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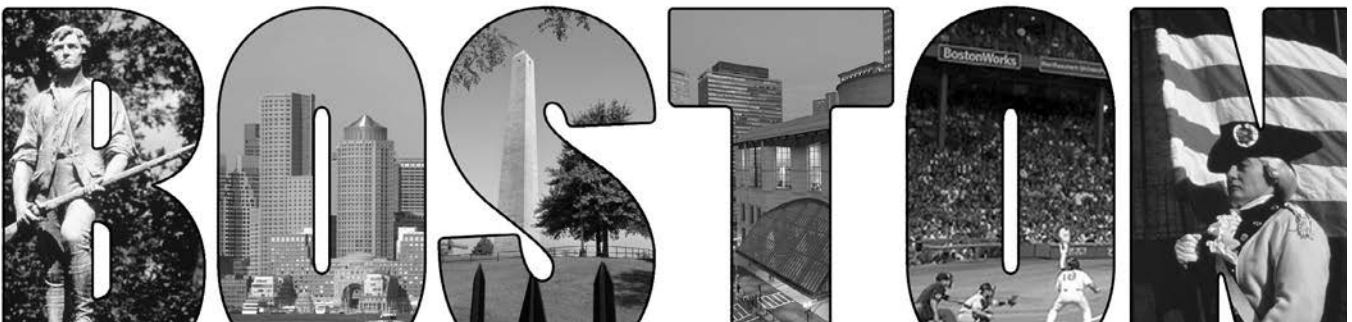


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—Franki Sibberson, NCTE member and Annual Convention attendee for 20+ years



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<p><b><i>Amelia Anne Is Dead and Gone</i></b> by Kat Rosenfield Dutton Juvenile, 2012, 304 pp., \$17.99</p> <p>Two similar lives and paths intersect briefly but tellingly in this suspense thriller. Small-town girl Becca can't wait to leave for college, but her attachment to her boyfriend James makes it unexpectedly hard for her to go. As his behavior becomes increasingly erratic, Becca procrastinates about her departure. Budding thespian Amelia Anne has been brutally murdered as the book opens, and the subsequent passages describe a woman preparing for a bright future after a romantic beach vacation with her boyfriend Luke. Readers will race through the book's pages to uncover the two women's commonalities, leading to one's death and the other's betrayal. As Becca's suspicions about others, especially one neighbor, escalate, so does the anger of Amelia Anne's boyfriend. Hinting at characters' motivation and omitting details, the author forces readers to draw their own conclusions. In the end, betrayals arise from unexpected places amid life's winding roads and detours.</p> <p>Barbara A. Ward Washington State University Pullman, WA</p>	<p><b><i>Anything But Ordinary</i></b> by Lara Avery Hyperion, 2012, 325 pp., \$16.99</p> <p>At 17, swimming champion Bryce Graham is one dive away from fulfilling her dream of competing in the Olympics. Instead, she plunges into a coma that steals five years of her life. When she finally wakes up, Bryce insists on returning home so that things can go back to normal—against the advice of her doctors. But is a “normal” life still possible? Her once close-knit family has been undone by their grief. Torn between the past and present, Bryce must find a way to make her second chance at life count.</p> <p>Avery's debut novel poses an interesting question: how does one let go of the past and move on with life after a tragedy? Although it contains some adult subjects—like drinking, sex, and suicide—that may be inappropriate for younger readers, Bryce's story would resonate with older adolescents who enjoy reading poignant dramas about romance, friendship, and family.</p> <p>Jessica S. Thomas Nashville, TN</p>
<p><b><i>Blood Wounds</i></b> by Susan Beth Pfeffer Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011, 248 pp., \$16.99</p> <p>Willa's family seems normal and happy. Her mother married Jack when Willa was young, giving Willa a better life away from the repressive small town of “No-where” Texas. But, when Willa's estranged biological father murders his wife and young daughters, this horrific crime churns up buried family secrets that make Willa question who she really is. She returns to the town her mother desperately tried to escape years ago to reopen the wounds of the past so that they can begin to heal.</p> <p>Pfeffer deals with disturbing but pertinent topics—divorce, mental illness, child abuse, and cutting. While many of these topics—and the brutality of the murder—make this novel unsuitable for younger readers, <i>Blood Wounds</i> would be a compelling independent read for high school students and particularly young women who, like Willa, are coping with a painful life event and trying to establish a stronger sense of self.</p> <p>Jessica S. Thomas Nashville, TN</p>	<p><b><i>Breaking Point</i></b> by Lesley Choyce Orca, 2012, 124 pp., \$9.95</p> <p>Cameron has almost always been able to run away from consequences. After a previous stay at a traditional juvenile delinquent center, Cameron is given the opportunity to go Camp Mosher, located on the coast of Nova Scotia far from anything else. As he puts to use his previous delinquent center political knowledge, he quickly finds Brianna and falls for her. But Brianna is trouble.</p> <p>Brianna influences Cameron to steal two kayaks and run away from Camp Mosher to begin their lives again. Despite his better judgment, they escape into the wilderness on the eve of an impending hurricane. As you follow Cameron's fast-paced story, you experience him making choices that will affect the rest of his life, for better or worse.</p> <p>Aubrey Kuppler Nashville, TN</p>

<p><b>Code Name Verity</b> by Elizabeth Wein Hyperion, 2012, 327 pp., \$10.98</p> <p>Fiction/Historical/WWII ISBN: 978-1-4231-5219-4</p> <p>After a plane crashes in France during World War II, two girls are separated. Queenie, a Scottish spy, is captured by the Gestapo and imprisoned at their headquarters. In order to live, Queenie must write a daily account of information she has gathered during her time as a spy that is then translated for the commander. Maddie, the pilot, is kept safe and tells her account of what is happening through diary entries she hides in her mattress. Both girls give their side of the story regarding their lives as a spy and a pilot during WWII and how they became friends. Both struggle with survival, courage, and constant worry that they will not make it another day. The records they leave behind provide the plot for this novel and a new outlook on war and the bonds it creates.</p> <p>Libby Byrnes Alpharetta, GA</p>	<p><b>Ditched: A Love Story</b> by Robin Mellom Hyperion, 2012, 288 pp., \$16.99</p> <p>Realistic Fiction/Romance ISBN: 978-4231-4338-3</p> <p>When 16-year-old Justina Griffith wakes up in a ditch on the side of the road, she realizes that she has been dumped by her prom date. Unfortunately, her prom date is her best friend, and the boy she is in love with. Justina has spent almost a year trying to overcome a reputation for being an excessive kisser. Throughout those months, her friendship with Ian grew, and so did her love for him. She recounts her story to the cashier at the 7-Eleven, using the stains on her iridescent blue dress as clues to uncovering her crazy night.</p> <p><i>Ditched</i> is an entertaining light read. This story is perfect for an individual read. Although the recommended reading level is grade seven and up, I would not suggest this novel to a middle school student due to the language and marijuana and kissing references.</p> <p>Deanna Velazquez Nashville, TN</p>
<p><b>Double</b> by Jenny Valentine Hyperion, 2012, 256 pp., \$16.99</p> <p>Identity/Psychological Thriller ISBN: 978-1-4231-4714-5</p> <p>Chap, tired of shuffling from place to place, seizes the opportunity to assume the identity of the boy on the flyer. For the first time in years, he experiences the sensation of being wanted, but the lie he harbors eats away at his comfort. One wrong word or gesture could cause the façade to crumble. He cannot fake being Cassiel Roadnight without someone guessing his lie. As Chap recalls the loss of the man he called Grandpa, he ponders his own true identity. He also wonders if family life drove Cass away, or if something more sinister was afoot. A mysterious stranger holds the key, and Chap's true identity is closer than he imagines.</p> <p>Readers will be spellbound by the dark secrets that unfold through well-crafted imagery.</p> <p>Greta Williams-Hopper Nashville, TN</p>	<p><b>Fighting for Dontae</b> by Mike Castan Holiday House, 2012, 150 pp., \$16.95</p> <p>Realistic Fiction/Identity ISBN: 978-0-8234-2348-4</p> <p>Javier is a middle school adolescent torn between two worlds. He wants to help his mom at home and secretly loves to read. Yet, he finds himself involved in the neighborhood Mexican American gang, knowing the violence and drug use is wrong. Javier tries to keep a cool image with his friends at school until he takes an elective as a teacher's aide in the special ed class. Surprisingly, Javier describes the elective as the best part of his day and develops empathy and patience for students in the special ed classroom. After several close calls, Javier must make decisions for himself to balance his complicated life.</p> <p>Urban students who like the thrill of adventure and violence will appreciate this plot. This read is best fit for eighth grade and above due to the violence, drug use, and frequent profanity.</p> <p>Lindsey Nelson Nashville, TN</p>

<p><b><i>Freshman Year &amp; Other Unnatural Disasters</i></b> by Meredith Zeitlin</p> <p>C. P. Putnam's Sons, 2012, 282 pp., \$16.99</p> <p>Kelsey Finkelstein knows that freshman year is important—no, absolutely crucial. In fact, she plans on upgrading her wardrobe, trying out for left wing on her school's soccer team, and finally winning over her lifelong crush, Jordan Rothman. What she doesn't plan for is fights with best friends, tyrannical soccer captains with scary eyebrows, and a mysterious newspaper photographer who always manages to capture her in seriously embarrassing situations. Although freshman year turns out to be slightly more disastrous than she had hoped for, Kelsey remains an optimist. Armed with an indomitable sense of humor and with a little help from her friends, she may just have her best year yet. Filled with witty dialogue and realistic situations, Meredith Zeitlin's clever and heartfelt novel will have readers cheering for Kelsey Finkelstein as she navigates her way through the unnatural disaster that is freshman year.</p> <p>Diana Liu Nashville, TN</p>	<p><b><i>Ghosts of the Titanic</i></b> by Julie Lawson</p> <p>Holiday House, 2012, 168 pp., \$16.95</p> <p>The trauma of working on the recovery of bodies and belongings after the Titanic catastrophe costs Angus Seaton his future. The young man never shakes the guilt of mistakenly pocketing the small purse of a young woman while he fought off exhaustion during the recovery. A mysterious figure haunts Angus and eventually haunts young Kevin Messenger. It is up to Kevin to unravel a mystery, 100 years in the making, before he suffers the same fate as Angus. How can he get his parents to believe that the voice he hears is not the product of an overactive imagination?</p> <p>Lawson intertwines the time periods as she sheds interesting insights into the fascinating lore of the great sea tragedy. Readers will want to learn even more about the aftermath.</p> <p>Greta Williams-Hopper Nashville, TN</p>
<p><b><i>Haze</i></b> by Erin Thomas</p> <p>Orca, 2012, 175 pp., \$9.95</p> <p>The swim team at Strathmore Academy has been keeping secrets from the authorities for three years after a hazing incident went horribly wrong, ending a swimmer's life. Bram is trying out for the renowned swim team for the second year in a row, and he needs to make the team again in order to keep his scholarship to the prestigious school. Jeremy, who was there three years ago when the secret happened, wants to go public with the information and warns Bram not to go to this year's party. Suddenly, Jeremy is hurt in a hit-and-run accident that results in a coma. Bram is trying to solve the mystery of what happened with Abby, Jeremy's sister, and prove that his beloved coach is not responsible. Young reluctant readers are sure to enjoy this fast-paced book packed with mystery, cliff hangers, and lots of actions.</p> <p>Aubrey Kuppler Nashville, TN</p>	<p><b><i>Immortal City</i></b> by Scott Speer</p> <p>Penguin, 2012, 368 pp., \$17.99</p> <p>Maddy Montgomery is a regular 17-year-old girl living in a city where angels are paid to save people who can afford their protection. By chance, Maddy meets Jackson Godspeed, the most famous guardian angel, but she is unimpressed by his fame and fortune. Still, she finds herself attracted to him. Despite his title in society, Jackson falls for Maddy because she is the only person in the city who sees him for who he is aside from a famous guardian. When a dark force enters angel city, Jackson and Maddy not only fight for their relationship and their safety, but Maddy also discovers that she has family secrets of her own to reconcile.</p> <p>Libby Byrnes Alpharetta, GA</p>

<p><b><i>Losers in Space</i></b> by John Barnes      Relationships/Science Fiction/Technology/Fame  Viking Juvenile, 2012, 384 pp., \$18.99      ISBN: 978-0-67006-156-3</p> <p>Sixteen-year-old Susan Terraille, the daughter of a famous actor, craves fame about as much as anyone else living in 2129. Work has become passé, and Derlock, Susan's new boyfriend, concocts a plan to gain the world's attention by hijacking a spacecraft bound for Mars while supposedly visiting Susan's aunt. Things go wrong quickly, and Susan realizes that she cannot trust Derlock, for whom the end always justifies the means. As friendships unravel and lives are lost, the crew members must find a way back home with only limited windows of opportunity. Barnes handles his characters and their plight deftly while making observations about the obsession with celebrity that seems to typify life in the future, in many ways mirroring the current preoccupation with reality programming. Readers may be just as interested in the science-related "Notes for the Interested" sections that accompany the storyline, such as the characters' believable evolution during their space journey.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Barbara A. Ward Pullman, WA</p>	<p><b><i>Master of Deceit: J. Edgar Hoover and America in the Age of Lies</i></b>      Espionage/Politics/American History  by Marc Aronson  Candlewick, 2012, 230 pp., \$25.99      ISBN: 978-0-76365-025-4</p> <p>J. Edgar Hoover was arguably one of the most powerful men in the United States during his lifetime. This thoughtful, thoroughly researched biography provides insight into the Federal Bureau of Investigation director whose hubris allowed him to consider himself above the law and to keep secret files on those he feared, disliked, or suspected of being Communist sympathizers. While describing Hoover's childhood and his later rise to power, this book is much more than Hoover's story; it's actually a vivid description of our nation during the '50s and '60s—a time of paranoia with parallels to the period after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. Examining the past carefully for clues to our possible future, the author weighs the price of secrecy and security. Older teen readers will enjoy the book's archival photographs and the author's description of his own research and writing process, and will certainly want to read more about this ever-intiguing individual.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Barbara A. Ward Pullman, WA</p>
<p><b><i>Me and Earl and the Dying Girl</i></b> by Jesse Andrews      Relationships/Death/Art  Harry N. Abrams/Amulet Books, 2012, 304 pp., \$16.95      ISBN: 978-1-41970-176-4</p> <p>Until this year, Greg Gaines has managed to remain unnoticed, tolerated by the various cliques in his high school but really fitting nowhere. He and his friend Earl, a foul-mouthed teen with aspirations for a better life, write and film their own movies, sometimes featuring the family feline, Cat Stevens. When Greg's former friend, Rachel Kushner, is diagnosed with leukemia, he unwillingly spends time with her, entertaining her with stories, jokes, and the films. As Greg hides behind his camera, he finally realizes that Rachel's uniqueness will be lost once she's gone. Although the narrator's voice is intrusive, self-deprecating, and downright annoying at times, it allows Greg to shield himself from his feelings about Rachel's illness and impending death. This poignant yet unexpectedly hilarious story will move teen readers coping with loss or pondering their own mortality. Art doesn't imitate life here; instead, it amplifies reality for the budding filmmaker.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Barbara A. Ward Pullman, WA</p>	<p><b><i>My Life in Black and White</i></b> by Natasha Friend      Coping/Relationships/Self-Esteem  Viking Juvenile, 2012, 304 pp., \$17.99      ISBN: 978-0-67001-303-6</p> <p>Sophomore Lexi's life is the envy of others. Not only does she have looks to die for, but she also has a great boyfriend in Ryan and a loyal best friend in Taylor. Everything changes during a disastrous night when she is betrayed by the two at a party and then is injured in a car wreck. In her eyes, her facial injuries make her less physically attractive than she was, and she lashes out at those around her, since she fears facing the world as less than beautiful. Now that she has lost her beauty, the thing that defined her, Lexi embarks on a journey leading to self-awareness and self-acceptance. The anger, jealousy, and vengefulness she experiences along the way are described realistically, with the author building sympathy for Lexi while also showing her behaving badly. Teen readers will empathize with Lexi's struggle to reinvent herself amid the book's multifaceted characters.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Barbara A. Ward Pullman, WA</p>



<p><b><i>Rebel McKenzie</i></b> by Candice Ransom Disney Hyperion, 2012, 288 pp., \$16.99</p> <p>This summer, Rebel McKenzie wants to attend the Ice Age Kids' Dig and Safari Camp; in fact, she is willing to run away from home in order to pursue her passion for the Pleistocene era. Unfortunately, a nosy convict and improper footwear foil her hitchhiking plans, and soon, Rebel finds herself babysitting her sleepwalking nephew Rudy in the boring mobile home community of Grandview Estates. Despite her less than ideal situation, Rebel is determined to make it to paleontology camp. Her solution? Win the local beauty pageant and use the prize money for the camp's registration fee. But as Rebel soon finds out, she might need a little guidance from some unexpected friends if she wants to be crowned as Miss Frog Level. In <i>Rebel McKenzie</i>, author Candice Ransom has woven a cast of quirky characters into a charming story about friendship, growing up, and most important, being true to oneself.</p> <p>Diana Liu Nashville, TN</p>	<p><b><i>Riot Act</i></b> by Diane Tullison Orca, 2012, 128 pp., \$9.95</p> <p>After the local team loses a hockey game, 17-year-olds Nick and Daniel, along with other fans, begin torching cars and destroying buildings in a riot throughout the town. Nick finds an incriminating photograph on the Internet and decides to turn himself in to the authorities; however, Daniel finds himself in an unexpected position that "earns" him the title of "hero." How? Daniel breaks a store window, attempting to escape the riot, but winds up helping a young girl.</p> <p>Because this book is very short, it is perfect for reluctant readers who judge a book by its size. This fast read has well-developed characters and plot. While the reading level is very low, the content of the book makes it appropriate for older middle school and high school students.</p> <p>Deanna Velazquez Nashville, TN</p>
<p><b><i>Small Damages</i></b> by Beth Kephart Philomel, 2012, 304 pp., \$17.99</p> <p>After her father's unexpected death, things fall apart for 18-year-old Kenzie Spitzer. While her mother moves on with a new catering business, Kenzie relies on her boyfriend Kevin to help her cope. But reliable Kevin isn't so reliable once Kenzie becomes pregnant, and her mother arranges a flight to Spain where a wealthy couple will adopt the child. As no word of rescue arrives from Kevin, and Kenzie languishes in Spain feeling banished and miserable, she bonds with the life that is growing inside her as well as with those around her, including Estela, the grumpy cook whose secrets influence Kenzie's own decisions about her unborn child. Memorable language evokes Seville's heat and flavors as Kenzie explores its architectural treasures and learns to prepare the same savory dishes prepared by Estela. While not surprising, the book's ending will prompt much discussion among teens about choices easily made and sometimes regretted.</p> <p>Barbara A. Ward Pullman, WA</p>	<p><b><i>Splendors and Glooms</i></b> by Laura Amy Schlitz Candlewick Press, 2012, pp. 384, \$17.99</p> <p>Cassandra, a dying witch in a secluded castle, possesses a portentous fire opal. An evil Italian puppeteer, Gaspare Grisini, commandeers two orphans to perform a puppet show with him in the London streets of 1860. Clara, the only daughter of a wealthy doctor and his wife, sees the performance and wants the trio to entertain at her 12th birthday party. The tension builds when Clara disappears after the show along with Grisini and the two orphans.</p> <p>They all converge at Strachan's Ghyll where Clara has been transformed into a marionette by the diabolical Grisini. Grisini covets the witch's gemstone, and he must steal it from Cassandra in order to get her destructive powers, which will also save her from a fiery death. He magically summons his two wards so they can steal the fire opal for him. The period is outlined in realistic detail as the story unfolds. A complex, convoluted tale, the novel is worth the astute reader's attention.</p> <p>Judith A. Hayn Little Rock, AR</p>

<p><b>Survive</b> by Alex Morel Razorbill, 2012, 259 pp., \$17.99</p> <p>Survival Stories/Depression/Suicide/Romance ISBN: 978-1-59514-510-9</p> <p>Jane Solis has a foolproof suicide plan. Having played by the treatment center's rules and convinced her doctors that she is healthy enough to fly home for Christmas, she prepares to swallow the pills that will kill her during the flight. But the plane crashes in a wilderness area, leaving only Jane and her annoying seatmate, Paul Hart, as survivors. Suddenly, as much as she had wanted to die, Jane now wants to live, and the two walk and climb as far as they can in order to improve their chances of being spotted by any rescuers. They form a strong connection as they rely on each other for survival, even sharing secrets. When Paul is injured severely, he insists that Jane leave for help, possibly saving the two of them. Teen readers will be touched by this poignant romance while debating their decisions and pondering their own capacity to survive.</p> <p>Barbara A. Ward Pullman, WA</p>	<p><b>The Fine Art of Truth or Dare</b> by Melissa Jensen Speak, 2012, 380 pp., \$8.99</p> <p>Romance/High School ISBN: 978-0-14-242090-4</p> <p>For Ella Marino and her friends Frankie and Sadie, Truth or Dare is a way of life. Not only does it keep their friendship in balance (truths keep Frankie from exaggerating too much), but it also keeps things interesting (dares encourage Sadie to come out of her shell every once in a while). For Ella though, Truth or Dare has always been about the truths because they, unlike flashy dares, make life less complicated and allow her to fly under the radar. But by some strange twist of fate, Ella finds herself tutored by the popular and impossibly charming Alex Bainbridge, and suddenly all of the simple truths that she had once surrounded herself with become a lot more complicated. In <i>The Fine Art of Truth or Dare</i>, Melissa Jensen has created a lighthearted story about a girl who learns that she must take a few dares in order to find out what she truly wants.</p> <p>Diana Liu Nashville, TN</p>
<p><b>The Disenchantments</b> by Nina LaCour Dutton Books, 2012, 308 pp., \$16.99</p> <p>Fiction/Summer Road Trips ISBN: 978-0-525-42219-8</p> <p>As the summer after graduation kicks off, Colby is ready for the best year of his life. First, he will be touring the Pacific Northwest with his best friend Bev and her band, the Disenchantments. Afterwards, Colby and Bev will be taking a one-way flight to Paris to embark upon their yearlong European backpacking journey. However, once the tour begins, Colby receives some astonishing news: Bev is leaving him and their traveling plans behind for an art school on the other side of the country. Despite Bev's betrayal, the show must go on. And as the summer quickly passes, Colby struggles not only with Bev's growing distance, but with what to do with his suddenly uncertain future. In <i>The Disenchantments</i>, Nina LaCour weaves together a captivating story about music, art, and growing up that perfectly captures the feelings of a group of friends who are waiting for a new chapter of life to begin.</p> <p>Diana Liu Nashville, TN</p>	<p><b>The Infests</b> by Sean Beaudoin Candlewick, 2012, 384 pp., \$16.99</p> <p>Zombies/Relationships/Science Fiction ISBN: 978-0-76365-947-9</p> <p>An equally brainy blending of chilling and hilarious, this book imagines the coming zombie apocalypse and may prevent readers from ever eating chicken again. When prisoner Nick (Nero) Sole accidentally cuts himself severely while working at a poultry processing plant, he is blamed for the ensuing mayhem, and is sent on a camping trip with several other prisoners. Awakening to the sights and sounds of their counselors dining on some of their companions after finishing chicken dinners, they race toward a mountain lodge for safety. Channeling the voice of a celebrity wrestler, Nero assumes leadership in slaving off the relentless attacks from the ever-growing zombie hordes. Connoisseurs of puns and clever writing will relish the references to zombies as "Moaners" and "Shamburglars." Not for the squeamish due to its graphic descriptions of carnage, this story is as much a zombie travelogue as a romantic romp, since Nero finds love, after a fashion.</p> <p>Barbara A. Ward Pullman, WA</p>

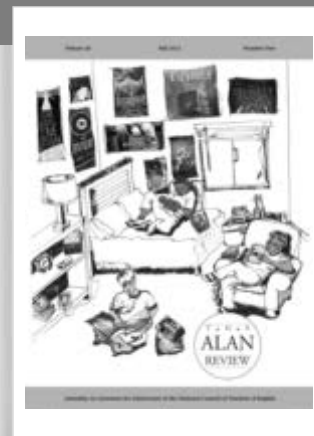
<p><b><i>The Knife and the Butterfly</i></b> by Ashley Hope Perez Carolrhoda Books, 2012, 264 pp., \$17.95</p> <p>Loss/Mystery ISBN: 978-0-7613-6156-5</p> <p>After a violent confrontation with a rival gang, Azael wakes up in a juvenile detention center, an environment that he knows well. The familiarity of these surroundings, however, belies something much stranger and more profound than Azael could ever expect from this experience—he isn't allowed to call anyone, hasn't met with a lawyer, and is made to observe a fellow inmate, Lexi, through one-way glass for hours at a time. Azael's caseworker, Gabe, cryptically insists that there isn't much time left for Azael to accomplish what he is supposed to do. As Azael pieces Lexi's life together, he is struck by how familiar they both are with loss—home, family, friends, safety, and stability. Perez gives the reader sympathetic yet critical insight into the world of gangs in Houston, Texas, and is careful to show the narratives of loss that drive so many young people to join them.</p> <p>Jesse Gray Nashville, TN</p>	<p><b><i>The Obsidian Blade</i></b> by Pete Hautman Candlewick Press, 2012, pp. 308, \$16.99</p> <p>Science Fiction/Coming of Age ISBN: 978-0-7636-5403-0</p> <p>Thirteen-year-old Tucker's life changes the day his father, Reverend Feye, is fixing a shingle on the roof and disappears. An hour later, he returns, looking worn and older, with a young girl. Then his father loses his faith and his mother descends into depression, making life intolerable for Tucker. After both parents mysteriously vanish, Tucker moves in with his estranged Uncle Kosh. Tucker begins to think that these bizarre happenings might somehow be related to floating disks that glow and fade, often over the house. He even wonders if these disks teleport captives to different periods in history and the future? Tucker enters one in hopes of finding his parents.</p> <p>Hautman creates a complex, spellbinding plot along with a charming, compelling hero. The genre fan will end up with more questions than answers in this first volume of a trilogy; those who devour science fiction and time travel will await the next adventure impatiently.</p> <p>Judith A. Hayn Little Rock, AR</p>
<p><b><i>The Princesses of Iowa</i></b> by M. Molly Backes Candlewick, 2012, 464 pp., \$16.99</p> <p>Popularity/Relationships/Self-Esteem ISBN: 978-0-76365-312-5</p> <p>Election to their Iowa high school homecoming court has always been the goal for popular Paige Sheridan and her best friends Nikki and Lacey, but after being involved in a drunk-driving accident at the end of junior year, Paige's priorities change. A spot on the homecoming court loses its promised luster. As she examines her goals and identity, Paige recognizes almost insurmountable disparities between what she wants and her friends' motivations. Along with Paige, teen readers realize that outer appearances have little to do with inner happiness.</p> <p>The author deftly and honestly describes the changes in this popular senior's life, as well as how easily she has distanced herself from her own accountability. This is a thoughtful book about family dynamics, the price of popularity, and the need to take a stand for the things that really matter. The multifaceted characters are likely to remind readers of their own classmates.</p> <p>Barbara A. Ward Pullman, WA</p>	<p><b><i>The Waiting Sky</i></b> by Lara Zielin Putnam Juvenile, 2012, 224 pp., \$16.99</p> <p>Family/Responsibility/Growing Up ISBN: 978-0-39925-686-8</p> <p>Jane McAllister has been the responsible one in the family ever since her older brother Ethan left for college. She reconciles the bills, cleans the house, and makes excuses for her mother's alcoholism. Leaving one type of disaster-in-the-making at home, she spends the summer chasing a natural kind of disaster, tornadoes, across the Midwest with her brother and a crew who collect data and take photographs. Ethan's crew tries to get as close as they can to the twisters without being injured.</p> <p>The author effectively portrays the lives of the siblings, chasing after one form of destruction while avoiding the chaos at home. The descriptions clearly show just how powerful twisters can be, prompting Jane to realize that her mother's own self-destructive choices spell ruin for anyone in her path. Despite being perched on the edge of disaster, Jane chooses a possibly brighter future for herself, no longer enabling her mother.</p> <p>Barbara A. Ward Pullman, WA</p>

<p><b><i>The White Zone</i></b> by Carolyn Marsden Lerner, 2012, 192 pp., \$17.95</p> <p>Realistic Fiction/Ethnicity ISBN: 978-0761373834</p> <p>Nouri, a Shiite Muslim, and Talib, a half-Sunni/half-Shiite, are cousins who have spent their childhoods together. But as war rages in Baghdad, divisions between the Shites and Sunnis grow stronger. When Nouri's uncle is murdered in a Sunni attack, Nouri begins to resent all Sunnis, including Talib. Meanwhile, Talib struggles to understand why his family is being blamed and mistreated. Just when it seems the fighting will never end, snow falls on Baghdad, something that has never before happened. It is in this miraculous moment that the two opposing religious sects are able to agree on one thing—the incredible beauty of the falling snow.</p> <p>Marsden's work is highly pertinent to today's society in which people are quick to overgeneralize others based on their race or religion. The alternating points of view in this story allow the reader to see both sides of a current social and religious struggle.</p> <p>Marlowe Brant Nashville, TN</p>	<p><b><i>Trafficked</i></b> by Kim Purcell Penguin Group, 2012, 384 pp., \$11.98</p> <p>Fiction/Trafficking ISBN: 978-0-670-01280-0</p> <p>After both of her parents are killed in a tragic bombing accident, Hannah is presented with an opportunity to leave her home in Moldova to start a new life in the United States of America. She envisions working as a nanny during the day and learning English as a student at night. After arriving in America, she not only learns that she will be unable to attend school, but also is treated as a slave in the home of her "new family." She is threatened with prostitution and even the father of the children she takes care of takes advantage of her sexually. When the mother finds out about their relations, she takes matters into her own hands and leaves Hannah wondering if she will even survive the night in a house she can no longer call a home.</p> <p>Libby Byrnes Alpharetta, GA</p>
<p><b><i>What's Left of Me</i></b> by Kat Zhang Harper, 2012, 356 pp., \$17.99</p> <p>Dystopian/Identity ISBN: 978-0-06-211487-7</p> <p>Eva and Addie began their lives the way they were supposed to—two souls working together in one body. One soul was supposed to become dominant, but Eva is still there in Addie's thoughts, even though she can no longer control their body. Their parents are worried because their daughter is not settling. Aware of the way society views these hybrids, Eva and Addie work to trick the doctors into thinking that Addie is the only soul in their body. Everything goes according to plan until they meet a girl who tries to help Eva regain control, a risk that could cost them their lives.</p> <p>Eva and Addie's story will be loved by readers who enjoy thinking about the "what if?" and issues of identity. Their story offers a compelling start to The Hybrid Chronicles, Zhang's first work.</p> <p>Marlowe Brant 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 <a href="mailto:melanie.hundley@vanderbilt.edu">melanie.hundley@vanderbilt.edu</a>.</i></b></p>

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Number 2

Winter 2013



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## Instructions for Authors

**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*.**

**FALL ISSUE Deadline:**

**MARCH 1**

**WINTER ISSUE Deadline:**

**JULY 1**

**SUMMER ISSUE Deadline:**

**NOVEMBER 1**

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## From the Editors

By the time you read this issue of *The ALAN Review*, the 2012 ALAN Workshop will be a memory. You will be engaged in a new year. Some of you will be hanging on to the memories of old friends visited and new friends met. Some of you will be relishing the speeches and comments of authors who are familiar favorites and a few whom you have only just discovered. Others will be engaged in new research projects stimulated by conversations with colleagues. Some among you will still be reading the new books you received at the workshop, while others will have read them all and be looking for more. We hope many of you will have passed them on to students, colleagues, friends. As my daughter, a junior in PK-3 education, said—Ooh books! Can I read them?

Sharing books with others—family, friends, students, teachers, librarians—is one of the perks of working with young adult literature. There is always a young adult book worth discovering and worth sharing. Jackie Bach is the best book-sharer I know. She gives books to students, to preservice teachers, and teachers. I don't think she knows how to visit a school without bringing a book to give away. After all, we have learned that sharing books makes a difference. Melanie is also one of the most generous souls I know. When we were both graduate students at the University of Georgia, we shared an office. I can't tell you how many times her spontaneous moments of sharing gave me better insight into teaching and researching. She helped me see YAL as a worthy avenue of serious research. I can still see her look of gentle chastisement when she realized I was ignorant of an

important writer in the community. I have gleaned a great deal from both colleagues, and I am still a work in progress. I am learning to emulate their thoughtful generosity, and my level of participation with ALAN is their doing.

As editors, we receive a few extra copies of each issue of this journal to send to others and for promotional purposes. Following Jackie's and Melanie's example, I made gifts of these copies to mentor teachers during recent visits with student teachers. In addition, I passed out copies of *The ALAN Review* and *Signal* (a wonderful gift from Jennifer Dial and her editorial team) during a presentation at the annual conference of the Louisiana Council of Teachers of English. I hope some of these seeds cast about will bear fruit.

Speaking of seeds . . . early in November of 2012, I met Sarah Mesle through an online research request. Sarah teaches young adult literature classes in the English department at UCLA and primarily attends the Modern Language Association (MLA) convention. She defines her research focus as American Literature, particularly to 1900. The Novel. Gender and Popular Culture. Transatlantic Cultures of Slavery. Nevertheless, she was scheduled to appear on a panel discussing YA literature at MLA during January 2013. Clearly, she shares an interest with the ALAN community. I sent her the last two issues. I hope she joins our YA family of readers, writers, students, teachers, librarians, and researchers.

Our theme for this issue is Flash Back—Forge Ahead: Dynamism and Transformation in Young Adult Literature. As an organization, our past has

always been one of sharing our enthusiasm for this great body of literature. In fact, the ALAN Workshop is currently so large it is hard to imagine a convention space that could accommodate more people and still capture the excitement and intimacy. At the same time, I never attend a session without thinking about someone who would really enjoy the experience.

So, how do we share more actively? As I look to the future, I believe we are at a critical moment of potential growth. As individuals, perhaps we should actively use Facebook, Pinterest, goodreads, and other social media outlets to share what we discover at the workshop. For instance, as I write this, I know that Teri Lesesne will be working her fingers to the bone tweeting away during the workshop. She will have done her part by the time you read this. And many of us will return to classrooms where we will offer book talks. As an organization, we will of course continue to explore methods of sharing. Perhaps we need to post speeches on YouTube or on the ALAN website, too. I think, however, that we miss an opportunity if we don't promote *The ALAN Review*.

The summer 2013 issue will be a double issue that celebrates the growth and history of *The ALAN Review* and the ALAN organization on its 40th anniversary. We will be reading memories from past editors, past presidents, writers, publishers, and ALAN contributors. This issue will mark the past and lead to the future. Now is the time to consider who needs to see this issue. Does your school or university library need to subscribe? Do you have a colleague that needs that final nudge to join? For quite a few years now I have considered the three annual issues of *The ALAN Review* as a continuation of the conversations sparked by the ALAN workshop. I hope you will carefully consider sharing the conversation by inviting people to join.

This issue has many rich offerings. In the President's connection, Jeff Kaplan surveys the past accomplishments of the ALAN community. His message provides multiple reasons to share the past and look forward to a rich future. Next, Justin Scholes and Jon Ostenson explore the wide appeal of the dystopian novel. They look closely at books in this genre written since 2000, discussing the common characteristics these books share and considering their potential for classroom use. E. Sybil Durand forges even further forward by discussing three post-colonial young adult

novels. She helps us see the establishment and growth of young adult literature that reaches well beyond the boundaries of the United States and Canada.

Adrienne Cleland and Shanetia P. Clark describe an action research study in which seventh-grade students selected texts and shared how and why they should be valued. The study specifically focuses on the self-selected reading choices of young middle school boys. Understanding the reading selections of boys, a group often considered reluctant readers, is a knotty problem that many of us have tried to untie. Amy Bright adds insight about how to scaffold young readers into more difficult and perhaps more mature young adult selections. Then Ricki Ginsberg further explores adolescent voices by describing her young adult elective for high school students. She incorporates technology as a tool for student expression. I was excited and jealous of her opportunity all at the same time. I was probably never bold enough when I had the chance, but with her modeling, many of us can explore new opportunities for our students.

Michele D. Castleman and Erin F. Reilly-Sanders explore the complex and controversial topic of killing in YA literature—not just violence and death, but the act of killing. They address a difficult topic thoughtfully, providing readers with important insights that can help us consider how to talk about these books with students, parents, and colleagues. Angie Beumer Johnson, Laurel Haynes, and Jessie Nastasi explore the staying power of *The Giver*, another text with killing as a central theme. They wonder what it might mean to read a book with such complex themes at different stages of our lives, what might be the different experience of reading the book as a pre-teen, a teen, or an adult?

Bill Broz explores a topic he has considered previously in an ALAN workshop; he offers a description of how he teaches young adult literature with his audience of primarily Mexican American preservice teachers in southern Texas. He pushes the discussion of how those of us who teach YA literature at the college level prepare these courses with an eye to the needs of both our college students and their future students. The next piece continues to probe the issue of how and why we select books for specific audiences. In AP Gatekeeping, sj Miller dispels the myths about using (or not using) YA literature in the AP classroom. This is a topic that continues to be debated often, but with



the benefit of sj's experience and expertise. I think you will find compelling reasons to include YA novels in settings that have often been neglected.

One of the most compelling features of *The ALAN Review* over the years has been the contributions of adolescent novelists. The final two columns are no exception. Beverley Brenna's column offers an author's perspective on breaking stereotypes through her presentation of characters. Amanda Havard, another author of novels for adolescents, points to the challenges

and excitement of connecting texts to new technologies. How might a character's journey be enhanced if we could follow his travel on Google. The possibilities are quite intriguing. Once again, we finish with Stories from the Field. Danny Wade, Bridget Mahoney, and Georgia Parker all remind us of little moments and tiny victories that make the efforts we all go through worthwhile. I hope you enjoy the issue, and when you are finished, pass it on.

## 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/>.

### 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.**

### Summer 2014 Theme: How to Teach Young Adult Literature in an Age of Censorship and Common Core?

In a time of extreme criticism and scrutiny of texts that are being used in the classroom, what are proponents of young adult literature to do? This issue seeks to address that question with submissions that offer very practical ways of incorporating (or continuing to incorporate) young adult literature in the classroom. What ways are you teaching young adult literature? How are you using young adult literature to meet or exceed what is being required in the common core? What experiences have you had with censorship, and how have you dealt with them? How can beginning teachers approach the inclusion of YAL in their classrooms to take advantage of the power of young adult literature to improve reading skills and foster a lifelong love of reading? **Submission deadline: November 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).



## Celebrating the Past/Envisioning the Future:

### The Next 40 Years of ALAN

“Developing students’ hearts, I believe, is what educators are called to do. Each and every small act of honesty, service, responsibility, and compassion that teachers and administrators encourage daily in their students—and model consistently in their own lives—helps create moral and civic habits of the heart that instill in students the courage to care.”

—Charles Haynes (2009), p. 6

“As Edith Wharton said, “The greatest books ever written are worth to each reader only what he can get out of them.”

—Catherine S. Ross, Lynne E. F. McKechnie, & Paulette M. Rothbauer (2006), p. 53

**A**s your next ALAN President (2012–2013), I have the distinct pleasure of hosting ALAN’s 40th Anniversary Year-long Celebration, culminating with our ALAN Workshop at NCTE in Boston (November 25–26, 2013). Imagine that! We are 40 years old. It seems like only yesterday (I am beginning to sound like someone’s grandparent) when ALAN—the Assembly on Literature for Adolescents—was just in its infancy. In 1973, a small group of dedicated young adult literature enthusiasts banded together to form an organization whose mission is to share the joy of reading young adult literature. And now look at us! After 40 years, we are not only still going strong, we are thriving. In fact, we

are now—among many things—the great driving force behind the dissemination of young adult literature, not only within the National Council of Teachers of English, but in the country and possibly the world.

Most impressive. And most sobering.

For many, young adult literature (or books for teens) has always remained a pleasant afterthought in the conversation of literature among serious and not-so-serious adult teachers and scholars. “Oh, you are reading that? Have you tried *The Great Gatsby*? Much more sophisticated for someone your age.” “Reading this? Couldn’t find anything better?” snips another. Such remarks are often heard or, if

not heard, they are at least implied, reflecting the opinion of those who regard teen novels as suitable for reluctant or non-readers, but not for serious people. After all, there is reading and there is reading . . .

And yet, young adult literature is still there.

In fact, good books for teens are not only present in our lives, but thriving.

Just like ALAN.

And the reason?

Simple.

Kids love drama. Kids love to read books that are filled with the stuff of their own lives. Yes, they recognize the characters and settings and plots as something familiar and true, but they often see young people—such as them—

selves—caught in ordinary and/or extraordinary situations that are somewhat similar to their own, and in that light, these books are just the tonic they need to contemplate their own realities.

If art is the selected exaggeration of reality, than young adult literature is the epitome of great art. For often, in the compact complexities of any books for teens, lies the inherent contradiction of so many of our lives: “Who should I love and why?” “What should I do with my life and why?” “Why does the world make so little sense?” Complex questions? Yes. Easy to find answers? No. And where do I go to start? Young adult books.

### **ALAN and Young Adult Literature—Our Past**

We started from humble beginnings—educators 40 years ago who assembled at the National Council of Teachers of English Annual Convention and decided to form a group to study and publicize good books for teens. Now we have grown to an organization of authors, publishers, and educators whose reach extends far beyond our grasp. Today, we attract a diverse group of readers, teachers, and scholars alike who come to us from everywhere—either in person, in our journal, and/or on the Web—and who are bound by the common goal of sharing good books for teens. Ah, what a gift.

And this gift of reading sustains us. It is what keeps us coming back and back, year after year, as we ask ourselves, “What did you read this year that was really good?” That book that made you say, “I have to buy this, I have to share this, I

have to give this to a kid who likes to read, or maybe one who might not like reading, but is having a problem similar to a character in this book, and thus can easily relate.” Or “How can I get this book into the hands of teenagers, and perhaps change their lives?” “What can I do to get one more kid to read?”

This has been the driving force behind our organization. It is the reason we have sustained our presence and continue to engage new members. It is the reason that ALAN makes a difference in the lives of so many—authors, editors, publishers, teachers, academics, librarians, media specialists, parents, teens, etc.—and the reason we ask ourselves, “What can we do to improve who we are and what we have become?”

Forty years ago, we started with a hope, a prayer, and a stapled newsletter. Today, we have a journal, a newsletter, a website, and a two-day workshop.

Forty years ago, we had coffee, tea, and cookies. Today, we have an author’s reception, a breakfast celebration, and a distinct presence in the National Council Teachers of English.

Forty years ago, we began with a handful of people asking themselves, “Do you think anyone cares about these books besides us?” to “Where did all these people come from?”

Forty years ago, we asked ourselves, “Are we going to end up repeating ourselves—talking about the same books over and over again (*The Catcher in the Rye*; *The Outsiders*; *Go Ask Alice*; *A Day No Pigs Would Die*; *The Contender*; *The Chocolate War*; *The Pigman*; *Are*

*You There God? It’s Me, Margaret*, etc.). Now we enjoy an endless discussion of all the new books that populate young adult bookshelves and find second homes in popular culture.

### **ALAN and Young Adult Literature—Our Present**

Today, ALAN has a strong and viable presence in the lives of so many. Young adult authors—people who write both fiction and nonfiction books specifically for teenage audiences—look to us to share their good works at our workshop, on our website, and in our journal. They want to remain a visible force in our organization because they know that ALAN represents the very best in edifying teachers and books lovers alike about what is good and relevant for all readers. They know that our audience—the folks who love to read and, more importantly, share great reads with great teens—are just the people that they must connect with to make sure their books reach the hands of adolescents.

Publishers also know that we are the place to turn to publicize their authors. They know that at our workshops, in our journal, and in our gatherings, they can find more than a friendly ear to share their latest “hot read,” “author to watch,” and possibly even “juicy gossip.” Publishers know that we matter because we bring their books to eager readers.

Educators from grade school to graduate school flock to our programs and get-togethers, our journal and website, our ancillary materials and full-length books. Their goal? To secure the latest

reads and insights on what make young adult literature an increasingly popular genre. They read and scour and digest what the leading scholars in our field mean when they say “reading saves lives” and explore how best to make this happen in our classrooms.

Librarians and media specialists look to us—to ALAN and its many leaders—as a “liaison for change.” They see us as one long interconnected chain that melds the imaginary divide between separate lives—the author, the publisher, the educator—into one seamless thread of sharing. We make reading happen because we share what we know.

As many of us know all too well, if young people do not read as teenagers, they are less likely to read as adults. If all they know as high school students are books that “they were asked to read, but didn’t want to read,” then more than likely, they will never read.

For this and this alone, we must honor the legacy of ALAN and preserve what we have accomplished, so we can realize our future. And what a future it is.

## **ALAN and Young Adult Literature—Our Future**

When I came to ALAN, I stood in awe of the many people I met so casually—the many authors, publishers, and educators who I read about and discussed so diligently in my graduate education classes. With the encouragement of the late Ted Hipple, one of the founders of ALAN and my mentor, I had no choice, but it didn’t matter—I was eager to become actively involved in ALAN. More than anything, I

wanted to connect with “the movers and shakers” of young adult literature and become more familiar with how their work—both commercially and academically—was making a significant difference in the lives of so many. I wanted to become like “them” so that I, too, could influence others.

And as I became more and more involved in ALAN—the Clip and File Book Review Editor, the Research Connections Editor, an ALAN Board Member, and now President—I asked myself, “How can ‘our reach far extend our grasp?’ I know that we do good work, and I know that what we say and do matters—to everyone—but how can we reach even further than we already do? How can we make ourselves matter to those who don’t know us, or maybe don’t know us as well as they should?

My contemplation of ALAN’s future has led me to discuss with our ALAN Executive Board, and now you, some thoughts and ideas for future initiatives that will help ALAN extend our reach further than it already does. Let me indulge . . .

**ALAN 40th Anniversary:** Our ALAN 40th Anniversary is a cause for celebration, and celebrate, we will. In our newsletter, our journal, our website, and our workshop, we will honor those who have come before us and those who will set the groundwork for our future endeavors. We will share our memories, our stories, our funny moments and poignant recollections, all in a deep and abiding desire to say to all that what we do not only matters, but has lasting significance far beyond any one individual or book.

**ALAN 2013 Workshop:** The ALAN 2013 Workshop will be where we will celebrate our past and discuss our future. There, we will reminisce, remember, and contemplate all that we have accomplished—both in person and in Powerpoint, in testimonials and in presentations—allowing all who have contributed to our success to share their memories and bring to us a sense of who we are, what we have accomplished, and where we are going. My hope is that the ALAN 2013 Workshop in Boston will be the place where we catch our breath and say what a great ride this has been—and let’s keep going.

**ALAN Website:** Forty years ago, technology was a microphone and an overhead projector. Our first journal was a stapled, mimeographed packet. Today, we not only have a well-respected, peer-reviewed journal, but an active website. And what was once science fiction has now become science fact—we can talk to each other instantly and share knowledge and articles at the flick of a mouse (or does anyone still use a mouse?). What’s next? I propose that ALAN seriously consider convening a committee of interested members to contemplate how we can best serve our members on-line.

To some extent, of course, we do that now, but with a centralized webmaster—someone whose duties and responsibilities are solely to maintain our ALAN website. We can do so much more. We can make our ALAN website the place to visit for the latest and greatest in the study of young adult literature. Let’s take advantage of our Facebook presence, our vibrant tweet-

ers, an active NCTE Ning, and the monthly ALAN Picks where we review the latest young adult books. If we put these, and more, under one ALAN heading, our potential for growth and reach is unlimited.

**ALAN Webinars:** If you are as old as I am, you remember when it was considered magic to have a phone conversation with two people in different places simultaneously—the conference call. Now, through the magic of technology, we can have instant communication with everyone—or practically everyone—so why not continue to expand ALAN’s presence by conducting webinars and book talks and Skyped convention seminars for our members and nonmembers alike? Why not make ALAN a force for the study and dissemination of young adult literature in cyberspace, thus expanding our services, our membership, and our impact?

**ALAN Journal:** *The ALAN Review* is a wonderful publication. We recognize that everyone—authors, publishers, educators, researchers, and just plain book lovers—can contribute valuable understandings and perceptions about the field of young adult literature. Published in Winter, Summer, and Fall, this publication highlights great reads and sharp insights about young adult novels and critical pedagogy. Yet, we are often not listed with peer-reviewed journals in academic circles.

How can we enhance our visibility? How can we become the journal mentioned in EBSCO-HOST—the journal citation index used at most colleges and universities to recognize journals of significance? How can we make our excellent publication the place

to secure scholarship and practical ideas for not only ALAN members, but for nonmembers as well? We have taken a number of significant steps in this direction. *The ALAN Review* is listed in the Digital Library and Archives of Virginia Tech University, but can’t we do more? And if so, what? We need to convene a committee to discuss this important consideration for our journal’s future.

**ALAN Book Reviews:** When reading young adult book covers, one often finds quotes praising books from *The School Library Journal*, *The Children’s Book Review Service*, *The Horn Book*, *Booklist*, *Kirkus Reviews*, and others, but rarely from *The ALAN Review*. Why not? Do publishers want reviews from more “prestigious” organizations? If so, how do we get there? How do we get the ALAN name on the covers of books that we have reviewed? I would like to see our book reviewers play a prominent role in supporting good young adult books by recognizing their endorsement on the book jackets of young adult novels, just like other prominent and recognized book reviewers.

**ALAN College Student Groups:** An organization that I admire and serve as a Chapter Counselor is Kappa Delta Pi, the international honor society in the field of education. I often thought that this organization should be the model for ALAN. They serve a wide constituency, from college students majoring in education to current elementary and secondary teachers to teacher educators and academic scholars. They hold conferences, webinars, and regional workshops, and they publish practi-

cal and academic journals. Most important, they have active college organizations where preservice teachers form clubs for the purpose of engaging in social and academic activities that promote teaching and learning at their respective colleges and universities, as well as in their surrounding communities.

Why can’t ALAN do the same? NCTE already has the policies and procedures in place for starting student groups at colleges and universities? Why not encourage our members—particularly those teaching future teachers—to start their own ALAN groups? In turn, those preservice teachers can help their local middle and high schools promote young adult literature. Many colleges and universities already have such groups in place. What can we do to encourage these groups? How can we develop more of them and then recognize them at our ALAN Workshop and throughout the year?

**ALAN and New Young Adult Authors:** Everyone comes to ALAN for different reasons—some to meet their favorite authors, some to rub elbows with noted publishers, and others to enjoy the company of good friends and colleagues. But all of us come for the love of good books and to learn how best to get those books into the hands of teens everywhere. And let us not forget those who come with the simple desire to write young adult books of their own, for doesn’t everyone have a story to tell?

Can we be doing more to help people become published young adult authors? Can we provide seminars? Tips on how to submit manuscripts or how to find a literary agent? In fact, just get started?

Wouldn't this be a great way to reach new members or those interested in trying their hand as a young adult author? Perhaps a webinar. A part of our workshop. A separate workshop. Let's hear some ideas.

**ALAN and Censorship:** ALAN has always played an important role in helping teachers and librarians deal with challenged books. We have stood tall and proud, answering questions, writing rationales, and recognizing individuals who have been at the forefront of controversies and challenges about books for teens, fending off threats to students' right to read.

Today, we have an actively engaged ALAN Committee on Censorship. Their task is to disseminate information on dealing with challenged materials and to help those authors and educators who are facing difficulty in having their works read by teens in public places. What we need to do next, though, is to make sure everyone knows this. We need to make the ALAN Committee on Censorship the committee to turn to when books are challenged, when educators are questioned, and when authors are pilloried. When books are thought of as things to keep young eyes away from, instead of as works of art to be discussed and reviewed, we need to be in the forefront of this prominent and important discussion.

**ALAN and the International Community:** Finally, now that technology has made the world smaller,

faster, and more inclusive, what can ALAN be doing to increase its international presence? What can we do to bring to the foreground books and stories and plays and poems that are written by international authors, playwrights, and poets who appeal to young adults? Should we have a separate journal for international young adult literature? Separate conference? Separate workshops? Webinars? Separate awards? Can we have an ALAN conference overseas? Maybe England? Eastern Europe? Africa? And can we participate virtually?

Granted, these are big ideas, and 40 years ago, they might have seemed prohibitively expensive and out of reach, but today, technology—especially Skype, YouTube, twitter, even simple email—has made the world of young adult literature more accessible, more individualized, and more inclusive. Let us push forward and see what we can do next.

## ALAN Workshop 2013—Boston

In Boston, we will celebrate 40 years of ALAN and the anticipation of at least 40 more. Long after we are all gone, ALAN will remain a presence in the lives of so many, helping to connect good books with teen readers.

Our ALAN Workshop 2013 theme is “40 Years of ALAN Celebrating Great Books for Young Adults.” We will honor our past, our present, and our future. We

will share what we know, what we want to know, and what we hope to know more about in the world of young adult literature. We will carry the torch to a new generation of readers, authors, publishers, and lovers of good books for teens as we proclaim loud and clear, “Books save lives—one youngster at a time.” I look forward to seeing you there.

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# Understanding the Appeal of Dystopian Young Adult Fiction

**B**estseller and teen choice lists of the last few years have seen numerous dystopian novels in their ranks—from the Hunger Games series to the Matched trilogy and numerous stand-alone titles. Tapping into a long tradition in literature hallmarked by works such as Orwell’s *1984* and Huxley’s *Brave New World*, dystopian fiction seems to have found a home in the growing body of young adult (YA) literature. The rising popularity of dystopian fiction for teens has attracted even the attention of the *New Yorker* and the *New York Times* (Miller, 2010; Bacigalupi, et al., 2010). While dystopian works have been a part of YA literature since Lowry’s *The Giver* and Sleator’s *House of Stairs*, they have experienced a resurgent popularity in the past few years.

As classroom teachers, we are constantly on the watch for books we can recommend to our students, so trends such as these matter to us. We want to be able to suggest good titles for our students to read outside of class, and we’re interested in finding strong YA novels to study in the classroom. The popularity of dystopian novels attracted our attention, so we set out to investigate this phenomenon, seeking to understand why teens found this genre so compelling and how we might take advantage of this in the classroom.

## Defining Dystopia

The concept of dystopia arose in the 20th century in response to such world events as the First World War, according to literary scholar Gregory Claeys (2010). As a counter to earlier fictional utopias (depictions of idealized societies that promise a glorious future),

dystopian fiction instead satirizes utopian ideals or describes societies where negative social forces have supremacy. Hintz and Ostry (2003), writing specifically about children’s literature, define dystopias as societies where “the ideals for improvement have gone tragically amok” (p. 3). A major premise of classic dystopian works is that humanity is the cause of its own nightmarish situation. Whatever has run “amok”—government, technology, commercialization—society as a whole is to blame because of incompetence, consent, or complacency. Our study yielded some common elements in dystopian literature (see Fig. 1), revealing a core of heavy and provocative themes. Previously, this kind of literature was written for an adult audience, those presumed to understand the intricacies of social, political, and moral issues.

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### Common Elements in Dystopian Literature

- Excessive measures to police society; unjust laws
- Pressure to conform
- Media manipulation and propaganda
- Measures to cover up flaws and lies within society
- Attempts to erase or revise society’s history
- Suppression of the arts
- Limited or complete lack of individual freedom
- Division of people into privileged and unprivileged groups
- Little hope for change
- Human lives that are rote, meaningless, or inhuman
- Economic manipulation
- Flawed, misunderstood, or abused advances (science, technology)
- Suppression of emotions

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**Figure 1.**

The recent explosion in dystopian literature for young adults interests us, in large part because these new titles include similar themes and conventions as classic works in this genre. Recent titles, though, are aimed squarely at a new audience (teens) and are enjoying strong success. To understand the nature of this phenomenon, we looked critically at a number of recent titles and found compelling reasons for the surge in popularity of dystopian works among adolescent readers.

## Our Process

In trying to uncover what about these books might explain their rising popularity, we selected a handful of the most popular or best-written books. We began by looking only at those books that had been written recently (since 2000), and then narrowing the possibilities to a manageable set by selecting titles that had appeared on both bestseller and awards lists or teen choice lists. Some titles were selected in an effort

**Table 1.** List of titles studied and prominent elements for classroom analysis

	Platonic or Romantic Relationship	Excessive Measures to Police Society	Pressure to Conform	Media Manipulation and Propaganda
<i>Across the Universe</i> (2011) by Beth Revis	X			
<i>Birthmarked</i> (2010) by Caragh M. O'Brien	X	X		
<i>Bumped</i> (2011) by Megan McCafferty	X		X	X
<i>The Declaration</i> (2007) by Gemma Malley	X	X		
<i>Divergent</i> (2011) by Veronica Roth	X	X	X	
<i>Enclave</i> (2011) by Ann Aguirre		X	X	
<i>Epitaph Road</i> (2011) by David Patneaude		X		
<i>Feed</i> (2002) by M.T. Anderson	X		X	X
The Hunger Games series (2008, 2009, 2010) by Suzanne Collins	X	X		X
<i>The Knife of Never Letting Go</i> (2008) by Patrick Ness		X		
<i>The Line</i> (2010) by Teri Hall		X		
<i>Little Brother</i> (2008) by Cory Doctorow		X		X
<i>Matched</i> (2010) by Ally Condie	X	X	X	
<i>Uglies</i> (2005) by Scott Westerfeld	X	X	X	
<i>The Unidentified</i> (2010) by Rae Mariz		X	X	X
<i>Unwind</i> (2007) by Neal Shusterman		X		



to give a greater cross section of the genre (e.g., some titles were chosen for the gender of their protagonist or the nature of the setting). We ended up with a list of 16 titles, including some series books, that we felt represented some of the most popular and well-written titles of the past decade. (See Table 1 for the complete list.)

We next set about reading these titles, recording our observations about which elements in the novels seemed significant and might help explain the ap-

peal. During this reading phase, we met together and compared notes; from these notes, we started to build a sense of the patterns and trends. As we finished each title, we reviewed the book in light of these patterns and sought to substantiate these in the context of other books on the list we had finished reading. Once we had read all of the selected titles, we met and discussed the specific elements we had identified and tried to bring out some larger, encompassing themes into which these more specific elements

Measures to Cover Up Flaws and Lies in Society	Attempts to Erase or Revise Society's History	Limited or Complete Lack of Individual Freedom	People Divided into Groups	Flawed or Abused Advances in Technology
X			X	X
X			X	
			X	
		X	X	
X			X	
X	X			X
				X
X		X	X	
X	X	X		
X	X	X		
X		X		
X				
X		X	X	X
			X	
		X	X	X

could fit. We noted, for instance, that efforts in these books to strictly police society or to suppress the arts or to create divisions into privileged and unprivileged groups could fit under a larger theme of the society's inhumanity; likewise, it was these same elements that often motivated a protagonist to acknowledge his or

her responsibility to take some action in restoring humanity to the community, which led us to an encompassing theme of agency. At the end of this process, we arrived at overarching common themes of inhumanity and isolation, agency and conscience, and relationships (romantic and otherwise).

The results of our analysis started us thinking that these books fulfill a

special role for teenagers, given their unique situation straddling childhood and adulthood. Some of the first connections we made were related to understandings of adolescent development, and these helped explain some of the popularity of these titles. We also looked at specific literary elements within these books and examined their impact. Finally, we considered what these findings might suggest for us as teachers, and how the conclusions we reached through this study might inform classroom practice.

## Adolescent Development and Dystopian Literature

The setting, themes, and characters in dystopian fiction are an appropriate fit with the intellectual changes that occur during adolescence. As adolescents develop, they are able to grasp bigger, more abstract concepts and consequences in the world around them and can engage in more critical thinking; they also show increasing interest in issues related to society at large (Larson & Richards, 1994; Steinberg, 2005). Dystopian novels that wrestle with deeper societal and moral issues are often well received by young minds that are developing the ability and even willingness to grapple with complex ideas.

As teens approach adulthood, they begin paying

more attention to the structures and systems that lie ahead. This includes career possibilities and lifestyle choices, but also more abstract systems such as moral standards and social norms. Morally, adolescents are moving from the black-and-white view of children toward the more nuanced view of adults, and the large number of significant transitions they experience can lead to uncertainty about their identities and futures (Kerig, Schulz, & Hauser, 2011; Steinberg, 2005). This uncertainty and questioning is part of the process through which teenagers develop their own set of values. Dystopian fiction features protagonists who are likewise questioning the underlying values of a flawed society and their identity within it—who they are going to be and how they are going to act. Every choice the characters make can carry enormous consequences, often to the point of significantly altering the world they've always known. Teenagers connect with these protagonists as they feel a similar weight on their shoulders.

## Specific Elements That Appeal to Teens

The connections between adolescent development and dystopian fiction highlight certain patterns that emerged from our analysis of these titles. While not every book we read featured every element described here, these books collectively represent significant themes and motifs that dominate the dystopian literature being published and read today. Based on our analysis and experience as teachers in secondary schools, these themes have a certain appeal to teenagers and also offer a wealth of material for classroom study. To supplement our own analysis, Justin queried some of his seventh- and eighth-grade students about the reasons they found these books appealing; we've included some of their responses in the following discussion.

### Inhumanity and Isolation

Whatever the backdrop of the dystopia—a violent society, a tyrannical government, an over-commercialized world—the protagonists come to understand that their society has become inhumane. They are appalled by the attitudes and actions of those within their culture, sickened at the complacency and even the open coldness of others toward situations that are cruel and unjust. As protagonists awaken to the realities around

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**The results of our analysis started us thinking that these books fulfill a special role for teenagers, given their unique situation straddling childhood and adulthood.**

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them, they feel an overwhelming sense that life has lost the value that it once had in the world—respect for life has been sacrificed for comfort or security. In YA dystopian novels, it is often this inhumanity that pushes the protagonists to action. The students in Justin’s classes, when asked how these books connected to our own society, commented that the government doesn’t take care of people in many of these books and that those in power tend to categorize people in arbitrary ways, thus creating unnecessary divisions.

In the book *Birthmarked* (O’Brien, 2010), Gaia has been training to be a midwife, just like her mother. At the start of the novel, she helps deliver a baby, then dutifully takes that newborn from its mother’s arms and gives it to the authorities. But the desperate pleas of the newborn’s mother echo in her mind, and she begins to question the authorities’ actions. These doubts, along with the mysterious disappearance of her parents, lead her to sneak into the Enclave (the seat of power) in search of answers. Once inside, she sees (in light of her training as a midwife) the epitome of inhumanity—the execution of a husband and his full-term pregnant wife for defying society’s strict mating laws. This is a defining point for Gaia, and she becomes determined to follow her own sense of right and wrong, despite the laws of the Enclave.

At the opening of *The Hunger Games* (Collins, 2008), Katniss is clearly aware of the injustices around her. To this point in her life, however, she has learned how to survive within them, and has no real thoughts of changing things. When her younger sister Prim is randomly selected as a tribute for the violent yearly games, however, the cruelty of the authorities becomes personal. Katniss’s experiences in the Hunger Games fuel her disgust at what life in her society has become—bohemian at the capitol, impoverished in the districts—and how the Games are used to control and intimidate otherwise innocent people. She is enraged at the utter enthusiasm many have for the violent Hunger Games, and arguably more enraged by the complacent attitude that prevails everywhere else. When she sees how cheap life has become, she is pushed over the edge and resolves to do whatever she can to change things.

While today’s teens mature in societies that aren’t nearly as cruel or twisted as those frequently described in dystopian texts, these protagonists’ growing understanding of the society around them mirrors

important growth taking place for teen readers. As protagonists in dystopian YA literature come to recognize the truth about the societies they live in, they often feel alone, separated from family and friends who do not share the same realizations. As a result, one of the conflicts they face is deciding whom they can trust with their understandings of their society’s flaws and with their plans to take corrective action.

In *Little Brother* (Doctorow, 2008), Marcus returns from his ordeal at the hands of an emboldened Homeland Security force, now aware of deep flaws in the society, flaws that his parents are unwilling or unable to see. Arguments with his father heighten Marcus’s sense of isolation, and even the friends who were incarcerated with him and know firsthand of the abuses eventually drift away from him, unwilling to pursue dangerous action against the society. Conor’s separation is clear at the beginning of *Unwind* (Shusterman, 2007), when his parents sign the papers to have him unwound (sent to have his organs harvested), but he grows close to Risa as the two of them seek escape from the authorities. Once in the relative safety of the Graveyard, however, Conor’s growing awareness of dark truths in the society distance him from Risa and push him into further separation, even from the society of his fellow Unwinds.

Feelings of isolation, of course, are not unusual for today’s teenage readers. Social issues, such as finding a place and fitting in, take on increasing importance for teenagers (Kerig, Schulz, & Hauser, 2011), and they worry about maintaining friendships and romantic relationships (Connolly & McIsaac, 2011). And while teens may be connected, on one level, with many friends through social networks and other technologies, such connections may not be as satisfying or as fulfilling as face-to-face relationships (Burke, Marlow, & Lento, 2010; Turkle, 2011), even though teens would not likely admit this possibility. Further, the choices teens begin to make about studies, extracurricular activities, and careers may distance them from formerly close friends. They find kindred

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**These protagonists’ growing understanding of the society around them mirrors important growth taking place for teen readers.**

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spirits, then, in the protagonists of dystopian literature who, by virtue of their growing awareness of society's flaws, find themselves similarly isolated from adults and even from their own peers.

Katy, from *The Unidentified* (Mariz, 2010), is one such protagonist. In her highly competitive society, where becoming Branded (sponsored by a corporation) assures you a comfortable existence, she has formed a tight bond with two other teens who share her musical interests, Ari and Mikey. Katy is increasingly suspicious of Branding, and as Ari becomes increasingly aggressive about pursuing Branding, she

and Katy begin to drift apart. Katy takes refuge in her relationship with Mikey, but once Katy herself becomes Branded, her relationship with him becomes strained. Becoming an insider to the Branding culture exposes Katy to more and more flaws in the society, a knowledge she can't share with Ari or Mikey because they remain blind to society's imperfections. The more Katy

understands about the truth of this society, the more adrift she feels in a confusing and potentially dangerous world and the less connected she becomes to her previous friends. The dynamics of her friendships will seem familiar ground to many teenage readers, and they can likely find comfort in reading their own confusions and sense of loneliness reflected in Katy's emotions.

#### **Agency and Conscience: The Brink of Adulthood**

Most YA novels feature a protagonist who is faced with challenges, external or internal, and who must overcome those challenges as part of coming of age or establishing an identity. Dystopian YA novels feature a similar motif, with the challenges faced often arising from the failures of society. Katniss Everdeen, in Collins's Hunger Games trilogy (2008, 2009, 2010), faces physical challenges in the form of the Games, but she must also deal with internal moral dilemmas as she questions the actions she's taken to preserve her life and family in the arena. These questions become even

more problematic as, in later books in the series, she is exploited as a standard-bearer for the revolt against President Snow and the corrupt government of the twelve districts. Cassia, in Condie's *Matched* (2010), must wrestle with her confused feelings for Ky, a boy with whom she has not been romantically matched per the society's optimal, algorithmic calculations. Pursuing a relationship with Ky would not only run counter to the society's strict regulations and place her future in jeopardy, but it might also bring about negative consequences for her family. While she feels attracted to her approved match, Xander, her attraction to Ky is qualitatively different and forces her to make significant choices about what path she will pursue within the society.

In the context of challenges such as these, dystopian fiction for young adults describes protagonists who reach a realization about their role in the larger society: they come to see themselves as agents, individuals with a will (often in sharp contrast to the will of the society) and with the capacity to not only disagree with prevailing opinions but to act out against them. The words of the Dylan Thomas poem that sound throughout *Matched*, "Do not go gentle into that good night," embody this growing sense of the potential to act. In Cassia's refusal to take the anxiety-reducing green pill that all members of her community carry, she demonstrates an understanding that she cannot be a passive member of the society. Holding on to the scrap of paper with the Thomas poem, learning to write by hand, kissing Ky—these are subtle acts of resistance that demonstrate Cassia's growing sense of agency. In her final decision in *Matched*, to leave in search of Ky and cut her ties for good with the Society, she embraces her role as agent, recognizing that what she's doing is bigger than just wanting to be with the one she loves. As she says to Xander, "Because it's about making our own choices. That's the point, isn't it? This is bigger than us now" (p. 356).

The protagonist's growing sense of the potential to act against society is a common characteristic of the YA dystopian fiction we examined. A striking example comes from Anna, the young girl in *The Declaration* (Malley, 2007), a book about a society that strictly limits population expansion. Anna has been harshly conditioned to see herself as unwanted and a drain on the world's resources—she is a Surplus. Once she's

made the decision to flee Granger House, where she and all the other Surpluses are kept isolated, she has to find a way to end up in solitary confinement so she can escape the House. She does so by arguing publicly with one of her teachers about the unfairness of denying people of her class the same longevity drugs other enjoy. As she puts into concrete words the doubts that she's been having, she "experiences her first taste of challenging the doctrine, and it was absolutely delicious" (p. 151). The change Anna experiences in this book is, perhaps, the most radical of all these dystopian novels. She begins the story completely indoctrinated, convinced of the appropriateness of her unfair treatment, but after Peter opens her mind and plants seeds of doubt, she begins to not only see the flaws in the society, but to embrace her role as an actor with the ability to choose how she acts within that society.

This notion of a protagonist's agency mirrors teens' own growing sense of their role as agents in a larger community, and explains in part the appeal of dystopian fiction to so many young people. Young children may blindly accept authority and follow the "rules" laid down by parents and other authority figures; as teenagers transition to adults, however, they are expected to take on more responsibility and to make more independent choices. High school juniors and seniors, for example, are making significant choices about post-high school education and career options. As the adolescent psychologist Steinberg (2005) explains, these increasingly adult roles "stimulate the development of independent decision-making abilities and the clarification of personal values" (p. 300). As teens' awareness of society's conventions and expectations gradually solidifies, they see their own potential as actors within the society. They come to recognize their own power as manifest in the choices they make about which career to pursue or what kinds of relationships they'll form. The protagonists in dystopian literature ring true with teens' own experiences, and with their growing sense of self as agent and as bearer of the responsibility for their actions. The teens that Justin interviewed echoed this idea, explaining that part of why they liked these books is because they are driven by the main characters' personalities; the exercise of agency and responsibility certainly plays a role in these characters' strengths.

This awareness of one's own agency as well as one's responsibility for the consequences of choices

is eloquently portrayed at the end of the novel *Across the Universe* (Revis, 2011). In destroying the pumping system that delivered a sedative-like drug to the residents of the spaceship he lives in, Elder has freed them to feel emotions once again. But by the end of the book, it's clear that he has doubts about this path of action and is worried about governing a society that is truly free to feel and think and act as its members wish. These are frightening choices he faces, and the consequences of those choices are significant, a fact that Elder seems to only fully realize once the decision has already been made.

Similarly, teenagers stand on the cusp of significant choices with life-altering consequences; there is little doubt that such choices will make them feel anxious and uncertain. It is likely comforting, then, to see this uncertainty in Elder or in Cassia as she ponders what the Society might do to her family if she leaves to find Ky. Seeing their own concerns and worries mirrored in these characters must help teens feel that they are not alone, and may even give them the courage to face those difficult choices and their consequences, much as do the protagonists of these dystopian works.

#### **Relationships: Platonic and Romantic**

The protagonists of YA dystopias gradually develop a sense of agency and potential influence as they become aware of the flaws in their society. While this growing awareness can isolate them from others around them, the actions they take and even their increased understanding of the truth are often aided by a relationship of some kind with another character in the story. This relationship, sometimes romantic, provides a catalyst for both the protagonist's changing perceptions about the society and his or her willingness to take action that runs counter to the conventions of that society.

In M. T. Anderson's *Feed* (2002), for instance, the disruption of Titus's "feed" (a constant Internet connection linked directly into the brain) certainly causes upheaval in his life. But it's his relationship with Violet that really forces Titus to reevaluate the

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**This notion of a protagonist's agency mirrors teens' own growing sense of their role as agents in a larger community.**

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role that the feed has played in defining who he is and what he wants out of life. The attraction he feels for Violet stems, in part at least, from her nontraditional lifestyle; the time he spends with her encourages him to explore the implications of a consumerist society with its tentacles, literally, in every space of his mind. For Marcus, in *Little Brother*, subversive action against the powers-that-be comes easily, almost immediately

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**These relationships, romantic and platonic, serve to actually shape [protagonists] thinking about the society around them.**

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after he is released from custody. In the process of taking his initial actions to a level where the resistance will be more organized, he meets Ange, a girl who shares similar distrust of the government. While Ange doesn't open Marcus's eyes the way Violet does Titus's, she does give him the courage to take increasingly public action, as in the case of the press

conference Marcus holds, and supports him as he eventually goes public with the story of his abuse at the hands of a government institution. In *The Declaration*, Mrs. Princent, the cruel House Matron who ensures that the Surpluses are tightly controlled, recognizes the potential dangers a romantic relationship can bring when she promises herself to "beat any idea of romance out of Anna" (p. 154).

Friendships, and especially romantic relationships, expose the protagonists to differing opinions and perceptions of life. This could clearly be dangerous to those in a dystopian society who want a strict status quo, where all think alike and fulfill a given role. In *The Knife of Never Letting Go* (Ness, 2008), Todd, a young man growing up in a society where all women were killed by a mysterious virus, provides a strong example of this. He encounters a teen girl, Viola, brought to Todd's planet by a spaceship that has crashed near his home, and her arrival causes no small disturbance in his society—a disturbance that reveals to Todd the first cracks in his society. Viola's very different perspective from a distant world helps Todd begin to see important truths about his world, and his relationship with Viola—displaying elements of both friendship and romance—drives him to take previously unthought-of actions in her defense as he

tries to protect her from men who would exploit or kill her to keep dark secrets hidden.

Romance and friendships are, not surprisingly, elements that teenagers are quite interested in. The onset of puberty and its accompanying hormonal changes, as well as shifting societal expectations that encourage boys and girls to see each other in romantic ways, connect with the romantic relationships portrayed in YA fiction. And friendships represent, as already discussed, a significant part of teenagers' sense of identity and self. But in dystopian fiction, these relationships play a more significant role than solely exploring one's sexuality or identity or weathering the ups-and-downs of romantic relationships. These relationships, romantic and platonic, serve to actually shape their thinking about the society around them and even encourage them to take subversive action.

One example of this influence is Condie's Cassia, a young girl who looks forward to her Match Banquet like every other girl and who seems set for a promising career in society. Why, then, does she suddenly decide to break with all conventions in ways that are at first subtle and then more public? Her attraction to Ky seems to give her the permission she needs to take his stories seriously and lends credibility to his suggestions that things in the society are not as they seem to be. By the end of the first book, this attraction gives her the courage to make a decision that is bound to have negative consequences for herself and her family. This is not to dismiss the influence of her grandfather or father, both "closet activists" who we infer have their own questions about the truths promulgated by the society, but it's clear that her attraction to and blossoming romantic relationship with Ky are what drive much of the change in her thinking and what give her the motivation to deviate more and more seriously from society's strictures.

It isn't enough to argue that dystopian fiction is compelling to young adult readers because it depicts romantic and platonic relationships. We would suggest that it is the nature of those relationships as depicted in this genre that speaks to young readers. These books portray honest and authentic relationships; they acknowledge that romantic relationships are not just about exploring physical attraction or sexuality, they are about how becoming intimate with another person can have an impact on the way you see the world, the actions you take, the level of

responsibility you feel toward another person. They confirm that friendships are about more than simply having someone to hang out with, someone with whom to pursue common interests; friends also have a significant impact on the way you see the world and can influence your actions in ways that are positive and negative.

## The Place of YA Dystopian Literature in the Classroom

While the patterns that emerged from comparing these titles are interesting to literary geeks like us, they also signal some important implications for teachers and librarians. First and foremost, we see that these novels can withstand serious literary scrutiny, and perhaps deserve a place alongside the study of other classic dystopian pieces such as Orwell's *1984* or Huxley's *Brave New World*. In fact, the dystopian pieces we discuss here bear striking similarities to these classics, and studying a YA dystopian novel would certainly provide an effective bridge to a classic piece, as has been suggested in the past by Herz and Gallo (2005) and Joan Kaywell (1993). Students' appreciation for *1984*'s Winston as he becomes aware of what's wrong in his society and of his potential for action will increase as they compare him to Cassia in *Matched* or Todd in *The Knife of Never Letting Go*. Likewise, Winston's relationship with Julia will benefit from a character analysis based on examining the relationship between Anna and Peter in *The Declaration*.

We can also look to ways to connect these texts with content from other curricular areas. The novels discussed here provide rich opportunities for discussion about the role government can and should play in our lives, and the responsibility individuals have for ensuring that justice and humanity are preserved by those in power. We could use dystopian literature to build cross-curricular connections between the English class and a Government or Civics course, with a thematic unit exploring the purpose and role that government should play. Connecting events in *Little Brother* to current events related to security, especially in the face of past and potential terrorist attacks, would help students explore the implications of these things for their lives and personal liberties. Similar connections could be built between physics courses and the exploration of space travel in *Across the Universe*, between

geography courses and the ideas of limited natural resources in *The Declaration*, or between debates of abortion policy in current events and the policies depicted in *Unwind*.

The dystopian novel doesn't need to be so close to our reality in order to provide meaningful exploration of significant topics, however: *Birthmarked* and *The Declaration* raise important questions about human rights and the value of a human life; *Unwind* raises similar questions and also explores the rights of teenagers to make decisions about their future. Issues of free choice—and paying the price for wrong choices—could be explored meaningfully in *Matched*, and the potential negative influences of a consumerist society rest in nearly every chapter of *Feed* and *The Unidentified*.

The richness of many of these novels argues for their study in the ELA classroom, whether independently or coupled with a dystopian classic. Perhaps most compelling, given the broad choices available in this genre, we could consider using dystopian novels in literature circles (see Daniels, 2002). This would allow students to exercise individual choice in selecting a book to study while at the same time allowing for whole-class explorations of these thematic issues and the stylistic elements of the genre.

For teachers and librarians both, we feel strongly that the connections between these novels and teens' lives and concerns argue for a need to showcase these books as we converse with teens about their reading. While the same could be said of most YA literature, dystopian literature seems to speak particularly strongly to teens at this time and to the choices and challenges they face as they move toward adulthood.

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**The connections between these novels and teens' lives and concerns argue for a need to showcase these books.**

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# Forging Global Perspectives through Post-colonial Young Adult Literature

In reading the call for this issue of *The ALAN Review*, one question in particular stood out to me: “What will our future roles as young adult literature advocates be and with whom should we be forging relationships?” As a former high school English teacher who taught World Literature, and in my recent work with preservice English teachers, my goal has consistently been to locate texts that not only engage my students and are relevant to their lives, but also invite them to consider the lives of young people (un)like themselves living in other parts of the world. I am particularly interested in the pedagogical possibilities of novels that feature young protagonists of color living outside of the cultural context of the US. However, it has been challenging to find such texts because they are underrepresented in the international young adult literature market—the collection of young adult books published in other countries that are then imported or republished in the US. (i.e., the Harry Potter series).

In a recent survey of winning and honor titles of the Printz Award for Excellence in Young Adult Literature over the last ten years, Cart (2010) counted a high number of international novels. However, he pointed out that these texts were primarily from Europe and Australia, and the stories that featured characters of color were all set in US. multicultural contexts. In a similar study, Koss and Teale (2009) reviewed bestsellers, teen lists, and award-winning young adult novels from 1999 to 2005 to determine the types of young adult novels that are published and that adolescents read the most. The authors determined that, while the number of stories with inter-

national settings was higher than they expected, the novels were “culturally generic with the characters’ ethnicity used only for descriptive purposes rather than functioning to depict insights about the culture or cultural practice” (p. 566). Like Cart (2010), Koss and Teale (2009) found that “the majority of international countries and characters portrayed were white and European” (p. 569). The authors conclude that,

The lack of cultural diversity in YA literature indicates that educators will need to make special efforts to seek out and use quality books that include diverse characters, and that publishers should increase their efforts to make available YA books that include multicultural characters and discuss issues related to race and diversity in significant ways. (p. 570)

Thus, I propose one way educators might forge ahead in the field of young adult literature is to advocate for literature that features diversity in international contexts. In this article, I focus on the possibilities, challenges, and potential pedagogical applications of post-colonial young adult literature.

## Defining Post-colonial Young Adult Literature

I use the term “post-colonial” to refer to the literary theory and body of literature that focuses on the experiences of nations colonized by Britain, France, Portugal, Spain, and the Netherlands (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 2002). The literature that has emerged in response to colonialism represents numerous countries from various regions of the world, such as the Americas, the African continent, and South Asia.

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## Post-colonial young adult literature features stories written for and about young adults coming of age during the time of colonization and afterwards.

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Although colonialism was carried out differently in these regions, they share a certain tension with and assertion of difference from the imperial worldview (Ashcroft et al., 2002). For instance, a central concern of post-colonial theory and literature is to interrogate

the relationship between the colonized and the colonizer (see Memmi, 1957/1991). McGillis (2000) explains, “The colonial mentality assumes that the colonizer represents a more advanced state of civilization than the colonized does, and therefore that the colonizer has a right to assume a position of dominance” (p. xxii). Post-colonial authors challenge this perspective and explore the ramifications such a worldview has had on groups of people

around the world during colonialism and afterwards. Post-colonial young adult literature explores similar events from the perspective of adolescents.

Locating post-colonial young adult texts can pose some challenges because they are not categorized as “post-colonial,” but rather tend to fall under the more generalized labels of “multicultural,” “global,” or “international.” While multicultural texts do include the experiences of immigrants of color from post-colonial nations, these stories often focus on the immigrant’s experience of adjusting to or assimilating into western culture, whether in Europe, North America, or Australia. Such insights are certainly important for readers to have. However, post-colonial texts merit special consideration because they are culturally and historically specific. In other words, post-colonial narratives offer a view of the world beyond a western cultural context because they feature characters that tell stories from within the purview of their own national contexts and invoke a colonial history that has shaped and continues to inform the sociocultural, economic, and political contexts of the geographical locations where the characters are located.

In my own search for post-colonial young adult literature, I have devised five characteristics that might serve as guidelines for other educators in their efforts to identify and select post-colonial young adult literature:

- Post-colonial young adult literature features stories written for and about young adults coming of age during the time of colonization and afterwards, and explores the ways in which characters navigate the geographical, cultural, social, economic, and political landscapes at play in that particular culture and time period.
- Post-colonial narratives are produced by authors who are members of the group depicted, in consideration of the colonial gaze that has characterized so many harmful representations of post-colonial subjects (Fanon, 1952/1967) and in support of these authors’ attempts to represent their cultures from their own insider perspectives.
- Post-colonial narratives are culturally specific and feature an unselfconscious use of local languages and/or dialects.
- Post-colonial narratives are often based on actual events and run across several genres, such as historical or contemporary fiction, fantasy, science fiction, and nonfiction (including memoir and autobiography).
- Post-colonial themes in these young adult texts mirror those explored in post-colonial theory, including identity—race, class, gender, sexuality, and nationality—hybridity, agency, the relationship between colonizer/colonized, among others (Ashcroft et al., 2002; McGillis, 2000).

This brief background serves as an introduction to the genre of post-colonial young adult literature, one that certainly raises more questions than answers about how to categorize these works.

### Identity in Post-colonial Young Adult Literature

One theme that post-colonial young adult literature and traditional young adult literature have in common is that of identity. Young adult literature recognizes adolescence as a unique moment in life with its own distinct challenges—that of growing up, marked by a search for identity and a need to belong (Cart, 2008). Post-colonial young adult literature addresses these challenges in a unique context: growing up during or after colonization. This context brings additional complications for young adults whose identities and the choices they can make are shaped and constrained by the social, cultural, political, and historical contexts of

the countries where the stories take place. As coming of age narratives, I believe these stories are relevant to young people in the US because they offer some familiar experiences and challenges about growing up, while also presenting readers the opportunity to engage cultures beyond their own and consider a different worldview. In addition, in invoking a colonial history and its aftermath, post-colonial young adult texts raise challenging questions about the current state of the world, which can in turn provide an opportunity for students to learn through inquiry and have generative discussions in the English classroom.

For the purposes of this article, I have selected three novels as exemplars of post-colonial young adult literature: the historical fiction novel *Climbing the Stairs* (Venkatraman, 2008), the historical fiction and graphic novel *Aya* (Aboutet & Oubrierie, 2007), and the contemporary realistic fiction novel *Now Is the Time for Running* (Williams, 2011). Additional texts educators might consider are included in an annotated bibliography at the end of this article. While these texts do not explore all of the concerns of post-colonial theory, the stories are rich and intricately weave many themes in the experiences and perspectives of young adults. The narratives successfully represent the complex ways in which social, cultural, and political issues intersect in the characters' lives.

I chose these novels for stories that feature a variety of historical eras, geographical locations, periods of young adulthood, and adolescent issues that secondary students will find engaging. In the following sections, I analyze each novel in terms of the theme of identity and discuss how the authors address and represent post-colonial issues from the perspective of an adolescent coming of age in post-colonial times. At the end of each section, I discuss some pedagogical considerations for using these novels with students. Together, these three stories paint a compelling picture of young people's lives in the (post)colonial past and present and provide opportunities for students and teachers to engage a variety of cultures and contexts.

## **Gender and Intersectionality in *Climbing the Stairs***

The Young Adult Library Association (YALSA) named *Climbing the Stairs* (Venkatraman, 2008) the 2009 Best Book for Young Adults. The story centers on Vidya, a

15-year-old girl coming of age in India in the 1940s, a time of tremendous social and political change. This historical fiction provides a different perspective on a well-known global event in history—World War II. The author reveals that Indians made up the largest volunteer army to fight alongside the British while they simultaneously struggled to gain their independence from Britain through the non-violent movement led by Mahatma Gandhi. Against this historical background, readers learn about the lives of Indian women in a patriarchal society through Vidya, as she attempts to resist and negotiate traditional gender norms. As a female, Vidya is expected to accept being in an arranged marriage and to cease her education once she becomes a wife and mother. Instead, Vidya dreams of going to college.

Feminist concerns run strongly throughout the narrative, as much of the novel takes place indoors and focuses on the daily lives of women. Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin (2006) explain that:

In many different societies, women, like colonized subjects, have been relegated to the position of "Other," "colonized" by various forms of patriarchal domination. They thus share with colonized races and cultures an intimate experience of the politics of oppression and repression . . . Feminist and post-colonial discourse both seek to reinstate the marginalized in the face of the dominant. (p. 233)

In this way, the story explores the marginalized status of women in a patriarchal society at the end of the colonial period in India. The narrative begins with Vidya as both an insider and outsider in her own nuclear family because of her gender. Her father is somewhat progressive and makes allowances that contradict her mother's more traditional and conservative ideas of what girls can and cannot do. However, when Vidya's father is severely injured in a peace protest and can no longer provide for his family, her mother finds herself suddenly helpless and follows the tradition that says she must live with her husband's family. Vidya realizes that there are no other alternatives for her mother because "[a]ll her life, she had been trained to be a

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**In invoking a colonial history and its aftermath, post-colonial young adult texts raise challenging questions about the current state of the world.**

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housewife. She had no education. She wasn't qualified for any kind of job" (p. 60).

Vidya, her mother, and older brother move to her grandfather's house, where her uncle, aunts, and cousins also live. In contrast to her upbringing, Vidya's extended family observes strict traditional

customs along gender lines. In her grandfather's house, even space is gendered: "the men lived upstairs and the women lived downstairs in that house" (p. 21). Vidya goes from having her own room and her own bed to living in the women's quarters in the "downstairs" portion of the house, where

she sleeps on a mat on the floor and finds her days arranged around cleaning, cooking, babysitting, and serving the men their meals. Readers follow Vidya as she negotiates the sociocultural limits placed on her because of her gender.

In addition to voicing gender issues in this novel, Venkatraman illustrates how identity categories such as gender, class, race, and nationality intersect in complex ways. In doing so, the author complicates any simple dichotomy of oppressor/oppressed by showing how oppression takes multiple forms, including colonization, racism, classism, and sexism. For instance, Vidya's family belongs to the Brahmin caste, an elite social status, which Vidya explains "wasn't meant to be hereditary or exclusive or hierarchical, but Brahmins and other "high" castes now oppressed those without education or wealth" (p. 8). However, having this measure of power over those less fortunate does little to protect Vidya's father from racist attacks by the British or Vidya from experiencing sexism in her grandfather's affluent, but conservative household. Her uncle once tells her approvingly, "Ah, Vidya, you've learned to be silent at last. Maybe we'll find you a husband despite your tanned complexion" (p. 34). He reveals both his expectation that, as a girl, she should be submissive and also the extent of his internalized racist beliefs that lighter skin color is more desirable. In weaving these categories, the author presents a view of India that is not only heterogeneous, but also makes a strong case for the ways

in which race, class, and gender constantly intertwine and complicate fixed notions of identity.

While my analysis focused on post-colonial themes in the novel, namely gender issues and the intersectionality of identities—the contradictions of Vidya's experiencing both sexism and socioeconomic privilege—there are multiple pedagogical approaches to this young adult novel. Students and teachers could certainly discuss the post-colonial elements of the story and reflect on the slippery, overlapping, and often conflicting nature of their own identities. Educators could also focus on the historical aspects of the story, which presents a perspective on World War II that is not typically addressed in social studies or literature courses and serves as a reminder that issues of colonialism extended well into the second half of the twentieth century. The novel also lends itself well to a study of culture and language as the author weaves Hindu beliefs and practices as well as many Hindi words into the narrative.

### **Counternarrative and Hybridity in *Aya***

*Aya* (Abouet & Oubrerie, 2007) is the first book in a series of three graphic novels about the adventures of teenage girls living in Côte d'Ivoire during the country's prosperous years in the 1970s. *Aya* won the 2006 award for Best First Album at the Angoulême International Comics Festival. Translated from French, the story is loosely based on Abouet's own childhood memories of Côte d'Ivoire. The light and humorous narrative follows *Aya* and her friends Adjoua and Bintou as they go out dancing and flirt with boys. *Aya* is the studious and responsible one who intends to go to medical school. Adjoua and Bintou are carefree and more interested in securing a good boyfriend than a career. The adolescent drama heightens when Adjoua gets pregnant and has to marry quickly.

Through its colorful illustrations and its humorous treatment of young adulthood, the author intended for *Aya* to function as a counternarrative. The novel portrays a vibrant and flourishing time in Côte d'Ivoire's past, in contrast to news media images of various countries in the African continent ravaged by poverty and disease. In the preface to the novel, Chase (2007) provides cultural, economic, and political background information on Côte d'Ivoire and indicates that, by depicting the country during a time of prosperity, *Aya* offers a narrative that belies "the news channels'

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## **Venkatraman illustrates how identity categories such as gender, class, race, and nationality intersect in complex ways.**

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unremittingly tragic narratives and unsettling images” of “swollen bellied children, machete wielding janja-weeds, and too many men and women dying of AIDS . . . that dominate the Western media” (para. 1–2). In this sense, the visual component of the graphic novel can help readers imagine Côte d’Ivoire in a different way than the African region is often represented.

In addition to functioning as a counter-narrative, *Aya* reveals both in images and text the cultural hybridity of the nation after colonization. Throughout the narrative, there is evidence of the continued cultural influence from France, which had colonized Côte d’Ivoire until 1960, as well as the newer influence of US popular culture in the seventies. For example, in one scene, Aya and her family are invited to have dinner at the house of her father’s employer, the owner of a brewery. Upon entering the gated mansion, Aya’s mother expresses admiration for the beautiful home, and the hostess shares that “[t]he furniture is from Paris” (p. 31). The owner of the brewery casually mentions that he knows the president of Côte d’Ivoire, who had him over recently and is “in Paris right now, meeting with president Giscard D’Estaing” (p. 31). Another vignette shows a woman describing a “Catherine Deneuve dress” she wants her tailor to reproduce for a wedding she is attending (p. 88).

Readers can also note the global reach of US American popular culture in seventies Côte d’Ivoire: the characters refer to the shows *Dallas* and *The Six Million Dollar Man*, and in an illustration of an outdoor disco—people dancing, music notes floating in the air, and a text bubble indicating music blaring from a loudspeaker—there is a man wearing the same white suit as John Travolta in the film *Saturday Night Fever* (p. 8). These scenes are juxtaposed with the local customs and fashions. For instance, Aya’s mother is a healer and the first person Adjoua goes to see when she feels ill; the girls wear European-style clothing as well as the *pagne*—the fabric wrap that can be worn as a skirt or dress. The narrative also indicates that there is a tension between socio-economic classes and that the more affluent individuals, such as the owner of the brewery, are not only able to afford French products, but they also use their cachet to enhance their social standing. Thus the novel complicates any singular representation of the African continent by including images and scenarios that illustrate the cultural hybridity of Côte d’Ivoire after independence.

The educational potential of *Aya* is that, as a graphic novel, it offers a visual component that is typically absent in print novels. When readers engage their imagination to construct for themselves the world about which they read, they draw images from a visual library built on their own experiences.

Graphic novels provide visual representations of culture through illustrations of objects and landscapes particular to a geographic region that readers might not have otherwise imagined for themselves. Of course, educators should always invite students to critically examine cultural representations, whether print or visual. For instance, in the case of *Aya*, the biographical information on the illustrator states that Oubrerie was born in Paris and travels frequently to Côte d’Ivoire. The fact that the illustrator had firsthand experiences in Côte d’Ivoire lends his illustrations a sense of accuracy. However, it is not clear whether or not the author and illustrator collaborated over the art or how faithful the novel is to Aboutet’s childhood memories. Nevertheless, *Aya* presents an opportunity for teachers to engage their students in literacy practices that include not only examining printed words, but also analyzing the illustrations as artwork and cultural representations that complement the narrative.

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**The visual component of the graphic novel can help readers imagine Côte d’Ivoire in a different way than the African region is often represented.**

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### ***Xenophobia in Now Is the Time for Running***

*Now Is the Time for Running* (Williams, 2011), one of YALSA’s 2012 Best Fiction for Young Adults winners, is based on actual events. In May 2008 in South Africa, xenophobic riots targeted tens of thousands of migrants and refugees, many of whom were from Zimbabwe and seeking asylum in South Africa. A number of international newspapers covered the story as several of those refugees were killed in these attacks (Underhill & Khumalo, 2010).

One particularly graphic image was widely circulated as representing the extent of violence in the riots—a man set on fire. In the postscript of the book, Williams explains that he was moved by these

incidents and his own conversations with displaced and homeless Zimbabwean youth and decided to weave them into the novel, which is set in the first decade of the new millennium. This novel deviates slightly from the criteria I devised at the beginning of this essay, namely that the author should be an insider to the culture represented. Although the author of this novel is South African and the main character, Deo, is a 15-year-old boy from Zimbabwe, the narrative revolves around the xenophobic constructions of immigrants in South Africa and their consequences, to which Williams bears witness.

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**This . . . narrative of xenophobia provides readers with a realistic account of the current social, political, and economic issues at play in post-colonial Zimbabwe and South Africa.**

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In the opening chapters of the novel, Deo witnesses the decimation of his hometown of Gutu, Zimbabwe, by soldiers who accuse the villagers of opposing the current president's reelection. Deo and his older brother Innocent narrowly escape the attack and make their way to the border, where they cross illegally into South Africa in search of their father. Deo is resilient because he has to take care of Innocent, who has a disability that remains unnamed throughout the

story. Through the brothers' journey, readers get a current portrait of Zimbabwe and South Africa—two countries in the “aftermath of colonialism” (Hickling-Hudson, Matthews, & Woods, 2004, p. 3).

In contemporary post-colonial Zimbabwe, there is a food shortage, a totalitarian government, military oppression, and hyperinflation. The author includes several accounts of Zimbabwe's unstable economy. In one scene, for example, a character remarked how devalued the currency had become: “Two hundred [South African] rands—today that is twenty billion Zim dollars. Tomorrow it might be thirty billion” (Williams, 2011, p. 79). This novel was also originally published in South Africa under the title *The Billion Dollar Soccer Ball* (Williams, 2009), and before he flees to South Africa, Deo describes stuffing a billion Zim dollars in his soccer ball:

I know where Amai [mom] hides our money . . . I find several fifty million dollar notes, a few more hundred mil-

lion dollars. There is no time to count it all. It's not much, but it will buy us some food . . . I stuff them into the leather pouch. The money fills out the ball nicely, and I find a piece of string and sew up the patch. I toss the ball into the air. Nobody will know I have a billion dollars in my soccer ball. (p. 32)

The recent economic realities in Zimbabwe reveal that hyperinflation indeed made it possible for Deo to be in possession of a billion dollars.

In addition to depicting recent social, political, and economic issues happening in Zimbabwe, the novel is also a moving account of immigration and xenophobia in South Africa. Once Deo and his brother cross into South Africa, they find an opportunity to earn a living even though they are illegal immigrants—they pick tomatoes on a farm located near the border. However, this respite is temporary as Deo soon experiences the wrath of the out-of-work farmers from the neighboring village. Deo does not understand why they are so angry until his friend Philani explains:

Before the people started coming across the river from Zimbabwe, the men from Khomele village worked on the Flying Tomato Farm. . . . There are thousands of people who come to find work in South Africa. And it is hard for the men from Khomele. They lose their jobs, and then they see people come from across the river eating the food they used to eat and getting the money they used to get. They're very angry, and who can blame them? (pp. 124–126)

This fast-paced and affecting narrative of xenophobia provides readers with a realistic account of the current social, political, and economic issues at play in post-colonial Zimbabwe and South Africa. The author reveals the complex nature of oppression in post-Apartheid South Africa, which is no longer solely based on race but on nationality and is intimately intertwined with economics and the fight over resources.

Using *Now Is the Time for Running* with students opens up multiple opportunities for them to learn through inquiry and class discussion. For instance, teachers and students could explore the historical events that have led to Zimbabwe's recent economic and political struggles. They could also conduct research on similar current events at play in their own national contexts—for instance, immigration issues in the US today—and have a conversation that considers immigration and xenophobia in global, national, and local contexts.

## Conclusion

My analyses of these three novels leave me convinced that reading stories about people who have experienced colonization and/or its aftermath is not only valuable, but also necessary. These narratives inform readers about the experiences of youth around the world in the recent and distant past, and may help US teachers and students cultivate empathy toward, and an ethical relationship with, cultures different from their own. Cart (2008) explains that one of the chief values of young adult literature is “its capacity to offer readers an opportunity to see themselves reflected in its pages” (para. 11). However, post-colonial young adult literature might also evoke a tension for readers who can identify with parts of the narrative, but never all of it. In other words, the experience of coming of age might be familiar to readers, but the cultures, events, and places depicted in the novels will likely not reflect readers’ own experiences. Thus, the challenge of using post-colonial young adult literature in education settings is that readers will have to grapple with both the elements in the story that echo their own lived experiences and those that evoke difference. While too great a cultural difference may alienate readers from the character’s experiences, reading about the experiences of young people coming of age elsewhere may offer some commonalities through which readers can engage difference.

Post-colonial young adult literature presents rich opportunities for classroom discussion. The literature explores multiple topics about the challenges of growing up and invites students and teachers not only to reflect on their own experiences coming of age, but also to examine their own cultures and the roles they can play in society. In addition, post-colonial young adult literature presents multidimensional account of identities—the ways in which identities such as race, class, gender, sexuality, and nationality intersect and are shaped by historical, geographical, economic, and social contexts. Teachers who use US multicultural young adult texts in their classes might consider pairing them with post-colonial young adult texts to encourage students to examine cultural issues from local, national, and global perspectives. Finally, in both social studies and literature courses, reading narratives set at a particular moment in history presents students with the occasion to conduct further inquiry

about the historical, political, and cultural details of the story. Like Wolk (2009), I believe that the questions that come out of these conversations can lead students to become democratic citizens on local and global scales:

Classroom inquiry nurtures social responsibility, and living a socially responsible life means to live a life of inquiry . . . . No longer is the curriculum simply the novel or the facts to be learned but, rather, the students and their teacher together using books, other authentic resources, and their own opinions and experiences to create the “living curriculum” as a true community of learners. (p. 666)

Educators could also teach the traditional academic skills related to literary analysis in new ways through post-colonial young adult literature. Specifically, because these texts often refer to local languages, their vocabularies are well suited to aesthetic and linguistic analyses. Consequently, teachers would be able to use these texts in ways that go beyond typical identification of plots, themes, symbols, and character development.

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Williams, M. (2011). *Now is the time for running*. London, England: Little, Brown and Company. When his hometown in Zimbabwe is decimated by soldiers, fifteen-year-old Deo and his older brother Innocent run for their lives and cross the border into South Africa in search of their father. As refugees, their struggle continues when they are faced with prejudice and xenophobia.

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## NCTE Literacy Education Advocacy Day 2013: April 18

Join NCTE members from across the nation for NCTE's Literacy Education Advocacy Day on Thursday, April 18, 2013. NCTE members attending Advocacy Day will learn the latest about literacy education issues at the federal level and have a chance to interact with people highly involved with those issues. See <http://www.ncte.org/action/advocacyday> for details.

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# Adolescent Males' Valued Texts:

Shaping and Making Their Identities Public

“To describe is to value”

—Patricia F. Carini

**B**y considering what students value and confront outside of the classroom walls, we literacy educators can start to create safe spaces for taking risks. As previous research (Beers, 2003; Clark & Marinak, 2011; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002) suggests, there is an imperative for classroom teachers to allow students to self-select texts, for by doing so, student motivation and desire to read increases. In addition, avenues for bringing out-of-school literacies and interests into the classroom are paved. This article seeks to extend this conversation by describing our action research study in which seventh-grade students selected texts and shared how and why they should be valued. What we found is that by allowing students to have choice and control within their reading and to voice the value of both the books and themselves, we had created space in which students were able to construct or alter their identities. To explain how this occurred, we briefly discuss the research literature and give details about the study, after which we share our findings regarding the participants' identities.

Adrienne and Shanetia met while Adrienne was earning her secondary English teaching certification. Shanetia was one of her education professors. Adrienne often spoke of feeling “almost jealous” because her middle and high school experiences did not mirror those of her grade-school days; she retreated from reading after grade school, finding that “school reading” was not enjoyable. She yearned for books and stories that spoke to her, that provided an escape from

her reality, or showcased the contradicting feelings she had during middle and high school. She vowed that when she entered into teaching, her classrooms would provide access to books that went beyond the common study novels that she had read when she was in school. She would do her best not to shy away from books with unhappy endings; instead, she would invite students to read more “melancholy” titles (de la Peña, 2012).

With this pledge, she entered into her classroom with a renewed focus. Young adult literature is so vast and intricate, just like the lives of adolescents today. Therefore, the texts Adrienne introduced and read while as a preservice teacher and now as an inservice teacher mark the continued evolution of her teaching philosophy.

## Brief Review of Literature

We were particularly interested in what the impact of self-selection would be on the adolescent males in Adrienne's class. The research asserts that adolescent males yearn for ownership of their reading selections. A study conducted by Patrick Jones, Maureen L. Hartman, and Patricia Taylor (2006, cited in Jeffery, 2009) found that 43% of the boys don't read or only read what they have to. Therefore, to disrupt these numbers, we set out to increase students' (particularly males') choice and control with the hope that both would raise the “enjoyment of reading and [foster]

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**We wondered what kind of connections and community building would occur in a “real classroom with real students.”**

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voluntary reading” (Taylor, 2004/2005). Taylor cites Brozo (2010): “Choice and control are two ingredients commonly missing in instruction provided to adolescent boys who are not reading as would be expected

in their grade level and who are disinterested . . . readers” (Taylor, p. 294).

Classroom teachers serve a vital role in supporting students’ self-concept and self-esteem. Therefore, we launched our study with the following premise: students who value books and perceive themselves as compe-

tent readers are more likely to read for purpose and pleasure, as well as improve fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension; therefore, in order to nurture literacy competence and motivation, adolescents should be invited to read and respond to valued texts (Beers, 2003; Clark & Marinak, 2011).

Other studies informed this action research project, too. Asking 55 middle school boys who frequent her school’s library, Charity Cantey found that they want action (Cantey, Bach, & Bickmore, 2009/2010). “[Adventure], suspense, and a touch of mystery” kept these boys active readers (p. 3). Moreover, “kids doing amazing things” generated the boys’ enthusiasm for reading. Dwayne Jeffery (2009) reminds literacy educators that “boys will read if we put the right book in their hands. They need books with male protagonists, honesty, and most of all, books with characters and stories they can relate to.” Boy readers are “discriminating readers” (p. 56). Moreover, research also shows that “out-of-school literacies play a very important role in literacy learning, and teachers can draw on these skills to foster learning in school” (Sipe, 2009, p. 3).

These examples of the research literature serve as the foundation of this action research. Therefore, our guiding question is, “How does allowing students, particularly males, to self-select valued texts support the construction of their identities?”

## **Methodology**

We embarked upon this action research project during Adrienne’s 10-week student teaching placement. The

study took place from February 2011 to May 2011 in a seventh-grade combined advanced and proficient English/language arts class in an urban middle school in central Pennsylvania. This class period lasted 50 minutes and met Monday–Friday. Twenty-five students were enrolled in the class; this article focuses on a representative sample of the males.

The action research project was modeled after the “Text Talk” project that was assigned in the adolescent literature/developmental reading class that Shanetia taught and Adrienne took. In that class, Adrienne and her cohort read and wrote a variety of texts, such as novels, short stories, poetry, informational pieces, plays, art, and music. In addition, the class selected texts to share with one another. For the “Text Talk Tuesday” presentations, students provided bibliographic information, genre, appropriate grade level, a summary of the text, and a brief explanation of why that text should be included in a classroom, school library, or curriculum.

We knew the effect the text talks had on the secondary English preservice teachers, but we wondered what kind of connections and community building would occur in a “real classroom with real students.” Adrienne assigned, assessed, and evaluated the success by implementing a classroom activity called Text Talk Tuesday, otherwise known as T3. In a world wherein life is increasingly difficult and young people are faced with new challenges that are unimaginable to people in their teachers’ generation and older, we were eager to discover more about the students vis-a-vis these Text Talk Tuesdays. For the purposes of this article, we limit our discussion to three males’ reports and presentations.

## **Participants**

Adrienne’s entire class participated in Text Talk Tuesdays. Each Tuesday, a different group of students presented texts of their choosing. Their goal was to pretend they were persuading teachers to include their text in future lessons. Students were informed that many texts would be presented, so they prepared their arguments using persuasion and solid reasoning. They talked about their books in a 5-minute presentation. Of the 25 students enrolled in the class, we are sharing the work of three adolescent males whose parents signed an IRB consent form—Jamal, Charles, and Ethan (pseudonyms)—because they are representative of the males in the class.

Jamal is biracial (Caucasian and African American) and highly capable of producing quality work on assignments, depending on his choice of companions on a given day. Like most adolescents, peer relationships were important. He had a tense relationship with some of his teachers, primarily because he enjoyed the social aspect of school.

Charles is also biracial (Caucasian and African American) and had a difficult time in seventh grade. His mother legally changed his name because of personal family issues that were linked to his birth name. Changing his name devastated his world. Therefore, his acting out in class—calling out, getting out of his seat, and insulting his peers—may have been attributable to this change.

Ethan’s family is from Ecuador, and he is the first to be born in the United States. He is bilingual and has exceptional verbal English skills, but his written English and penmanship were strained. As the first family member born in the United States, Ethan expressed the pressures imposed upon him by both his parents and his culture to succeed. He, too, wanted to be accepted by his classmates, though his small stature made him a social target.

### Data

With each presentation, the students created a handout for Adrienne, which included the following information: title, author, genre, a short summary of the text, a paragraph describing why the text should be included in the classroom, and why the students valued the text. (See Appendix A for the assignment write-up.) The day of their T3 presentation, students submitted a handout and spoke to their peers. While some jumped at the opportunity to present their projects to the class, others were more hesitant due to fear of speaking in front of their peers, so as part of their grade, Adrienne awarded participation points for simply reading the handout aloud. Students were advised that because public speaking is so scary for many, they should treat their peers with the utmost respect. As the presentations progressed, the ease of speaking formally in front of the class increased.

Figure 1 details the selections that the three highlighted males—Jamal, Charles, and Ethan—chose. More in-depth explorations of their texts and presentations follow.

## Appendix A: Text Talk Tuesdays (T3)

February 10, 2011

Each week, a different student will present a “Text Talk” on a text of their choosing. You will select a text that you love or one that has been special to you for any reason. Your goal is to pretend as though you are convincing your teachers to include your text in their future lessons. Many texts will be presented, so you must be persuasive and be sure to include solid reasons to back up why your text should be selected. You will be presenting your text to the class in the form of a 5-minute presentation.

For each presentation, you must also create a handout for the class containing the following information:

- Title
- Author
- Genre
- A short summary of the text
- A paragraph describing why this text should be included in your classroom
- A paragraph explaining why you value this text

The day of your presentation on T3 (Text Talk Tuesday), you will turn in a copy of your handout; these will be used for a special project at the end of the semester.

I will be presenting T3s of my own on the first three Tuesdays of this project. Then, from March 8–29, groups of students will be presenting. Today you will be signing up for a date to present your T3. Shortly after you sign up and know what date you will be presenting, you should get started on finding and reading your text.

You may choose from a variety of types of texts: poem, short story, historical fiction, fantasy, mystery, music, artwork, etc. You may also read a nonfiction work. If you have a question regarding the type of text you are selecting, please ask. And always, enjoy selecting your text!

Student	Type of Text	Genre	Text Title
Jamal B.	Book	Fiction: Realistic	<i>Secrets in the Shadows</i> (The Bluford High Series), Anne Scraff
Charles B.	Book	Fiction: Fantasy	<i>Ark Angel</i> , Anthony Horowitz
Ethan P.	Book	Fiction: Realistic	<i>Bait</i> , Alex Sanchez

Figure 1. Books presented by three male students

### Jamal B.

“Buying presents is not more special than the ones you make.”

—*Jamal*

Jamal’s report pleasantly surprised us and his classmates. His intellectual competence was never in question, but his motivation to complete the work was. Prior to this project, Jamal mentally drifted in and out of class, but his attitude shifted dramatically with the announcement of the T3 projects. His peers noticed and commented on the positive and excited change in demeanor in the class.

Jamal chose *Secrets in the Shadows* (Scruff, 2007). This book is part of The Bluford High series in which:

. . . the main characters all attend a fictional [urban] California Bluford High School, named after the first African-American astronaut Guion “Guy” Bluford. Alternating between male and female protagonists, each book focuses on characters whose parents leave them (and only sometimes return), who face bullies and gunshots, and who experience their first romances. (Cantey, Bach, & Bickmore, 2009/2010, p. 4)

Jamal reported that he had tried to read this book before in school, but had been denied. Previous teachers and librarians had said that it contained too much violence, sex, and other “inappropriate” elements. Not deterred, Jamal returned to this book.

After summarizing the book, Jamal explained why he felt the story should be included in the classroom. He explained, “The story should be in my teacher’s classroom because it teaches that money takes over people’s minds. It shows that a guy is not thinking about other people, but *that* girl!” (Brown, personal communication, March 29, 2011). As we listen to conversations throughout the school, it has become apparent to us that this age group is concerned with pursuing several different types of relationships. Peer relationships are paramount. Jamal reflected upon how selfish someone can be when pursuing a relationship, even to the point of forsaking other important relationships. His insight into how “money takes over people’s minds” is also important in light of students’ intense attention to their peers’ clothing, sneakers, cell phones, and jewelry.

In the third section, which asks why he valued the book, Jamal wrote, “I value this text because it tells me that Raylin is turning into his dad. He is

starting to be a monster” (Brown, personal communication, March 29, 2011). Jamal is being raised by a single mother and has no positive male role model in his life. He responded to the text and its main character because of a personal situation he has endured for years and can relate to (Rosenblatt, 1938).

Jamal continued, “This book also taught me that gifts from the heart have an endless price. Buying presents is not more special than the ones you make” (Brown, personal communication, March 29, 2011). Jamal took this message away from the book when so many other images were present. He found value in a book that was both relevant to his experiences and meaningful to his growth, in that it gave him a deeper moral message that could inspire him to be a better young man.

### Charles B.

“The story almost made me break a sweat reading it!”

—*Charles*

Charles B. chose to read *Ark Angel* (Horowitz, 2006). For him, completing this project in the first place should be celebrated. Charles rarely completed assignments and was in danger of failing the seventh grade. He completed the assignment fully and earned an A. The summary Charles completed was detailed, and during his time of presenting to his peers, he was engaging and passionate. His level of enthusiasm inspired his peers, and they were eager to ask him questions about the story. His classmates even wrote the title of the book down so they could read it on their own. When Charles saw the “A” he had earned, he was ecstatic and expressed that he will work to raise his grades.

Charles believed *Ark Angel* should be included in the classroom because “[it] proves that children or teens can care a lot about the earth and that children are able to control their actions and help the environment” (Baldwin, personal communication, March 22, 2011). He also became energized about the environment. He concluded by saying, “The story is also very interesting to read. It is very intense. It contains a lot of action and keeps you at the edge of your seat. Most teenage kids my age are interested in action” (Baldwin, personal communication, March 22, 2011). His understanding of what teenagers want is on target.

Charles listed his reason for valuing the text: “It

was written by my favorite author. The story almost made me break a sweat reading it! Intense, mysteries, and action books are my favorite kind of texts” (Baldwin, personal communication, March 22, 2011).

### Ethan P.

“[If] you open up, you will feel better. Talking to someone is just one way to feel better.”

—Ethan

When first assigned the project, Ethan chose a fantasy book. He expressed some excitement for the project, but like many other students, he needed some encouragement to get started. Ethan had been struggling to finish the fantasy book, and when his interest waned, he needed help to find something more interesting. He sought assistance right around the time Adrienne found out through other students that he was cutting himself. All the signs supported that he was cutting: he wore long sleeves even on warm days, he was withdrawn at times, and he expressed through various mediums that he was depressed<sup>1</sup>. One evening, Adrienne scanned her home library and located *Bait* (2009) by Alex Sanchez. She thought it would interest him without being overbearing. The book confronts the sensitive issue of a teenage boy cutting himself to release his anger about the years of sexual abuse he had endured. While the reason for Ethan’s cutting was uncertain, Adrienne thought that maybe something in the book would reach a part of him that she couldn’t.

Discreetly giving Ethan the book, she did not say what it was about. Adrienne simply told him that he may enjoy reading it. Throughout the day, she saw him reading it—in the halls, in the cafeteria, and in her class. He read this book everywhere. The following morning, Ethan asked if he could change his book selection to *Bait*.

When it came time for Ethan to present his T3 report, we were not sure what to expect. His written report disclosed a personal desire to open up about his experiences. Ethan wrote that he valued the text because “[if] you open up, you will feel better. Talking to someone is just one way to feel better” (Perez,

1. School protocol was followed. Adrienne and her mentor teacher sent Ethan to the nurse so she could examine his cuts and file a report. He reported to the nurse and school psychologist regularly.

personal communication, March 22, 2011). He read his written report aloud to the class, but it was the discussion that followed that indicated just how much this text really did speak to him.

Ethan went “off-script” and began to tell the class why the main character in the book, Diego, would cut himself. He confessed that the character was sexually abused as a young boy and even started to question his own sexuality. At this point, different boys in the class started to mutter the words “fag,” “gay,” and other derogatory terms, but Ethan held fast to tell Diego’s story. He said to the class that even though the boy questioned his own sexuality, it was because of the abuse he endured. Diego had no outlet to deal with what happened to him or the anger that resulted, so instead, he resorted to cutting himself and fighting. The

passion and conviction with which Ethan spoke to defend this fictitious character indicated that he could empathize and even identify with him.

After Ethan began to defend Diego, students started asking more questions. They wanted to know who abused Diego, how old he was, and what his anger caused him to do. Ethan coolly answered the questions and advocated for this misunderstood character, forgetting for a moment that he was a shy and reserved seventh grader. Regardless of all the names his peers called Diego, Ethan boldly defended his fictitious friend. At the end of Ethan’s report, at least 10 students, some of whom were the bullies, asked to borrow the book. Some of these students dealt with similar issues in their past as well. *Bait* was the most shared book of the T3 project; it became the impetus for many boys to become public readers and, most important, change their behavior toward their peers (Skillen & Clark, 2011).

## Identity Construction

We set out to discover how these three young males utilized self-selected texts to construct their identities. The T3 project underscored the need for a classroom

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**The passion and conviction with which Ethan spoke to defend this fictitious character indicated that he could empathize and even identify with him.**

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space that would provide “a forum upon which to build cosmopolitan worldviews and identities” (Bean & Moni, 2003). These novels reinforced topics that are at the forefront of students’ minds: peer relationships, money, abuse, and their world. After the presentations, Adrienne met with students individually to discuss their choices.

Jamal’s T3 illustrated that he questions the rules of relationships. He highlighted that the reason that the main character, Roylin, turned to lying and stealing and, therefore, sacrificed relationships with his friends was that Roylin “. . . is not thinking about

other people, but *that* girl” (Brown, personal communication, March 29, 2011). Jamal realized that pursuing dangerous behavior, even if he wants to purchase a gift for his dream girl, is not right. He became a close and critical reader, expounding upon why the protagonist behaved as he did, thus helping Jamal to reconstruct the manner in which he himself behaved. In other words, through his selection, *Secrets in the Shadows* (Scraff, 2007), he was

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**Jamal made the deliberate decision not to follow Roylin’s path. Even more crucial is what he learned about healthy relationships and his place in them.**

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able to “imaginatively rehearse” a particular path—in this case, stealing his friend’s wallet. Jamal made the deliberate decision not to follow Roylin’s path. Even more crucial is what he learned about healthy relationships and his place in them.

Charles, too, used a book, *Ark Angel* (Horowitz, 2006), to expose his goals to his peers. The entire class learned of his commitment to the environment. Charles’s revelations about his desire to protect the environment demonstrated his interest and possible future career. Prior to the T3 project, Charles’s out-of-school literacy choices were neither validated nor affirmed. However, when he made public his interests, his feeling of “personal rejection” was diminished (Lenters, 2006). The affirmation he received from the entire classroom community edified his self-concept and self-esteem.

Ethan was able to use *Bait*’s Diego (Sanchez, 2009) to reveal himself to his classmates. Speaking through a veil of anonymity (Clark & Marinak, 2010),

he exposed and delved into issues surrounding victimization. *Bait* not only mirrors adolescent lives, it also explores lessons that affect adolescent lives. Ethan advocated for those who had been victimized. His sense of agency, as spoken on behalf of the protagonist Diego, so moved his classmates that their behavior toward those who had traditionally been marginalized changed. On another level, Ethan became a public reader! His confidence escalated, and he was embraced by his peers.

The three, brave young males shared during both the T3 project and debriefing interviews that the power to choose their own books was important. Their comments that this project sparked a renewed interest in school and connected them to their classmates was remarkable. Beyond forging new bonds with their peers, we observed shifts in their demeanor and behavior in class.

These boys were not public readers. In other words, the reading they did prior to this project was relegated to stories in the literature anthology or common study novels. Since other types of novels were not welcomed into the classroom, these young males, especially Jamal, believed that their reading preferences did not matter. Publicly acknowledging and celebrating the books that provided a lens into their lives created a safe space and provided room to construct personal identities.

Prior to this action research project, we had many hopes and preconceptions about what would occur. We had questions about how Adrienne’s students, in particular the males, would respond, and we wondered if they would embrace different types of text, such as poetry, music, or art. What actually happened during this research project went beyond our own expectations. We were surprised that all of the boys, including the three we highlighted in this article, chose novels, many of which were challenging and multi-layered. They reached for books that were not easy. What this shows is that when given the chance, students will strive beyond the simple; they want to stretch their thinking, and they want to be validated when they do.

Many students chose some intense and heartfelt books that contained themes some might consider mature for their young ages. These themes ranged from the environment to sexual abuse and self-mutilation. Questions of romantic relationships arose. This variety

illustrates the topics that concern them as they shape their own identities in an increasingly complex world.

## Final Thoughts

This action research served two purposes. First, it showed the importance of student choice in the classroom. Adrienne, who is currently a beginning teacher, experienced firsthand what happens when motivation, choice, and control intersect. The students in her class relished the opportunity to unpack and bring new books, short stories, and poems to their classmates. Before this project, they had never been asked to do such things. Her teaching will forever be changed. Second, as a teacher educator, Shanetia's pedagogical choices have been reaffirmed: continue to enable individuality within the classroom and remain steadfast in introducing quality books, stories, poems, and other types of texts into the teacher education program's coursework. The chasm between the teacher education program and secondary classrooms is lessening. The experiences in the adolescent literature class within the teacher education program clearly influenced Adrienne's student teaching and full-time classroom teaching.

Much scholarship has focused on the importance of enabling students to have choice in the classroom. Scholars such as Tatum (2005); Fletcher (2006); Beers, Probst, and Reif (2007); and Smith and Wilhem (2002) have researched the impact of adolescent males having choice and control in the classroom with regards to reading, and the profound effect it will have on them long-term. Despite all of this knowledge, the call *still* needs to be heard. What is deemed as common knowledge, that students need choice, is not consistent and pervasive in classrooms today. Students are still not being invited to share valued texts with their peers in the classroom, and there is still a pressing need for teachers to "hold the space" for students, especially young males, to voice their reading desires—not only to advance the love of reading, but also to foster a sense of classroom community. As we discovered, the textual choices are oftentimes more complex and complicated than what is being offered in school.

The T3 project helped to further solidify the classroom community. The students highlighted in this article showed both who they are as readers and who

they are as people. The active construction of new identities as *public* readers was profound. Reading in spaces inside and outside of the classroom was new for these students. That

in and of itself demonstrates the importance of reiterating the call to allow students to make connections to texts in meaningful ways, in spite of additional pressures due to the various standardized tests. The T3 project reaches beyond the typical book report,

wherein students just give a summary. Ironically, the end result of urging students to open up and articulate why the texts should be valued actually makes the case for them to be valued. It's an ideal symmetry.

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**What is deemed as common knowledge, that students need choice, is not consistent and pervasive in classrooms today.**

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## 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!

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## Writing Bridges:

How Writers Scaffold Mature Content in YA Literature

**Y**oung adult literature frequently challenges its young readers. Its ability to connect compelling plot and characters with experimental and literary technique offers readers a unique reading experience that provokes and engages them. Chris Crowe's 2002 survey "YA Boundary Breakers and Makers" is distinguished for reviewing a selection of books that impacted the category of young adult literature. Among the texts reviewed was S. E. Hinton's *The Outsiders*, a novel recognized for capturing teenage voice and experience; the author herself was only 16 years old at the time of publication. Other titles included Robin McKinley's *Beauty*, which revisited the classic fairy tale "Beauty and the Beast," and Karen Hesse's *Out of the Dust*, an American novel narrated in poetic verse that overturned the expectation that young adult novels need to be told in prose style (Crowe pp. 116–117). Crowe's article illustrated how young adult literature today provides an exciting, vibrant, and innovative environment in which writing can evolve and connect with readers.

Three recent novels—Margo Lanagan's *Tender Morsels* (2008), Libba Bray's *Going Bovine* (2009), and Andrew Smith's *The Marbury Lens* (2010)—characterize this distinctive environment. Lanagan's medieval portrayal of a damaged young woman who retreats into a fantasy world, Bray's protagonist Cameron, a teen suffering from Mad Cow Disease who sets off on a hallucinogenic adventure, and Smith's transportation of his protagonist to an ultra-violent fantasy world when he puts on a pair of glasses all contribute to broadening the category of young adult literature.

Recently, the Michael L. Printz Award (introduced in 2000) has recognized young adult literature by innovative and exceptional writers, and the books that appear on this list each year bear a striking similarity to those that Crowe recognized as important books for teens. Bray's novel was a 2010 Printz Winner while Lanagan's was a 2009 Honor Book. Michael Cart (2010) notes that the award was created to recognize the "newly literary, sometimes experimental, and increasingly diverse character of young adult literature" (p. 28). The key to describing many Printz Honor and award-winning books is "experimental," and they can be characterized by a blending of forms, types of stories, re-visitations of familiar stories, and a focus on unique and challenging language.

However, an examination of the Printz Award winners and books most recently reviewed and discussed reveals that there is crossover between these titles and the ones often challenged and banned from school libraries. A highly publicized example of this conversation is Meghan Cox Gurdon's 2011 article in the *Wall Street Journal*, "Darkness too visible: Contemporary fiction for teens is rife with explicit abuse, violence, and depravity. Why is this considered a good idea?" This article discussed the presence of darker material in young adult literature, a visibility that she found unnerving and dangerous for teenage readers. Yet many of the books she refers to are the most popular among teens, librarians, and teachers. These include novels such as Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian* (which won the National Book Award in 2007), Suzanne

Collins's *The Hunger Games*, and Lauren Myracle's *Shine*. Her article drew discussion and disagreement from writers of young adult literature, young adult readers, and others who love the literature.

The novels by Lanagan, Bray, and Smith have been widely reviewed and discussed in the last few years; specifically, they have been criticized for mature content and praised for exceptional writing. The mature content in each of these novels is flagged and documented by reviewers that otherwise praise style, language, and story. For example, Ian Chipman's 2008 review of *Tender Morsels* (Lanagan, 2008) notes, "Lanagan touches on nightmarish adult themes, including multiple

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**The novels by Lanagan, Bray, and Smith have been widely reviewed and discussed in the last few years; specifically, they have been criticized for mature content and praised for exceptional writing.**

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rape scenarios and borderline human-animal sexual interactions, which [should be reserved] for the most mature readers" (p. 69). A *Publisher's Weekly* review makes this focus on mature themes explicit when the reviewer writes, "With suggestions of bestiality and sodomy, the novel demands maturity—but the challenging text will attract only an ambitious audience anyway" (p. 52).

The maturity critics identify as necessary to read *Going Bovine* (Bray, 2009) is perhaps of a different sort; rather than the darker themes present in Lanagan's novel, Bray's calls for the reader to recognize advanced ideologies, themes, and theories. *Publisher's Weekly* reviews the novel as "an absurdist comedy in which Cameron, Gonzo (a neurotic dwarf), and Balder (a Norse god cursed to appear as a yard gnome) go on a quixotic road trip during which they learn about string theory, wormholes, and true love. . . . [Bray] trains her satirical eye on modern education, American materialism, and religious cults" (p. 46).

Smith's *The Marbury Lens* (2010) takes the maturity called for by Lanagan and Bray a step further. Indeed, Smith's novel was the most attacked in Cox Gurdon's *Wall Street Journal* article, where she refers to it as inappropriate and dark. Reviewers signpost

content, but at times they neglect style, format, and other aspects of the writer's craft that these authors use to engage an audience.

In this article, I argue that the maturity of content is consistent with the complexity of language, style, and form. These new novels present content that may challenge readers, but that content is paired with a sophisticated form that mirrors many adult literary and canonical novels. In this way, these three writers scaffold content with literary technique. Scaffolding, a term often used in educational theory, "attempts to frame, support, and guide" readers through difficult or mature material (Kemp Benson, 2011, p. 126). Readers are therefore able to comprehend advanced literary technique and mature content as writers build bridges for learning within their novels.

In addition, writers rely on a form that emphasizes a back-and-forth structure between the real and a fantastical world. Modeling scaffolding throughout their novels, Lanagan, Bray, and Smith encourage readers to then bridge fantasy with reality. While this imperative is recognized positively by important institutions such as YALSA, *The School Library Journal*, *Booklist*, and award committees, it has attracted the attention of critics who disregard the stylistic contributions of such literature and focus instead on what is deemed "inappropriate content." The young adult reader is the ideal consumer of content, style, and form, all of which will be considered in this article.

### ***Tender Morsels* by Margo Lanagan**

Margo Lanagan's *Tender Morsels* introduces Liga Longfield, a young protagonist who is 13 years old at the beginning of this medieval-novel set. The reader finds her trapped in a smoky (but not burning) house, the smell of which makes "her insides dangerous, liquid, hot with surprise and readying to spasm again" (p. 6). Her innocence and naiveté prevent her from understanding that the smoke causes her to have a miscarriage, and it is not until her second pregnancy, when she is 14, that she realizes that the smoke and teas her father brings home from town are designed to cause her to lose the babies she carries.

The mature themes of *Tender Morsels* are introduced not because of the miscarriages Liga suffers, but because the babies that Liga carries are her father's. When he dies traveling home on the road from town, Liga finds herself alone and unprotected, 15 years old

with a newborn. It is here that she suffers a gang rape from five town boys, a horrific incident that causes her to attempt to kill herself. A small piece of magic envelops her and her daughters, Branza and the still-unborn Urdda (the result of the gang rape), and she is whisked away to her own personal heaven, where she stays for almost 25 years. This place becomes her new home, and, as critic Mavis Reimer (2008) notes, “If homes are places from which people can be kept out, they can also keep people in their places” (p. xiv). Liga is unable to remember or imagine another, less ideal world. Yet, over the time she spends there, tiny holes appear in the wall between her heaven and the real world, where experience, reality, and pain seep through. Liga and her daughters are forced to confront the realities of life, both positive and negative, bringing back the full extent of what happened to Liga.

Lanagan’s impressive and complex use of language supports this mature plot with literary scaffolding. For example, *Tender Morsels* uses slang and language that has to be decoded throughout the novel, calling for strong reader engagement. The prologue is disconnected from protagonist Liga, yet it introduces two characters, Collaby Dought and Muddy Annie, who become important later in the plot. The prologue immediately makes the real world seem unfamiliar to the reader as Lanagan’s Collaby Dought narrates, “Well, we lay there in the remains of the hay cave, that we had collapsed around us with our energetics. We looked both of us like an unholy marriage of hedgehogs and goldilocks. I laughed and laughed with the relief of it, and she laughed at me and my laughter” (p. 1). The language and situation immediately craft the medieval setting, and show word play, slang, and dialect that continue throughout the novel.

Another characteristic of the language is that it distracts from the action of the novel. For example, Lanagan employs instances of lyrical language during Liga’s miscarriage, such as, “She pressed her nose and mouth into the crook of her elbow, but she had already gulped smoke. It sank through to her deepest insides, and there it clasped its thin black hands, all knuckles and nerves, and wrung them, and wrung them” (p. 6). The reader is aware that the smoke aborts her baby, but the language distracts from the event through detail and lyricism. Lanagan’s novel also creates the opportunity to search for parts of speech, such as kennings—compound expressions

that describe Liga’s movement as “top-heavy, slick-thighed, numb-footed, and hollow” (p. 8), Branza and Urdda as “hoar-daughters” (p. 111), and Urdda as a “waster-space” (p. 167).

Language is also a marker of character. Liga has the ability to communicate personality, selfhood, and individuality through the language she uses in dialogue. An important moment of revelation is when the usually goodhearted Liga borrows the language of her father to tell him, “That’s what has killed me, that woman’s poison. Strong bones, my arse” (p. 13). To this, her father “laughed that she had borrowed his way of talking” (p. 13). Characters change the way they use dialogue to reveal something important about themselves. For example, as they grow up in the bubble of Liga’s heaven, young Branza and Urdda have never heard speech patterns different from their mother’s. When Collaby Dought breaks in from the real world, they are taken aback by the way he speaks:

Yes indeed, liller smoocha-pooch, I am foul and cruel. Let your friend take you back to Niceland, or Sweetland, or Lovey-dove Land, where you belong. Or sisters, is it, did you say? Don’t look like it. Poked of different dads, I’d say. Slut-mothered, and no doubt of such matter themselves, eh? . . . You don’t know what I’m saying, do you, so iggenrent you are? I could flap out my old man, no doubt, and you’d think it was a turnip or some such. (pp. 166-167)

The time spent decoding slang and dialect leads a reader to the heart of the subject matter. But for Branza and Urdda, the real meaning is concealed, even though they clearly hear Collaby speak.

Lanagan’s style emerges through her desire to rewrite and reinterpret fairy tales, a facet of YA literature that Crowe (2002) discussed in his article using Robin McKinley’s *Beauty*. In contemporary literature, rewritten fairy tales and mythology are frequently employed to recast old stories in new contexts. Writers of both adult and young adult literature engage with archetypes that demonstrate the ability of old stories to reverberate within new. Recent collections of contemporary fairy tales, such as Kate Bernheimer’s

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*My Mother She Killed Me, My Father He Ate Me* (2010) and Ludmilla Petrusherskaya's *There Once Lived an Old Woman Who Tried to Kill Her Neighbor's Baby* (2009) are indicative of the seditious edge a contemporary hand can lend to revisitations, especially when considered alongside the work of Margo Lanagan.

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**Lanagan offers another kind of story that teenage readers must adapt to, learning that no text is stable, but rather it changes and evolves.**

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Indeed Susan L. Roberson explains, "Spatial movement . . . invites a remapping of the various spaces, lines, borders, definitions, and names that define or attempt to define our lives and our stories" (p. 10). Similarly, writers interact with stories sometimes relegated to the category of children's or young adult literature by simultaneously removing them from this

category and allowing them to retain inexorable links to childhood. Donald Haase agrees, "[B]oth adults and children desire to tap into the liberating potential of the tale, to recapture home as a place free from repressive constraints and governed by the utopian imagination" (2000, 361).

*Tender Morsels* reworks "Snow White and Rose Red," a Grimm's fairy tale that tells the story of two sisters who befriend a bear and defeat a dwarf. The bear and dwarf are central to the novel itself, and it is perhaps the relationship between these two sisters that best mirrors the fairy tale, one with blonde hair (Branza) and the other dark (Urdda). The fairy tale is a unique mode for telling this story. The strange disconnect between the harsh and mature stories of the Brothers Grimm and the reenvisioned Disney versions shows Lanagan to favor the former. She uses traditional fairy tale tropes and bends them toward a mature theme.

For example, Lanagan introduces two magical bears in Liga's heaven; however, these bears are men participating in a fertility festival in the real world. When they cross over still dressed in their bear furs, they become the animals they pretend to be. Although the first bear visitor spends time living in the cottage with Liga, Branza, and Urdda and conducts himself with a certain respectfulness, the second bear, a less moral man, forgets his man-self and Liga must warn

her daughter, "You should not let him nuzzle you so" (p. 182).

Another example involves the plants that grow in Liga's heaven, which turn into gold coins when the character Collaby Dought brings them home. Money and gold, common in fairy tales, are not welcome in this one, because they represent currency, economy, and patriarchy, which Liga tries to leave behind. In this way, the fairy tale supports the mature content, using common tropes while subverting them. It remains a strong and recognizable foundation, and Lanagan uses this familiarity to show teenagers how to reinterpret and reexamine what they know to develop a new understanding of its meaning. By using the familiar to begin in one place, Lanagan offers another kind of story that teenage readers must adapt to, learning that no text is stable, but rather it changes and evolves.

### ***Going Bovine* by Libba Bray**

Contrasting the medieval setting of *Tender Morsels*, Libba Bray's *Going Bovine* is an almost up-to-the-present contemporary novel, using fictionalized representations of current trends in popular culture to flesh out the story. Main character Cameron Smith is an ordinary 16-year-old who is apathetic about school and life in general. His twin sister Jenna goes to school with him, and Cameron sums up their social disparity by saying, "Jenna's seen me but she's pretending she hasn't. When you're pre-majoring in perfection, having a brother who's a social paramecium is a real drawback" (p. 15).

Cameron doesn't express too much ambition outside of smoking pot at school and checking out his sister's friend, Staci Johnson. When he starts hallucinating fire giants (something he thinks is a side effect of bad pot) and getting uncontrollable muscle twitches, he is diagnosed with Mad Cow Disease, a terminal illness that he is told will quickly turn his brain into a sponge. When he goes into the hospital, he meets/hallucinates an angel named Dulcie who tells him he must save the world, a task that will also give him a cure for his disease. This leads him on a cross-country adventure from Texas to Florida—Disney World is the destination—punctuated with bus rides and party houses and jazz clubs and restaurants with incorrectly spelled names (the "Kountry Kitchen"). All the while,

the reader watches Cameron travel between a fantasy world and his small hospital room. The reality of his situation is blurred, and the question of whether his adventure is a hallucination makes this a rollicking read.

Although this book's mature content is not at first apparent, the intertextuality and the referencing across important canonical literature, popular culture, politics, and society encourage teenage readers to search out and make connections across several texts. Literary theorist Michael Riffaterre (1990) explains that "An intertext is one or more texts which the reader must know in order to understand a work of literature in terms of its overall significance" (p. 56). In *Going Bovine*, these include Norse mythology, the canonical *Don Quixote*, the Bible, the pop culture of Disney World, and positivity and self-esteem movements, all of which demand a certain amount of prior understanding in order to make meaning of passing references. It is the particular use of intertextual style that makes it possible to make connections among Bray's references, detouring reader attention from the overarching fact of Cameron's eventual decline and death from his disease.

This technique is visible in many contemporary novels, such as S. E. Hinton's *The Outsiders* (1967/2012). As novelist Dale Peck notes:

[T]his and other echoes strike me as crucial to the success of Hinton's novel. They soften the challenging nature of the book's subject matter by wrapping it in references, tropes, and language familiar to its adolescent readers. . . . Ponyboy's older brother, Sodapop, is characterized as "16-going-on-17." A quotation from *The Sound of Music* would seem out of place in a novel rife with "blades" and "heaters" and teenage pregnancy, but it's hard to deny after Ponyboy's immediate assertion that "nobody in our gang digs movies and books the way I do." (n.p.)

In the same way, *Going Bovine* uses colloquial language that is punctuated by the vocabulary of pop culture, mythology, and America. Examples include Parker Day, the host of Bray's fictional YA! TV, who finds his parallel in Carson Daly and MTV; SPEW, or the State Prescribed Educational Worthiness test ("Please turn in your SPEW test prep books to Chapter Five: Why Thinking Can Cost You on Test Day" [p. 9]); *Star Fighter*, a cult sci-fi franchise; Buddha Burger, a play on the ethical eating movements in America; and Ragnarok, the end of the world in Norse mythology. All are presented briefly but in detail, and each

contains implication and meaning.

Alongside Cameron's language, Bray employs the language of pop culture and intertextuality. She expects readers to be fluent in reading across sociological texts, and expects that if they are not, they will seek out the references and parallelisms that she employs. She uses an MTV-like station with a hip DJ named Parker Day to encourage a critique of pop culture, mimicking speech in order to make these comparisons. Iphigenia, another DJ at the Party House in Florida, says to Cameron:

"Cool! Hey, you wanna see the rest of the Party House? We've got a pool that shoots Rad XL Soda—'The Soda for Our Generation'—out of a fountain in the back. It is so nuclear." She sighs. "I've been trying to get 'nuclear' to catch on for ages—like, at least three weeks—but so far, all the feedback forms say it's just not time for it yet. Sometimes I'm so far ahead of the curve that no one gets me." (p. 377)

The language and mannerisms create an intertext of their own, and encourage teens to make connections through mimicry.

Yet, Bray takes this a step farther. Her style employs intertextuality by structuring the novel on two large texts: the canonical novel *Don Quixote* and Norse mythology. The references and allusions to these become another form of language. Cameron's hallucinations and fantasy world are based on the things in his everyday life that are set up at the beginning of the novel. For example, in Spanish class he reads *Don Quixote*, and he notes, "The only thing I know about Don Quixote is that he and his sidekick go off and have imaginary adventures, battling windmills disguised as giants and that sort of thing" (p. 32). Cameron's adventure takes on aspects of Quixote's. Accompanied by Gonzo, he becomes engulfed in an imaginary world where he battles the physical manifestations of his disease. In addition, Cameron notes that his mother used to read him stories from books of Norse mythology (Cameron notes that she could be an English professor, but she didn't finish

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**The intertextuality and the referencing across important canonical literature, popular culture, politics, and society encourage teenage readers to search out and make connections across several texts.**

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her dissertation [p. 33]). Then, halfway through the novel, Cameron meets Balder, a Norse god in lawn-gnome form. Cameron remembers some of the Norse mythology, while Balder fills in the extra details.

This intertext is canonical and veers away from the pop culture that Bray employs throughout the rest of the novel. However, she equates canonical intertext

with the intertext of pop culture, showing teens that they can read texts across borders and boundaries, and make comparisons for themselves in whatever form they come in. In this way, she dissolves borders between texts and genres in her novel, and does it by using a sophisticated and important form of literary theory. Bray's style involves sprinkling references throughout her

novel, making them so plentiful and ubiquitous that teen readers have to find the interpretative agency to attach to many concepts, questions, and ideas.

Through all of this is Cameron's own impending death from Mad Cow Disease. Bray uses humor, language, and religious stereotypes to help Cameron think about and try to make sense of death, something he knows he will soon be facing. Alongside Cameron, this intertext is aimed at mature and engaged teenage readers. Bray uses language to support this intertextuality, and Cameron's character becomes the bridge that connects language, pop culture, and the canon.

### ***The Marbury Lens* by Andrew Smith**

Although *The Marbury Lens* is set in the present, the fantasy world it conjures is much different than the ones offered by either *Tender Morsels* or *Going Bovine*. Jack Whitmore is a 16-year-old boy living with his grandparents in California. His parents—a teen mom and a dad he doesn't know—are absent, and he counts his best friend Conner as the closest family he has. The story begins at the onset of summer vacation, when Jack and Conner are about to embark on a trip to England where they will visit a private all-boys school that they may attend in the future. Before they

leave, Conner throws a party during which Jack wanders away; he is drugged and abducted by a doctor named Freddie Horvath. Jack eventually escapes the doctor, but after this event, he constantly questions his sanity and wonders if the drugs Freddie Horvath gave him have permanently affected his grasp on reality and fantasy.

When he arrives in England, he is given a pair of glasses called the Marbury Lens that allows him to travel to a fantasy world ravaged by ongoing war. However, Jack's abduction makes it difficult for the reader to determine whether Jack is physically going to a fantasy world called Marbury or whether Marbury is a figment of his imagination. There are refrains that repeat throughout the novel, one of which is of Jack reciting, "*Freddie Horvath did something to my brain and I need to get help*" (p. 78). This demonstrates his uncertainty over whether the man who kidnapped him created the violent world of Marbury in his mind or altered his brain in a way that confuses his understanding of reality.

Yet, the world of Marbury is physically real to Jack. There, Jack travels with two boys, Ben and Griffin, as they run away from horrible creatures that attempt to kill them. The more time he spends in Marbury, the harder it is to return to his own world; he loses large chunks of time in the real world, and finds that he can spend days in Marbury when only a few minutes will pass in England. Jack's breakdown is palpable, and the violence of Marbury becomes more and more real as the novel progresses.

Unlike the sometimes-concealed violence in *Tender Morsels*, hidden by complex dialect and slang, the violence of Marbury is carefully detailed and described. The language used is graphic and unrelenting, and Jack's calm experience of it is unnerving at times: "Most of the bodies hung upside down, those with heads arched their necks backward, chins petulantly angled like hell-trained magnets at the ground. Men and children, adorned, every one of them, with stained stakes or arrow shafts" (p. 148). Young Ben and Griffin swear constantly, making exclamations that seem too old for their age, yet it is appropriate because of what they have been through. This is the language of violence, war, and conflict, and Smith is careful to use his descriptions to his advantage. He uses language to mark the differences between two worlds, while using common refrains—"Freddie

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**This deliberate attempt to characterize both worlds by using different narrative language in each encourages the reader to determine which place is more unreal.**

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Horvath did something” (p. 267) and “You haven’t gotten away from anything” (p. 176)—to work as a lyrical binding together of Marbury and the real world. This deliberate attempt to characterize both worlds by using different narrative language in each encourages the reader to determine which place is more unreal.

The style similarly reflects this overt directness. Jack is a first-person narrator whose quick thoughts and back-and-forth speech between present, past, first person, or third person emulate and reflect the style of Smith’s writing. *The Marbury Lens* uses a short, quick style in both worlds. The story places the reader entirely in Jack’s head, which makes his switch to talking about himself in third person (“Jack doesn’t cry, though. Never has.” [p. 25]) underscore how the war in Marbury is both personal and distant. Style and language work together in a direct way, particularly in Marbury, to show that Jack’s abduction in the real world seems more violent than the overwhelming violence of a fantasy world. The subdued scene of Jack’s abduction occurs primarily as his mind processes the event, yet his thoughts and reflections when lying as a prisoner in the small room on the top floor of Freddie Horvath’s house come across as more horrifying than the decapitations, death, and destruction of Marbury.

Smith seems to want his readers to consider whether reality or Marbury is harsher, particularly since the more Marbury intrudes, the more the real world softens. Yet it is the horrors of the real world that seem to have created the necessity for a fantasy world. The directness is unflinching, yet it does raise the question of the difference between fantasy violence and real-life violence, and which moments are more truly horrifying.

The language of conflict and war is direct and strong, which makes the small moments that depict the experience of getting through young adulthood stand out clearly throughout the novel. Jack’s own ambivalence about his place in the world and his budding relationship with a young English girl named Nickie are very much in the vein of contemporary realistic fiction. It isn’t until late in the novel that Jack says:

I hated being sixteen. It was worse than anything. For all the crap I’d ever read in “teen issue books” about the clumsy awkwardness of my age, how a guy’s voice changes, how goofy we act, and how we are enslaved by embarrassing and involuntary bodily functions like wet dreams and unman-

ageable boners at the least convenient times, being sixteen was never comfortable, cool, or even remotely humorous for me. (p. 211)

Yet this normality only heightens Jack’s breakdown by the end of the novel, where fantasy and reality begin to mix together without sense. Marbury and the real world become mixed up, emphasized by a section that crosses the present with the past, the real with the fantastical, and Jack’s several burgeoning identities.

*Quit it, Jack.*

I begged myself, Seth, whoever. “No!”

I hammered my fists down into my thighs. I stripped naked, shaking, stood in the tub, turned the shower on full cold.

*Cold, like Ma giving me a bath in the well water.*

*Quit it, Seth.*

Roll. Tap. Tap. Tap.

*Come on, Jack. It’s only going to be for a second.*

*Come on.*

“No! Please!”

It’s too easy. (p. 216)

The intertwining narratives of Jack in Marbury, Jack’s abduction, and a third story about a young, murdered boy named Seth confuse Jack’s own sense of reality.

*The Marbury Lens* is one of the outstanding titles that have been discussed for their maturity, yet Smith contrasts the theme of war with language in order to match structure to content. Although youth are regularly exposed to violence in news and media, depicting it so visibly allows Smith to show how one young man makes sense of it.

## Form and Implications

While these authors employ language and style differently, their novels typically have a similar form: a back-and-forth structure between a real and fantastical world. They share the intricate creation of secondary worlds—Liga’s heaven, the hallucinated fantasy world that Cameron navigates, and Marbury. The maturity of content in these three novels is tempered

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by the fact that each novel is not completely realistic. Although real situations lead each of these three characters into a fantasy—Liga’s rape and traumatizing childhood, Cameron’s terminal illness, and Jack’s abduction—the fantasy seems to make it more realistic . . . and perhaps better understood. However, the way that each character deals with these difficult issues is to retreat into a fantasy world, although none are entirely convinced that it is a fantasy. An educational research study suggests,

Children’s ability to distinguish reality from fantasy in media presentations is a complex process involving the development of a number of analytic skills. Such evaluations require knowledge about the nature of the medium as well as knowledge of the real world phenomena being portrayed. Given the amount of time which children spend with television and books, two prominent sources of fiction, it would seem that such encounters must contribute to the development of these skills and may in fact constitute the primary context in which these skills develop. Moreover, both media present varying levels of reality and fantasy and, by so doing, challenge the child to formulate criteria which enable a determination of what is real and what is not. (O’Reilly Landry, Kelly, & Gardner, 2011, p. 40)

These young adult characters cannot distinguish between fantasy and reality themselves, which makes teen readers question the reality or fantasy of certain

situations. The effectiveness of moving between fantasy and reality creates an in-between space that helps to scaffold mature content with literary complexity. Scaffolding is used throughout these three novels to bridge what is difficult with the language needed to understand it; furthermore, readers are

supported as they negotiate reality and fantasy in relation to one another.

Readers develop the interpretative skill to experience the space “in-between.” Each novel contains both a fantasy and a realistic world, and the characters navigate between the two places, adapting to the situation that arises in each world. Bray in particular challenges the reader to question whether or not the real world presents a true reality or if instead the fantasy world creates a better version of real experience.

For example, the separation between Cameron’s “real” world and the hallucination from his sickness blurs the borders between truth and fiction. At points in the novel, the two worlds read almost as one, as Cameron encounters “The Wizard of Reckoning” in his fantasy, while also slipping out of fantasy into the reality of his nurse, Glory, speaking to him at the hospital:

The Wizard of Reckoning points his finger at me again, and my body screams in anguish, as if I’m on fire. It brings me to my knees, shutting my eyes against the swearing pain.

“Just relax, baby. You be okay.” It’s Glory’s soothing voice. I open my eyes, and she’s shooting something into my IV line.

“Try to sleep.”

“Cameron!” Gonzo’s cowering behind the high hat, using the sticks like a cross in a vampire movie. (pp. 162–163)

As a *Horn Book Review* noted, “Readers will have a great time trying to sort everything out and answer the question at the heart of it all: even if Cameron’s experiences are all a dream, are they any less real?” (p. 554).

Ian Chipman’s *Booklist* review identifies the real and the fantastic worlds in *The Marbury Lens* by suggesting that “although the many gut-quivering story elements are not clearly defined, they always speak to each other, and Smith wisely leaves much up to the reader. People will talk about this book and try to figure it out and maybe try to shake it off. But they won’t be able to” (p. 52). Jack even compares the interconnectedness of worlds, real and false, to “one of those Russian dolls that you open up, and open up again. And each layer becomes something else” (Smith, p. 3). Fantasy helps these characters cope with difficult and disturbing contexts by stepping outside of the real world and experiencing how problems play out in a new world. As Jack Zipes has noted, “It is through fantasy that we have always sought to make sense of the world, not through reason. Reason matters, but fantasy matters more” (p. 78). The fact that the connection between these worlds is both strong and tenuous means teen readers have to navigate between real and imagined experience.

The reconciliation of reality and fantasy differs in each of these three novels. Liga realizes that keeping herself out of the real world is no experience at all, yet the only way she could cope at the time was through retreating into a fantasy. Her “heaven,” however, was shown to be bland and lifeless without the other

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**Scaffolding is used throughout these three novels to bridge what is difficult with the language needed to understand it.**

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side of experience. As Miss Dance explains to Branza, Liga's daughter, upon her return to the real world:

Now you are in the true world, and a great deal more is required of you. Here you must befriend real wolves, and lure real birds down from the sky. Here you must endure real people around you, and we are not uniformly kind; we are damaged and impulsive, each in our own way. It is harder. It is not safe. But it is what you were born to. (pp. 356–357)

Likewise, Cameron's bleak reality necessitates the fantasy world; however, the indistinct border between the two worlds challenges teen readers to understand how the problems of one world may affect another. The novel ends with Cameron running out of time in both the fantasy world and the real one, yet this allows him to enter into a third, new space. Similarly, the end of *The Marbury Lens* seems to conflate the real world with the fantasy one, and insinuate that they are the same place. Back at home at the end of the story in what Jack sees as "the real world," he encounters characters he only knew in Marbury, including Ben and Griffin. This makes teen readers reexamine the horrific world of Marbury through the lens of reality.

Although these novels employ important literary devices paired with mature content, there is more to their popularity. Teen readers often require a startling hook into the novel, which, in this case, comes in the form of strong, empathetic, and well-written characters. Character is overwhelmingly important to making the mature content and literary devices work. Liga, Cameron, and Jack form an additional bridge between these two, scaffolding elements of mature content and literary complexity. The sympathy that the authors create for these characters at the beginning of the novels makes it possible for readers to view difficult content empathetically. Though the mature themes might involve situations difficult for teen readers to imagine, recognition of why and how a teenage character becomes implicated in a negative situation is important to reader agency and development.

As readers, we may recognize mature themes that are difficult and foreign, those that we would rather skip over in favor of escapist literature, but finding characters who are sympathetic and believable makes these themes engaging and worth the effort to read further. These characters also make it possible for authors to introduce a literary sense of language, form and style, because it is their unique voices and

situations that call for the experimental and elevated aspects of writing. Through the voice of a protagonist whose age matches that of many teenage readers, writers introduce a variety of literary techniques. Rather than avoiding difficult material, the literary scaffolding and important aspects of character will not only meet young adult readers' goals for reading good, engaging, and challenging literature, but will also increase their propensity and ability for transitioning into more adult literature.

Although some critics believe that this new trend in young adult literature toward experimental and mature content is a danger to younger readers, I believe it encourages them to read more actively and at a more demanding level. In a recent interview with Jian Ghomeshi on CBC radio, author Daniel Handler (Lemony Snicket) was asked about his new book, *13 Words* (2010), a picturebook for children that contains the word "despondent":

**Jian Ghomeshi:** "Do you think we underestimate children's capacity to understand multisyllabic words?"

**Daniel Handler:** "Oh, definitely . . . I'm proud to introduce the word *despondent* to very very young children. . . . it makes me happy that perhaps it would replace the word *sad* or *unhappy* . . . in a young child's vocabulary."

Handler used the picturebook form as scaffolding for beginning readers to understand and encounter complex words, while also learning how to read. Similarly, the novels I have discussed here use mature language, style, and form as scaffolding for mature content. The confusion created between reality and fantasy is purposeful and important, and allows readers to experience the in-between space that these writers actively fill in with a scaffolding structure of mature content and literary devices.

Teen readers can be given credit to read what is deemed "darker" or more mature material because writers provide the necessary tools for them to understand this content while also acquiring the skills for reading more complex literature. Readers who want to be challenged can be, since the literary forms that are necessary in higher levels of reading comprehension prepare teen readers for more difficult literature. Writ-

ers are celebrated for this experimental new literature, and it is only fair that their readers be given due credit and respect, allowing them to explore challenging books for their age group.

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## Voices from the Classroom:

### Young Adult Literature in the 21st Century

**T**eaching initiatives and paradigms shift, but the integration of technology in schools continues to be a focal point. As a high school English teacher, I have always worked to introduce my students to the latest information and technologies because, like most teachers, I am in the profession to best prepare my students for the future—to help them become better readers, writers, speakers, and thinkers. Typically, reading is imagined to be a very solitary act, but the Internet allows readers to connect with each other. I wanted my students to reach out of the classroom and make these connections.

Attewell & Battle (1999) researched the achievement of students who have access to a computer at home. They found that, “[H]aving a home computer remains positively associated with higher reading and math scores, and with higher school grades, even after controlling for the various measures of family economic and cultural resources” (p. 6). While I could not control my students’ computer use at home, I felt it was imperative to give them more access to computers in the classroom. Yu, Tian, Vogel, and Kwok (2010) state, “Without the problem of ‘fear of embarrassment’ in face-to-face interaction (Leary & Kowalski, 1990), online social networking allows university students to feel more comfortable in expressing themselves and interacting with peers and professors” (p. 1500). I hypothesized that my students were, in relevant ways, comparable to these university students, and adding technology to our curricular tools would allow them to become more engaged in the

classroom content and more comfortable in conversations about reading.

Over the past two years, over 100 students have taken my technologically integrated Young Adult Literature (YAL) elective. Some are avid readers, others hope to rediscover their love of reading, and a few are just looking for elective credit. The reading levels in each class range from students who read far below grade level to others who surpass most adults. The students don’t reflect those in a typical English classroom where, often, a number of students are reluctant to read because most of their classmates already have a passion for reading. Upon completion of the elective, students have the opportunity to enroll in my Advanced Young Adult Literature course. Both of the courses are a semester long.

My dream design for the course went beyond my traditional classroom activities that allowed for groups of students to read and discuss books in literature circles. I envisioned my students better connecting with the literature through technology—author chats, blogs, book reviews, and book trailers. As I teach in a low-income community, many of my students don’t have access to computers at home, and our library computer lab is in high demand and not available for the continual connectivity I desired. As a result, I had minimal success with many of the technology-driven activities in my course; there simply weren’t enough technological tools to implement the lessons.

My research posed the hypothesis that incorporating technology would boost students’ reading habits

and increase their self-efficacy in regards to their reading abilities. Through the funding of the ALAN Foundation Grant, I was able to provide my students with a computer, a projector, and a webcam—tools that would allow them to have easy access to technology.

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**Because most were requesting more exposure, I was determined to surround them with books and improve their reader confidence.**

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To research the impact of the new technology, I surveyed the students at the beginning, middle, and end of the course with open-ended questions about how the technology impacted their reading habits. In the survey on the first day of school, students ranked their reading habits as poor, fair, good, or excellent. Interestingly, more than half of the students ranked their reading habits as “fair.” The open-ended questions revealed that several of the students wanted to learn about different genres of literature and expand their book interests. It was quite surprising to me that these students, who signed up for a reading elective in addition to their required English grade-level course, did not identify as strong readers, but I was pleased that they wanted to strengthen their reading interests and habits. Because most were requesting more exposure, I was determined to surround them with books and improve their reader confidence.

## **Engaging Readers through Technology**

### **GoodReads**

I created flexible lesson plans that allowed students to use the class computer for GoodReads ([www.goodreads.com](http://www.goodreads.com)) during their Sustained Silent Reading (SSR) time. GoodReads is a social-networking website dedicated to connecting readers. Students benefit from this website because they can review books; keep track of books they have read, want to read, and are currently reading; form book clubs; post in private or public discussion groups; access free book giveaways; answer book trivia; vote on book lists; participate in author interviews; message authors; and access other book-related activities. GoodReads was more familiar to me than comparable websites like Shelfari or LibraryThing, and many of my colleagues are active contributors to that website.

GoodReads has many capabilities and, as an added bonus, it allows my students to connect with other students and teachers within our school and read their book reviews. In this particular class, we used the first 50 minutes of our 84-minute period to discuss books, genres, and other book-related topics, after which students were given 34 minutes to read silently or access GoodReads. At times, I used the projector to share aspects of the website, but students used it primarily to personalize their experience in the class based on their interests. In addition to the class time provided for students to access GoodReads, I set up a workstation where they could utilize the computer before and after school and during study hall periods. I also made my own computer available during class time, so there were always two computers available to the students.

GoodReads offers a cell phone application, so I allowed the students to use their phones during class. Our district’s cell phone policy relies on teacher discretion, and I found that a brief discussion about responsible cell phone use during class was helpful. There were only a few instances when I had to speak with students privately about using their cell phones for GoodReads only. As students recommended books in class, many others would immediately add these books to their “to-read” lists using their phones or one of the two computers.

We rotated which students used the computers, and I reserved the computer lab each month so the whole class could access GoodReads at once. I was surprised that many students preferred to access GoodReads at home or with their cell phones, so during the majority of our classes, neither computer in the classroom was being used. Overall, about 25% of the students accessed the website daily, 60% accessed it weekly, and 15% only used it when we went to the computer lab or during class. Not all students enjoyed using the website, so I offered writing assignments as an alternative to the students’ book review and discussion board participation grades. None of the students elected to do the alternative assignments, but many commented in their post-surveys that they appreciated having the option.

As a way to understand the impact of the integration of technology on the students’ reading habits and confidence, I created discussion threads where students could share their thoughts about the various

forms of technology. When student Shayla (all names are pseudonyms) was asked how GoodReads benefited her classroom experience, she said, “It made me look forward to logging on every day to update my progress on each book I read.” I found that several students wanted to constantly log into GoodReads to update their lists. My room seemed to have a revolving door with students stopping in at all times of the school day to update their GoodReads accounts and search for more books to read.

I was pleased with the way students connected to each other on the discussion forums. A few created their own public discussion groups specific to their interests. Gina said, “It also helped me to learn how to interact with other people who are also book lovers.” While the requirement was to log on to GoodReads weekly, several students reviewed and posted daily. After some time, I stopped creating the topic ideas in our classroom forum and let students take over, so they could generate discussion threads about topics that interested them. A few student-generated topics were: The Horror Genre, When and Where Do You Like to Read?, Fast-Paced or Gradual Swoop?, Books vs. Movies, Unicorns vs. Zombies (my personal favorite), and various threads addressing individual books they wanted to discuss with others in the class. In her research regarding GoodReads, Walker (2010) reflects, “The fact that students have some freedom of choice and an opportunity to articulate group understandings in a nonthreatening (face-to-face and virtual) manner would seem to be the key to success” (p. 6). Student Telah states, “The discussions were interesting because everyone had such different opinions about books, authors, and genres.”

Students were required to complete a minimum of two book reviews per quarter. As a class, we critically examined various book reviews online. When we read the reviews together, we discussed the good and bad qualities of each example. After several of these discussions, I decided not to set specific requirements for students’ own reviews. As a reviewer myself, I shift between informal and formal book reviews. I felt that providing specific requirements for students’ book reviews would restrict their creative freedom.

By the end of the semester, some students reviewed over 50 books. Aaliyah stated, “It also was helpful that you could see a multitude of other people’s feelings towards a book so you don’t get hung

up if someone [in class] says it was bad.” Writing the book reviews forced the students to think deeply about the books they were reading. Many complained that they had to work very hard to convince others that their favorite books were truly special. Diana stated, “Being able to put my reviews to the test really helped my writing skills overall.” Writing the book reviews enabled the students not only to examine the literary merit of the books they reviewed but also to craft their writing to make a convincing case.

GoodReads allowed my students to explore books beyond my classroom or library. Repeatedly, students expressed that the website was a great tool to access information about new and interesting titles. Gina, an avid paranormal fiction reader, stated, “If it weren’t for GoodReads, I wouldn’t have learned to broaden my selection of books I enjoy.” Another student, Danielle, acknowledged that she hadn’t had much success at the library. She added, “With GoodReads, I can search the books I am looking for and can find [them] immediately without being disappointed, like when I search in the library.” GoodReads allowed students to see millions of new, unknown books. Sam shared, “I had read all the YA Lit books I wanted in my public library by the time I was eleven. GoodReads helped me realize there were so many more books out there.”

At the end of the semester, Josie, one of the most active contributors to the class discussion board, posted, “I really hope I’m not the only nerd who will still be on [GoodReads] after the class is over because you guys read and recommend some really [sic] good books and this would be the only place I can figure out what to read!” Laura commented her favorite part about GoodReads was, “I never had any idea that so many people share the common interest of reading and could be connected in a large way.” After the class ended, students continued to post on the website. Six of the 20 students in the pilot course (from two years ago) still continue to post on the website weekly.

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### Author Skype™ Session

Skype™ is just one of many video conferencing tools that can be easily utilized by teachers. Young adult literature is unique in that the authors in this field are accessible to their audience. Author Kate Messner (2010) states, “I log onto my computer, open Skype,

and within minutes after the bell rings, I’m connected to students on the other side of the country for a 20-minute chat” (p. 43). I wanted my students to connect to the authors of the titles they were reading in order to boost their reading habits.

As the students enjoyed reading Julie Halpern’s *Get Well Soon* (2007), I organized a Skype™ session with her. I chose Skype over other video conferencing tools simply because my school has a username and password that I could easily access. Word spread, and over 50 students squeezed into a conference room to chat with her. The Skype session was very easy to set up—I connected the projector to the computer and exchanged login names with Halpern. The author chat energized the students—several asked questions about the creative writing process or sought suggestions for pursuing a writing career.

Following the session, a student, Laura, created a discussion thread on GoodReads because she wanted to discuss the experience. Tina replied to Laura’s post with, “It was enjoyable to listen to her tell us that [the book] was based on her life and what she’s gone through. I applaud her for being so open and honest about it.” Sam, who read the book nine times before the author Skype session, said, “I always think that when someone is famous, they automatically stop being a normal person and start being some super-cool famous person with no need for non-famous people. But Julie Halpern was nothing like that. //Squeal of excitement!//” And Diana replied, “Julie Halpern was an inspiration. She really gave us a better look into writing and publishing.” More than anything, the Skype session helped the students understand that the authors of the books they read are real people, and it encouraged them to email and tweet their favorite authors.

### Blogging

A more advanced reader, Leila, took the Young Adult Literature course as an independent study with me to further challenge herself. As she was already active in the GoodReads community, Leila decided to create a blog to advance her study of the field. We chose this website together because it was not blocked by our Internet firewall, and she liked the user-friendliness of the website. Her blog posts recommend and review books, reflect on life events, and explore how reading has contributed to her life. One of her posts was reprinted in our town’s online newspaper. When asked how blogging benefitted her classroom experience, she stated, “Being able to blog gave me time to think about what it was that I had read and reflect on what I really thought of the books. It’s something completely different from a discussion because the entire time you’re having a debate within yourself over what you really thought.”

Blog websites like [www.blogger.com](http://www.blogger.com) are free, and based on Leila’s work, I plan to incorporate them into my Advanced Young Adult Literature course. Blogging appears to be a strong tool of differentiation for readers who would like more of a challenge or want to become more active in the reading community. Students are able to write about any reading-related topic of interest, and blogging forces them to truly think and elaborate to create cohesive posts.

### Book Trailers

As another way to engage my students in new and interesting young adult literature, I used the projector to show book trailers. They enjoyed the trailers so much that they asked me to show a new book trailer every day. These trailers are posted on author and publisher websites, YouTube, Amazon, and GoodReads. Each day, students shared book recommendations with their peers, and I kept the projector ready to play the book trailers after each recommendation. Book-talking has always been an effective way for me to familiarize my students with new titles, but book trailers seemed to be even more valuable. Therefore, I tried to mix book talks and book trailers throughout the semester.

The students’ final group project was to create their own book trailers toward the end of the first quarter in the semester-long course. Students worked together in our school’s computer lab and found

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## Word spread, and over 50 students squeezed into a conference room to chat with [Messner].

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the process to be very easy overall. Using Windows Movie Maker (PCs) or iMovie (Apple), which are both very user-friendly, students can fuse pictures, movies, and text to generate very professional-looking book trailers. A few students enjoyed the process so much that they created additional book trailers later in the semester as they finished reading other books. Jenna stated, “I absolutely loved that assignment. Being able to come up with a trailer for a book—it was definitely an exciting experience, especially after reading the book and seeing how well the trailer fit the book.” The book trailer project was successful overall, and only 3 out of 19 groups responded in their post-surveys that they disliked the assignment. Most of the issues revolved around the group dynamics and personalities, though two of the groups struggled because none of the group members was technologically savvy. Overall, the students enjoyed the assignment, and several students were so excited about their videos that they posted them on YouTube to show their friends and the public.

### Prezis

All of the students in our school are familiar with PowerPoint, and many of them have fully mastered all of the capabilities of the program. While this is an effective presentation tool, I wanted my students to step outside of their comfort zones and utilize unfamiliar technologies for their independent theme projects—the final project at the end of the second quarter. Each student selected a theme in literature or an author to study and researched the topic in the computer laboratory. I signed up for three consecutive days in the computer lab so students could research their topics and create a presentation. They then presented their projects in the classroom using the class computer and projector.

Prezi ([www.prezi.com](http://www.prezi.com)) is a cloud-based software that allows students to create more dynamic presentations. I chose it because I saw a colleague use it successfully in a meeting, and after experimenting with it, I found it to be user-friendly. At first, the website was overwhelming to students, and many asked if they could use PowerPoint instead. Because of this, I had to model its capabilities using the projector and allot more time in the library so students could become more comfortable with the software.

The majority of the students grew to enjoy the software, but there were certainly a number of students who disliked the requirement. When I asked the students whether they enjoyed watching the presentations, every student agreed that the Prezi presentations were much more engaging than the presentations they were accustomed to. Alandra, a student who doesn’t enjoy using technology, stated, “It took me some time, but I grew to absolutely love it. I am definitely going to use this for presentations next year in college. My prezi looks so professional!”

### Conclusion

With these new tools in the classroom, it was very easy to include technology in every lesson. I worked to include a website or video each day to increase student engagement. The students were truly excited about reading, and the integration of technology seemed to play a large role in this attitude.

In the final class survey, I asked students to share how the technology and course helped their reading habits and confidence. Only one student still ranked her reading ability as “fair.”

Every other student circled “good” or “excellent.” While I feel that the technology boosted students’ confidence in their reading abilities, I believe it was also influenced by several other factors, including group discussions, teacher conferences, and the achievement of reading goals. Eliza, who enjoyed reading in middle school but lost her passion for reading in high school, stated, “I’m glad I’ve finally learned to love reading again and am now open to so many different genres and writing styles.”

Almost all of the students who weren’t confident in their reading skills shared that the course helped boost their confidence. Amber, a struggling reader, wrote, “Now I’m reading better than I ever have, and I have books after books waiting for me to read! I never thought I would really be able to read well, but now I know I can read better and am interested in it. It just

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**Overall, the students enjoyed the assignment, and several students were so excited about their videos that they posted them on YouTube to show their friends and the public.**

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shows how practice makes perfect.” Many of the students did not realize how much they enjoyed reading, and Sam reflected, “It helped me see what a big reader I am.” In response to the number of books the course

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## **They continually posted their reading goals in discussion threads and then gushed when they surpassed them.**

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and technology exposed her to, Joanna shared, “In this class, you can’t help but read a lot!” and Ana enthused, “My adoration for reading has become an obsession.”

One result that I hadn’t anticipated was the feeling of true accomplishment that so many students felt about the

number of pages they had read. They continually posted their reading goals in discussion threads and then gushed when they surpassed them. Several wrote that their reading increased when they discovered that it brought them comfort. For instance, Jayla wrote that she was “more able to understand books that are higher than my reading level,” and “When I read, my problems get smaller. Books are my own form of therapy. [They] aren’t just therapeutic to me, but they can make me smarter, too.”

At times, I worried that I spent too much of the class time teaching and modeling these new technological tools instead of discussing books, but the advantage was that students became comfortable with unfamiliar technologies that they can use productively in the future. Students’ reading may have increased without the technology, of course, but I can confidently say that its incorporation effectively enhanced their abilities to access, review, and discuss titles.

Even students who were avid readers before

the course began acknowledged that the technology helped introduce them to many more books. In fact, they often complained that they did not have time to read all of the books on their to-read lists. Alicia felt GoodReads helped her the most because it gave her “motivation to start reading a lot of different books” to add to her “lengthy to-read list.” The last line of Diana’s final exam expresses it best: “I will read any book thrown at me. YA Lit has really broadened my horizon and I can’t wait to read more.” Alicia concludes, “I look forward to learning more about the struggles of different people [through reading]. I want to understand the world so I can make it a better place.”

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## Complicating Killing in Young Adult Fiction

“Often the products of our popular culture appear to take violence casually. . . . Rather than try to shield children from the world they live in, we ought to be trying to give them the tools to read this world carefully and critically . . . . The important thing is to open a dialogue.”

—McGillis, 1997, p. 130

**A**mong the characterizations and experiences blooming in young adult (YA) literature, one noteworthy branch is a small but strong collection of books that feature protagonists who kill. These titles complicate the concept of killing by exploring relatable protagonists placed in a position to kill another character. The novels incorporate techniques that highlight the complexity of this situation: the choices, consequences, and impact upon the protagonist’s identity go beyond the time-honored motif of dealing with the guilt of an accidental killing in contemporary realistic fiction or the self-defense killings common in traditional fantasy.

Conventionally, unintentional killing in YA literature has served as a cautionary tale for young adults to be careful or has served as preparation for healing from such a situation. *Whirligig* (Fleischman, 1999) and *Tears of a Tiger* (Draper, 1994) are classic examples of protagonists who dealt with the guilt of killing someone after driving under the influence of alcohol. An alternative is the killings in speculative fiction—in the last book of the Harry Potter series (Rowling, 2008), Harry’s killing of Voldemort is a metaphoric conquering of evil, and the violence is reasonable given the rules of Rowling’s imaginary world.

More recent novels accompany these more traditional stories of killing, instigating discussion among parents and educators about their depictions of violence for young adult readers. Some parents and

educators’ concerns appear to follow the assumption that suggestible young adults will “respond to depictions of violence by becoming violent themselves” (Nodelman & Reimer, 2003, p. 87). It is unlikely that any of the authors of this collection of YA novels intends for readers to copy the violent behavior of these protagonists. On the contrary, several of the authors discussed in this article mention their hopes to trouble depictions of violence or to deter violence with their writings. Neri (2010), Sedgwick (2010), and Strasser (2002) each include an author’s note that expresses anti-violent sentiments; Strasser even dedicates *Give a Boy a Gun* “to ending youth violence” (p. 3).

Even if a text has the power to incite violence, it should be noted that the premise of responding to violence in literature by becoming violent suggests a passive reader, one who is unable to read against the actions presented in the book. Instead, Eco, a reader response theorist, suggests that readers have three options: to “assume the ideology of the text and subsume it into their own reading,” to “miss or ignore the ideology of the text and import their own,” or to “question the text in order to reveal the underlying ideology” (as cited in Sarland, 1999, p. 49). We posit that the texts we examine here encourage the reader to choose the third option and question the text through specific literary techniques that complicate the act of killing.

Recent young adult novels that include protago-

nists who consider the compulsion or experience the consequences of killing create an accessible space for exploring and interrogating the nature of killing. Traditionally, such violent plot points might be glossed over or accepted as commonplace within the book's genre. In these pioneering YA novels, however, the characterizations of the protagonists and the choices and consequences they face are typically well described, which we argue encourages reflection, discussion, and interrogation of the act of killing.

We sought YA novels featuring protagonists who kill in order to examine the value of such literature. We examined over 42 YA titles spanning four decades. All of these YA novels include relatable protagonists faced with the choices or possible consequences of killing another character. We observed that the collection of YA novels included characterizations and plot points that encouraged the reader to take a critical or analytical perspective when reading about killing. The techniques are:

1. The protagonists are often placed in positions where they must kill.
2. The protagonists only choose to kill people whom they believe deserve it.
3. The protagonists reevaluate their identities as killers.
4. The protagonists often rationalize their determination to kill extensively.
5. The protagonists' expressions of guilt demonstrate they are good people despite their deeds (see Fig. 1).

To restrict the sample size, we limited our focus to novels that were published within the last decade, that extensively addressed one or more of the techniques we observed in the greater sample, and that represented both realistic and speculative fiction. Using content analysis, or inferences from the texts to their contexts (Krippendorff, 2004, p. 10), we conducted a close reading of 13 of the YA novels. To ensure standardization, we both read all of the novels in the sample and extensively discussed our interpretations to ensure the meanings we pulled from the novels were logical and consistent. These novels comprised a stratified sample used to investigate how these techniques were used and the value of complicating killing in YA literature.

Techniques	Realistic Fiction	Speculative Fiction
The protagonist is forced to kill.	<i>Sunrise over Fallujah</i> <i>Purple Heart</i>	<i>Graceling</i> <i>Hold Me Closer, Necromancer</i> <i>Ship Breaker</i> <i>I Am Not a Serial Killer</i>
The protagonist is a vigilante/antihero who only kills people who deserve it.	<i>I Hunt Killers</i>	<i>Slice of Cherry</i> <i>I Am Not a Serial Killer</i>
The protagonist reevaluates his/her identity in light of considering killing or shifts his/her identity to reflect himself/herself as a killer.	<i>I Hunt Killers</i> <i>Purple Heart</i> <i>Revolver</i>	<i>Graceling</i> <i>I Am Not a Serial Killer</i>
The killing requires a lot of rationalization in order to comfort the protagonist.	<i>Revolver</i> <i>Yummy</i> <i>Right Behind You</i>	<i>Fire</i>
The protagonist's expression of guilt helps prove that he or she is still a good person.	<i>I Am the Messenger</i> <i>Sunrise over Fallujah</i> <i>Purple Heart</i> <i>Right behind You</i>	<i>Fire</i> <i>Graceling</i> <i>Ship Breaker</i> <i>Hold Me Closer, Necromancer</i>
The book mixes genres, bringing elements of metaphoric killing in Fantasy into contemporary realistic fiction.	<i>I Am the Messenger</i>	<i>Slice of Cherry</i> <i>I Am Not a Serial Killer</i>

**Figure 1.** Titles of recent young adult fiction that use the listed techniques separated by genre

Many of the novels listed include multiple techniques to critique or address the nature of the violence. Whether through gritty realism, fantastic metaphor, or a blending of genres, these books call into question the psychological states of the protagonists. The novels may also help the reader to take a more active or questioning role while reading. Genres, considered “contracts between a writer and his readers” (Jameson 1975, p. 135) establish what the reader can expect from a text. When an author combines genres, the reader cannot take the expected rules of the world of the novel for granted and must read the text critically. Often, the techniques complement or influence one another to create a complicated picture of motives, identity formation, and consequences.

### **Blending Genres to Question the Protagonist’s Understanding of Reality**

Ten of the YA novels comprising this sample play with genre to unsettle expectations of the plot and characterizations (Jameson, 1975, p. 135). Within the scenes in which characters express their motives to kill or in which the actual killing is depicted, the genre expectations are often mixed with those of another genre. This can add fantastic or gritty elements to the scene and demonstrate the protagonist’s altered state of mind. For example, in *Slice of Cherry* (Reeves, 2011), Kit and Fancy, daughters of a convicted serial killer, live in a small Texas town. The outcast siblings, who share their father’s compulsion to kill, are moved to kill people who have wronged others. This provides Kit and Fancy with an opportunity to befriend those who have been victimized in the town.

As magical realism, *Slice of Cherry* is primarily a piece of fantasy, but its incorporation of typical issues from a bildungsroman and its focus on characters and relationships import a strong flavor of contemporary realism. When Kit and Fancy kill, the sisters enter a fantastical “happy place” or alternate world to commit the murders and dispose of the bodies (p. 160). This “home” or “garden” (pp. 161, 163) may be read literarily either as a fantasy land that the sisters access through a magical device or as a psychological escape in which the protagonists are omnipotent and find freedom from the difficulties of their daily lives. The blending of fantasy, paranormal, and contemporary realistic fiction genres plays with readers’ expecta-

tions. This may encourage readers to view the motif of killing from a kaleidoscope of angles, considering it from literal, metaphorical, and even psychological perspectives.

Similarly, *I Am the Messenger* (Zusak, 2002/2005) incorporates fantastic elements into a contemporary realistic plot. Ed Kennedy’s coming of age story is told among elements of a quest, with surreal events that contribute to his transformation along the way. If fantasy typically presents killing as metaphor and contemporary realistic fiction as mirroring reality, combining these two approaches adds depth to both. This also requires respect for the reader’s ability to determine reality from fantasy and to read inquisitively. When books like these blur genre lines, they move readers out of their comfort zones. This discomfort seems to allow readers to see the ordinary extraordinarily and encourages them to think critically about what they are reading and to reevaluate their own expectations.

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**This discomfort seems to allow readers to see the ordinary extraordinarily and encourages them to think critically about what they are reading.**

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### **How Writers Encourage Self-Reflection**

#### **Force the Protagonist to Kill**

One technique we investigated was how the protagonists are forced into killing another character. In contemporary realistic war stories, like *Purple Heart* (McCormick, 2009) and *Sunrise over Fallujah* (Myers, 2008), the protagonists are required to kill in self-defense or in defense of another as part of their military service during the Iraq War. Similarly, *Hold Me Closer, Necromancer* (McBride, 2010), an urban fantasy, sets its protagonist, Sam LaCroix, in a situation where he must kill or be killed. He is forced to make this choice when Douglas, a more experienced necromancer, kidnaps Sam and attempts to drain his powers and take his life. Instead of viewing Sam as a murderer when he kills Douglas, Sam maintains his position as a hero in the reader’s mind. Sam defends himself, overcoming necessary obstacles as he comes of age and into power.

However, it is not just the act of self-defense that complicates killing in *Hold Me Closer, Necromancer* (McBride, 2010). Complications also stem from the brutally graphic depiction of the scene, such as the taste of Douglas's blood as some of it hits Sam's tongue—"a viscous, heavy saltiness" (p. 309). Sam

is overwhelmed by the experience and blacks out, later admitting that "it was too much" (p. 310). Sam later invites investigation as he reflects on the deed and the emotional aftermath: "'I still didn't want to kill him,' I said, looking at the floor. I waited for some feeling to emerge. Remorse, maybe. But nothing came. I felt hollow as I stared at my dirty carpet"

(p. 333). Rather than letting the killing go unquestioned, understood as something necessary and acceptable given the fantasy world, McBride deliberately probes at the moral issues involved in killing.

In all cases of killing that involve extenuating circumstances beyond the control of the protagonist, the reader can view that protagonist more sympathetically. Several books (such as Lyga, 2012; Reeves, 2011; Wells, 2010) depict characters who question whether their environment or a genetic predisposition toward murder has influenced their thoughts and actions. Furthermore, by taking a sympathetic view toward the protagonist, readers can more easily place themselves in the character's shoes, allowing them to personally investigate the complexity of the actions and the rippling ramifications of killing in the character's life. These books also provoke the reader to think critically about horrible acts committed by well-meaning protagonists.

### **Position the Character as an Antihero**

Some books present protagonists as antiheroes who limit themselves to killing only people who presumably deserve it. Sanderson, Tayler, and Wells (2009) refer to this type of antihero as the "Punisher," named after the Marvel character who first appeared as a nemesis for Spiderman. This hero "kills people, but they were all bad." *I Am Not a Serial Killer* (Wells,

2010) was not published as a young adult book in the United States but is often considered one, given that it is about a 15-year-old protagonist who believes he is a sociopath. John Wayne Cleaver uses his fascination with serial killers to help track down a local serial killer and learns that the killer is actually a demon. When he locates the Clayton Killer, he kills him as punishment for his crimes, but also to protect future victims. Here, the killing is justified because the victim has previously killed and intends to do so again. While John's act is the lesser of two evils, this complex character has to deal with the result of indulging his homicidal impulses.

The antihero protagonist typically reflects both before and after the killings, justifying why the victim deserves to die. This repeated examination of his or her choices reinforces the question of whether the antihero can ever truly justify killing. Sanderson et al. (2009) note that this type of antihero is often shallow, "because people think that this is enough to hang a whole character on" (2:34-minute mark). *Jenny Green's Killer Junior Year* (Belasen & Osborn, 2008) is the fictional account of a girl who initially kills in self-defense, but soon turns to killing boys she thinks have done wrong according to her personal moral reasoning. This book demonstrates how an antihero can be perceived as shallow when the killing is not interrogated through the stylistic and narrative choices. In contrast, John Cleaver struggles to avoid killing and contemplates the choices and ramifications extensively. When fully fleshed out, these characters address the idea of killing in complex ways as they urge the reader to question his or her thoughts, feelings, and actions.

### **Reevaluate Identity**

When dealing with the reality of killing another character, these protagonists often question their identity or value as a person. This explores how such actions influence the identity formation of the character and, by extension, allows the reader to see the impact such deeds have. Literature can serve as an entry point, allowing the young adult reader to "consider how one defines one's own identity, the role which peers and society play in that defining process, and how the repercussions of moral decision can affect identity development" (Bushman & McNerny, 2004, p. 64). The paths and relationships protagonists navigate

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**These characters address the idea of killing in complex ways as they urge the reader to question his or her thoughts, feelings, and actions.**

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are complex when faced with an identity defined by another's death.

In *I Hunt Killers* (Lyga, 2012), the protagonist, Jazz Dent, is the son of an imprisoned serial killer. Jazz is raised by his variably abusive and senile grandmother while wrestling with his identity and his impulses to kill. After his grandmother hits him, Jazz contemplates the choice of killing or caring for her and the impact this choice would have on his personality:

Maybe in caring for her, he would observe something, learn something about his lineage, something that would give him some sort of insight into his father and his own upbringing. Anything. Something to help him figure out how to avoid a future that, on some days, felt inevitable. A future that ran thick with blood.

Or maybe, more likely—

“Just like your daddy,” Gramma gasped, fumbling into a chair, having apparently decided not to die. “You’re just like your daddy.”

Now *that* hurt. More than a beating ever could. (p. 96, emphasis present in text)

Jazz's fear of being like his father drives many of his choices—from his treatment of his grandmother to his choice in girlfriend—as he struggles against his upbringing and desire to kill. This tension comes to a head when Jazz and his grandmother are captured by the Impressionist, a copycat killer who follows the example of Jazz's father. The Impressionist urges Jazz to kill his grandmother as a rite of passage. When he refuses, Jazz admits to the reader that he “was more trying to convince himself than deny the Impressionist” (p. 343). By facing and resisting killing, Jazz learns more about himself and vows to hunt killers.

These books show young adult readers the possible twists and turns of personality development as they see the impact of the protagonist's choices. Rather than a literal warning against poor choices, Jazz's story presents a metaphor for making choices. When identity formation is clearly depicted as a multidimensional part of character, reading books like *I Hunt Killers* (Lyga, 2012) and *I Am Not a Serial Killer* (Wells, 2010) become a process through which readers can reflect upon their own identity formation.

### Rationalize Killing

Some young adult protagonists within our sample develop substantive rationalizations to kill. This shows

that they are struggling with committing an act they know to be wrong in a way that the reader can access. In particular, Sedgwick (2010) uses the entirety of *Revolver* to focus on the question of whether Sig Andersson should use his father's gun to kill Gunther Wolff, the man who has taken him hostage in hopes of obtaining the gold that he swears Sig's father stole. Sedgwick weaves together both Sig's past interactions with his mother and father as well as Wolff's actions and threats to argue for and against killing. The alternation of chapters between the present—1910 in the Antarctic—and Sig's childhood in 1899 allows the reader to participate in the protagonist's choice and rationalization by tying past parental guidance and choices to their present impact. In the end, Sig takes a middle approach in which he is responsible for Wolff's death but does not kill him with the gun. Instead, he uses indirect means, allowing Wolff's own actions to contribute to his imprisonment and eventual death.

By including extensive and deep consideration over the choice to kill, this sample allows room for reflection. These reflections take up more space on the page, and thus require the reader to spend more time

reading about the killing and interrogating it. This period of inquiry can happen either before or after the event. In the case of *Fire* (Cashore, 2009), the protagonist, Fire, revisits throughout the story the role she played in her father's death. She eventually comes to terms with her use of her psychic abilities to convince her father to put himself in danger in order to prevent him from killing a young man (p. 303). As Fire gradually reveals her responsibility, her admissions evolve from suggesting that she was a witness, to claiming responsibility, to rationalizing why she did it.

In contrast, the 11-year-old protagonist in the biographical graphic novel *Yummy* (Neri, 2010) avoids taking responsibility for his own actions by referring to the murder he committed as an “accident” (p. 69). In response to his unintentional killing of a 14-year-old girl in a gang shooting, older members of his gang shoot Yummy for becoming “too much of a problem”

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**Books that respect the gravity of killing also suggest a focus on life. If the taking of a life is serious, then life, too, is important.**

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take away from the significance of the situation. In the end, this type of extended introspection prevents the reader from avoiding the subject or taking it lightly, instead demanding a deeper or more critical reading.

### **Investigate Guilt**

Another key feature of these books that investigate killing is that protagonists' feelings of guilt are typically emphasized. These expressions of remorse demonstrate the gravity of killing, requesting that readers take the act as seriously as the characters do. One of the reasons that Printz-award winning *Ship Breaker* (Bacigalupi, 2010) makes such an impact is that Nailer is very open about his feelings of guilt after killing his father, Richard, even though he acted in self-defense. His friend Sadna comforts him, saying, "Richard never felt a thing when he hurt people. Just didn't give a damn. It's good that you feel something. Trust me. Even if it hurts, it's good" (p. 319). Nailer's guilt is contrasted with Richard's presumable lack of feeling. This suggests that part of being a redeemable protagonist is feeling guilt, even overwhelming guilt.

Books like *Ship Breaker* (Bacigalupi, 2010), *I Am the Messenger* (Zusak, 2002/2005), *Sunrise over Fal-lujah* (Myers, 2008), *Purple Heart* (McCormick, 2009), *Fire* (Cashore, 2009), *Graceling* (Cashore, 2008), and *Hold Me Closer, Necromancer* (McBride, 2010) focus on guilt and acknowledge the seriousness of killing. None of these stories take killing in stride. Instead, through the use of these techniques, they demonstrate their commitment to respect death. While it seems that the novels within this sample are focused on death, books that respect the gravity of killing also suggest a focus on life. If the taking of a life is serious, then life, too, is important.

(p. 84). This prevents further introspection or reconciliation of his actions, and readers are left to choose for themselves how they feel about Yummy and his choices. The progress of working through these issues cannot be casual, easy, or quick because that would

## **Conclusions and Implications**

Many variables influence the formation of trends and shifts within young adult literature, from what inspires individual authors to what captures the attention of editors and interests young adults. Coats (2011) wrote, "YA texts tend to appear in thematic clusters, revealing an intertextuality that responds to the market, which in turn responds to prevailing cultural and personal fantasies" (p. 318).

Although examining why there are so many YA novels that depict killing is beyond the scope of this article, this literature functions within an ideology that sees children-as-capable by addressing a previously forbidden topic through new and complex ways (Dresang, 2003, p. 24). Interrogating such young adult protagonists allows readers to explore complex and difficult issues from multiple vantage points and through metaphors and relatable emotions. Dresang considered children-as-capable to be "worldly wise," "technologically savvy," and "media rich"; "there is little [these children] have not seen or heard" (pp. 22–23), including violence. Reflecting this "children-as-capable" ideology, literature intended for such readers is often "many-voiced, rhetorically diverse, and composed of many genres and perspectives within a single book" (Glasgow, 2002, p. 41), as we see in the techniques described here and used in our sample.

In a culture that bombards young adults with violence (see Miller, 2005, p. 87) and news stories of murders and suicides, Mauro (1997) notes that violence "can be a soft, subtle, often unfelt thing" (1997, p. 113) due to oversaturation. Similarly, McGillis (1997) wrote, "[M]uch of the reading that people do is unthinking absorption of familiar messages" (p. 129). The challenge to educators, then, becomes following the lead of books like those examined in this sample. With a teacher's mediation, young adults can begin to think critically and interrogate the ideas and images that they encounter daily rather than passively absorb or ignore them (see Miller, 2005).

Finally, through examining the five criteria described in this article—whether the protagonists are forced to kill, whether they are operating as vigilantes or antiheroes, how these choices impact their identity, how they rationalize the act, and whether they feel guilty—readers are encouraged to take a critical stance and interrogate the nature of killing and the

characterizations of the protagonists in the novels comprising this sample. This allows readers to explore complex and difficult issues from multiple perspectives. McGillis (1997) writes about using such critical stances to examine the familiar and to “understand the forces that impinge upon us. In doing so, we gain a distance from these forces and a vantage point from which to assess what we read. We become critical readers, active rather than passive readers” (p. 129). Seeing *Jazz*, *Sig*, *Nailer*, *Fire*, and *Fancy* deal with the consequences of killing provides different perspectives through each story with which to critically consider the ramifications of death and murder.

Reading and interrogating young adult novels within the child-as-capable ideology allows readers to situate and develop their own stance toward understanding the nature of killing. This can be extended to address basic issues of death and, consequently, life. YA authors often acknowledge that when they write about death, they are actually writing about life (e.g., Lauren Oliver, personal communication, 2012, October 3). Young adult novels that are engaged in complicating the choices and consequences of killing—whether fantasy, science fiction, realistic, or genre blending—provide a strong and vibrant branch for teens to rely upon as they read critically.

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## Probing Text Complexity:

Reflections on Reading *The Giver* as Pre-teens, Teens, and Adults

**T**he call for manuscripts for this issue asks, “What [YA] titles endure and why?” During Angie’s 12 years of teaching a young adult literature course at Wright State University, she has always chosen Lois Lowry’s *The Giver* (1993) to initiate college students who are used to a diet of classics, since they often believe only classics are of value in classroom settings. This Newbery-winning book’s emotional and philosophical complexity parallels classics such as *1984* and *Brave New World*, enabling even high-browed English majors to easily see the value of YA literature. As one student, Jacob (all names are pseudonyms), wrote, “[I]f this is what YA lit is about, sign me up!” On a syllabus where book titles come and go, *The Giver* has remained, due to the passionate responses it continues to evoke from adult readers. The enduring questions that cut to the core of our identities as individuals and members of a society and the artful rendering of the plot make *The Giver* a classic.

Pardon the cliché, but time does indeed fly, and 10 years have passed since Angie and two students from her young adult literature course wrote an article about the power of reading *The Giver* at the time of the September 11 terrorist attacks (Johnson, Kleismit, & Williams, 2002). Now another pattern in reading *The Giver* has emerged from the written responses—1½–2 pages about their thoughts, feelings, and the craft of the novel—of two undergraduate YA literature classes. Angie noticed the increasingly poignant and powerful ways in which adults described their reactions to this young adult book. In addition, those

who had read the book during their upper-elementary, middle school, or high school years seemed to have significantly more powerful responses as adult readers compared to their initial responses to the book. While it is no surprise that students would report different responses from their readings as youths, Angie recently noticed far more adults commenting on this phenomenon in an intentionally generic writing prompt. Perhaps the increased number of students writing about their younger experiences reading *The Giver* implies that more teachers of younger students are incorporating this enduring book in their literature studies, and of course this also speaks to the power of the book for individual readers—teachers—who want to share this excellent novel with their students.

Intrigued by the commonalities in the students’ responses, Angie asked all members of two YA literature classes for permission to study their responses, inviting them to be co-researchers. Laurel and Jessie stepped forward to learn the ropes of qualitative research. From a total of 43 students in the two classes, 26 granted consent for their responses to be used for the study. Each with our own copies of the participants’ responses to *The Giver*, we individually pored over the data, reading through the responses without *a priori* assumptions to allow patterns to emerge.

We met and discussed many facets of the responses; three themes emerged from our participants as they recalled *The Giver* from their youth. *The Giver* left them 1) not understanding the novel, 2) not liking the novel, or 3) not *remembering* the novel (ironic for a book about the value of memory!). On the other



hand, the adults also wrote of the tremendous power *The Giver* held for them now, either as a first-read or subsequent reading. Focusing on the intensity of adult readers' responses to the text, three additional themes emerged from comments about 1) their connections to Jonas, 2) their empathy for him, and 3) their insights and questions sparked by the book. How can an award-winning novel written specifically for young adults have such a different impact on younger readers than adult readers? Examining adult readers' powerful evocations of *The Giver* and comparing their past and present readings of this enduring book can provide insights to curricular literary text selection and the Common Core State Standards (2012a).

### **What Makes *The Giver* Complex?**

Given the push for increased text complexity due to the CCSS, teachers may run toward dense classics to ensure a rigorous curriculum. However, when adults who are devoting their lives to the teaching of English spontaneously vouch for the complexity and craft of a YA novel—as evidenced in the adults' responses to *The Giver*—there is a serious argument for its quality and complexity. At a purely surface level, the book's vocabulary is not too advanced, making it easier to read; however, common words take on meanings specific to the narrative—phrases such as “comfort objects” and “relief-of-pain.” The euphemistic language (e.g., “release,” “stirrings”) may challenge some readers intellectually and emotionally. In addition, the book requires many inferences to be made by the reader. Even some of the adults wonder about the light-eyed reference regarding Jonas, Rosemary, and The Receiver. Lowry's novel also poses intellectually difficult questions: What makes for a good and just society? How do we overcome that paralyzing moment when we have no idea whom we can truly trust?

Perhaps most important, the book is emotionally challenging. The works our society tends to deem most worthwhile and those that last the test of time are often titles that present new, often disturbing, insights. (Consider Academy Award-winning films and Nobel Prize-winning literature.) *The Giver's* intensity of emotion juxtaposed against a sterile, blindly accepting society is truly chilling. With the many complexities of this novel, it is no wonder that adults recalled their confusion upon an initial reading at younger ages.

Lowry stated that though she wrote without a

particular audience in mind, she later believed the novel best suited for eighth grade and higher because “although a younger reader can enjoy the story that is contained in the book, it takes a slightly more mature kid to begin to appreciate the issues and questions the book raises” (L. Lowry, personal communication, May 28, 2012). This statement was based on what Lowry has heard from teachers about their students' reactions.

Teachers, parents, and students alike acknowledge the complexity of *The Giver* in online discussions, such as the following comments from a 2009

amazon.com discussion thread. While some teachers have had positive experiences reading the book with younger students, many commented on the deep issues that might be better comprehended at older ages. One parent wrote that fifth graders “are not mature enough to understand the philosophical issues that this book brings up.” Similarly, another contributor wrote, “I am a great admirer of Lois Lowry's work, just not this series—for this age group [10-year-olds] in a school setting. At the risk of appearing ridiculous, I would say great college material.” Certainly the YA literature students agree with this comment; it is far from ridiculous. In fact, the recommended eighth-grade readership may be a bit young according to this reader: “I am a teenager who read the book in 8th grade. I honestly do not recommend the book for kids that young.” Even this engaged reader, one who comments on an amazon.com discussion, had difficulty in eighth grade, perhaps at the age of 13 or 14, reading *The Giver*.

To be clear, we are not advocating censorship; we treasure *The Giver* and hope all readers experience its power. We are, however, advocating an acknowledgment of the text's complexity and a reconsideration of the grades in which the book may be required for whole-class or group literary study. Readers are individuals, and some younger readers will grasp the nuances of *The Giver*, but in general, older teenagers and adults may reap the most benefits from such a layered novel.

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**With the many complexities of this novel, it is no wonder that adults recalled their confusion upon an initial reading at younger ages.**

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The truth is, YA literature has been overlooked in the push for increasing complexity and rigor in the curriculum. We contend that the concept of text complexity in the CCSS has been oversimplified. The Standard 10: Range, Quality, and Complexity web-

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***The Giver* might be comprehended, enjoyed, appreciated, and memorable in the upper grades of high school.**

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page for the CCSS (2012c) lists no YA titles for high schoolers. The CCSS's "Appendix B: Text Exemplars and Sample Performance Tasks" (2012b) lists *The Book Thief* (Zusak, 2006) as the sole YA title suggested for grades 9–10, and no YA novels are recommended for grades 11–CCR ("career and college readi-

ness"). It seems the mere label of "young adult" puts a book in jeopardy of not being incorporated into the high school curriculum.

*The Giver*, regardless of the lack of challenging vocabulary, has genuine text complexity in the topics addressed and layers of meaning.<sup>1</sup> Based on the YA literature students' responses, we surmise that *The Giver* may be more complex than the majority of upper-elementary, middle school, and possibly even younger high school readers can appreciate. Perhaps as whole-class or group literary study, *The Giver* might be comprehended, enjoyed, appreciated, and memorable in the upper grades of high school. By examining the adults' reflections of their current and previous transactions (Rosenblatt, 1938/1995) with *The Giver*, we argue a case for this particular text's inclusion at the upper levels of high school (grades 10–12). Although *The Giver* will be our primary example, many YA titles are legitimately complex and rigorous for literary study in secondary schools. Their addition to curricula would do much to broaden and diversify the list of suggested texts from the CCSS.

1 The CCSS use Lexile® text measures determined by word frequency and sentence length. *The Giver*'s Lexile® text measure is 760L (Lexile®), at the gr. 4–5 complexity level, according to the CCSS chart (Lexile® Find Book, 2012; Lexile Text Complexity, 2012)—not ideal grades at which to study this novel.

## **Psychological Development and Younger Readers**

In his response to *The Giver*, future teacher Nathaniel wondered "if this book freaked any kids out." Many teachers agonize over their students' psychological readiness when determining whether or not to have their classes read *The Giver*. There are some mature and dark themes present in the text: government control, sexual arousal, disillusionment, infanticide, and geronticide (the killing of the elderly).

Consider that some readers encounter *The Giver* in fifth grade, perhaps at age ten. Nathaniel also wrote, "From a psychological standpoint, kids reading this book for school would just be entering into Piaget's last step of cognitive development." According to Piaget, the last stage of development is the formal operational stage, which typically is not entered until age 11 or so. At this stage of development, an adolescent is capable of abstract reasoning and can "consider implications and incompatibilities, think hypothetically, search for alternatives, and reject inappropriate solutions without physically needing to test them" (Bohlin, Durwin, & Reese-Weber, 2009, p. 123). Students who are entering the formal operational stage are just beginning to have the skills they will need to make sense of a complex text.

*The Giver* raises many questions that younger students do not spend the majority of their time ruminating over—such as the form of society, individuality, and the cost of choice—other than at the level of their own social circles. Students at young ages may not be emotionally or cognitively developed enough to handle the subject matter. Preteen and teen readers often read books with protagonists near their own age, so it makes sense, considering that Jonas is 12, that the book would seem appropriate for this age group. After all, wouldn't they be more likely to empathize with Jonas? Would he not have similar concerns and cares to a typical preteen? On the surface, yes, but Jonas and readers live in very different societies. Jonas experiences the emotional complexities of a drugged, sterile populace and receives intense memories of experiences that none of his peers, "family unit," or community have ever known. He is isolated and incredibly different from an average reader in a modern setting.

Sarah, who read the book in sixth grade and

remembered very little of the novel, commented that she would teach the book at a much older age when students could consider “lying, loneliness, loss, and so much more.” Not to underestimate the experiences of younger students, but lying, loss, and loneliness take on vastly different meanings to Jonas. As Jessie reminds us, Jonas’s world is shaken when he reads his job instructions: “8. You may lie” (Lowry, 1993, p. 54). What, then, of his parents and all the other adults he has trusted? The foundation of all he has known has collapsed. Deborah Appleman (2009) warns that even older teens are disturbed by the literary theory of deconstruction, when everything they have known is now uncertain, and lack of closure reigns. How much more difficult and disturbing might these ideas be for younger readers of *The Giver*?

### **Literary Complexity: Dealing with Layers of Meaning and Ambiguity**

As with any excellent novel, *The Giver* may be read on many levels. Readers may enjoy the plot, but some may miss the literary richness the book has to offer. For Laurel, *The Giver* was “like when I read *Beowulf* and Shakespeare when I was younger; I enjoyed them then, but I didn’t fully understand them. I feel like I got a better grasp of the story as an adult.” To directly compare this YA text to such complex classics speaks volumes. Laurel had read *The Giver* in middle school, but did not remember “many specifics other than the snow at the end.” Similarly, Jessie wrote that she had read *The Giver* “sometime in middle school,” but was not sure she had ever finished the book.

Contrary to the majority of the YA lit students, Elizabeth and Jennifer did remember reading *The Giver*, with Jennifer noting, “even now I can still recall how it struck a chord somewhere deep within me,” but “I don’t think that I quite understood all of the things the book was trying to tell me.” For Abigail, the powerful literary style and issues addressed in *The Giver* may have been confusing, and she commented that “. . . (I was very naïve), and what I did not understand, I didn’t like.” While a few students were able to enjoy *The Giver* at a younger age, most were not.

One scene students remarked upon with a high frequency was the ending of the novel. The narrative is intentionally ambiguous—an intriguing challenge

for some mature readers who have a taste for close reading to seek clues to a more definitive ending. For younger readers, the ending may prove a source of confusion or dislike of the book as a whole. As a first-time reader of the book, Jacob wrote, “We are left—no pun intended—out in the cold! Did Jonas and Gabriel die?” The ending is ambiguous, leaving Jonas and Gabe on a snowy slope with a sled, an item that he recalled from a memory that was transmitted, but not something that existed within his real life in the Community, and the faint sound of music. The ending could be a dream or hallucination, it could be a vision in death, or it could be reality—in which case the world outside of the Community is not as Jonas was led to believe, thus making the reader wonder which scenario it is.

Megan commented that the ending gave her no “closure.” As a younger reader, Abigail found “the ending left me unsatisfied.” Elizabeth wrote “how frustrating it was to not know if Jonas and the baby died or actually made it to their destination. I still don’t know.” The ending has the power to color the entire parting message of the book, depending upon which scenario the reader chooses to believe. Gwen divulged, “the ending is so sad to me and almost frustrating in a way.”

Even as adults, ambiguity can be hard to tackle, but it seems more difficult for younger readers. Rebecca wrote that in sixth grade she “mostly just didn’t like the ending. It was too unclear.” Mary brought up the point that “the next generation of readers—who enjoy unprecedented, immediate access to answers to any question—are likely [to be] disturbed by the ambiguity.” A student who learns that there is a right answer for questions may not be able to see that for some questions, there are no definitive answers and no one solution. Students may have even more difficulty with ambiguity if taught that only one correct interpretation of literature exists (Booth, 1995), which is often the way rigorous, complex texts are taught. Though some of the adults in the YA literature classes

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**As with any excellent novel, *The Giver* may be read on many levels. Readers may enjoy the plot, but some may miss the literary richness the book has to offer.**

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would have preferred a more definitive ending, they typically still found *The Giver* to be an excellent read, appreciated far more than when they had read the book as a younger student.

## **Emotional Complexity: Memories—and Lack Thereof—of Intense Moments**

For a text as well written and emotionally charged as *The Giver*, it is not surprising that the adult read-

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**Just as readers are mortified right along with Jonas at the discovery of the “Release” of the baby, the adults’ responses expressed further connections to Jonas.**

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ers were greatly moved during their reading. The most harrowing moment depicts Release—the appalling scene of infanticide when Jonas’s father puts the baby’s corpse in the trash chute and waves “bye-bye” (Lowry, 1993, p. 151). Susan stated, “I was just as shocked the second time at how the community disposes of the old and those that are released.” Even knowing the

plot from a previous read, Susan still found Lowry’s writing exceptionally hard-hitting. Elizabeth found it “horrifying.” Vaughn empathized to the point that he felt “beyond angry” at this scene. Jonas’s epiphany of what Release truly is screams off the page, “*He killed it! My Father killed it!*” (Lowry, 1993, p. 150, original emphasis). Jonas’s shock and mortification parallel the adult readers’ responses.

As intense as this scene is, some adults did not even remember this moment from reading *The Giver* at a younger age. Could it be that some younger readers block out these disturbing scenes, thus forgetting much of the book, as was the case for two of these adult readers? Gwen wrote, “I remembered there was something bad about this process [Release]. . . . I almost wanted to believe I was thinking of something else, or had my stories mixed up.” Laurel definitely blocked out the horror: “I honestly don’t remember [the baby’s murder] from years ago, and that surprises me, because it literally makes me sick to read it.” Judging by the adults’ responses to reading about how Jonas witnessed his father, brainwashed, willingly injecting an infant’s head with lethal fluids, it seems

plausible that younger students would try to forget the scenes that disturbed them so much. The power of this moment is in part what draws us in so poignantly as adult readers, whereas, for younger students, this moment may be enough to want to forget much of the book entirely.

## **Powerful Responses of Adult Readers**

### **Connections**

Just as readers are mortified right along with Jonas at the discovery of the “Release” of the baby, the adults’ responses expressed further connections to Jonas. Many see *The Giver* as a novel for younger readers based on Jonas’s age—despite other novels with young protagonists that are taught at older ages, such as *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Twain, 1885/1996) or *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Lee, 1960/2002). Lowry remarked that she enjoys “writing about protagonists who are 12 or thereabouts because at that age they seem to combine the characteristics of childhood . . . idealism, ingenuousness, curiosity . . . with the beginning of a more sophisticated view of the world” (L. Lowry, personal communication, May 28, 2012). Jonas painfully (literally and figuratively) encounters this more sophisticated view of the world due to his role in the society. Though he is only 12, many adult students voiced a feeling of similarity between themselves and Jonas based on their life experiences.

Jonas is forced to handle serious responsibilities and grapple with the understanding that his society is flawed, despite being raised from birth to believe it perfect. While developmentally, readers around Jonas’s age will be experiencing greater responsibilities and more cognitive and emotional maturity than they had in earlier childhood, older readers are capable of a better understanding of the situations in which Jonas is placed. For example, Meyshia pondered her own mortality and the ritual storytelling of the Olds. She noted that she would “relish the thought of being able to attend [her] own funeral.” Further, she wondered if the Olds knew their lives were ending, or if they were “just tired of living and maybe that they wanted everything to end.” Thoughts of their own and others’ mortality are not often, we hope, on the minds of younger readers.

Adults’ life experience through political involve-

ment and knowledge can also play into a deeper understanding of the novel. Younger readers in upper elementary, middle school, and even into high school are usually uninformed on the nuances of political issues and the running of government beyond the basics; furthermore, typically not until the senior year of high school do students take a course in government, when they consider issues beyond their own microcosm. Considering the utopian society, Olivia wrote, “When I was younger . . . I can remember feeling that the Community was the epitome of everything bad and wrong,” but as an adult she could see benefits of the society in which Jonas lived—though she also recognized the flaws and was frightened by the appeal of Jonas’s society.

With greater understanding of the suffering in the world, the idea of a world without pain *is* appealing. When faced with the distress of poverty, famine, disease, and death, not having complete freedom of choice seems an acceptable option to eliminate these harsh realities. Alexa commented on the diversity of opinions of government: “My ‘utopia’ is different than everyone else’s, and more important, I believe my idea of ‘utopia’ has changed throughout my life.” One person’s “utopia” may consist of a society centered around sports, while an avid reader may long for a world filled only with books. The political preferences and personal “utopia” of the readers can make them more, or less, accepting of the way Jonas’s society is run.

In comparison to the United States, Jonas’s community is painfully empty of freedom. However, when compared to other countries, the society seems relatively normal. Most older readers are aware of the cultural allusions that Lowry plays upon in her book: China has a law limiting the number of children a family can have, many nations limit free speech and censor media, and arranged marriages still take place. In a post-9/11 world, we here in the US, too, have our trade-offs for protection and freedom. Younger students have a knee-jerk reaction that this lack of choice is wrong, and that is all there is to it. The adult students (though most still disliked the society) could understand the reasoning, or at the very least thought to question how it came about. Cultural understanding and varied political opinions led the adults to delve more deeply beyond the younger students’ superficial reaction and to seek comprehension. As Sabrina

stated, “Every day governments make decisions based on the greater good.” Political preferences and personal beliefs certainly shape the reader’s opinion of the society in *The Giver*.

### Empathy

Life and literary experiences typically heighten empathy, and older readers are often capable of a deeper reading of the text.

We don’t mean to minimize the understanding younger readers may have as *younger readers*, but the adults’ memories of their preteen and teenage readings along with their current readings of *The Giver* argue for its depth and complexity. The heavy topics facing Jonas allow older readers to relate to him and his role, regard-

less of his age. Georgina stated that she was “confused and angered right along with Jonas.” Some of the YA lit students stated that they empathized with Jonas, and if in the same situation would have chosen the same path. Rosalind mentioned that “[i]f I lived in a world like that and was given the same knowledge . . . I would want to escape, also.”

Younger readers, while they may have understood the plot in general, may not be able to imagine Jonas’s situation or how they would have reacted if given his knowledge and responsibilities. In his training to be the future Receiver for the rest of his life, Jonas is being given the entire knowledge of the society and its past—an incredible burden for any one person, let alone a child. Older readers, already employed or seriously considering a specific career path, can better understand the responsibility placed upon Jonas. Younger readers may not have a vision of what their future holds and may respond differently to the assignment of a lifelong position at an age so close to their own. While many younger readers, when prompted, might happily claim that they wish to become a rock star, or the president, plenty of others would recoil at the idea of having their entire life decided by others—particularly when in the “rebellious” phase of adolescence.

Like Jonas, though to a lesser degree, older read-

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**Some of the YA lit students stated that they empathized with Jonas, and if in the same situation would have chosen the same path.**

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ers have carried their own burdens and those of others. Do younger readers grasp what it might be like for one person to carry the mental and physical memories of all of society's history, perhaps days of slavery or genocide? Jill, who hadn't read the book when she was younger, stated that she was glad she first read it as an adult, noting that "some young readers may lack the life experience necessary in order to appreciate the more nuanced references and overtones that I enjoyed in the story."

### Insights and Questions

Other insights emerged from first-time and repeat adult readers of *The Giver*. Sabrina, who had not read the book before the YA lit class, commented that she "did not expect the power [*The Giver*] had from the first page," later noting the tremendous craft of Lowry as a writer. Rebecca stated that she found symbolism and allusions to Christianity that she had missed in

the previous reading. Regarding her multiple readings of *The Giver*, Olivia stated, "I love it when you pick up a book you've read a hundred times and every time you open the front cover to begin, a brand new book is waiting inside for you." This aligns with Louise Rosenblatt's (2005) transactional theory and her assertion that "reading is always a particular event involving a particular reader at a particular time under particular circumstances" (p. 35). With every event, thought, relationship, and experience, we are given more tools for understanding literature and the world around us. If *The Giver* offers enrichment on every subsequent reading, it is indeed an enduring text.

Excellent novels leave us pondering them long after the final page. Nathaniel linked his questions specifically to the age of readers:

After I read this book, I spent a couple of hours on what I was thinking . . . Honestly, I had so many questions, thoughts, and comments that I didn't know what to do with all of them. However, one unifying thing stood out during my thought process. I kept wondering how all of these questions would've changed, or how my experience would've changed if I had read this book between the 11-14-year-old version of me.

Indeed, what might be gained or lost by reading this book at various ages? Do younger readers often "spend a couple of hours" thinking after their reading? What might be gained from rereading as older high school students or adults?

Almost all of the adults' responses conveyed that they had questions while reading. Some mentioned the specifics of how the society actually ran. Susan considered the role of the Elders: "It made me wonder if the Elders were aware of the truth and so made rules knowingly and calculatingly, or if in their training, as they replaced the Elders before them, they were just handed down the emotionless list of rules and directions and so continued on in naiveté." Jacob was so curious about the unknowns of the book that he researched in attempts to learn more about "the history of Jonas's communal society of sameness."

Many pondered the form of the society, individuality, and the cost of choice. Jill found herself asking what she deemed the "central question: 'What necessitated the Sameness and how was it achieved?'" These topics may be considered by younger readers—in fact, some students mentioned having outrage when younger at the lack of choice—but younger readers would be more likely to focus on the topics in relation to how they affect them personally, as opposed to the effect on society as a whole. In contrast, Nancy asks, "[W]ould life really be better if we never experienced pain, loss, grief—if we never experienced truth?" With utopian and dystopian stories, a fine line is walked to determine if the end justifies the means. In *The Giver*, readers wonder if the suffering of one to ensure blissful ignorance of many is worth it, if "perfect" job placements and family assignments offset the elimination of choice and the moral implications involved in maintaining a state of "perfection." While reading, Jane asked a very troubling question, "[W]hat is the meaning of these characters' lives?" Jonas's world not only requires readers to come to terms with the dystopia of his community, but also the failings of the past society that created the world in which he now lives.

### Taking a Stand for YA Literature as Complex Texts

The call for manuscripts for this issue asks, "As we pursue the next trend in young adult literature, what

should we be careful not to lose?” In spite of good intentions of rigor and complexity, we must not overlook whole fields of literature due to the age of protagonists and the label of YA lit. *The Giver* is a classic, just as powerful today as in its publication year of 1993. The call for manuscripts also asks, “What will our future roles as young adult literature advocates be and with whom should we be forging relationships?” YA literature advocates must forge “relationships” with the CCSS, laying bare the ways that the field does indeed meet the rigors of complex texts. If adults have enriching, complex transactions with *The Giver*, surely the text is appropriate for high schoolers as well. As Abigail wrote,

This was my third read-through of *The Giver*. The first time I read it as a freshman in high school. I remember disliking it. . . . The second time I read the novel *The Giver* was for a 200-level literature course at [a community college]. . . . By that point, I had studied other books that dealt with utopia type themes as well as dystopias . . . . With all of the new knowledge during the second reading, I enjoyed the novel more, but I still didn’t understand why *The Giver* is so highly regarded. . . . Now, after my third reading of the book, I think I understand . . . . I was amazed at how well everything fell together in the book. . . . It felt complete because I was finally able to see it in a different light.

Early in her college studies prior to our YA literature class, Abigail had not encountered the book powerfully enough for her to appreciate not only the themes but also Lowry’s craft and style. Her rereadings, along with her literary experience, led her to a fulfilling literary transaction. Why would we deny the depth of such experiences by prohibiting the literary study of books such as *The Giver* with our high school students?

The field has increasing numbers of proponents for the inclusion of YA literature in high schools (Soter & Connors, 2009; Atwell, 2007; Johnson & Ciancio 2010). Although the CCSS note that its examples of appropriately complex texts are just that, examples, teachers may feel pressured not to stray from the recommended titles. Similarly, although the CCSS specify three factors to be taken into account when considering text complexity (qualitative aspects, quantitative measures, and individual reader and task traits), it seems the reader’s individual factors may get lost in a curriculum designed to be more and more rigorous for a generic student in any given grade. The best inten-

tions of standards and curricula often lose ground to the reality of funding cuts that can accompany low standardized test scores.

We lose much—in particular the chance to create lifelong readers—if we narrow the secondary school curriculum to canonical texts only. The CCSS “Appendix B: Text Exemplars and Sample Performance Tasks” (2012a) for stories, drama, and poetry for grades 11–CCR seems particularly suited to *The Giver*. The tasks ask students to consider how protagonists “maintain their integrity when confronting authority” [RL.11–12.9] (2012, p. 163). Jonas’s figurative and literal journeys deal directly with his integrity as he challenges authority. Students should also be able to “analyze how *over the course of the text* different characters try to escape the worlds they come from, including whose help they get and whether anybody succeeds in escaping” [RL.11–12.2] (2012, p. 163, original emphasis). This task was specified for *The Great Gatsby* (Fitzgerald, 1925/1995), but clearly the world of *The Giver* would work well.

Students are also asked to analyze the impact of “. . . *language that is particularly fresh, engaging, or beautiful* to convey . . . *multiple meanings*” [RL.11–12.4] (2012, p. 164, original emphasis). Lowry’s diction, unique to the narrative, certainly fits the bill here. While classics should not, of course, be eliminated from the curriculum, many excellent YA novels could further the literary study of all secondary students. Teachers need not fear straying from the CCSS example text list to help their students meet the critical thinking tasks set forth in the standards.

As noted earlier, *The Giver* is complex in many ways. YA novels are often far more complex than sentence length and word frequency reveal, and therefore (as the CCSS and Lexile® agree) should not be the sole factor in determining whole-class novels or group novels for literary study. Surely Lowry has received much mail from young readers who have been quite moved by *The Giver*. However, independent reading, such as in a reading workshop (Atwell, 2007), is an

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**If adults have enriching, complex transactions with *The Giver*, surely the text is appropriate for high schoolers as well.**

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ideal environment for individuals to read far above their peers. Lexile® text measures (2012b) do not tell the whole story about a book's complexity, rigor, or sophistication. Simply because a 2nd–4th grader *can* read *Speak* (Anderson, 2001)—a National Book Award Finalist—does this mean the book is the best choice for most readers (or any readers) in those grades?

Soter and Connors (2009) argue for the inclusion of YA literature in high schools primarily due to its literary merit. Of those unaware of the depth of many YA works, they claim, “[t]hat literature for adolescents might be stylistically complex, that it might withstand rigorous critical scrutiny, and that it might set forth thoughtful social and political commentaries has simply not occurred to them” (p. 63). We do our students a disservice if we foolishly sweep away decades of high-quality YA literature simply because of their labels of “young adult” or the age of protagonists.

If readers cannot fully comprehend or cope with the issues in texts, they will simply not care about them, and as Lowry reminds us, “Of course they needed to care. It was the meaning of everything” (1993, p. 156). That is why *The Giver* endures: it has great meaning. The tragedy is the diminishing of that meaning when a reader is not ready or able to comprehend the text. This book is too good, too powerful, too thought-provoking—too *complex* not to be read by older teenagers and adults.

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# The Undergraduate YA Lit Course:

## One Iteration

I teach the course Children’s and Adolescent Literature at the University of Texas-Pan American (UTPA), located 12 miles from the Mexican border in Texas. At the 2011 ALAN Workshop, my colleague, Dr. Amy Cummins, and I offered a break-out session titled: “The Undergraduate YA Lit Course: What? How? Why?” Our stated goal for the session was to allow instructors of this course a forum for sharing some of the particulars of their courses with fellow practitioners. Though I was invested in the cause, I was skeptical about our likelihood for success; our session was to occur late in the afternoon of the second day, just before the close of the conference. To our delight, however, every chair in the room was taken by an enthusiastic teacher of undergraduate young adult literature, eager to talk shop. The article that follows is an extension of that workshop session and those conversations.

My goal in writing this article and in sharing information about my course with readers is to inspire a dialog about how the undergraduate young adult literature course is being taught around the country, in a variety of contexts and configurations, in the second decade of the 2000’s. I believe such a dialog will support the professional development of instructors teaching those courses, support the development of the curriculums of those courses, and provide a resource to people new to the field who are beginning their journeys as teachers of this undergraduate course—instructors and courses that could rightly be seen as the pillars of the developing young adult literature discipline. Based on this article, I invite comment from and

correspondence with professionals who are currently teaching this course or who have recently taken what they feel is a representative or exemplary version of this course.

### The Broz Course

Though an English department offers this course, it is constructed and presented as a teacher education course. Any undergraduate eligible to take upper division English courses can enroll, but I discourage those who have no particular interest in the literacy development of children and young adults. I perceive my students’ professional development needs to be in most ways similar to students in other regional state universities where I have worked. Most intend to be teachers, and like many future teachers, most of them intend to return to the local schools from whence they came to pursue their careers. Also like many future teachers, a lot of them are first-generation college students. I want students in my classes to learn about a number of highly recommended titles for young people, including the subgenres that help define those books and the teaching issues that surround them. I want them to learn how to find other highly recommended titles and how to keep up with developments in the field. I want them to learn how to invite their future students to read these books, and how to organize and manage that student experience to optimize the development of students’ reading and interpretive abilities.

In my case, because of the high poverty rate in Hidalgo County, Texas (one of the top ten poorest

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**In inviting ninth graders to read and interpret books and “fifteenth” graders to learn to teach, I am helping students develop facility with processes.**

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counties in the nation for the last 60 years), many of the students at my 20,000-student commuter campus are nontraditional—older, married with children, and/or working full-time. The most unique feature of my students, and one that I account for in the design of the course, is that 86% of the students at UTPA share some degree of Mexican American heritage. Many are bilingual with their first language being Spanish. Many of the elementary education-focused students in my classes intend to teach in bilingual classrooms. Therefore, I include culturally relevant Mexican American and bilingual titles in my reading list and in my book talks.

In a context that I am guessing is not uncommon across the country, UTPA combines children’s literature and young adult literature into one undergraduate course that is recommended for or required of a variety of K–12 teacher education candidates, including mid-level and high school ELA teachers, elementary reading and bilingual teachers, and some others. Each semester, about half of the 33 students who enroll in each section of my class have a secondary focus and about half have an elementary or early childhood focus. Besides this professional course, the UTPA English Department offers a literature methods course, a course in linguistics for teachers, and a writing methods course, all required for secondary English education candidates.

### **Who Am I as a Teacher of Young Adult Literature at the College Level?**

To borrow a term from Mark Twain’s *Pudd’nhead Wilson*, I claim membership in one of the “First Families of Virginia” (p. 23) in the YA literature world. I took my undergraduate YA literature course at the University of Iowa in 1970, in a program headed by G. Robert Carlsen. Carlsen wrote one of the first popular texts describing and promoting YA literature, *Books and the Teenage Reader: A Guide for Teachers, Librarians, and Parents* (1967), and was himself a student

of Dora V. Smith, another of the founders of the discipline. In that class, I read *The Outsiders* (Hinton, 1967) and *The Contender* (Lipsyte, 1967) when they were hot off the presses. This was a reading-intensive course in which I may have read 25–30 titles. But because I went on to teach high school English, mostly to eleventh and twelfth graders, and because my personal professional interests were composition and creative writing, I had very little classroom teaching contact with YA literature over the next 25 years. At my first two postings as a professor of English Education beginning in 1997, someone else was already teaching the undergraduate YA lit course and not about to give it up. The 2012–2013 academic year will be my sixth as a teacher of this course. I suspect that many college teachers of young adult literature come to it either as an avocation or as a draftee of a desperate department chair. That is not exactly the case with me. I am more of a returning prodigal.

From composition studies I bring to my undergraduate YA lit course the promotion of robust writing processes, requiring drafts and peer response, for the course’s major papers. I know how to construct a writing workshop classroom and how to merge that community with a reading workshop classroom. I understand that, in inviting ninth graders to read and interpret books and “fifteenth” graders to learn to teach, I am helping students develop facility with processes.

My teaching of the course is also influenced by an event that took place at the University of Iowa (and likely at other institutions) in the 1990s. In about 1992, Dr. Jim Marshall was head of the English Education program and coauthor with Richard Beach of *Teaching Literature in the Secondary School* (1990), the forerunner to *Teaching Literature to Adolescents* (Beach, Appleman, Hynds, & Wilhelm, 2010), which is now the most widely used and influential college textbook for teaching secondary literature pedagogy. Amid much controversy, Dr. Marshall changed the title of the Carlsen YA literature course, from simply “Adolescent Literature” to “Reading and Teaching Adolescent Literature.” That title change marked the change in content and focus from what was essentially a literature course about YA titles, authors, genres, and the history of the young adult book, to a course focused on contemporary titles and genres, *and how to teach them*. My course is more influenced by Marshall than by Carlsen, devoting perhaps 50% of its

energy to literature pedagogy and related issues.

Additionally, I must mention that as a high school English teacher working with rural and working-class Iowa students, I had already learned the value and importance of culturally relevant literature. More farm kids would actually read Faulkner's short story "Race at Morning," about deer hunting with an adolescent main character, than his short story "A Rose for Emily," about unrequited love with no kids in sight (both in Faulkner, 1993). That understanding led me to the utility of inviting students to read literature by Iowans about Iowa. When I came to UTPA, situated in the Texas borderlands, I immediately began looking for local texts by local authors and found many (see Broz, 2010).

The absolute best thing that happened to me upon being hired as an assistant professor to teach children's and YA literature at UTPA, however, was that Virginia Broz, national board certified teacher of Early Adolescent English Language Arts, M.A. English Ed. (U. Iowa), and 30-year veteran eighth-grade teacher (and, as it happens, my wife), was also hired as an instructor for the course. I was well aware that I owed most of my knowledge of young adult literature in the '70s, '80s, '90s and '00s to Virginia. If I had not been assured of at least her coaching, I would not have had the guts to apply for the UTPA job. Delightfully, we had the opportunity to develop the course together. All of the initial reading list and most of the modeled teaching practice are hers. I contributed most of the pedagogical theory and professional development aspects of the course. Though Virginia has now retired from teaching, the iteration described below is still her/our course.

### Stated Learning Goals for the Course

One of the first things we did was to revise the learning goals for the course (see Fig. 1). I hope my readers and students find most of these goals self-explanatory. Number 6 refers to issues such as the importance of offering students multicultural and culturally relevant books, preparing future teachers to deal with censorship, and the use of young adult books like *The Misfits* (Howe, 2003) in anti-bullying campaigns. Number 7 seems vitally important because the literacy narratives students write reveal that many of them do not read for pleasure, and many students admit that they

did not read the books assigned in high school. Occasionally, a student tells me that reading the kick-off book in our class, *Night* (Wiesel, 2006), marks the first book he or she has ever read cover to cover. Remember, many of the students in my classes are not English majors. Number 8 refers primarily to teaching students how to find and interpret professional reviews of children's and YA books for the purpose of professional decision making about text selection and use.

I think goals 3, 4, 6, 8, and 9 are clearly pedagogical in nature. These goals are part of the reason I judge my class to be 50% focused on reading and literature pedagogy. The Carlsen course I took as an undergraduate was by contrast a "titles, authors,

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**As a high school English teacher working with rural and working-class Iowa students, I had already learned the value and importance of culturally relevant literature.**

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By the end of the course, students will be able to:

1. Write an effectively developed analytical essay on one or more YA or Children's Lit texts.
2. Participate meaningfully in small- and large-group discussions focused on YA or Children's Lit texts.
3. Practice a variety of classroom writing, discussion, and cooperative learning activities designed to engage readers with literary texts.
4. Understand basic strategies of effective pedagogy in elementary and middle-school level ELA classes.
5. Demonstrate enhanced appreciation of genre, format, and quality of texts in YA and Children's Literature.
6. Demonstrate a strong understanding of contemporary issues, concepts, and knowledge in YA and Children's Literature.
7. Demonstrate a continued or renewed reading fluency and interest in reading for pleasure and enjoyment.
8. Understand and use professional resources that support the selection of quality books for children and young adults.
9. Recommend to Borderland students, parents, and teachers a variety of culturally relevant and bilingual, English/Spanish-language texts, and understand the utility of such texts for bilingual students.

Figure 1 . Learning goals for the Broz YA literature course

genres” course that paid little or no attention to literature pedagogy. Along with *Hot Rod* (Felsen, 1950) and *Escape from Nowhere* (Eyerly, 1969), we could

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**Every course could likely be placed on a continuum from literature and genre courses on one end to primarily pedagogical courses in which YA titles are featured on the other.**

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have been reading Dixon’s *Growth through English* (1967), but we weren’t. If we talked about teaching, it was in the contexts of “individualized reading” or free reading. I know that the Carlsen course is still one of the popular models today. Every course could likely be placed on a continuum from literature and genre courses on one end to primarily pedagogical courses in which YA

titles are featured on the other. I hope an emerging dialogue about the undergraduate YA lit course will help me see where on that continuum our course fits. I am guessing that it will fit well into the pedagogical end of the scale.

### **My Teaching Philosophy for Teacher Preparation Courses**

My approach to this and to other teacher education courses for preservice teachers is heavily influenced by Grossman’s *The Making of a Teacher* (1990), Schon in *Educating the Reflective Practitioner* (1987), and the work of Fullan in *The New Meaning of Educational Change* (1991). One important experience that Grossman highlights in her study of preservice English teachers in a fifth-year M.A. program is the binocular vision teachers must develop in order to learn new practice and how to teach reflectively. Grossman demonstrates the effectiveness of preservice students experiencing the modeled practice of the methods professor with student’s eyes while reflecting on those experiences with their developing teacher’s eyes. Therefore, in my class, when I invite students to read the young adult titles, I ask them to do the exact same kinds of activities that I would ask eighth graders or tenth graders to do, and I manage those activities with the same pedagogical moves and goals as I would use and have used in a public school. Then, as part of the university course work, we think, write, and talk

about those teaching practices and learning experiences. In Schon’s words, “At the same time that they are reflecting on the problem, they are experiencing the phenomena of the problem” (p. 277).

There are several layers of reasoning for this approach. One motivation for modeling my own teaching practice for preservice students comes from Fullan (1991), citing Doyle and Ponder (1977–1978). In the article, “The Practicality Ethic in Teacher Decision-Making,” Doyle and Ponder discussed concepts of instrumentality, congruence, and cost, saying that in order to enact new practice, teachers need to learn instrumentality, or how to enact the practice, through observing an experienced professional who is successfully enacting it. All of the students who enroll in our course have participated elsewhere in their student lives in ineffective small-group activities. I want each of them to experience book-group discussions that are engaging and that work to develop interpretive abilities and promote further reading (Broz, 2011). I believe my students will learn the instrumentality of how to manage book groups through my modeled practice.

Teachers also need to believe that a teaching practice has congruence, meaning that they must believe the practice fits the needs of their students. If the professional students in our course believe that their book discussion of *The House of the Scorpion* (Farmer, 2004) meets their own needs for reading and interpretive development as readers and students, they are likely to believe their future students, who sit in the same or similar classrooms as my students did in their youth, will benefit from that practice.

Last, teachers must believe in the worth of the cost in time, energy, and risk of sanction necessary to change practice or to institute practices that are new to a school. This concept suggests that preservice teachers in my classes need to be very excited about their experiences with children’s and YA literature if they are to go forth and bring those experiences to their future students. This last point ties to another of Grossman’s concepts, the necessity for “over correction” (p. 127) for past faulty or ineffective student experiences, which really amounted to faulty “apprenticeships of observation” (Lortie, 1975). These faulty apprenticeships of observation, if not examined and corrected, will lead my students to future teaching practices based in their own “institutional biogra-

phies” (Britzman, 1986, p. 443) and to teaching just as they were taught during their K–12 educations.

While I am enacting these practices, I follow Grossman and Schon in asking students to reflect on their ongoing student experiences with teacher’s eyes by making explicit the means–ends relationship of my practice. I talk with students as true apprentices, saying things like, “In this class, we read *Night* [Wiesel, 2006] first because once they start, most readers cannot stop reading the book, and we want that first experience to really engage readers.” Or I say, “This class used to read *Uglies* [Westerfeld, 2005], until a junior high teacher tipped me off that *The Hunger Games* [Collins, 2010] was going to be *big*. But now I am switching to *The House of the Scorpion* [Farmer, 2004] because nearly everyone has read *Hunger Games* or seen the movie, and the drug violence on the border makes *Scorpion* very relevant.” And I insist that students start talking about and referring to their own developing *teaching practices*.

Modeled practice is especially important in my current teaching position because some of the public schools in the part of Texas from which my students come have been documented as some of the least effective in the country. Some have high school dropout rates approaching 50% (see Murillo, 2012, p. 19). Apprenticeships of observation for the teaching of reading and literature that my students had in some of these schools are very likely to be unsupported by or at odds with current research and recommended practice. Anecdotal reports from my students suggest that in some middle schools, much of the reading/literature curriculum consists of “testing” on Accelerated Reader (AR) titles. Over the last five years, I have read hundreds of assigned literacy narratives, the audience for which is first, the class, and second, me. In these essays, student after student has described ineffective and outdated teaching literature practices that may even include the reading aloud of whole, book-length texts in class for days on end, sometimes student by student, down the row, with no opportunity for students to take the text home, read outside of class, or engage in any orchestrated reading activities that approximate mature adult reading behaviors.

Additionally, the majority of students who take our course tell me that they were never offered any culturally relevant Mexican American or bilingual texts in their public school days, even though their

school was 99% Mexican American. Reports of the absence of Hispanic titles come not only from students who are 40 years old, but also from 21-year-old students who graduated from high school in 2009.

The State of Texas’s liberal alternative teacher certification laws seem to me to result in many classrooms being staffed with teachers who have not taken what would be considered standard teacher education courses, including literacy and English Education courses.

When UTPA students begin to practice in the Texas schools, they will likely meet resistance to introducing culturally relevant texts. They may meet resistance to doing more than pushing the AR buttons. They will be asked how using YA texts will improve state test scores. Consequently, they will need to bring understandings of “congruence, instrumentality, and cost” with them from my class. That is why my students fill out no study guides and take no quizzes or tests over the YA books. I refuse to endorse those teaching methods in any way. That is also why they read three Mexican American titles (one bilingual) out of seven required titles, and my book talks on children’s and young adult titles (about 50) are on culturally relevant Mexican American literature. I am convinced that I have to do a lot of “over correction” for deficits in some Lower Rio Grande Valley public school curriculums and teaching practices. I want the future teachers trained in this class to be determined to enact practices in their own classrooms that invite students to be readers instead of just test takers, readers who read for their own purposes.

In the end, I feel that I must teach our course using the very methods I am advocating that these future teachers use in their own public school classrooms. I have to walk the talk. I cannot lecture about constructivism and sociocultural learning theory. I need to be able to enact it. And I believe YA titles deserve a place in the “taught” literature curriculum, not just at the periphery of free reading or AR choices. The text box on page 74 lists the books assigned for this course. Without being exhaustive, I will outline

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**I must teach our course using the very methods I am advocating that these future teachers use in their own public school classrooms.**

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## Reading List for the Course, Fall 2012 (in the order read):

*Night* by Elie Wiesel (2006)

*Fever 1793* by Laurie Halse Anderson (2002)

Choice between:

*The Tequila Worm* by Viola Canales (2007)

or

*The Jumping Tree* by René Saldaña, Jr. (2002)

*Maximilian: The Mystery of The Guardian Angel*

by Xavier Garza (2011)

*The House of The Scorpion* by Nancy Farmer  
(2004)

*Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson (2009)

*The Misfits* by James Howe (2003)

**Choice Book** chosen by student for Curriculum  
Project

my reasons for choosing each of these books.

*Night* (Weisel, 2006) is a great first book because it is short and about as compelling as books come. With some front loading and background building, most students will have an engaged reading experience with Wiesel's memoir. I do not know if it is unusual throughout Texas, but very few of the South Texas students in my classes have been assigned *Night* in secondary school. I also use *Night* because it is frequently taught in middle school or high school Holocaust and WWII thematic units, and because it is an excellent example of a book about history. It is also a book for adults often read by teenagers.

I use *Fever 1793* (Anderson, 2002) because it is an excellent example of historical fiction, and because it (with *Speak*) gives me two books by one of the foremost contemporary YA authors. *The Tequila Worm* (Canales, 2007) and *The Jumping Tree* (Saldaña, 2002) are great Mexican American YA titles, containing plenty of Spanish and written by authors who grew up within 25 miles of our campus. Dr. René Saldaña, Jr. used to teach YA Lit at UTPA. Both authors return to this area of Texas frequently for school and library visits. For these two books, I ask students to read the professional reviews, study the awards and other recommendations for each book, and then choose which of the two titles they want to read for class. *Maximilian: The Mystery of the Guardian Angel* (Garza, 2011)

is another Mexican American title by a local author, this one aimed at a somewhat younger audience. It is the only book for grades four and five I require. *Maximilian* offers a complete bilingual text. Xavier Garza also writes bilingual children's picturebooks and is a frequent visiting writer in local schools and libraries.

*The House of the Scorpion* (Farmer, 2004) is award-winning science fiction. I always include one science fiction text and require students to read a textbook chapter about the genre. I noted above my progression from *Uglies* (Westerfeld, 2005) to *The Hunger Games* (Collins, 2010) to *Scorpion*. It is about a future time when both the United States and Mexico have given up on border drug violence and created a no-man's-land along either side of the border, which is controlled by drug cartels. Our campus would be situated in that no-man's-land.

I assign *Speak* (Anderson, 2009) because it is just about the best example of the teen problem novel I have found. It also tends to make students think about school and being a teacher (as does *The Misfits* [Howe, 2003]). I require a reading about the teen problem novel genre as well. Additionally, *Speak* is often the object of book challenges, and censorship is one of the issues I ask students to read about, write about, think about, and discuss. *The Misfits* is also a teen problem novel that highlights the subject of bullying and the issue of using young adult books in school anti-bullying campaigns.

For each of these books, students write "reading response journals," prepare written items for discussion, and then participate in in-class book groups and sometimes online, real-time, small-group book chats. The exception is *The Misfits*, for which students participate in a literary letters activity. One major paper offers students the chance to choose one of these books on which to write an analytical paper based on their own reading, with support drawn from scholarship about the specific genre of the book they choose.

### Other Textual and Electronic Resources

Our course is heavily assisted by a Blackboard online teaching platform website. On that site, I provide students access to a limited selection of chapters (within the fair use policy) from two textbooks, one about YA literature and one about children's literature. I also provide four of my own articles and book chapters as

additional required readings (see this list at the end of the references)—one about student choice in reading, one about Mexican American YA lit, one about bullying, and one about censorship. I could just as easily lecture about these topics, but students have a better time reading the articles and, I believe, are more comfortable responding to and even reading against the text when the material is in reprint and not delivered in person.

Our university library has been very supportive in keeping on reserve a collection of 30 exemplary children's picturebooks that are used for another major assignment. And as will be discussed in more depth below, students make significant use of The Children's Literature Comprehensive Database, which is available to them on our library's website. Of course, Blackboard makes it easy for me to provide many other resources, from links to author websites to a timeline of Elie Wiesel's life provided by the US Holocaust Museum.

### **Addressing Special Cultural Relevance and Accommodating Elementary-Focused Students**

I have probably made it pretty clear how I try to accommodate my Mexican American students' ethnic and cultural backgrounds and the ethnic, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds of the majority of students in area public schools. Of course, not all of my students are Mexican American, nor are all students in area public schools Mexican American. I do not teach—nor do I advocate for future teachers in my class to teach—only Mexican American titles. But as we teach and take Children's and Adolescent Literature at UTPA, we are in a Hispanic-dominant geographic and cultural area. Anglos or others living in our area of Texas who do not know about quinceañeras, for example, need to learn, just to understand where they are living. During the course of the semester, I book-talk about 30 bilingual picture books, which Spanish-speaking students volunteer to read to the class. I also book-talk about 20 YA titles from authors like Ben Sáenz, Matt de la Peña, Diana López, and Malin Alegria.

The book talks about bilingual picture books are one way I accommodate elementary-focused students who take our course. Also, all students review the 30 picture books on reserve and write a response journal about 12 of them. For the literary essay assign-

ment mentioned above, students can choose to write about one of the YA books or about two of the picture books. Often the elementary-focused students write about the picture books, while the secondary-focused students write about one of the YA titles.

One of our major assignments is a Reading Interest Inventory project I borrowed from Richard F. Abrahamson in which students interview a child between ages 4 and 14 and use that information to write a report about the student's interests, reading development, and reading habits. Based on that report, my students use the Children's Literature Comprehensive Database to find and write recommendations for three highly recommended books that match the child's interest, age, and reading ability. I encourage students to interview a child whose age matches that of the children with whom they intend to work. The final project for the course asks students to write a curriculum proposal for a thematic unit at a grade level and on a topic of their choice. I suggest that this project be tailored to the age level at which each of my students intends to work, whether they plan careers as teachers, librarians, or something else, such as youth corrections officers.

In the above narrative, I have discussed most of the course assignments except the Reflective Essay, which I cast as a literacy narrative, and which begins with a personal reading development timeline. These narratives serve two purposes: one is to reacquaint students with their own literacy development and allow them to analyze and make some conclusions about the influences that helped or hindered them in becoming a reader; the other is to broaden students' understandings of the literacy development of others who largely grew up in the same geographical area they did under some of the same socioeconomic and cultural influences. The latter is accomplished by offering students the opportunity to read 12–15 literacy narratives by other students in the class. Some of these future teachers benefit from knowing that they are not the only ones who struggled with second-

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**The final project for the course asks students to write a curriculum proposal for a thematic unit at a grade level and on a topic of their choice.**

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language acquisition or fell behind in reading because there were no books in their childhood homes. Additionally, students who had a more successful and less painful literacy development, like many of the English majors, need to know that a lot of people who struggled with reading still learned to read and even made it to college. Anyone with experience assigning literacy narratives knows that they are often amaz-

ing, disturbing, touching, unique, and surprising. The Reflective Essays in my class run the whole gamut.

The course builds to the final project mentioned above, which then asks students to create a proposal for a thematic reading unit based on an anchor book for common

reading and five supplemental titles for individual or small-group reading. I see such units as vehicles for wide reading, deep reading, individual and small-group reading, reading from titles differentiated by such factors as length and difficulty, and an opportunity for students to exercise choice in reading. Restricting their choice to highly recommended books emphasizes and reinforces professional decision making about text selection. Previous assignments using the Children's Literature Comprehensive Database to find highly recommended books create the foundation for this culminating activity. The model for the Curriculum Proposal Project is a real interdisciplinary thematic teaching unit devised by Virginia and the eighth-grade core team of teachers at Fairfield Middle School in Fairfield, Iowa. The theme for that unit is epidemics.

### **A Highlighted Theme of the Course—Professional Decision-Making in Choosing, Justifying, and Defending Specific Titles**

Our course has several themes. One is asserting that the purpose of promoting children's and young adult titles is to help students develop their reading and interpretive abilities, and *not* so they will gain the knowledge of what happens in a particular book or so

they will improve their test-taking abilities regarding supposedly "discreet" reading comprehension "skills," such as making inferences. Reading in school should always be about, at least in part, becoming mature adult readers.

Another theme, one that accounts for the emphasis on book-discussion groups, is that social interaction with other readers can be, should be, and often is the motivation and reward for reading. Book groups provide this social interaction; Accelerated Reader does not.<sup>1</sup>

A theme I want to highlight here, and one I feel is central to teaching children's and YA literature in schools, is professional decision making about what books to use and to invite students to read. I tell students that all stakeholders should reasonably expect that books teachers assign in class, include in their classroom lending libraries, or recommend from the school library should be highly recommended by professional sources and should be age-appropriate. The fact that we personally like a book, or that there is a class set in the book room, is not good enough. Excellent reviews from *School Library Journal* and a couple of national awards are, by my standards, good enough. Appearing on your state's annual school library association reading list is also great.

All of this information is available for hundreds of thousands of children's and young adult books on the Children's Literature Comprehensive Database and possibly on other databases with which I am not familiar. This database tells teachers that *Speak* is listed on 24 Best Books Lists from the likes of The American Library Association, has won 15 honors or prizes, and is recommended on 14 state reading lists, including Texas. The citation for *Speak* offers excerpts from ten professional reviewing sources—both academic (like *The ALAN Review*) and commercial (like *Booklist*). The age-appropriateness recommendations for *Speak* vary from a beginning age of 12 to a beginning age of 16. The review from the journal you now hold in your hands calls *Speak* "a book of distinction," while *Voice of Youth Advocates (VOYA)* gives it a 5 for quality, its highest rating. They say it is "hard to imagine it being any better written."

This information is not only valuable in choosing books to invite students to read, but also in defending books against book challenges and in convincing library and curriculum officials to buy books and

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## **Social interaction with other readers can be, should be, and often is the motivation and reward for reading.**

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incorporate them into the curriculum. Using this database or others like it allows teachers to find books to include in thematic units or to match the particular interest of individuals or groups of students. If a teacher reads a good book like *Fever 1793* and wants to create a thematic unit on epidemics, she or he can easily use the searchable CLCD to find other highly recommended books, like *An American Plague* by Jim Murphy (2003). My students readily find six highly recommended books for their thematic units aimed at grades one through twelve and on such diverse themes as astronomy for third graders and mythology for middle schoolers. Additionally, checking the CLCD could help teachers avoid some popular but inferior titles that the reviews and recommendations from professional sources do not justify reading. Many of my students report being assigned to read *A Child Called It* (Pelzer, 1995), which would not be the case if their teachers had met a reasonable standard for choosing only books with good professional recommendations. Students in this class also use the database to find three highly recommended and age- and interest-appropriate books of their choice for the child who is the subject of their reading interest survey.

## Conclusion and Invitation

So that is our course. It is one way that undergraduate children's, adolescent, and young adult literature courses are being taught in 2012–2013.<sup>2</sup> I would like to have more YA genres included in my reading list. For instance, I need a graphic text. I could be using online discussion boards, if I knew how to manage and grade them. I am weak on the traditional juvenile-aged chapter books for grades three through six. I know that all students do not have to be reading the same book at the same time, and I should allow more choice and independence. But I live in AR Land, and I feel the need to emphasize reading for social purposes, which fits with common readings or at least thematic choices. I have thought about splitting the course into young adult literature and children's literature. That could "up" our department's numbers of course hours taught and make more room for the young adult books that I currently don't have time to include. But then the secondary people would miss out on the picturebooks, which do have some applications in higher grades. And I worry that the elemen-

tary-focused reading teachers, some of whom need to get their personal reading motors going, would not get the same adult reading workout from children's books as they get from the YA books. Could we get a grad course in contemporary YA lit to "make" once a year? One cannot do everything.

I am sure there are practitioners out there who will read about our course and say, "'bout like mine." Others may suggest that G. Robert Carlsen is rolling over in his grave. Let the discussion begin.

## Notes

1. My professional negative opinion of Accelerated Reader is based on my understanding of sociocultural learning theory and the scholarship of Stephen Krashen (in his volume *Free Voluntary Reading* [2011], Chapter 4, "Should We Reward Recreational Reading?"). I am also influenced by anecdotal accounts from my students that speak of loss of interest in reading after AR and widespread cheating on AR tests.
2. Readers are invited to email me at brozwj@utpa.edu for additional information about any of the following topics related to this course: assignment guides, typical classroom activities and routines, hybridity and online teaching.

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- Canales, V. (2007). *The tequila worm*. New York, NY: Wendy Lamb.
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### Additional Required Readings for the Course

- Broz, W. (2002). Supporting *Am I blue*: A rural Midwestern reconsideration committee and school board vote to “take no action” to remove *Am I blue*. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, 45, pp. 340–350.
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### Call for Abstracts on Teaching YAL Courses

Instructors of YA lit courses at any academic level are invited to inquire about submitting abstracts for chapters (or smaller pieces) for a possible edited collection on teaching such courses. Send inquiries to Bill Broz at brozwbj@utpa.edu or James Blasingame at James.Blasingame@asu.edu using the subject line “Abstract Inquiries.”

## AP Gatekeeping:

Exploring the Myths of Using YAL in an AP English Classroom

**F**or the past six years, I have been collecting data on the myths and realities about AP and pre-AP English literature teachers' inclusion (or lack thereof) of Young Adult Literature (YAL) in their classrooms. The data demonstrates the ever-present power that these myths have in shutting the gates against the inclusion of YAL in AP literature classrooms. More specifically, it focuses on teachers' attitudes, both pre- and post-introduction to YAL through a weeklong study of Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak*<sup>1</sup> (Herz & Gallo, 2005) paired with an AP English literature and composition curriculum at different AP Summer Institutes (APSI).

The significance of the study reveals how teachers' predispositions toward using YAL in an AP classroom influence students' decisions on the texts they select when writing on question 3 of the AP English Literature and Composition exam. More specifically, AP literature teachers, administrators, and literacy coaches from diverse teaching contexts who work with youth who are ethnically and linguisti-

cally diverse are asked to share what kinds of reading materials they use in their classrooms, what their attitudes are about literary value or merit, and about how their attitudes toward YAL affect student choice on the AP English Literature and Composition exam.

Findings thus far reveal that participants had mixed attitudes about using YAL that influence why students are *not* using YAL on question 3 of the exam. This gives rise to the following questions: What influences AP teachers to recognize the larger sociopolitical context in which their students are being tested? What leads them to make the choice to include YAL in their AP classrooms? Why are so many AP English literature teachers *still* teaching from the canon? How can these findings impact other teachers to merge YAL into and with the canon?

Based on my former experience as a high school AP literature and composition teacher, I was selected to work for the College Board in a variety of capacities over 12 years: as a consultant, teaching best

practices for both pre-advanced placement and AP English literature and composition teachers in diverse settings across the country; as vertical team coordinator; as an AP auditor for the AP English literature and composition syllabus; as an AP Diversity grant mentor; and as a reader and now table leader for the AP English literature and composition exam. Needless to say, I enjoy my work with teachers, but more important, I enjoy watching their burgeoning agency through the rewards that emerge when they find the links that connect students' personal experiences to their pre-AP and AP English literature classroom. While the rewards are abundant, many of the AP teachers I work with also feel that their hands are bound to the expectations and pressures—placed upon them by the College Board, school district mandates, and school administrators—to prepare their students to use only canonical writings on the AP exam. This column explores those dichotomous myths and provides paired realities about using YAL in an AP English classroom.

## Identifying and Debunking the Myths

While the APSI are not prescribed by the College Board, there are specific expectations that guide my time during the weeklong institutes. I have a contractual obligation to accurately represent the vision of the College Board, to disseminate College Board materials, and to provide opportunities for teachers to engage in activities that will prepare them to teach AP literature and composition classes. I therefore have *some* latitude in how to conduct the day-to-day activities and can draw from current best practices and research in education.

In my work with teachers during the APSI, I proclaim from the onset that I do not believe in teaching to the test, but that I will provide tools that help students make links not only to the test but to life beyond it. In other words, during the institutes, I engage teachers with the tools that challenge their own beliefs about what good literature is and provide myriad opportunities for them to have agency and voice during our work together. Throughout our week, I scaffold in theories (reader-response, critical pedagogy, social constructivism, sociocultural theory) and pedagogies as they *link* to AP curriculum so as to build a context for not teaching to a test but rather, as previously said, teaching *beyond* the test. I try to provide a space where they can develop a consciousness about their role as gatekeepers around privileging the canon over YAL, and then invite them to explore possibilities for including YAL in their AP lit classrooms. Regardless of my intentions, the prevailing myths have

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## Regardless of my intentions, the prevailing myths have generated great resistance to using YAL in an AP English classroom.

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generated great resistance to using YAL in an AP English classroom, so let's explore some of the common myths.

### Myth #1: The AP Composition and Literature Exam Is Prescriptive

The suggested AP Curriculum is somewhat diverse, and contrary to popular belief, it is not prescriptive. The College Board suggests that teachers use diverse authors who represent different time periods from the sixteenth to the twenty-first century and who write about myriad topics, such as but not limited to “[i]ssues that might, from a specific cultural viewpoint, be considered controversial, including references to ethnicities, nationalities, religions, races, dialects, gender, or class [that] are often represented artistically in works of literature” (College Board, 2008, p. 52).

The College Board (2008) describes the English course this way: “The course includes intensive study of representative works from various genres and periods, concentrating on works of recognized literary quality. . . . The pieces chosen invite and reward rereading and do not, like ephemeral works in such popular genres as detective or romance fiction, yield all (or nearly all) of their pleasures of

thought and feeling the first time through” (p. 51). While the course description suggests that “An AP English Literature and Composition course engages students in the careful reading and critical analysis of imaginative literature” (p. 51), the College Board does not specifically name or endorse YAL or graphic novels, or even multigenre pieces. If teachers utilize or promote such types of readings in their classrooms, they have probably done their own research, attended workshops, discovered its merit in teacher education courses, and/or learned first-hand from readers at the exam that students can choose to write about a genre/author who falls outside of the canon.

### Myth #2: “Similar Literary Quality” on the AP Literature Exam Includes YAL

Question 3 on the exam is the open question. After the prompt, students are asked to “Choose a text below or another of similar literary quality.” The exam however, fails to acknowledge what is meant by similar literary quality (Miller & Slifkin, 2010). This current lack of clarity about the literary quality of noncanonical readings and genres has generated a long-standing misconception that classroom teachers (and the College Board) are the gatekeepers about what genres or YAL texts constitute literary value or quality. While policies and the like (i.e., AP workshops, AP memos, College Board conferences, and AP initiatives, which are set forth by the College Board) certainly affect teachers’ decisions and attitudes about what constitutes AP-level materials and curriculum, teachers often blindly adopt Col-

lege Board materials as sacred or canonical in nature, and students are concomitantly influenced by these materials and inherit ensuing attitudes toward what texts are deemed worthy of the AP stamp, “similar literary quality.”

On this, Nieto (2006) suggests that “Unless [teachers] have access to texts that challenge conventional knowledge, and unless they engage in deep reflection and serious dialogue (Freire, 1970) about their own knowledge and the curriculum they will teach (Apple, 1993), most teachers do not develop the practice of questioning mainstream knowledge” (p. 58). Foregrounding a key finding from my own study, a participant wrote that until the College Board makes a statement clarifying “similar literary quality,” she wouldn’t discourage students from using YAL, but she *would* explain the risk of using it. One teacher wrote, “I see the value in YAL but am concerned that some of the readers don’t.”

The College Board claims that AP English students should be able to read and write about materials that are worthy of college level, yet many secondary English teachers don’t recognize the numbers of English education professors who teach and endorse the merit of YAL in their college classrooms (Applebee, 1996; Bloom, 1994; Christenbury, 2000; Gallo, 2001; Gillis, 2002; Herz & Gallo, 2005; Miller & Slifkin, 2010; Schwarz, 2006; Spencer, 1989; Vogel & Zancanella, 1991; Weiner, 2002). While on one hand the College Board claims that issues of “access and diversity” are among their top priorities (*6th Annual AP Report to the Nation*, College Board, 2010) and that “more

low-income students are participating and experiencing success in AP than ever before,” the data fails to reveal the grade levels and types of genres that students are reading successfully. This reality does not imply that students who come from low-income homes or who are non-white are drawn exclusively to any particular genres *per se*, but it is important to recognize that not all students who are in AP English classrooms have benefited from prior courses or culturally and linguistically relevant materials and resources that set them up for success in ways that many of their white peers have experienced. These realities actually argue more strongly for the inclusion of YAL on the exam.

### **Myth #3: Teachers and AP Readers Are Not Gatekeepers: YAL Is Not “Similar Literary Quality”**

In their course description, the College Board states that close reading should involve “analyzing and interpreting the material,” “learning how to make careful observations of textual detail,” “establish[ing] connections among their observations,” and “draw[ing] from those connections a series of inferences leading to an interpretive conclusion about a piece of writing’s meaning and value” (College Board, 2008, p. 51). Many AP lit teachers, on the other hand, do not seem to extend the College Board’s statement to the inclusion of YAL.

Teachers have tremendous power as gatekeepers; they hold passkeys and attitudes about curriculum and materials for students that often stay with students in the next level of their academic

lives. One teacher who did not and would not use YA lit in her AP literature classroom said, “I am not convinced by the quality, layering, or complexity of its literary merit or for its richness in meaning of literary artistry in an AP lit classroom, but I would use it in a non-AP classroom, especially with reluctant readers.” Other common attitudes reinforce this cluster of dominant beliefs: YAL is for struggling and marginalized readers; it is not layered enough for mature audiences; it is far too accessible and below reading level; it is better to introduce students to texts that they would not otherwise read on their own, i.e., canonical works. Such sentiments implicitly privilege the canon, imbuing it with more literary value and quality over YAL and other genres of reading.

This is commonly echoed by many AP lit teachers and readers at the exam. Teachers are indeed quite vulnerable to the power that resides in the hands of the College Board as to what constitutes “similar literary quality,” and I offer the following as factual evidence. At the 2010 reading event, the question leader on the open question said aloud to the reading room of well over 330 readers and table leaders that no student should be scored higher than a four (anything below a five is considered a failing paper) if s/he writes using a YAL text. The power of her statement skewed the entire room’s readings of essays. She sent a clear message that not only was YAL *not* deemed “similar literary quality,” but that the students’ essays could not possibly be strong.

This person did not have the authority to make such a statement

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**Even though there are measures in place at the reading to assure that essays are scored on the quality of the writing, there are still readers who dismiss YAL and who judge the source text, not the essay.**

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and was demoted to table leader status the following year. Since then, both the question leader and the chief reader have come forward to state that readers should judge the quality of the *essay* as a whole and not the text the student writes about. Regardless, it is little wonder that teachers are hesitant to encourage students to use YAL, graphic novels, or anything outside of the canon on the exam. Even though there are measures in place at the reading to assure that essays are scored on the quality of the writing, there are still readers who dismiss YAL and who judge the source text, not the essay.

#### **Myth #4: Teachers Feel Competent about the Literary Merits of YAL**

A trope that emerged from the teachers in my study suggests that there should be tiers that could differentiate the overall quality of YAL. All of my participants expressed concern regarding their lack of ability to differenti-

ate between the complex layering in some YAL and weaker YAL. One participant stated, “YAL texts should be evaluated on their own merits; some have high-level storytelling while others are lesser developed.” I do think she has an excellent point. After all, we say the same about fiction in general.

When asked what kept teachers from using YAL in their classrooms, many teachers were quite expressive. One teacher wrote, “Students need to read from the canon to be introduced to challenging language.” Another teacher said that her lack of knowledge about the genre kept her from introducing YAL. Yet another said, “My colleagues say that YAL belongs in the elementary and middle schools, not in the high school where they use more complex texts.” One offered, “There are too many YAL texts so it waters down the good ones.” Still another teacher wrote (and was echoed by two-thirds of the teachers), “I am concerned that a student would be judged by a reader at the exam and would be scored poorly.” When asked through a follow-up question about the potential effect of a College Board statement that endorsed YAL as “similar literary quality” on the exam, all teachers said they would include YAL in their classrooms, though they would tell the students to select a YAL text that they had studied as a class. And finally, a teacher from upstate New York said that until she’d established herself as an AP lit teacher, she would not use YAL because of its stigma as a less-valuable genre.

When asked how they would research the merits of YAL texts, answers included: the Internet, *Eng-*

*lish Journal*, school librarians, the ALA, *The Library Journal*, NCTE, colleagues, students, and *New York Times Book Reviews*. Although many of the APSI teachers said they would use YAL in an AP classroom, we asked, “What would still keep you from using YA lit or graphic novels in your classrooms?” Three teachers responded that they felt they lacked knowledge about what other texts were out there; one teacher said that he felt the reading level was too low and not representative of college-level reading; three teachers said there would likely be a lack of departmental or administrative support; many said they just simply lacked time; one teacher even said that the school had a book ban on YAL.

#### **YAL Deserves Its Due**

YAL as a tool for student agency is important because it is “a personal narrative in which the self is a protagonist who confronts and solves problems, with associated motives and affect” (Dozier, Johnston, & Rogers, 2006, p. 12), and when affirmed and validated, it can be a catalyst for intrapersonal, interpersonal, and social change (Kornfeld & Prothro, 2005; Miller, 2005a, 2005b, 2008; Stallworth, 2006; Sturm & Michel, 2009). Teachers can be instruments of social change and creators of agents (often students) who can become ambassadors for social change, as their identities are affirmed (Hagood, 2002). Young adult literature can empower students to experience the world around them in ways that authenticate their own life experiences. When students see their realities mirrored in text, they

can negotiate toward or against the experience of the characters therein (Hagood, 2002), and come to terms with pieces of their own identities. Students benefit and gain in cultural capital when teachers choose texts wisely, because texts can be catalysts for particularized knowledge and human experience, and as students transact with the world around them, change can happen.

Based on what we know about the influence that YAL has in youth culture, the College Board, along with college professors and high school AP English teachers, need to form consensus around the issues of using YAL on the AP literature and composition open question and the definition of “similar literary quality” on the exam. The College Board is a main gatekeeper in this struggle for YAL inclusivity on the exam, and for that matter, a stakeholder that lends itself to a larger social acceptance about its literary merit. As long as the College Board ignores the power and merit of the research on YAL in English AP classrooms, YAL will continue to remain marginalized, not only by the canon but also by AP lit teachers.

The College Board’s history stems back to 1900 and has no doubt influenced numerous educators about what texts and genres are privileged over others. Those who govern the College Board have an opportunity to greatly change teachers’ and students’ attitudes and perceptions about YAL worldwide. In fact, they hold such great power that they can influence other testing communities’ attitudes about the merit of YAL, such as with state and federal exams con-

nected to NCLB. The College Board would be remiss if they do not clarify the meaning of “similar literary quality,” because at the AP English literature reading, readers are supposed to make evaluative decisions (on the open question) on students’ abilities to draft an analytical essay, *not* about students’ abilities to select a text of literary merit or, for that matter, what constitutes literary merit in specific texts. In other words, *they should be evaluating student writing*.

Rose (2009) said, “A good education helps us make sense of the world and find our way in it” (p. 31). As a teaching community, when we don’t prepare students for the lives they might lead by offering them opportunities to read stories that provide tools and agency, we are guilty of re-indoctrinating the status quo. Students need to be armed with the tools and confidence to navigate the demands placed upon them by the 21st century and, for that matter, a new economy. The data from this study suggests that it is less important today that a student can read a canonical text than that they are able to read widely, shift and apply literary lenses depending on context, unpack meaning, critique ideas, and make sense of literature in a way that is useful and applicable in their lives. As a teaching community, we will grow stronger along with our youth as we ask tough questions about what it is we truly value for all of our futures.

One teacher noted that if YAL were integrated across all classrooms, its stigma might subside. NCTE/IRA Standard 1 makes just this point:

Students read a wide range of print and nonprint texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classic and contemporary works . . .

But with the emphasis on the Common Core Reading Standard 11 for grades 11–12 and its emphasis on nonfiction/informational texts, I wonder if it will once again have an even stronger hold than the College Board as a gatekeeper impacting teachers’ decisions.

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#### Note

- 1 See prior research on the power and meaning of teaching *Speak* in an adolescent literature course (Miller, 2008).

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## Call for Nominations: James Moffett Award

NCTE's Conference on English Education offers this grant to support teacher projects inspired by the scholarship of James Moffett. Each proposed project must display an explicit connection to the work of James Moffett and should both enhance the applicant's teaching by serving as a source of professional development and be of interest and value to other educators. All K–12 classroom educators who teach at least three hours or three classes per day are eligible to apply for the grant. Proposals on which two or more K–12 classroom educators have collaborated are also welcome.

Applications for the Moffett Award must include:

- A cover page with the applicant's name, work and home telephone numbers and addresses, email address, a brief profile of the applicant's current school and students, and a brief teaching history (when and where the applicant has taught).
- A proposal (not more than 5 pages, double-spaced, 12-point font) that includes an introduction and rationale for the work (What is the problem or question to be studied? How might such a project influence the project teacher's practice and potentially the practice of other teachers? Why is such a project important?); a description of the explicit connection to the work of James Moffett; initial objectives for the project (realizing these might shift during the project); a clear, focused project description that includes a timeline (What will be done? When? How? By whom?); a method of evaluating the project (What indicators might reviewers note that suggest the work was valuable to the applicant and to other teachers?); and a narrative budget (How will the money be spent?).
- A letter of support from someone familiar with the applicant's teaching and perceived ability to implement and assess the proposed project.

Moffett Award winners receive a certificate designating the individual as the 2013 recipient of the CEE Moffett Award and a monetary award (up to \$1,000) to be used toward implementation of the proposed project. Submit proposals to CEE Moffett Award, NCTE, 1111 W. Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL 61801-1010 or [cee@ncte.org](mailto:cee@ncte.org), Attn: CEE Administrative Liaison. Proposals must be postmarked by **May 1, 2013**. Proposals will be judged on such criteria as the strength of the connection to James Moffett's scholarship and the perceived value and feasibility of the project.

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## Able Texts:

### Breaking Stereotypes with/in Children's Novels

The completion of *Wild Orchid* (Brenna, 2005), my first book involving a protagonist with special needs, coincided with the beginning of my research interests related to children's literature depicting characters with disabilities. It was the fall of 2003, and I was a special education consultant, sitting in my office late one Friday afternoon, gathering loose ends and planning the week ahead. In my spare time, I had been looking for books about characters with disabilities—in particular, I was seeking authentic representations of the students I had come to know so well as a teacher, thinking that schools should really endeavour to make available to young readers the possibilities of human experience. In my free time at home, I had also been writing the first draft of a young adult novel about a teen looking for independence—a girl something like me as an adolescent, and a rather boring character, although the few quirks that had inserted themselves into Taylor Jane's original profile made her decidedly more interesting.

I pulled out the file folder containing the list of books I had located so far, noticing with disappointment the lack of fiction titles presenting characters with disabilities.

"Somebody should do some serious research on this topic!" I said to myself, thinking of books as necessary windows and mirrors for readers. I wondered whether it was the act of locating titles that would solve the inequity I currently saw in school resources, or whether there just weren't many books out there.

"Somebody should write something about a character with a disability who has the potential for a happy future, even though he or she doesn't get miraculously cured," I said to myself, thinking of the common tendency of authors to kill or cure these characters. Then I thought about my own developing teen protagonist, Taylor Jane Simon. As I thought about her particular and unique characteristics, I began to see her as somewhere on the autism spectrum. A few ideas came to me regarding what I could add to her profile that would

move her a little further along that spectrum, perhaps even into a full-blown diagnosis. Asperger's Syndrome interested me because I had been working with a number of students experiencing its effects, and I wanted to learn more about it.

"Maybe I should be that writer," I said to myself. "And," I continued, pondering the PhD I'd been thinking of starting for so long, "maybe I should be that researcher." I now have eight published books for young people, with a ninth in press, and I finished my PhD in 2010, focusing on children's literature with a dissertation called *Characters with Disabilities in Contemporary Children's Novels: Portraits of Three Authors in a Frame of Canadian Texts*.

One of the things I addressed in my dissertation is the importance of stories. In my own family, a storytelling mother paved the way for rich learning. Considering what she taught and modelled through relating her own stories, my own views on inclusion and diversity are no surprise.

I am sitting at the kitchen table waiting for lunch. I am five years old and I have just come home from Kindergarten. My mother is mixing milk with the contents of a can of Campbell's mushroom soup and stirring it in a pot on the stove. She is telling me about how things were, when she was a child. "Tell another old one," I say, meaning one of the old times' stories. "Tell *Johnny and the Pear*."

*It is 1924 and my mother is a grade five student attending a one-room school in southern Saskatchewan. "Seven-year-old Johnny and his immigrant parents had just moved into the district, and the students were not being very receptive to him. On this particular day in September, a season when cases of peaches, pears, and plums were brought home from town to be preserved in glass jars for winter use, the girls are sitting under the shade of a caragana hedge, eating noon lunch. Mary opens her pail and gives a squeal of disappointment. On top of her sandwiches there is a piece of tissue paper, but the pear her mother had promised is missing. Immediately the students think of Johnny."* (Brenna, 2008, p. 255)

As my mother relates the rest of the story, her voice is thick with regret. The students chase Johnny down the road. He runs until he cannot run anymore, and then he falls in the dirt. The students pounce. They assure him that if he owns up to taking the pear, they'll let him go. Dutifully, he confesses. Someone runs and tells the teacher. Johnny is herded back into the school, where he receives the strap. That afternoon the room is uncomfortably quiet, except for Johnny's sobs. The next morning, Mary has a secret. "My mother found the pear, forgotten, on the shelf at home," she says (M. Stillborn, personal communication, 2008).

I watch my mother carefully as she finishes the story and spoons soup into my bowl. Her nose is red, and her eyes are all watery. I smile. My mother is very predictable. Along with the soup, there is a Prem sandwich and

rice pudding for dessert. I am hungry, and I eat.

—Brenna, 2010a, pp. 178–179

Other stories from my mother, in the telling and the retelling, support an understanding that we are all equal in some way in our importance on a community landscape—equal and valuable. Perhaps this is a prairie mentality from the Saskatchewan Depression, when whatever people had was shared. Perhaps my mother was a trailblazer, paving the way to school inclusion for children who are differently abled before policies about integration came into public favour. Her story about Eddy certainly underpins my own inclusionary philosophy as a teacher and a writer.

After a year of teacher training, my mother is in charge of twenty children in grades one to eight. She has not been given any special teaching strategies for students who might have challenges. There is an older boy at this school, Eddy, who has unique mannerisms and learning needs, a boy who, in a different period of medicine, might have qualified for an autism diagnosis. A neighbour woman asks my mother how she is getting along with this student. "He's okay," she replies. "But sometimes he gets on my nerves." On Monday this boy is not at school, nor is he there on Tuesday. My mother telephones to a tearful parent who says, "I heard what you said about my son," and then who loudly hangs up the telephone. My mother walks a mile through the snow to the boy's farm. When Eddy's mother opens the door, my mother says, her lips trembling, "I'm very sorry. I did say that. When I'm tired, any of the children get on my nerves. I like your son, and I want him back at school." Difficult words to say, yet they bring relief. Eddy is back in class the next day. My mother's emotion in

the telling and retelling of this tale is palpable.

My mother has learned an important lesson, and, through her telling and retelling of this story, so have I. No longer is she the only one whose eyes are damp at the close of her stories. In adulthood, I cannot tell any of these stories without feeling the emotion my mother connects to them. And that is one of the legacies my mother has provided: not only do I have these intergenerational family stories, but I have absorbed the emotional background that accompanies them in her telling.

—Brenna, 2010a, pp. 182–183

Since completing my dissertation, I have continued to look at patterns and trends within and among books portraying characters with disabilities, and some interesting changes have appeared since the early "kill or cure" mentality of authors. I'm happy to see that endings in children's literature don't generally include the death of the character, nor does religion intervene to effect a miraculous "recovery," as when the disability suddenly vanishes in a blur of spirituality.

Other patterns in contemporary fiction are apparent, however. Texts in my study samples, for example, gravitate toward intermediate and young adult audiences, neglecting a readership between ages 8 and 11. It also appears that although disabilities of various kinds are more often and more realistically portrayed, other aspects of difference have been ignored—namely, differences in sexuality, ethnicity, and religion. While characters may have a disability, other unique traits, such as particular cultural backgrounds or minority sexual orientations, are

not included alongside. In terms of genre, there seems to be a dearth of fantasy and mystery titles supporting a protagonist with a disability. Perhaps related to the inability of authors to fathom a character with a disability working in fantasy or mystery contexts is the lack of characters in realistic fiction who travel from one place to another.

Unlike the prevalence in classic texts of such disabilities as polio and blindness, there doesn't seem to be a predominance of particular disabilities in contemporary texts for young people, and one diagnosis is very rare indeed. I have only been able to locate one fiction title where a character has a Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD), and that title happens to be my own intermediate-age novel *The Moon Children* (Brenna, 2007). *The Moon Children* was written after *Wild Orchid* as I continued to represent characters with traits similar to those of children with whom I had become familiar in my work as a special educator. None of my fictional characters are actually based on any real kids, but I've thought about characteristics of particular kids that I wanted to adapt and include for the purposes of breaking stereotypes.

As a teacher, I had often felt powerless to assist children with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS), one of the diagnoses under the FASD umbrella. My creation of the character of Billy Ray—a ten-year-old boy who suffers from the effects of prenatal alcohol in various ways that include an inability to read, severe hyperactivity, and a heart defect—was one cathartic step that made me feel as if perhaps my voice might make a

difference in prevention, as well as in understanding and support, for people with FASD. Billy Ray is a gifted storyteller, and his friendship with another character in the story becomes the hinge on which the plot turns, a plot that includes a cameo of Chrysta, his strongly supportive biological mother—the kind of mother who makes mistakes, as we all do, but learns from them. To me, Chrysta Lee Ray is the best kind of hero—someone who rises above truly difficult challenges and lets her inherent strength shine.

I wonder what it would feel like to have a baby with differences caused by maternal alcohol consumption, to be told by doctors and educators that my child's physical and mental symptoms were rooted in a disorder that I had inadvertently created. No wonder silence has surrounded this particular disability; considerations related to FASD are heartbreaking. Yet change is not going to occur unless people speak out, and while this book has not been on any bestseller lists, it is the book I am most proud of. Writing it involved taking action toward social justice in a way that I hope can make a difference.

The idea that stereotypes about disability can be dislodged with children's fiction is an alluring concept, making some books particularly able texts within a social justice framework. Similarly, the idea is certainly provocative that, in order to use books for social change, one must unpack stereotypes about disability within the texts themselves. Getting it right is an objective that has resonated in the very core of my writing self, a goal that has caused me to burn the midnight oil in order to figure out

nuances related to particular abilities and disabilities and translate these nuances into characters that I hope “seem real.”

In addition to giving volume to the little voice in my conscience demanding authenticity, how has my research on children's literature affected my own writing? In the first place, just naming a particular diagnosis—Taylor Jane's Asperger's Syndrome—occurred as a result of my awareness of unheard voices in this regard. Perhaps this works against the commonplace, helping this text operate as a stereotype-breaker. I certainly hope so!

Second, conceptualizing Taylor's character as someone who identified with adult texts—in particular the works of Harold Pinter (in *Wild Orchid*), Samuel Beckett (in *Waiting for No One*, the second book of the series), and Jean Paul Sartre (in *The White Bicycle*, the third and final book)—occurred as the result of an unconscious understanding that intertextuality has been limited as far as “reading up.” Characters with disabilities that read or remember young children's books have certainly been more common than characters selecting mature reading material about which to proselytize.

Third, taking a character and moving her into titles in a connected series may also serve to break a stereotype in the field of children's literature where a protagonist with a disability rarely carries more than one title. Taylor Jane will have supported three books by the time I am finished with her. In the last installment to Taylor's story (*White Bicycle*), I fully address another trend I've noticed in contemporary titles about characters with disabili-

ties: these characters rarely travel. In response to this environmental over-stability, I send Taylor to France in *The White Bicycle*. Yes, she has transition challenges and language challenges, but these are not her greatest challenge, which involves overcoming her mother in a determined quest for independence.

The initial title in my historical fiction series, *Falling for Henry* (Brenna, 2011), was originally created as a stand-alone; however, Kate Allen is a very able character that resonates with me because of her anxiety disorder—her claustrophobia is too much like my own to want her story to end. In addition to her adventures with a charming Prince Henry, soon to become

Henry VIII, perhaps she will have some involvement with the Princes in the Tower . . . but that story is still in the making. Only time will tell!

*When she's not writing children's books, Beverley Brenna is conducting research and teaching classes in Elementary Education at the University of Saskatchewan. Her research interests include children's literature, the reading and writing processes, and special education. She lives on an acreage near Saskatoon with her husband, three sons, a dog, a cat, two parakeets, two frilled lizards, a frog, two tarantulas, and many, many fish. More information about her published books can be found at <http://www.beverleybrenna.com>.*

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## Call for 2013 Halle Award Nominations

The NCTE Richard W. Halle Award for Outstanding Middle Level Educator honors a middle level educator who has consistently worked to improve the quality of middle school education and middle school educators, especially in the English language arts. Originally established in 1996 by the Junior High/Middle School Assembly, this award pays special tribute to the person who has worked to improve schools and schooling for the middle level—teacher, principal, college faculty, curriculum specialist, or supervisor.

Nomination information can be found on the NCTE website at [www.ncte.org/awards/halle](http://www.ncte.org/awards/halle) and must be submitted no later than **June 1, 2013**. Results will be announced in September, and the award will be presented at the 2013 Annual Convention in Boston, Massachusetts, during the Middle Level Get-Together.

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## Immersed in Stories:

A New Journey into Reading

**W**hen I wrote *The Survivors* in 2009, the world hadn't yet seen an iPad. We hadn't been introduced to new forms of storytelling, hadn't consumed stories in transmedia and app-based experiences. Not really. And in my graduate school education classes in Peabody College at Vanderbilt, our discussions about technology in the classroom revolved around smart boards and how to teach students the full uses of technology, even as we dissected which forms of technological know-how were important for which ages. These discussions were current then, sure, but now seem antiquated in only three years' time. The reason is simple: in that time, everything has changed.

I have a particular vantage point in this evolution. I feel the effects these changes have made on all our lives—and will continue to make with increasing speed—with a weight I'm not sure most people could. I am, after all, an author, a transmedia storyteller, an educator, and now an app developer.

When I envisioned *The Sur-*

*vivors*, the first in a young adult paranormal fantasy series with historical and mythological ties that somehow coexist nicely with its pop-culture setting, I envisioned an app. I didn't know the word for it then, and I certainly couldn't tell anyone how to make what I saw in my head. Once there was a 100,000-word narrative in place, I spouted to anyone who would listen—friends, family, cohorts, other writers, and literary agents—about a vision I saw for the future of books. “Imagine one day you could touch the screen of a Kindle,” I would say, “and where there was historical research, you could see documents or books, sources that the author or, better yet, the character read to make the conclusions presented in the story!” To blank stares, I'd say, “Imagine if you could hear music playing at the right time in the right moment, like a soundtrack in a movie. Or if you could follow a character's travels on Google Earth. See the real places they visit. See clothes they're wearing—and buy them yourself. What if you could *talk* to them? On Twit-

ter? Or inside the book? Wouldn't that be amazing?”

And it was amazing, but at the time it was far from feasible, far from a reality. It quickly became apparent that I would have to make it happen before anyone would understand what I proposed. What I saw was a future for the way you could read a book, a way to further immerse a reader in story worlds—dive further, if you like to dive, or skim the water and just read the text, if that were more your style. I saw a curated reading experience that could get you as close to what I thought of as the most immersive, most engaging, and most perfect form of story consumption: experiencing what I saw in my head when I, the author, wrote it.

I have always experienced stories—my own and others'—in particularly intense ways. For me, there is a soundtrack, a camera pan (for a camera that doesn't exist), a perfectly coiffed sentence to illuminate and illustrate, a gentle rhythmic lull to the character's voice that says so much about him. I think and imagine in giant, grand-scheme

pictures and in minutiae so small, people can't be bothered by it. And because of that, transmedia stories, interactive book apps, and new story experiences of any kind are the perfect medium for my art. In a new, interactive form of a story, I can share with you the song that plays and the detailed observation you may not have made on your own. I can write original music that conveys tone in an emotional way that my words might not. I can give you the aesthetic details of a character you might miss or not form as fully as you could. I can inform all that you imagine, and take it to greater heights. When I write a story, I live it, breathe it, (don't) sleep it, eat it, and drink it in.

With a transmedia story, one you can explore and fall in love with the way I do, *you* can do all those things, too. You can find yourself immersed, consumed by the story, and caught up in the chaos of the story world itself. Print books can do this to an extent, but there are limits. Though the greatest imaginations may take more from my words than I put into them, other minds might not open themselves to the possibilities of just how big and real and sensory the story could be. These new kinds of stories I once dreamt of offer you all of this: the words, sounds, sights. These stories and their cross-platform, transmedia content are jumping-off points for each reader. You don't all have identical experiences with a print book, and so you wouldn't in a new story form, either. But whatever way you would have read the book, these new kinds of stories can offer you *more*.

## Going Places When You Read

In my undergraduate studies in early childhood education and child development, I acquired a mental list of take-aways from massive processes, concepts, or experiences we want children to have. This is of particular importance to me. I work this way: I get to know the inner workings of everything I touch, and then I find one recurring mantra to repeat to myself that symbolizes all of that. When studying the art of teaching a child to read—thinking of *how* I wanted children to be able to read and what they could get from it—a single phrase rang on repeat inside my head: people need to *go places* when they read.

It's simple, right? Maybe that's a goal you set for students, or maybe you've never thought of it quite like that, but that's the gist, isn't it? You don't learn to love literature, stories, or books if all you do is decode words on a page. You do not engage in other worlds if you don't care about them. You cannot put yourself there if you don't wonder, ask questions, or let yourself depart the text. So when I formed this asinine idea of an interactive book, of an immersive story, I knew my head was in the right place because it gave books an even better chance of taking you somewhere. If you were already a reader accustomed to mental travel while reading, then I could simply fuel your fire. But if you were not this reader, if you were one of the many children, teens, or even adults who never really connect to stories, this new interactive book could make reading so much more.

By the time these unconnected readers are offered young adult lit, many people have already given up on them; they may tell you that if these readers haven't already made it there, they may never make it, so what's the point? (For the record, I'm not one of those people. I don't think it's ever too late, for anyone. For anything.)

But there is a point.

## The Immersedition™

Fast-forward to 2011. I've signed with a small start-up publisher, Chafie Press, to publish the five books in *The Survivors* series. I partnered with Chafie because of their desire to breach the world of the interactive book, faster and with more passion than any of the bigger, more traditional publishers could offer me. Soon after *The Survivors'* release in the spring, parent-company Chafie Creative and I were neck-deep in the development of what we now call an Immersedition™. The Immersedition interactive book app is a model of an interactive book. It is not a one-size-fits-all platform. It is not for every story. It is not a stagnant platform, but is instead a concept that will evolve with each iteration of the technology and with each step the world takes toward becoming more accustomed to consuming stories in new and varied ways. And so it is a way to accomplish everything I set out to do. It is a way to bring mine and many other authors' stories, current and classic, to life in a new way.

In what was originally a 283-page hardback book, *The Survivors Immersedition* has over 300 touch-points that elicit over 500 frames

of additional information without ever visually leaving the pages of a book. You are guided through the book by watermark icons that tell you where a point of interaction is and what kind of interaction it will be. In the prologue, which takes place in Salem in 1692, there are character profiles of the Reverend Samuel Parris and Governor William Phips, side by side with brief histories of the infamous witch trials and historical documents from the era, all of which fill out your understanding of the story and of the history behind it. But if you read only the book, with none of these extras, the story is complete enough to stand on its own. This is the key. In an Immersedition, the additional content takes the story to new heights, but the story can stand on its own merits. The book can exist as just a book, but it can exist as so much more, too.

In other places, there is a soundtrack—some original and some licensed from the likes of Coldplay, Mumford & Sons, or Old Crow Medicine Show—that plays a certain song at just the right moment, just like I foretold. And the rest I imagined is there, too: interactive satellite maps, character profiles that evolve as the story evolves for spoiler-free reading, character clothes and style, the cars they drive, the places they visit, books they read, mythological backgrounds and information, handwritten author anecdotes, and so much more. And, yes, you can even talk to the characters from inside the book. They have Twitter accounts that they've had for years that you can access from inside the app; ask them a question, get an answer. The content is high qual-

ity and carefully selected, and it is always relevant. We may have put a *ton* into it, but each choice was a deliberate one. The Immersedition is about offering you a choice to engage as you like. Content is never forced upon you. Nothing just appears in your line of vision, detracting or distracting from your reading experience. But if you would like to dig, then it's as easy as touching a watermark.

### The Future of Books

I think that this is where stories are headed. It could be because I watched a generation read *Twilight* and then think an actor was the embodiment of a character enough to fall for him. It could be because I see an ever-growing need for *more* from my and others' reading. In any case, I know that we are in the right time and place to blur the lines between fantasy and reality, to offer more to consume and to create more that is consumable. There are entities out there creating story apps that are much more intricate and game-like, stories that abandon the idea of a central narrative and offer you a chance to explore a story world on your own like never before. I am excited to see where these transmedia ventures head and what will come out of them. As a storyteller myself, I'm excited to embrace them.

But that's not what we—what *I*—set out to do. I wanted to make an evolutionary step in *books*. I wanted to show you what we were capable of doing with the written word. Some will tell you I have not taken enough steps toward the future, not fully embracing a world beyond books. Others will tell you

that I've gone too far, that I'm building things that will threaten the greatest asset in our society.

But I hope you can see what I see: that this is the crucial step. Books will always matter. Should I say that again? Books will *always* matter. It doesn't mean they're going to look the same as they do now. It doesn't mean—actually, I implore you *not* to let it mean—that loving books-as-we-know-them will keep you from embracing the newest forms of storytelling. I see a world where stories and literature-based experiences exist in myriad ways. And perhaps foolishly, I believe that this will offer the next generation *more* opportunities to engage in the narratives of past, present, and future, not fewer. I don't think offering book apps and interactive stories means that I'm jumping ship on hopes of raising readers. Instead, I think it means that I am one of the few who are patching the holes to keep our ship from sinking.

Not that I'm biased, of course.

We're raising and educating a generation of thinkers whose brains either consume information in more rapid and varied ways—because avenues by which to consume information are more rapid and varied than they have been before—or whose brains don't ask questions because they don't have to. Is that too bold a statement? Probably, but it's what I see. What Chafie and I have created offers a solution for both sides of that spectrum. For those who ask questions of themselves while reading, I have presented an answer. For those who never ask the questions in the first place, I offer a friendly prompt that a question could have

been asked there—and then answer it. I want to offer you, the reader, a way to engage in stories like never before. I want you to read books in a new, more immersive way. It's that simple.

### YA as the First Step

And why young adult, you might ask? The answer to that is even simpler—because they get it. When we were beta-testing the pilot *Immersedition*, a version that existed without the intro page and demo video it now does, we tested it on 8th–12th graders, college students, and adults. The adults opened the app and refused to move forward until someone presented them with instructions. (They wanted to be *told* to turn pages like an eBook, or to touch buttons where virtual buttons appeared.) College students asked, “When does it do something?” as they rapidly flipped pages and waited for something to jump out at them, waited for something to *happen* (which, of course, everyone would hate if it actually did). But the 8th–12th graders took the iPads out of our hands, flipped pages, touched watermarks, enlarged them, closed them, made music play. They never asked a question. They got it instantly, and they were hooked. (Ultimately, it's the adults' fault that there are instructions in the app at all.)

Clearly, I knew before that moment that I wanted to start in young adult literature for my adventures into interactive books—I did, of course, write *Survivors* long before there was an *Immersedition* to speak of—but this testing just validated it. I can't tell you how many teenagers—even teenage boys who usually wouldn't be

caught dead reading “something like that”—walk up to me and say, “If books were always like this, I'd read all the time.” Or, “Are there more of these? Where can I get more books like this?” That, too, is much-needed validation, and I take it warmly. I understand. They want more books that take them places when they read. I want more books like that, too.

### Changing the Way We Teach Stories

What started as a vision for how to tell my story quickly evolved into a new way to tell anyone's story. And what I quickly accepted as a new way to tell stories, I saw even more clearly as a new way to *teach* stories. *The Survivors Immersedition* was the pilot app for Chafie Creative and me. The second is a *Romeo & Juliet Immersedition* that takes a whole new step toward making it obvious that book apps can offer us something we've needed for a while. Whether used in a classroom as the curricular text of choice, used only by a teacher as a guide in creating his or her discussions and plans, or used by the struggling eighth grader who, without an *Immersedition*, might ditch the book and read Sparknotes instead, the *Romeo & Juliet Immersedition* is a new way to think about a teachable text.

In the educational *Immersedition*, we use similar watermarks and the engage-as-you-like model. There are no textbook-style features, like quizzes at the end of an act, but there is access to thought-provoking discussions that arise at the appropriate line. We address ways to work out puns, identify themes, read stage directions,

discuss characters, and decode allusions often missed. We offer simple video interpretations for particularly difficult scenes. Additionally, we created a reader mode that offers a chance to read only the text with the watermarks, and a workshop mode that offers footnotes, puns, themes, and foreshadowing already marked up. And there's more. This app is a chance to capitalize on every teachable moment, a way to guarantee high-quality, thought-provoking information and discussion to anyone who reads the book. It is a chance to take literature-based learning experiences to an entirely new level, a way to individualize instruction with a single tool.

### Embracing the New Models

I challenge you to see the potential that I see in the *Immersedition* model. Open your mind to what literature and story experiences you could have or could offer the students and readers you connect with. I challenge you to wonder where we're headed and to start consuming new stories as they're offered to you. They might not always come from the most-established entities. (*Wired* magazine once said about the *Immersedition* that we were only able to accomplish what we did because we were small and unattached to a more established group, a business steeped in its own dated traditions). They might not always feel familiar. But what if they're worth it? What if they offer you something new that will become as magical to you as books are?

I love books. I'm one of their biggest fans. I write, read, and



teach them. I tear them apart and think about them. I let them infiltrate my mind, take over my soul. I am not the enemy. Not yours. Not books'. Instead, I am an inventor. I see what a story, what a *book* could be, and I take steps to make it that. The Chafie team and I are ready to take other books—so many other books!—to this level. In *Survivors*, I got my chance to truly blur the lines between fantasy and reality. And in *Romeo & Juliet*, I'm thrilled to see a high-quality, literature-based interactive educational text land on the table. To me, this could change so much for so many.

Yes, I think that this is where stories are headed. I think they will

exist in apps and on the Internet, across platforms, and in an increasingly slim space that holds the line between fiction and reality. I think we will find ways to teach stories to those who need it most, offer more ways for stories to take us places than they already do. We will find ways to reinvent storytelling for those who already love books and those who haven't yet had the good fortune of falling in love with them. I think if we open our minds, we can take a step together toward embracing a future of books, securing what we love about them, exploring what they could become.

Actually? I don't think. I know.

### Editors' Note

Throughout the online version of this issue, you will find active links to additional related content.

*Amanda Havard is the author of the supernatural young adult series The Survivors, a transmedia franchise with an online following of over 3 million readers. For her first series, Havard teamed up with transmedia content studio Chafie Creative to create Immersedition™ book apps, a patent-pending app that is a curated, interactive reading experience for full-length novels. The Survivors was the debut Immersedition™. She recently headed up the first Chafie educational project, a Romeo & Juliet Immersedition. It is currently being adopted in schools across the country.*

## Stories from the Field

### Riley Writes a YA Novel

#### Danny Wade

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On the first day of class, their jaws dropped in my undergraduate Young Adult Literature course when I exclaimed the classics are not the best books for teens. I knew I couldn't convince any of them on the first day, so I transitioned to explaining that they would read 16–20 YA works during the semester. Again, their jaws dropped.

We then introduced ourselves. Most were English education or elementary education majors. One was a writing major interested in writing a YA novel. The last introduction was Riley, who professed, “I am a writer.” I inquired, “Oh, you're also interested in writing a young adult novel?” Surprisingly, he explained, “No. I'm in the course because I might want to teach middle school or high school English. I've published eight novels. They're not young adult.”

Early in the semester, Riley showed deep enthusiasm for what we were reading. I began prodding him to write a YA novel. My suggestion didn't seem to click. One day during a discussion about diversity issues, Riley described one of his novels about a soldier who hides his homosexuality while serving in the army. Riley expressed he wanted to represent gay men in similar situations as strong men who also make sacrifices and serve this country with dignity and pride.

After listening, I told him about the need for more LGBTQ content in the YA genre. I saw a spark as he left class that day.

A week before the semester ended, Riley gave me a copy of his new novel, *Dissecting Sean Connor* [self-published by R. J. Hamilton; available on Amazon]. While I admired its blue, glossy front cover, Riley explained that it's about a gay teen who finds hope and confidence despite being constantly bullied in high school. I then opened it to his handwritten note, “Dr. Wade, thank you for opening my eyes to a genre as important as YAL and for inspiring me to write my first young adult novel.”

### Our Little Secret

#### Bridget Mahoney

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Wide eyed, Addie motioned me to an unoccupied corner of the classroom.

“One of the characters in here is gay,” she whispered, motioning to the novel in her hand.

“I know,” I whispered back.

“Did you know before you gave it to me?”

I nodded.

“It's cool,” she continued to whisper, “to read about someone kind of like me.”

I gave her shoulder a squeeze. “I'm glad you like it.”

“The principal and stuff, do they know about this book?” she asked.

“I don’t think so and I’m not going to say anything.”

She nodded solemnly, completely understanding the need for secrecy. I watched Addie return to her favorite reading spot, a quiet corner of the classroom. She opened up *Keesha’s House* by Helen Frost and commenced reading.

When I began teaching a reading class for struggling readers, I was unfamiliar with some of the titles included in the independent reading collection, *Keesha’s House* among them. I took *Keesha’s House* home to read, and as soon as I finished it, I passed a copy to Addie. I was thrilled and amazed that a book with a homosexual character had made it into the school. An administration scared to upset conservative parents paired with a literacy specialist with strong traditional religious beliefs resulted in an unwillingness to purchase or allow books with homosexual characters.

This refusal to allow access to homosexual characters was problematic for Addie. An openly lesbian adolescent, Addie struggled to identify with the characters in the books supplied by the school. Addie’s obvious identification with Harris, the homosexual character in *Keesha’s House*, resulted in the creation of a voracious reader. Reading and enjoying *Keesha’s House* made Addie more willing to read other books I suggested. She finished the year as one of my strongest and most avid readers. While I’m happy *Keesha’s House* got her reading, I’m sad it had to be our little secret.

## YA Book Buzz

### Georgia Parker

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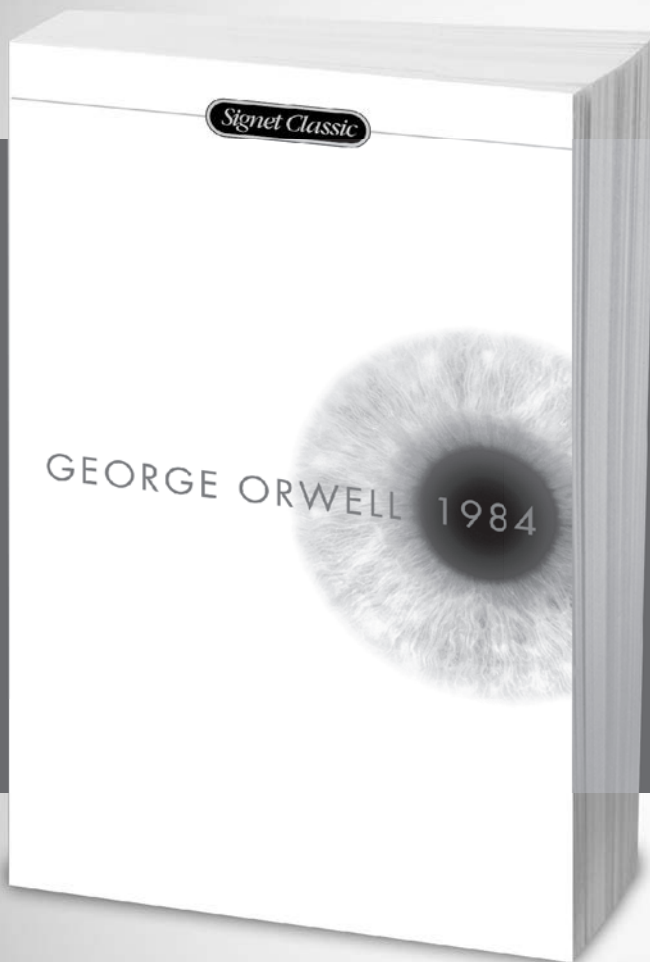
As many English teachers do, I cringe when I excitedly introduce a new novel only to be met with eye rolls and groans. However, after attending NCTE and ALAN in Chicago, I returned armed with a wealth of new ideas to engage my students. I paired several YA novels that included Dashner’s *Maze Runner Series* (2009), Roth’s *Divergent* (2011), Oliver’s *Delirium* (2011), Hautman’s *Rash* (2006), Weyn’s *Empty* (2012), and Treggiari’s *Ashes, Ashes* (2011) with Orwell’s classic *1984* (1948). In Chicago, I even chatted with James Dashner about my plans—an amazing experience!

The objective was to spark my students’ excitement about reading. I asked students to choose one of the YA novels and produce a book trailer depicting a common theme in that book and *1984*. The buzz began, and my students assembled some amazing trailers, posted them on YouTube, and even had some of the authors, unsolicited by me, comment on them. My students were thrilled, to say the least. Even more fulfilling for me was the book chatter, not just in my room, but in the halls, by the lockers, and at lunch time. My students were not just reading the one required YA book, they were passing them around. Students were counting down to the release of the *Divergent* sequel, *Insurgent* (2012), and lining up to borrow my copy of *The Maze Runner* (2009), because all the copies were checked out of our school’s library. The kids were reading because they wanted to not because it was required.

As a college prep school, our curriculum is founded on the canon. However, I have long believed that YA literature must be incorporated and encouraged. Schools promote the learning of a lifelong sport through PE. Why not provide students with an opportunity to become lifelong readers? Pairing YA literature with classics accomplishes this goal.

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