ies). Miller explores the idea of helping students see the intersection of the humanities with social issues; she finds many characters in YAL who are able to express their feelings about their societies through artistic endeavors.

In the author’s column, Rachel Caine explores her relationship with books and how she grew to love them. It’s a love letter of sorts to those who love YAL, have followed its trajectory, and are interested in writing or just learning more about the business. Judith A. Hayn’s interview with Canadian author Marthe Jocelyn is a wonderful conversation on the role of YAL nonfiction, and readers will find several new titles to add to their “must-read” list, if they are not already familiar with her work.

This issue’s Stories from the Field are all—to borrow a term from one of them—revolutionary, in a way. They are stories of readers relating fictional characters’ lives to real events, as well as breaking rules out of a love for reading. These are the stories that those of us who have taken risks using texts in our classroom, even just placing them on the shelves, can relate to. You may connect your identity as a lover of YAL with these readers and their stories.

So, here’s to our authors. Enjoy.

## ALAN Foundation Research Grants

Members of ALAN may apply to the ALAN Foundation for funding (up to \$1,500) for research in young adult literature. Proposals are reviewed by the five most recent presidents of ALAN. Awards are made annually in the fall and are announced at the ALAN breakfast during the NCTE convention in November. The application deadline each year is **September 15th**.

# 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/>.

## **Summer 2013 Theme: 40th Anniversary Issue**

While we will be soliciting articles from past ALAN presidents and editors as well as influential young adult authors, we welcome submissions that reflect on the past 40 years of ALAN. **Submission deadline: November 1, 2012.**

## **Fall 2013 Theme: Reading and Using Nonfiction Young Adult Literature**

So often our schools tend to privilege the reading of fiction over the reading of nonfiction. But what about those kids who want to read something other than the novels we assign? What about the students who crave nonfiction? The theme of this issue asks us to consider the role of nonfiction in the classroom and in the personal choice reading of adolescents. What is it about nonfiction that grabs students? What role can/should nonfiction play in classrooms? What nonfiction have you used that empowered adolescents? What is it that we must consider or celebrate when we teach/use/recommend nonfiction? 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: March 1, 2013.**

## **Winter 2014 Theme: Reaching Them All, ALAN Has Books for Everyone**

The theme for the 2012 ALAN workshop is “Reaching Them All, ALAN Has Books for Everyone.” Current ALAN president cj Bott notes that there are young adult books for boys, for girls, for challenged readers, brilliant readers, LGBTQ teens, teens in other countries, teens from other countries who now live here, Christian kids, Jewish kids, Muslim kids, non-believing kids, kids with problems at home—alcoholism, illnesses, incest, divorce—as well as kids from happy, fun-loving homes, homes with two moms or two dads or one mom or one dad or one of each or grandparents, teens who live in cyberspace, teens who can’t afford a computer, and so on. We welcome submissions related to this theme—how young adult literature reaches young adults. 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: July 1, 2013.**

## **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](mailto:jbach@lsu.edu).



# *The Hunger Games* and *Little Brother* Come to Life on VoiceThread:

Helping Students Respond Visually to Young Adult Literature

In a world where reality television rules the prime-time slots, students do not step back to consider how the shows in which they have become entrenched are mediated or constructed events. Kellner (2009) argues that the dramatic events created by the media often involve competition; these spectacles “are highly public social events, often taking a ritualistic form to celebrate society’s highest values” (p. 1). As teachers, we can push students to see patterns of ritual in these shows and to identify the formulas that make them work. Young adult (YA) novels such as *The Hunger Games* (2010) can help facilitate these discussions.

In our undergraduate English Education program, I teach a course titled “Digital Media and Technology in English Language Arts.” In this course, I strive to engage students in critical conversations about technology and media and ask them to use appropriate forms of technology to respond to and analyze various forms of media, including television shows, Web pages, and young adult novels, with technology or media as a central theme. Two YA novels I use for this class are Collins’s *The Hunger Games* (2010) and Doctorow’s *Little Brother* (2008). *The Hunger Games* offers opportunities to explore the idea of constructed events in media and to challenge students’ view of media, while *Little Brother* allows students to explore ways in which society might appropriate technology to fight a cause.

In *The Hunger Games*, the United States has

become the nation of Panem after a political uprising of unspecified cause. Panem is divided into twelve districts, and every year, each district must send a male and female tribute to fight in the annual Hunger Games. How is the winner determined? The last tribute living wins. *The Hunger Games* focuses on the experience of Katniss Everdeen, the female tribute from District Twelve. Collins’s novel raises many questions about society and our reality television culture, and when implemented purposefully in the classroom, can lead students to critically examine the ways in which reality television shows are mediated experiences for the participants and the viewers. Still fueled by the Twilight series novel-to-movie phenomenon, even my college students cannot wait for the impending and much-hyped release of *The Hunger Games* movie. Students enjoy imagining what the scenes and characters might look like; they enjoy visualizing the novel.

In *Little Brother*, the protagonist Marcus finds himself in the wrong place at the wrong time when he chooses to skip school one afternoon. As a result, Marcus and his other tech-savvy friends get arrested by the Department of Homeland Security when there is a bombing in San Francisco. Once he is released, Marcus and his friends use their extensive knowledge of technology to hack various systems and free one of their friends still held captive by the government. This novel offers a commentary on Big Brother government that is accessible to young readers, and it teaches readers a lot about technology in easily accessible

language. My students find themselves really riled up about issues of privacy after reading *Little Brother* and start thinking about ways in which they may be unknowingly “watched” as they move through their daily lives.

## **Responding Visually to YA Novels: The Assignment**

A course examining media and technology offers opportunities to seamlessly and purposefully integrate the visual, the spoken, and the written in published multimedia products. NCTE/IRA Standards for English Language Arts (1996) require “students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes” (Standard 12). This standard frames the visual response assignment that I ask students to create as part of their reading of *The Hunger Games* and *Little Brother*. Through this assignment, students develop an understanding of visual literacy and its importance in the English Language Arts curriculum.

The assignment asks students to create a visual response that requires thoughtful commentary from viewers and asks them to consider ways that visual images can be used to help their own students develop critical responses to texts. Working from Debes’s (1969) definition, I share with the class my broad definition of visual literacy as the ability to interpret, analyze, and make meaning of information presented in the form of an image. I then guide the students through using principles of visual rhetoric to examine the ways in which components work together to compose images that relay thoughtful, intentional information.

I ask students to present their visual response through VoiceThread (<http://www.voicethread.com>). VoiceThread is a free, online application that allows users to create a series of images or slides. They can then record audio for their images, type text, and/or mark or highlight specific features of their image as they discuss it. Finally, VoiceThread allows other users to record, either through audio or typed text, a response to products users publish on the site. Users have the option of keeping their product private and inviting other users to view it or of publishing it to the general VoiceThread community. These options make VoiceThread a versatile, low-tech tool to implement with students in a classroom.

The visual response assignment asks students to develop a visual image or a series of visual images to represent their response to issues in *The Hunger Games* and/or *Little Brother*. I have students publish their images on VoiceThread. Their images must move beyond depicting scenes from the novels; they must make a critical commentary on the issues surrounding technological advancement, constructed/mediated events in media, etc. as presented in the novels, as explored in their reading responses to the novels, and as discussed in class. The image(s) must also be more than a simple photograph. I encourage students to experiment with digital media, such as photo-editing programs, to alter the images and represent them in a way that helps push the message they are trying to convey to the audience. Because

VoiceThread allows students to incorporate written or recorded audio text, I require students to write and record a brief explanation of the ideas they are trying to convey through their image(s). I then have students take time in class to respond to each other’s visual responses, leaving either typed comments or recorded comments with the use of a microphone I provide.

I provide students with support in creating their visual responses. First, we create VoiceThread accounts and tinker with the program in class. We practice critiquing various visual images and edited photographs by becoming familiar with visual rhetoric and then using it to apply various criteria to “reading” images and discussing them with the class. We also look at how manipulating images with photo-editing software alters the ways we read them. I provide students with resources for various free photo-editing software, such as Photo Plus (<http://www.serif.com/free-photo-editing-software/?MC=FSSPHOTOPLUS>) and Google’s Picasa software (<http://picasa.google.com>). Additionally, I show students how to use the Paint program, standard on PCs, to edit images.

Finally, it is important to allow time for class discussion prior to asking students to create a visual re-

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**A course examining media and technology offers opportunities to seamlessly and purposefully integrate the visual, the spoken, and the written in published multimedia products.**

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**These discussion opportunities allow students to express and revise their perspectives on texts before producing a critical, formal response to them.**

sponse to novels. Groenke and Maples (2008) note that many literature teachers use discussion as a predominant mode of communication because “we know discussion affords students opportunities to hear diverse viewpoints and perspectives.” These discussion opportunities allow students to express and revise their perspectives on texts before producing a critical, formal response to them. To prepare my students for our in-class discussion, I provide a few questions about *The Hunger Games*<sup>1</sup> and *Little Brother*, including the following overarching questions:

- In what ways do *The Hunger Games* and *Little Brother* comment on technology, media, and society?
- What positive statements do the novels make about technology and media? What negative statements do they make?

- What key passages support these statements?
- What key passages stand out to you as a reader?
- What commentary do these novels offer about the convergence of society with ever-increasing technological developments?

Students’ responses are not multimedia projects in the sense that they are using video-editing software and incorporating music; rather, the focus of the project is primarily on the images they create. The VoiceThread platform results in products that run more like sophisticated slide shows, with commentary not only from the creator but from other users in the VoiceThread community, prioritizing the image over other multimedia elements students might integrate through other technological platforms. In fact, one requirement of the assignment is that students create their own image(s) using a camera and digital-editing software, which avoids copyright issues generated when students grab images from the Internet. Finally, I evaluate students’ projects based on their depth of analysis, insight, and meaning, their evident integration and manipulation of image(s), and their polish and attention to detail (see Fig. 1).

	16–20 points	11–15 points	6–10 points	0–5 points
<b>Depth of Analysis/ Insight/ Meaning</b>	Outstanding analysis of the issues technological advancement poses to society as presented in your novel; clear meaning conveyed through final image(s); intent of meaning as indicated through statement is clear in visual response	A sufficient analysis of the issues presented in your novel; an idea of the meaning conveyed through the final image(s) is present; intent of meaning as indicated through statement somewhat connects with visual response.	An inadequate analysis of the issues presented in your novel; little idea of the meaning conveyed through the final image(s); intent of meaning as indicated through statement has little connection with visual response.	Little effort made to construct a visual image that is original and presents a commentary on the novel.
<b>Evident Integration and Manipulation of Image(s)</b>	Excellent work creating your own image and manipulating it to deliberately convey critical thinking and a clear message!	A decent effort at creating your own image and manipulating it to convey some critical thinking and a message.	A questionable effort at creating your own image and manipulating it; little critical thinking evident; no clear message.	Little effort made to create and manipulate your own image; no critical thinking evident; no clear message.
	8–10 points	5–7 points	2–4 points	0–1 point
<b>Polish and Attention to Details</b>	Excellent work communicating credibility and professionalism through clear, thoughtful format and presentation!	A good job of presenting your work.	Some improvements needed so that your work comes across as serious and academic.	Work seems sloppy or like a draft; presentation was slapdash.

Figure 1. Rubric for visual response project

## The Responses Students Create: Tony's Example

Students love *The Hunger Games* and *Little Brother*, and they love discussing them; however, they express much uncertainty about how to respond via a visual medium. While they initially struggle with this response assignment because it is outside the paradigm of what a traditional literature assignment looks like in their experiences, students always succeed with it.

Tony was a student in my class a couple of semesters ago, and his visual response, “Weapons of Mass Protection,” represents the approach students take by using a single image they have created and recording a commentary on it (see Fig. 2). Notice the small icon with an avatar bubble above it; that icon indicates that Tony recorded his thoughts for others to hear as they view his image. Tony’s initial comment in his product “Weapons of Mass Protection” reads:

In the Dystopian novels *The Hunger Games* and *Little Brother*, we can see the characters struggle with how they will defend themselves from the dangers society has brought upon them. This is no different from the society in which we live. At one point or another, we must choose how we will defend our values. We might choose to defend ourselves with technology, just like Marcus does in *Little Brother*. We also might choose to use something less mechanical, like Katniss does in *The Hunger Games*.

Tony’s response refers to the discussions students had in response to *Little Brother* about privacy and the extent to which students individually value it. Some students felt strongly about fighting for their personal privacy while others accepted that lack of personal privacy might offer benefits for society as a whole. Some students also accepted a lack of personal privacy because they had never experienced negative consequences. Examples we discussed in class included, but were not limited to, websites monitoring visits and targeting users with ads, security cameras in public places, and people taking pictures or video of others without their knowledge through their personal devices. As Tony notes, Katniss’s loss of privacy in *The Hunger Games* is different from Marcus’s loss of it in *Little Brother* because Katniss’s lack of privacy is more overt through the lens of the television cameras.

VoiceThread offers a highlight tool that allows users to draw on their image and to point out its various features as they discuss it, and like most students, Tony took advantage of this feature by adding a large

red question mark to his image just above the knife. At this point in his commentary, Tony says:

This begs the question, “What will you choose, technology or savagery?” Each situation is a different animal. Technology can be viewed as focused and methodical. It could be the only “pure” way to defend yourself without letting emotions interfere. On the other hand, using a simple thing like a knife might be the only way to leave a reminder to your aggressor of the consequences of actions. So, what weapon will you choose to protect yourself?

While Tony’s questions offer a broad commentary, they show specific connections to *The Hunger Games*

and *Little Brother* because he specifically addresses both of the novels in his initial statement. Tony then steps back to consider the broader implications he sees in both novels and in his final response to them. The computer keyboard represents the weapon used by Marcus in *Little Brother*; the knife offers a direct reference to Katniss and her fight to win the annual Hunger Games. Tony also engages his viewers by

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**Some students felt strongly about fighting for their personal privacy while others accepted that lack of personal privacy might offer benefits for society as a whole.**

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Figure 2. Image created by Tony in response to *The Hunger Games* and *Little Brother*

asking rhetorical questions to invite them into the “conversation” begun by his response.

As I noted earlier, students begin this project feeling some trepidation because it is outside of the mediums and paradigms typically used to respond to literature. Yet, as evidenced by Tony’s images and

commentary, they do produce thoughtful, intentional responses that compare, analyze, and evaluate the issues presented in two young adult novels. In the final portion of his response, Tony notes:

This particular project enabled me to connect with each of the YA novels on a deeper level. In my opinion, a traditional written response to a YA novel, or any novel for that matter, hinders the connection to the characters and themes presented within a particular text. By adding in or making a visual

component the focus of the response, this project allowed me to explore different visual representations that aided in my understandings of each YA novel. The response I crafted engages the two YA novels on many different rhetorical levels and depicts the authentic connection I made to the common themes and issues contained in both YA novels. My final project allowed me to present those common themes and issues that connected the two YA novels that a traditional “book report” would not have allowed for in writing alone through the use of both verbal and nonverbal language. My response was worth more than a thousand words because it was not only limited to the confines of written language, it exploded out into the realm of creative visualizations that knew no bounds.

The assignment’s invitation to focus on responding visually helped Tony further understand the novels in different ways than traditional written modes of response. He also felt that he could not have expressed the connections he made between the two novels as effectively through a more traditional written medium, such as a book report.

## Visual Literacy and Textual Response

Good readers visualize events in the text (Beers, 2002). Asking students to analyze purposefully and apply visual rhetorical devices to their responses to any young adult novels will help students develop their visualization skills; it asks that they consider the

rhetorical demands of *visual* text, not just written text, thus helping them to become more visually literate. Visually literate students become “more resistant to the manipulative use of images in advertisements and other contexts”; they “can interpret, understand, and appreciate the meaning of visual messages [and] can use visual thinking to conceptualize solutions to problems” (Mestre, 2008).

Furthermore, the world in which we live is becoming increasingly visual, moving visual communication into a predominant mode (Mestre, 2008). Literacies practiced in schools need to equip students to not only read but to write and communicate in a variety of forms required by evolving 21st century literacies. Selfe and Hawisher (2004) assert, “If literacy educators continue to define literacy in terms of alphabetic practices only, in ways that ignore, exclude, or devalue new media texts, they not only abdicate a professional responsibility to describe the ways in which humans are now communicating and making meaning, but they also run the risk of the curriculum no longer holding relevance for students who are” living and communicating in digital environments (p. 233).

Tony noted that responding in a predominantly visual format required him to think beyond the confines of written communication and allowed him to respond in ways that written text alone would not. In other, more extended visual assignments with students, they have noted that the process of responding visually required them “to re-read the novel and to think about it critically as they made deliberate decisions in their selection of images” (Dail, 2011, p. 189). As teachers, we have opportunities to think outside the box and incorporate a range of literacies when asking students to respond to literature. Because my students are preservice teachers, I ask them to think about this when creating assignments for their own students. Integrating genuine opportunities to use 21st century literacies in our curriculum supports student learning through modes they already use, helps them to think critically about those modes, and encourages them to think about text in different ways.

### Endnote

1. Specific questions about *The Hunger Games* and *Catching Fire*, the second book in the series, are available through Scholastic at <http://www2.scholastic.com/browse/collateral.jsp?id=36164>.

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## Locating Queer Community in Award-Winning LGBTQ-Themed Young Adult Literature (2005–2010)

“I tried to imagine what it would be like if people always reacted to Annie and me that way—being hurt by us, or pitying us; worrying about us, or feeling threatened—even laughing at us. It didn’t make any sense and it was unfair, but it was also awful.”

—*Annie on My Mind* (Garden, 1982, pp. 192–193)

In Nancy Garden’s seminal young adult novel *Annie on My Mind* (1982), high school seniors Liza Winthrop and Annie Kenyon establish a friendship that evolves into romantic love. While the book is one of the first young adult (YA) novels with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) content to actually depict the romantic aspects of a relationship (i.e., what it feels like to fall in love) and ends on a hopeful note as the young women make plans to reunite after their first semester in college, it also depicts the challenges Annie and Liza face from family, friends, and school administrators who disparage their identities. As they experience the exhilaration of falling in love, they also experience fear of being outed, which overshadows their relationship throughout the novel.

Twenty-four years after the publication of *Annie on My Mind*, in sharp contrast to the fear and isolation Annie and Liza face, David Levithan’s *Wide Awake* (2006) depicts a hopeful future, decades after 9/11: the United States has survived the Debt, Deficit, and Fuel Depression (a.k.a. the Greater Depression), the War to End All Wars, and the Reign of Fear, and it has

also witnessed the Supreme Court’s ruling to legalize gay marriage. In fact, the book begins the day after a presidential election in which a gay Jewish man named Stein has won the popular and electoral vote. When the governor of Kansas demands a recount, 16-year-old Duncan, his boyfriend Jimmy, and their circle of friends travel to Kansas to participate in a political rally on Stein’s behalf. Although they face some resistance to their relationship and their political views both at home and in Topeka, they also find support and inspiration from each other and the larger community of LGBTQ people and their many allies.

These two representative novels illustrate a trend in the field of young adult literature (YAL) that, with some exceptions (e.g., Lauren Myracle’s 2011 YA novel *Shine*), moves away from depictions of LGBTQ characters who are ostracized by their families, friends, and acquaintances. In fact, Cart & Jenkins (2006) argue that, although today’s LGBTQ teens continue to face homophobia and heterosexism, they are also more likely to embody their identities “without peril, often with the help of caring adults or peers in gay/straight alliances” (p. 166). And recent LGBTQ-

themed YAL is beginning to mirror this trend, depicting LGBTQ characters who are part of welcoming, supportive communities of LGBTQ people and their allies. As Banks (2009) argues, these evolving representations of LGBTQ experiences “render certain kinds of experiences possible: by viewing characters coming out to both resistant and accepting parents, friends, and teachers, young readers can see the possibilities available to them” (p. 34).

## A Framework for Analyzing YAL with LGBTQ Content

In *The Heart Has Its Reasons: Young Adult Literature with Gay/Lesbian/Queer Content, 1969–2004*, Cart and Jenkins (2006) analyze YAL with LGBTQ content published from 1969 to 2004 according to its representations of sexual identity, using the following categorizations: homosexual visibility (HV), gay assimilation (GA), and queer consciousness/community (QC). This framework is based on Jenkins’s research and builds on Rudine Sims Bishop’s model for analyzing representations of African American identity in children’s literature.

According to Cart and Jenkins (2006), homosexual visibility characterizes much of the YAL with LGBTQ content published in the 1970s and 1980s, like *Annie on My Mind*, and depicts a character who voluntarily or involuntarily comes out “with much of its dramatic tension arising from what *might* happen when the invisible is made visible” (p. xx). Cart and Jenkins include transgender identities within this categorization, noting that more recent titles that depict homosexual visibility include *Luna* (2004) by Julie Anne Peters and *So Hard to Say* (2004) by Alex Sanchez. Meanwhile, gay assimilation falls on the opposite end of the spectrum, depicting characters who “‘just happen to be gay’ in the same way that someone ‘just happens’ to be left-handed or have red hair” (p. xx), like, for example, Jacqueline Woodson’s *The Dear One* (1991).

YAL that features queer consciousness/community depicts LGBTQ characters within supportive LGBTQ communities, as well as their families of choice and of origin (Cart & Jenkins, 2006, p. xx). One such book is Julia Watts’s 2001 Lambda Literary Award winner *Finding H. F.*, which depicts two closeted friends from the fictional Morgan, Kentucky, who embark on

a road trip through Atlanta where they find spiritual community and acceptance at the Metropolitan Community Church. Another YA text that features queer community is David Levithan’s *Boy Meets Boy* (2003), which Cart and Jenkins describe as “a story of a queer community as envisioned by GBLTQ teens who would just like to hold hands or attend a school dance without getting gay-bashed or facing peer rejection” (p. 150). Like Levithan’s *Wide Awake* (2006), *Boy Meets Boy* features characters who find welcoming communities of both LGBTQ people and their allies.

Cart and Jenkins note that earlier YA books with LGBTQ content often depicted death (e.g., AIDS-related illnesses, suicide, murder) of the gay character (e.g., *When Heroes Die* [1992] by Penny Raife Durant), but their hope is that books will move away from this representation to depictions of LGBTQ people living healthy lives within supportive communities, since “many teens now make the transition from the closet to an out life without peril” (p. 166).

Drawing from Clark and Blackburn’s observation that Cart and Jenkins “emphasize community over consciousness” (2009, p. 29), we examined YAL with LGBTQ content published after 2005 for the ways in which it depicts (or does not depict) queer community. Although the use of the term “queer” is controversial, Ressler and Chase (2009) argue that it has been appropriated by members of the LGBTQ community as an inclusive term that “incorporates all identities,” including “lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, intersex, perceived, and allies” (p. 17). Therefore, we have followed in Cart and Jenkins’s footsteps in our use of the term “queer community.”

We selected YAL that has been honored by several notable groups in the field of LGBT-themed literature: Lambda Literary, the American Library Association (ALA)’s Rainbow Books, and ALA’s Stonewall Book Awards (see Table 1). Of the 24 books we reviewed, the majority (20) depict homosexual visibility as characters choose or choose not to embody

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**Themed YAL is beginning to mirror this trend, depicting LGBTQ characters who are part of welcoming, supportive communities of LGBTQ people and their allies.**

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**Table 1.** Analysis of selected YAL with LGBTQ content published since 2005

Year	Title and Author	Award/Honor <sup>1</sup>	HV	GA	QC
2005	<i>Swimming in the Monsoon Sea</i> by Shyam Selvadurai	2006 Lambda Winner	X		
2006	<i>Between Mom and Jo</i> by Julie Anne Peters	2007 Lambda Winner	X		X
2007	<i>Someday This Pain Will Be Useful to You</i> by Peter Cameron	2008 Rainbow Starred Book		X	X
	<i>Hero</i> by Perry Moore	2008 Lambda Winner	X	X	X
	<i>grl2grl</i> by Julie Anne Peters	2008 Rainbow Starred Book	X	X	X
	<i>Freak Show</i> by James St. James	2008 Rainbow Starred Book	X		X
	<i>Breathing Underwater</i> by Lu Vickers	2008 Rainbow Starred Book	X		
	<i>Parrotfish</i> by Ellen Wittlinger	2008 Lambda Finalist	X		X
2008	<i>Down to the Bone</i> by Mayra Lazara Dole	2009 Rainbow Starred Book			X
	<i>How They Met and Other Stories</i> by David Levithan	2009 Lambda Finalist	X	X	X
	<i>Out of the Pocket</i> by Bill Konigsberg	2009 Lambda Winner	X		X
	<i>Finlater</i> by Shawn Stewart Ruff	2010 Rainbow Starred Book	X		
	<i>Skim</i> by Mariko Tamaki and Jillian Tamaki	2009 Rainbow Starred Book	X		
	<i>What They Always Tell Us</i> by Martin Wilson	2009 Lambda Finalist	X		X
2009	<i>How Beautiful the Ordinary</i> , edited by Michael Cart	2010 Rainbow Starred Book	X		X
	<i>The Vast Fields of Ordinary</i> by Nick Burd	2010 Stonewall Winner	X		X
	<i>Almost Perfect</i> by Brian Katcher	2011 Stonewall Winner	X		X
	<i>Ash</i> by Malindo Lo	2010 Rainbow Starred Book	X		
	<i>Sprout</i> by Dale Peck	2010 Lambda Winner and Stonewall Honoree	X		X
	<i>Wildthorn</i> by Jane Eagland	2011 Lambda Winner and Rainbow Starred Book	X		
	<i>Into the Beautiful North</i> by Luis Alberto Urrea	2010 Rainbow Starred Book		X	
2010	<i>Jumpstart the World</i> by Catherine Ryan Hyde	2011 Lambda Finalist			X
	<i>Will Grayson, Will Grayson</i> by John Green and David Levithan	2011 Stonewall Honoree and Rainbow Starred Book	X		X
	<i>A Love Story Starring My Dead Best Friend</i> by Emily Horner	2011 Rainbow Starred Book	X		X

<sup>1</sup> All awards/honors are in the children's/young adult category, and all are fiction. ALA's Stonewall Children's Young Adult category was added in 2010, and ALA's Rainbow Books began honoring books in 2008.

their sexual identity. Yet the majority of these 20 texts (14) also depict queer community, as characters discover a supportive community of friends and family after they come out. Overall, we found that 17 (over 70%) of the books depict queer community, and just

5 of the books depict gay assimilation. Clearly, these texts portray a range of LGBTQ and ally experiences, reminding readers that “there is no unitary experience of gayness” (Mitchell, 2000, p. 119).

## Celebration of Difference in terms of Sexual Orientation and Gender Variance in ELA

The March 2009 issue of *English Journal* featured several articles from classroom teachers who include LGBTQ themes in their curricula. For example, when teaching literature, Kristin M. Comment (2009) illuminates the gay subtext found in Dickinson and Whitman and includes biographical information on authors' sexuality. David Blazar (2009) uses performance pedagogy as he guides students through *Angels in America*, and Joel M. Freedman (2009) describes his writing activities surrounding the 2008 National Day of Silence, which was dedicated to Lawrence King, a 15-year-old who was killed by a classmate because he was gay. Freedman's students wrote in the voices of the people involved in the hate crime and in so doing, demonstrated empathy. These are admirable approaches that demonstrate a deliberate effort to include a range of human experiences in the classroom. If literature is to serve both as a window and a mirror into the human experience, it is important to position readers in a way that allows it to be both.

In their work with adolescent readers, Clark and Blackburn (2009) found that if we, as educators, assume that students approach texts from a homophobic perspective, or if we discuss only heterosexual relationships when it comes to romantic love, then we marginalize LGBTQ students and reinscribe heteronormative thinking. In addition, they found that young people in their book groups preferred LGBT-themed literature that depicts LGBT youth participating in queer communities and argue that "teachers must make a deliberate effort to include literature that falls into the QC category" (p. 30). We agree.

Knowing that English language arts teachers have a proud history of teaching for social justice (Bomer & Bomer, 2001; Bomer, 2007; Kutz & Rosekelly, 1991; Lewis-Bernstein Young, 2009) and that contemporary YAL is a powerful tool, both in its potential for creating lifelong readers (Blasingame, 2010; Cole, 2009) and in its ability to teach about LGBTQ topics (Kenney, 2010), we share descriptions of three LGBTQ-themed YA texts that depict queer community and that were published after 2005. In addition, we each describe possibilities for teaching our selected texts: essential questions for Catherine Ryan Hyde's

*Jumpstart the World* (2010), emotion logs and Venn diagrams for David Levithan's *How They Met* (2008), and points of discussion for Peter Cameron's *Someday This Pain Will Be Useful to You* (2007).

## Reading *Jumpstart the World* with Preservice and Inservice English Teachers

In Kansas, where it's sometimes hard to be heard over the hatred espoused by Fred Phelps,<sup>1</sup> I (Katie) have been eager to introduce quality YAL with LGBTQ content to the preservice and inservice English teachers in my English methods courses. Catherine Ryan Hyde's *Jumpstart the World* (2010) is an ideal selection.

Fifteen-year-old Elle lives in New York City in her own apartment because her mom's boyfriend doesn't want Elle around. A loner who doesn't trust people very easily, Elle opens up to her new neighbors Molly and Frank, who invite her over for homemade chicken noodle soup and Scrabble. Elle feels an immediate attraction to Frank, who is gentle and who listens in a way that no one else ever has. Although their relationship never moves beyond friendship, Elle isn't prepared when she learns that Frank is transgender. She initially pulls away from him as well as her new friends at school—all members and/or allies of the LGBTQ community who identify and accept Frank's gender identity immediately. Although Elle herself often does not say/do the "politically correct" thing—she's honest and awkward, and sometimes regrets her words and actions, allowing the reader to learn alongside her—she eventually becomes both a friend and ally within her community, providing a space in her home and in front of her camera where her school friends can fully embody their identities. When Frank is injured in a car accident, Elle takes on an activist role, sneaking into Frank's hospital room to stand guard overnight after Molly is forced to leave at the end of visiting hours.

My students (all future and current English teachers) spent portions of five class meetings in a course

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**If literature is to serve both as a window and a mirror into the human experience, it is important to position readers in a way that allows it to be both.**

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called Literature for Adolescents responding to and discussing *Jumpstart the World*, returning to these essential questions throughout our reading:

1. What labels do I use to describe myself and the people around me?
2. In what ways do I embody/enact my gender? What assumptions do we make about people based on how they express their gender?
3. In what ways do these assumptions/stereotypes restrict or enhance what we do and what we achieve?
4. In what ways do my words, actions, and the way I treat other people and the world around me shape my identity and self-perception?

Prior to reading this text, students engaged in a value line, placing themselves on an imaginary line based on whether they agreed or disagreed with (or fell somewhere in between) the following value statements that connect to themes in *Jumpstart*:

- It's easy not to care about what other people think of me.
- Words do not have the power to hurt people, if they choose to ignore them.
- People who fit in have an easier time in life.
- Fitting in is important.

Students reviewed each statement individually, taking a few moments to think/reflect before placing themselves on the line. They discussed their perspectives in small groups and then as a whole class, physically moving up or down the line as their perspectives shifted. By this time in the semester, most students had acquired a copy of the text, read the cover blurb, and knew that it features a transgender character. I purposefully composed value statements that apply to people all along the spectrums of sexual orientation and gender identity in the hope that my students (all of whom self-identified as heterosexual and gender normative) would begin to make connections to their own lives and experiences. These statements also introduce the idea of community and the potential benefits and drawbacks of membership within communities.

Students then engaged in several quick-writes and subsequent pair-shares in response to the following prompts, which connect to themes in *Jumpstart* and are applicable to people of all gender and sexual identities:

- What does it mean to be beautiful?
- What criteria does society and/or media use to judge someone's beauty?
- Think of someone who is beautiful (it could be you!). What makes this person beautiful?

Since Elle is often witness to or the target of her mother's judgments regarding physical beauty, these statements help the reader establish a context for understanding Elle's strained relationship with her mom, as well as her evolving understanding of beauty. Ultimately, as she explores activism through photography, Elle reminds the reader that it's okay (and even desirable) to notice what makes us different/unique, but that we needn't disparage one another for those differences—that, in fact, there is beauty in our differences.

Over the course of four class meetings, students engaged in several small-group interactions that involved speaking, listening, reading, and writing—namely, literature circles (Daniels, 2002) and silent discussions (Blasingame, 2009, pp. 613–614). As students participated in these learning activities, I was surprised at how little direct instruction related to LGBTQ issues I needed to provide alongside the novel. In my undergraduate students' final English methods course, which they will take later, I spend at least one three-hour class meeting on sexual orientation and gender variance, discussing terminology, readings, statistics, language, etc. But I didn't do any *teaching* of LGBTQ topics for the reading of *Jumpstart*; my students didn't need it. This book led them through some of the most productive learning that I've ever seen in my methods classes. In their end-of-semester writing and discussions, students who, at the start of the semester, identified as conservative in terms of their beliefs on the rights of LGBTQ people, questioned the fairness of laws that prohibit same-sex couples from marrying one another (and enjoying the privileges associated with that status). One student wrote the following response during our silent discussion:

This book has made me look at the idea of equality in a new way. I've always believed that marriage should be between a man and woman; however, now I see that since we live in America, we should all have the same rights. If I can get married, then why can't someone who is gay? If we look at the issue as separate from religious teaching, which is what we are supposed to do in this country, the answer becomes more clear.

Many students acknowledged their own heterosexual privilege as citizens whose lives are not personally affected by anti-LGBTQ policies and laws. And they articulated a need to “jumpstart” their own worlds—in particular, their classroom libraries and curricula—rather than sitting idly by because, as one student put it, “what goes around [eventually] comes around.”

### **Looking at Love through David Levithan’s *How They Met***

While the reading of novels and plays holds an important place in contemporary classrooms, reading themed short stories allows for multiple glimpses into a topic in a relatively short period of time, making it a useful way to examine a subject from a variety of viewpoints. Moreover, as Kimberly Hill Campbell (2007) argues in her book, *Less Is More*, short stories hold students’ attention, they are just plain fun to read, and teachers can easily monitor students’ reading with short texts.

With these thoughts in mind, I (April) have created a love-themed short-story unit based on 2009 Lambda Award finalist David Levithan’s collection of short stories, *How They Met* (2008). What makes this collection noteworthy is not its romantic theme: there are many literary collections about love. What makes this collection so groundbreaking are the types of stories found inside. Next to the story about a gay teenage boy’s crush is the story of a lesbian girl’s betrayal, which is followed by the story of a young girl who is in love with a boy much too old for her. Levithan’s collection shines a spotlight on human relationships—not gay, not lesbian, not straight, not bi, and not transgender—but human relationships in all of their complexity. He offers the following by way of introduction: “These stories aren’t connected . . . but of course they are, in a way. They don’t share characters, but they share many other things. . . . Together these stories say much more than they would apart” (p. ii). It is my belief that the placing of these stories in a single collection *creates* queer community as they speak to one another in theme and content, and while many of them depict queer community outright, together they create a rich tapestry of human experience.

This unit is designed to allow students the opportunity to see what these stories say together and

to find both mirrors and windows into their experiences, regardless of their sexual orientations. The unit contains four stories grouped together into two pairs—unrealized love and set-ups—and the accompanying activities are relatively simple:

students create Venn diagrams for each pair of stories. While students could certainly create diagrams related to plot, setting, character traits, etc. for each pair of stories, the focus of their reading will be on characters’ emotions. Emotions are an appropriate lens in a unit on love since, by definition,

love *is* emotion. Therefore, by examining characters’ emotional states as an essential part of students’ readings, students focus on the human experience of love in the context of specific experiences.

To do this, students keep an emotion log during their readings of the stories. As they make their way through each pair of stories, they stop several times and list a few feelings (e.g., confused, anxious, thrilled, etc.) that the narrators might be experiencing at that point in the story, perhaps reflecting on how they themselves felt in particular situations. Once they have read both stories, they should have two lists of emotions to be transcribed into a single Venn diagram of emotions surrounding the pairing. (See Table 2 for a model emotion log that is ready to be transcribed into a Venn diagram.)

By the end of the unit, students will have two Venn diagrams and will be able to quite literally see the emotional intersections of the stories. Listed below are the paired stories from *How They Met* that I’ve selected for this unit.

#### *Unrealized Love*

“The Good Witch”: Damon asks Sally to the prom because he is bored in biology class, and she says yes. When he picks her up and Sally is interested in more than a date of convenience, he tells her he is gay, realizing it for the first time for himself.

“Flirting with Waiters”: Rebecca develops a crush on Seth, the guy who works at the pizza shop by her

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**The placing of these stories in a single collection *creates* queer community as they speak to one another in theme and content.**

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Table 2. Emotion log: Set-ups

Gabriel	Roger
Attraction	Intrigue
Disappointment	Attraction
Hope	Hope
Admiration	Contentedness
Nervousness	Gratitude
Joy	Excitement
Curiosity	Relief
Gratitude	

house. Because she isn't even in high school and he is in his senior year, she is doomed to admire him from a distance. Despite their age difference, the two become friends while Rebecca learns about love.

#### Set-Ups

"Starbucks Boy": Gabriel gets stuck spending his summer babysitting a precocious six-year-old girl named Arabella. Arabella insists on maintaining a strict schedule that includes morning reading, followed by a trip to Starbucks for "a vanilla mocha decaf latte, hold the mocha" (p. 8). When Gabriel meets a boy he likes behind the counter, he discovers Arabella's routine was about more than her love of lattes; she was setting him up for love.

"The Number of People Who Meet on Airplanes": Rory and Roger sat next to each other on the airplane and noticed that they were reading the same book. They thought it was destiny, but when a guest at their 10-year anniversary party reveals that they might have been set up, Roger investigates. He discovers Al Schwartz, a retired ticket agent, who made it his life's work to set people up on their flights across the country.

## Understanding Others and Ourselves through *Someday This Pain Will Be Useful to You*

The book *Someday This Pain Will Be Useful to You* (2007) by Peter Cameron offers the ideal opportunity for readers to know a homosexual teen. Eighteen-year-old James Sveck is the highly intelligent son of well-intentioned but dysfunctional divorced parents living in post-9/11 Manhattan. While James has been accepted to Brown University, he would prefer to use his college fund to buy a home in a small town in the Midwest where he can live alone, completely isolated from the world. Since the book is written in first person, readers have a direct and immediate connection with James as he comes to grips with the complexities of growing up, with acceptance of self and others, and with allowing himself to forge meaningful relationships.

This book is valuable for many reasons, but what stands out most to me (Elle) as a teacher is that it presents a story that is highly relatable because James is an extremely human protagonist. The story does not hinge on James's sexuality but rather incorporates this aspect of his personality as only one of the many facets of his complex character. Readers will identify with James and his experiences. Ultimately, this book invites readers to experience compassion for James, not as a gay person, but as a human being.

When thinking about how to teach this novel, it was important to me to be mindful of how readers in my class were positioned in relation to the text. I didn't want to assume students were homophobic and turn this into a lesson on tolerance, nor did I want to assume they were all heterosexual, thereby marginalizing homosexual students' experiences. Rather, I wanted their readings to be focused not just on James's sexuality, but on important human experiences such as isolation, loneliness, and sadness. Therefore, I framed my teaching of this book as I would any text, around discussion. In the section below, I've provided key moments in the text that allow students to examine important ideas. By providing these points of discussion here, my hope is that readers of this article will gain a sense of this novel's potential for classroom discussions.

*Point of Discussion # 1:* Throughout the novel, we recognize James's focus on the basic human need to be seen and noticed. When James runs away from home but returns the next morning, his mother and sister remark that they weren't aware that he had disappeared. His mother even comments that eventually they would have noticed, but that next time he will "just have to stay away a bit longer" (p. 221) if he wants them to notice that he is gone. In a candid moment with his therapist, James mentions that he is thinking "about the woman who died on September 11 who no one knew was missing" (p. 174). Using this theme as a motif, find and quote five key instances from the book that depict this idea. Then explain how the motif functions within the text. How does James's need to be noticed change throughout the story? What is your response to this basic human need?

*Point of Discussion # 2:* This story touches on the universal theme of isolation and alienation from others in an entirely human and moving way. James's isolation is the result of a lack of community, much less queer community. How important is community? What communities are you a part of? How do these communities support and define you? How does James's lack of community impact him throughout the book?

*Someday This Pain Will Be Useful to You* invites serious and thoughtful classroom discussion about what it means to be a part of a community. Students discuss their own difficulties with being a part of a community and, through close readings of James and the self-imposed isolation that he experiences, students are able to identify times that they have alienated themselves from others both intentionally and unintentionally. Classroom discussions surrounding this text are often frank and intense as students ultimately recognize that James's lack of community is the result of his actions and attitude.

When I was preparing to teach this text, I expected that James's sexuality would be the focus of many class discussions due to the somewhat conservative nature of the community where I was teaching. I was surprised to find that, while students did comment on this aspect of the text, it was primarily in regards to the role that sexuality plays in finding community and self-acceptance. This book, and James's character, provided an excellent entry point into literature with

an LGBTQ protagonist precisely because James is so much more than his sexuality. *Someday This Pain Will Be Useful to You* provides students with the opportunity to reflect on their actions, attitudes, and choices, as well as their chosen communities.

## Locating and Teaching Queer Community in YAL

As Cart and Jenkins (2006) hoped and predicted, YAL with LGBTQ content continues to expand our notions of what it means to come out or be out within a supportive community of LGBTQ people and allies. Garden gave us a glimpse of this hopeful future in *Annie on My Mind* (1982) when Liza mentions that she experiences a small sense of community among some of her peers at school after coming out: "I guess if I add it all up, though, I'd have to say that for every kid who was rotten—and there were really only a few—there were at least two, like Valerie and all the kids who just said hi to me in an ordinary friendly way, who counteracted it" (pp. 218–219).

While the decision to come out remains an important consideration for characters in many YA novels, these texts no longer depict only negative consequences of embodying an LGBTQ identity in a homophobic society. In fact, depending on the reader's lived experience, YAL that depicts queer community can serve as a mirror of the reader's own experiences/observations, or it can serve as a window into the kind of world the reader wants (or should strive) to create. By integrating texts with queer community into our curricula, we can show students what the world can and should look like in terms of how we demonstrate respect and appreciation for all facets of our own and others' identities.

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**YAL that depicts queer community can serve as a mirror of the reader's own experiences/observations, or it can serve as a window into the kind of world the reader wants (or should strive) to create.**

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### Endnote

<sup>1</sup> Fred Phelps is pastor of the Westboro Baptist Church of Topeka, Kansas, which is known for its anti-gay demonstrations at US military funerals, LGBTQ pride celebra-

tions, and any other event the group perceives to be in support of LGBTQ people.

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# Rethinking the Texts We Use in Literacy Instruction with Adolescent African American Males

Out of all the texts in the world, why do we put these texts in front of African American adolescent males living in economically deprived communities?

—*Reading for Their Life* (Tatum, 2009, p. 42)

**T**he nation's young black males are in a state of crisis." Such is the sobering conclusion of a recent report from The Council of the Great City Schools (Lewis, Simon, Uzzell, Horwitz, & Casserly, 2010). In support of this conclusion, the report lists the following findings:

- In 2007, one out of every three Black children lived in poverty compared with one out of every ten White children.
- In 2008, Black males were almost twice as likely as White males to drop out of high school.
- In 2006, Black students were two times more likely than Hispanic and American Indian students, three times more likely than White students, and five times more likely than Asian American students to be suspended from school.
- In 2010, the unemployment rate for adult Black males was twice as high as the unemployment rate for White males of the same age (Lewis et al., 2010).

Research is beginning to connect these negative educational, economic, and social outcomes to low literacy rates among African American male students (Edwards, McMillon, & Turner, 2010; Tatum, 2009). A

recent report from the Annie E. Casey Foundation was the first to directly link graduation rates with reading skills and poverty levels (Hernandez, 2011). This report, based on a longitudinal study of nearly 4,000 students, finds that students who are not proficient readers by third grade are four times more likely than their proficient peers to drop out of high school. Poverty increases the dropout rate even further: students who were both non-proficient readers and who lived in poverty for at least a year were six times less likely to graduate than proficient readers. A third factor—race—raised the likelihood of dropping out even higher; 31% of poor, Black, non-proficient readers did not complete high school, a rate that is eight times that of all proficient readers.

How many African American males are non-proficient readers? According to recent NAEP data, only 14% of African American eighth graders performed at or above proficiency in reading on national tests (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009). Black males, on average, performed nine points lower than Black females on these tests. Putting these two recent reports together, it would seem that a majority of the nation's Black males are in desperate need of inter-



ventions in literacy education, and that improvements in literacy skills among these students would translate not only into improved test scores, but improved lives for these young men.

## Closing the Literacy Gap

Much has been written about how to improve literacy rates among minority children and teens, and a good deal of this research focuses on the choice of texts. Research has stressed the importance of providing children and adolescent readers with texts that reflect their personal experiences and that accurately portray characters like themselves and their families, friends, and peers (Allington & Cunningham, 2007; Bell & Clark, 1998; DeLeón, 2002; Feger, 2006; Ganji, 2008; Pirofski, 2001; Purves & Beach, 1972). The availability of such texts affects both reading achievement and reading motivation in students (Allington & Cunningham, 2007; Bell & Clark, 1998; Gangi, 2008; Heflin & Barksdale-Ladd, 2001). Research shows that “when readers interact with literature that relates to their culture-specific experiences, their reading comprehension performance will improve” (McCullough, 2008, p. 7). Research also suggests that adolescents who typically display antipathy toward reading may react differently when provided with texts that are culturally relevant, as author Sharon Flake (2007) describes:

Black boys will read. But to get them off to a flying start, we’ve got to give them books that remind them of home—who they are. When this happens, they fly through books—even the most challenged readers. They hunger for the work like a homeless man finally getting a meal that’s weeks overdue. (p. 14)

In a recent book, Tatum (2009) takes the idea of culturally relevant texts a step further, arguing that African American adolescent males need exposure to texts that not only contain characters who look, act, and think as they do, but that encourage and empower these young men to take action in their own lives and in the lives of others around them. He maintains that one reason that African American males suffer academically, emotionally, and culturally is a lack of exposure to “texts that they find meaningful and that will help them critique, understand, and move beyond some of the turmoil-related experiences they encounter outside school” (p. xii). Tatum calls such writing *enabling texts*, and contends that not only should such

texts be put into the hands of African American males at every opportunity, but that these texts should also be mediated by a teacher, parent, librarian, or other adult—that is, utilized to “engage the students in dialogue about issues and concepts that matter in school and society” and to do so from “multiple perspectives and in relation to multiple identities” (p. 90). The mediation of an enabling text is critical to Tatum, who reminds readers of the historical importance of community literature circles within the African American population. Without the chance to discuss their reading with others and to respond to the texts through writing, Tatum argues, enabling texts cannot fulfill their true potential in the lives of these young men.

## Defining and Identifying Enabling Texts That Feature African American Males

How can educators, librarians, and parents identify texts that are culturally relevant, powerful, and able to make a positive difference in the lives of their readers?<sup>1</sup> This is a difficult task, particularly given the small number of books that feature African American characters published each year (Horning, Febry, Lindgren, & Schliesman, 2011). While any given book with an African American male protagonist may hold the interest of Black adolescent male readers, many of these texts fall short of the benchmarks set for an enabling text. According to Tatum (2009), some of these books actually “reinforce a student’s perception of being a struggling reader incapable of handling cognitively challenging texts” (p. 65). He calls such texts *disabling* texts. Included in his definition of disabling texts are books that are developmentally inappropriate, that is, books that may be on the student’s reading level but “ignore their need for human development” (p. 67). As an example of this type of disabling text, Tatum describes a case in which a Berenstain Bears book, written for primary students, was selected for instructional use with a 16-year-old Black male (p. 67).

Also included in his definition of disabling texts are books that serve mainly to reinforce the stereotypes of Black males, especially Black urban males. Some titles in the street fiction genre may meet this criterion; as Brooks and Savage (2009) discuss, these books “embod[y] the potential to valorize infidelity,

criminal activity, and a wide range of unprincipled and even stereotypic behaviors” (p. 50). However, as these researchers also note, street fiction novels are scattered along a “nuanced and varied” continuum such that dismissing all street fiction as disabling shortchanges the genre (p. 51).

To help teachers, librarians, and parents identify

enabling texts—those texts that have the potential to motivate Black males to become better readers and to help them define themselves—we have created the rubric shown in Figure 1 (Tatum, 2009, p. 77).<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise noted, each characteristic was derived from Tatum’s work. In the next section, we use sample enabling texts to describe each element of the rubric.

Characteristic	Definition	
Provides a healthy psyche	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• leads Black teen males to look within</li> <li>• shows Black male teens defining themselves</li> </ul>	
Provides a modern awareness of the real world	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• connects to issues/questions that students find essential today</li> <li>• takes place w/in the context of their life experiences</li> <li>• deals with issues that are important to Black adolescent males</li> <li>• presents “real” environments/conditions Black male teens face inside and outside school</li> </ul>	
Focuses on the collective struggles of African Americans	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• provides insight into issues related to social justice</li> <li>• allows Black male teens to take a critical look at their oppression &amp; oppressors and to examine the academic &amp; social ills they face</li> <li>• contains content that will cause them to take action in their own lives</li> <li>• challenges them to think about their existence</li> </ul>	
Serves as a road map for being, doing, thinking, and acting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• reflects an improved human condition</li> <li>• suggests steps/strategies/supports for improving life</li> <li>• speaks to the power of the individual and of the collective</li> </ul>	
Recognizes, honors, & nurtures multiple identities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• academic</li> <li>• cultural</li> <li>• economic</li> <li>• gendered</li> <li>• personal</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• social</li> <li>• sexual</li> <li>• communal</li> <li>• national</li> <li>• international</li> </ul>
Demonstrates resiliency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• focuses on self-reliance</li> <li>• focuses on self-determination</li> <li>• shows Black males as problem solvers</li> <li>• challenges victim mentality</li> </ul>	
Interesting and provocative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• thematically engaging</li> <li>• complex/multilayered</li> <li>• developmentally appropriate</li> <li>• fast moving and provocative</li> <li>• taps into feelings, imagination, and intellectual curiosity</li> </ul>	
Avoids caricatures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• hoopster</li> <li>• fatherless son</li> <li>• gang recruit</li> <li>• truant</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• uses poor grammar and raw language</li> <li>• rappers</li> <li>• drug users</li> </ul>
Includes a mentor or role model	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• provides guidance or offers wisdom to the protagonist</li> <li>• often an adult or elderly member of the African American community</li> <li>• usually not didactic or preachy</li> </ul>	

Figure 1. Enabling text rubric (based on Tatum, 2009)

## Characteristics of Enabling Texts

### Provide a Healthy Psyche

Tatum (2009) argues that enabling texts portray characters who practice self-reflection, leading readers to look within and to define themselves. The process of

self-definition is often an explicit part of an enabling text's narrative. Take, for example, the protagonist David in *Pull* (Binns, 2010). After David's father kills his mother and is sent to prison, David must decide whether to risk splitting apart his younger siblings in order to pursue a college education and basketball career (his mother's dream for him) or to keep his family together

by forgoing college in favor of an apprenticeship with a construction foreman. David eventually chooses the latter path, explaining his decision to his high school basketball coach this way:

You asked me what I want for my future. I want the wind. And mortar and bricks too . . . I want to look over the plans for something that never existed before. I want to dream up those plans and make them real . . . And I'll be taught by a master. And in the meantime, I'll be keeping my family together. Not because I feel guilty, and not because I have to. I'm doing it because I want to (p. 302).

David comes to this decision after a good deal of introspection, and his thought processes are clearly documented throughout the novel. At the end of the novel, David summarizes what he has discovered through his deliberate decision making: "People can learn if they're willing. Learn to live their own lives, and overcome their own faults. They can decide not to crash and burn, and not to be ruled by other people's dreams" (Binns, 2010, p. 307). Novels like this one provide young adults with a healthy model for their own decision making.

### Facilitate a Modern Awareness of the Real World

As Tatum (2009) notes, enabling texts connect adolescent readers with the world around them by honestly portraying characters, issues, problems, and environ-

ments that African American males might encounter in the real world. Consider two important facts related to this characteristic of an enabling text.

First, "realistic" for one reader may be fantastical for another. Just as we should not assume that a White teenager comes from a middle-class, dual-parent, suburban home, we should also be careful not to assume that all African American adolescent males come from urban, poverty-stricken, violent communities (Hughes-Hassell, Hassell, L., & Agosto, 2010). Not all Black adolescent males will identify with a protagonist who must check his clothing for gang colors before leaving his home each morning, as the characters in *Chameleon* (Smith, 2008) must do. This does not mean that gritty urban fiction cannot be enabling or is not realistic—undeniably, many people do live in situations like these. But educators, parents, and librarians should recognize that some African American male readers may find it difficult to connect with the characters in such novels. As one Black teen noted in a discussion of *Autobiography of My Dead Brother* (Myers, 2005), a book that meets the criteria of an enabling text, "I mean it was a good book, but since I'm not in a gang it wasn't anything I could relate to" (personal communication, March 15, 2011). Unfortunately, it is difficult to find contemporary young adult (YA) titles that feature African American males that take place outside of harsh inner-city settings.

The second important factor to keep in mind when considering which texts offer a "modern awareness of the real world" is that books other than contemporary realistic fiction can also meet the criteria for this category. Tatum (2009) recommends that teachers use historical works, such as *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (Douglass, 1845/1997). These texts, while seemingly not at all modern, still offer truths that resonate with young adults today. While the world has changed in the decades since such texts were written, adolescents can still draw parallels between the people, events, and issues in such historical texts and their modern-day lives. As YA author Sharon Draper states, studying the past allows us to "understand some of the social, economic, and political realities of the present. The past is a teacher from which we can learn much" (Hinton-Johnson, 2009, p. 92).

Similarly, genre fiction (such as fantasy and science fiction titles) should not be automatically dis-

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**Unfortunately, it is difficult to find contemporary young adult (YA) titles that feature African American males that take place outside of harsh inner-city settings.**

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carded for failing to represent the “real world.” Like historical texts, genre novels often present modern, real-world problems and issues indirectly; they require only a small leap from the reader to bridge seemingly fantastical narratives with the realities of everyday life.

### **Focus on the Collective Struggles of African Americans**

The African American community has faced and continues to face a variety of obstacles along the path to equity. Enabling texts neither ignore these struggles nor paint African Americans as merely victims of history. Instead, as Tatum (2009) argues, enabling texts challenge African American males to critically examine the challenges they face, whether those challenges are academic, social, economic, or personal. Enabling texts may achieve this focus through looking at historical African American struggles such as slavery or the Civil Rights movement. For example, *The Rock and the River* (Magoon, 2009) explores the civil rights era through the eyes of a young man who feels torn between the nonviolent beliefs of his father and the dangerous-yet-exhilarating Black Panther allegiance of his brother. Alternatively, enabling texts may deal with present-day civil rights struggles faced by African Americans. Tupac Shakur’s poetry anthology *The Rose That Grew from Concrete* includes several poems that confront the economic and social ills of African Americans. Consider a portion of this untitled piece that implores readers to “Please wake me when I’m free / I cannot bear captivity / where my culture I’m told holds no significance” (1999, p. 15).

### **Serve as a Road Map for Being, Doing, Thinking, and Acting**

Despite an awareness of societal and personal challenges facing African American males, enabling texts are positive in that they affirm the power of both the individual and the collective to improve one’s life (Tatum, 2009, p. 68). These texts do not present miracle solutions to poverty, oppression, prejudice, or violence. In fact, if a novel resolves itself with such a magic bullet—a character wins the lottery and is transported out of poverty, or a gang member suddenly and without significant cause sees the error of his ways and reforms—this is a good indication that such texts are not enabling in that they do not reflect

the way problems are solved in reality.

As Tatum argues, African American males need concrete strategies for confronting problematic issues in their own lives, and enabling texts can help provide such strategies. For example, in *The Rock and the River* (Magoon, 2009), the protagonist Sam decides to testify at a friend’s trial, even though it could mean endangering himself. Sam’s brother tries to prepare him for what this choice signifies: “You have to understand what it means to tell the truth . . . . People are afraid to testify. It’s a serious thing to stand up and say the cops are lying.” Sam replies, “The easy choice is almost never the right one, right?” (p. 222).

Enabling texts present difficult choices and genuine responses to issues—responses that African American readers can use as models when making similar choices in their own lives.

### **Recognize, Honor, and Nurture Multiple Identities**

Just as real people can never be defined by a single trait, neither should characters be solely “the smart guy,” “the Puerto Rican,” or “the single teen mom.” As Tatum (2009) notes, characters should instead be portrayed as having multiple identities—academic, cultural, religious, gendered, social, national, etc. Such a nuanced portrayal is closer to reality and encourages readers to reflect on their own identities as well as to realize that other people they encounter in life should also not be defined or judged by a single characteristic.

Two titles that illustrate this characteristic are *We Could Be Brothers* (Barnes, 2010) and *Bronx Masquerade* (Grimes, 2002). In *We Could Be Brothers*, the two main characters—young men who initially appear to be insurmountably different from one another—each discover hidden identities within the other, leading them to develop respect and friendship for one another. The students in *Bronx Masquerade* develop a love of poetry during a study of the Harlem Renaissance. When they begin to share their original poetry with

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**Enabling texts present difficult choices and genuine responses to issues—responses that African American readers can use as models when making similar choices in their own lives.**

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each other on open-mike Fridays, they discover the individuals beyond the stereotypes. Tyrone explains:

I look around this class and nobody I see fits into the box I used to put them in . . . Mr. Ward [the English teacher] says you have to take people one at a time, check out what's in their head and heart before you judge. Word. (Grimes, 2002, p. 86)

### Demonstrate Resiliency

Whether an African American male reader is growing up in urban poverty or in suburban affluence, developing resiliency—the ability to think critically, solve

problems, and bounce back from negative events—is critical for long-term success. According to Tatum (2009), enabling texts can assist in this development by portraying characters, especially African American male characters, who are self-reliant problem solvers. Seeing such a positive portrayal of African American males can confer a sense of self-efficacy on readers.

An example of a text that fulfills this criterion is *Bang* by Sharon Flake (2007). Thanks to a well-intentioned but misguided father, the protagonist (an African American male) of *Bang* finds himself kicked out of his home and having to survive the violent streets of his neighborhood on his own. Despite a few missteps along the way, the protagonist ultimately finds a way to survive without resorting to the cruelty and lawlessness of those around him. While his particular path is not one that many adolescent readers would choose to follow, the overall positive portrayal of this young man as a determined, resourceful problem solver gives African American male readers someone to look up to in literature and affirms the reader's ability to demonstrate those same character traits in the midst of adversity.

### Interesting and Provocative

For Tatum (2009), a key component of literacy is the ability not only to read, but also to be able to express oneself in writing. Thus, enabling texts should provide positive reinforcement of the characteristics of strong

writing. They should be engaging and fast-moving; they should be thematically rich; they should provoke deeper thinking from their readers; and they should awaken the intellectual curiosity of the reader.

One example of such a text is the novel *Black and White* (Volponi, 2006), which tells the story of two young men, one African American and one White, who have very different experiences within the criminal justice system after being caught for the same crime. The novel's plot provides fertile ground for additional exploration and discussion of such questions as "How color-blind is justice?" and "Is American society constructed to save some and sacrifice others?" Another example is Tupac Shakur's poetry. After reading the following poem, teens might be inspired to write their own poetry that addresses the "weeds" they believe are holding back the growth of young Black men in America: "I find greatness in the tree/ that grows against all odds/ it blossoms in darkness/ I was the tree who grew from weeds" (Shakur, 1999, p. 115).

### Avoid Caricatures

Tatum (2009) notes that stereotypes of Black teen males are prevalent in disabling texts, where they are likely to be portrayed as "the hoopster, the fatherless son, the gang recruit, the truant, the dummy in need of remediation, and the purveyor of poor grammar" (p. 82). When Black male characters defy these stereotypes, they are often mocked by others for demonstrating intelligence or for breaking the norms of their impoverished neighborhoods. Not mentioned by Tatum but equally important, disabling texts also often stereotype non-African American characters as well (for example, the Asian nerd, the Hispanic girl with an attitude, or the cruel White teacher). Enabling texts avoid such caricatures, instead providing well-rounded and multidimensional characters. Such texts often succeed in this regard by showing characters directly challenging stereotypes or realizing in the course of the narrative that the stereotypes they held are invalid.

For example, the protagonist in Sharon Flake's poem "You Don't Even Know Me" rebukes his teachers, neighbors, and even his friends for making assumptions about his academic ability, his career aspirations, and his behavior based on stereotypes of Black male teens: "You know/ I've been wonder-

ing lately/ Trying to figure out just how it could be/ That you can see me so often/ And don't know a thing about me" (2010, p. 4). In *The Freedom Writers Diary* (The Freedom Writers with Erin Gruwell, 1999), one teen writer comes to discover that she cannot be defined by the labels others place on her: "For the first time, I realized that what people say about living in the ghetto and having brown skin doesn't have to apply to me" (p. 203).

### Include a Mentor or Role Model Figure

One aspect of enabling texts that is not discussed by Tatum but which we identified in many of the texts we evaluated was the presence of a mentor or role model figure. This character is often, but not always, significantly older than the protagonist and passes along wisdom and advice in the course of the narrative. While the mentor or role model is often an African American male, this is not always the case. In fact, sometimes the role model relationship develops unexpectedly, as in Walter Dean Myers's *Lockdown* (2010), where the mentor role is fulfilled by an elderly White character who at first seems openly hostile toward the protagonist. Nor does the mentor figure have to be physically present in the narrative; in *Jimi and Me* by Jaime Adoff (2005), the main character idolizes Jimi Hendrix, whose song lyrics and life story provide the guidance that the protagonist needs to navigate a difficult family situation.

### Conclusion

For Tatum (2009), the ultimate goal of literacy instruction is not simply to improve the reading scores of adolescent African American males, but to empower them to improve their lives. Just changing the texts we use in our literacy instruction alone will not achieve this goal; however, it is an imperative first step in the process. A careful, thoughtful, and informed selection of texts is critical. As Tatum notes, however, the final decision of whether a text is engaging and inspiring will be made by the young men themselves. And the only way we will be able to know their ideas is if we make their "voices and viewpoints part of the equation" (Tatum, 2009, p. 138). In this spirit, we end this article with quotes from three young Black men who participated in a discussion of enabling texts that we facilitated. We believe their comments confirm

Tatum's (2009) assertion that enabling texts provide a forum for young Black males to define self, become resilient, engage others, and build capacity.

I think *Sunrise over Fallujah* [Myers, 2009] is a good book for African American males to read 'cause it's common for us to go to war without noticing really why. A lot of them they don't really join the military unless they think they have nothing . . . or because they think they don't have anything else to do.

This book [*Skeleton Key*, Mowry, 2007] showed how [African American males] are always having to struggle for everything, and we really have to earn everything we get. And it really was a good way of showing how Jarett turned nothing into something. And he was able to do all these positive things in such a negative environment.

[*Bronx Masquerade*, Grimes, 2002] . . . tells us that African American males feel like we do have a future, we just have to invest in it. . . . Me, for example, I don't live in a neighborhood in a community where I have problems like this. I'm sorta one of the luckier males. But these guys have to work hard day in and day out to make something with their life while people around them are constantly telling them they have no future, that they can't do anything with it. So these guys are really brave and courageous for going past what other people think is right in the African American community to make a future for themselves.

### Notes

1. Tatum's (2009) definition of enabling text is broad and includes literary and nonliterary texts, conventional and nonconventional texts, and texts that do not feature African American characters (p. 41). In this article, we only focus on identifying enabling texts that include African American male protagonists.
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## 2013 Call for Promising Researcher Award

### Eligibility

The 2013 Promising Researcher Award Competition is open to individuals who have completed dissertations, theses, or initial, independent studies after the dissertations between December 1, 2010, and January 31, 2013. Studies entered into competition should be related to the teaching of English or the language arts, e.g., language development, literature, composition, teacher education/professional development, linguistics, etc., and should have employed a recognized research approach, e.g., historical, ethnographic, interpretive, experimental, etc. In recognition of the fact that the field has changed in recent years, the Committee on Research invites entries from a variety of scholarly perspectives.

### Procedures and Deadlines

**1. Entrance:** Candidates must submit two (2) copies of a manuscript based on their research. Manuscripts should be written in a format, style, and length appropriate for submission to a research journal such as *Research in the Teaching of English*, *College Composition and Communication*, *Curriculum Inquiry*, *Teaching and Teacher Education*, or *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*. Normal manuscripts range between 25 and 50 double-spaced pages. (Tables, figures, references, and appendices are considered part of the manuscript.) All pages must be on standard 8 ½" x 11" paper, must have at least 1" margins at the top, bottom, and both sides, and must be in a standard font. Manuscripts in any other form (abstracts, dissertation reports, reprints, or published articles) cannot be considered in this competition. Although manuscripts should conform to the publication standard of the above-mentioned journals, selection as a Promising Researcher does not guarantee eventual publication in those journals.

**2. Manuscripts:** Manuscripts should be sent to: NCTE, Promising Researcher Award Competition, 1111 W. Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL 61801-1010, Attention: Felisa Mann. Manuscripts must be received on or before March 1. Accompanying all manuscripts *must* be a written statement verifying that the research was completed within the specified completion dates. This letter must come from someone other than the candidate (e.g., the major professor or a researcher knowledgeable in the field) who agrees to sponsor the candidate.

**3. Contact Information:** The *name, current address, position, and telephone number of the entrant* should be transmitted along with the manuscript to facilitate communication between the selection committee and the entrant. *This information should be on the cover page only.*

**4. Judging:** Manuscripts received on or before **March 1, 2013**, will be transmitted to members of the selection committee for evaluation. Results of the judging will be available after May 15, 2013, and entrants will be notified of the results shortly thereafter. Manuscripts will not be returned to the authors.

### 5. Summary of Dates and Deadlines:

December 1, 2009 – January 31, 2012	Completion dates for research entered
March 1, 2012	Deadline for receipt of manuscripts (two copies)
May 15, 2012	Results of final judging will be available



## The Healing Power of Art

“What he said to his enemies / was a window pushed high as it would go.  
Come in, look for me where you think / I am. Then when you see no one is there,  
we can talk.”

—Nye, “What He Said to His Enemies” (2002, p.119)

In 2010, while speaking to the Arizona Humanities Council in Tempe, Arizona, poet Naomi Shihab Nye asked: “Is empathy the key note to sustainability?” She went on to posit that art can lead us to places of respect for one another, a fact she illustrates in her poem “Wandering around an Albuquerque Airport Terminal” (2007). Besides illustrating the power of human compassion and connection, the poem confirms that hearing one another’s stories is a form of cultural diplomacy.

The poem further identifies communication as an essential ingredient in the transfer of emotion and reveals the power of language to inextricably link and heal us: “The minute she heard any words she knew—however poorly used—she stopped crying.” Hope for unity, for communication across cultural lines—what Nye describes in her poem as “the shared world”—is not lost if we take the time to listen, to connect, to share. We redefine and remake ourselves; we become different people as we read more, talk more, and write more. When we hear people’s stories, when we share intimate aspects of self and culture, when we accept new ways of knowing, we can reduce ignorance, grow hope, and diminish hate.

If the growing body of young adult literature (YAL) on the topic of art’s healing power is any evidence, other authors share Nye’s beliefs. Alexie makes

the point rather explicit in his book *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian* (2007), a mostly autobiographical text in which he turns his life into art. Bruce, Baldwin, and Umphrey (2008) present Alexie’s philosophy: “Alexie equates poetry with survival. . . . Art is a synthesis of imagination coupled with anger . . . . Art intervenes in violence and generates survival” (p. 7). Literature with this focus, shared with adolescent readers, might foster humanitarian habits of mind as well as build an awareness of the healing power of art. This article examines YAL as a potential tool for approaching humanitarian discussions, provides an annotated bibliography of relevant YA books, and explores one novel in depth to illustrate YAL’s power for encouraging critical thinking about social issues and for recognizing art’s healing power.

### YA Literature as Mentor Texts

YAL works to build the empathy Nye describes because it features characters and issues with which adolescent readers can readily identify; the texts are relevant and relatable. A springboard for stimulating multifaceted thinking, YAL provides the opportunity to read, to write, and to argue about social issues in a modern context.

Young adult authors like those featured in the

annotated bibliography of Figure 1 address the healing power of art while also commenting on art as a vehicle for discovering identity. All of these authors seem to suggest art carries not only an element of catharsis and discovery, but also a transformative power. This transformation is mostly personal for the protagonists featured, since the art serves as a psychological balm, but it becomes public when the protagonist acts on his/her enlightenment and works toward social change. Although art helps us understand the world in which we live, somehow it also connects us to our humanity and to the nuances of relationships. As a repository for artifacts, art further acts as a type of cultural encyclopedia—a reference, a decoder or translator of who we are as a people. As we individually escape into artistic creation, we discover potential; art renews our hopes and gives us reason to dream. Art provides a place to battle the demons in our lives and to survive the fight.

In their recent article, “Portrait of the Artist as a Young Adult: Who Is the Real Me?” Zitlow and Stover (2011) argue for “using art to order [life’s] chaos” (p. 34). They describe how YAL provides a bridge to self-discovery and how art can help teens “better negotiate the difficult waters of adolescence” (p. 35).

Because young adult literature is likely to reflect the diverse realities that young people face, its topics are accessible and relevant. Adolescents often connect with these novels because they identify with characters comparable in age whose lives parallel their own and who struggle with similar conflicts and issues. Implementing books with explicit humanitarian themes potentially encourages critical and independent thinking while supporting youth agency, inviting engagement, and sponsoring literacy.

### **Catching Fire Reveals the Power of Art**

One book with a strong art-as-healing motif, *Catching Fire* (2009) by Suzanne Collins, captured the interest of adolescent readers in 2010 when it reached number one on YALSA’s Teens’ Top Ten list. Collins’s dystopian novel is the second in a trilogy about Katniss Everdeen and Peeta Mellark after their experience in the Hunger Games arena, the Capitol’s sadistic and tyrannical means to inspire fear and to maintain control. This installment in the saga reveals the two teens seeking retaliation against President Snow, a preda-

tory leader who doesn’t just have blood on his hands but also blood on his breath. A satyric man, he is fond of unrestrained revelry, lecherous in his use and abuse of power and in his disregard for human life.

Realizing they are pawns in a political game, Katniss and Peeta both decide to defy the Capitol and give hope to the rebels with their final messages to the designers of the Games. As a means to send that message, they transform art into activism. During the Hunger Games, Rue suffers a senseless death, motivating Katniss to send a message to the Capitol by bedecking her with a floral shroud—a gesture of both defiance and love. She wants President Snow to know the depth of her attachment to Rue as well as to send a message that such manipulation and acts of senseless killing have not gone unnoticed. Katniss also designs a soft sculpture and hangs an effigy of Seneca Crane (p. 237) to mimic how the Capitol put him to death for allowing two tributes to live in the Hunger Games.

Peeta paints Rue, capturing and memorializing her in those moments after her death in the arena. Although their thinking is openly forbidden, Peeta wants to hold the government accountable, and Katniss considers her boldness proof that they might be able to kill her in body but not in spirit. She refuses to play the Games by the Capitol’s rules; she’s willing to be a martyr for the cause.

Besides using art to reclaim his power, Peeta attempts to utilize his talent as a baker, painter, and illustrator to showcase beauty in a world gone rotten. During the meeting with President Snow, Katniss’s mother serves cookies that feature Peeta’s frosting work: “They are beautifully iced with softly colored flowers” (p. 22). The cookie that Katniss crushes during her conference with President Snow displays a tiger lily, a flower depicting both art and symbolism. According to [blessedgardens.com](http://blessedgardens.com), the tiger lily represents the water element and the more powerful

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**Realizing they are pawns in a political game, they both decide to defy the Capitol and give hope to the rebels with their final messages to the designers of the Games. As a means to send that message, they transform art into activism.**

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Alexie, S. (2007). *The absolutely true diary of a part-time Indian*. New York, NY: Little, Brown.

Using the humor motif and cartooning, Alexie demonstrates through his protagonist, Junior, how humor and poetry carry the power to save us from despair, from a loss of human identity, and from genocide of the human spirit.

Anderson, L. H. (2001). *Speak*. New York, NY: Penguin Putnam.

To heal from her silent depression, Melinda, a rape victim, draws trees. With the help of her art assignments, Melinda gains the perspective and strength to express her feelings. Ultimately, she reclaims her voice and speaks out against her attacker.

Carvell, M. (2002). *Who will tell my brother?* New York, NY: Hyperion.

Drawing from his father's patience and strength and motivated by his brother, Evan is determined to enlighten his community about the disrespect perpetuated by Indian mascots. For his efforts, Evan faces the bullying and violence that often accompany intolerance. To help him understand his cultural identity and how intricately it is tied to his past and to his ancestors, Evan draws hands, an exercise that reconnects him to his estranged Mohawk family circle and engenders cultural pride.

Creech, S. (2004). *Heartbeat*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.

Although this story is told in free-verse poems about a 12-year-old, its symbolic depth offers appeal to older readers. In an effort to understand death, loss, and the power of perspective, Annie—whose running cadence parallels a heartbeat—draws apples. Both her running and her art are attempts to escape the changes in her life: her mother's pregnancy and her grandfather's encroaching dementia.

Fitch, J. (1999). *White oleander*. New York, NY: Little, Brown, and Company.

Astrid Magnussen and Paul Trout survive the cruelties life thrusts upon them, not the least of which are the travesties of the foster care system. If not for his cartoon artistry and graphic novel creations, readers would question Paul's ability to survive just as readily as we observe the therapeutic power Astrid's art has for her. Whether painting, drawing, remaking her mother's letters sent from prison, or designing suitcases to capture the impact, influence, and personality of each of the mother figures in her life, Astrid discovers her identity, her humanity, and the transcendent power of art. True to the Old Norse origin of her name, Astrid finds beauty despite the ugliness and the unfairness of life.

Hyde, C. R. (2010). *Jumpstart the world*. New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf.

Elle has been abandoned by her mother whose wealthy new boyfriend Donald doesn't want to live with a teenager. So, at age 15, Elle has her own apartment and must learn to navigate the world without traditional support. The support she does find comes from unexpected friendships, especially from her neighbor Frank, who tells Elle: "That's why there's such a thing as activism. Sometimes you have to jumpstart the world just to get it to be what even the world admits it should be" (p. 143). With inspiration from Frank, Elle becomes an activist using a camera.

Koertge, R. (2003). *Shakespeare bats cleanup*. New York, NY: Candlewick Press.

When 14-year-old Kevin Boland catches mononucleosis and is quarantined in his home, he discovers that keeping a journal and experimenting with poetry not only fills the monotonous hours but also helps him develop a stronger sense of self, make sense of his passions for baseball and girls, enrich his relationship with his father, and come to terms with his mother's death.

Paulsen, G. (1988). *The island*. New York, NY: Dell.

Wil, like a contemporary Thoreau, discovers the wonders of nature through drawing herons, turtles, frogs, and fish, while also learning intimate details about his own identity. The island experience also helps Wil navigate the tension rising between his parents and the move to yet another new town.

Sandell, L. A. (2009). *A map of the known world*. New York, NY: Scholastic.

Wishing to escape the monotony of her claustrophobic life and to distract her from the grief of her brother Nate's death, Cora Bradley seeks solace in drawing beautiful maps. When Cora begins to develop a relationship with Damian, the Poe-like boy who was in the car with Nate the night he died, she uncovers her brother's secret artistic life. In a collaborative project, both Cora and Damian learn the redemptive power of art, friendship, and love as they cope with the grief.

Figure 1. YA books featuring the power of art

aspects of femininity, especially female courage. In addition, tiger lilies are a hardy, resilient, and aggressive flower—once cut from the stem, another blossom will quickly replace it, and if not pruned often, tiger lilies can quickly overtake an entire garden. These features all relate to Katniss, the “girl on fire,” proclaiming she is a force to be reckoned with.

In an effort to take the power from his haunting dreams, Peeta paints. Art is his method for tapping his courage, his way to “stop running and turn around and face whoever wants [him] dead” (p. 118). Art also distracts Peeta’s mind, giving him something else to focus on: “I [Katniss] like to watch his hands as he works, making a blank page bloom with strokes of ink, adding touches of color to our previously black and yellowish book” (p. 161). Peeta also paints the Games—the detail is rich, the colors vivid, and the likeness so exact that Katniss responds, “I can almost smell the blood, the dirt, the unnatural breath of the mutt” (p. 53).

A third character who knows the power of art is Cinna. Whether designing wedding dresses, costumes that glow like coal embers, or a dress that spins out to reveal a feathery mockingjay, Cinna, who channels his emotions into his work, is a true artist with cloth and makeup and hair. In fact, his tremendous creativity and his ability to use art as activism get him killed.

Ultimately, Collins suggests art has power to influence the human condition; she presents characters who use art to make political and social statements, to escape oppression, and to cope with adversity. As Zitlow and Stover (2011) report, “Introducing students to such characters is one option for providing them with productive ways of making sense of their pain and confusion” (p. 35). Escaping from pain and confusion into art provides a healthy alternative to some of the choices adolescents might otherwise make. Collins’s characters also encourage students to question the status quo and to think critically about social issues like oppression, tyranny, and socioeconomic disparity.

## Fostering Humanitarian Conversations

Although Jimi Hendrix proclaims, “Music doesn’t lie. If there is something to be changed in the world, then it can only happen through music” (Hendrix, 2010), that transformational power is not unique to music, as readers glean from Collins’s book. Long ago, Plato

outlined three castes in *The Republic*: Producers, Auxiliaries, and Guardians. As members of the Guardian caste, teachers nurture the intellectual, athletic, artistic, creative, and altruistic aspects of their students. The humanities enable and empower educators in that important humanitarian work, and a plethora of young adult books provide a map. As cultural voices, these authors as artists work for the betterment of the world, and through their art, youth can claim their own voices.

As they read these words, adolescents also read their world. Young adult books like the Hunger Games trilogy and like those in the annotated bibliography of Figure 1 provide interesting and complex ideas to discuss and debate. They supply an ideal platform for youth to notice differences, think critically, consider alternate positions, and make more informed, ethical choices. They also prescribe art as an antidote to pain and confusion. When curriculums foster conversations about books that focus on humanitarian concerns, they provide the opportunity to read, to write, and to argue about issues in a relevant context. Prompts like those listed in Figure 2 serve to stimulate conversation. Critical questioning on such topics exposes youth to situations that encourage a critical stance so as to inspire wisdom that might lead to an improved way of living in the world.

Wishing to steer away from controversy, teachers often hesitate to discuss contentious social issues or to conduct the conversations encouraged by critical theory pedagogy, but the process begins when teachers make stimulating materials available and allow for student questions. Of provocative texts, students will likely ask: “What is happening and how did it get this way?” According to McNeil (1999), “The main goal of this curriculum is to help students see different kinds of knowledge, to understand how knowledge is constructed or how it reflects a given social context, and to make their own knowledge” (p. 165). The goal is not to seek homogeneous interpretations, but rather to welcome diversity, encourage young people to negotiate their own meaning, to argue with the interpreta-

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**As cultural voices, these authors as artists work for the betterment of the world, and through their art, youth can claim their own voices.**

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1. Katniss passes judgment on the capricious fashion trends and social habits of the Capitol. According to Katniss, the Capitol is where everyone lives “incomprehensibly silly lives” (p. 37). From shade-shifting skin to intricate tattoos and atypical hairstyles, the people in the Capitol strive for individually special looks. Speculate about contemporary society’s obsession with vanity—looking younger, slimmer/trimmer, and more attractive for the opposite sex. What motivates this focus?
  2. Katniss sees the same freakish excess in the Capitol’s eating habits and parties—essentially allusions to the conspicuous consumption famous in Trimalchio’s feast: “The party, held in President Snow’s mansion, has no equal” (p. 76); no opulence has been spared, “so that people can eat and drink and do whatever they please in the utmost comfort. . . . But the real star of the evening is the food. Tables laden with delicacies line the walls” (p. 77). While people in the outlying districts suffer poverty and starvation, “here in the Capitol they’re vomiting for the pleasure of filling their bellies again and again” (p. 80). Where in society do you see “freakish excess” or tremendous disparity? What is your response to such situations?
  3. Katniss wonders: “Who else will I fail to save from the Capitol’s vengeance? Who else will be dead if I don’t satisfy President Snow?” (p. 41) Likewise, Gale asks: “What about the other families, Katniss? The ones who can’t run away? Don’t you see? It can’t be about just saving *us* anymore” (p. 100). Where do you stand on the subject of social obligation? To what degree are humanitarian concerns an individual’s responsibility?
  4. Setting aside her personal fears and safety, Katniss decides not to run away but to fight for Rue and Prim and all the other children: “Aren’t they the very reason I have to try to fight? Because what has been done to them is so wrong, so beyond justification, so evil that there is no choice? Because no one has the right to treat them as they have been treated?” (p. 123). Knowing there is injustice in the world, should we attempt to fix it? Do we challenge the status quo or just avoid conflict? Have you ever chosen to fight against some injustice? If not, what paralyzed your decision? Describe the experience.
  5. Katniss realizes that people don’t respond to help Gale after the whipping in the square because “fear [gets] the better of compassion” (p. 109). To what degree do you agree with Katniss’s assessment about human behavior? Have you ever experienced the fear she describes?
  6. As punishment for his supposed crimes, the Capitol turns Darius into an Avox, a word formed from *vox*, the Latin for voice, and the prefix *a-*, meaning *not* or *without*. This man, whose voice, playful and bright, would ring across the Hob to tease Katniss, is mutilated, robbing him of speech. Think about and describe a time you have been robbed of your voice or you have observed someone else who has been silenced by an abusive display of power or by intimidation factors.
  7. What strategies do you have for easing the pain of life’s chaos? How might art help do so?
  8. Consider the work of these artistic activists:
    - the music of the American folk music duo, the Indigo Girls, who have championed various causes and held benefit concerts for the environment, gay rights, the rights of Native Americans, and the National Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty;
    - the documentary photography of social activist Jacob Riis, who argued for a change in tenement housing in New York City at the turn of the 20th century through his photographs;
    - the satirical street art of England-based Banksy, who makes political and social commentary with his graffiti;
    - other artists who function as activists.
- Do you consider these artistic actions effective forms of protest? Have you ever performed art to convey a social message?

**Figure 2.** Talking points/writing prompts with a humanitarian focus

tions of others, and to make sense of popular culture in terms of their own values.

When horror haunts life, whether as terrorism or violence, as upset or upheaval, the question should be, *what can I do?* These authors suggest we turn to art. Art slows us down, forces us to notice and to cherish small details, details that disaster has the power to erase. In *19 Varieties of Gazelle* (2002), Nye claims “We need poetry for nourishment and noticing, for the way language and imagery reach comfortably into experience, holding and connecting it more successfully than any news channel we could name” (p. xvi).

This focus on nourishment and noticing teaches us that art’s job is not only to look nice; art has something to say. In this role as spokesperson and sage, today’s young adult books possess immense potential. They speak to adolescents, using their language and meeting their emotional needs as they are developing personal philosophies. They also illustrate art’s power in the struggle against the demons in our lives. Art contributes to perspective building and to survival; as we expand the canon, we expand minds with the offered diversity in perspective.

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# A Critical Analysis of Language Identity Issues in Young Adult Literature

“It is language, more than land and history, that provides the essential form of belonging.”

—*Blood and Belonging* (Ignatieff, 1993, p. 5)

**F**ollowing Erikson’s stages of development (1968), the major task for adolescents is to develop a stable and positive sense of identity and to discover who they are as individuals, separate from family and community. While identity construction is challenging for all adolescents, it is particularly so for English learners as they “. . . are faced with an additional range of identity choices and pressures deriving from the linguistic, cultural, and often religious differences between their home environments and the social practices of the school and wider community” (Cummins & Davison, 2007, p. 616).

Learning by its very nature brings identity changes that positively transform and, at times, negatively position students (Pavlenko & Norton, 2007). For instance, “Mexican American students’ language and culture are daily invalidated by English-only politics and sentiments in school and without” (Saldaña, 2010, p. 103). Do English learners feel silenced or marginalized or do they feel empowered by their language identity? What language roles do adolescent English learners feel they must play in their families, at school, and in the larger community? Which novels help English learners explore and monolingual English speakers try on different language identities? An examination of young adult literature (YAL) can highlight books that reflect language diversity and

help students, both English learners and monolingual English speakers, explore issues related to language identity. The focus of this study was to conduct a content analysis of selected YAL and critically analyze those works for issues related to language identity and English learners.

## **Adolescence, Identity, and English Learners: A Conceptual Framework**

How English learners see themselves in relation to learning a new language and culture is captured in the notion of ethnic identity (Harklau, 2007). According to Anzaldúa, “ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity” (1987, p. 59). The conceptual framework for this study is shaped by current research and the belief that language identity is a dynamic and complex process shaped by psychosocial, contextual, and interactional factors (Harklau, 2007) leading to three different styles of adaptation—ethnic flight, adversarial identity, and transcultural identity, as proposed by Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco (2001). Ethnic flight reflects assimilation into English and identification with mainstream American culture. In contrast, adversarial identity involves rejecting standard English and American culture, most often as a result of having been rejected by the culture. Finally, the development

of a transcultural identity involves creatively fusing aspects of both cultures.

Caution is needed in considering these adaptations, however. McKay and Wong (1996) argue that the idea of immigrants committing to only one identity and one language is xenophobic, and Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco (2001) maintain that individuals may fit into different categories at different times in their adaptation process. Nevertheless, adolescent English learners may experience acculturation and identity formation as a one-way process and feel that they must choose between their home and their new language and culture (Olson, 1997).

Ethnic flight and language loss result from powerful internal forces operating within the adolescent, namely “the desire for social inclusion, conformity, and the need to communicate with others” (Wong-Fillmore, 2000, p. 208). In the midst of assimilation, adolescents may not consider the long-term costs. For instance, what happens when children grow up speaking a language different from their parents?

Hijuelos describes such a case in his introduction to *Cool Salsa: Bilingual Poems on Growing Up Latino in the United States* (Carlson, 1994). As a child, he contracted a kidney disease, and after two years in the hospital, spoke English rather than Spanish. Returning home, his parents still spoke to him in Spanish, but he responded in English. “There I was, speaking English in a working-class immigrant household . . . and there was always the growing reticence—maybe a resentment—on my part about that language, Spanish, which surrounded me but was no longer a direct part of me” (p. xvii). Such language boundaries influence communication since “one obvious reason for learning the language spoken by one’s parents . . . is to connect more strongly to the family and its history” (Ogulnick, 2000, p. 57). Venkateswaran (2000) confesses that it was only years later that she realized the cost of her privileged education in India: “I was out of touch with my own country’s emotions and ideas . . . , and out of touch with my mother, whose education and personal growth was located in Tamil language . . .” (p. 63).

Powerful external forces also encourage language loss, “socio-political ones operating in the society against outsiders, against differences, and against diversity” (Wong-Fillmore, 2000, p. 208). As a result, English learners are “often positioned within a deficit

framework that limits the kinds of identities and communities that can be imagined by and for these learners” (Pavlenko & Norton, 2007, p. 676). Such discrimination can lead to the formation of an adversarial identity.

Transcultural identities acknowledge the importance of multiple languages and cultures. One recent trend in literature that underscores the importance of transcultural identity is the use of interlingual text, books in English interspersed with words from other languages. These books may merely allude to code switching, or they may include interlingual words along with a glossary (Broz, 2010). There is also “mestizaje,” such as “parquear el carro,” a type of linguistic hybridization so Mexican Americans can show “their ties to both parent languages, countries, and heritages, but . . . separate themselves by speaking a language considerably different from both tongues of origin, thus fashioning a separate and distinct identity” (Saldaña, 2010, p. 100).

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**One recent trend in literature that underscores the importance of transcultural identity is the use of interlingual text.**

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### **Selecting Young Adult Literature for Critical Analysis**

Many excellent examples of YAL depict the socio-cultural transitions of immigrants and linguistically diverse families, but language may not be specifically mentioned as part of the adaptation process. For this study, the authors selected only books with explicit mention of language as an identifiable issue, but not necessarily the major one. Some of the books selected have only a few references to language, but they illustrate key factors in language identity formation. In addition, the authors chose to analyze stories with settings from the 1950s to present times. McGlinn’s study showed that literature depicting European immigration to the US in the 19th and early 20th century generally presented a nostalgic view leaning toward assimilation, while recent works portrayed a more complex assessment of immigration and, therefore, language identity issues (2007). Additionally, not all books selected describe stories of first-generation im-



migrants; some depict second-generation immigrants or later, residents whose stories demonstrate how lan-

**The selected books also reflect the language diversity in the US and provide a broad perspective on identity issues.**

guage identity factors play out over time. Further, while there were language references in short story and poetry collections, the authors limited their analysis to novels and the two fictionalized memoirs by Jiménez (2002, 2008). All books were selected through an extensive search of YAL databases and lists of recommended or award-winning books. Table 1 lists the 20 books analyzed. Those receiving at least one award or cited on a suggested reading list are noted by an asterisk in the references. The selected books also reflect the language diversity in the US and provide a broad perspective on identity issues.

**An Evaluation of Young Adult Literature for Language Identity Factors**

As noted earlier in the discussion of the conceptual framework, language identity is shaped by various factors. Based on a review of the research on adolescent language identity, the authors selected Harklau's (2007) three interrelated emphases in ethnic identity formation among English language learners: psychosocial, contextual, and interactional. These became the criteria, shown in Table 2, used to analyze the selected books.

Relevant quotes and incidents were collected during a close reading of each book. That data was entered into a spreadsheet and coded with the three factors. The examples were analyzed as either positive or negative influences on the process of language identity formation. Selected examples found in the critical analysis of the literature are discussed in this section. The final section of this article offers an interpretation of how some of the examples may reflect

**Table 1.** Languages represented in young adult literature selected for analysis

Title	Author	Year	Home Language	Suggested Reading Level
<i>Any Small Goodness</i>	Tony Johnston	2001	Spanish	Grades 6–9
<i>Ask Me No Questions</i>	Marina Budhos	2006	Bengali	Grades 7–10
<i>Betti on the High Wire</i>	Lisa Railsback	2010	Unnamed	Grades 5–9
<i>Bitter Melon</i>	Cara Chow	2010	Chinese	Grades 8–12
<i>Breaking Through</i>	Francisco Jiménez	2002	Spanish	Grades 7–12
<i>Call Me Maria</i>	Judith Ortiz Cofer	2006	Spanish	Grades 5–8
<i>Day of the Pelican</i>	Katherine Paterson	2009	Albanian	Grades 6–9
<i>Flight to Freedom</i>	Ana Veciana-Suárez	2001	Spanish	Grades 7–10
<i>Good Enough</i>	Paula Yoo	2008	Korean	Grades 7–10
<i>The Great Wall of Lucy Wu</i>	Wendy Wan-Long Shang	2011	Chinese	Grades 6–9
<i>Home of the Brave</i>	Katherine Applegate	2007	Sudanese	Grades 6–9
<i>Inside Out &amp; Back Again</i>	Thanhha Lai	2011	Vietnamese	Grades 5–9
<i>Life, After</i>	Sarah Darer Littman	2010	Spanish	Grades 8–12
<i>Reaching Out</i>	Francisco Jiménez	2008	Spanish	Grades 7–12
<i>Return to Sender</i>	Julia Alvarez	2009	Spanish	Grades 6–9
<i>Roots and Wings</i>	Many Ly	2008	Cambodian	Grades 7–12
<i>Shine Coconut Moon</i>	Neesha Meminger	2010	Punjabi	Grades 9–12
<i>Something about America</i>	Maria Testa	2007	Unnamed, from Kosovo	Grades 7–10
<i>A Step from Heaven</i>	An Na	2001	Korean	Grades 8–12
<i>Tangled Threads: A Hmong Girl's Story</i>	Pegi Deitz Shea	2003	Hmong	Grades 6–9

**Table 2.** Factors used to evaluate language identity themes in young adult literature

<p><b>Premise:</b> Language identity is shaped by psychosocial, contextual, and interactional factors (Harklau, 2007) leading to different styles of adaptation: ethnic flight, transcultural identity, and adversarial identity (Suárez-Orozco &amp; Suárez-Orozco, 2001).</p>
<p><b>Psychosocial Factors:</b> Factors influencing how English learners see themselves in relation to their new language and culture</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Self-esteem</li> <li>• Ethnic and social affiliations</li> <li>• Transition to new culture/language</li> <li>• Familial/intergenerational dynamics</li> </ul>
<p><b>Contextual Factors:</b> Factors influencing how specific contexts and institutions marginalize or integrate English learners</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Community institutions (e.g., social and religious)</li> <li>• Educational institutions</li> <li>• Political/governmental/legal institutions</li> </ul>
<p><b>Interactional Factors:</b> Factors influencing how language identity is processed and negotiated in social interactions and reflects power relations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Family interactions</li> <li>• Teacher–student interactions</li> <li>• Peer interactions</li> <li>• Community interactions</li> </ul>

eventual adaptation styles of ethnic flight, adversarial identity, and transcultural identity.

### Psychosocial Factors

Psychosocial factors include psychological and social influences on how English learners see themselves in relation to their target language and culture. In adolescence, relationships with peers become the most significant ones as the desire for social inclusion grows.

Adolescents may struggle with self-confidence versus self-doubt and become preoccupied by how they appear to others. For English learners, this struggle might lead to self-labeling of their ethnicity and language. In *Any Small Goodness* (Johnston, 2001), Arturo moves to a new school and his name is “gringo-ized” by his teacher. “Probably to make things easier on herself. Without asking. Ya estuvo. Like a used-up word on the chalkboard, Arturo’s erased” (p. 9). Later, Arturo realizes that to give up his name is to give up his identity, so he and his friends, whose names have also been gringo-ized, reclaim their names and their identity. In a similar example from *Betti on the High Wire* (Railsback, 2010), Babo is adopted by an American couple who rename her Betti, because they feel it would be easier for her to have an American name. To Babo, however, “It doesn’t sound right at all. It sounds weird” (pp. 44–45).

Another event that can lead to a loss of self-

esteem is bullying, such as that experienced by Há in *Inside Out & Back Again* (Lai, 2011). “Someone called me Ching Chong./ Is that good?/ Didn’t sound good./ Then he tripped me . . . ” (p. 152). In addition, Ha is frustrated by her inability to communicate her knowledge in English, and that feeling is compounded by her teacher’s patronizing behavior. “I’m furious, unable to explain I already learned fractions and how to purify river water. So this is what dumb feels like. I hate, hate, hate it” (pp. 156–157).

The preceding examples deal with offenses from the outside (teachers and peers). However, pressures and criticism from within the language group also occur, as in *Bitter Melon* (Chow, 2010) when Frances’s mother criticizes her, comparing a bank teller’s perfect Cantonese sounds to her “gwai lo accent”—an insulting reference to her American (or devil) accent (p. 5). Even benign actions can lead to self-esteem issues. In *Good Enough* (Yoo, 2008), Patti does not speak fluent Korean because her parents were concerned that she might speak English with an accent. Consequently, Patti laments, “. . . I have the vocabulary of a four-year-old when it comes to speaking Korean, stuff like ‘I’m hungry’ and ‘I have to pee’” (p. 21). Finally, Francisco Jiménez is fluent in English and Spanish by the time he goes to college in *Reaching Out* (2008), but he quickly realizes that academic language demands are different. “I was not doing well in English

or Spanish, my own native language! I got a D on my English paper. I was too embarrassed to tell what grade I got on my Spanish composition” (p. 45).

Adolescence intensifies the basic social need to communicate as young people seek to belong, to form affiliations. For English learners, those bonds can be forged within and outside of their own ethnic/language group. Broz (2010) cautions that English learners

come into classrooms “representing a full range of personal and family closeness or distance” from their cultural roots (p. 85). The strength of these bonds can be influenced by the internal and external regard for the home culture/language and the ability to participate, through

language, friendships, and social organizations, both within and outside the ethnic/language community.

The two sisters in *Ask Me No Questions* (Budhos, 2006) are an interesting comparison. The older sister, Aisha, distances herself from her Bangladeshi peers, immersing herself in American culture and striving to be the perfect student. “She began to study the other kids—especially the American ones. She figured out how they walked, what slang they used. Sometimes she’d stand in front of the mirror practicing phrases like ‘my mom’ or ‘awesome’ . . . [At night] after she’s crawled under the covers, she keeps talking in the dark, rehearsing who she wants to be the next day” (p. 24). Nadira, the younger sister, stays closer to her Muslim family, and in the end, she demonstrates her own strength and coping skills, presenting evidence on behalf of her family when her father is detained because the family’s visas have expired.

The sisters in *The Great Wall of Lucy Wu* (Shang, 2011) also differ in their affiliations initially. Regina, Lucy’s older sister, invests in the Chinese American community, having “single-handedly gotten the school to offer Chinese as a class, persuaded the PTA to buy Chinese language software, and brought dozens of speakers to school to discuss Chinese language, food, history, and culture” (p. 12–13). Lucy, on the other hand, defines herself in terms of participation in basketball at school, and she resists her parents’ efforts to have her attend Chinese school on Saturday. Although

not as fully developed, Kek and his cousin, Ganwar, from *Home of the Brave* (Applegate, 2007) differ in their ability to reach out and form bonds. Ganwar is angry due to injuries sustained from the conflict in Sudan, so he withdraws. Perhaps with unrealistic ability and courage for a newcomer to the language and culture, Kek reaches out to an elderly woman and cares for her farm animals.

English learners come to a new culture and language in a variety of ways—as refugees, immigrants, migrants. Their transition to a new culture and language is influenced by individual coping skills and resilience, the reasons for the move, immigration status, abruptness of change, extent of participation in the new language, and the degree of similarity or difference between the home and new language. Among the 20 books analyzed in the study, six depict immigration due to war, some with the addition of time in refugee camps: *Betti on the High Wire* (Railsback, 2010), *Day of the Pelican* (Paterson, 2009), *Home of the Brave* (Applegate, 2007), *Inside Out & Back Again* (Lai, 2011), *Something about America* (Testa, 2007), and *Tangled Threads: A Hmong Girl’s Story* (Shea, 2003). Within this group of books, *Betti on the High Wire* is different because Babo is adopted and comes to America with new parents who do not speak her home language and are not familiar with her home culture. Therefore, Betti is not part of an ethnic neighborhood and has no language support group to ease her transition.

Other books in this group reflect main characters who may have lost family members due to war, but who are able to flee with family, as in *Day of the Pelican* (Paterson, 2009), *Something about America* (Testa, 2007), *Inside Out & Back Again* (Lai, 2007), and *Tangled Threads: A Hmong Girl’s Story* (Shea, 2003). On the other hand, Kek, in *Home of the Brave* (Applegate, 2007), travels to the US alone, since his mother is missing amidst turmoil in the home country, but on arrival, he is reunited with an aunt and cousin. While the country is not at war in *Flight to Freedom* (Veciana-Suárez, 2001), the political regime change in Cuba forces the Garcia family to flee to Miami, where they live in political exile. Even though the journey to the US may have been abrupt due to situations in their home country, all of these families have a home language support system.

However, some refugees are relocated in geo-

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## English learners come to a new culture and language in a variety of ways—as refugees, immigrants, migrants.

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graphic areas such as Vermont (*Day of the Pelican*), Minnesota (*Home of the Brave*), or Alabama (*Inside Out & Back Again*) where there may not be an ethnic neighborhood to serve as an extension for their home language. On the other hand, time in refugee camps, as described in *Day of the Pelican*, *Inside Out & Back Again*, and *Tangled Threads: A Hmong Girl's Story*, while difficult, provides initial exposure to English to ease some transition issues.

Another seven books describe families who are first-generation immigrants to the US for economic reasons, including *Any Small Goodness* (Johnston, 2001), *Ask Me No Questions* (Budhos, 2006), *Breaking Through* and *Reaching Out* (Jiménez, 2002, 2008), *Life, After* (Littman, 2010), *Return to Sender* (Alvarez, 2009), and *A Step from Heaven* (Na, 2001). Most of these families not only have a home language support system, but they have moved to geographic areas where they can have contact with similar language communities. *Return to Sender* is the exception as Mari's family members are undocumented migrant workers who move to rural Vermont to work on a dairy farm.

Four books, *Bitter Melon* (Chow, 2010), *Good Enough* (Yoo, 2008), *The Great Wall of Lucy Wu* (Shang, 2011), and *Shine Coconut Moon* (Meminger, 2010) depict families with children who are second-generation or later immigrants who may not have learned the parents' home language. The main characters in these books live in areas where there are similar language communities, but they may or may not participate in those. Grace, the focus of *Roots and Wings* (Ly, 2008), is a second-generation Cambodian American whose mother and grandmother fled their war-torn country, initially moving to Florida, where they were part of an ethnic community; later, before Grace is born, they move to Pennsylvania. Thus, Grace grows up outside the Cambodian American community and only reconnects after her grandmother dies. Finally, *Call Me Maria* (Cofer, 2006) is a departure from the books about immigrants since, as a resident of Puerto Rico, Maria is a US citizen. She grew up speaking Spanish and some English, yet she has many of the same transition issues. When Maria moves to New York City with her father, she immerses herself in the barrio and participates in a world of Spanish, English, and a newfound language, "Spanglish."

As English learners move into a new culture and

language, familial and intergenerational roles and dynamics may be affected. Adolescents often pick up a new language more quickly than adults, since they are attending school, interacting with teachers and peers, and using language for purposes beyond social interaction. These differences in the rate of acculturation can lead to a destabilization of family roles and to role reversals in which adolescents translate and negotiate issues for parents. In *Ask Me No Questions* (Budhos, 2006), when immigration officials question her uncle, Nadira sees his embarrassment and anger. "It's like the words are stuck in his mouth, and he can't get them out . . . I know he hates this: He hates that his English has fled him, and his own daughter is showing him up in front of an American man" (p. 81).

As another example, Meli's father (*Day of the Pelican*, Paterson, 2009) was pleased that English lessons were offered at the refugee camp, but as he struggled to learn the language, Meli was relieved when he stopped attending. "How could she learn something with Baba at her elbow feeling lost and hopeless and humiliated by his own children? Still, how were they to get along in America if their father couldn't even speak to people? It would be as though Mehmet [the brother] had become head of the family. . . . What would happen to them in that strange new land without him in charge?" (p. 93).

In many cases, as the younger generation learns a new language, they even correct their parents. On a visit home, Francisco (*Reaching Out*, Jiménez, 2008) causes awkwardness and anger when he tells his father, "Papa, did you know that the word *naiden* should really be *nadie*? This is what my Spanish professor told me" (p. 66). All the while, parents worry about children forgetting their home language and possibly losing touch with family and culture, as depicted in *Day of the Pelican* (2009). "Mama shook her head. 'They're forgetting Albanian'" (p. 110). Children are sometimes embarrassed by their elder's lack of English ability as well, as Grace laments in *Roots and Wings* (Ly, 2008). "I wanted my grandmother to go

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**As English learners move into a new culture and language, familial and intergenerational roles and dynamics may be affected.**

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to school to learn English so that she didn't ask what was happening on television when my friends were around or where to sign her name on a form" (pp. 59–60).

### Contextual Factors

Contextual factors in community, educational, and political and governmental institutions can serve to marginalize or integrate English learners. These ten-

dencies within the US are related to two contrasting paradigms—monolingual meritocracy and multilingualism (Wong & Grant, 2007). Some communities appear to embrace multilingualism and multiliteracies based on their demographics; however, an examination may yield little evidence of such support.

The church and relocation

agencies in *Day of the Pelican* (Paterson, 2009) and *Home of the Brave* (Applegate, 2007) appear supportive, but in the community at large, the picture is different. Kek (*Home of the Brave*) experiences hostility from a city bus driver when he is uncertain about the process of paying for his ride. "C'mon, hurry up. The driver makes a face that says *stupid-new-to-this-country-boy*" (p. 113). Similarly, in *Good Enough* (Yoo, 2008), Patti and her father encounter prejudice as they check out at the register of a local store.

"Unbelievable," Mrs. Thomas says loudly . . . as she grimaces at us. . . . She rolls her eyes at Stephanie. She lowers her voice as she speaks to her daughter, but I can hear every word. "These people, they come to our country, they don't bother learning the language . . ." (p. 282)

In *Inside Out & Back Again* (Lai, 2011), Há's family tries to reach out and meet the neighbors, but doors are closed against them. In another frightening incident, "A brick shatters the front window, landing on our dinner table along with a note. Brother Quang refuses to translate" (p. 162). After the terrorist attacks on 9-11, Meli and Mehmet in *Day of the Pelican* (Paterson, 2009) experience open hostility from their peers at school, and in *Something about America* (Testa, 2007), a hate group targets the local Somali

community and blankets the neighborhood with racist leaflets. In both books, however, other community members come together and extend support to heal the wounds.

Educational institutions are shaped by the curriculum, expectations, instructional engagement, and access to programs. In schools, a monolingual meritocracy focuses on English in the classroom as the norm for academic achievement, while the model of multilingualism and multiliteracies acknowledges the importance of English as well as preserving home languages (Wong & Grant, 2007). While none of the books illustrated cutting-edge programs, some seemed to make a difference to English learners. In *Home of the Brave* (Applegate, 2007), Kek feels comfortable in his ESL class, and their teacher engages students in hands-on, acquisition-oriented activities. Likewise, in *Tangled Threads: A Hmong Girl's Story* (Shea, 2003), Mai meets Miss Susan who welcomes her to ESL.

"This is my class . . . . Some schools call it E.S.L.—English as a Second Language. You speak Hmong first, and you speak it at home. Others might speak Polish first or Spanish first." I nodded. Miss Susan swung the door open, and all the kids stood and said in Hmong, "*Txais tos! Welcome to Roger Williams!*" My eyes got very wet, and I covered my mouth to hide the quivering of my lips. For the first time since my arrival in America three weeks ago, I felt like I belonged" (p. 112).

Negotiating the bureaucracy of political, governmental, and legal institutions can be difficult for the native English speaker; for an English learner, it can be overwhelming. In the United States, ". . . powerful social and political forces operate against [language diversity and] the retention of minority languages. To many and perhaps most Americans, English is more than a societal language; it is an ideology" (Wong-Fillmore, 2000, p. 207). Legal issues regarding citizenship and immigration status arise in several books, including *Ask Me No Questions* (Budhos, 2006), *Breaking Through* and *Reaching Out* (Jiménez, 2002, 2008), and *Return to Sender* (Alvarez, 2009). Additionally, a few books mention resettlement issues related to the characters' refugee status, as in *Day of the Pelican* (Paterson, 2009), *Home of the Brave* (Applegate, 2007), and *Inside Out & Back Again* (Lai, 2011). In each instance, the primary language of interaction is English, with little or no support for the participants' home language. *Ask Me No Questions* also highlights

how immigrants fall victim to unscrupulous individuals, such as dishonest attorneys who hinder rather than help them through the process of immigration.

### Interactional Factors

“Discourse has a very real-world effect—what one says or does affects not only others but oneself” (Alsup, 2010b, p. 2). Through social interactions, language identity and power relations are processed and negotiated.

Our first interactions are with family, but that language shifts given generational preferences and family roles. Pura Belpré award-winning author Viola Canales began elementary school speaking only Spanish because “only Spanish was spoken in her home out of respect to her grandmother, who spoke no English, even though her parents, both US citizens, both US high school graduates, were bilingual” (Newman, 2009, p. 67). Likewise, while several fathers require their children to use the home language with the family, as illustrated in *Breaking Through* and *Reaching Out* (Jiménez, 2002, 2008), *Return to Sender* (Alvarez, 2009), and *A Step from Heaven* (Na, 2001), the young people often engage in language mixing as described in *Return to Sender*.

Ofie asked, “*Papa, necesito dinero for my lunch porque hoy sirven grilled cheese sandwiches.*” . . . “*En español,*” he reminded her. He already knew that Ofie wanted money to buy her lunch instead of taking leftover tortillas and beans. But he wanted her to ask him in Spanish.” Ofie folded her arms and stood her ground, “I’m American. I speak English.” Papa gave her several slow nods. “Bueno, americanito, tendras que comprar tu almuerzo con tu propio dinero.” That night, . . . he turned the TV to a Spanish channel. “*Se termino la television en ingles,*” he announced. No more English or Spanglish in the house. We had to practice our Spanish. (pp. 174–175)

At school, teacher–student interactions may reflect language to include or to exclude. Inclusive learning communities acknowledge all students’ previous linguistic and academic achievement and employ “a range of language registers and codes (e.g., from standard to more colloquial forms of speech and from monolingual to more mixed language uses)” (Franquiz & Reyes, 1998, p. 213). Some teachers, however, suppress or ignore such hybrid moments (Gutierrez, Baquedano-Lopez, & Tejeda, 1999).

There were no real instances of teachers encouraging multiple languages in the classroom, but there

were teachers who tried to include and those who seemed to exclude English learners. For instance, in *Call Me Maria* (Cofer, 2006), Maria feels that her teacher judges her. “What does he understand? Why I do not always choose to talk in class? Does he understand what it is like to sound different from others so that some people will look at you as if you are from another planet, and others will laugh as if everything you say is a joke?” (p. 89). On the other hand, in *Reaching Out*, Francisco recalls a high school English teacher who reached out and encouraged him to read *The Grapes of Wrath* (Steinbeck, 1939/2002). “It was difficult to read because I was still struggling with the English language, but I could not put it down. I identified with the Joad family.

Their experiences were like my own family’s, as well as those of other migrant workers. I was moved by their story, and for the first time I had read something in school to which I could relate” (p. 9).

In adolescence, peer interactions reflect peer pressure and power relationships as language is used to silence and to position individuals negatively or

positively. Most of the characters in the books analyzed find friends within their own language group, as Mai does with the student aide to her ESL teacher in *Tangled Threads: A Hmong Girl’s Story* (Shea, 2003). “I only come in here for an hour on Tuesdays and Thursdays. But we’re both in the seventh grade, so we have the same lunch period. You can sit with me and my friends if you want” (p. 114). They also form friendships with native-English-speaking peers who help them navigate school procedures as well as English, as is the case with Dani in *Life, After* (Littman, 2010).

“You are one smart cookie, Miss Daniela Bensimon from Argentina. Come on, tell me where’s your next class and I’ll show you the way.” As I told him the classroom number of my next class, I tried to figure out why he was comparing me to a biscuit, and if this was a compliment or an insult. It was no wonder I felt so tired at the end of the day. Trying to think in English was exhausting. (pp. 138–139)

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**In adolescence, peer interactions reflect peer pressure and power relationships as language is used to silence and to position individuals negatively or positively.**

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In comparison, there were many examples of hurtful peer interactions. In homeroom, Kek (*Home of the Brave*, Applegate, 2007) finds a note on his desk and is hopeful that he has a new friend, but when he opens the note, it is a drawing of “a dead body made of bones. ‘Hungry, Kenya?’ a boy in the back asks. His voice has knives in it” (p. 152). Consequently, some

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## English learners may participate within only one or a variety of communities.

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English learners adapt their behavior, as Mai describes in *Tangled Threads: A Hmong Girl's Story* (Shea, 2003). “I’d seen only a few Hmong kids raise their hands to answer or ask a question. At the same

time I sometimes saw American kids laugh at how the words came out or at a question they thought was stupid. I never raised my hand outside [ESL]. I would rather make believe I didn’t understand than raise my hand and lose face” (p. 174).

English learners may participate within only one or a variety of communities, including an ethnic enclave, a diverse multilingual community, or a more monolingual community that could present challenges to recent immigrants and non-English speakers. Betti (Railsback, 2010) is in a unique situation as she is adopted and moves to another country without home language support. However, Betti is surrounded by a caring community who help her. In contrast, in *Flight to Freedom* (Veciana-Suárez, 2001), Yara has access to a strong Cuban community in Miami. In yet a third scenario from *Shine Coconut Moon* (Meminger, 2010), Sammy chooses not to interact with her Indian peers and community because “they talked about things I knew nothing about, sometimes using words in languages other than English—which is the only language I’m fluent in. Things always got real awkward real fast when we realized we had nothing much to talk about” (pp. 51–52).

## The Results in Terms of Language Identity

How can the examples found in the analysis of selected YAL be interpreted in terms of adaptation style and language identity formation? What style of adaptation has the character in the book chosen or what style will the character ultimately choose? Based on the analysis of the examples and the factors associated

with them, some possible interpretations follow. As noted earlier, individuals can move through more than one style of adaptation, as is evident from the analysis of the books.

### Ethnic Flight

For these individuals, speaking English is more than just communicating. “It also becomes an important symbolic act of identifying with the dominant culture . . .” and perhaps, “moving away from the world of the family and the ethnic group” (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001, p. 104). In *Shine Coconut Moon* (Meminger, 2010), Sammy’s mother definitely chooses this adaptation as she severs ties with her Indian family after her divorce; by suspending any real contact with family or the Indian community, she takes Sammy along this same path. Years later, a visit from her brother and the interest that Sammy shows in reconnecting with her grandparents and her Sikh heritage move Sammy and her mother back toward a transcultural style.

In *Ask Me No Questions* (Budhos, 2006), Aisha also chooses ethnic flight as an initial response after immigration. She believes this choice is the most effective one in her quest to become high school valedictorian and attend college. However, when her father is detained by immigration because the family’s visas have expired, her carefully constructed world collapses, and her sister helps her regain a more transcultural identity. To a lesser extent, in *The Great Wall of Lucy Wu* (Shang, 2011), Lucy chooses ethnic flight because she has a limited world view that revolves around basketball and middle school. When her great aunt visits from China, Lucy literally builds a wall with a bookcase in her room to block out the ethnic and language influence. In getting to know her great aunt, however, she learns about her family heritage and becomes more receptive to learning about the language at Chinese school.

### Adversarial identity

Several characters appear to initially choose an adversarial identity, rejecting English and American culture. Given the difficulties they have experienced, this choice is not a surprise. However, this is probably not the end point of their identity formation. First, Há experiences intense bullying from her peers at school in *Inside Out & Back Again* (Lai, 2011), and her

teacher does not intervene to help her, which sends a negative message. In addition, her family relocates to Alabama where there is no strong ethnic language community for support. Except for the “cowboy” who is their sponsor and Miss Washington who tutors Há, they have few friends outside the family unit. Há is especially frustrated by English, which is very different from Vietnamese. Nonetheless, there are encouraging signs in her friendship with Miss Washington, who intercedes at school so Há can have a peaceful lunch alone in the classroom, away from bullies in the school cafeteria.

As noted earlier regarding *Home of the Brave* (Applegate, 2007), Kek’s cousin Ganwar is angry because he was injured in the war. Consequently, he directs his anger outward and refuses to become involved in the community. When Kek mentions that he thinks he will like living in America, Ganwar disagrees. “Yeah, that’s what I thought, too. But you’ll never really feel like an American . . . Because they won’t let you” (p. 87).

Finally, in *Betti on the High Wire* (Railsback, 2010), Babo has many reasons to push back in an adversarial manner. She has to leave her home country, her adoptive parents change her name to Betti, and she struggles daily with English. Yet, despite the language barrier and her enormous sense of loss, her new family is gently supportive, allowing her the space to adjust. Still, it may be harder for her than for characters in the other books to build a transcultural identity.

### **Transcultural identity**

The analysis highlighted at least two examples of individuals who have already built a transcultural identity, incorporating aspects of both their culture of origin and mainstream American culture. First, Francisco Jiménez’s memoirs, *Breaking Through* (2002) and *Reaching Out* (2008) paint a picture of a young man overcoming poverty, language barriers, and prejudice to become fluent in both of his languages. Moreover, because readers can follow his journey from childhood to young adulthood, they get a glimpse of how long it takes to become fluent in two languages for both personal and academic purposes.

In *Call Me Maria* (Cofer, 2006), Maria has enthusiastically embraced Spanish, English, and Spanglish. She feels confident about her abilities. “I know words

in two languages. I will not give up either one. It gives me an advantage to know more than you know. . . . I will not forget my first language. And now I know my second language well enough so that I am not going to be lost in America” (p. 28).

In *Flight to Freedom* (Veciana-Suárez, 2001), Yara shows her ability to integrate her two languages and cultures, all the while struggling with the powerful questions that transcultural identity brings. She remembers that when she first memorized the words to the Pledge of Allegiance, she did not really understand them. “But now I know what those words stand for. When I put my hand over my heart, and when I declare my allegiance to those colors and to the republic they represent, I cannot help but wonder if this means I have forgotten my own birth. This is very confusing, and I’m not sure I can even explain the division I sometimes feel inside my heart” (p. 186).

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**Yara shows her ability to integrate her two languages and cultures, all the while struggling with the powerful questions that transcultural identity brings.**

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### **Conclusion**

Each of the transcultural identity examples presented were native Spanish speakers, which coincides with the findings by Rumbaut (2002) who studied the children of immigrants to the US post-1960 to assess whether they maintained attachments to home language and culture into adulthood. The findings of this longitudinal study indicate that the level of transcultural attachment was small—around 10%—but it was more significant with some national-origin groups, particularly Mexican Americans living close to the border. His interpretation of the data was that for second-generation Americans, “theirs was an American future, not a bilingual or binational one” (p. 90).

However, these findings do not take into account some of the factors considered by this limited analysis of YAL, namely, the contextual support of educational institutions and the critical importance of teacher–student interactions that “stress mutual respect, sharing, and learning in a community” (Pavlenko & Norton,



2007, p. 686). English learners “will perform better academically if schools as institutions and classroom teachers in particular make an effort to invite into the classroom the home culture and language from which the students come” (Alsup, 2010a, p. 81). Positive learning environments acknowledge and affirm the

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**Clearly, in the 20 books examined, language is a part of teens’ negotiation of their own identity as they explore who they are in their new worlds.**

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learner’s home language and culture, capitalize on the powerful social network of family and community, and help all learners “imagine themselves as members of a linguistically diverse world” (Pavlenko & Norton, 2007, p. 677). The YAL analyzed in this study is just a small subset of the books that could be used to engage English

learners and monolingual English speakers and help teachers spark discussions of language variation that address the Common Core State Standards (<http://www.corestandards.org/>).

Gloria Anzaldúa writes, “I am my language. Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself. Until I can accept as legitimate Chicano Texas Spanish, Tex-Mex, and all the other languages I speak, I cannot accept the legitimacy of myself” (1987, p. 59).

Clearly, in the 20 books examined, language is a part of teens’ negotiation of their own identity as they explore who they are in their new worlds.

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\*Indicates that the book has been listed on at least one award or suggested reading list (e.g., IRA Notable Books for a Global Society, Pura Belpré, Printz Award).

## *My Most Excellent Year: Staging Identities*

There are countless reasons for reading, but when you're young and uncertain of your identity, of who you may be, one of the most compelling is the quest to discover yourself reflected in the pages of a book. What a comfort that provides, seeing that you are not alone, that you are not—as you had feared—the only one of your kind.

—*How Beautiful the Ordinary: Twelve Stories of Identity* (Cart [Ed.], 2012, p. 1)

**W**e first approached Steve Kluger's *My Most Excellent Year: A Novel of Love, Mary Poppins, & Fenway Park* (2008) as a superb novel to teach social justice with a Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning (LGBTQ) framework (Buyserie, 2011). As a breakthrough LGBTQ novel, *My Most Excellent Year* meets seven of the nine qualities necessary for excellence in LGBTQ young adult novels that Hayn and Hazlett (2011) first envisioned in 1998: Sexuality is not the central issue of the novel; Augie Hwong, a gay teen, is one of three protagonists; Augie is multifaceted, admired, and, as director of the school musical, is in a leadership role; Augie has a wide circle of friends, including heterosexuals who actively support him; Augie is in a healthy, positive romantic relationship by the end of the novel; and, as an Asian American, Augie represents racial diversity. *My Most Excellent Year* shatters the old stereotypes of LGBTQ young adult (YA) literature to such an extent that the novel represents Hayn and Hazlett's most important wish and fulfills a seventh necessary quality; that is, by providing positive depictions of a gay teenager and his peers, *My Most Excellent Year* cannot be read as an exclusively LGBTQ novel, but one where "all characters are treated as adolescents living the teen experience, no matter their sexuality. Not only is this thematic change the

first item on [Hayn and Hazlett's] 1998 wish list, it is also the single most positive and defining movement toward LGBTQ adolescent works that . . . leave binding stereotypes behind" (p. 70).

*My Most Excellent Year* challenges not only stereotypes of LGBTQ novels, but of YA literature as a whole, making the novel's specific genre delightfully difficult to pin down. Is the book a suite of love stories? A chorus of coming-of-age stories? Is it a utopia in the making where differences unite rather than divide? Is it a musical in prose, all the characters crooning happily as the curtain drops at the end? It is all these and more, but most of all, *My Most Excellent Year* is a novel that allows adolescent—and adult—readers to rehearse a host of empowering identities. If Alsup (2010) is correct in saying that "reading literature suddenly becomes a very personal act . . . as readers come to terms with developmental problems and challenges through vicarious experience of the trials and tribulations of teen protagonists" (p. 7), then *My Most Excellent Year* may be an ideal text for adolescent identity formation.

Many YA novels afford room for their protagonists to try on different identities, some with relative safety. In turn, the readers of these novels—typically young adults themselves—can also don some of these same identities. These new identities, though

often powerful, are usually limited in scope. To fully develop these characters' identities, authors typically only provide them with the opportunity to try on one or two different identities at most. A broader range of identities are explored by Virginia Euwer Wolff's LaVaughn (*Make Lemonade*, 1993), who tries on the identities of parent, future college student, and social worker, alongside dutiful daughter, while other identities, such as girlfriend or best friend, remain undeveloped until the next book in the trilogy, *True Believer* (2001). While LaVaughn does try on a relatively wide range of identities over the course of two novels, roles that most YA characters in other books don't begin to access, in overflowing contrast, *My Most Excellent Year* allows its characters multiple and various identities within a single text, providing young readers with many transformative models.

However, this book is not just written for the YA crowd. Parents and other adults have equal access to this narrative, as the parents of the teen protagonists take their own turns at narrating parts of the story. Through their letters, memos, and emails to each other and to their children, we learn how to be loving and supportive parents, parents who are extremely skilled at talking to their teenagers. But we also learn how to help our teenagers campaign for civil rights, help our gay son quite effortlessly come out to the world, even though everyone already knew he was gay, and "be a pain in the ass" (p. 21)—when called for, of course.

Perhaps most intriguing, the novel itself gets into the act, trying on different identities: part YA literature, part fiction for anyone of any age, the novel perhaps makes its most dramatic identity shift when it takes on the guise of a musical, a genre known for its suspension of disbelief. Though not written as a musical script, but rather in a series of multigenre snippets that parallel the episodic structure of a musical, the book itself takes on narrative challenges that are successfully resolved in family-friendly productions.

The novel takes its cues from the characters who, both literally and figuratively, sing and dance their way to stardom, fame, romance—and who come out to an entire high school without anyone batting an eye. While Augie, T. C. Keller, and Alejandra Perez narrate the story in turn, the supporting cast is given voice: two fathers, one mother, an advisor, a best friend, a boyfriend, and a soon-to-be-adopted brother.

True characters in their own right, all take their turns in the spotlight, helped along by outstanding dialogue. In one scene, Augie's father shows us all how to be emotionally in touch with our children, delivering words of comfort that are truly inspirational. Rather than pretending to be true to life, the characters have apparently memorized Kluger's superb script.

Yet this story is no spoof: it's magic. Through the guise of a musical, both characters and readers learn to suspend their disbelief and believe in magic—real transformative magic. We

believe that a little deaf orphan boy can meet Mary Poppins, his dream nanny, while realizing he can be content with the actual people who love him; a teenage boy can learn that he has to stop trying to impress if he wants to get the girl; the same girl can learn that she doesn't have to stand in the shadow of her politically connected family to be a star; and another teen boy can come out to the world with no pains of suffering or fear—perfect acceptance from friends and family alike.

Take your places, readers. It's showtime!

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***My Most Excellent Year* allows its characters multiple and various identities within a single text, providing young readers with many transformative models.**

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### **Spotlight 1: T. C. Keller**

Despite the book's musical theme, T. C. is ironically the one leading character not asked to audition for the school's production of *Kiss Me, Kate*. "What a bunch of cheesers" (p. 143) is his response to this oversight, as he had just achieved a second-place finish in the school's talent show with his recitation of JFK's inaugural speech—a role he took on primarily to win the heart of Alejandra, or Alé, whose commitment to political activism is rather deeper than T. C.'s initial understanding of relationships with girls.

Known by a variety of names—"Tick" (to Augie), "Anthony" (to Alé), and "Tony C" (to Pop, his father), not to mention Red Sox fan, adopted "big brother" to a deaf orphan boy named Hucky, and teen member of a congressional committee—T.C.'s storyline assures us that simultaneously embodying multiple identi-

## An Interview with Steve Kluger

**B&H:** *Though your book is not written as a literal musical script, we clearly saw many parallels between the story and the musical genre. How would you respond to this comparison?*

**Kluger:** I grew up on (a) Broadway musicals, and (b) *I Love Lucy*. My entire life has been grounded in those two “realities.” In fact, when I was 15 and tried to buy a ticket to the Tony Awards, I discovered they were sold out—so my only recourse was to tell the stage doorman at the Shubert Theatre that my mother—Carol Channing—had forgotten to leave my ticket at the box office. (You’ve already read what happened after that.) All that was missing was Ethel Mertz whispering urgently in my ear, “Lucy, let’s get out of here.” And as to the musical comedy aspect of things, my hands-down favorite review quote came from *Entertainment Weekly* regarding my third (and favorite) novel, *Almost like Being in Love*: “As breezy and preposterous as a Broadway musical.” Real life feels a lot better when it’s got a score by Jerry Herman or Kander and Ebb.

**B&H:** *In the article, we argue that the book could be instrumental in helping teens and their parents try on new roles. In particular, we admire the book because the parents get to be key players in the story. What response have you had from teens and parents who have read your book?*

**Kluger:** Parents and tweens tend to respond strongly in favor of it; teens tend to be divided on whether or not there’s any merit to it at all, in terms of being even remotely realistic. Clearly, it’s an entirely subjective point of view that depends on what the particular teen’s personal experience has been. From my own perspective, I was merely chronicling the extended family that my niece and nephew, Emily and Noah, have been brought up to call their own. When my sister-in-law Lori (Lori Mahoney in the novel) was pregnant with Emily, she registered with a website that networked her with four other expectant mothers in and around her zip code who were all due to give birth to their respective firstborns the same month. This is how the August Mom’s Club was born (“Auggies” for short).

That was 14 years and almost a dozen children

ago, and now it’s tough to remember who belongs to whom biologically; there are 11 kids who think I’m their uncle (which caused some territorial problems for Noah early on, but which he’s come to understand for what it is). In addition to the regular extended-family events (including the annual stay at a big old house in Big Bear over MLK weekend), the openness and support structure between kids and parents is exactly what’s depicted in *My Most Excellent Year*.

And indeed, it’s sometimes tough to figure out who’s the adult and who’s the child. Seven years ago, I was at an Auggies cookout, playing in the backyard with most of the kids (the favored game was always “Let’s Get Uncle Stevie,” which, translated into legal terms, means “assault and battery”). After about half an hour, I went into the house to catch a breather and discovered four-year-old Noah and five-year-old “nephew” Joey watching *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers* on TV. So I sat down with them, popped a can of Diet Coke, and downed it in three gulps. Since this instantly caused me to inflate like a medicine ball, I saw an easy way of getting a cheap laugh from the kids by letting out a burp that registered on the Richter scale. Noah giggled mildly, but Joey didn’t. Without taking his attention away from the Power Rangers, he rolled his eyes, sighed impatiently, then turned to me and demanded, “Say ‘excuse me’.” Which I immediately did, just prior to going into the den and collapsing onto the couch in laughter. There’s nothing quite like being busted by a five-year-old.

**B&H:** *The focus of the article is on shaping identities. From your website and other books, it’s clear that you share many identities that the characters try on (Red Sox fan, movie lover, political activist, supporter of LGBT youth). Do you feel that you share all the identities in the book or are there some that you tried on just for the story?*

**Kluger:** It’s all real-life stuff. I wouldn’t know how to make up any of it if I hadn’t lived it myself—especially when I’m writing about (and for) kids. They keep you honest.

**B&H:** *In our article, we claim that Hucky is the plot catalyst, and we’ve discussed how very different the book would be without him, as he allows T. C., Augie,*

and Alé to try on the role of parent, which gives each of these characters a depth that they might not otherwise have had. When did Hucky come into the picture?

**Kluger:** Hucky was a character I first came up with in 1982, but for whom I was never able to find the right story—and I tried about a half-dozen times. At various stages, his age ranged from 6 to 11, sometimes he was deaf and sometimes he wasn't, occasionally he had parents named Ben and Louise, and I remember that once he lived in Indiana (I'm sure there was a reason, but it escapes me entirely now). The only thing he didn't have was a personality, so I put him away and promised him I'd find the right story for him eventually.

Years later, Noah was born, and when I came up with the premise for *My Most Excellent Year*, I brought Hucky Harper back and turned him into a deaf version of my nephew, right down to the hangaburs, his mad face, and his stuffed dog named Shut-the-Door (no adult could make up a name like that). And the catalyst that brought Noah and Hucky together and gave me the novel's theme was the purple balloon story—which happened to us when Noah was 3 1/2.

**B&H:** We also argue, based on Hayn & Hazlett's wish list, that the novel is not a coming-out LGBTQ novel because it shatters the constraints of many LGBTQ storylines. Was this intentional? If so, how did you shape the characters and plot to attain this?

**Kluger:** It was intentional, but I didn't have to do anything to shape the characters or the story. Augie is me when I was that age, except for the fact that I had to stay quiet about it if I wanted to keep my teeth. I was a diva, and I was *fabulous* at it. So when it came time to write the novel, I named myself Augie, made myself Chinese (*Flower Drum Song* was my favorite musical when I was 6; come to think of it, I was listening to the overture on my iPod this morning), and put myself in an era where gay-straight alliances and out kids were so *not* unusual in urban schools that I actually had a chance—through Augie—to live the kind of open adolescence I'd have lived if I'd been born 35 years later.

**B&H:** Would you characterize your book as *Young Adult Lit* or something else?

**Kluger:** It was written as an adult novel in much the

same way my second one—*Last Days of Summer*—was written. After a year in print, *LDOS* (*Last Days of Summer*) made the jump by itself into the Young Adult category and has since become a staple in high school English classes. Twelve years ago, you'd have found it in the general fiction section of the library; these days you're just as likely to find it in YA as well (or instead). But by the time I wrote *My Most Excellent Year*, the YA market had grown so enormously that the novel was automatically tagged as YA. That wouldn't have happened in 1998. Which says a *lot* about how savvy kids have become.

**B&H:** We obviously love the book, and Crag has included the book in several of the college-level courses he's taught (and Beth has published another article about the book). If teachers were to use *My Most Excellent Year* in the high school classroom, what would you hope that students (and perhaps teachers and administrators) would gain from the book?

**Kluger:** The four themes that are self-evident: (1) being different is just about the coolest thing you can possibly aspire to; (2) real-life magic happens every day of your life if you just open your eyes and look (the stage doorman at the Shubert was my first witness to that); (3) you can achieve anything you want to achieve just by using your head and Lucy Ricardo's determination (the stage doorman at the Shubert was my first witness to that, too); and (4) Ethel Merman is God.

**B&H:** During Crag's teaching, he's also heard the occasional complaint that the book is not realistic (Alé has a bodyguard, Augie learns he's gay without any real backlash, etc.). We compare the book to a musical to emphasize that readers should approach the book with a good dose of suspension of disbelief, but we also feel the book is rooted in reality and that the identities that the characters try on are attainable. How do you respond to these types of criticisms/concerns?

**Kluger:** This always makes me laugh. Teens can find realism in novels about vampires, but not in novels where kids are accepted for who they are and occasionally have nurturing and supportive relationships with their parents. This kind of gives you a clue about how tough it must be to be a kid these days, but I'm still holding fast to the possibility that a world like that can exist. It's the Broadway musical thing again. I also believe that Brigadoon comes to life out of the Scottish mist once every hundred years . . .

ties can be empowering. Stringer (1997) supports this possibility, arguing, “Identity achievement and self-understanding provide the psychological freedom that enables us to balance self-reflection with realistic action” (p. 1). While T. C., Alé, and Augie’s ambitions are often based more in idealism than realism (Augie wants to hire Coretta Scott King to emcee their talent show), their ability to achieve Stringer’s concepts of “identity achievement and self-understanding” comes

directly from simultaneously occupying multiple roles, each shaping and challenging the other roles in their own lives and the lives of their friends and family.

When we first meet him, T. C. takes pride in a few roles that some people, specifically his advisor and his future girlfriend, consider less than ideal. First, he touts his status as a B+ student, simply because he

wants to be a “chip off the old block” (his dad, Pop, was a B+ student in college) and he *doesn’t* want to be a “poser”—two arguments that drive his advisor, Lori, nuts. Second, he is always planning his next move with Alé, a characteristic that, unsurprisingly, does not impress her. Yet with these initial flaws, and despite Alé’s and Lori’s initial doubts, T. C. is the genuine article. In this sense, he doesn’t simply “try on” the role of friend, he is the epitome of friendship. No one under his care is left to fend for themselves; in one way or another, T. C. supports Augie, Alé, Hucky, and even his Pop, for life.

Scene Change: *T. C.’s first-grade year when T. C. first meets Augie.* Augie, an American-born Chinese forced by his FOB (“Fresh Off the Boat”), civil-rights-crusading mother to eat bok choy and sprouts for lunch, described himself as “a professional sideline watcher”; at the same time, T. C. was unaware of the fact that “in first grade everybody wanted to be Tick” (p. 6)—until, of course, his mother died. After her death, T. C. sees through everyone’s platitudes that things will be okay and turns for the first time to Augie, who “was the only one who knew what to say and how to say it” (p. 3). As T. C. comments, “Any-

body who can pull off something like that for you isn’t just a best friend—that’s brother territory. So Augie told his mom and dad that they had a new son, and I told Pop the same thing. Screw biology” (p. 3).

From that point on, T. C. and Augie assume the role of brothers. We realize quickly, as they do, that the relationship means more than just playing *Galaxy Fighters* and having sleepovers. Rather, T. C. shows us all how to care about our friends; it is important to note that he is also one of our primary guides toward supporting LGBTQ youth. Granted, when Augie first asks what T. C. would say if he knew Augie liked boys, T. C.’s response of “Duh” may not have been poetic, but his follow-up response rings true: “Who’s the boy?” and “I need to see how he treats you first” (p. 106). Later, Augie briefly questions his own worth after Andy, his new boyfriend, attacks Augie’s masculinity, a move prompted by Augie’s love of divas but dismissive of Augie’s talent on the soccer field. T. C. immediately sees right through Augie’s insecurities, even though the brothers are IMing at the time:

**AugieHwong:** Tick, have you ever been ashamed of me?

**TCKeller:** I’ll kick his ass.

**AugieHwong:** Whose??

**TCKeller:** Andy’s. Is that what he said to you???

**AugieHwong:** No. I mean, not exactly. But wouldn’t I be less of a freak if I acted like a normal guy once in a while?

**TCKeller:** And turn into somebody your own brother wouldn’t even recognize??? I swear to God I’m going to kick his ass.

**AugieHwong:** You don’t have to. You just answered my question. (p. 290)

To clarify, no actual violence occurs, and Augie is perfectly capable of taking care of Andy’s indiscretion on his own in a way that validates their relationship and shows the whole school how to come out with style. But T. C.’s confidence in Augie proves to be exactly the type of support Augie needs. Indeed, T. C.’s natural incredulity that Augie should act “normally”

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**T. C. is the genuine article . . . he doesn’t simply “try on” the role of friend, he is the epitome of friendship. No one under his care is left to fend for themselves.**

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is one we can all take to heart, particularly when discussing LGBTQ issues: through the brothers' conversation, sexual identity—not homophobia—becomes normative and normal. And while T. C.'s grades may suffer slightly from his distrust of straight-A posers, T. C. knows on one level that being a poser with your friends—and maintaining social inequalities—is pure crap.

On another level, however, T. C. at times exemplifies the role of poser in his pursuit of Alé, for he is constantly plotting his next move with her—acts that, of course, Alé quickly spots for the frauds they are (though some moves *are* honest, catching her off guard). While Alé is admittedly also falling for T. C., T. C. keeps losing ground precisely because he is not genuine, at least not consistently. Fortunately for him, he also meets Hucky, a six-year-old deaf orphan boy who decides T. C.'s baseball skills are worth improving. (Hucky reads the signs sent by the opposing team to feed T. C. the best pitches—unless Hucky is mad at T. C., in which case T. C. strikes out.) In typical T. C. fashion, T. C. commits himself to Hucky and strives to help Hucky achieve his wish that Mary Poppins will one day come take care of him. T. C., perhaps subconsciously, recognizes himself in Hucky, a young boy with no mother to take care of him. From then on, T. C. takes it upon himself to teach Hucky about magic of various kinds, but particularly the kind of magic that happens when people love you.

During the course of the novel, T. C.'s commitment to Hucky permanently shapes T. C.'s identity, allowing T. C. to realize the importance of being genuine (lessons he already knows when dealing with friends, but ones he finds more complicated when translating to romance). He stops his schemes with Alé, helps her raise a baseball diamond at Manzanar, and introduces Hucky to the real Mary Poppins.

Naturally. Musical, remember?

## Spotlight 2: Augie Hwang

Augie is a director par excellence, leading non-drama “civilians” (p. 241) like T. C. and Andy to inspiring performances in the talent show, an arena they had never imagined they would play in. Instrumentally, he “discovers” Alé and jumpstarts her promising singing career by casting her in the finale of the talent show, a performance that wins her first prize. For his tour de

force, he orchestrates a plan to bring T. C. and Hucky face-to-face with Mary Poppins, aka Julie Andrews. T.C. is impressed with Augie's leadership skills: “The kids love him and I can understand why . . . I always knew that Augie could push the edge of any envelope whenever he wanted to” (p. 95). His leadership extends to other parts of the school as well, influencing two other freshmen to come out of the closet and encouraging other hopeful actors to refine their natural performing abilities.

But he's also a leading man—or leading lady (think Katherine Hepburn)—worthy of Tony Award consideration. He does almost everything with brimming confidence—except fall in love. Comfortable in the very different roles of theater whiz kid and star athlete (he is a scoring machine in soccer and letters in swimming and track), the only stumble Augie makes on the stage of his life is in his relationship with Andy. As Alé observed after the auditions for the talent show, “Augie seemed back to normal again. Or at least as normal as you can be when you're Augie, when your life has turned upside down practically overnight, and when you're not confident enough to share the news with anyone else yet—not even the people who love you the most” (p. 80).

After Hucky asks Augie why Andy doesn't know that Augie loves him, Augie finally makes the first move and reaches out to hold Andy's hand at the movies. Andy responds, yet the relationship is still difficult for Andy: he's worried about how his father, a former Air Force pilot, might react, and he's uncomfortable with how Augie comports himself in public (Augie's serenade to Andy at a café impresses all listeners but Andy). In a private chat, Andy writes, “Augie, you're a guy. Once in a while you need to remind people before they forget” (p. 261). But even when romance doesn't go his way, Augie takes the lead in the relationship, refining Andy's performance in comparison to his own. Andy eventually comes around to accepting Augie as his boyfriend just as he is: “maybe you *are* the only boy in the world. Even

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**T. C.'s commitment to Hucky permanently shapes T. C.'s identity, allowing T. C. to realize the importance of being genuine.**

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when you're Gypsy Rose Lee" (p. 308).

Bolstered by his supporting actors—T. C., Alé, mutual friend Lee, Hucky, and his parents—Augie plays through the bump in his confidence. Together, as cast members, they bring out the best in each other. Indeed, the critical role his parents play behind

the scenes cannot be overstated. For many LGBTQ families, coming out can be a traumatic event; the parents may even, as in Alex Sanchez's *Rainbow Boys* (2003), disown their child. Augie's parents, however, are his buttresses. In a letter to T. C.'s dad, Craig Hwong writes: "Augie's almost fifteen and about three steps away from Adolescent Hell—but he still hasn't told us he's gay yet. He couldn't possibly think it would make

any difference to us. Wei and I have been encouraging him to be himself ever since he memorized *Annie Get Your Gun* at the age of two" (p. 53). Still, his father recognizes that life could be difficult for Augie: "As a gay kid he'll be a natural leader. Put him in a macho bullshit environment and he's going to have a hard time" (p. 55).

Craig's relationship with Augie is one to which all fathers should aspire, as the father-son duo can talk about anything: "Dad? Is love supposed to hurt?" (p. 187). Craig asks Augie to describe what he feels when he thinks about Andy, and Craig would in turn relate "what it was like when the same roller coaster got ahold" of him (p. 187), trusting that "All [Augie] really needed to hear was that he's not the first kid who's had to go through this" (p. 188). Andy himself acknowledges how effortlessly Augie's parents accept his sexuality: "It's the way your parents know we're boyfriends and we never had to tell them. And they're *happy* about it" (p. 311). Moreover, Craig has a refreshing sense of humor about his son's disorienting love life. He writes in an e-memo to T. C.'s father: "Andy kissed Augie on Sunday, and now we keep misplacing our son. Half an hour ago I found him sitting in a broken armchair in the basement with a

blank stare on his face. And he couldn't remember how he'd gotten there" (p. 333).

As director and actor, Augie Hwong thrives in the spotlight, modeling a take-charge mindset for readers of all ages. Possessing certitude rare in an adolescent, Augie is aware of his uniqueness. Quoting American composer and lyricist Stephen Sondheim, he exclaims:

"Here's to us.  
Who's like us?  
Damn few." (p. 392)

### Spotlight 3: Alejandra Perez

Out of the three teens, Alé begins the novel with the most rigidly defined roles: daughter of the former Ambassador to Mexico, "stuck-up" rich kid with a bodyguard, current political activist, straight-A student, and—even at age 14—"prepared to settle for a loveless career in the diplomatic corps because it was proper and expected" (p. 335), *despite* both her status as "persona non grata all along Embassy Row" (p. 12; she's been unintentionally insulting prime ministers since the age of five) and her hidden desire to be a dancer. As we eventually learn, Alé creates some of these expectations for herself, while others are indeed handed to her. Her parents, unlike T.C. and Augie's collective set of parents, never step in as temporary narrators of the novel. Their silence with us illustrates their lack of communication with their daughter on anything not related to diplomacy. Nor does Alé realize until well into the novel that she is partly responsible for the lapse in communication between daughter and parents.

Alé's also the newcomer to Brookline, Massachusetts, and she has a little trouble fitting into a regular high school where there are "No nannies, no bodyguards, no heads of state, no dinners with Chelsea Clinton or Tobey Maguire, and no one who wouldn't think you were a stuck-up pain in the ass if you mentioned either one of them" (p. 14). Fortunately for her, she's soon sought out and befriended by Augie, whose love of theatre and famous personalities allows him to see Alé's connections in a favorable light, and Lee Meyerhoff, who, though now the most popular girl in the 9th grade, was once the outcast rich kid herself. Admittedly, there's a brief problematic moment when we as an audience fear that Lee and Alé are trying on the role of "dumb girl" just to be popular, but that fear

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**As director and actor, Augie Hwong thrives in the spotlight, modeling a take-charge mindset for readers of all ages. Possessing certitude rare in an adolescent, Augie is aware of his uniqueness.**

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is quickly assuaged by Lee and Alé's exposé of the farce, and by the end of the book, they've landed the titles of President and Vice President of the Student Council. Clearly, the girls were just using the stereotypical role of dumb girl as a way to enter the hearts of the masses and launch their political campaign, for committed political activist is the one role that Alé embraces throughout the book, despite her hesitation with the new roles of friend, girlfriend, and believer of magic.

Despite Alé's resistance, Augie effortlessly directs Alé as she tries on her new roles. By paralleling Augie's own coming out, Alé succeeds in coming out to herself and to her family—with Augie's intervention, of course. First, by talking to her before she's popular, Augie completely ignores the social expectations of fitting in just because you're supposed to, foreshadowing how he manages to come out to a bunch of 9th graders with perfect grace and acceptance. He also tricks her, with a little help from Lee, into performing the song and dance routine "The Music and the Mirror" in the talent show, where she wins first prize and is handpicked by the principal for the lead in the next school play, *Kiss Me, Kate*.

As we learn, these are just the first two steps not only toward her "promising career" (p. 346), but also toward helping her family see her true passion. By the end of the novel, her family, though still without narration rights, both supports her dramatic debut *and* uses her musical career to advance their diplomatic exchanges, allowing Alé both to achieve her dream of singing and dancing *and* create a spot for herself within her ambassador family. Rather than remaining a girl who chooses Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis for a role model—a woman whom Alé eventually confesses "associate[d] with kings, duchesses, and the top 4 percent of the social register . . . [but had] two marriages [that] were regal but joyless" (p. 334)—Alé switches her allegiances to Mary Poppins, a woman whose abilities she had earlier rejected because, at the age of seven, she "simply couldn't accept umbrellas as a believable means of air travel" (p. 335). The new Alé clearly doesn't have a problem with such affronts to the laws of physics.

Augie and Lee help Alé come out of her shell, but they're not alone. As we've seen, Alé is also befriended by T. C. Keller, though his advances are not purely congenial in nature. His initial attempts at suave,

9th-grade-boy romance leave her unimpressed, but her family's unspoken expectations—or Alé's interpretation of these expectations—that she is to marry high within the social registry further complicates their relationship, even after T. C. performs JFK's inaugural speech for her at the talent show, convinces her to learn sign language so that she can talk with Hucky, and helps her launch her campaign to restore the Manzanar baseball diamond. Of course, T.

C.'s constant plotting doesn't help, but even after he proves he's genuine, Alé still needs to wait for inspiration from Mary Poppins before she reconsiders her true feelings. She also needs time, for as she says, "You don't plan falling in love the way you plan a formal dinner for twelve"

(p. 351). By the end of the novel, Alé discovers that the best role of all *is* being loved for who you are; with T.C., Augie, Lee, and Hucky's help, she learns how to find and love herself first—a performance worthy of her standing ovation.

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**By the end of the novel, Alé discovers that the best role of all *is* being loved for who you are; . . . a performance worthy of her standing ovation.**

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#### **Spotlight 4: Hucky Harper**

One of the primary plot catalysts—or the mover and shaker of several plots—Hucky does not enter the novel until page 97 when T. C. notices him at a baseball game, nor is he named until page 143. His delayed entry links and overarches the multiple relationship plots (T. C. and Alé, Augie and Andy, T. C.'s father and his girlfriend, Lori) and propels the novel to enchanted places it may never have imagined it would go, including to New York to meet Mary Poppins.

Initially, Hucky, a six-year-old deaf boy, appears to be profoundly alone, donning a fierce mask so no one can get close. Abandoned by his mother, in and out of foster homes, Hucky nonetheless reaches out to T. C., helping T. C.'s batting average by passing on the pitching signs. Hucky, who Augie believes is like a younger T. C., is emotionally frozen, his identity formation in stasis. Numbed by his experiences, repeatedly betrayed by adults, Hucky is a child unwilling to try on new clothes. Instead, he clings to miracles,

waiting for Mary Poppins to swoop in to rescue him from his problems.

During the second half of the novel, Hucky drives some of the most significant elements of the plot, bringing the characters together in important ways. He serves as the glue between Alé and T. C., as Alé

recognizes that T.C. is not hanging out with Hucky merely to impress her, but that he cares deeply for the boy—which *does* impress her. Hucky also inspires Augie to hold hands with Andy at the movies, taking “affirmative action” (p. 246) in their relationship. In addition, Alé, T. C., and Augie commit to resolve Hucky’s emotional issues,

planning a magical meeting with Mary Poppins in New York.

As Hucky thaws, he provides opportunities for Augie, T. C., and Alé to try on the role of adults, arranging outings around the city and sleepovers at T. C.’s, and providing succor and support when he, Hucky, is upset. T. C. escapes severe punishment from his father for taking Hucky to New York without permission because, as Pop quickly recognizes, T. C. undertook this action not for selfish reasons, but for a greater good. Besides, the crazy plan to get Hucky in to see Julie Andrews on Broadway actually succeeds.

As a story that ends happily, Hucky becomes a son, a brother, a lunch menu activist, and, perhaps most of all, a Red Sox fan in all its grief and glory.

### Spotlight 5: The Parents

As highlighted above, the parents play critical roles as stage managers and behind-the-scenes supporters for their children, though Alé’s parents, particularly her father, lurk in the wings for much of the novel, remaining essentially unresponsive. In contrast, Augie’s father, Craig, shines as a father, as seen in Spotlight 2—a stellar performance for which he should win a Tony Award, if not a Nobel Peace Prize, for Parenting. He also plays the role of dating counselor with Ted, T. C.’s father, teasing him into pursuing a deeper relationship with Lori, T. C.’s advisor. In addition

to the two fathers, Augie’s mother, Wei, though not as prominent, has also deeply etched her influence on her son, sparking his passion for musicals. As a reviewer for the *Boston Globe* and a fierce critic of ethnic and gender stereotypes in the theater, Wei’s two-sentence review of *Carousel* signals to Augie the importance of gender equality: “Nice songs to beat your wife to. Attend at your own risk” (p. 112).

Like T. C., Ted also promotes equality for all sexual identities. One role that Ted takes in stride is his role as surrogate parent of a gay son. He provides important support for Craig by insisting that Augie isn’t hiding anything: either “(a) he doesn’t know it himself yet or (b) he’s straight” (p. 54). Either way, if it’s right for Augie, it’s right for Ted. Furthermore, Ted slips smoothly into the clothing of the parent of a new child, adopting Hucky with open arms. Ted stumbles, however, as a widower (his wife told him to get remarried or she “would kick his ass,” p. 22); he hasn’t been taking the dating process with appropriate gravitas. In fact, Ted and Lori, early in their relationship, act more as adolescents, teasing and flirting, downplaying their attraction to one another. Yet how do adults who have been friends for years become romantically involved? There appears to be no script for such a relationship. Though Lori has been looking out for T.C. since his mother’s death, and is in effect part of the family already, she only assumes a parental role when she urges leniency for the “T. C. and Hucky meet Mary Poppins” adventure on the “slim chance [she] might have a future say in the care and feeding of Anthony” (p. 381).

T. C.’s real mother, though deceased, is perhaps one of the most important parents in the novel, as T. C. addresses her at length in each of his chapters, keeping her apprised of the important events in his life. His mother may not be trying on any new identities of her own, but T. C. reinforces his own identity as he recognizes and accepts the gifts she has given him. As he stumbles through his relationships with Alé and Hucky, he asks his mother for help, imploring her to give him the kind of advice a mother would offer a son about dating and raising a child. Before she died, T. C.’s mother helped him to believe in magic, shepherding a lost purple balloon across the state to prove to T. C. that the missing item was simply looking for him—and would find him in the end. Years later, T. C. realizes his mother taught him to “Never,

ever stop believing in magic” (p. 403), to know that loved ones will always make sure you have a purple balloon when you need it. Bestowed with his own magic, he can now act for others as his mother acted for him.

## Finale

Young adult literature has been touted as a rehearsal stage for the identity formation of its readers (Alsup, 2010; Aaronson, 2001; Bean & Moni, 2003; Spanke, 2010; Stringer, 1997; and others). Alsup (2010) specifically suggests that teaching literature “might be the key to positive identity growth and development for teen readers” (p. 4). Based on this premise, Alsup speculates whether literature written primarily for adolescent readers “about teen characters having life-like problems, [could] be the ideal genre to prompt and support such positive identity growth” (p. 4). Can exposure to various identity models through YA literature provide the kind of reinforcement adolescents may not receive—or relate to—through other means and help them form positive identities? We envision future research projects that study whether classroom use of novels such as *My Most Excellent Year* explicitly contribute to positive identity formation, bearing in mind Alsup’s concerns regarding power, ethics, and morals that English teachers must consider as they assign texts that may shape students’ lives (p. 5). In the meantime, we offer *My Most Excellent Year* as a transformative classroom text that emphasizes positive identity formation.

Despite the challenges English teachers face as they strive not to impart their own personal morals onto students, Alsup also argues that many English teachers “believe that education is . . . is about the growth and development of human psyches that are thoughtful, empathetic, and open-minded, in addition to intelligent” (p. 7). If students read to grow, to know who they are in relation to others in the world, if they read to measure how their actions contribute to or disrupt our community, then novels such as *My Most Excellent Year* surely provide a wealth of material for such self-study, both in and out of the classroom.

For adolescents, particularly for LGBTQ teens—and for parents and teachers—this novel is a wardrobe thrown open. It encourages readers of all ages to try on as many identities as they can, keeping the ones

that fit. It compels parents to model for their children the acceptance of a variety of gender and sexuality roles. And it urges both younger readers and their parents to communicate the mutual trust that boosts adolescents toward adulthood—an important skill for all, and especially crucial for LGBTQ families. To our students, the novel showcases how to support all their peers by tapping into each other’s abilities, rather than judging each other by what they do not possess or by what mainstream society expects of them.

To emphasize these supportive roles for friends and family, we have spotlighted three protagonists, their new brother, Hucky, and their parents. We have shown the multiple identities each of these characters tried on, keeping some while rejecting others. T. C. no longer needs to plot his way into a girl’s heart but can now connect his

political interests with romance, all while remembering that love is worth waiting for; Alé has stepped out of her parents’ expectations into her own light as a singer and dancer, while retaining her fierce activism; Augie, though always the confident and talented actor, uses the lessons from his first romantic relationship to embrace his new role as a gifted director, creating masterpieces with his actors’ latent talents; Hucky chucks his hands-off mask and begins to thrive with others; and the adults solidify their roles—no longer merely supporting actors, these role models help the parents in the audience become integrally connected with their own children while allowing the teens in the audience to validate their parents’ trust. It may seem all too neat and tidy and impossible, but remember what a magical musical can do: let us glow in harmony for a few moments before we re-enter our own often baffling lives. The curtain may fall, but we can take the best of the show with us when we leave.

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**Can exposure to various identity models through YA literature provide the kind of reinforcement adolescents may not receive . . . through other means and help them form positive identities?**

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<p><b><i>A Greyhound of a Girl</i></b> by Roddy Doyle Amulet Books, 2012, 206pp., \$16.95</p> <p>Mary O'Hara has heard a billion times that the past lives on, but it isn't until she meets the ghost of her great-grandmother, Tansey, that she realizes just how true this is. Doyle's <i>A Greyhound of a Girl</i> is a novel that explores death and moving on through the lives of four generations of women. It revolves around a tragedy, Tansey's unexpected demise, and its effect on her 3-year-old daughter, Emer. Now, with Emer on her deathbed, Tansey comes back to comfort her and, in the meantime, forever change the lives of her descendants Mary and Scarlett.</p> <p>The combination of Mary's playful dialogue and Tansey's matter-of-fact attitude toward death make <i>A Greyhound of a Girl</i> at once utterly heartbreaking and wildly amusing. Although intended for young adults, this exquisite novel deals with death and moving on in a way that can be enjoyed by people of any age.</p> <p>Molly Druce Ponte Vedra, FL</p>	<p><b><i>Beneath a Meth Moon: An Elegy</i></b> by Jacqueline Woodson Nancy Paulsen Books/Penguin Young Readers Group, 2012, 208 pp., \$16.99</p> <p>Life brightens briefly for Laurel once her family moves from Jackson, Mississippi, to the small Midwest town of Galilee. She's a cheerleader and dating the high school's basketball star. But T-Boom introduces her to meth, and Laurel quickly comes to crave its effects. Meth helps her forget the family she left behind in August 2005 before Hurricane Katrina's arrival. But it also makes her forget the things that matter. She ends up on the street, begging for change to pay for her meth and becoming invisible to passersby. Laurel's poignant story is told in a series of remembrances of her once-happy life and the losses she has experienced. While her recovery is uncertain, clearly she is making the effort, thanks to supportive family and friends like street artist Moses. This is a gripping, honest account of life's pleasures and pains and what it takes to survive.</p> <p>Barbara A. Ward Pullman, WA</p>
<p><b><i>Bloody Chester</i></b> by J. T. Petty (writer) and Hilary Florido (illustrator) First Second Books, 2012, 143 pp., \$18.99</p> <p>Set in the wild frontier, <i>Bloody Chester</i> is a tale of a young man coming of age and struggling to carve out an identity for himself. At its core a <i>bildungsroman</i> (or journey novel), <i>Bloody Chester</i> encapsulates the very best traditions of quality adolescent literature: identity formation, development of an ethical code (even at the expense of personal gain), and learning the differences between lust and love. While there are elements that may, at first glance, seem taboo and that warrant caution and close reading—references to sexuality, suggestive language, violence—these elements are contextualized in the time period and not sensational or gratuitous. <i>Bloody Chester</i> at times reads like a (much better written) <i>Catcher in the Rye</i>. Overall, these taboo elements help to keep the voice of the narrative authentic in the vein of some of the best and most revered stories of the old frontier.</p> <p>Brian Kelley New York, NY</p>	<p><b><i>Curveball: The Year I Lost My Grip</i></b> by Jordan Sonnenblick Scholastic, 2012, 304 pp., \$17.99</p> <p>Incoming freshman Peter Friedman and his best friend AJ have everything planned out. They'll use their baseball prowess as tickets to success and popularity in high school. After a devastating arm injury precludes playing baseball, Pete feels lost without the sport around which his identity has been based. Using the camera equipment his grandfather gives him, he realizes that there is much truth revealed from behind the lens, but whose truth is it—the subject's or the photographer's? Pete's life becomes complicated by Angelika, a classmate who shares his passion for the camera but demands honesty with himself and others.</p> <p>Pete is also concerned about how Alzheimer's is robbing his grandfather of his most precious memories. Although Pete does, indeed, lose his grip on life at several points, he regains his equilibrium and shows readers the benefits of self-honesty. Filled with humor, pathos, and insight, this page-turner is another homerun.</p> <p>Barbara A. Ward Pullman, WA</p>

<p><b><i>Dark of the Moon</i></b> by Tracy Barrett Harcourt Children's Books, 2011, 320 pp., \$16.99</p> <p>Juvenile Fiction/Mythology ISBN: 978-0-547-58132-3</p> <p>Ariadne and Theseus are like many teenagers. She loves her kind mother, simple brother, and garrulous friends. He loves his helpful stepfather and flighty mother. Life is a little different for them, however: Ariadne's mother takes the form of a goddess for three days out of every year; her brother is confused for the murderous Minotaur; Theseus's true father may be Poseidon or the king of Athens. For them to reach their fate, they may need to take away what is most precious to the other.</p> <p>Barrett expertly weaves her story from the strands of both Ariadne's and Theseus's viewpoints to create a world both of its time and pertinent to now. Older teenagers who can appreciate discussions on the intersection of religion and politics, handle implied scenes of sex and violence, and enjoy new twists on often-told stories will find much to cherish here.</p> <p>Walt Colt Nashville, TN</p>	<p><b><i>Divergent</i></b> by Veronica Roth HarperCollins, 2011, 487 pp., \$17.99</p> <p>Dystopian Fiction/Identity ISBN: 978-0-06-202402-2</p> <p>Beatrice Prior must make a decision—one that will change the course of her life forever. On Choosing Day each year, 16-year-olds across dystopian Chicago must devote themselves to one of five factions, each committed to the cultivation of a particular virtue. On one hand, Beatrice can remain in Abnegation and live a quiet life with her family; on the other, she can be true to herself and join a rival faction. Regardless of her choice, Beatrice must be careful not to divulge a secret she has been warned to keep—a secret that can unravel society as she knows it.</p> <p>Amidst budding friendships and oft-confusing romance, Beatrice struggles to come to terms with the decisions she has made and their unimaginable consequences. Despite its similarity to other dystopian novels, <i>Divergent's</i> depiction of adolescence rings true. Growing up isn't easy, and growing up with a terrible secret is just plain hard.</p> <p>Alex Ivey Brentwood, TN</p>
<p><b><i>Friends with Boys</i></b> by Faith Erin Hicks First Second Books, 2012, 213 pp., \$15.99</p> <p>Friendship/Family/Identity ISBN: 978-1-59643-556-8</p> <p>After years of home schooling, Maggie's mother abandons the family and leaves Maggie to navigate a local school system and its social structures. Having grown up in a house full of men, particularly three brothers with whom she always tried to fit in, Maggie regrets not interacting more with her mother and learning "girly things." Maggie establishes her own circle of friends when she befriends a vocal and colorful Lucy and her brother Alstair (on whom Maggie develops her first crush). As Maggie attempts to deal with a spirit haunting her since she was a child, she learns that no matter what one goes through in life, forming genuine bonds with those on whom we can rely and from whom we can seek comfort should be our priority. The black-and-white coloring adds a nice somber tone to resonate emotional power, capturing a textual tone that moves from comedic to serious.</p> <p>Brian Kelley New York, NY</p>	<p><b><i>From Bad to Cursed</i></b> by Katie Alender Hyperion, 2011, 448 pp., \$9.99</p> <p>Supernatural/Ghosts ISBN: 978-1-4231-3471-8</p> <p>This second installment of the <i>Bad Girls Don't Die</i> series finds sisters in trouble with the spirit world. Kasey has made it home in time to start school after an evil spirit possessed her. Alexis begins to worry when Kasey slips into a strange group of girls called The Sunshine Club. Kasey and Alexis must work together to find a way to get rid of Aral before the other Sunshiners learn of their plan. Throw in a breezy love interest who flits by in the first and last 50 pages, murderous plots, X-File-type government agents, and high school homework, and you get the gist.</p> <p>Fans of the supernatural will enjoy this book. Young women will appreciate a cast of female characters who can take care of themselves and each other. While it is the second book of the series, reading the first book is not a must.</p> <p>Sarah Cossey Jackson, GA</p>

<p><b><i>Girl Meets Boy</i></b> edited by Kelly Milner Halls Chronicle Books LLC, 2012, 208 pp., \$16.99</p> <p>The age-old tale of “he said she said” never dies when it comes to romantic relationships. Especially the teenage ones. A clever compilation of six stories told through the eyes of the male and female, the dynamic YA authors who created the stories seek to expose the roadblocks and romanticism that stem from the various and sundry misconceptions of the adolescent mind. From a tortured soul searching for real love, to an interfaith couple defying their not so compliant parents, <i>Girl Meets Boy</i> is the perfect piece of literature to make you ask, “If I knew the other person’s point of view, could I be in a successful relationship?”</p> <p>Cliché, but true, there really are two sides to every story. And at the end of the day, we can always learn from our differences. Whether they help us or hurt us, they will always make us stronger.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Jeuel A. Davis Clemson, SC</p>	<p><b><i>Heart of a Samurai</i></b> by Margi Preus Amulet Books, 2010, 274 pp., \$7.95</p> <p>Stranded on an island with four companions in 1841, Manjiro’s fate quickly changes as an American whaling vessel passes near their island and takes the castaways aboard. Over the next decade, Manjiro becomes a whaler, traveling extensively throughout the Pacific and the Atlantic; however, he yearns to return to his small village in Japan and eventually become a samurai. Manjiro’s lifelong desire to become a samurai steadily guides his thinking, which allows him to make prudent choices in extreme nautical and interpersonal situations. But will his dream unlock a return path to his home?</p> <p>Preus peppers this novel with periodic drawings of aquatic life as well as drawings rendered by the historical Manjiro. The book’s epilogue includes Manjiro’s biography and definitions of some Japanese words. The novel’s fast-paced action, illustrations, and historical details ignite the reader’s imagination and leaves them wanting more adventures with Manjiro and more information about US/Japanese relations.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Charles M. Owens, Jr. Nashville, TN</p>
<p><b><i>Island of the Unknowns</i></b> by Benedict Carey Amulet Books, 2011, 265 pp., \$6.95</p> <p>Lady Di Smith and Tom Jones are the only two kids in Folsom Adjacent that can figure out what happened to Malba Clarke. Nothing exciting ever happens living in Folsom Adjacent, but this mystery is one that can no longer be overlooked, and it will change the lives of the lazy folk forever. With the help of some fellow outcasts, they use their logical minds to solve their unfamiliar clues that involve math, wits, and courage.</p> <p>Carey’s effort to ground math in the physical world involves allusions to famous mathematicians, secret societies and gangs, and some clever diagramming. The suspense carries you along until the very end, making you question everything that crosses their path and ache to solve the mystery along with them. It takes careful reading to follow along at times, but it’s worth the adventure to help learn and appreciate math in everyday life.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Claire Holman Fairfax, VA</p>	<p><b><i>Jessica’s Guide to Dating on the Dark Side</i></b> by Beth Fantaskey Graphia/Houghten Mifflin Harcourt, 2009, 351 pp., \$8.99 ISBN: 978-0-15-206384-9</p> <p>Lucius Vladescu is a vampire. Jessica Packwood is his vampire princess. But to this small-town Pennsylvania teen, getting through the school day is hard enough without a tall, dark, handsome vampire stalking her and calling her by her long forgotten Romanian name. It’s no secret that 17-year-old Jessica was adopted by free-spirited, vegan parents. But what they’ve hidden from her, an immortal destiny, will change her life forever.</p> <p>Without warning, Jessica is plunged into a world of rumors, lies, and a fate she isn’t sure she wants to fulfill. As responsibility to her heritage overpowers her and Lucius’s kisses weaken her resolve, Jessica is faced with a choice between normalcy and unbelievable power. If only she has the courage to choose.</p> <p>Beth Fantaskey’s first novel continuously grapples with the social ramifications of male and female power colliding, all wrapped up in the delicious vampire genre that has captured the nation.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Kirstin Slitt West Hartford, CT</p>



<p><b><i>Money Boy</i></b> by Paul Yee Groundwood Books, 2011, 184 pp., \$16.95</p> <p>Ray has recently emigrated with his family from China because his father, Ba, believes there will be more opportunities available to them in Canada. However, after discovering his son's homosexuality, Ba forces Ray out of the house and onto the streets where he must fend for himself. In a journey in which he discovers the different aspects of being a Chinese immigrant and a homosexual man, Ray sells his body on the streets in order to survive. Living away from home, he learns appreciation for both the values of his old life and those of the previously unfamiliar world outside of his family.</p> <p>Yee's novel explores a variety of social and moral issues, such as immigration, homosexuality, and the power of money. Through his naïve protagonist, Yee makes connections between wealth and virtues like honor and freedom, raising questions about what it means to truly possess these qualities.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Tory Cortes Charleston, SC</p>	<p>Adolescent Fiction/Coming of Age ISBN: 978-1-55498-093-2</p> <p><b><i>My Friend Dahmer</i></b> by Derf Backderf Abrams ComicArts, 2012, 224 pp., \$24.95</p> <p>Derf Backderf and his friends don't know what to make of the new Jeffrey Dahmer. This previously shy loner is making a name for himself as a high school class clown with few inhibitions and a remarkable wit. Backderf's friends, The Dahmer Fan Club, embrace (and exploit) Dahmer's new public persona, but, faced with serious indications that Dahmer's public displays are hiding something deeply wrong, they struggle to keep him at a safe distance.</p> <p>Backderf is careful to reveal Dahmer as a tragic figure whose home life, sexual identity, and hidden thoughts and urges lead him down what seems an inexorable path of isolation and alcoholism. While Backderf does not excuse Dahmer's behavior in high school or beyond, he asks a question that the reader can't help but ask at every page, "Where were the damn adults?"</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Jesse Gray Nashville, TN</p>
<p><b><i>Out of Control</i></b> by Rick Jasper Lerner Publishing Group, 2012, 107 pp., \$7.95</p> <p>"What would Dad say if I quit?" wondered Carlos "Trip" Costas as he contemplated his future baseball career. Since he was little, his father, Julio, taught him everything he knew about how the game of baseball is played. His father financially supported the team, ensuring they had the best of everything, including the nicest hotels for travel games and a part-time trainer. Believing Trip could make it in the big leagues, Julio pushed his son, at times too far, yelling from the stands at multiple games. Despite Trip's pleas, his dad threatens to stop financially supporting the team if Trip decides to sit himself on the bench. Torn between trying to please his father and pursuing his passion for music, a tragic event teaches Julio about what is really important in life.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Libby Byrnes Alpharetta, GA</p>	<p>Fiction/Sports ISBN: 978-0-7613-8538-7</p> <p><b><i>Pregnant Pause</i></b> by Han Nolan Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011, 340 pp., \$16.99</p> <p>Eleanor Crowe is a very stubborn and rebellious 16-year-old girl who has been in and out of trouble. Now she's pregnant. After announcing her pregnancy, Eleanor feels as though her world is crashing down around her, and everyone is slowly turning their backs on her when she needs them the most. Her parents are frustrated with her and have left for Kenya, her in-laws are not her biggest fans, her husband is not very supportive, and she's not even sure if she wants to be married. On top of it all, she is stuck working at a camp for overweight children for the summer.</p> <p>This story chronicles Eleanor's journey as she wrestles with the decision of whether or not she should keep her baby. Han tells an insightful and compelling story about self-discovery, growth, and what it is like to be 16 and pregnant.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">La'Toya Wade Smyrna, TN</p>

<p><b><i>Shooting Stars</i></b> by Allison Rushby Walker &amp; Company, 2012, 272 pp., \$9.99</p> <p>Teenager Josephine “Jo” Foster is up close and personal with the world’s most famous celebrities on a daily basis—as a member of the paparazzi. Taking pictures of the stars to save up money for photography classes, Jo will do whatever it takes to get her money shot. That is, until she’s sent undercover to a rehabilitation facility to photograph teen heartthrob Ned Hartnett—the very celebrity that helped Jo get her start.</p> <p>Suddenly, this feisty photographer finds herself posing as a patient in the treatment center, torn between doing the job that will finally enable her to pay for photography classes and her burgeoning friendship, and maybe even romance, with Ned. As she grows closer to Ned, Jo realizes that things aren’t always as they seem—in her life or in Ned’s—something that forces her to decide just how far she’s willing to go to achieve her dreams.</p> <p>Caroline Wilson Houston, TX</p>	<p><b><i>The Difference between You and Me</i></b> by Madeline George Viking, 2012, 255 pp., \$16.99</p> <p>Jesse is a fisherman-boot-wearing, self-proclaimed weirdo that fights for what she believes in. Emily is the J Crew-clad student council vice-president that always has a plan for everything, including her future. Both girls are harboring their secret relationship while carrying out their normal lives. When an issue comes up that divides the entire town and puts these girls on opposite sides, will they learn to compromise in order to maintain a relationship?</p> <p>Madeline George spins an entertaining story that tells of two girls trying to find their way in the world of high school and in the world of relationships. The story of Jesse and Emily does a great job of demonstrating the importance of learning to decide what things in life are worth fighting for.</p> <p>Courtney R. Morgan New Braunfels, TX</p>
<p><b><i>The Farewell Season</i></b> by Ann Herrick Puddledown Publishing Group, 2011, 143 pp., \$10.99</p> <p>Football lovers and non-football fans will enjoy this compelling story. Eric Neilson’s enthusiasm for playing high school football is nearly stifled by the death of his supportive father. For Eric, everything changes, and he struggles to understand his mother’s erratic behavior. With the help of Glynnie, who is dealing with her parents’ divorce, Eric learns that he needs to deal with his grief, not ignore it. The realistic feelings and true-to-life characters provide a story with an important lesson about life and loss.</p> <p>The reader empathizes with Eric’s pain as he tackles the most heartbreaking obstacle of his life, then rejoices when he resolves his grief and puts himself back on the playing field! This story crosses the “goal line”—both for teens who may face similar hurdles, and for those who wonder about such “what ifs” in life that may yet befall them.</p> <p>Patricia D. Engelking Lowell, OR</p>	<p><b><i>The Fault in Our Stars</i></b> by John Green Dutton Juvenile, 2012, 313 pp., \$17.99</p> <p>Hazel Grace Lancaster has terminal cancer. Along with her life-sustaining oxygen tank and doctor visits, she attends weekly Support Group meetings to help her deal with her illness. It is at one of these meetings where she meets Augustus Waters, a cancer patient in remission. Using Augustus’s leftover make-a-wish, the two set off for answers about Hazel’s favorite book, finding companionship and love along the way.</p> <p>John Green tells the story of two teenagers with cancer who are struggling to find their place and purpose in the world. Holding little back in his depiction of this ailment, he allows for his characters to grow through their shared hardships and triumphs. Hazel and Augustus meet in Support Group, but they gain far more than support. They gain a sense of purpose and find out what it means to be not dying of cancer but living with it.</p> <p>Zachary Oswanski Nashville, TN</p>

<p><b><i>The Future of Us</i></b> by Jay Asher and Carolyn Mackler      Fiction/Relationships/Destiny Razorbill, 2011, 356 pp., \$12.91      ISBN: 978-1-59514-491-1</p> <p>Set in 1996, Josh and Emma are not the constantly wired teenagers of today. Josh has just given Emma a free AOL trial cd rom for her new computer. Upon logging on, Emma sees a page that has all her personal information and pictures. Emma has stumbled onto herself 15 years in the future, on Facebook. Josh is there, too, but their profiles do not remain static, rather the smallest actions throughout their days cause ripples in time, where their Facebook profiles and subsequently their futures change with every click.</p> <p>This novel not only examines how we write our destinies, but also to what extent our future is written in technology. Asher and Mackler’s compelling depictions force the reader to examine the simultaneous help and hindrance that lies in current technology, keeping the reader guessing about the future of Emma and Josh as well as the future of humanity.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Meghan Andersson San Diego, CA</p>	<p><b><i>The Name of the Star</i></b> by Maureen Johnson      Mystery Putnam Juvenile, 2011, 372 pp., \$16.99      ISBN: 978-0-399-25660-8</p> <p>When Rory Deveraux’s parents take a sabbatical to England during her senior year, she chooses to spend it at boarding school in London. But it just happens to be the same time someone is copying Jack the Ripper’s famous 1888 murders near the very school Rory attends. The more London and all of England get swept up in “Rippermania,” the fewer leads the police have. But then Rory sees someone. Is he the new Ripper? Why did no one else see him? And what will happen to Rory now that she’s the only witness?</p> <p>As Rory’s journey takes her above and below modern London in this exciting read, it’s easy to get swept up with her. From romance to mystery, humor to suspense, and everywhere in between, Johnson’s story of an American teen with amazing capabilities is a worthwhile read.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Kate Mitchell Cape Elizabeth, ME</p>
<p><b><i>The Near Witch</i></b> by Victoria Schwab      Fantasy/Family Hyperion Books for Children, 2011, 228 pp., \$10.99      ISBN: 978-1-4231-3787-0</p> <p>A child is missing in the town of Near, a mysterious place that bears the legacy of witchcraft. Town leaders suspect a young male stranger whose arrival in Near coincides with the disappearance of the child, but Lexi Harris, a spitfire girl who is determined to find answers, befriends the young man, Cole, and is sure he has nothing to do with the kidnapping. As the nights go by, more children disappear from their beds and hostility grows toward the stranger. Lexi persists in her search for answers and discovers more about Near than she might like to know as she is led down a trail of history to the true story of the Near Witch.</p> <p>Schwab’s storytelling is rich with descriptive detail, and students, particularly female students, will identify with Lexi, who is frustrated by the limits set upon her by the adults in her life. She is anxious to be free from stereotypes of what a girl “should” be.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Rachel Van Dyke Nashville, TN</p>	<p><b><i>The Statistical Probability of Love at First Sight</i></b>      Romance/Family Relationships by Jennifer E. Smith      ISBN: 978-0-316-12238-2 Poppy/Little, Brown, 2012, 236 pp., \$17.99</p> <p>The four minutes that cause Hadley Sullivan to miss her flight to London might change her life. As she waits for the next available flight, she meets Oliver, a Brit who is also on his way to London. They end up sitting together and sharing secrets that result in their bonding during the flight. After a kiss, they somehow get separated at Heathrow Airport. Although Hadley reluctantly heads off to her father’s wedding, she can’t get Oliver out of her mind, and once the ceremony is over, she relies on the only clues she has to where he might be. But just as Hadley’s father is starting a new life, part of Oliver’s life is ending, and Hadley arrives at the most inopportune moment. Fans of <i>Anna and the French Kiss</i> will relish this book about love, taking chances, and forgiveness, and may decide to book a flight to Europe.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Barbara Ward Pullman, WA</p>

<p><b><i>The Storyteller</i></b> by Antonia Michaelis Amulet Books, 2011, 402 pp., \$18.95</p> <p>Seventeen-year-old Anna seems to be living in a fairy tale, and not a happy one. It begins when she finds a little doll with a dangerous owner who also has a gift for storytelling. A notorious drug dealer and outcast, Abel is everything that Anna is not. Drawn to him and his mesmerizing stories, Anna begins to discover more about the boy with the icy eyes and Micha, the little sister he would die to protect.</p> <p>Is Abel truly dangerous? And how do his stories seem to predict the tragic events that are happening? As Anna falls deeper and deeper into Abel's stories, the lines of reality blur and the stakes become higher. Michaelis deftly interweaves truths and tales as she explores the harsh reality of family, love, and desperation.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Grace Chee Easley, SC</p>	<p><b><i>The White Assassin</i></b> by Hilary Wagner Holiday House, 2011, 242 pp., \$17.95</p> <p>In this second book in the Nightshade Chronicles, Juniper and the valiant rats of Nightshade City are struggling against their nemesis, Billycan, and his army of swamp rats. The story takes the reader into the rats' world as they attempt to subdue Billycan. Seemingly simple at its onset, the story becomes increasingly complex as the history of Billycan, Juniper, and the other main characters is revealed.</p> <p>The theme of good vs. evil is interwoven throughout the story, but the complexity of the characters makes this book worthwhile. Deception and duplicity are vital elements, but so are redemption and forgiveness. The noblest characters are not immune to the inner turmoil that Billycan faces. Similarly, Billycan is not the cold-hearted killer that he appears. Wagner has succeeded in creating an imaginative world inhabited by rats, bats, and snakes, and has simultaneously delved into the age-old issues of identity, trust, and love.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Alec Woodhull Nashville, TN</p>
<p><b><i>The Year of the Book</i></b> by Andrea Cheng Houghton Mifflin Books for Children, 2011, 160 pp., \$15.99 ISBN: 978-0-547-68463-5</p> <p>Friends, who needs them? You do not have to worry about being invited to go on ski trips or sleepovers or wonder if your friends like your outfit. Anna's friends are the characters in the books she reads. They take her on their adventures without having to be asked. But, Anna soon realizes the benefits of having real friends and being a friend.</p> <p>Chang introduces young readers into the world of a Chinese American girl who is struggling with finding her place in the both the Chinese and American cultures. The story includes references to Chinese words (and characters), traditions, calendar, and food. Readers will learn that friendship is important in all cultures.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Angela Draper Nashville, TN</p>	<p><b><i>This Dark Endeavor: The Apprenticeship of Victor Frankenstein</i></b> by Kenneth Oppel Simon &amp; Schuster, 2011, 298 pp., \$10.99 ISBN: 978-1-4424-0315-4</p> <p>Who was Victor Frankenstein BEFORE he created his monster? What was he like as a teen? <i>This Dark Endeavor</i> provides a view into his possible past. Victor and his twin brother Konrad are nearly inseparable; they share a love of adventure. They discover The Dark Library filled with secret books of alchemy and ancient potions. The boys' father forbids them to go into the Library, but that just makes Victor want to go in even more. Then Konrad becomes deathly ill, and Victor tries to save him with the Elixer of Life.</p> <p>The journey to find the ingredients for the Elixer pushes Victor and his friends to the limit of their endurance; their desperation to save Konrad pushes them beyond even that. This novel provides a glimpse into the making of a scientist desperate to unlock the secrets of life; its connections to Frankenstein are thought-provoking in this excellent read.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Melanie Hundley Nashville, TN</p>

<p><b><i>Trial by Fire</i></b> by Jennifer Lynn Barnes Egmont, 2011, 368 pp., \$17.99</p> <p>Werewolves/Family/Fantasy ISBN: 978-1-60684-168-6</p> <p>Bryn, the human Alpha of a pack of werewolves, is settling into her position as leader. She knows that she doesn't fully understand werewolf politics and rules, but she does the best she can to figure out how to keep her pack together and safe. Pack safety is challenged with the arrival of a teenage werewolf named Lucas. He shows up on Bryn's front porch, bleeding and injured, and wants Bryn's protection. Is Lucas who he says he is? Does he have an ulterior motive for coming to Bryn's pack?</p> <p>Bryn has to choose between the safety of her pack and her humanity. She will have to face and fight her greatest challenge alone. Bryn, a strong, female, human Alpha, challenges the expectations of were society, and this novel challenges the expectations of the current vein of werewolf novels.</p> <p>Melanie Hundley Nashville, TN</p>	<p><b><i>Tris &amp; Izzie</i></b> by Mette Harrison Egmont USA, 2011, 267 pp., \$16.99</p> <p>Magic/Teen Romance ISBN: 978-1-60684-257-7</p> <p>In many respects, Izzie's life is already a fairy tale. She reigns as queen bee of Tintagel High with best friend Branna and perfect basketball captain boyfriend Mark always at her side. Beautiful, brainy, and beloved, Izzie seems to have it all. But Izzie has a secret. Beneath picture perfect appearances exists a mysterious, unpredictable world of magic. And when Tristian, a strikingly handsome stranger, arrives at Tintagel, Izzie's two worlds collide, and a supernatural adventure begins.</p> <p>One love potion, or "philtre" gone awry sets the tone for Harrison's brew of high school drama mixed with a legendary love story. Izzie must face magical foes and heartache alike as she unravels the truth of her past. In so doing, she seeks her true place between two worlds.</p> <p>Virginia Hornblower Snowmass Village, CO</p>
<p><b><i>Ultraviolet</i></b> by R. J. Anderson Carolrhoda Lab, 2011, 306 pp., \$17.95</p> <p>Mystery/Science Fiction ISBN: 978-0-7613-7408-4</p> <p>Shortly after waking up in a hospital, 16-year-old Alison is transferred to the Pine Hills Psychiatric Treatment Centre. At first her memory is hazy, but as she spends more time in Pine Hills, Alison realizes that she is the prime suspect in a bizarre murder case. Although she has confessed to murdering Tori Beaugrand, high school golden girl, the police cannot locate Tori's body, and even Alison can't quite explain how Tori managed to disappear into thin air.</p> <p>Everything changes, though, when a mysterious scientist visits the center and takes an interest in Alison and the unusual sensory powers that she has had ever since her youth. With his help, Alison is not only able to figure out what really happened to Tori, but also discover the true capacity of her extraordinary abilities. Anderson builds her story up slowly at first; however, the plot's many shocking twists will grab hold of readers and keep them guessing until the very end.</p> <p>Diana Liu Nashville, TN</p>	<p><b><i>Publishers who wish to submit a book for possible review should send a copy of the book to:</i></b> <b>Melanie Hundley</b> <b>1021 Delmas Ave.</b> <b>Nashville, TN 37216-3630</b></p> <p><b><i>To submit a review for possible publication or to become a reviewer, contact Melanie Hundley at melanie.hundley@vanderbilt.edu.</i></b></p>

## To Thine Own Self Be True:

But First, Write Your Way to That Self

**B**e true to yourself. Simple advice, until we try to apply it and a question emerges. “What is self?” The concept of identity is complex and certainly not static. Who I am at 12 is not who I am at 17; who I am as a daughter is not always who I am as a best friend; who I am in school is not who I am at the mall, or at my part-time job, or on Facebook, or alone in the wilderness. So how are teens to go about finding, or constructing, or understanding their intertwining selves? Is there a core self, a true self, that remains in any relationship and in any setting? Should there be?

Young adult literature can help young people as they go through what perhaps will be the first of many identity crises. The word *crisis* is dramatic, and feels right for what teens experience so deeply; the word hints at the agony that can be involved in confronting issues of self. Bucher and Hinton (2010) explain:

As they are bombarded with messages from parents, family, peers, television, the Internet, school, and their communities, young adults must search for ways to make sense of this cacophony of voices. While attempting to discover their own identities, they ask: Who am I? What kind of person will I grow up to be? . . . Developing a personal, sexual, and individual identity is a significant (although sometimes unconscious) task for young adults . . . Many young adults are turning to realistic fiction for answers. (p. 128)

Identity could be the overarching theme in an English language arts classroom for an entire school year; in fact, it might be hard to find novels for teens that do *not* involve characters searching for self, wondering about who they are in relation to others, in relation to their changing bodies, in relation to their world. Read-

ers can turn to literature to see the multitude of ways characters answer some of the questions raised above. This article will focus on books that have characters who write, who confront—and sometimes resolve—issues of identity through their writing. That writing can take many forms, so the sections are organized by genres and formats (though many books cross or stretch boundaries, or include multiple types of writing). Interestingly, while many of the examples involve characters who write by choice, a good number show characters responding to school assignments. They often begin these assignments with resistance but unwittingly end up with a great product as well as some understanding of who they are.

### Journals, Diaries, Blogs

In the graphic novel *Page by Paige* (Gulledge, 2011), the title character composes in both words and pictures to help herself figure out who Paige is when she has to start life in New York City after moving from Virginia. She actually has a chance to reinvent herself, both at school and within her family. As she tries to separate her own identity from that of her mother, whom she considers fake, she takes steps to assert herself, and then must ponder her mother’s words, “Sometimes I wonder what happened to the old Paige . . . She was a better daughter” (unpaged).

Eventually, Paige shows her sketchbook/notebook to her mom, which leads to a tentative yet caring and productive conversation. Later, Paige uses an analogy, showing that while mothers know what they hope their daughters will become, and can provide an out-

line, “. . . it’s the daughter who draws the lines, and she might connect dots you didn’t intend, making a whole different picture. . . . So I’ve gotta trust the dots she’s given me, and she’s gotta trust me to draw the picture myself” (unpaged).

In *Dear Toni*, by Sand-Eveland (2008), the plot is set into motion by a class writing assignment. The product will be put in a museum vault for 40 years to be read by a future audience. We get to see change as we read one middle school writer’s 100 entries, accompanied by drawings. It begins on Sept 9:

Dear Whoever You Are, Help me! I’m being beaten and tortured and tied to a post in a burning fire. . . . According to Mr. Mackenzie, my teacher, kids’ journals are a dying art form. Well, good thing, I say! . . . I am being forced to write for a hundred days. One hundred days of torture and pain. (p. 1)

The tone has changed by the last entry. “I guess maybe this journal is my Christmas gift to you . . . I hate good-byes. . . . Even though you weren’t ever REALLY here, you were real to me . . . and I am going to miss you a lot. I hope my life wasn’t too boring” (p. 125).

Detorie’s *The Accidental Genius of Weasel High* (2011) involves another long-term school assignment—this time a notebook blog extending over 20 weeks. Larkin Pace wins the grand prize for his illustrated blog, in which he tells some funny stories and figures out some things about himself in relation to family, friends, and (insert dramatic pause here) a girl.

## Letters

*The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (Chbosky, 1999) is told as a series of letters that begin “Dear Friend.” Charlie has been a withdrawn observer of the world around him, but through his writing, we see him grad-

ually relating to people and coming to some understandings about events that led to his being a certain way, and about how it’s possible to become someone who can begin to relate to people. His final letter, he realizes, might be his last, since, “I’m not sure if I will have the time to write any more letters because I might be too busy trying to ‘participate’” (p. 213).

How do you know who you are after you lose everyone you love? In *Love, Aubrey* (LaFleur, 2009), the title character writes letters to her little sister’s imaginary friend, as well as to her mother who has abandoned her; through writing, she is able to grapple with hard questions, including why she survived the car accident that killed her father and sister. Writing also proves therapeutic. In a way, the letters are to herself—her *new self*.

Joe Jones reluctantly corresponds with an author in the short story, “Your Question for Author Here” (DiCamillo & Scieszka, 2010). He could be identified as a utilitarian—he asks the author to supply him with a bunch of author stuff for his assignment, and Maureen O’Toole answers in ways that actually get far more writing out of him than his teacher’s original questions would have, and some reading as well. Joe ends up asking a sincere question of the author, “How do you know if you might be a writer?” (p. 116). He surprises himself by doing some self-initiated writing, a haiku that begins “What author kicks butt . . .” (p. 123). His signing of his final letter with “Your writing pal” (p. 123) indicates that he knows himself—perhaps a new self—in a way that he did not at the beginning of the story.

In *So Totally Emily Beers* (Yee, 2007), Emily, on a cross-country trip with her mother after her parents’ divorce, writes a series of letters to her dad, though we never know until the end if she will send them. She reflects, “How did the pioneers do it? Did they have to ride with their mothers? There’s no way I’m going to make it to California” (p. 7). Much later, settled in her new home, she writes about their visit to a psychologist. “It was just like three friends talking, only one was a mom, one was a daughter, and one was a psychologist . . .” (p. 266). After asking the psychologist if she gets paid just for talking to people and hearing the response, “I get paid for listening, too,” Emily realizes, “I think I want to be a psychologist when I grow up” (p. 267). That discovery helps her relate to her absent father in a new way, also.

### Additional Books with Characters Writing Journals, Diaries, Blogs

Almond, D. (2010). *My name is Mina*. New York, NY: Delacorte Press.

Klise, L. (2001). *Trial by journal* (M. S. Klise, Illus.). New York, NY: HarperCollins.

Myers, W. D. (1999). *Monster* (C. Myers, Illus.). New York, NY: HarperCollins.

## Other Books Using an Epistolary Format

- Baskin, N. R. (2009). *Anything but typical*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.
- Klise, K. (2007). *Regarding the bees: A lesson in letters, on honey, dating, and other sticky subjects* (M. K. Klise, Illus.). Orlando, FL: Harcourt.
- Lubar, D. (2005). *Sleeping freshmen never lie*. New York, NY: Penguin Group.
- Spinelli, J. (2007). *Love, Stargirl*. New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Woodson, J. (2009). *Peace, Locomotion*. New York, NY: G. P. Putnam's Sons.

## Memoir and Autobiographies

Joe Bunch is skeptical about writing his alphabiography for his seventh-grade teacher, not only because it would be boring to write about himself from A–Z and it would be difficult to use all the letters (since he doesn't care much for xylophones), but also because he knows telling the truth about his identity could lead to trouble. In *Totally Joe* (Howe, 2005), Joe informs us, "Every single thing anybody knows about us is ammunition" (unpaged). Joe has experienced harassment from classmates who don't appreciate his sexual orientation, but he doesn't let this stop him from writing about his crushes, friendships, and thoughts about his future wedding plans, recognizing that there will be no bride. The Life Lesson at the end of the entry on his future states, "There should be a magazine called *Grooms*" (p. 85). By the time Joe gets to W, he chooses to have the letter stand for *Writing*; he has figured out that he likes writing, and that, as the Life Lesson says, ". . . when you're writing, the person you're talking to is mostly yourself" (p. 176).

*My Most Excellent Year* (Kluger, 2008) consists of three essays written by eleventh graders who agree that their ninth-grade year fits the title of the assignment best. Their memoirs are aided by documents such as saved emails, instant messages, and theatre programs. T. C., Alejandra, and Augie figured out a lot about themselves that memorable year. Augie writes, "I figured out something in ninth grade . . . when I chose a brother who could teach me how to be Augie

Hwong . . . I figured out that it's not just the people we love, but the people who love us *back* who show us how high we can really soar" (p. 391). He concludes his memoir with a Sondheim (1981) quote:

"Here's to us.  
Who's like us?  
Damn few." (p. 392)

## Poetry

The ninth-grade narrator in *My Best Friend, the Atlantic Ocean, and Other Great Bodies Standing between Me and My Life with Giulio* (Harrington, 2008) holds a philosophy: "Life is just so much happier when you shoot for the middle" (p. 133). While writing in her poetry journal, Delia notices that her teacher has sat down to grade papers, ". . . so I'm going to stop sonneting for a while. I'm SO not exerting all that effort when he's not watching. I'm not into that over-achievement thing, after all. I mean, there could be a limited amount of achievement in my body, and what if I use it all up before I reach, say, 17? THEN what?" (p. 31).

While Dilia doesn't see herself as much of a student, we readers can't help but notice that she is learning in spite of herself. She's daydreaming about a boy, and ponders, "Ironic, isn't it, that you have to be together in order to break up. (We reviewed literary terms in class today, which is why I'm so up on my irony at the moment. English teachers always seem to find a way to teach about irony, every year,

## Other Books with Authors or Characters Writing Memoir

- Abeel, S. (2003). *My thirteenth winter: A memoir*. New York, NY: Orchard Books.
- Fershleiser, R., & Smith, L. (2009). *Six-word memoirs on love and heartbreak by writers famous and obscure from Smith Magazine*. New York, NY: HarperPerennial.
- Greenwald, S. (2006). *Rosie Cole's memoir explosion*. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Small, D. (2009). *Stitches: A memoir*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton.
- Wizner, J. (2007). *Spanking Shakespeare*. New York, NY: Random House.



and I always seem to forget what it means in a matter of minutes.)” (p. 83). At another point, she lets us in on her writing process. “Maybe—for reasons I can’t begin to comprehend—it would be easier to express what’s on my mind if I were to reach back a ways and get into e.e. cummings mode . . .” (p. 131). The story concludes with her resisting (or at least pretending to resist) her changing identity. She’s heading out on vacation, and will not be forced to use her poetry writing muscles for a week:

I feel sad about that, actually, like I’m going to miss you, journal. But I have to close you up, now, and we’ll meet again on Thursday and have a chat.

Wait a minute! I’m writing to myself, so I’M the journal. Which means I’m CLOSING MYSELF UP INSIDE IT. HELP! GET ME OUTA—(p. 141)

*Fishtailing* (Phillips, 2009) is a novel in verse, narrated by four teens and accompanied by teacher comments that show how influential teachers can be as young people are struggling to find, create, and express who they have been, are, and are becoming. The kids write from their hearts and wrench the readers’ hearts, but evidently not the heart of Mrs. Farr, who responds to one poet, “You have an admirable grasp of syntax and a rich vocabulary. However, your images are disturbingly violent. Perhaps you can find more optimistic diction to flavor your poetry. We can all use optimism” (p. 14). Here’s another:

Your narrative line of the Central American village massacre rings with authenticity and verisimilitude. It is a dreadful chapter in that region’s history, and an individual tragedy for anyone involved in it. If this is your experience, my sympathies.

### Other Books Involving Poetry

Creech, S. (2001) *Love that dog*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.

Creech, S. (2008). *Hate that cat*. New York, NY: Joanna Cotler Books.

Nye, N. S., selector. (2010). *Time you let me in: 25 poets under 25*. New York, NY: Greenwillow Books.

Watson, R. (2010). *What Momma left me*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury.

Woodson, J. (2005). *Locomotion*. New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons.

In your poem, however, you dwell on blood and carnage excessively. Perhaps an uplifting moment of redemption is in order for the protagonist. You might also reconsider your point of view. (p. 35)

## Journalism

Adina is a journalist. Well, that was her identity before she landed on an island with a bunch of beauty pageant contestants. She had participated in the contest only as a means to an end, intending to write an exposé of the practice she so hated, but a plane crash foiled her plans. Can she still be an investigative reporter without pen, paper, computer? And will she find out things about these girls that are far different from her original hypotheses? Read *Beauty Queens* (Bray, 2011) to find out. Every survivor demonstrates major identity shifts in this funny, thought-provoking book.

Hildy Biddle, in Bauer’s *Peeled* (2008), is a reporter for her high school newspaper, *The Core*. She used to wear that identity comfortably, since she was the daughter of a respected journalist. Now that her dad is dead, she’s confused, but her writing helps her deal with grief, and she gets very serious when she investigates happenings at a supposedly haunted house in her apple-farming community. Someone is lying, and is willing to go to great lengths to see that she does not discover the truth or print her opinions in her new publication, *The Peel*. She finds a mentor in a former professional journalist and encounters situations that test and strengthen her sense of ethics and commitment to both justice and the rights provided by the First Amendment. Hildy has enemies, but they don’t include herself. Though one of her conclusions is, “If you need to be popular, journalism is not for you” (p. 229), she gets to a place where she knows her father would be proud of her, an authentic place where she can be who she really is, and who she wants to be.

In Bryant’s historical novel *The Trial* (2004), Katie lives an ordinary life until the day she is chosen to be her uncle’s assistant at the historic trial of Bruno Richard Hauptmann, accused murderer of the Lindbergh baby in 1932. Katie gets to try out a new role as she listens carefully, observes the people in the courtroom, forms opinions, and learns the ins and outs of being a reporter. In an intense six weeks, she grows proportionately in skill, wisdom, and maturity. She likes the identity she has assumed and plans to pursue journalism as a career.

## Other Books Relating to Journalism

- Crysdale, J. (2010). *Fearless female journalists*. Toronto, ONT: Second Story Press.
- Feinstein, J. (2005). *Last shot: A Final Four mystery*. New York, NY: Knopf.
- Ingold, J. (2010). *Paper daughter*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
- Kunze, L., with Onur, R. (2011). *Secrets*. New York, NY: Greenwillow Books.
- Myers, W. D. (2010). *Cruisers*. New York, NY: Scholastic.

## Writing for Self, toward Self

There are many other books with characters who write for any number of purposes. Jason, in *Anything but Typical* (Baskin, 2009) is not comfortable relating to people face to face, but is secure and confident as a writer. He composes stories online and corresponds with other creative writers, including a girl he comes to really like. When he gets an opportunity to meet her at a StoryBoard conference, he's faced with a crisis of identity. Rebecca will discover he has autism. Will that scare her away, ruining their relationship? What does it mean if he is not willing to share that part of his identity with her? Can he take the risk?

Story writing is crucial to the plot of *The Wild Girls* (Murphy, 2007). Two girls win a short story contest, earning the right to attend a prestigious writing camp. As they try out new techniques and storylines, they discover things about themselves that are empowering. In both *A Star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame* (Woods, 2010) and *Kalpna's Dream* (Clarke, 2004), teachers' essay writing assignments lead to self-discovery and expression. In the latter, the assignment given to eleventh-graders directly asks them to ask themselves "Who am I?" and answer that crucial question. The main character in Donnelly's *Revolution* (2010) has to write a major research thesis in order to graduate. The task takes Andi to places far away and deep within, resulting in healing and major change.

Readers who meet some of these characters who are writers might begin to notice something interesting. We so often hear about people searching for themselves, trying to "find themselves," often looking in all the wrong places. But maybe that phrase

and concept are flawed. How could there be a self out there somewhere, or even within, all ready to be discovered? Rather, what we see in these books with characters who write is that the writing helps them construct an identity; they write themselves into being. If the characters can do it, readers can, too.

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# Who's Holding the Mirror?

## Missing Representations of Dating Violence in Young Adult Literature

Approximately one in five females in high school have been or are involved in an abusive dating relationship (Silverman, Raj, Mucci, & Hathaway, 2001). Boyfriends who attack, beat, and stab their girlfriends are too often featured in the news. If this is such a common problem for teenage girls, why do we find so little exploration of it in young adult literature (YAL), a literature that is known for not shying away from reality? That was the question that I asked myself after reading Sarah Dessen's courageous 2000 YA novel, *Dreamland*, and searching for articles on dating violence in YAL with very few results. Cole (2004) echoes my thoughts when she asserts that, "While child abuse is an ample theme in young adult literature, dating violence has been explored minimally" (p. 62). Literature mirrors life, but in the case of dating violence in YAL, there are too few people holding up that mirror. Exploring *Dreamland* via Chodorow's research on how identity is shaped sheds some well-needed light on why girls enter and remain in abusive relationships.

In "Family Structure and Feminine Personality," Chodorow (2007) explores how early childhood interactions, especially with families and mothers, shape men and women differently. In general, children's personalities are affected greatly by the people around them, and females especially are more likely to find definition in their relationships. Young girls spend more time with their mothers than young males do. Chodorow points out the potential problem in this identification, noting that mothers tend to hinder the development of individual personalities in their

daughters in order to live out their own dreams vicariously.

Examples from different cultures around the world show how girls and women tend to be more communal, or social, than boys and men are. When children reach the age of five in rural Modjokuto, Indonesia, girls are expected to work with their mothers and the other women on household chores, while boys are encouraged to play on their own with the other male children (Chodorow, 2007). Boys, therefore, are generally better at developing individual personalities and not relying on other people to define who they are. Because of this ability to individuate, boys see a difference between their *valued* independence and the *disparaged* dependence of girls. Consequently, they desire to separate themselves from anything that would make them less individuated or that could be considered "feminine" (Chodorow, 2007).

In this article, I consider the fact that girls tend to individuate poorly and thus are more prone to identity development via female familial and social influences. I also explore the characteristics of abusers, victims, and violent dating relationships, and how friends and family contribute to the shaping of a girl into a victim. I examine how those traits and trends are unflinchingly represented in *Dreamland*. I chose to examine *Dreamland* rather than another YA novel, like *Fault Line* by Janet Tashjian or *Things Change* by Patrick Jones, because *Dreamland* articulates clearly how Caitlin's identity becomes entangled with that of her abuser.

## Media's Role: Distorting Identity and Reporting Often Terrible Results

As a young woman raised by two loving parents who both encouraged me to stand up for myself and be my own person, it was difficult for me to imagine staying in a relationship with someone who hurt me physically, mentally, or both. I needed a book like *Dreamland* to be able to empathize with victims of dating violence. When I finished reading, I wondered why so many girls experience abusive relationships, and why they stay in them and allow the abuse to continue, as Caitlin does in *Dreamland*. Examining popular magazines, websites, and TV shows provided some insight into this issue. In April of 2011, the homepage of *Seventeen* magazine's website demonstrated how pop culture renders it imperative for young girls to have a boyfriend. The two most popular articles on the site were "20 Things You Shouldn't Say to Him" and the "30-Day Guide to Making Him Yours." The website offers 12 different quiz categories that girls can take online, six of which relate to boyfriends, boys in general, and romantic relationships. This website had the same quiz options available in October of 2011. *Seventeen* magazine is marketed to girls ages 12 to 19 (Seventeen).

Television also portrays the message that having a boyfriend is a necessity for a young girl. On Disney Channel shows like *Hannah Montana* and *Sonny with a Chance*, it's difficult to find a female character who isn't spending much of her time "crushing" on a boy and trying to win his affection. These characters are the role models that our culture feeds young girls. Girls emulate these boy-crazy characters who give the message that life is about getting and keeping a boyfriend, even for young girls. Brookes and Kelly (2009) confirm that our "'consumer-media culture' . . . has established itself as one of the most powerful influences over identity formation for children and young people" (p. 599).

Television shows portray girls with boyfriends as popular with and respected by the other girls. It's not surprising then that girls in America feel that it's important to have a boyfriend, regardless of how those boyfriends may treat them. Girls live under the assumption that as long as they are dating, they will have the respect of their peers, respect that is necessary for girls to feel like they possess an iden-

tity. Chodorow (2007) states, "In any given society, feminine personality comes to define itself in relation and connection to other people more than masculine personality does" (p. 368). This explains why girls tend to look at others to define themselves. They are influenced by their friends who are influenced by the media; it's a cycle that continues to affect the way that girls view themselves.

Because the story in *Dreamland* seems so vivid and realistic, I began to research the topics in the novel and found interviews with and stories about real victims of dating violence. The number of stories paralleling Caitlin's story in *Dreamland* is shocking. Even nonfiction stories that are more recent than *Dreamland* share some of the same characteristics. These parallels show that there are trends when it

comes to violent relationships. Many of the young women reported that their boyfriends were "so sweet" to them in the relationship's beginning, but then, "suddenly," the abuse began.

One example of a real-life story that parallels *Dreamland* is that of Sarah Van Zanten (Burleigh, 2007). She met a "nice" boy in high school; however, after they dated for awhile, he became violent. When asked why she didn't just leave her boyfriend when he started hitting her, she replied, "I felt ashamed of sticking with him . . . I think it has to do with being in one of the first relationships of your life. You don't really know where to draw the line." Other girls at school also influenced Sarah's actions and decisions. When her boyfriend beat her unconscious at a party, someone called the police, who arrested him. This arrest led to his being kicked out of school. A friend of Sarah's reported that "Even the other girls were saying to her, 'How could you do this to him? He's so cute'" (Burleigh, 2007). The other girls ignored the fact that she had been physically assaulted, seeing instead that she was no longer associated with her "cute" ex-boyfriend.

This reading of the novel examines how Caitlin's story in *Dreamland* parallels Sarah's and so many others' stories of dating violence. Like Sarah's, Cait-

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lin's fictional story demonstrates that girls struggle to develop their identities sans the approval of their media-influenced female peers and that they are fighting an up-hill battle.

## Getting In

Another aspect of the development of identity in young women, aside from gaining approval of friends, is the relationship between the young women and their parents. Caitlin's need for more status and attention in *Dreamland* begins

when her parents ignore her while they search for her runaway sister, Cass. Caitlin's birthday is far from everyone's mind "as [the] kitchen became mission control, full of ringing phones, loud voices, and panic" (Dessen, 2000, p.

13). Caitlin has become like a statue sitting in the kitchen as everyone rushes around her, not acknowledging her presence or the fact that she is worried about her sister, too. The absence of familial support in Caitlin's life leaves her longing for something to fill that void.

Caitlin then reveals that she never had the attention of her parents like her sister did; she was always the quiet one in the background while her sister played sports, earned good grades, and had a steady boyfriend. The first-person narrative gives readers insight into Caitlin's thought process, and how she feels about being "inferior" to her sister and friends. It was difficult to have a sister who was "always blazing the trail ahead"; she left Caitlin no choice other than to "pale in comparison" (Dessen, p. 15). Like many adolescent girls, Caitlin feels like she is alone in her life, even when she's surrounded by people. With her parents being distracted by her sister's running away, Caitlin searches for a way to garner some of their attention, a way to feel noticed by them and by her friends at school so that she feels more connected with the people in her life.

Her best friend at school convinces her to try out for cheerleading, something that Caitlin agrees to mostly because it's something that her sister has never done. She makes the squad and is awarded a spar-

kly uniform and a new sense of popularity. Her first attempt at gaining attention works to an extent: "My making cheerleader changed my mother's life. . . . She had finally found something to concentrate on that was familiar and busy in the strange silence of Cass being gone" (Dessen, p. 41). But even with that attention from her mother, something is still missing for Caitlin; she hasn't distinguished herself from her sister or achieved the completeness that she's looking for. She laments that, "The only reason I'd even tried out was to do something different from Cass. But here, in the end, I was following her again" (Dessen, p. 35).

Caitlin is still lacking something that will boost her popularity even more, something that will make the other girls jealous of *her* for once. She isn't feeling like she is truly a part of the female community at school, even after becoming a cheerleader, since "it was decided early on that [she] would be at the top of the pyramid . . . . This also led to [her] being hated with a passion by Eliza Drake" (Dessen, p. 41). Instead of being accepted as a cheerleader, she's now a target to some of the other girls. Her attempts at positively individuating herself from her sister are failing as well; consequently, she turns to a negative method of gaining attention: Rogerson Biscoe.

More than just a boyfriend, Rogerson is a boyfriend with an element of danger. He dresses in grungy clothes and has dreadlocks in his hair. This element of danger—of looking like a "drug dealer" and having "that wild look," as Caitlin's friends say—gives the reader a sense of foreboding when Rogerson is introduced, a sense that real girls usually don't have when entering into a relationship that turns violent (hence the abuse seems sudden when, in fact, warning signs were present) (Dessen, p. 52). Caitlin ignores that foreboding because her friends say that "he's hot" and "sexy," labels clearly demonstrating approval (Dessen, p. 52). In Rogerson, she finds a negative way to get attention, both from her disapproving parents and from her friends, who are also physically attracted to him. Rogerson changes Caitlin's definition of "boyfriend," and the interest that the other girls take in him show Caitlin that being with a guy like Rogerson will boost her popularity even more than being with another guy because he's different—he is mysterious.

Rogerson demonstrates that mystery and begins to make Caitlin feel that she needs him, ignoring her completely after he drives her home from a party.

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## The absence of familial support in Caitlin's life leaves her longing for something to fill that void.

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Caitlin spends her time thinking about him and wishing to see him or hear from him, but he seems to have disappeared. That tactic is the first step that Rogerson takes in getting Caitlin “addicted” to being with him. The separation only makes her want to be with him more, which is exactly what he wants; Caitlin is being conditioned to latch onto Rogerson once he comes back into her life, which helps to explain some of her behavior later in the relationship after he begins to hit her. She’s afraid to end the relationship because she’s afraid that she’ll end up back where she started: the quiet, unpopular girl in the background. Once Caitlin sees Rogerson again, she feigns anger, trying to hide the fact that she’s been longing to see him. He quickly distracts her by touching and kissing her. The physical way that he gets her to submit to him forebodes his communication style. He doesn’t try to explain why he didn’t call; he just takes Caitlin in his arms and kisses her. For Rogerson, being physical is how he gets what he wants. In this instance, the touching is gentle, but later he’ll use this physicality in a negative way when he gets angry.

Rogerson’s touching and need to be physically connected to Caitlin is strongly demonstrated on their first real date. Between pages 78 and 81, Dessen mentions Rogerson driving with his hand on Caitlin’s leg, grabbing her and kissing her, and taking her hand to lead her up to his house. Rogerson “leaned over and kissed me, hard, his hand reaching behind my neck and holding me there, his mouth smoky and sweet” (Dessen, p. 79). This language shows the dominance that Rogerson is exerting over Caitlin with his hard, rough kissing and his firm grip, forcing the kiss to last longer. His desire for physical dominance indicates his abusive tendencies.

## Going Down

After that first date, Caitlin and Rogerson are officially together, which has just the effect on Caitlin’s friends that she wanted. Some of the other cheerleaders are talking about Rogerson when they see him outside. Rina, Caitlin’s best friend, is especially excited for her; even though “she might have wanted [she and Caitlin] to both date football players, she [loves] the idea of [Caitlin] with Rogerson. It was just forbidden and wild enough” to be appealing (Dessen, p. 89). Caitlin and Rogerson are now the main topic of conversation after

cheerleading practice, which means that Caitlin has finally reached the status level that she coveted.

However, once obtained, the attention from her friends ceases to be such a powerful motivator. Her desire to be with Rogerson quickly surmounts her need for status and acceptance by her family and friends. Soon she has “stopped riding home with the team and squad, leaving instead in the BMW with him,” and Rogerson encourages this separation when he tells Caitlin things like, “‘They’re a bunch of idiots. I don’t know why you’d want to hang out with them anyway’” (Dessen, p. 93). With Rogerson’s encouragement, Caitlin begins to spend less and less time with her friends, and more and more time with him. She also continues to question her parents’ love for her. She wonders why they aren’t more concerned with what she’s doing with Rogerson since they have yet to meet him:

Maybe it was because they knew what his father did, who his brother was, had seen his mother’s face on For Sale signs staked into a million lawns, and this made him safer, somehow. The other option—that somehow, losing me would be less of a loss [than Cass], never as hard as the one already suffered—was something I pushed out of my head each time it rose up, nagging. (Dessen, p. 103)

Even after attaining the boyfriend who brings her extra attention from her parents, Caitlin still doesn’t have the assurance that they love her as much as they love her sister. She even admits that she uses Rogerson to try to fill a missing part of herself, that she, “took his wildness from him and tried to fold it into myself, filling up the empty spaces all those second-place finishes had left behind” (Dessen, p. 110). She confesses that she tried to fill herself with him, but not that she succeeded.

Caitlin’s attempts to fill in her life with Rogerson, coupled with the thoughts that her parents still don’t love her as much as her sister, shows that having a boyfriend is not the only thing that gives a girl her identity, and that a dating relationship shouldn’t overtake the life of an adolescent girl. If it is a negative

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**She’s afraid to end the relationship because she’s afraid that she’ll end up back where she started: the quiet, unpopular girl in the background.**

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relationship, the girl is in danger of developing a negative identity because “feminine identification is based . . . on the gradual learning of a way of being familiar in everyday life” (Chodorow, 2007, p. 374). Since Caitlin spends so much time with Rogerson, he is the person with whom she most identifies.

Caitlin shows just how much being with Rogerson was taking over her life. “I . . . was struggling to keep my grades up, since I was suddenly spending so many weeknights (when my parents assumed I was doing cheerleading squad activities) with him” (Des-

sen, p. 110). Caitlin has also begun to use drugs with Rogerson in order to maintain her status among Rogerson’s friends. Rogerson is beginning to totally monopolize Caitlin’s time, and she’s started lying to her parents, a trend that will continue to escalate

throughout the rest of the story as she is forced to cover up the bruises from Rogerson’s beatings.

Concerning Caitlin’s old friends, she explains that she doesn’t see them anymore because Rogerson doesn’t like them (Dessen, p. 115). The attention that Caitlin wanted from her parents and friends is now useless to her; she’s lost the desire for both community and individuation. Girls need to individuate, however, while maintaining a sense of community; the two must work together because it takes a healthy sense of community to fully individuate. Sadly, Caitlin’s community has failed her, and consequently, she has no self. She has Rogerson, and their relationship is beginning to overtake her life. Her identity is entwined with his—she can’t identify herself apart from him. He treats her like someone special, at least in the beginning of their relationship. It’s now his attention that she wants, not that of her family and friends.

Things begin to take a turn for the worse in Caitlin and Rogerson’s relationship one day after Caitlin chooses to stop and help Rina instead of going home to wait for Rogerson to pick her up for a date. Once they finally meet up, much later than they had originally planned, Rogerson is complaining to Caitlin about her choosing to be with Rina instead of him, a complaint to which she replies:

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**A girl has to come to understand that she is worth more as herself than she is as someone’s girlfriend.**

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“Oh, come on,” I said, reaching over playfully to knock him on the knee. “Don’t be such a big baby.”

When he hit me, I didn’t see it coming. It was just a quick blur, a flash out of the corner of my eye, and then the side of my face just exploded, burning, as his hand slammed against me.

The noise it made was a *crack*, like a gunshot. And it wasn’t like in the movies, where the person just stands there and takes it. I reeled back, hitting my head against the seat. (Dessen, p. 143)

That first hit comes as a shock to Caitlin, as Rogerson’s quick temper overpowers her. Once his initial angry outburst is over, however, Rogerson returns to his normal, affectionate self. They just continue their evening as if “nothing had happened, nothing at all” (Dessen, p. 145). He’s back to treating Caitlin the way that he always did. Rogerson blinds Caitlin to the implications of his behavior because he is her *boyfriend*; sustaining this relationship is her top priority.

At the end of the night, Rogerson takes Caitlin home just as if they’d had a normal night out. Caitlin explains her thought process and why she doesn’t leave him after he hits her:

I could have just gotten out of the car and walked up to my house, leaving him behind forever. Things would have been very different if I had done that. But the fact was that I loved Rogerson. It wasn’t just that I loved him, even: it was that I loved what *I* was when I was with him. Not a little sister, the pretty girl’s sidekick, the second runner-up. All I’d ever wanted was to make my own path, far from Cass. And even after what had happened, I wasn’t ready to give that up just yet. (Dessen, p. 146)

Caitlin believes that she has finally found her identity, not in herself, but as Rogerson’s girlfriend. She so firmly believes that she is nothing without her boyfriend that she can’t bring herself to leave him, even when their relationship turns violent. Chodorow (2007) explains that, “processes of separation and individuation are made more difficult for girls” (Chodorow, p. 372). The problems that girls have with individualizing themselves apart from others have made escaping violent relationships more difficult. A girl has to come to understand that she is worth more as herself than she is as someone’s girlfriend.

The bruises on Caitlin’s face are easily explained to her parents and friends; she makes up a story about being bumped into at a party. She has a harder time, however, hiding the evidence of the violence from herself. She talks about how hard it is to forget the

look that was on Rogerson's face as he struck her, but then "he'd kiss me harder and I'd go under again" (Dessen, p. 150). "Going under" is a phrase that is often associated with anesthesia or drowning, demonstrating how Caitlin feels drugged and helpless when she's with Rogerson, which makes sense because sometimes she really is drugged when they're together. He uses her physical attraction to him to distract her from the truth, always using touch as his main form of communication in both positive and negative situations.

Rogerson's second attack on Caitlin occurs for a different reason than the first. Rogerson sees her talking with her male photography teacher and automatically assumes that she's having an affair with that teacher. Caitlin wanted the jealousy of her friends when she started dating Rogerson, but Rogerson's jealousy is a different beast. This beating differs from the first in another way as well. Rogerson doesn't try to act like it never happened; instead, he tells Caitlin that it's her fault, that she brought this one on herself (Dessen, p. 156). At this point, because Caitlin identifies herself through Rogerson, she just submits to the beating and accepts his explanation.

Caitlin's willingness to make excuses for Rogerson goes along with Walker's (1977) report that women in abusive relationships often go "to elaborate lengths to justify why their men batter them, often accepting blame for the incident" (p. 54). Caitlin comes up with another lie to explain her swollen, bruised face to her parents when she goes back into the house after Rogerson kisses her again. Rogerson "kissed me hard and urgently, his hand curling around the back of my neck, the way he knew I liked it. As if somehow, that way, he could give back what he'd taken from me. And I let him" (Dessen, p. 158). Rogerson's behavior has begun to settle into a pattern at this point: get angry about something small or imagined, hit Caitlin, and then kiss her in order to make up.

It's after this second attack that Caitlin shows her first signs of wanting her situation to change, of maybe wanting to get out of this abusive relationship. She writes a letter to her sister in her dream journal that reads:

My boyfriend, Rogerson, hit me tonight. It wasn't the first time. I know you can't believe I'd let this happen: I can't either. But it's more confusing than you'd think. I love him. That sounds so weak and pitiful, but lately, it's been

enough for me to forgive anything. But after tonight, I'm not so sure. (Dessen, p. 161)

Caitlin is admitting to herself that her relationship is negative and reaching out for help, but not to anyone who could actually do something about her abuse. Her runaway sister will never see this letter as it sits, tucked away, in the journal in her room. Caitlin wants help, but she still feels that she won't be worth anything if she isn't with Rogerson anymore. The influence of her "friends" is still too strong in her mind, telling her that she can only *be someone* if being that someone involves *being someone else's girlfriend*.

Because of these beatings, Caitlin has to wear clothes that cover her arms and legs. Rogerson has taken to hitting her only where she can easily cover the bruises with her clothes (Dessen, p. 164). His awareness of the fact that she has to cover the marks or he'll be found out shows that he is aware of what he's doing to her and wants the abuse to stay hidden so that it can continue. He likes being in control of Caitlin. His beatings continue to escalate until "it got to be that sex was the only time [Caitlin] could count on being safe. And it never lasted long enough" (Dessen, p. 166). The more Rogerson hits Caitlin, the more she longs for time when he'll leave her alone, but she realizes that during intercourse is the only time when she's guaranteed safety, so she's willing to have sex frequently.

More insight as to why Caitlin feels like she can't ask for help comes as she's talking to Rina, who is beginning to suspect that something is wrong. Rina questions Caitlin, who lies and says that everything's fine. The lies come easier to her now since she's had practice throughout her entire relationship with Rogerson, but she still wishes that things were different. She says:

I look at her . . . and for a split second I wanted to let it all spill out. About the importance of time, and the helpless feeling I got every time I saw that black BMW, not knowing what waited on the other side of the tinted windows . . .

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**He uses her physical attraction to him to distract her from the truth, always using touch as his main form of communication in both positive and negative situations.**

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But I couldn't tell her. I couldn't tell anyone. As long as I didn't say it aloud, it wasn't real. (Dessen, p. 171)

By not talking about her problems, Caitlin is able to pretend that they aren't happening. At this point in the story, she is lacking "communion," or "being at one with other organisms" (Chodorow, 2007, p. 377). She feels alone and doesn't know how to reach out to those around her. Confessing to others would give her more community, but it would also grant validity to

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## She's hoping that someone will eventually notice that something's off, that something's wrong in her life.

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her situation. She resists telling Rina or anyone else because she knows just how bad the situation is, and she doesn't want people questioning her as to why she hasn't gotten out of the relationship sooner.

Caitlin's feelings are best shown in the book

through her few letters to her sister Cass via her dream journal. Caitlin isn't afraid to write her true feelings in these letters because she knows that she's never going to send them. Her second letter to Cass comes after her conversation with Rina. Caitlin is trying to sort out her feelings as she writes:

Something's happening to me. It's like I'm shrinking smaller and smaller and I can't stop it. There's just so much wrong that I can't imagine the shame in admitting even the tiniest part of it. When you left it was like there was this huge gap to fill, but instead of spreading wide enough to do it, I just fell right in, and I'm still falling. (Dessen, p. 176)

Cass running away was a big motivation for Caitlin to try and make a name for herself, to finally get a boyfriend and get some of the attention that had been previously placed on Cass. This plan may have worked had Rogerson not been an abuser, or if she had a stronger female community around her, a community that taught her that she didn't need a boyfriend to shape her identity. Caitlin is realizing this, and that realization prompts her to write these letters to her sister as an unheard cry for help.

## Getting Out

Caitlin is waiting and wishing that her mom will notice and step in to take care of her. She wants help, but she's too hurt and embarrassed to ask for it.

When her mom is in her room one day, Caitlin thinks, "Maybe this was it. Maybe she *could* save me . . . but she didn't seem to see me, even as I pleaded that she would" (Dessen, p. 193). Caitlin's baggy, long clothes are more than just a way to cover up her bruises and other marks from Rogerson's beatings; they're also a cry for help. She's hoping that someone will eventually notice that something's off, that something's wrong in her life. In this way, Dessen invites her audience to share in the responsibility for healthy young girls. She shows us the power of observation, or noticing.

However, Rina is the one, not Caitlin's mom, who finally notices that Caitlin has become distant. She tries cajoling Caitlin into acting like her old self, suggesting a trip to the lake. The problem for Caitlin comes when she can't get in touch with Rogerson via phone; she knows that he'll be angry if he comes to pick her up and she's not home. Rogerson's lack of trust in Caitlin has left her with an inability to relax if she doesn't have his permission to go, and she shows this by carrying her phone around all day at the lake, making Rina angry that she won't just enjoy the day (Dessen, p. 209). That trip to the lake makes Rogerson angry in a way that he's never been before. This time the beating takes place in plain sight in Caitlin's front yard, even though he knows that her parents are having a party right in her backyard. Caitlin says:

I lifted my head and he was standing over me, breathing hard. I knew I should get up before someone saw us but somehow I couldn't move. . . . It was the first time he'd done it out in the open, not inside the car or a room, and the vastness of everything, fresh air and space, made me pull myself tighter, smaller. (Dessen, p. 215)

By staying there on the grass and not getting up when Rogerson tells her to, Caitlin bravely stands up for herself. The noise of the beating brings her parents, who have called the police. Caitlin may have chosen to stay in the yard, may have chosen to let her secret out, but she is still plagued with the mindset that Rogerson is her everything. She still believes that "he had been all I'd had, all this time. And when the police led him away, I pulled out of the hands of all these loved ones, sobbing, screaming, everything hurting, to try and make him stay" (Dessen, p. 218). Caitlin is "unable to grow out of . . . self/other distinctions" (Chodorow, 2007, p. 379). Even after months of beatings, and after crying out for help in her head and on paper, Caitlin can't just accept the help of the people

she loves because she thinks that by losing Rogerson, she's losing herself.

Without professional help, Caitlin isn't able to break free from the mindset that she is worthless without her boyfriend. She goes to a rehab facility and takes time to heal. This example is good for adolescents who could be in a situation like Caitlin's, but who are too hurt, both physically and mentally, to accept professional help. Sometimes the effects of such a negative search for identity are so strong that they can't be changed without help from someone who is trained in this type of recovery. Young girls are trained to seek male relationships; it's time we instead train them to individuate in healthy ways.

Caitlin's recovery from this type of thinking isn't instant; it's a long process that has its good days and its bad days. She talks about her time in the rehab facility and how hard it is to change her thinking:

Other days I thought about Rogerson. . . . it should have been easy to finally lift that heaviest of weights and place it squarely where it belonged, on Rogerson. But this, even on the good days, was hard. After all that had happened, how could I miss him? But I did. I did. (Dessen, p. 233)

Caitlin undergoes sessions with a therapist while she's at rehab to try to break her way of thinking about herself as not worth anything without her boyfriend. The therapist tells Caitlin that she shouldn't try to forget her relationship with Rogerson, but that she should learn from it instead (Dessen, p. 242).

*Dreamland* finishes with Caitlin leaving rehab and going home, knowing that she'll have to continue her therapy sessions to continue her recovery. The realistic way that Dessen portrays Caitlin's recovery is positive in that it can show girls that big problems can't always be fixed instantly, while at the same time, it ends things on an optimistic note, with hope for Caitlin's future. She's home from rehab, her family is working with her to continue her recovery, and her sister is coming back into her life. This ending shows girls that there is hope for them, even if they are caught in a negative relationship like Caitlin.

These selections of *Dreamland* demonstrate the way that culture has influenced real girls and their literary counterparts when it comes to relationships and dating violence. The book ends well for Caitlin, something that, sadly, can't be said about some girls involved in violent relationships. This article mentions earlier how literature mimics culture and society,

but society can learn from literature as well. Dessen's descriptions of Caitlin's realistic thought processes throughout the book and the fact that she gets the help she needs to leave Rogerson can be helpful to girls who are in situations that are similar to hers, girls who want the status that comes with having a boyfriend, regardless of how their boyfriends act or how they treat their girlfriends.

I didn't know how prevalent dating violence is in our society until I read this book and conducted my research. I didn't know about the negative cycle of violence involved in these kinds of relationships, but now I do. I salute Sarah

Dessen for writing about a topic that is too often ignored in YA literature. The disparity between real-life dating violence and most literature's portrayal of it must be remedied. If literature mirrors life, why are there so few stories on dating violence? This problem needs more exposure and more people working to change our culture; girls deserve to know that their worth is not determined by who they date, or by how long those relationships last. We need more authors like Dessen who are willing to take on the tough subjects, thereby helping to open the eyes and minds of young readers so that they are better prepared to handle these issues. We need more authors who are willing to hold up the mirror and more readers who are willing to look in it.

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### Other Books to Consider

- *Inexcusable* by Chris Lynch—*Inexcusable* is the story of Keir, a high school student/athlete who thinks he is a good guy; he gets good grades, is polite, has lots of friends. That changes when his friend, GiGi, accuses him of raping her.

Lynch, C. (2007). *Inexcusable*. New York, NY: Atheneum Books for Young Readers.

- *Things Change* by Patrick Jones—*Things Change* is about sixteen-year-old Johanna who has her first boyfriend. Paul is affectionate with Johanna at first, but then he hits her. This story of dating violence

includes letters from Paul to his father which help to explain why Paul is abusive.

Jones, P. (2006). *Things change*. New York, NY: Walker Books for Young Readers.

- *Fault Line* by Janet Tashjian—Tashjian uses the viewpoints of both the abuser and the abused to add a different dimension as she tells about the relationship of Becky and Kip.

Tashjian, J. (2003). *Fault line*. New York, NY: Henry Holt and Company, LLC.

- *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson—In *Speak*, Anderson focuses on the aftermath of a rape and how it affects Melinda, both on the inside and the outside.

Anderson, L. H. (1999). *Speak*. New York, NY: Speak.

- *Tornado Warning: A Memoir of Teen Dating Violence and its Effect on a Woman's Life* by Elin Stebbins Waldal—This memoir is the true story of how the author's abusive relationship and how she got out. She also discusses the healing process that she has experienced over the years.

Waldal, E. S. (2011). *Tornado warning: A memoir of teen dating violence and its effect on a woman's life*. Carlsbad, CA: Sound Beach Publishing.

## Exploring Identity(ies) in *Yummy: The Last Days of a Southside Shorty*

**T**he middle school years are a critical time in adolescents' development. As they move toward independence, adolescents struggle with their sense of identity as they not only consider the past but also think about their place in the present and future (e.g., AACAP, 2011; Halverson, 2010). This developmental process also includes understanding the "master narratives" that adolescents adopt and then "reproduce through talk" (Hammack, 2008, p. 236). If it is true that literacy practices shape readers' identities and identifications, then through engagement with texts, students might better come to understand themselves, their peers, and the world (McCarthy & Moje, 2002). More specifically, young adult (YA) literature, with its focus on adolescents, provides a fitting space in which to explore characters' and their own identity(ies) and "might be key to positive identity growth and development" (Alsup, 2010, p. 4).

Numerous researchers have shown the importance of looking at identity in and with YA literature. Niday and Allender (2000), for example, used a cultural studies perspective in their work with secondary and college students to explore how characters border-cross, and Harper (2007) studied masculinity in YA novels with female protagonists. More recently, Blackburn and Clark (2011) examined sexual identity in their study of adolescents and adults who participated in literature discussions using YA literature with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and/or questioning (LGBTQ) characters and themes.

Building off this work, I offer here another analytic perspective that we can use to discuss identity in

YA literature, Gee's (2000–2001) concept of identity. I show how one group of middle school students explored identity(ies) through a book club discussion of the multiple-award-winning graphic novel *Yummy: The Last Days of a Southside Shorty* (Neri & DuBurke, 2010), which was named an American Library Association (ALA) Great Graphic Novel for Teens and an ALA Notable Book in 2011; it was also selected as a Coretta Scott King Honor book (2011) and an International Reading Association (IRA) Notable Book for a Global Society (2011).

I begin with the perspectives that inform my work. Then, I present the context for the students' discussion. I close with the prompts and activities we used in our discussion.

### Gee and Identity

Identity is not something fixed, but rather fluid, relational, and interactional; we make claims about who we are, and others construct who we are, by comparing and contrasting ourselves with others (e.g., Gee, 2000–2001; Mishler, 1999; Moje, Luke, Davies, & Street, 2009; Sarup, 1996). In particular, adolescence is a time where identity formation is in flux as teenagers move in and out of multiple group memberships (sports teams, clubs, etc.), cultures (religious, ethnic, etc.), and subcultures (e.g., goth, emo, gamer) trying to create and define identities for themselves.

Gee (2000–2001) proposed four interconnected perspectives on identity, suggesting that we can use them as analytic lenses to study different aspects of

how identities are fashioned and maintained (see Table 1). Although all four perspectives coexist today, Gee argued that, historically, society has moved from

**Gee’s conception of identity is a natural framework from which to read and discuss characters in YA literature.**

a focus on who we are as determined by nature, to the second (who we are as determined by our place[ment] in society), to the third—we are what and who we are largely based on our individual achievements and skills as they are recognized by others. The fourth perspective—“we are what we are

because of the experiences we have had with certain sorts of ‘affinity groups’”—has gained prominence in the last decade (2000–2001, p. 101).

Each of the four identities emerges or is recognized through where and how it comes to be (process), who or what gives it power, and where the source of power comes from. To illustrate each of the four perspectives, Gee used himself as an example. He was born an identical twin (N-identity); this is something developed from nature, not constructed by others. Next, he is a college professor (I-identity); his position is sanctioned by an outside body of some sort. Gee is charismatic (D-identity); this identity is something that others may assign to him and/or he adopts for himself. Finally, he is a “Trekkie” (A-identity); Trekkies have a shared love of the show *Star Trek*.

Gee’s conception of identity is a natural framework from which to read and discuss characters in YA literature because, similar to teenage readers, the protagonists are adolescents undergoing change and identity development at multiple levels and in manifold contexts. Likewise, just like learners’ identities are social constructions influenced by social and cultural contexts (peers, family, media, etc.), so too are characters’ identities. Teachers and students can use the four perspectives to not only generate questions about how identity is functioning for certain individuals (characters) in a particular context or across various contexts, but also discuss the types of master narratives that they and the characters subscribe to.

In the book club, our discussion of *Yummy* was predicated on Gee’s (2000–2001) definition of identity:

The “kind of person” one is recognized as “being,” at a given time and place, can change from moment to moment in the interaction, can change from context to context, and, of course, can be ambiguous or stable. Being recognized as a certain “kind of person,” in a given context, is what I mean here by “identity.” In this sense of the term, all people have multiple identities connected not to their “internal states” but to their performances in society. (p. 99)

**Identity and Yummy**

*Yummy*, the graphic novel authored by Greg Neri and illustrated by Randy DuBurke (2010), presents a wonderful opportunity to introduce Gee’s work to students, not only because of the layering of identities in book, but also because of how others in the story view and talk about *Yummy*. The book *Yummy* recounts

**Table 1.** Four ways to view identity (Gee, 2000–2001)

Process		Power	Source of Power
Nature-identity: a state	developed from	forces	in nature
Institution-identity: a position	authorized	authorities	within
Discourse-identity: an individual trait	recognized in	the discourse/dialogue	of/with “rational” individuals
Affinity-identity: experiences	shared in	the practice	of “affinity” groups

events that happened in Chicago in 1994. Eleven-year-old Robert (“Yummy”) Sandifer accidentally kills a neighborhood girl while trying to shoot a rival gang member. At first his fellow gang members protect him, but as police presence in the neighborhood increases, they become nervous. Yummy becomes a liability, and his own gang murders him.

Neri, a teacher in Los Angeles at the time, was impacted by the story and wanted to explore whether Yummy was a victim or a bully. Based on public records, personal stories, and media reports, Neri crafts Yummy’s story. Among the stories Neri heard were the neighborhood accounts of Yummy’s father being in prison “for drugs” and his mother’s multiple arrests for “drugs and prostitution.” Because his mother also physically abused him, he was removed from her care and alternated between his grandmother’s house and the streets. Yummy could hug a teddy bear at night after robbing someone at gunpoint. In short, he was a little boy living a very grown up and rough life. In the author’s note, Neri writes, “When Yummy was found

dead and all the facts came out, I wasn’t sure who the bad guy was” (unpaged).

Since Yummy is not alive to tell his own story, Neri writes from the perspective of Roger, a made up “friend” of Yummy who narrates the events for readers. In trying to answer the question “Why did this happen?” Roger talks to people in his neighborhood about Yummy, each person vocalizing his or her opinion as to what went wrong and who the real Yummy was (see Fig. 1).

DuBurke’s black-and-white illustrations skillfully support and enhance the text story. Panels of differing sizes and shapes with distinctive ratios of black to white enhance the mood and tone.

The novel also incorporates the perspectives of newscasters, psychologists, and politicians. All of these citizens and stakeholders speak to Yummy’s identity—who they think he is (see Fig. 2). Readers never really hear Yummy’s perspective or voice; all we have is what others think he might have said or what they said about him based on whatever knowl-



Figure 1. Roger’s wondering about the real Yummy



Figure 2. Some outsider perspectives on Yummy

edge they had. It is this third person, and this sometimes far-removed identity construction, that I wanted the students to think about.

## Context of the Discussion

Our discussion of *Yummy*, which occurred on two concurrent Mondays after school (60 minutes each), was part of a larger funded project—a yearlong series of book club discussions centering on social respon-

sibility.<sup>1</sup> Participants included 15–20 sixth- and seventh-grade students who signed up specifically to read the graphic novel. Book clubs, “small, collaborative groups whose purpose is to enhance literacy and personal and social growth” (Polleck, 2010, p. 51) are transformational spaces because of the conversation that takes

place among participants. According to Wolk (2009), “young adult literature is one of the most meaningful and enjoyable ways for students to inquire into social responsibility because . . . within these stories are moral and ethical quandaries, just as there are endless civic issues” (p. 667). I hoped that our discussion of *Yummy* might interrupt some of the cultural narratives the students may hold regarding who commits crimes and why.

*Yummy* was also selected because it related to four areas of social responsibility: caring and empathy; social problems and social justice; power and propaganda; and, war, peace, and nonviolence (Wolk, 2009). These areas of social responsibility align with how I view identity and identity construction: teaching *Yummy* could be considered an “act of supporting and challenging” students’ identities related to these themes and offering a space for the students “to explore how their identities [in terms of these themes] are hybrid” (McCarthy & Moje, 2002, p. 233). I was further interested in how students’ assumptions, perceptions, and thinking regarding identity, especially in terms of how we label others, could be challenged and/or transformed through reading and discussing *Yummy*.

## Discussing Identity(ies)

Because of students’ potentially different, culturally based responses to the text, and the need for students to be able to develop a personal response to the novel, as an entry to discussion I first posed questions that incorporated reader response theory; I then posed questions that incorporated aspects of critical literacy and other literary theories. All of these initial questions related to identity in some form—the identity of the author, the identity of the reader (or potential reader), and/or *Yummy*’s identity. These provided a bridge for using Gee’s four perspectives. Reader response questions (e.g., How do you react to *Yummy*? Could the events described in *Yummy* happen here?) were designed so that students could make connections among *Yummy*, the story, and themselves and their experiences. Critical literacy (Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002) questions (e.g., Why do you think *Yummy* was the way he was?) prompted students to question the characters’ multiple viewpoints of *Yummy* and broader social and cultural issues impacting the story. By asking about the possible reasons for what happened to *Yummy* and how his fellow gang members treated him, we were getting closer to talking about *Yummy*’s identity(ies). Additional questions touched on aspects of deconstruction (i.e., binary opposition) and cultural studies theory because both of these pointed the discussion even more to Gee’s identity perspectives (e.g., Characters in the book seem to talk about *Yummy* as being “good” or “bad” and as a “child” or “grown up thug.” Is he totally in one or the other or does he move? How and why do you think he moves?).

Once we were finished with the discussion questions, we were ready to tackle Gee. I handed out the “Who Is *Yummy*?” sheet (see Fig. 3) and explained to the students that we were going to talk about identity. In making the worksheet, I went through the novel and looked for places where others labeled and/or described *Yummy*. I purposely left out some key identities (such as gang member) so that students would be prompted to add them.

I described the four types of identities and then read the directions aloud to the students. We did the first example (boy) together, discussing how it could possibly be labeled as N-identity, because he was born as a male (as opposed to a female), and as D-identity,

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**I hoped that our discussion of *Yummy* might interrupt some of the cultural narratives the students may hold regarding who commits crimes and why.**

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Who Is Yummy?

What does identity mean? Identity can mean several things. Jim Gee, a teacher who studies kids and video games, says there are four types of identities.

1. *N-Identities, or nature-identities*: these are identities beyond our control (being a girl or boy; being black or white) but they become important in how others see, think, and talk about them.
2. *I-identities, or institution-identities*: these are identities authorized (or given) by institutions (government, groups of people, society); people have “roles” (prisoner, teacher) that they accept or reject at different levels.
3. *D-Identities, or discourse-identities*: these are identities that can come about based on how others talk about that identity (he is shy, she is funny); a person can accept or reject how others see him or her, or the person can talk about and create his or her own identity (“I am friendly”).
4. *A-identities, or affinity-identities*: these are identities that come about through loyalty to a set of common/shared activities (track club, book club) or traditions of a group/other people in terms of shared beliefs or behaviors (anti-war group, Nicki Minaj fan club).

**Directions:** Yummy was given or called each of the words/terms below by himself or others. What I want you to do in pairs or small groups is label each one as an N, I, D, and/or A identity. Be ready to talk about why you gave the labels you did. NOTE: A word/term can have more than one identity label!

Boy	_____	Yummy	_____
Shorty	_____	Monster	_____
Little Killer	_____	Scared	_____
Brother	_____	Family	_____
Friend	_____	Capone	_____
A bully	_____	Kid	_____

Are there any I forgot? If so, put them below and label them.

Figure 3. Identity labels (based on Gee, 2000–2001)

because others called him a boy, meaning a child (e.g., young, immature). Then the students worked in pairs and small groups to complete the rest of the identities before we shared our responses as a whole group.

Using Gee’s perspectives provided a scaffold to discuss identity and worked to expand our discussion. Just asking what Yummy was like or why events played out like they did might have yielded simple answers. For example, when deciding what identity labels could be attached to the term “brother,” the students came up with three related to his membership in the Black Disciples gang: Identity (this label was authorized by the gang), Discourse (Yummy was

called this by the gang, and he accepted this label), and Affinity (his loyalty to and the shared interests of the gang).

After talking about how Yummy was part of an affinity group because of his gang membership, Tim jumped in, saying sarcastically, “Yeah, they really look out for each other [by] shooting a young member.” This led to further discussion about Yummy’s and the gang’s identity(ies) and the uses of the term *brother*. After all, if Yummy was really their brother, a term they called him, how does the meaning change if they then murdered him? And, what do such terms mean in real life and in our relationships with others?

When I asked the group about the term “Little



Killer,” an identity the news media gave Yummy, they stated it could be an I-identity and a D-identity because he was given the label and, depending on one’s interpretation of events, seemed to embrace or reject it. Students discussed why Yummy might have adopted (or not) the identity of “Little Killer” and “brother” more so than “child” and “boy.” We also talked about how terms like “monster” got applied to Yummy. Who called him a monster? Was it deserved? Is that a label

he would have embraced? This led to our discussion of name calling, including from the media, and the impact it has on people and their behavior. It also led to a discussion of how name calling and labeling can impact what people do and say in real life.

Although brief, my initial exploration using Gee’s (2000–2001) perspectives

on identity with the graphic novel *Yummy* provides a useful framework that we can use for discussions with YA literature. First, the four perspectives ask us to think more deeply about identity and the extent to which identity(ies) are embraced or rejected. For example, right before we discussed the Identity sheet, the classroom teacher asked the students, “If you heard that an 11-year-old shot a girl, what would your first impression have been?” The first answer a student came up with was “monster.” By using the Identity sheet, we used a framework to examine the term four different ways. Second, looking at characters’ identity development and endorsing master narratives can provide a mirror for adolescents to examine their own belief systems and the reasons for them. For example, students discussed the fact that some readers might wrongly assume (a master narrative) that only Black people “live in the projects/hood/ghetto.”

By studying Yummy’s identities, we were ultimately able to address the questions that prompted Neri to write the book: Why did this happen? Who was Yummy? Most of the students felt that, ultimately, Yummy was a victim of circumstances beyond his control and that his “narrative” was almost completely due to the influence of the gang.

## Final Thoughts

With only two after-school sessions to discuss Yummy, we only scratched the surface of identity. However, our discussion using Gee’s framework has shown me that it can be a valuable addition to help scaffold and structure conversations about identity, labels, and action/inaction. These, in turn, can serve to disrupt the assumptions that students hold about race, culture, gender, etc. If we can push students to think about characters and identity more deeply, then perhaps those same ideas will translate into real life and make a difference in how adolescents perceive and treat others, leading to more positive identity development for everyone.

### Note

- <sup>1</sup> Other young adult novels in the book club include *Gym Candy*, *The Hunger Games*, *The Rock and the River*, and *Hurt Go Happy*. The year-long project was funded by an ALAN Foundation research grant.

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### Falling in (Book) Love

**W**hen I was twelve, I fell in love. No, not with a *person* . . . I was late to that particular party. Instead, I fell in love with a *book*. And an inappropriate book at that—a gaudy genre book, with romance and adventure and—gasp!—*science fiction!*

My mom, who'd been trying to get me to read Books For Nice Girls, was appalled. My dad was amused, since he was the science fiction fan in the household. He had never tried to get me to read anything, just left books out he thought I might find interesting. A much better strategy, as it turns out, than my mom's "You must read this because it is Good For You!" approach. (An even better approach: he began to *hide them* in drawers, so I had to look harder for them.)

The book in question was, in retrospect, not a great classic of literature. It wasn't even really a very *good* book. But none of that mattered, because at age 12, I didn't have much of a discerning eye for such things, and the only thing I cared about was that, suddenly, I *cared*. Passionately. So passionately I wept when I imagined the depth of the main character's pain. In

short, that book taught me how to project myself so fully into an imaginary situation that I felt very real emotion. And I was hooked.

I remember how book-mad I was about this story. I read it cover to cover at least a dozen times. I tried to find other books by the same author (and failed; she only wrote three in total and two were impossible to find). I wrote down all the character names and wrote little backstory information on them (some of it totally made up). I read the book out loud onto audiotape, dramatically. I dressed up my discarded Barbie dolls and acted out the Important Scenes. I wrote to the publisher and asked if I could please have a poster of the cover because I loooooooved the book so much.

Obsessed? Little bit, yeah. I even found myself making crossword puzzles out of the names when I was bored. *In church*.

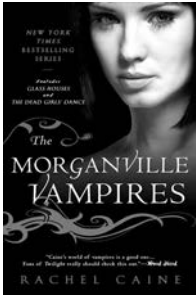
I look back on that as the moment where I realized that books were like friends I'd never met before. I credit that book, and the author, for opening up the world to me.

Fast forward many years. I was writing adult Science Fiction/Fan-

tasy (SF/F), and I loved it. I'd accidentally found myself in a brand new subgenre: urban fantasy. And I happened to be writing something offbeat from the usual tropes, so I stood out. Sales happened, to my shock. I mean, I love it when people buy my books, I just honestly never *expect* it.

And then my publisher cautiously broached the question of whether I might like to write for young adults. Now, mind you, when I was falling in love with books, there wasn't much for (a) teens and (b) girls in general . . . particularly not in SF/F, which I liked more than anything else. There were female characters, but they were generally the passive elements of the story, not the active ones. I'd learned to blow right past that, but still, on some level, it made me sad that there weren't too many female main characters being portrayed that appealed to teens in the paranormal/SF/F area.

I was *so* surprised to discover that there had been a complete sea change in teen literature during my absence—an amazing one. It wasn't just that there was more being written for the audience, it was *what* was being written. Strong



in.

About the time I was writing my first Morganville Vampires series, a book came out that got some buzz. It was *also* about vampires. You may have heard of it. Little thing called *Twilight*. So naturally, on the recommendation of a bookseller, I picked it up. It wasn't popular yet; it was selling well but hadn't become the tsunami of popularity it would become. So I was on the leading edge, I think.

And you know what? I liked it. I thought it was a pretty good story. In my mind, I saw Bella as the traditional kind of Gothic literature heroine. This was an unabashed romance story with a vampire twist, and yeah, she wasn't quite as assertive as others, but you know what? There's a spectrum of characters. Not every character needs to fall on the fringes. She was kind of . . . normal, thrown into an abnormal situation.

People often react with disbelief when I say I understand why teens, particularly early teens, fell so hard in love with the book, but I go back to the beginning of my story: you fall in love with a book. Not always the *most appropriate book*. And that doesn't really matter, because one book is not the defining element of your life. As you go on, read more, refine your viewpoints and your tastes, you may not like *Twilight* as well. You may love it.

stories. Great characters. Action, adventure, science fiction and fantasy and paranormal, oh my!

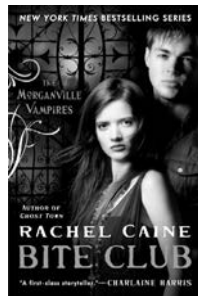
I was pretty excited to jump

You may look back on it with sentimental fondness. Or you may be appalled you ever read it.

And all of those are *okay*.

It's popular to hate *Twilight* now and, by extension, perhaps all teen-oriented vampire stories (a *big* mistake, and I am not talking just about my own works; there are some amazing books out there, believe me). In fact, some extend this disdain to *all YA literature*.

Which is just utterly absurd. The work being done on the YA shelves is, of course, a spectrum—some you'll love, some you'll hate, some you'll golf clap and forget. But right now, it's where genuinely fresh stories are shining through. Does it push the envelope? Yes. All genres have edges, and all edges get pushed. If they don't, the genre



becomes stale and people feel they're reading "the same old thing," until someone comes in and blows up the walls and suddenly there's a gold rush to explore the new territory. Witness the recent revival of the traditional epic fantasy series, which is surging ahead with glee (and shattering many of the traditional tropes).

So it's not too surprising that YA authors are also seeking new territory to claim for themselves. Sometimes, when you write an edgy epic fantasy, like George R. R. Martin and his *A Song of Ice and Fire* series, you get acclaim and awards. Sometimes, though, when you push the envelope in teen literature, you get outrage instead. Witness the recent spate of articles

in the mainstream press, such as Meghan Cox Gurdon's June 2011 *Wall Street Journal* article with the provocative tag line, "Contemporary fiction for teens is rife with explicit abuse, violence, and depravity. Why is this considered a good idea?"

The distressing thing is that it *isn't true*. Yes, there are books that show abuse, particularly child abuse and sexual abuse, because those are issues that teens face in their lives. And violence was certainly *everywhere* in my neighborhood and at my high school when I was growing up. Drug use was something she didn't mention, but it certainly was prevalent even when I was a teen. Ditto drinking. Ditto cursing. And you know what? Nancy Drew didn't exactly prepare me for the moment when someone I trusted went too far (in whatever way) on a date.

So I will defend to my last breath books that deal with the kinds of things teens *may* encounter. It's even better, of course, if they *never* encounter them, but there's something to be said for advance knowledge. We have afterschool specials about "The more you know," don't we? Why is it okay for grade school, but not for high school?

But the question that's being asked now, of course, is *how much is too much*?

And I think from an author's standpoint, it's very difficult to tell that, because all cultures are always in motion. What was daring 50 years ago may be quaint today. The pendulum swings both ways, too, because some things that wouldn't have raised an eyebrow in literature of the 1950s and '60s

wouldn't dare be published today in their original form, because of changing expectations and cultural acceptance. Hence, the outcry to re-



move acknowledged classics from libraries because they're no longer acceptable. So all we can do in this business is trust ourselves, and tell the stories we want to tell. I think most YA writers are aware that we're going to have to sit behind a table or stand in front of an audience and in some way justify our decisions. We're going to have to look into the eyes of an eleven-year-old who is heart-broken that we killed a beloved character, or a mom who is upset because our books used inappropriate language. We understand that there's something incumbent on us that may not be there in other markets. Those boundaries are hard to define, but they obviously exist when you read the criticism being leveled.

How will we adapt to that? I don't know. Certainly the YA literature being developed for the movies will be a test of the genre; with films like *The Hunger Games* showing both the creativity and challenge that authors are bringing to the shelves, there may be a wave of enthusiasm, or a firestorm of protest. Whatever comes of it, we will press on. It's what we do. It's *book love*, only this time from the other side of the page.

And I do love it, truly.

What keeps me going is the delight of doing the work, and the enthusiasm of my readers . . . and

that is *amazing*. I still write urban fantasy, and I adore it; my readers are fantastic people, and very supportive, but adult readers are typically more restrained in their approval. Remember how I talked about my obsession with that first book I loved? That's my YA audience. They write me long, long, *long* letters and emails. They draw pictures. They make videos. They show up in droves at events and signings, and scream and jump and hug and take photos with me. They make every minute of those early mornings and late nights getting the work done mean something special.

It humbles me to realize, as I do daily, that somewhere, someone is reading one of my novels—probably one of the YA novels—and it is blowing their head wide open and introducing them to the power of words. Then I recall that my first book-love wasn't very good, and maybe mine aren't much better; I leave that to other people to judge, frankly, because that way lies author madness. It still pleases me to think that I stand in that special and amazing place in some person's life out there . . . their *first book love*, whatever they may think of it later in life. Doesn't get better than that.

What amazes me is how many emails and letters I get telling me that my books did something for the readers—helped them deal with bullies, or make better grades, or cope with their bad situations. Then there are all of the letters I get saying that not only have I inspired them to read, but to write . . . and I get a *lot* of those. There is a whole generation of teens fired up by the great flowering of teen lit, and those teens are our next wave of

great authors. I think that's truly, tremendously exciting. Watch out, world. Ten years from now, you are going to be blown away, again.

I often get asked by teens who write to me what kind of advice I have for new writers, and I'll go ahead and share it here as well, because I think it's timeless advice (handed down to me from the very smart people who came before me):

- 1. Be a writer.** You can talk about writing all you want, but there is no substitute for sitting down and doing the work. Forget the excuses. Forget "finding the time," because there aren't spare moments lying around for you to gather up. You *make the time*, and you write. Or you don't. There are a thousand distractions, every day . . . and if there aren't, you can invent them. So writing is a choice you make, just like the gym, or spending time with your family.
- 2. Be committed.** Seriously, unless you are only with creative people, your family and friends *will not understand* why you can't just put off your writing. They'll interrupt you. They'll think you're not "really working." And from their perspective, they'll be right, so you have to get used to the fact that you're going to make hard choices if you want to really be a writer. You can't do everything, and that's going to make you feel bad sometimes. You have to accept it.
- 3. Be persistent.** Writing is an *art* and a *craft*. It is not something you just do out of nowhere, anymore than you are a natural-born ballet dancer or electrical engineer. Maybe you're a gifted

child, but lots of studies have shown that child prodigies rarely end up becoming stars . . . unless they also learn discipline and persistence. The first thing you write is just that—the first thing. To be a working writer, you must *keep writing*. And it will almost certainly take ridiculous amounts of time to succeed. I know a handful of writers who wrote their first book, sold it, and made a ton of money; they are the exceptions. Most work hard, work long, and eventually find success (or sometimes don't). If you're easily discouraged, you won't be doing this long. It's a marathon. No, it's a triathlon. And honestly? You never stop running it.

4. **Be wary.** This is a business that will break your heart and grind the pieces into dust if you let it. There are plenty of people who will take advantage of your wide-eyed innocence and enthusiasm; plenty more who may not rip you off, but will shrug and let you walk into a bad deal because it's your job to know the hazards. So educate yourself about the business of writing. Learn about publishing, about contracts, about agents, about every part of the process. And then talk to others. Then Google. Then start over, because you can never be prepared enough.
5. **Be self-critical.** This is very, very important. It's good to be confident; we're *all* confident, and have to be. But you must also look around you and measure yourself with clear eyes against everyone else. You must understand where your strengths and weaknesses are, and learn

how to maximize the first and minimize the second. You must learn to accept the hard knocks, the revisions, the critique, the 1-star reviews with grace, in a spirit of willingness to learn. Accept that you can always, always improve. If you don't do these things, your career will be tough and unpleasant, and quite probably short.

6. **Be grateful.** If you're a working writer, at any level, it's a gift. It may be the cheap on-sale Walmart closeout gift—mine certainly was for many years. There's really not much any author can do to hit the bestseller lists, except write the best thing possible at the time. Chance favors the persistent, and if Lady Luck winks at you, enjoy it and be grateful to those who helped you get there, and be generous to those who are still working at it. None of us control the process. It's much better to be happy where you are now than think you'll be happier if you could just be *over there*.

Yes, I still have mad book love. I read constantly. And I love going to work. As for my process specifically, I have office hours. I write during daily, standard hours (mine happen to be early mornings). I have work space, headphones, a playlist for each and every book, a coffeemaker, Internet access, and that's pretty much all I need. I can take everything I need with me in a single computer bag (well, except for the coffeemaker, but sacrifices must be made). I use Scrivener as my main word processor for my first and second drafts, then Word for copyedits, then my proofs gen-



erally arrive in Adobe Acrobat. I like Macs, and my little workhorse of a Macbook Air is a jewel.

I spend an average of 8 hours a day writing, then another 4 hours doing other things, like updating websites, blogging, answering email, designing promotional items. In all, it averages about 12 hours a day, with very few days off, but because I arrange my hours to have afternoons and evenings free, it's a little like having a weekend every day.

I think my life is pretty balanced. I travel a great deal and make lots of appearances just now; I spend about three to four months out of the year traveling, speaking at conventions, doing signings, giving lectures. When I can, I travel with my husband, who's an artist; because he doesn't fly, he forces me to slow my roll a little bit, take the train, drive, not be so frenzied to *get there*. We enjoy the journey, which is nice.

It's kind of an ideal life, for the moment. It won't stay this way; nothing does. In the next few years, my popularity will either grow or decline; either one will dictate what I do next. But I won't stop writing until someone makes me.

Because I have, now and always, crazy mad book love. And I hope you do, too.

*Rachel Caine is the author of more than 20 novels. She is the author of several series, including the Weather Warden series, the Outcast series, the Morganville Vampires series, and the Revivalist series (August 2011).*

*She was born at White Sands Missile Range, which people who know her say explains a lot. She has been an accountant, a professional musician, and an insurance investigator, and until recently carried on a full-time secret identity in the corporate world. She and her husband, fantasy artist R. Cat Conrad, live in Texas with their iguanas, Popeye and Darwin, a mali uromastix named O'Malley, and a leopard tortoise named Shelley. Learn more about the author at [www.rachelcaine.com](http://www.rachelcaine.com); [www.facebook.com/rachelcainefanpage](http://www.facebook.com/rachelcainefanpage); and [www.twitter.com/rachelcaine](http://www.twitter.com/rachelcaine).*

### **Call for Student Reviews for *Voices from the Middle***

*Voices from the Middle* is NCTE's journal for the Middle Level Section. The Student to Student feature runs in each of the year's four issues and contains five short book reviews *written by students* who have enjoyed a book and want to recommend it to others. This has been a popular and motivating element of *VM* since its inception.

Wendy Ranck-Buhr, principal at the San Diego Cooperative Charter School, serves as department editor for this feature. She invites teachers from across the nation and the world to submit their students' book reviews. We know from teacher feedback that these reviews motivate students to write with care, help readers pick out new books, and generally support our students as readers and writers.

Please send Student to Student submissions as Word files to [vmstudenttostudent@gmail.com](mailto:vmstudenttostudent@gmail.com). Keep in mind that reviews should be 200 words (including bibliographic information—title, author, publisher, year of publication, number of pages, non-discounted price, and 13-digit ISBN number), the student's grade and school must be identified, and the book reviewed should not have appeared in *VM* within the last three years. (For an easy reference, check the annual indexes appearing in every May issue, both print and online.) You will be required to secure a parent's signature on a consent-to-publish form and fax or email that form to Dr. Ranck-Buhr.

We hope you will encourage your students to write reviews for consideration. Publication has made a difference in so many student lives!

## How to Ruin Your Students' Readings of Visual Texts (and Still Sleep Well at Night)

**A**s a high school teacher, one of the highest compliments I ever received came from a small group of students in my film and literature class—a semester-long language arts elective for juniors and seniors. Toward the end of one of those semesters, as students were filing in before class was to begin, one of my students—I'll call her Megan—plopped her backpack down next to her desk and looked up at me. She stared at me rather disgustingly for a moment and then said, “You've ruined movies for me.”

I was a bit taken aback, but I followed up. “How?” I asked.

Megan said that she could no longer just enjoy movies. She was always considering the filmmakers' choices—their uses of particular camera angles and movements, costume colors, lines of dialogue, special effects, and set design. She would turn to her friends in the middle of a Friday night out at the movie theater and say things like, “Did you see that low angle?” To her enthusiastic observations, her friends inevitably responded by asking her to shut up. Before I

could respond to Megan's accusations that I'd ruined movies for her, a few other students who had arrived early to class that day agreed with her. “I know,” said Shahin, “My dad won't let me talk when we're watching a movie at home anymore. He said he didn't care whether or not that last transition was a matching shot.”

Of course, my reaction to all of this was to be both grateful for great students and proud of what we'd been able to accomplish together in only a couple of months. My students now approached films outside of class in the way we'd been studying them in class—by asking themselves what message the filmmakers were trying to convey and how that message was being conveyed. “Ruining” a film meant unlocking the power to analyze and make meaning from it in new and exciting ways. And even if my students' friends and family members weren't interested in having their own film experiences “ruined,” I knew that my students enjoyed wielding the power that comes with a critical eye and a careful use of analytical tools.

With that introduction, this column is about ways that we might “ruin” other interactions we have with young adult texts in our classrooms. not just films. In fact, the focus of this piece is on our interactions in our classrooms with visual texts in print. Recently, an increasing number of excellent comic books, graphic novels, multimodal novels (e.g., Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, 2007; Myers's *Monster*, 1999; Selznick's *The Invention of Hugo Cabret*, 2007), graphic novel adaptations of other literary works (e.g., Hamilton's *Ray Bradbury's Fahrenheit 451*, 2009; Hinds's *The Odyssey*, 2010), and picturebooks (e.g., Tan's *The Arrival*, 2006) intended for young adult audiences have been published.

I recognize that the mere presence of these beautiful, complex, and challenging texts is not an argument for reading them in our middle school, high school, and college classrooms. But pedagogically based arguments for including them have been eloquently made by, to name a few, Carter (2007b), Fisher & Frey (2007), Frey & Fisher



(2004), Monnin (2010), Schwarz (2006), and Yang (2008). I recommend checking out rationales like these if you are unsure about the necessity for including visual texts in a language arts classroom.

I also understand that we are sometimes up against administrators, parents, and even longtime language arts teachers who don't understand the value of "reading" *Persepolis* (Satrapi, 2003), because they never read anything visual as high school or middle school students. For those folks, we can make a simple and direct defense for including visual texts in the classroom. Below is one example written by Ashley (personal communication, January 31, 2012), currently a student teacher in the English education program where I teach. Ashley has included *Persepolis* (Satrapi, 2003) and *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (Alexie, 2007) in a ninth-grade classroom as part of her preservice practicum teaching experience. Here's what she had to say about teaching visual texts:

I think it is very important to teach visual texts (at least to some extent). One reason is that it is in the standards (I know this is a boring answer, but it's true). For Tennessee standards, "Media" has its own section. Another reason is that NCTE claims that literacy is made up of "cultural and communicative practices." As an English teacher who is responsible for teaching literacy, it would be negligent of me to deny the role visual images play in my students' "cultural and communicative practices" in which they participate every day and that they will be expected to use in their future careers. Another great reason is that students become engaged with visual images. Also, they are a text and can be used to teach certain elements (such as internal conflict) that can

be transferred to other texts (such as written texts).

I'll let that suffice as a rationale. If you are still not convinced, the rest of this article is probably not for you. My intended audience is those of us who know we should be including graphic novels and other visual and multimodal print texts in our classrooms but just haven't done it yet. Or haven't done it successfully. Or are still looking for better ways to help our students read, respond to, and write visual texts.

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### **My purpose is to suggest resources and ideas for teachers who are just getting going in the graphics game.**

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If that's you, I would like to share some resources and ideas that you could utilize in your classroom to get started in supporting young adult readers in interpreting visual texts and making connections to them. My purpose is to suggest resources and ideas for teachers who are just getting going in the graphics game. For more comprehensive treatments of reading, teaching, producing, and learning with visual texts, please check out the following: Carter (2007a), Frey and Fisher (2008), McCloud (1993; 2006), and Monnin (2010).

Because I want this column to provide some key ideas to teachers who are trying visual texts in their classrooms for the first time, I spoke with a few of our Eng-

lish education program's student teachers who had recently used visual texts in their student teaching or practicum placements. Out of those conversations, two ideas that seemed to resonate were (1) the importance of students explicitly learning how to read visual texts, and (2) the value of having students produce their own visual texts. Given limited space, I have chosen to focus in more detail on the first, while giving relatively little attention to the second. Once you get the ball rolling with explicitly teaching students to interpret visual texts in your classroom, the resources above, in particular McCloud (2006), are useful in helping students produce their own visual texts.

### **Getting Started**

As a way of introducing visual texts in my classroom and as a method for assessing my students' understanding about how visual texts work, I begin with a close reading of something visual. In using the term *close reading* in the context of analyzing a visual text, I draw on Teasley's (2011) recent application of this method of analyzing print texts to film studies in classrooms. I have found that close reading works best with something that includes a narrative but is relatively short (a page or two in length).

My favorite source for younger readers is Bang's (2000) *Picture This: How Pictures Work*, in which she considers the affective nature of illustrations and the ways that the shape, color, angle, and size of objects in a picture affect our emotions as we view them. In the first half of the book, Bang carefully manipulates a simple and abstract

image of a wolf encountering Little Red Riding Hood in the forest to display these differences. How do we feel as readers when the shape of the wolf's eye is changed? What about when its teeth are turned from black to white? How do different shapes of trees affect viewers' feelings about the message of the picture? In addition to Bang's (2000) book, many children's picturebooks work well for close readings with younger readers. I am particularly fond of Wiesner's (1991) *Tuesday*.

For older readers, my favorite source of material for these initial close readings is Madden's (2005) *99 Ways to Tell a Story*. Madden begins the book with an eight-panel comic, titled "Template," that tells a simple story: A man is typing on a laptop while sitting at a desk. He gets up and shuts the laptop, then proceeds down the hall. When he is nearly to the refrigerator, someone upstairs calls down, "What time is it?" He responds, "It's 1:15." The voice upstairs says, "Thanks!" as the man opens the refrigerator. He stands staring at the open refrigerator, then hunches down in front of it and thinks, "What the hell was I looking for anyway?!" The rest of the book features 98 different ways of visually telling this story. Variations include the story as a political cartoon, map, collection of advertisements, graph, and manga; at least one version features an unreliable narrator. Because there are many adaptations of the same basic visual narrative, Madden's book rewards multiple close readings with students and allows them to see how different author choices affect our interpretations of the message and purpose of the narrative.

## Conducting a Close Reading

In conducting a close reading of a visual text, I begin by displaying the text on a screen for all of us to view. Additionally, students can look at their own copies of the text—ideally copies that they can write in and highlight. Then we take a few minutes to individually inventory all of the visual elements we can identify. Students quickly list everything they see. This list might include: shape, color, words, layout, thought bubbles, speech bubbles, method author used to create the visuals (e.g., pen and ink, brush, computer software, paper cutout), number of panels, specific visual details (e.g., an old hat, a spiral staircase, a window, a long hallway, a superhero costume, a certain style of clothing), use of light, and the way each panel is framed (e.g., high angle, low angle, close up, long shot).

After each of us individually creates a list, we share our lists as a class, trying to come up with as complete an inventory of visual elements as possible. In my experience, students are adept at this exercise, noticing elements of the visual texts that I had always missed. There are also students who are familiar with the terminology associated with visual art and design and use it fluently, though I don't think fluency with the vocabulary

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**This first close reading is about noticing the many visual elements that make up a page, scene, or image.**

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of visual elements is necessary at this stage. This first close reading is about noticing the many visual elements that make up a page, scene, or image. In later close readings, it is vital for students to have a working set of terms for analyzing visual images; those terms can be taught over time as needed.

Many teachers who are adept at deconstructing authors' uses of literary tropes and grammatical flourishes might feel like they don't themselves have a useful set of terms for identifying visual elements. If you're in that spot, both of McCloud's (1993, 2006) books provide useful terminology. Christel (2001) also includes a short but helpful list of terms for evaluating still frames of films that work with print visual texts.

In addition to developing a vocabulary for analyzing the visual elements of graphic novels, comic books, and other visual texts, it is also important to know the grammar and techniques for telling visual stories. Comics and graphic novels typically use panels that are ordered sequentially, but for first-time readers (teachers or young people), it can be tricky to know what order to read them in. McCloud (2006) helpfully explains that comics are typically read first from left to right and then from top to bottom (in some cultures, however, texts are read first from right to left). This same order holds true for captions and word balloons within individual panels. Also, captions, thought bubbles, and speech bubbles each look and function differently, but this might not be clear to readers who aren't familiar with their forms and functions. Again, McCloud (2006) is helpful for

understanding how these elements work in the creation and interpretation of graphic novels and comics.

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**If readers learn to tune into the interactions between text and images . . . , their ability to create meaning is greatly increased.**

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After listing all of the elements in the text we're close reading, our discussion moves toward responding to two key questions:

1. What is the author and/or artist trying to say with this text?
2. How is the author and/or artist saying it?

The movement here is from an inventory of visual elements to a critical evaluation of those elements—and a consideration of the overall message of the visual text (or excerpt) as it is constructed by individual elements. For example, one of Madden's (2005) versions, titled "Thirty Panels" (pp. 62–63), includes less detailed art work framed mostly from a distance (although there are some close ups), but it adds a great deal of narrative information not included in the original eight-panel "Template." Students could discuss the use of framing: Why the close attention to some moments and not to others? What do the sound effects add to our understanding of the story? How do we view the characters differently now that we know more about them (we see, for example,

who is upstairs asking for the time)? Why is the artwork less detailed? What is the overall purpose of this version? How is that purpose accomplished differently than in "Template"?

The purpose of these close reading exercises is to draw attention to the elements of visual narratives and to their rhetorical effects. As students become adept at these close analyses, they are better able to make connections to the texts and consider the author's and/or artist's intentionality and craft.

### **A Close Reading of Word(s) and Image(s)**

Once students can expertly read images closely in this way, I think it's important to consider the particular ways images and words interact. McCloud (2006) includes a list of seven ways that words and pictures combine:

1. **Word-Specific:** Words providing all you need to know, while the pictures illustrate aspects of the scene being described.
2. **Picture-Specific:** Pictures providing all you need to know, while the words accentuate aspects of the scene being shown.
3. **Duo-Specific:** Words and pictures both sending roughly the same message.
4. **Intersecting:** Words and pictures working together in some respects while also contributing information independently.
5. **Interdependent:** Words and pictures combining to convey an idea that neither would convey alone.
6. **Parallel:** Words and pictures following seemingly different paths without intersecting. (p. 130)

McCloud (2006) provides examples and diagrams to better understand each of these categories (see pp. 130–141). While I can't fully explain each of them here, the point is that there are several possible relationships between words and pictures, and these relationships significantly affect the meaning being made within panels and across the complete text. If readers learn to tune into the interactions between text and images and not only focus on isolated visual elements, their ability to create meaning is greatly increased.

### **Making Comics**

Media literacy educators (e.g., Buckingham, 2003; Hobbs, 2011) have pointed out the importance of including media production as part of any pedagogical effort to critically analyze media. Buckingham (2003) argues, "Creative production can be a means of generating new and more profound critical insights" (p. 122). In my experience, as students create their own comics, they come to better understand the methods that authors use in producing visual texts and are, therefore, more capable at interpretation and analysis.

One concern for teachers who introduce comic creation in their classrooms is the reaction of students who don't feel competent in drawing visuals. One of our English education program's student teachers, Rachel (personal communication, January 31, 2012), said she overcame this concern by sharing her stick figure drawings with students. She also said that found pictures and photos (e.g., from magazines or printed from websites) can ease the fears of

students who aren't comfortable drawing. There are also several free or inexpensive software applications that can be used to create comics. Beach, Appleman, Hynds, and Wilhelm (2011) list the following: Comic Life, ToonDoo, MakeBeliefsComix, Pixton, and ReadWrite-Think Comic Creator (all can easily be found online).

### Some Can't-Miss Visual Texts

I have chosen to highlight specific introductory activities that students can do to help them learn how to understand, analyze, and connect with visual texts in the classroom. This has meant focusing the discussion on a narrow selection of texts that could be utilized in these activities. However, I want to make sure that teachers know where to look for the very best in visual texts for young adults. There are many high-quality options, but here are 10 that were mentioned by educators who have expertise with YA visual literature (listed in alphabetical order by author).

- Bragg, G., & O'Malley, K. (2011). *How they croaked: The awful ends of the awfully famous*. New York, NY: Walker.
- Broskol, V. (2011). *Anya's ghost*. New York, NY: First Second.
- Griffin, A., & Brown, L. (2010). *Picture the dead*. Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks.
- Hamilton, T. (2009). *Ray Bradbury's Fahrenheit 451: The authorized adaptation*. New York, NY: Hill and Wang.
- Hinds, G. (2010). *The odyssey*. Cambridge, MA: Candlewick.
- Satrapi, M. (2003). *Persepolis: The story of a childhood*. New York, NY: Pantheon.

Smith, J. (2004–2010). Bone series.

Columbus, OH: Cartoon Books.

Spiegelman, A. (2006). *The complete Maus: A survivor's tale* [includes both *Maus I: My father bleeds history* and *Maus II: And here my troubles began*]. New York, NY: Pantheon.

Tan, S. (2006). *The arrival*. New York, NY: Arthur A. Levine.

Yang, G. L. (2006). *American born Chinese*. New York, NY: First Second.

I haven't read all of these, but they were recommended by people I trust. Here's to "ruining" graphic novels and other visual texts for our students!

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## Found pictures and photos . . . can ease the fears of students who aren't comfortable drawing.

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studies, and creative writing in Utah. His research is focused on investigating the ways that young people live and learn across virtual and physical landscapes and among multiple media.

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## In the Midst of Heroines:

An Interview with Canadian Author Marthe Jocelyn

**M**arthe Jocelyn is the winner of the Vicky Metcalf Award given annually to a Canadian author for a body of work that is inspirational to Canadian youth; Jocelyn won this prestigious prize sponsored by the Writers' Trust of Canada in 2009. I was unaware of her immense influence in children's literature until I reviewed her recent nonfiction work for the journal *VOYA* (*Voices of Youth Advocates*) this year. *Scribbling Women: True Tales from Astonishing Lives* (2011) not only introduced me to currently obscure (for the most part), but important in their time, female writers, but also acquainted me with a unique voice in young adult literature. Jocelyn offers a catalogue of children's books and also has a growing list of fiction and nonfiction for teens. After contacting her and expressing my interest in an interview, we began a productive email chat. I trust that American readers will discover the charm and complexity of subject matter Jocelyn chose for her YA (young adult) books.

**JAH:** You have been writing for a long time and won a major award in Canada for your body of work. Tell our readers about that award and its importance in Canadian children's books.

**MJ:** The Vicky Metcalf Award is an annual prize "given to the author of a body of work in children's literature that, in the opinion of the judges, dem-



onstrates the highest literary standards." In other words, a Big Fat Honour, not to mention a lovely purse of \$20,000, bestowed as part of the Writer's Trust Awards.

**JAH:** I am pretty impressed with that. You originally wrote for children, right? Did the transition to young adult literature grow out of that or did it just kind of happen?

**MJ:** I don't think of myself as having made a transition, because I still write for children as well as for teenagers. Some of my characters got older along with my daughters, but my daughters are now in their twenties and I am (happily) stuck in adolescence. I also continue to publish board books, picturebooks, and middle grade novels.

**JAH:** Readers might want to know a little about how you write. Is the process different for nonfiction than for fiction?

**MJ:** Jumping into a new work of fiction is often an exuberant time—from a few days to a few weeks. I like to crash-write a first draft and then start over. For me, it is much easier to revise than to write, so if the initial writing can happen without too much pondering, then I have a heap of material to pick away at. With nonfiction, the first glorious weeks are spent greedily reading, with a little note-taking

on the side. Once I know the general parameters of the book I imagine I'll write, then the agony begins.

**JAH:** Are you a full-time writer?

**MJ:** Yes, I'm a full-time writer, which I would not recommend to anyone hoping to make a living. I try to teach or speak to make ends meet, but mostly I write or read or think or make pictures all day long. Nice, eh?

**JAH:** I agree. That does sound like a pleasant way to live. What prompted you to become a writer?

**MJ:** When my older daughter was nine, I had an idea about a ten-year-old girl who becomes invisible in New York City, and I just started to write it down, a litany of adventures in our downtown neighborhood.

I took a writing class, then finished the book and began to write others. I had my own little business, designing and making toys and children's clothing, but after four or five books, the writing took over.

**JAH:** As mentioned earlier, I discovered your work when I reviewed *Scribbling Women* for *VOYA*, which is primarily aimed at librarians and educators. I was fascinated by the women you selected and the painstaking research you did for the book. Would you discuss how you came up with the idea for the book, how you selected the women, how you researched them, and finally, why that title?

**MJ:** As I mention in the introduction to *Scribbling Women*, the seed was planted while I did research for my previous nonfiction book, called *A Home for Foundlings*. While writing that, I came across the letters of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, wife to the British ambassador in Turkey in 1717. One particular letter, written to a friend in England, changed the course of medical history with its clear description of the method used by the Turks to inoculate their children against smallpox. Lady Mary's brother had died of this illness; she herself had survived, but was severely scarred. The epidemic in England was killing one person in six, including hundreds of children. Impressed with the extraor-

dinary success of the Turkish method, Lady Mary petitioned the queen until inoculation was tried and eventually adopted.

I wondered, as I read that letter, what other observations were casually, or intentionally, noted through the centuries by writers who were women, and therefore more likely to be ignored. Of course I discovered dozens and dozens, and left undiscovered thousands more. I could write volume after volume and never be done. So choosing only eleven subjects was a challenge. The publishing schedule helped with that, forcing a cut-off date. The final list includes the women (and one child) who lingered in my brain and vibrated with kid-appeal, as well as showcasing writing that would be meaningful to a young reader. Lady Mary, for instance, was eventually cut, despite her thousands of pages of letters, because the style and context required too much extra discussion. The interpretation of the texts is the behind-the-scenes aspect of these stories—trying to keep the narrative flowing while encapsulating the history of whale-hunting, for instance, or synopsisizing the war in Vietnam in two paragraphs.

The title is a direct and ironic reference to the sneering remark with which the author Nathaniel Hawthorne dismissed the women writers amongst his peers: "a damned mob of scribbling women" (quoted in Mott, 1947, p. 122). In a letter to his publisher in 1855, he went on to say that his own success was imperiled "while the public taste is occupied with their trash." Too bad he doesn't know how eighth graders across the country still suffer through *The Scarlet Letter*.

**JAH:** I like the concept of using women and girls who are not necessarily well known now, although some were at the time they wrote. In fact, the only writer I knew was Nellie Bly!

**MJ:** It's my challenge to librarians to see how many of the women they've heard of. You'll be glad to know that you are not alone in being introduced to most of these writers for the first time.

When I talk to students, I like to begin with a thousand-year-old quote from Sei Shonagon, a lady-in-waiting in the Imperial court of Japan: "I really can't understand people who get angry when

they hear gossip about others. How can you not discuss other people? Apart from your own concerns, what can be more beguiling to talk about and criticize than other people?" (p. 3).

Realizing that the legacy of gossip is essential to being human—particularly a reading and writing human – is a great place to start with any biography, which is rarely an unbiased account—it is what or who you choose to put in, as well as what or who you leave out.

**JAH:** I think my favorite woman in the book was Ada Blackjack; her adventures living in such isolation with only men near the Arctic Circle, and her harrowing tale of survival fascinated me. Do you have a favorite or not? If so, who would that be?

**MJ:** People ask me often which of the women is my favorite, but I really truly can't decide. I agree that Ada's story is a touching one (especially the fact that even though she was barely literate, under *dire* circumstances she felt compelled to *write it down*), but each of the 11 has some astounding quality that kept her in the final lineup.

**JAH:** The research for the book is impeccable, like your other nonfiction work, *A Home for Foundlings* (2005). I am glad you suggested I read it before moving to your historical fiction text, *Folly* (2010). I am amazed at the scholarship that went into getting these two works of nonfiction completed. Describe your process of gathering factual information for each of these books, *Scribbling Women* and *A Home for Foundlings*, as they are in such different publication formats.

**MJ:** I am a novice at writing nonfiction and tend to be disorganized, so my approach—involving teetering piles of unsorted books, a blizzard of paper, and illegible sticky notes—would likely horrify a more accomplished writer or a librarian. However, the random reading is what leads me inch-by-inch from one text to another, from website to bibliography to index to thrift store finds to library stacks.

With *A Home for Foundlings*, I had access to the image collection of the Foundling Museum in London, so almost all the photographs in the book were reprinted *gratis*. That was a *huge* gift. I

also spent several days in the London Metropolitan Archives (during a ghastly heat wave), barely nibbling at the 800 linear feet of primary source material that sits in their storage. There is simply no more evocative experience than holding a scrap of flannel that symbolizes the handing over of a baby by a mother to an institution.

With *Scribbling Women*, I used the Internet a little more to track down where the primary sources might be. I spent time at the Nantucket Historical Society while studying Mary Hayden Russell (whaler's wife), but had to rely on newfound connections in Australia, England, and Vietnam to uncover documents and personal narratives about some of the other subjects. I read Ada's diary, on file at the Dartmouth library, and the letters of Margaret Catchpole (transported horse-thief), in facsimile rather than in person. Because of the difficulty of amassing abundant images, it was clear from the beginning that this book would be presented as stories, rather than as typical picture-based nonfiction. We did include at least one image per woman, and although we have a portrait of Sei Shonagon, who lived a thousand years ago, poor Mary Hayden Russell is represented by a whaling boat.

**JAH:** I can see *Scribbling Women* used in a biographical/autobiographical unit in teaching, and *A Home for Foundlings* fits into any study of culture. How do you envision teachers and librarians using these texts?

**MJ:** Although it was not my original intention to create a source for lessons, I've been delighted to hear from educators about the many ways the books are useful. *A Home for Foundlings* makes an interesting companion reader to any fictional work involving orphans or foundlings (not just my own!), and can also be part of a unit on family history.

*Scribbling Women*, apart from the obvious biographical and historical connections, easily inspires a whole series of creative writing exercises, from the poetry and lists of Sei Shonagon—creating a 10th-century version of texting—to the monosyllabic diary entries of Ada Blackjack, the memoirs of Hatty Jacobs and Doris Garimara, and the witty anthropological observations of Mary Kingsley. . . .



I'm working on a Teacher's Guide, so please check back for a wealth of classroom opportunities!

**JAH:** I have to confess I fell in love with feisty Mable Riley. Her story, subtitled *A Reliable Record of Humdrum, Peril, and Romance*, was first published in 2004. Is this your initial foray into historical fiction with a young girl as the protagonist?

**MJ:** *Mable* was my second historical novel. My first was *Earthly Astonishments*, which features a girl who is 28½ inches tall and joins an exhibition of human oddities in Coney Island in 1884. By the time I got to Mable, four years later, I was a little more confident and was also jumping in from a different rock, the one that has tangible inspiration underfoot—in this case, family history in the form of my grandmother's diaries.

**JAH:** The "Acknowledgments" tell us that this story, set in small town Ontario, Canada, in 1901, was inspired by two of your grandmother's diaries that you found in her attic. I understand they formed the concept for this book about Mable. Where was the genesis for the character and the plot outline?

**MJ:** My grandmother in real life was more like my heroine's prissy sister, Viola, than like Mable herself. She was pious and formal and certainly towed the line of duty. In the back of one of her diaries, however, she had written some (dreadful) love poems, with references to trembling lips and blushing velvet cheeks. It was the surprise of bumping into a new angle of my stuffy and obedient Gram that made me think of a young girl trying to meet expectations but barely containing her curiosity and sauciness in the course of any day.

The plot was entirely fabricated (my grandmother's diaries were deadly dull!) and came from simply imagining a very small pond—the village of Sellerton—and realizing that even a not-very-big rock, in the shape of an opinionated widow, could cause tidal-sized ripples in 1901.

**JAH:** I like the intertwining of four varied forms of written expression here: Mable's journal where she records her everyday life; her creation of "A Romantic Novel" featuring the unfolding of Hel-

ena's melodramatic tale; Mr. Goodhand's reading of the local paper's Personal and Social Notes"; and, finally, the humorous rhymes Mable used for spelling exercises or to note specific events. Journal writing is something we like to encourage, so having the model for students is an inspiration. Did these all work into your plan at once, or did you add any later?

**MJ:** I knew from the start that the book would be written as a diary, and that there would be a (for the time and place) risqué secret writing project, the Romantic Novel. The rhymes appeared soon after, when looking through the reading primers used at the time as part of my research. The offerings were so uninspiring that I knew Mable would object and be forced to create her own. More research led me to the newspaper archives of the Ontario town where I live, and to the actual Personal and Social Notes published daily. They were so good that I have used many of them verbatim.

**JAH:** Helena's adventures that Mable relates for her friends back home show your connection to *A Home for Foundlings*. The "Introduction" of that text relates the inspiration for your choice of the Thomas Coram home, since your grandfather lived there. This book is an amazing work of nonfiction as I think your personal interest really resonates for the reader. Can you talk a little bit about the process of writing this one as compared to *Scribbling Women*?

**MJ:** Funnily enough, because my grandfather died when I was two, he was as unknown a subject for me as were the scribbling women. And although I use him as an example from time to time, and have a couple of pages at the end that focus on his life after the foundling hospital, the book is not about him.

Along with most other literary humans, I am fascinated with the idea of orphans, or better yet, foundlings, because they represent *secrets* and parcels of *unknown*, which are the key to any story. And here was a foundling in my very own history! Living with hundreds of other foundlings! Although there are several biographies of Thomas Coram, the founder, there is nearly no recent writing about the

hospital itself, so my research was based on sources starting back in the 1700s. Much of what I looked at, housed in the London Metropolitan Archives, consisted of letters or lists or account books, or what is called “token”—the small objects (left by mothers with the babies) that would optimistically serve as identity tags, should the parent ever be able to reclaim her child. I hoped that by displaying some of the actual materials as images in the book, along with my personal interpretation and emotional links, the reader might have a sense of the impact that those scraps of paper had for me.

**JAH:** *The Home for Foundlings* leads us to *Folly*, your most recent historical fiction work. Mable taught me what folly means—foolish and thoughtless—so I was ready for that (p. 210). However, the tour de force of using three narrators, some separated in time, was unique. Mary, James, and Eliza all advance the plot, and I confess the mystery stymied me for a couple of chapters. The information from the *Foundlings* book is interspersed throughout and is certainly integral to the story. Where did these voices originate? The time switches add to the mystery of the plot line, and I wonder how you conceived this angle.

**MJ:** While I was researching for *A Home for Foundlings*, I realized that there was a novel—or two—in the stories I was learning about. Even before that, in fact, when my father gave me a thread of information as to where his father had been raised (“the Thomas Coram orphanage” is what he remembered), I followed it to discover the present-day Coram Family organization, who offered me a transcript of the original report about my great-grandmother’s application to leave her son in their care. All a-tremble, I read her story, torn between the thrill of being the first person in my family to know our own beginnings and the über-thrill of a writer cutting the ribbon on a gift-wrapped idea.

There needed to be at least two voices, a mother and a child. The other voices, and the time shift, came in to illuminate the shame so entwined with having or being an abandoned child in the late 1800s, and to add a small sheen of mystery. As a few reviewers helpfully noted, the mystery is not particularly mysterious, but I wanted to highlight

that a single misunderstanding can affect an entire life.

**JAH:** You suggested a look at your first foray into historical fiction, *Earthly Astonishments* (2003), might be revealing. You continue to explore your interest in orphans here with Josephine, although I doubt if you have any personal connection to dwarfism. Her parents sell her into white slavery because I think she scares them. After she escapes the MacLaren Academy for Girls, Little Jo-Jo is turned into an amazing creation; her world of slimy freak show entertainment reminds me of today’s fascination with reality TV and its focus on the bizarre. How did you ever discover this phenomenon of Coney Island hoopla set in the 1880s? R. J. Walters and his Museum of Earthly Astonishments did not exist, but you must have based your novel on similar establishments.

**MJ:** Living in New York, I went often to Coney Island, both for the beach and for the grimy history of the boardwalk and the carny culture. Curiosity led me to discover its amazing, glamorous, and notorious ups and downs as a destination and a home to hundreds of outsiders and misfits. There were dozens of “dime” museums and astonishing spectacles to bedazzle the tourists, so the Walters museum would have fit right in.

**JAH:** Only 28 inches tall and 12 years old, Josephine’s cleverness and spirit get her out of some pretty unsavory situations. How did you conceive her?

**MJ:** Josephine was originally conceived as a curmudgeonly elderly fairy, captured and imprisoned by a Victorian impresario. After several chapters, my writing group suggested that I eliminate my human sidekick and make the fairy a real girl. I already had several scenes in mind where her tiny size was essential, so I began to research just how small a human could be. I found several historical role models for people this size—and Josephine was born.

**JAH:** Are Miss MacLaren and her Academy based on your research into similar schools of the era?

**MJ:** Honestly, I don't think I researched the Academy at all, relying on a lifetime of reading novels about harsh Victorian schools. It was meant to be slightly cartoonish in extremity, and who better to inform on the subject than Dickens, Fielding, and Brontë?

**JAH:** You have another later historical fiction novel with *How It Happened in Peach Hill* (2007) that examines a different form of chicanery—fraudulent spiritualism. Annie and her mother Madame Caterina are 1924 grifters who travel from small town to small town while they bilk a vulnerable public with fake fortune-telling and séances. Annie is so vulnerable that my heart went out to her as I read. She is caught up in her mother's schemes and forced to play along, but she is sadly aware of the con games they play. These scams are part of today's world, too, but your research into the particular practices of that era is fascinating. What inspired your interest?

**MJ:** I wrote a short story by the same name in a collection called *Secrets* (2005) that I edited for Tundra Books. I was playing with the idea of having a child be the sidekick for a criminal parent. The idea came from a lovely, creepy story by E. L. Doctorow about a family of murderers. Obviously death could not be the crime in a children's book, but psychic chicanery holds a wealth of possibility.

**JAH:** Annie yearns to be free from the con and works hard to escape. Where did her character's fiery, feisty spirit come from?

**MJ:** Annie's unusual upbringing and her lifelong familiarity with playing tricks gives her the quick thinking needed to be in control—or at least to pretend that she is. Her spirit came from her mother, don't you think? Personality traits need to be inherited by characters just as they are in real life.

**JAH:** I also love those old wives' tales that appear as titles for each chapter and foretell what will happen. Where did you find those ironic captions? One of my favorites starts Chapter 18: "When a strange dog begins to trail you, good luck will follow" (p. 138), and another is before Chapter 11: "In ancient Egypt, when a cat in a private house died a natural

death, all the residents shaved their eyebrows" (p. 80). Always good information to have, I would think.

**MJ:** Some of the proverbs I used for chapter headings are common ones, but I dug and delved in old books (and online, of course) for sayings that would faintly relate to the content of each section. I did not make anything up, though I was tempted.

**JAH:** A moving young adult fiction book is the last one I read for this interview, *Would You* (2008). The title refers to the game Natalie and her high school pals play as they spend what should be an idyllic summer. They ask each other loaded questions where either answer has the potential for disaster. Natalie's sister Claire is heading off for college in the fall and Nat is jealous. That ends abruptly when Claire is hit by a car after she stumbles away from a break-up with her boyfriend. In much of the story, Claire is in a coma, and Natalie and her mom and dad deal with the grief of watching a brain-dead daughter slip away. Natalie's story is painful, yet poignant to read. I found it oddly peaceful and reassuring. Where did this idea originate?

**MJ:** This is the most personal of all my books. My sister was hit by a car and seriously brain-injured when she was 27 and I was 21. I made the characters closer in age and much younger, but my own experience was the seed for this story.

**JAH:** The emphasis on donating one's organs is a powerful reminder for all of us, especially teens as they are usually young and healthy. What motivated you to write this one?

**MJ:** It is interesting that you refer to an "emphasis" on organ donation, since I think there are only two or three pages in which the characters are concerned with that aspect of the tragedy. It was actually a member of my writing group who said, Hey, wouldn't donation become part of the issue? And I realized that the teens might have a particular take on that process that the adults would not.

Although the initial idea for the book came from events in my own youth, by the time I was

ready to write on the subject, I was living with two teenage daughters who have irreverent views of the world. I was curious to show real horror and sorrow absorbed by kids whose usual mode of expression was black humor.

One of my daughters has since lost a dear friend in an eerie duplication of the accident in the book. I was moved to see the comradeship amongst the mourners, and still the uncrushable ability to find something to laugh about even while grieving.

**JAH:** Finally, what are you doing now? Do you plan more young adult nonfiction, more historical fiction, more fiction?

**MJ:** Right now I'm working on *four* books simultaneously, which is stretching it a bit thin, even for me who likes to keep my brain jumping around. I'm making a picturebook with my daughter (our second collaboration), as well as a sort of craft book, a middle-grade adventure fantasy co-written with a friend, and a YA novel that unfolds through linked short stories. Whew.

**JAH:** The women and girls you feature are strong and assertive, no matter where or when they existed. Did you intend for this to happen? What are your inspirations for featuring girls and women in your writing?

**MJ:** I don't really have a clever answer for this one. My characters come along one-by-one and each one needs conflict to make a successful story, which often means disagreement with the world and an effort to fix things. I myself am somewhat cowardly, so I suppose I write girls who embody an element of who I imagine being. A sign of my cowardice is that I haven't yet tackled a boy as a main character, so hopefully I'll conquer that fear someday soon. In the meantime, just look around. We are in the midst of heroines every day.

\* \* \*

The last sentence of our interview tells me what drew me to the works of Marthe Jocelyn. Her characterizations of girls like Mable, her young teen females like Annie and Natalie, and her women like Mary and Ada Blackjack give us strong female voices to read about and appreciate. Listen to Mable's conversation with the suffragette Mrs. Rattle when her heroine has to leave town or face prosecution:

"We're friends now," I ventured.

"Yes," she said. "We're friends."

"I supposed one good thing is that we are writers," I said. "We could write letters to each other, could we not?"

"Of course!" she cried. "Writers never have to say goodbye. We simply write another letter." (p. 243)

With four books in the pipeline at once, we should not have to say goodbye to Marthe Jocelyn anytime soon, and I am grateful.

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## Stories from the Field

### Fictional Characters and Living People Experience a Political Victory

**Sharon Kane**

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In my young adult literature course, we explore numerous ways authors play with and work with the overarching theme of identity. One assignment involves novels featuring characters who are gay; concurrently, we read articles and discuss GLBTQ issues. Often students tell me it's their first experience encountering protagonists talking about sexual orientation, and usually good things result. Occasionally, a student asks if he or she can opt out of the assignment or read an alternative selection. I encourage students who express discomfort or disagreement to read a few of the choices just to get to know the characters and to listen to their stories. I point out that these teens we're meeting through our reading didn't exist, didn't live, before authors created them. For example, John Green and David Levithan introduce us to two boys who share the name Will Grayson; Steve Kluger invites us to listen to three narrators who complete the school essay assignment, "*My Most Excellent Year*"; James Howe gives us *The Misfits* who band together politically and combat some bullies, and then he helps one of those misfits to provide a deeper self-portrait in *Totally Joe*.

At 11:49 on Friday, June 24, 2011, I received an email containing a link to breaking news. Cari wrote:

Dear Professor Kane,

In the midst of the legalization of gay marriage and my reading of my book with a gay character, I couldn't help but think you somehow planned this week's book selection to coincide with this momentous occasion! I couldn't help but send this [link to a news article] to you along with some of my newfound excitement and hope for the gay characters in our books. . . .

While I cannot accept any personal credit regarding New York's legislation, I felt affirmed. Isn't this why we teach literature, so that characters become real for readers, so that we empathize with the books' people, feeling their suffering, sharing their burdens, rejoicing when a society makes a change that rectifies an injustice in their lives? My hope is that during upcoming courses, my students and I, along with the characters, will be able to hear future wedding bells as writers give us new books with GLBTQ themes!

### A Reading Revolution

**Bill Broz**

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Colleague and friend of English teacher, Kate Riveira

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Kate's teaching assignment is a study in contrasts. The setting, serene—the redwoods near La Honda, California. Her students, troubled—mandated by the courts to a lock-down "boys camp." Kate's veteran teaching practice, dynamic and inventive—able to catch the boys' interest; conversely, it seems, unable to reach a fundamental goal—students' sustained focus to read whole books independently. The revolution arrives

in two boxes, gifts from two young adult authors and their publishers. From Ben Saenz: five copies each of *Sammy and Juliana in Hollywood*, *Last Night I Sang to the Monster*, *He Forgot to Say Good-Bye*. From Matt de la Peña: copies of *Ball Don't Lie*, *Mexican White Boy*, *We Were Here*. Books about Zack and Sticky—boys in “the system.” Or Miguel in *We Were Here*—from San José, adjudicated perhaps in the same courtroom where Kate’s students were adjudicated, sent to a facility like theirs—Miguel “on the run” down the coast passing just a few miles from their facility.

What Kate sees:

“I watch boys who have never read a book being absorbed in the stories. And then the cascade effect. One boy finishes a book and then recommends it to another. The books start being passed around. Boys are asking me daily if I can recommend a book for them. They finish Matt’s books, which arrive first, and move on to Ben’s. The discussions ensue; one day, we talk about survivor guilt. I explain the concept, then the boys start teaching me. Many have seen friends and/or family members shot, and they wonder why they made it. The ties to the books seem very strong.”

What Kate hears:

Boys make statements like, “I enjoyed the book because it is a great struggle. I can relate to the character’s emotions and thinking.” “When I am reading a page, I just can’t wait to move on to the others.” The books “describe how the juvenile justice system works.” “I feel like I am in the shoes of the main character.” “It is like being one with the book.”

Can’t stop the revolution:

Kate has to be out for a few days. One boy asks the substitute teacher if he can take the book back to his dorm to read. Incorrectly, the sub says, “No.” Upon Kate’s return, she hears about this incident and on a hunch asks the boy if he took the book anyway, despite the potential stiff consequences. He tells her, “Yes.” Kate tells him that it is a great reading moment. He hasn’t stopped reading since.

Students in such facilities deserve to be offered good books that they can and will read, books that reflect their lives, books that offer a glimpse of a better future.

## Late Library Book

### Brian Schmitt

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It happened again. A teacher shared information about a course he was taking on young adult literature and requested some additional books for the classroom library. I asked him for some recommendations, and he said he enjoyed *The Hunger Games* (2008) by Suzanne Collins. This occurred in August; I ordered the books for his library and filed the conversation in the back of my mind.

In October, a student told me she was excited about the movie based on *The Hunger Games*. She encouraged me to read the novel, so I picked up a copy from the school library. I couldn’t put the book down and learned of the trilogy. I quickly spoke with our library aide and asked for the second book of the trilogy, *Catching Fire* (2009). She called me and stated that the book was not available and a week overdue. I asked the name of the student who had the book.

You can imagine the look on the student’s face when she walked in my office. I asked her if she had *Catching Fire* and she responded, “Yes.” When asked if she knew her book was overdue, she questioned, “Did you call me to the principal’s office because you want to read my library book?” We laughed, I smiled and said, “Go back to the library, resign the book out, and finish it because I want to read it!”

The library aide called laughing and couldn’t believe I called a student to the office for having a late library book. The librarian brought in personal copies of the second and third books in the trilogy. I shared the story repeatedly and everyone agreed, don’t tell the principal the name of a good book or you might get called to his office to talk about it.

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