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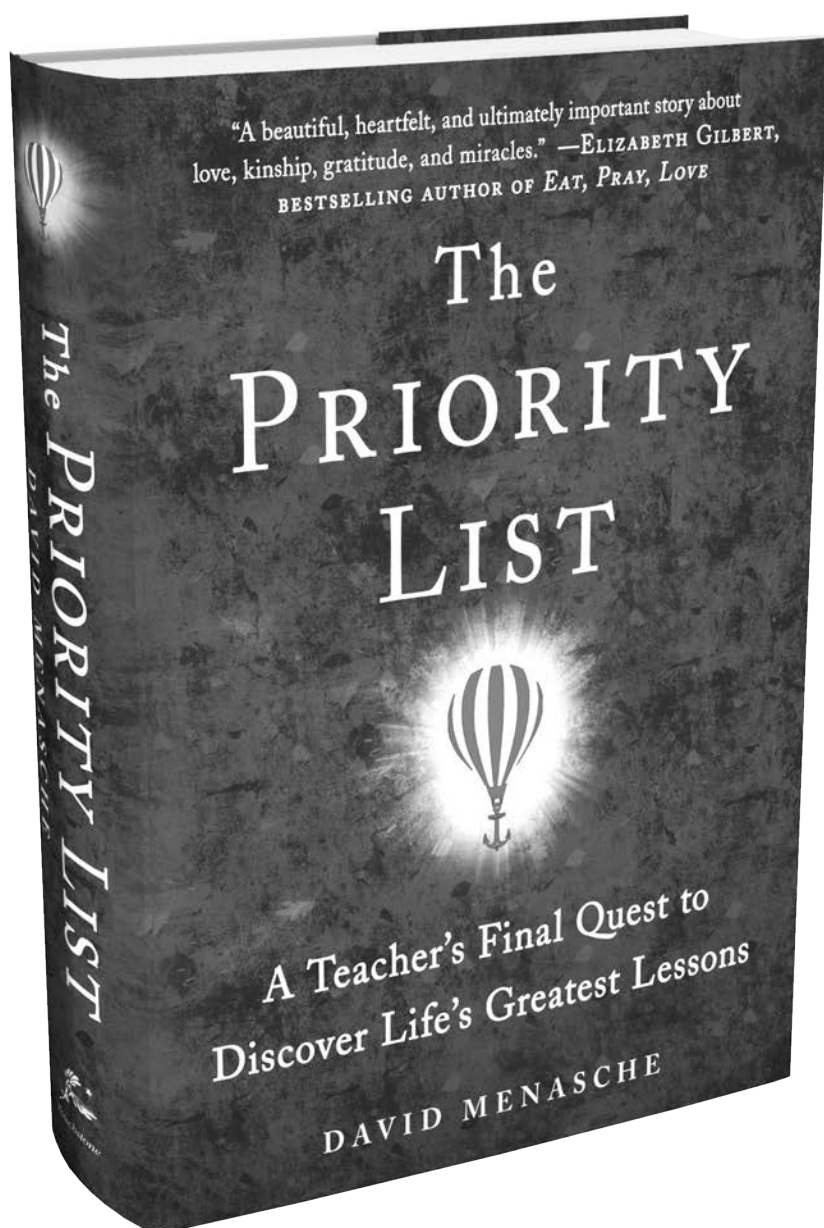
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<p><b><i>A Girl Called Problem</i></b> by Katie Quirk Eerdmans Books for Young Readers, 2013, 243 pp., \$8.00 ISBN: 978-0-8028-5404-9 Fiction</p> <p>In Swahili, Shida's name means "problem." Shida's name serves as a reminder of the fact that her father died soon after her birth. Shida does not have many friends, and the neighbors call her mother a witch. So when her village is asked to move to Njia Panda, Shida cannot wait. She desperately wants to start a new life, especially in a place with a school and hospital where she can continue to develop her healing skills. When hardship follows Shida to Njia Panda, she must do everything she can to help the village and prove that she is an important member of the community.</p> <p>Katie Quirk spent two years teaching and writing in Tanzania. Her experiences and love for the country inspired her to write this novel. Included in the book are further resources for readers to learn more about the country and its culture.</p> <p>Laura Wilczek Eden Prairie, MN</p>	<p><b><i>Beta</i></b> by Rachel Cohn Science Hyperion, 2012, 336 pp. \$17.99 ISBN: 978-1-4231-7335-9 Fiction/Dystopia</p> <p>On the island of Desmesne, emotionless clones serve humans as everything from janitors to nannies. Elysia, one of the first experimental teen clone models, has never known anywhere else but the idyllic island. Humans there have everything they want, but Elysia soon learns that having no needs or desires leads many to abuse their privilege. Her human family expects her to take illegal drugs with them and comply with unwellcome sexual advances. Unlike the unfeeling clones they expect, Elysia has opinions and desires, and she soon learns other clones feel, too, and they resent the humans.</p> <p>As Elysia falls in love with another teen beta clone, she grows to fear her future as a slave on Desmesne and wonder what life exists off the island. Readers will discover the world alongside Elysia and wonder what it means to be human when supposedly soulless clones develop morals while humans are inhumane.</p> <p>Laura Cockman Fishers, IN</p>
<p><b><i>Boston Jacky: Being an Account of the Further Adventures of Jacky Faber, Taking Care of Business</i></b> by L. A. Meyer Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Books for Young Readers, ISBN: 978-0-54797-495-8 2013, 368 pp., \$16.99 Series/Money/Adventure</p> <p>The unflappable Jacky Faber returns to Boston after spying and painting in Spain. Of course, being Jacky, her previous brushes with death have had little effect on her, and she continues to behave impulsively and without considering the consequences of her actions. As she reunites with her friends, works to free her favorite tavern from debt, and waits to be reunited with Jaimy Fletcher, she thrusts herself in the middle of tension over the increasing numbers of immigrants arriving in Boston and the women's temperance league.</p> <p>Although Jacky takes care of her financial business quite well, she lacks social skills. Sometimes her arrogance and quick way of speaking spell disaster, especially when her enemies have long memories and a taste for revenge. This book abounds with adventure, intrigue, missed opportunities, and humor. Despite her imperfections, it's hard not to get a kick out of Jacky's independent ways and her lust for life.</p> <p>Barbara A. Ward Pullman, WA</p>	<p><b><i>Break Point</i></b> by Kate Jaimet Orca, 2013, 160 pp., \$9.95 Fiction/Sports ISBN: 978-1-4598-0352-7</p> <p>Sixteen-year-old Connor Trent takes a position working at the Bytowne Tennis Club one summer. This ideal job not only allows him to begin training for the National Junior Tournament, but also enables him to spend more time with the club owner's daughter, Maddy. When various club fundraisers are sabotaged, Connor and Maddy set out to discover the culprits responsible for bankrupting the club. Connor soon realizes that the only way to save the club and alleviate Maddy's fears for her family's livelihood is to win the upcoming tennis tournament. It will all come down to the final match. Will Connor be able to finally defeat his archrival Rex Hunter and win the much-needed tournament cash prize?</p> <p>Jaimet's fast-paced novel artfully combines authentic first-person descriptions of tennis matches with a moving plotline that reveals the protagonist's contemplation of morality, making this an ideal read for preteen and teen boys.</p> <p>Juli Avery Nashville, TN</p>

<p><b><i>Bruised</i></b> by Sarah Skilton        Amulet Books, 2013, 274 pp., \$16.95</p> <p>Realistic Fiction/Trauma Recovery and Identity        ISBN: 978-4197-0387-4</p> <p>Since the demo, Imogen has been famous at her school for her Tae Kwon Do skills. At age 16, she has already achieved her status as a black belt. This identity that she has come to cling to is shattered as she wrestles with her reactions while in the midst of a hold-up at a local diner. Beneath the diner table, she meets the eyes of Ricky Alvarez. Together, the two build their relationship through coping with what happened that night, both desperate to evade the cowardice in their hearts.</p> <p>On top of Imogen's shattered self-image, the already broken relationships in her life begin to surface. By returning to the Children's Home Rules, values she followed as an eight year old studying the ways of martial arts, Imogen rediscovers the heart of her training and her family.</p> <p>Allison Crandall        Nashville, TN</p>	<p><b><i>Dead Is a Battlefield</i></b> by Marlene Perez        Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012, 227 pp., \$7.99</p> <p>Supernatural Fiction        ISBN: 978-0-547-60734-4</p> <p>Jessica Walsh is still recovering from a traumatic fire that occurred on last year's Grad Night when she learns she is a Virago, a female warrior that is to fight for her town when it is in need. When a new boy comes to Nighthshade, the girls at school begin to act very strangely. Jessica and the other Viragos continue to train to prepare to protect their town from the danger that seems to be approaching.</p> <p><i>Dead Is a Battlefield</i> is a part of Marlene Perez's "Dead Is" series. This is the sixth book in the series, but the first told from Jessica's perspective; the others have been narrated by and focused on the Giordano sisters. Jessica learns much about responsibility, friendship, and strength.</p> <p>Ryane Williamson        Tulsa, Oklahoma</p>
<p><b><i>Dear Life, You Suck</i></b> by Scott Blagden        Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013, 306 pp., \$16.99</p> <p>Fiction/Humor        ISBN: 978-0-547-90431-3</p> <p>Cricket Cherpin thinks his life sucks. Orphaned at 8, he grew up in a boy's home in middle-of-nowhere Maine. Now he's about to turn 18 and has to leave. His past is traumatic, his future is looking bleak, and he needs to figure things out fast. This story follows Cricket as he sorts out his future and works through his past, and ultimately finds hope that maybe life isn't so bad, after all.</p> <p>Scott Blagden's irreverent first novel offers a real and heartfelt narrative through the eyes of a troubled, rebellious, complex teenage boy. Alternating comedy and tragedy punctuated by moments of tenderness and hope, Blagden tells a compelling and unusual story of overcoming the past and shaping the future.</p> <p>Olivia Gail Drake        Sewanee, TN</p>	<p><b><i>Goodbye, Rebel Blue</i></b> by Shelley Coriell        Amulet Books, 2013, 307 pp., \$16.95</p> <p>Fiction/Identity/Romance/Family        ISBN: 978-1-4197-0930-2</p> <p>Rebecca "Rebel" Blue's life is turned upside down after sitting next to Kennedy, a kind and selfless classmate, in detention. When Kennedy dies the following day in a car accident, Rebel, a loner rebel and budding artist, desires to make amends for her unfriendly behavior toward the girl by completing her bucket list. In doing so, Rebel encounters the joys of friendship, family, faith, and love and, as a result, is able to rid herself of her "rough" exterior that masked her true identity and feelings.</p> <p><i>Goodbye, Rebel Blue</i> is a compelling drama with unforgettable characters struggling with real teenage problems. Coriell's story will resonate with middle and high school students who are trying to establish a stronger sense of self and enjoy reading poignant dramas about romance, friendship, and family.</p> <p>Juli Avery        Nashville, TN</p>

<p><b>Grave Mercy</b> by Robin LaFevers Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012, 549 pp., \$16.99 ISBN: 978-0-547-62834-9</p> <p>In fifteenth-century Brittany, fourteen-year-old Ismae has learned to fear men for their aggression. She quakes when her father forces her into marriage, but on the night of her wedding, a secret group spirits her away to the convent of Saint Mortain, the God of Death. There she discovers mystical powers and trains as an assassin. Three years later, she leaves the convent on a mission to protect the Duchess of Brittany from French conspirators.</p> <p>Ismae begins to question her upbringing when she falls in love with someone the convent commanded her to kill. Fans of fantasy and romance will wonder alongside Ismae whether it is more important to follow the convent's directions or listen to her own heart and trust a man for the first time. As Ismae navigates treacherous political courts and secret passageways, she will discover the power she wields in making her own choices.</p> <p>Laura Cockman Fishers, IN</p>	<p><b>Gum Girl</b> by Rhode Montijo Disney Hyperion Books, 2013, 128 pp., \$14.99 ISBN: 978-1-4231-5740-3</p> <p>Gabby Gomez chews gum all the time. Her mom advises her to take a break, but she does not listen. Then, in a superheroic bubble-blowing accident, Gabby turns into gum. At first, Gabby worries about what her mom will do if she finds out, but then she learns that she can use her new power for good and becomes Gum Girl. Gabby must learn to balance her lives as a student and a superhero without letting anybody know that she is Gum Girl, because the more people she helps, the more villains take notice.</p> <p><i>Gum Girl</i> is told in a mixture of words and pictures, ideal for younger readers or reluctant readers. Her transformation from ordinary gum-chewer to hero leaves readers wondering how she will keep her secret and how she will solve the next crime that comes her way.</p> <p>Laura Cockman Fishers, IN</p>
<p><b>Heartbeat</b> by Elizabeth Scott Harlequin Teen, 2013, 226 pp., \$16.99 ISBN: 978-0-373-21096-1</p> <p>Emma's mom has died, but she is being kept alive by machines because she is pregnant. Dan, Emma's stepfather, chooses to keep her mother "alive" long enough for the baby to survive. Emma believes that Dan's decision is selfish, cruel, and not what her mother would have wanted. She is so angry at Dan, she stays locked in her room, leaving only to go to school and to visit her dead mom in the hospital.</p> <p>Emma, who was once a dedicated and competitive student, allows her grades to drop and her dreams of going to a top ten university to die along with her mother. Olivia, her best friend, tries to help her deal with her pain and anger, but she does not really understand. Emma feels all alone until she gets to know the "bad boy" of the school, Caleb. He understands her, but can he fix her?</p> <p>Amanda Brown Nashville, TN</p>	<p><b>In Too Deep</b> by Coert Voorhees Hyperion Books/Disney Book Group, 2013, 336 pp., \$16.99 ISBN: 978-1-4231-8109-5</p> <p>Annie Fleet is an outcast as a freshman. Known for being the nerd who loves the ocean, not to mention a faculty member's kid on scholarship, she doesn't quite match the norm at her private prep school in LA, filled with wealthy prodigies and movie star's children. But when she embarks on a mission trip to Mexico with her crush and two other students, she discovers that her part-time teacher, part-time secret treasure hunting chaperone has an alternate agenda for the trip: finding a long-lost treasure, using Annie as his diver. Finding the treasure will be nearly impossible; avoiding danger will be even harder. Will Annie get out of this adventure alive?</p> <p>Voorhees, critically acclaimed author of <i>The Brothers Torres</i> and <i>Lucky Fools</i>, has a captivating way of flirting with romance, action, suspense, and typical teenage emotions in this epic novel, creating a story impossible to put down.</p> <p>Kristen McKnight Pittsburgh, PA</p>

<p><b><i>Invisibility</i></b> by Andrea Cremer &amp; David Levithan          Philomel Books, 2013, 358 pp., \$18.99          ISBN: 978-0-399-25760-5          Magical Fiction</p> <p>Stephen has been invisible since the day he was born. Outside of his family, no one ever knew he existed, until Elizabeth, a new girl in his apartment building, sees him. They begin to build a relationship while solving the mystery of Stephen's invisibility. They discover a world that they never knew existed all around them.</p> <p><i>Invisibility</i> is co-written by Andrea Cramer (the author of the Nightshade series) and David Levithan (the author of <i>Every Day</i>). It is a fast-paced and intriguing story that has elements of love, magic, and friendship. Both Stephen and Elizabeth narrate the novel, alternating chapters and providing multiple perspectives on an interesting story.</p> <p>Ryane Williamson          Tulsa, Oklahoma</p>	<p><b><i>My Boyfriend Is a Monster: Wrapped Up in You</i></b> by Dan Jolley          Lerner Publishing Group, 2012, 127 pp., \$19.36          ISBN: 978-0-7613-6856-4          Graphic Novel/Supernatural Romance</p> <p>Nothing seems to go right for Staci. When her best friend Laura starts hanging out with two new friends and starts talking about a séance, Stacy feels obligated to go with her. The four girls conduct the séance in a local museum, calling on ancient Incan powers within the exhibit. Their magic was more powerful than they realized, awaking the mummy of Prince Pachocute! The prince warns Staci of the dangerous magic they released. Together, Staci, Laura, and the prince must stop Laura's new friends from becoming frighteningly powerful witches.</p> <p><i>Wrapped Up in You</i> is the sixth in the <i>My Boyfriend Is a Monster</i> series. The series features teens caught in supernatural phenomena encroaching into their normal lives, while falling in love and facing adventure. The visual appeal of the graphics and the typical challenges faced by characters in the book would make any titles within the series appealing to teens.</p> <p>Allison Crandall          Nashville, TN</p>
<p><b><i>Pawn</i></b> by Aimée Carter          Harlequin Teen, 2013, 304 pp., \$9.99          ISBN: 978-0-373-21055-8          Dystopia/Rebellion</p> <p>At 17, everyone takes a test ranking them I to VII, where VIIs are most useful to society. Kitty Doe's III assigns her a sanitation job in Denver, where she will never see her family or boyfriend again. Of course, when government officials offer Kitty the chance to become a VII, she accepts.</p> <p>To become a VII, Kitty is surgically transformed into Lila Hart, part of the family controlling the testing system. There she learns of the factions within it that led to Lila's death. As both sides of the family attempt to control her actions, Kitty must find a way to prove she is more than just a political pawn. Fans of dystopias and adventures will wonder whether Kitty will follow the government that has taken everything from her or if she will find a way to support the Blackcoat Rebellion and overthrow the system.</p> <p>Laura Cockman          Fishers, IN</p>	<p><b><i>Playing with Fire</i></b> by Bruce Hale          Disney Hypertion, 2013, 320 pp., \$15.99          ISBN: 978-1-4231-6850-8          Action/Adventure</p> <p>Strange things have happened at each of Max's foster homes that lead to his being kicked out. The only place left that will take him now is the Merry Sunshine Orphanage, which secretly trains orphans to become spies. As Max learns skills like lock-picking and decoding, he receives clues telling him his father may still be alive. Max must rely on his newfound skills and friends to find his father and evade the Merry Sunshine Orphanage's enemy, the LOTUS organization. But when every spy has his or her own agenda, Max has to choose where his loyalties lie. Thrilling twists abound as Max solves puzzles and learns secrets that reveal hidden plans and motives. When everyone, even his long-lost father, is hiding a secret, Max must determine his own values and figure out which spies to help.</p> <p>Laura Cockman          Fishers, IN</p>



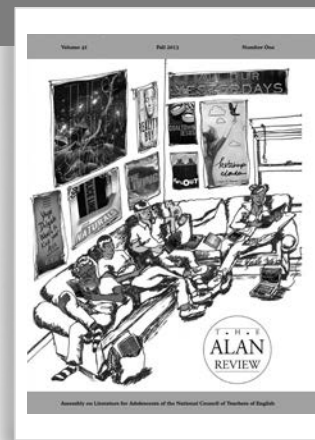
<p><b><i>Shadow on the Mountain</i></b> by Margi Preus Amulet Books, 2013, 304 pp., \$16.95</p> <p>Historical Fiction ISBN: 978-1-4197-0424-6</p> <p>Espen, along with his family and friends, have watched the Nazis come and occupy their country. The war against the Germans was short, and the royal family has fled Norway for the allied countries. It would seem that all hope is lost, but Espen wants to find a way to fight the Nazis. His wish is granted as he becomes a courier for the secret resistance. After some time of doing this without failure, tragedy strikes and Espen takes a bigger role in the resistance. As the Nazis tighten their grip on the Norwegians, Espen's job gets more complicated and dangerous. Could a teenager help end the Nazi occupation of Norway? Can Espen become a hero and still stay alive to see his country again? He will have to hide from the Shadow on the Mountain.</p> <p>Margi Preus has crafted a historical fiction piece with such excellence, you will feel like you are in Norway and running around as a secret spy.</p> <p>Clay Welch Somerset, KY</p>	<p><b><i>Sick</i></b> by Tom Leveen Amulet Books, 2013, 288 pp., \$16.95</p> <p>Horror/Apocalyptic ISBN: 978-1-4197-0805-3</p> <p>"The ER has been blocked off by police at this time. Patients are being asked to go to other local hospitals. . . ." Brian and his friends are the bad boys of the school. They skip class, intimidate others, and get into an occasional fight. But when a mutating zombie-like outbreak reaches their school, Brian and his best friend Chad find themselves stuck with art geeks and drama weirdos in the theater department. Brian's sister and ex-girlfriend are somewhere else in the school and likely in danger. These "bad kids" must team with the drama kids to go on a rescue mission. Can they get to the girls before it is too late? Better yet, will they all survive or will they become <i>Sick</i>?</p> <p>Tom Leveen's first venture into the horror genre will take you on a ride through the mind of a teenager and lead you to see hidden bravery and hope in the next generation.</p> <p>Clay Welch Somerset, KY</p>
<p><b><i>Skylark</i></b> by Meagan Spooner Carolrhoda Lab, 2012, 333 pp., \$17.95</p> <p>Science Fiction/Dystopia ISBN: 978-0-7613-8865-4</p> <p>Lark Ainsley should have been harvested of her Resource years ago, but still, she waits for her name to be called on Harvest Day. Finally, her turn comes, but soon she realizes that hers is no ordinary harvest. She believes herself to be one of the few Renewables; those who can regenerate the Resource after being harvested. Lark is certain that she wants no part of a life that forces her into being a source of power for the rest of those within the Wall.</p> <p>Lark's journey takes her outside the Wall, a place that has always been forbidden, and is determined to fight for her life. She encounters strange pockets of Resource as well as "shadow men" who threaten her life and are never too far behind her. Spooner weaves a compelling story of survival and human nature twisted with a bit of magic.</p> <p>Adrienne Fehringer Nashville, TN</p>	<p><b><i>The Boy on the Bridge</i></b> by Natalie Standiford Identity Scholastic Press, 2013, 256 pp., \$17.99</p> <p>Studying Abroad/Romance/Cultural ISBN: 978-0-54533-481-5</p> <p>Intrigued by Russia, Laura Reid spends a winter semester abroad in Leningrad in 1982. She and her classmates tolerate the bad food, the brutally cold weather, and suspicious Russians. Laura's chance meeting with Alyosha on the bridge near her dorm prompts friendship and romance as he introduces her to the real Russia—places that only someone born in the country would know. Things move fast between the couple, and she skips classes and misses curfew in order to spend time with him. As her friends warn her that Alyosha may have ulterior motives for his quickly professed love, doubts and suspicions assail her. At some points, teen readers may be just as confused as Laura is when it comes to knowing who to trust or believe. This compelling story, where desperate situations often lead to desperate solutions, will evoke shivers at the ending as readers consider what Laura has lost and gained.</p> <p>Barbara A. Ward Pullman, WA</p>

<p><b><i>The Incredible Charlotte Sycamore</i></b> by Kate Maddison          Holiday House, 2013, 282 pp., \$17.95</p> <p>Historical Fiction          ISBN: 978-0-8234-2737-6</p> <p>Charlotte Sycamore, the daughter of the surgeon to Queen Victoria, is none too pleased about her impending arranged marriage to the much older Nelson Abercrombie. Seeking some freedom, Charlotte abandons the safety of her home at Buckingham Palace for a night of sword fighting with her two best friends when they are suddenly attacked by rabid mechanical dogs. In order to save the lives of her friends as well as the Queen, Charlotte must find who is responsible for the monsters and put a stop to it any way she can.</p> <p>Charlotte's father always tells her, "be truthful to yourself and your beliefs," and she attempts to do just that. The events Charlotte faces force her to decide what it is she believes in and how to be true to herself. She learns to stand on her own and risks everything to fight for what she believes to be right.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Adrienne Fehninger          Nashville, TN</p>	<p><b><i>The Infinite Moment of Us</i></b> by Lauren Myracle          Amulet Books, 2013, 336 pp., \$17.95</p> <p>Romance/Identity          ISBN: 978-1-4197-0793-3</p> <p>Wren has always done exactly what her parents want, including studying to get into Emory's pre-med program and avoiding dating. As she graduates high school, she disappoints her parents with her decision to work in Guatemala instead of going to college in the fall. For once, she needs to make choices completely on her own.</p> <p>Then Wren meets Charlie. As they fall in love, Charlie learns that not everyone will abuse him as his mother and ex-girlfriend, Starrta, did. Wren and Charlie grow together over the summer as they experience the newness and steaminess of first love. The excitement of their discoveries of themselves and of each other emphasizes the possibilities opening to them. Readers will wonder if Wren and Charlie will stay together beyond the summer as they grow away from the people who have made decisions for them and grow into themselves.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Laura Cockman          Fishers, IN</p>
<p><b><i>The Lightning Dreamer</i></b> by Margarita Engle          Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013, 182 pp., \$16.99</p> <p>Historical Fiction          ISBN: 978-0-547-80743-0</p> <p>With more wisdom and insight than the typical Cuban teenage girl, Tula longs for a life different than the one her family and society force upon her. Tula refuses to believe that girls are not fit for an education. She refuses to accept the husband her mother "buys" for her. She also refuses to believe slavery is a good thing for her country. Frustrated with familial and societal expectations and beliefs, Tula turns to writing to help her process everything she endures. Only when Tula writes does she experience feelings of freedom. Over time, Tula learns how to use her writing to help others experience freedom as well.</p> <p>This novel is a series of poems written from Tula's perspective and the perspectives of others she encounters. The entire work is inspired by the real life and work of abolitionist poet Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda, whose childhood name was Tula.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Laura Wilczek          Eden Prairie, MN</p>	<p><b><i>The Quick Fix</i></b> by Jack D. Ferriolo          Amulet Books, 2012, 208 pp., \$15.95</p> <p>Noir/Mystery          ISBN: 978-0-8109-9725-7</p> <p>Franklin Middle School is a typical noir scene. It has its crime lord, Vinny, who runs gambling on basketball games, its shady businessmen, a set of twins who make their own blend of addictive pixy sticks, and its hall monitors trying to keep everything straight. When a popular cheerleader is taken to the "outs," the irredeemably unpopular clique, via a squirt gun shot, private eye Matt Stevens must figure out who is mounting a takeover of the school underworld and how the plot relates to a tiny box everyone seems anxious to find.</p> <p>This sequel to <i>The Big Splash</i> stands on its own as mystery readers try to figure out whodunt alongside junior high detective Matt. Plot twists abound as suspects reveal secret motives, hidden identities, and fall into the "outs." Matt becomes increasingly entangled in mystery as he learns the roots of this crime twist around his own family.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Laura Cockman          Fishers, IN</p>

<p><b><i>The Twelve-Fingered Boy</i></b> by John Hornor Jacobs Lerner Publishing Group, 2013, 264 pp., \$17.95</p> <p>Fiction ISBN: 978-0-7613-9007-7</p> <p>Shreveport Justice Cannon is doing comfortable time at Casimir Pulaski Juvenile Detention Center in Arkansas, manipulating wards and pushing candy. Everything changes, though, when his new cellmate Jack arrives. He's not quite normal in many ways, most notably in that he has twelve fingers and is hiding a huge secret that will lead him and Shreve on the journey of a lifetime.</p> <p>Jacobs's first YA novel is a fast-paced, twisted narrative told from the perspective of a juvenile delinquent who gains some mysterious powers after a chance encounter. The combination of realism and science fiction makes for an unusual and engaging retelling of a classic "good vs. evil" storyline about humanity and the monsters we hide within ourselves.</p> <p>Olivia Gail Drake Sewanee, TN</p>	<p><b><i>Time between Us</i></b> by Tamara Ireland Stone Hyperion, 2012, 384 pp., \$17.99</p> <p>Fiction/Romance/Time Travel ISBN: 978-1-4321-6840-9</p> <p>Growing up in 1990s suburbia, Anna Greene is a pretty normal teenager. She goes to school, runs cross-country, and works in her family's bookstore. But one day, everything changes when Anna notices a shaggy-haired boy watching her on an early morning run. One moment, he's there; the next moment, he's disappeared into thin air. Anna is perplexed at first, but once she runs into the mysterious boy at school, she quickly realizes that her life will never be the same again, because Bennett Cooper has a secret—a secret that will not only bring them together, but can also tear them apart. In her debut novel, Tamara Ireland Stone weaves together a captivating story that addresses the classic question of whether or not love can truly stand the test of time.</p> <p>Diana Liu Nashville, TN</p>
<p><b><i>To Be Perfectly Honest: A Novel Based on an Untrue Story</i></b> by Sonya Sones Simon &amp; Schuster, 2013, 496 pp., \$17.99</p> <p>Relationships/Verse Novel ISBN: 978-0-689-87604-2</p> <p>A minor character from Sones's <i>One of Those Hideous Books Where the Mother Dies</i> is thrown into the limelight in this novel in verse. Colette, who suffers from a "Daughter-of-a-Famous-Movie-Star-Disorder," is a pathological liar. Colette's summer is ruined when her mother takes an acting role in the middle of nowhere and expects Colette to watch her little brother Will instead of going to France with girlfriends. The summer improves when Colette meets Connor, a young biker dude with orange and black hair, who falls for her instead of using her to get closer to her famous mother.</p> <p>Anyone who knows anything about lying knows that one's reality is affected by the lies, but what happens when a liar meets a liar? What happens when the lying starts getting people hurt, especially those you love? Readers will be smitten by Will—his innocence and lisp—and will learn a thing or two in the process.</p> <p>Joan F. Kaywell University of South Florida</p>	<p><b><i>Trash Can Days</i></b> by Teddy Steinkellner Disney Hyperion Books, 2013, 352 pp., \$16.99</p> <p>Realistic Fiction/Friendship ISBN: 978-1-4231-6632-0</p> <p>Four middle-schoolers narrate <i>Trash Can Days</i>: Jake Schwartz, his sister Hannah, his best friend Danny, and aspiring writer Dorothy Wu. While Hannah concerns herself with being popular, Jake struggles to make friends in middle school. He and Danny drift apart as Danny becomes a basketball star and begins a secret relationship with Hannah. Jake longs to fit in with Danny's popular friends until he finds out being popular means joining a gang.</p> <p>As gang violence increases, the friendship between Jake and Danny strains. Instead of following the crowd, Jake and Dorothy begin a writing club and learn they can be cool just by being themselves. The multi-narrator format of <i>Trash Can Days</i> demonstrates how each child deals with his or her own issues, but some of the topics and language might be too intense for the younger readers to whom this is recommended.</p> <p>Laura Cockman Fishers, IN</p>

<p><b><i>When You Wish upon a Rat</i></b> by Maureen McCarthy          Amulet Books, 2012, 288 pp., \$16.95</p> <p>Fiction/Middle School          ISBN: 978-1-4197-0161-0</p> <p>What would you do if you were given the chance to perfect your life with three wishes? For Ruth Craze, an overworked and misunderstood 11-year-old, changing her life sounds like a fabulous idea. What she really wants in life are more responsible parents, less obnoxious brothers, and true friends. So when Rodney the Rat, a stuffed animal from her favorite aunt, offers her the chance to create the perfect life with three wishes, Ruth jumps at the chance. But as Ruth quickly discovers, wishes don't always work out the way you think they will, and soon she finds herself amidst a whole new set of misadventures. Maureen McCarthy weaves a charming tale that will leave readers asking themselves what they might wish for if they ever come across their own Rodney the Rat.</p> <p>Diana Liu          Nashville, TN</p>	<p><b><i>Who I'm Not</i></b> by Ted Staunton          Orca Books, 2013, 186 pp., \$12.95</p> <p>Realistic Fiction/Mystery          ISBN: 978-1-4598-0434-0</p> <p>Danny does not know who he is. However, he does know that he is not Danny. The real Danny is a boy who went missing three years ago, and who would be about his age if he were still around. Danny is the perfect persona to take on while he thinks of what to do next. He has been passed around from foster family to foster family for his entire life.</p> <p>Now that Harley, his "guardian," is dead, he has no one and nothing. All he has are the tricks of the con artist's trade that Harley taught him, so he becomes Danny. While he is Danny, he finds a dysfunctional but loving family, a suspicious cop who does not buy his story, and a girl who he thinks is his lucky charm. Can he convince his new "family" and especially the cop that he really is Danny?</p> <p>Amanda Brown          Nashville, TN</p>
<p><b><i>Will &amp; Whit</i></b> by Laura Lee Gullledge          Amulet Books, 2013, 192 pp., \$12.95</p> <p>Graphic Novel / Identity          ISBN: 978-1-4197-0546-5</p> <p>Wilhelmina, known as "Will," has lived with her aunt Ella since the deaths of her parents. She stays busy creating lamps to avoid her fear of the dark and of her past. She cannot avoid the darkness, however, when Hurricane Whitney blows into town and knocks out all power, forcing Will to confront memories of the accident that killed her parents. "Whit" teaches Will that her friends and aunt support her, and Will uses this love to create art that uses light and dark to pay homage to her parents.</p> <p><i>Will &amp; Whit</i> stands out for its use of entirely black-and-white pictures. Light and darkness play important roles, as drawings of Will's shadow reveal feelings she hides. <i>Will &amp; Whit</i> is charming and thought provoking as Will transitions from fear about her tragedy to acceptance.</p> <p>Laura Cockman          Fishers, IN</p>	

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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 alan-review@uconn.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 three members of the editorial review board, unless the length, style, or content makes it inappropriate for publication. Usually, authors should expect to hear the results within eight weeks. Manuscripts are judged for the contribution they make to the field of adolescent literature, clarity and cohesiveness, timeliness, and freshness of approach. Selection also depends on the manuscript's contribution to the overall balance of the journal.

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

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

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

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

<b>FALL ISSUE Deadline:</b>	<b>MARCH 1</b>
<b>WINTER ISSUE Deadline:</b>	<b>JULY 1</b>
<b>SUMMER ISSUE Deadline:</b>	<b>NOVEMBER 1</b>

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## From the Editors

Her curiosity was too much for her. She felt almost as if she could hear the books whispering on the other side of the half-open door. They were promising her a thousand unknown stories, a thousand doors into worlds she had never seen before.

—*Inkheart* (Cornelia Funke, 2003)

**A**s editors of *The ALAN Review*, we strongly believe in the theme for this issue—Reaching Them All, ALAN Has Books for Everyone. In framing the call, we explained 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.

This idea, books for everyone, provides an interesting framework for the articles and columns in this issue. As we have been working to put this issue together, we have been struck by the connections between many of our manuscripts and current issues in the news. The stories in the news about bullying, strong female role models, changes in schools, and complex issues around relationships provide an interesting background for this issue.

Over the past few months, the number of news stories about bullying has risen, and we have watched the parents, schools, football teams, and teens respond to incidences of bullying. Not surprisingly, we

have also seen an increase in young adult literature dealing with issues around bullying. The idea of teens as heroes and role models has also been present in the news stories; features about teen athletes overcoming tremendous odds, teens saving siblings from fires, and teens raising money for terminally ill adolescents have all dominated the national news. In addition to teen heroes, we have also seen teen activists campaigning for gay marriage, for paths to citizenship, and for equal rights. This questioning of society and society’s laws is also playing out in current YAL dystopian texts. These are examples of the “thousand unknown stories” that books can provide for us.

Often those stories are connected with events that occur off the page. YAL, both past and present, provides the stories that whisper to readers, that call to them from that half-open door. “The Look of Classic Young Adult Literature” by Alan Brown and Joan Mitchell, along with several other authors, many of whom are ALAN members, focuses on those young adult authors whose works can now be considered classics. This article is based on a 2012 NCTE panel in which participants joined roundtables that focused on a particular author and his or her relevance to the secondary classroom today.

In “Beyond Sensation: *The Hunger Games* and

Dystopian Critique,” Margaret J. Godbey examines the fascination with this series that has garnered so much attention. She uses reader response to consider why readers are so taken with this series, addressing such themes as the implications of reality television and the representations of gender expectations, and highlights the need for readers to critically examine the novel’s depiction of a future society.

Interestingly, two articles in this issue deal with girls who are especially strong female characters. In Karen Hildebrand’s interview with bestselling author Rae Carlson, we learn of her journey as an author as well as the inspiration for her fantasy novels. Marsha Sprague’s “Girls Who Kill: The Changing Face of YA Warrior Heroines” is a provocative examination of female protagonists from the eighties and today and their changing attitudes toward killing humans in battle.

In “Construction and Depiction of Identity in YA Novels with Digital Communication Technologies,” Koss and Tucker-Raymond discuss how identity and digital communication are evident in much of today’s young adult literature. They closely examine 31 novels for their constructions and depictions of identity.

Young adult novels continue to struggle for widespread acceptance as a body of quality literature. “Text Complexity and “Comparable Literary Merit” in Young Adult Literature” by sj Miller explores the various ways in which these novels meet the demands of text complexity. In addition, Miller argues that these novels should be considered of “comparable literary merit” under the definition and expectation of the College Board.

If you haven’t checked out Shannon Hitchcock’s work, you’ll want to after reading Hinton’s interview with her. In this article, the two explore historical fiction, including Hitchcock’s first novel and her journey into young adult literature.

Educators and parent groups continue to draw attention to the perils of bullying. In their article, “Content Analysis of YAL Related to Bullying,” Jones, Dennis, Torres-OvRick, and Walker draw attention to how this issue is presented in young adult fiction. In “The Portrayal of Bullying in YAL: Characters, Contexts, and Complex Relationships,” Harmon and Henkin continue the discussion by reminding us that this theme has been present since the early years of YA literature—e.g., *The Chocolate War* (1974) and *Blubber* (1974)—and they go on to present a discussion of bullying in current texts.

Bott, Cohen, and Gregory continue the discussion on bullying and frame the idea of institutional responsibilities for bullying in their column, “When Institutions are Liable for Bullying.” Hundley, Bickmore, Bach, and Binford wrap up this issue with a discussion of how English language arts and social studies can use both fiction and nonfiction texts to promote student learning of complex texts.

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# 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/>.

## Fall 2014: Stand Your Ground: Fostering Independent Thought and Action

As we listened to conversations during the ALAN Workshop in Boston, it was clear that we, as educators, possess a passion for adolescents, the books intended for them, and the authors and publishers who make them possible. We recognize the power of story to change lives, grant hope, create resilience, and offer solace. And yet, in the same conversations, too many of us expressed a sense of defeat and isolation, fear and despondence, as we imagined returning to our classrooms a few days following.

We sometimes need to be our own best allies as we fight to teach in ways we know to be good and right and true—and increasingly uncommon in an age of commonality. We need to defend our selection of materials and practices as we **stand our ground** in the face of scripts and censors, standards and accompanying tests. We invite educators to unite around our shared commitment to kids and YA literature to offer evidence-based support for the innovative work we do in our classrooms and libraries, and celebrate the ways in which we encourage our students to think independently and act in good conscience, even when the odds feel daunting. We welcome your stories of battle, loudly fought or quietly conceived, victorious or otherwise.

As always, we also welcome submissions focused on any aspect of young adult literature not directly connected to this theme. All submissions may be sent to [alan-review@uconn.edu](mailto:alan-review@uconn.edu) prior to **March 31, 2014**. Please see page 2 of this issue or the ALAN website (<http://www.alan-ya.org/page/alan-review-author-guidelines>) for submission guidelines.

## Winter 2015: Race Matters: The Presence and Representation of Authors and Characters of Color in YA Literature

By 2019, approximately 49% of students enrolled in US public schools will be Latina/o, Black, Asian/Pacific Island, or American Indian (<http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2011/2011017.pdf>). Our field has been increasingly criticized for not reflecting these demographics in the literature published for its readers. For readers of color, this can result in a disconnect between lived reality and what is described on the page. For readers from the dominant culture, this can result in a limited perception of reality and affirmation of a singular way of knowing, doing, and being. For all readers, exposure to a variety of ethnically unfamiliar literature can encourage critical reading of text and world, recognition of the limitations of depending upon mainstream depictions of people and their experiences, and the building of background knowledge and expansion of worldview.

In this issue, we invite you to share your experiences, challenges, hesitations, and successes in using or promoting young adult literature that features characters and/or authors of color. Invite us into your classrooms, libraries, and school communities to better understand the potential value and necessity of broadening the texts we use to capture the imaginations of all readers.

As always, we also welcome submissions focused on any aspect of young adult literature not directly connected to this theme. All submissions may be sent to [alan-review@uconn.edu](mailto:alan-review@uconn.edu) prior to **July 1, 2014**. Please see page 2 of this issue or the ALAN website (<http://www.alan-ya.org/page/alan-review-author-guidelines>) for submission guidelines.

## The Look of Classic Young Adult Literature

To commemorate the 40th anniversary of ALAN, it seems only appropriate to celebrate the significant contributions of authors who have blazed a trail for the field of young adult literature (YAL) with poignant, raw depictions of the world of adolescents. This trail has evolved over the past 40 years into a multi-lane interstate, crossing borders into current social issues, accelerating to adapt to new technologies, and merging with other genres. While the future of YAL appears limitless, a tribute to these great authors speaks to the unique and powerful attributes that have propelled this field into scholarly debates concerning its relationship to the literary canon, its role in the English classroom, and its struggles against censorship. Before paying tribute to these individual authors' contributions, however, we believe it is important to foreground the ongoing conversation about the place of YAL in secondary schools as we move toward a broader discussion of current and future classics in YAL.

Current scholarly discussions leave little room for doubt concerning the necessity of incorporating YAL into the English curriculum. There is even a sense of urgency that failing to introduce students to YAL may have dire consequences for their future reading habits. As Alan Sitomer (2010) suggests, “[T]eens today are reading almost *in spite of* school, not because of it” (p. ix). Aside from great storytelling, YAL offers a connection to teenagers' lives that many of the classics lack. Susan Groenke explains that YAL has always “featured teenagers, dealing with life on their own terms as best they could” while honoring “teens' lives and their experiences . . . [and showing] teens as capable,

smart, and multidimensional” (Groenke & Scherff, 2010, p. xii). Jeffrey Kaplan (2012) adds, “Despite all the recent social, environmental, and technological changes, young people are still interested, above all, in their own lives” (p. 20).

Young adult literature is written *about* teenagers, *for* teenagers, and within contexts that mirror the world of teenagers. In these texts, they are not asked to identify with Dostoevsky's 19th-century Russian protagonist who is contemplating the murder of a pawnbroker or Hawthorne's adulteress who is shunned by her Puritan community. Instead, they see their lives reflected in the characters, settings, plots, conflicts, and themes, and they find issues nested in familiar contexts that are pertinent to their daily lives: social pressures, bullying, eating disorders, familial strife, and identity crises. Some educators argue that despite its relevance to teenagers' lives, the low quality of young adult literature makes it unworthy of precious classroom time. However, Soter and Connors (2009) contend that current YAL has “the kind of literary merit that canonical literature demonstrates . . . stylistically complex (with) thoughtful social and political commentaries” (p. 66). Furthermore, Hazlett (2012) argues that within the English classroom, the value of YAL surpasses canonical literature due to its developmental appropriateness for teenagers:

[D]evelopmental theorists . . . state that YAL best fits adolescents' maturity and cognitive development. Bluntly summarized, a tenth-grade geometry textbook is obviously unsuitable for an ordinary second-grade student; likewise, much classical literature is similarly difficult for adolescents' comprehension—but unlike elementary educators, secondary teachers expect discernment of the classics. (p. 156)

Because the most outstanding YA novels are both well written *and* accessible to a wide variety of students from various reading levels, the argument for expecting *all* students to engage with Faulkner's or Hawthorne's prose because they are examples of "great" literature becomes less tenable. This is not to say that YAL should supplant "classic" novels in the English classroom, but that YAL's ability to combine high-quality, accessible writing with characters and topics that are relevant to adolescents' lives should make us think more critically about how and when we choose to teach both YAL and the classics. If, as research and classroom experience have demonstrated, YAL engages and motivates adolescents to become lifelong readers, then we cannot, in good conscience, allow it to remain on the sidelines of the English curriculum. As educators, we must value our students as individuals and as readers and be willing to enter *their* worlds by utilizing relevant fiction (and nonfiction) in the classroom as often as possible. As Groenke and Scherff (2010) suggest, "Teenagers' reading habits and their out-of-school lives *must* matter in today's classrooms if we don't want to further students' disengagement with school" (p. 2).

During last year's NCTE roundtable session entitled "Eight Great American Young Adult Novelists"—a session in which preservice and inservice English teachers engage with important topics surrounding great American writers and texts—keynote speakers and roundtable leaders tackled many of the aforementioned issues as they discussed authors who have had a tremendous impact on both young adult literature and adolescent literacy. For the purposes of this article, we asked roundtable leaders to reflect upon the author they chose to discuss with session participants and focus on that author's specific impact on the field of YAL, the appeal of his or her novels to adolescent readers, and the general highlights of the roundtable discussion.

In the forthcoming sections, nine teacher educators—eight from the session "Eight Great American Young Adult Novelists" and one, Joan Kaywell, winner of the 2012 Hipple Service Award, who presented on Robert Lipsyte at a separate NCTE session—will each describe the significant impact of one of their favorite YA novelists. These authors have all communicated to adolescents that their lives *do* matter, weaving stories that capture much more than stereotypical

"teen angst." Their characters are rich and dynamic; the social issues they tackle are complex and messy; but more than anything, these authors do not shy away from depicting the reality of adolescence with its simultaneous beauty and brutality. Ultimately, these authors represent the best of YAL and verify Monseau and Salvner's (2000) claim that today's young adult literature has "come of age and proven (itself) to be literature of quality" (p. ix).

## Robert Lipsyte

By Joan Kaywell, University of South Florida

Some believe that S. E. Hinton's *The Outsiders* is the signature book for young adult literature because Hinton herself was a teenager when she wrote the book. That same year, however, a young journalist in his twenties also published his debut novel, *The Contender*, which went on to become another seminal YA novel. After Cassius Clay beat Sonny Liston and became the heavyweight champion of the world in 1964, Robert Lipsyte became the new boxing reporter for the *New York Times*. Not even a year later, Lipsyte got the idea for *The Contender*, and it was this book that started his professional fiction writing career. In Lipsyte's (2013) own words, "I've always had two writing lives, one as a journalist and one as an author of fiction. I love them both. They complement each other" (para. 1).

Lipsyte was the recipient of the Margaret A. Edwards Award honoring his lifetime contribution in YA literature with 13 YA novels and 8 YA nonfiction to his credit. Lipsyte's journalistic side has fed his imagination with sports stories that bring pleasure to young and old alike. His memoir, *An Accidental Sportswriter*, describes Lipsyte's two professional sides: the journalist who has interviewed some incredible sports stars (e.g., Muhammad Ali, Mickey Mantle, Billie Jean King) and the novelist who has incorporated his knowledge of sports into fiction.

One of the reasons Lipsyte is so popular among teens, especially boys, is that he addresses relevant issues in a style that does not preach, but simply gets them to stop and reflect on their fears, choices, possibilities, and relationships. *The Contender*, for example, encourages teens to think twice about dropping out of school, whereas *Raiders Night* exposes the gritty reality of hazing and steroid use in high school

football. Though most of his YA novels have come out of his experiences as a journalist, his personal life has also infiltrated his novels. Lipsyte admitted that the overweight and bullied protagonist in *One Fat Summer* mirrors his own boyhood, struggling for real friendships while trying to like himself—all of himself.

At the roundtable, we mostly talked about Lipsyte's latest and first middle-level novel *The Twin-*

*ning Project*. I wondered how his professional or personal side influenced the writing of this tale. Had he visited Roswell in order to create this story of twins raised on separate planets who must unite to save the world? Lipsyte himself participated in our discussion and explained that this book originated from his boyhood experience of staring at the stars and wondering if his twin lived elsewhere. If that's the case, I'm sure his twin, a renowned journalist in his own right, is somewhere on

his planet interviewing the likes of Ender and writing about Quidditch.

## Lois Lowry

By Jacqueline Bach, Louisiana State University

Lois Lowry has published over 30 novels and won two Newbery Medals as well as a Margaret A. Edwards Award. Perhaps best known for her novel *The Giver*, Lois Lowry was writing about utopias and dystopias well before the era of *The Hunger Games*. In many of her novels, protagonists find themselves, very often for the first time, confronting the problems of the adult world, fighting to keep their personal freedom, and attempting to save human lives.

In their votes for the top YA novels of the 1990s, Hipple and Maupin's (2001) participants placed *The Giver* at the top of their lists, in part because of Lowry's memorable characters. Characters in her novels must depend on one another, something Lowry identifies in her own reasons for writing: "I try, through writing, to convey my passionate awareness that we

live intertwined on this planet and that our future depends upon our caring more, and doing more, for one another" (2013, para 9). Caring is often accompanied by gifts, both literal and figurative, that run through Lowry's work and make her stories appeal to readers who perhaps still long for magic as a way to escape the challenges of adolescence. These simple gifts emerge suddenly, such as the appearance of the color red in *The Giver* or a handkerchief in *Number the Stars*, and serve as catalysts for protagonists to discover how important their roles can be in their world.

At our NCTE roundtable, we first discussed Lowry's recently published fourth installment in The Giver series, *Son*, which finally brings us back to Jonas and Gabriel after their infamous snowy sled ride to the village with the twinkly lights. The second topic of conversation illustrated how Lowry's works still appeal to students and are taught in diverse school settings. Johnson, Haynes, and Nastasi (2013) capture one reason for the lasting presence of Lowry's novels: "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" (p. 61). And these insights are Lowry's gifts to us.

## Walter Dean Myers

By Jennifer Buehler, Saint Louis University

A legendary figure in the field of young adult literature, Walter Dean Myers has been writing award-winning books for teens for over 40 years. Best known for his street-smart works of contemporary realistic fiction, Myers has also written historical fiction, nonfiction, biography, memoir, short story collections, and novels in verse. His books have been honored with almost every award given in the fields of children's and young adult literature, including five Coretta Scott King Awards, two Newbery Awards, and the first-ever Michael L. Printz Award. A three-time National Book Award finalist, Myers received the Margaret A. Edwards Award for Lifetime Achievement in Young Adult Literature in 1994 and was named the National Ambassador for Young People's Literature in 2012.

Myers is one of those rare authors whose books are both critically acclaimed and highly accessible to teen readers. By writing about characters who struggle with racism, poverty, and the stresses of inner-city life, Myers makes reading relevant and powerful for youth who do not always see their lives reflected in

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literature. His books respect and validate urban teens' life experiences. At the same time, they challenge readers to develop a critical view of our contemporary world and a deeper understanding of culture and history.

Teens who read Myers's books will encounter a broad range of topics, from the Iraq War in *Sunrise over Fallujah* to a modern-day retelling of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* in *Street Love*; from sports and civil rights in *The Greatest: Muhammad Ali* to political philosophy in *All the Right Stuff*. In our roundtable discussion, teachers agreed that the realism in Myers's novels speaks powerfully to African American students in urban schools. However, the issues Myers takes up are equally important for readers of all backgrounds to explore. Readers who say they struggle to "relate" to a story like *Dope Sick*, which features a teen hiding in an abandoned building after fleeing from a drug deal gone wrong, benefit from the perspectives of characters whose lives are different from their own.

One roundtable participant explained how she uses *Monster*, the story of a teenager on trial for murder, to challenge stereotypes about people who are incarcerated and to open up conversations about justice, democracy, and our responsibility to each other as members of a community. Inevitably, books such as this one invite discussion and debate. They provide a space for readers to reflect on different forms of lived experience as well as our common humanity.

## **Mildred D. Taylor**

**By Chris Crowe, Brigham Young University**

Her best-known novel, *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*, earned Mildred D. Taylor the 1977 Newbery Medal and established her as a respected author of historical fiction for young readers. She followed that book with a series of historical novels and novellas that continued the saga of the Logans, a resilient, hard-working, but poor African American family in the Mississippi Delta in the 1930s and '40s. Taylor's stories, based on her own family's history, present African American characters in loving, supportive families who, despite harsh Jim Crow oppression, battle discrimination, poverty, and other obstacles to claim their share of the American dream. Her books are notable because they portray African Americans as courageous survivors to be admired, not as downtrodden victims to be pitied.

In her 1997 ALAN Award acceptance speech, Taylor (1998) reported that she had received criticism from white and African American readers who disliked her use of racist language and/or her portrayal of white and black characters. In her defense, she said,

In the writing of my books I have tried to present not only a history of my family, but the effects of racism, not only to the victims of racism but to the racists themselves. I have recounted events that were painful to write and painful to be read, but I had hoped they brought more understanding. . . . As a parent, I understand not wanting a child to hear painful words, but as a parent I do not understand not wanting a child to learn about a history that is part of America . . . . My stories might not be "politically correct," so there will be some who will be offended, but as we all know, racism is offensive.

Sadly, racism still exists today. As we examined at our roundtable, Taylor's books provide opportunities to discuss racism past and present, and they deserve a place in English classrooms not just because they are examples of effective writing and storytelling, but also because they provide opportunities for students to read authentic accounts of African American life prior to the civil rights movement and to discuss still-relevant issues of social justice and equality.

## **Virginia Euwer Wolff**

**By Kia Jane Richmond, Northern Michigan University**

Virginia Euwer Wolff creates "contemporary realistic novels that engross readers with the struggles of everyday life" (LaTrobe & Hutcherson, 2002, p. 72). In 1988, Wolff published her first young adult novel, *Probably Still Nick Swansen*, an award-winning story of a 16-year-old boy troubled by the death of his sister. She has penned five YA books: *The Mozart Season*, *Make Lemonade*, *Bat 6*, *True Believer*, and *This Full House*. Although she received the Addams Book Award in 1999 and a National Book Award in 2001, Wolff's books are rarely the focus of academic scholarship, as evidenced by the fact that only a few essays focus exclusively on teaching Wolff's work.

One such essay is "'Making It More Real': Book Groups, *Make Lemonade*, and the School Nurse" (Chandler, 1996). NCTE roundtable participants were introduced to this essay, and they discussed Wolff's accessible format (lyrical, open-verse poetry), her successful use of figurative language and character development, and her thoughtful treatment of social issues.

Participants agreed that Wolff's novel, *Make Lemonade*, about a teen babysitter, a single teen mother, and their interdependent relationship makes a fantastic choice for the high school English curriculum.

Participants discussed numerous avenues to encourage students' responses to Wolff's novels, including online discussion forums, art pieces, and photographs (Richmond & Delorey, 2004). Discussion also centered on Wolff's decision not to have the char-

acters in *Make Lemonade* "be any race, any particular ethnicity" and her hope that readers "would have the characters be whatever ethnicity they needed them to be" (as cited in Sutton, 2001, p. 281). Wolff said, "I wanted young girls in Jolly's situation, maybe pregnant or with babies, and maybe going back to school, to be able to say, 'I read two chapters!' In the amount of time they had, with the amount of concentration they could muster, I wanted them to be able to get through the book" (as cited in Sutton, 2001, p. 282).

Additionally, young readers could critique Wolff's description of teen mothers to determine whether or not she stereotypes them, perhaps by utilizing contemporary examples in shows such as MTV's *Teen Mom* series. Further recommendations for students responding to Wolff's novels include writing oral narratives (Juzwik & Sherry, 2012) and other alternatives to typical book reports (Mitchell, 1998). Wolff's accessible style, engaging characters, and social awareness invite students to see themselves and the world around them more clearly.

### **Laurie Halse Anderson**

**By Wendy Glenn, University of Connecticut**

Laurie Halse Anderson's commitment to creating stories that enrich, disquiet, and guide the teens she admires led to her selection as the 2009 recipient of the prestigious Margaret A. Edwards Award. Commit-

tee members describe Anderson's first three novels, *Speak*, *Fever 1793*, and *Catalyst*, as "gripping and exceptionally well-written," noting how Anderson uses "various settings, time periods, and circumstances" to "poignantly reflect the growing and changing realities facing teens" (Glenn, 2009, p. 2). Anderson has published five additional novels, *Prom*, *Twisted*, *Chains*, *Wintergirls*, and *Forge*, along with several titles for younger readers.

Our roundtable conversation centered on two quotations drawn from scholarship on Anderson and her work. We looked first at how she describes teenagers as "rough drafts":

They're always adding details to fit these new personalities. They're putting in new information; they're expanding to fit their larger bodies and their larger sense of self. They cut, they contract, they pull back in when they run up against unexpected pain or harshness; they're always polishing these new versions of themselves, trying to see who will stay in control. (Glenn, 2009, p. 1)

Participants appreciated how Anderson respects the complicated nature of growing up and creates relatable characters in a variety of settings to help readers connect with stories across time and place. Whether we follow Isabel (*Chains*) through Revolutionary America or Melinda (*Speak*) through the halls of a contemporary high school, we find ourselves imagining parallels between their richly described worlds and our own.

With this perspective in mind, participants explored Anderson's thoughts on writing for teens:

Being a teenager usually sucks. It's hard and confusing and few adults have the guts to talk about it honestly. That's my job . . . In my books, characters mess up. They make mistakes. Sometimes they drink. Sometimes they have sex. Sometimes they cut class and are disrespectful to adults. They mess up and then they have to deal with the consequences of messing up—just like in real life. (Glenn, 2009, p. 18)

Participants were intrigued by the way Anderson crafts stories that allow readers to (re)experience their lived realities in a fictional way, creating spaces in which they can explore and wonder and ultimately choose a path that reflects who they want to be and become. When Tyler (*Twisted*) chooses integrity over popularity and Lia (*Wintergirls*) faces the truth about friendship and loyalty, we find models of young people worth emulating.

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## John Green

By Lisa Scherff, Estero High School (Estero, FL)

John Green entered the young adult literature world in 2005 with his debut novel *Looking for Alaska*, which won the prestigious Printz Award. Since then, Green has published several award-winning novels, including *An Abundance of Katherines*, *Paper Towns*, and *The Fault in Our Stars*. He also coauthored *Will Grayson, Will Grayson* with David Levithan. Green's impact on the field is enormous—teen readers love his books, and the ongoing series of videos that he and his brother Hank have been posting on their website Vlogbrothers have expanded his reach to an even wider audience.

Readers love Green's novels because the "characters are real teens who learn, grow, think, and change . . . [and] unabashed realism is what propels Green's works" (Barkdoll & Scherff, 2008, p. 67). Green himself is unapologetic and uncompromising in his desire to capture life in all of its complexity:

Humor and tragedy coexist everywhere. . . . All the sick people I've known were still funny. I wanted to capture the fact that people who are chronically ill or in pain, those people have very difficult lives. It's not a joyous laugh fest, but those people are as alive and human as anyone else and part of being alive is being able to crack jokes. (Carpenter, 2012)

Although Green is referring to his most recent novel, *The Fault in Our Stars*, his quote could apply to almost all of his novels, which is why they appeal to students (and adults).

Our table discussion focused mainly on how to teach Green's novels and not get in trouble with the censors. We only wish administrators and parents loved his novels as much as we do and would recognize their value. As Green has suggested:

Telling a story that includes drinking, drug use, and sexuality can be a platform for discussion, but I really hope that the most interesting questions in my book are not, "Should you get drunk and let your friend drive drunk to her death?" (Of course you shouldn't.) To me, the significance of the drinking and the drugs is that these kids are experiencing self-destructive impulses (as so many teenagers do) and are trying to find ways to respond to those impulses. This weird desire that a lot of us have as teenagers—to hurt ourselves without killing ourselves—is one of the ways I think we cope with the unfairness of suffering. (Barkdoll & Scherff, 2008, p. 70)

## Chris Crutcher

By Alan Brown, Wake Forest University

I still remember my first reading of *Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes* (1993) by Chris Crutcher and my first encounter with the story's protagonist, Eric Calhoun, who, in so many ways, reminded me of myself as a teenager:

In truth, the only reason I don't allow people up close and personal with my emotional self is that I hate to be embarrassed. I can't afford it. I spent *years* being embarrassed because I was fat and clumsy and afraid. I wanted to be tough like Sarah Byrnes, to stand straight and tall . . . But I was paralyzed, so I developed this pretty credible comedy act—I'm the I-Don't-Care-Kid. . . . But I'm not stupid; I believe there is more important shit to be dealt with [in life]. (p. 77)

Chris Crutcher is a gifted storyteller, someone who tells real stories about real teenagers. These stories are the result of years of working as a child and family therapist specializing in abuse and neglect, a time during which Crutcher witnessed the raw, emotional, and disheartening side of children's lives. In telling these stories, he teaches teens about themselves, their peers, and the world around them, a world that can be as cruel as it is compassionate. Through these stories, teens consider what it means to face their fears, overcome obstacles, and seek a light in the proverbial darkness.

Crutcher's most important novels include *Deadline*, *Whale Talk*, *Ironman*, *Chinese Handcuffs*, *Running Loose*, and his most recent novel, *Period 8*, many of which are included on banned book lists across the country due to challenges based on language and content. As a result, Crutcher has become a leading voice in the fight against censorship by promoting what NCTE has titled "students' right to read." For his outstanding contributions to YAL and his continued efforts to battle censorship, Crutcher was awarded NCTE's National Intellectual Freedom Award. His numerous other awards include the ALAN Award and ALA's Margaret A. Edwards Lifetime Achievement Award.

In a recent issue of *English Journal*, Crutcher talked about how writing influenced his adolescence and the impact great teaching can have on a teenager's future: "A good writer and a good teacher just do their work in a different place. After all, what is education if you don't feel better about yourself in the world? If

you want to save lives as a teacher, empower kids” (Eisenbach & Kaywell, 2013, p. 78). As Joan Kaywell discussed with attendees at our roundtable, the idea of student empowerment can provide a powerful narrative in teaching literature, particularly for students who need help dealing with the “more important shit” (Crutcher, 1993, p. 77) of their everyday lives.

## Robert Cormier

By Steve Bickmore, Louisiana State University

I have recommended Robert Cormier’s books since I began teaching in the late 1970s. His books were available for students’ self-selected reading and litera-

ture circles. I am especially fond of *I Am the Cheese*, and I have passed it on to numerous students and other teachers. With this NCTE roundtable in mind, I decided to use Cormier’s novels as touchstone texts for my English methods class and have students collaborate to practice constructing small activities, lessons plans, and completed units based on a shared reading.

The students picked one of seven Cormier novels. Imagine my surprise

when students accused me of selecting old, dated, and possibly irrelevant works from a dead white guy for possible use in their contemporary classrooms. For me, Cormier was instrumental in pioneering dark, realistic fiction for adolescents with open, unconventional endings. Aside from his influence in the early years of realistic young adult literature, there are other issues to consider. Teachers and librarians have championed his books, especially *The Chocolate War*, in the battle against censorship. His characters are complex and well crafted; they frequently confront mental and physical abuse as they struggle with what is “real” in their environment. His themes of betrayal, government conspiracy, and terrorism seem current today. Nevertheless, there I was, standing accused of suggesting antiquated fiction. Students were encouraging

me to be relevant with my choices, just as I normally am in my young adult literature and English methods courses. Ultimately, students agreed that the novels were teachable, but old.

This dilemma was the topic of our roundtable discussion. We discussed Cormier and his quality contributions. But, I admit, the majority of the participants were closer to my age than the ages of my preservice teachers or their future students. We concluded that the study of young adult literature has arrived at an era of maturity. We have writers, like Cormier, Hinton, Zindel, Kerr, Blume, and others, who are now examples of classic authors with an established history and texts that have stood the test of time—we have a canon. Perhaps the pertinent question is: will these authors be considered too old by the new generation of English educators as they select texts? In other words, will they be . . . well, too canonical?

## Conclusion

The group of YA novelists depicted here are all prolific, award-winning authors who have significantly impacted the field of YAL as foundation builders, risk takers, and boundary pushers. Due to their contributions and those of many other YA authors, critics and censors have been unable to dissuade the growing number of teachers, teacher educators, and librarians who have embraced the opportunity to provide great books for teens that reflect their own lives. And yet, it is Steve Bickmore’s final question about whether classic YA novels might someday become too canonical for new generations of readers that challenges us and advances the conversation about the future of YAL. A central attribute of YAL is its capacity to adapt to the ever-changing world of adolescents. While the struggles and themes of adolescence (e.g., discovering one’s identity, familial conflicts, social pressures) may persist, the contexts in which teens deal with these issues are always changing—and thus YAL changes with them. Jeffrey Kaplan (2012) suggests that “young adult literature changes as quickly as teens do themselves” (p. 20). As educators, we must discern how to keep pace with current trends and changes in YAL while still retaining quality titles that remain timeless.

As we reflect on an adolescent literature course we had with Dr. Joe Milner at the beginning of our master’s program at Wake Forest University many

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years ago, we fondly recall some of the now canonical YA novels we read during that course: *The Pigman* by Paul Zindel; *Maniac Magee* by Jerry Spinelli; *Nothing But the Truth* by Avi; *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* by Mildred D. Taylor; *Out of the Dust* by Karen Hesse; and *The Giver* by Lois Lowry. As we think back on these stories, we vividly recall the many characters we came to know and love: Lorraine, Jeffrey, Phillip, Cassie, Billie Jo, and Jonas. These characters might

not be widely known to everyone, but that is the beauty of reading; there are always more characters to meet.

As we compare these characters to those of other classic American novelists, authors such as Harper Lee, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Alice Walker, J. D. Salinger, and John Steinbeck, we realize that they, too, remain front and center through the strength of their characters: Scout, Gatsby, Celie, Holden, and Lennie. While

**Table 1.** Classic characters from classic YAL

Classic Characters	YA Novel	Author
Junior	<i>The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian</i>	Alexie, Sherman
Melinda	<i>Speak</i>	Anderson, Laurie Halse
Matilda	<i>Fever 1793</i>	Anderson, Laurie Halse
Octavian	<i>The Astonishing Life of Octavian Nothing, Traitor to the Nation</i>	Anderson, M. T.
Phillip	<i>Nothing but the Truth</i>	Avi
Weetzie	<i>Dangerous Angels: The Weetzie Bat Books</i>	Block, Francesca Lia
Margaret	<i>Are you There, God? It's Me, Margaret</i>	Blume, Judy
Tyrell	<i>Tyrell</i>	Booth, Coe
Charlie, Patrick	<i>The Perks of Being a Wallflower</i>	Chbosky, Stephen
Adam	<i>I Am the Cheese</i>	Cormier, Robert
Jerry, Archie	<i>The Chocolate War</i>	Cormier, Robert
Salamanca	<i>Walk Two Moons</i>	Creech, Sharon
T.J.	<i>Whale Talk</i>	Crutcher, Chris
Sarah, Eric	<i>Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes</i>	Crutcher, Chris
Miguel	<i>We Were Here</i>	de la Peña, Matt
Matt	<i>The House of Scorpion</i>	Farmer, Nancy
Annie, Liza	<i>Annie on My Mind</i>	Garden, Nancy
Alaska, Miles	<i>Looking for Alaska</i>	Green, John
Hazel, Augustus	<i>The Fault in Our Stars</i>	Green, John
Patty	<i>Summer of My German Soldier</i>	Greene, Bette
Billie Jo	<i>Out of the Dust</i>	Hesse, Karen
Ponyboy, Dallas	<i>The Outsiders</i>	Hinton, S. E.
Gene, Finny	<i>A Separate Peace</i>	Knowles, John
Alfred	<i>The Contender</i>	Lipsyte, Robert
Jonas	<i>The Giver</i>	Lowry, Lois
Steve	<i>Monster</i>	Myers, Walter Dean
Jamal	<i>Scorpions</i>	Myers, Walter Dean
Cat	<i>Shine</i>	Myracle, Lauren
Ann	<i>Z for Zachariah</i>	O'Brien, Robert
Brian	<i>Hatchet</i>	Paulsen, Gary
John	<i>Nightjohn</i>	Paulsen, Gary
Stanley	<i>Holes</i>	Sachar, Louis
Jeffrey	<i>Maniac Magee</i>	Spinelli, Jerry
Cassie	<i>Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry</i>	Taylor, Mildred D.
LaVaughn	<i>Make Lemonade</i>	Wolff, Virginia Euwer
Lorraine	<i>Pigman</i>	Zindel, Paul

the latter list of character names may be more recognizable to the current generation of adults, it does not necessarily make them better, just older, or perhaps just more accepted in popular culture and society. At the same time, many adults may not know the names of the characters our students will remember most vividly: T.J. (Chris Crutcher), Steve (Walter Dean Myers), Alaska (John Green), and Melinda (Laurie Halse Anderson). We hope someday they will, though, because, like many sports Halls of Fame who induct new members each year, there is always room in the canon for future classics. And as we reconsider the look of classic literature, we would love to see Scout mingle with Cassie, Holden with Alaska, and T.J. with Jeffrey. More important, we believe our students would benefit from seeing these enduring characters interact in the English classroom.

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## Beyond Sensation:

*The Hunger Games* and Dystopian Critique

Hey, hey, give 'em what they want  
If lust and hate is the candy  
If blood and love tastes so sweet  
Then we give 'em what they want  
Hey, hey, give 'em what they want  
So their eyes are growing hazy  
'Cause they wanna turn it on  
So their minds are soft and lazy, well  
Hey, hey, give 'em what they want  
From "Candy Everybody Wants"  
by Drew and Merchant (1992)

**T**he Hunger Games trilogy and high-grossing film are popular culture phenomena.<sup>1</sup> But what drives readers' enthusiasm for the series? As a work of dystopian literature, reading the Hunger Games trilogy should be a disturbing experience. Ryan (2010) writes:

[I]f there is one truth that can be taken away from the Hunger Games [trilogy] it is this: we, the reader, tuned in and boosted its rating. Even while Katniss rails against the Games as disgusting and barbaric, we the readers turn the pages in order to watch them. We become the citizens in the Capitol, glued to the television, ensuring there will be another Game the following year. (p.111)

Grossman (2009) writes, "One of the paradoxes of the book is that it condemns the action in the arena while also inviting us to enjoy it, sting by sting. Despite ourselves, we do" (para. 5). As Ryan and Grossman point out, there is a valuable, dystopian experience within the series; however, popular responses to the Hunger Games suggest that many readers do not interrogate the text or read self-reflectively. Entranced by the hor-

ror of the violent premise and the sensational speed of the narrative, readers overlook elements of the text that fuel the series' appeal and weaken the text's dystopian purpose.

Reader-response theory considers the individual and personal transactions that occur silently between reader and text. As Rosenblatt (1938/1995) points out, "The reading of a particular work at a particular moment by a particular reader will be a highly complex process" (p. 75). This transaction, arising as it does from a silent interaction with the text, is difficult to collect or examine. However, literary phenomena such as the Hunger Games trilogy produce visible fan responses that are available for interpretation. In this article, I suggest that aspects of the text that fuel its popularity, the dynamics of reality television, the interruptions and silences of the first-person narrator, and the portrayal of gender also create a text that evokes that which it attempts to condemn. As a result, the trilogy invites a passive response from viewers and does not elicit the active social critique that is the hallmark of dystopian literature. Readers do not seem to ask *why* they take such pleasure in a story about children murdering children for televised entertainment. They do not question the similarities between American entertainment culture and the culture of Panem, and they do not seek ways to change their society.

In *Utopian and Dystopian Writing for Children and Young Adults* (2003), Hintz and Ostry outline the long, rich history of utopian and dystopian literature and note its attraction to readers of all ages. Utopian and dystopian fiction, they argue, asks readers to

imagine other worlds and compare them to their own. In his foreword to this book, Zipes writes, “we are in need of this literature, especially for young readers, to provide hope for a different and more humane world” (p. ix). In “Dystopian Novels: What Imagined Futures Tell Young Readers about the Present and Future,” Hill (2012) writes, “By witnessing futuristic societies no one would want to inhabit, adolescent readers can imagine a future they desire, envisioning a present that can begin to build toward that future” (p.

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**Fan responses to the Hunger Games series suggest that it *is* merely entertainment.**

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102). Thus, the dystopian novel “mingles well with the coming-of-age novel, which features a loss of innocence” (Hintz & Ostry, 2003, p. 9) and is a particularly appropriate form for young adult literature. And yet, adult and young adult dystopias differ. Booker (2013) affirms that the foundational impulse of dystopian fiction is “a critique of existing social conditions or political systems” (p. 101). Dystopian literature and film “should encourage the reader or viewer to think critically about it, then transfer this critical thinking to his or her own world” (p. 5). But, as Sambell (2003) observes, true dystopias contain inherent problems for authors of children’s and young adult literature. Dystopias for younger audiences address problems of society without the “protagonist’s final defeat and failure” that is so “absolutely crucial to the admonitory impulse of the classic adult dystopia” (Sambell, p. 165). There is reluctance to write or publish dystopian fictions that might overwhelm young readers ill-equipped to question, much less challenge, the ideologies and institutions in which they and their families participate. As Cadden (2012) explains in “All Is Well: The Epilogue in Children’s Fantasy Fiction,” hope and reassurance remain essential elements of children’s fantasy fiction.

Collins seems to recognize the dilemma facing authors of dystopian young adult literature. At the end of *Mockingjay*, Katniss reflects on what she will tell her (curiously) unnamed children. She asks, “How can I tell them about that world without frightening them to death?” (p. 389). This question encapsulates why the Hunger Games series is problematic as a dystopian text: it tells the story of a society that uses murder as

televised entertainment and a political weapon *without* “frightening them [readers] to death.”

## **Intention and Response**

In numerous interviews, Collins speaks of her hope that the books will stimulate social critique and combat audience passivity. In an interview with Deborah Hopkinson (2009), Collins states “I hope they [the books] encourage debate and questions. Katniss is in a position where she has to question everything she sees. And like Katniss herself, young readers are coming of age politically.” In an interview with James Blasingame (2009), Collins states: “The sociopolitical overtones of *The Hunger Games* [series] were very intentionally created to characterize current and past world events, including the use of hunger as a weapon to control populations” (p. 726). When asked what she hopes readers will come away with after reading the book, Collins answered that she hopes they will ask “questions about how elements of the book might be relevant in their own lives. And, if they’re disturbing, what they might do about them” (“Interview,” n.d., para. 9).

However, fans of the series do not seem to have responded with thoughtful reflections or insightful connections between the text and the social and political realities of the twenty-first century. Instead, fan responses to the Hunger Games series suggest that it *is* merely entertainment: the series has no more resonance with readers than a video game or a reality television show. Readers draw attention to how quickly they can read the books. “I raced through all three books in one weekend” says Rosemary Shearer (Minzesheimer, 2012, p. 2). Rafe Singer enjoyed the “exciting pace” (Minzesheimer, 2012, p. 2). Stephanie Meyer, author of the *Twilight* series, wrote “I was so obsessed with this book” (*Hunger Games* website), and Stephen King describes them as “a jarring speed-*rap*” (2008, para. 4). The books are (to many) pleasures to be consumed rapidly without serious reflection.

In response to the text, young fans dress up as “gamemakers” and enact scenes from *The Hunger Games* by hunting one another with Nerf weapons. When interviewed by *USA Today*, readers dismissed concerns about the violent premise of the books. One young person states: “I’m 18. I’ve played video games

more violent than *The Hunger Games*. I've seen a lot of war coverage on TV" (Minzesheimer, 2012, p. 2). Another fan states: "The violence is pretty exciting" (Minzesheimer, 2012, p. 2). In an effort to connect literacy and physical activity, educators at Southside Middle School in Florence, South Carolina, organized a "Hunger Games" field day. Their physical education teacher, dressed as Effie Trinket, had student "tributes" move between activities such as "tracker-jacker" tag and "power struggle tug of war" (Meder, 2013, p. 6A). Clearly, this type of role-playing is done in the name of fun—young people show enthusiasm for novels and films by dressing up as they did for Harry Potter and Star Wars.

However, when considering texts such as the Hunger Games books, this impulse is not without implications. Muller (2012) observes in "Virtually Real: Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games* Trilogy" that the "entertainment value of the virtual modes in and of the text, with their capacity to diminish moral perspective, has clearly appealed to young readers" (p. 62). She argues that the books' examination of the dangers of virtual entertainment risks "perpetuating their entertainment value" (p. 51). The desire to act out scenes of slavery, oppression, and murder, as performed for a privileged television audience, suggests that young readers do not recognize the dystopian aspect of the series or their society's complicity in perpetuating a culture of consumption, violence, and social injustice.

Fan responses to the book and film replicate the desire for commodity acquisition similar to the citizens of the Capitol. Citizens of the Capitol, watching the tribute interviews, applaud the numerous fashion makeovers integral to the competition and appropriate Katniss's Mockingjay pin as a fashion accessory. *People* magazine (All about *The Hunger Games*, 2012), mirroring Caesar Flickerman, encourages readers to get to "know" the actors in a collector's edition featuring interviews and a glossy cover photo of actress Jennifer Lawrence as Katniss. A breathless fashion layout encourages fans to "Get Katniss' Look: Her functional style works as well on the weekend as it does in the games" (pp. 76–78). Exploitation and trauma have become a fashion choice. A nail polish advertisement for Capitol Colors asks, "What will you be wearing to the opening ceremonies?"<sup>2</sup> Readers who imagine dressing like Katniss or painting their nails in the "colors"

of the enslaved and starving districts of Panem have not shifted their gaze from the book and onto themselves or their society. They do not recognize that the Capitol mirrors the privilege and passivity of American culture; they do not recognize that they identify with the population that engineers and watches, but not the one that fights in the Hunger Games.

Such responses from young people may simply demonstrate their lack of critical reading skills and lack of life experi-

ence. However, professional reviewers also avoid engaging critically with the violent content of the novels or reading them critically as a dystopian text. Younger readers may not register the violence as "real," but adult reviewers who do recognize the violent content minimize it; they reassure readers that,

although the violence is graphic and prevalent, it is safe. King (2008), Grossman (2009), and Miller (2010) suggest that violence in the Hunger Games is secondary and that the numerous, and ultimately repetitive, acts of murder are not the primary focus of the novels. King, in fact, observes that the "shoot-it-if-it-moves" quality of the books offers the pleasures of a video game (2008, para. 3). His short, practical review suggests that, like a video game, the escalating violence is ultimately meaningless.

The book's "efficiency," that is, the absence of significant reflection, is also accompanied by "displays of authorial laziness" (para. 4). By the time readers accompany Katniss and Squad 451's block-by-block attack on the Capitol in *Mockingjay*, they, like Katniss, are desensitized to the escalating attacks reminiscent of videogame levels. In her essay "Fresh Hell," Miller (2010) also notes uneven aspects of the text and the absence of a clear dystopian project. The book, she writes, does not "even attempt to abide by the strictures of science fiction" (para. 13). *The Hunger Games*, she writes, "could be taken as an indictment of reality TV, but only someone insensitive to the emotional tenor of the story could regard social criticism as the real point of Collins's novel." Miller labels the text a work of "fable or myth" (para. 8). Similarly,

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**They do not recognize that they identify with the population that engineers and watches, but not the one that fights in the Hunger Games.**

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Grossman (2009) writes that the violence in the book, “rather than being repellent . . . is strangely hypnotic. It’s fairy-tale violence, Brothers Grimm violence—not a cheap thrill but a symbol of something deeper” (para. 5).

Grossman’s and Miller’s reading of *The Hunger Games* series as a fairy tale minimizes its violent content and the dystopian admonitory impulse. (Note, for instance, Grossman’s use of the word “sting” to describe murder in *The Hunger Games*.) Unlike dystopian literature, traditional folk- and fairy tales are not critical of their culture or politically subversive. In-

deed, one of the functions of the fairy tale is to uphold traditional gender roles and power structures. The power of the aristocracy is always reasserted. Beauty’s value is her appearance and her obedience to her father and husband. Marriage is Cinderella’s only goal, and the upstart maid in “The Goose Girl” is torn

to pieces for stepping beyond her social class. Zipes (2006) argues that folktales and fairy tales maintain dominant institutions of power and oppressive class structures.

Folktales and fairy tales have always been dependent on customs, rituals, and values in the particular socialization process of a social system. They have always symbolically depicted the nature of power relationships within a given society. Thus, they are strong indicators of the level of civilization, that is, the essential quality of a culture and social order. (p. 79)

If the *Hunger Games* trilogy constitutes a fairy tale, then it is worthwhile to consider what it reveals about our cultures’ values as well as our “attitude toward the young and [our] cultural construction of youth” (Clark & Higonnet, 1999, p. 5).

Comparing the text to a video game explains why readers minimize the violence in the series. Connecting the work to fairy tales reveals its support of commodity acquisition and conventional gender roles. But the strongest explanation for the absence of dystopian reflection in readers may be found in the series’ use of reality television. Viewers of reality television know that although the emotions of characters appear

“real,” they are staged. Ellis (2009) writes that this awareness is central to the appeal of reality TV:

Reality TV is based on a paradox. Its situations are unreal or artificial, yet reality is what we seek from them: the reality of the individuals involved. Viewers are keenly engaged in the process of decoding the “real” people, of judging the sincerity of what they are putting on display. They are required to perform “naturally,” to give the kind of performance of self for a viewership that was created in the early years of TV. But it has to be a performance of sincerity itself since it will be judged harshly if it seems to be evasive, duplicitous, or scheming. (pp. 111–112)

Participants on television shows seem to express real feelings and thoughts, but they are always aware of their performance; viewers cannot know what they are truly thinking or feeling. What is genuine and what is performance? In the *Hunger Games* books, this question alters the relationship between the reader and Katniss by replicating the relationship between viewer and reality television character. As a result, the performative nature of reality television becomes both the subject of the *Hunger Games* dystopian critique *and* the reason why readers do not think critically about their society—the emotional distance between reader and text encourages readers to consume the books’ content as sensation without self-reflection. Readers of the *Hunger Games* *watch* the novel and avoid the transactional interrogation of dystopian fiction. Like Capitol viewers, readers sit back at a distance and enjoy the story because the fast pace of the plot offers them the pleasures of reality television: commodity acquisition, sensational violence, and passive voyeurism: it’s just a story—it has nothing to do with them.

## Interruption and Silence

This is where adult readers, educators, and literary critics can intervene. In order for the dystopian critique to be successful, certain aspects of the text must be recognized and resisted. The first element is the use of the first-person narrator. The first-person narrator is a popular device in children’s and young adult literature because it creates a sense of immediacy and connection. However, Katniss, always aware of her onscreen presence and ever-present surveillance, avoids introspection. As a result, the narrative interrupts moments when the character might begin to explore her emotions or think about the situations she encounters. Like a television commercial interrupting

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### Readers of the *Hunger Games* watch the novel and avoid the transactional interrogation of dystopian fiction.

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the climax of a movie or a show, Collins diverts readers' attention away from uncomfortable emotions and difficult questions.

These are moments readers should focus on—what Katniss is not saying, and why. Following tribute selection in *The Hunger Games*, for instance, Katniss is distraught about leaving her home and her family; however, the allure of material comfort overwhelms her emotional response. Instead of conveying the brutality of the situation or her feelings of loss, Collins draws readers' attention to sheets "made of soft, silky fabric. A thick fluffy comforter gives immediate warmth" (p. 54). Instead of considering her predicament or the government responsible for such injustice, Katniss is "too tired or too numb to cry. The only thing I feel is a desire to be somewhere else. So I let the train rock me to oblivion" (p. 54).

This pattern of interruption and silence continues in *Catching Fire*. Returning for her bouquet during the Victory Tour to District 11, she accidentally witnesses the execution of the old man who whistled Rue's song. Katniss steps back in to see the Peacekeepers "Forcing him to his knees before the crowd. And putting a bullet through his head" (p. 62). The shooting provides a shocking ending to Chapter 4, but as Chapter 5 opens, Katniss is whisked away. In response to Effie's questions, Katniss is silent. Peeta redirects the conversation by replying, "An old truck backfired," and shifts the conversation to complaints about his treatment and the real purpose for their Victory Tour: convincing the Districts that they are not rebels, just two kids in love (p. 63).

Readers know Katniss is upset by the shooting because she sits down on an inferior piece of furniture: "[A]ll I've done today is get three people killed, and now everyone in the square will be punished. I feel so sick that I have to sit down on a couch, despite the exposed springs and stuffing" (Collins, 2009, p. 65). Despite the shock, she remains aware of material culture. Readers know Katniss is vaguely aware of the poverty in District 11, but "Everything is happening too fast for [her] to process it" (p. 68). This pattern of interruption and silence creates the fast-paced plot, but it also distracts and diverts the reader: "'Come on. We've got a dinner to attend,' says Haymitch" (p. 68). In order to resist the pace of the text, readers must recognize that opportunities for self-reflection or connection to current culture are quickly undermined

by dinner parties and fantasy makeovers. Just as television shifts from reports of tragedy to commercials advertising face cream or automobiles, questions about power, social justice, and the complicity of the entertainment culture in sustaining oppressive policies are pushed aside by a new dress, new food, and the excitement of sudden celebrity.

Throughout the series, Katniss does not understand the situations she finds herself in and cannot anticipate the results of her actions. Her limited understanding of the political environment makes her dependent on others for information and explanation, but the first-person narration limits the voice of adult characters who might educate Katniss and the reader. Therefore, readers must work to see what she cannot. A striking example of Katniss's inability to observe and decode the world around her occurs at the dinner party in *Catching Fire*. Her mockingjay pin, now "a new fashion sensation" among the Capitol residents, appears on the unique gold watch of the new Head Gamemaker, Plutarch Heavensbee.

Plutarch has run his thumb across the crystal face of the watch and for just a moment an image appears, glowing as if lit by candlelight. It's another mockingjay. Exactly like the pin on my dress. Only this one disappears. He snaps the watch closed.

"That's very pretty," I say.

"Oh, it's more than pretty. It's one of a kind," he says. (pp. 82–83)

Alert readers may recognize that Plutarch is not what he appears to be, but Katniss does not figure out until the denouement that Plutarch is part of the rebellion. Following her rescue, Haymitch admonishes Katniss for her political naïveté, "'So it's you and a syringe against the Capitol? See, this is why no one lets you make the plans.' I stare at him uncomprehendingly" (p. 384). The first-person narrative glides past serious interrogations of power and resistance, so, understandably, many fans remain at the surface, engaging in games of tug-of-war, dress up, or reenactments with Nerf guns.

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**The first-person narration limits the voice of adult characters who might educate Katniss and the reader.**

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## Gender and Power

The second element readers need to attend to is the performance of gender. Many readers find Katniss “incredibly brave” (Minzesheimer, 2012, p. D1). Katniss’s independent spirit and hunting prowess are viewed as evidence of a new, powerful female character, but this reading, as appealing as it is, overlooks the many ways the books reinforce conservative gender codes.

<sup>3</sup> Understanding Katniss’s performance of gender is important because, as Vallone (1999) writes, “Arguably, it is in adolescence that girls need feminism most” (p. 197). Rubinstein-Avila (2007) observes that

female characters in young adult literature “strive to meet the expectations of a socially conservative and sexist patriarchy” (p. 363). Representations of girls and women in the Hunger Games reinforce the idea that becoming an object of desire and finding fulfillment in a heterosexual

relationship is a primary goal for female characters in young adult literature:

[O]ne way to contain the girl who has learned to imagine her future as a healthy, strong, well-educated professional is to teach her that romance is at the core of life; that without erotic satisfaction—without eliciting male desire—she will be forever unfulfilled. The man, rather than the self, becomes the focus of her interest in the strong and active years when she might be developing her own potential. (Mitchell, 1995, p.188)

Katniss may be tough, she may be feisty, but her survival hinges on her ability to become an object of desire; thus, she evokes a fantasy of female power that does not disturb conventional conceptions of gendered behavior for teenage girls. Throughout the series, Katniss is nurturing, beautiful, submissive to adult male authority, and, above all, chaste.

The numerous makeovers in each book reinforce and validate the importance of physical beauty for female identity. Despite her token resistance, her new-found beauty brings Katniss attention and pleasure:

The creature standing before me in the full-length mirror has come from another world. Where skin shimmers and eyes flash and apparently they make their clothes from jewels. Because my dress, oh, my dress is entirely covered

in reflective precious gems, red and yellow and white with bits of blue that accent the tips of the flame design. The slightest movement gives the impression I am engulfed in tongues of fire.

I am not pretty. I am not beautiful. I am as radiant as the sun. (p. 128)

The transformational makeovers take Katniss beyond “pretty” or “beautiful” to an appearance that is transcendent, yet, her appearance is out of her control. She does not own her image or her body, and she is incapable of wielding either. Her stylist, Cinna, uses fashion to express political resistance<sup>4</sup>; Haymitch coaches her actions and modifies her reactions; Katniss remains unaware. Even after she becomes the Mockingjay, the symbol of the rebellion, Katniss resists authority or leadership. She remains an image; any power she may have is an act.

What they want is for me to truly take on the role they designed for me. The symbol of the revolution. The Mockingjay. . . . I must now become the actual leader, the face, the voice, the embodiment of the revolution. . . . I won’t have to do it alone. They have a whole team of people to make me over, dress me, write my speeches, orchestrate my appearances—as if that doesn’t sound horribly familiar—and all I have to do is play my part. (Collins, 2010, p. 11)

In order to see how Katniss conforms to stereotype, it might be helpful for readers to consider how different the story would be if Katniss was not beautiful. What if Peeta and Gale did not desire her? What if Katniss embraced her leadership role and was an active member of the rebellion? Instead, her nurturing impulse, her pleasure in each makeover, and her resistance to leadership reinforces conventional gendered behavior for girls: be attractive, nurture others, keep quiet, and let the boys lead.

If, as Seelinger Trites asserts in *Disturbing the Universe: Power and Repression in Adolescent Literature* (2000), “Young adult novels are about power” (p. 3), then the Hunger Games teaches readers that Katniss’s strengths are her capacity to love and her ability to perform love for an audience.<sup>5</sup> Katniss nurtures virtually every character she encounters: Prim, Rue, Peeta, Haymitch, her allies, and, of course, her own mother. Her strengths reflect a modern feminism that values “[s]uch virtues as connectedness, caring, and personal accountability” (Clark, Kulkin, & Clancy, 1999, p. 73).

The limits Collins places on Katniss’s political



awareness and capacity for leadership, however, reduce her performance of gender to a tradition in which women resist engaging in the public sphere. At the Reaping, she appears to emulate masculine heroes who step forward to fight for their people or defend their nation, but Katniss does not step forward for District 12. It is Prim's "untucked blouse forming a duck-tail" (p. 22) that triggers her instinctive response to defend her "child." In contrast, Peeta, who as a baker and artist seems to bend or transgress traditional gender roles and is valued for his capacity to love and his acts of selflessness, understands the political system they inhabit and attempts to subvert it. Throughout the series, Peeta is able to work the crowd and, until he is tortured, resist the Capitol. The night before their first Hunger Game he articulates his desire to maintain his identity, "I want to die as myself" (Collins, 2008, p. 141).

Interrogating Katniss's gendered silence may be one of the most productive ways for readers to resist the sensation of the text. Gale and Peeta describe the oppression of Panem and voice their disgust and hatred for the Capitol. Katniss may think angry thoughts, but she has been effectively silenced: "I learned to hold my tongue and to turn my features into an indifferent mask. . . . I avoid discussing tricky topics" (Collins, 2008, p. 6). Katniss listens as Gale "rant[s] about how the tesserae are just another tool to cause misery in our district. A way to plant hatred between the starving workers of the Seam and those who can generally count on supper and thereby ensure we will never trust one another" (p. 14).

Readers should ask why acts of resistance are rarely of Katniss's making. Katniss's dramatic gamble that the gamemakers will prevent their double suicide is a reaction to Peeta's understanding of how the games are used for political purpose—"We both know they have to have a victor" (pp. 343–344)—and his decision to sacrifice himself for Katniss by opening the tourniquet on his leg. In *Catching Fire*, aghast at the excess and gluttony of the Capitol, she silently remembers the starving children in District 12. Peeta, however, verbalizes his revulsion and translates it into thoughts of rebellion:

"Maybe we were wrong, Katniss."

"About what?" I ask.

"About trying to subdue things in the districts" (p. 81).

But the most significant moment of silence occurs in *Mockingjay* when Gale and Beetee devise a bomb that will kill civilians and those who aid the wounded.

"That seems to be crossing some kind of line," I say. "So anything goes?" They both stare at me—Beetee with doubt, Gale with hostility. "I guess there isn't a rule book for what might be unacceptable to do to another human being."

"Sure there is. Beetee and I have been following the same rule book President Snow used when he hijacked Peeta," says Gale.

Cruel, but to the point. I leave without further comment. I feel if I don't get outside immediately, I'll just go ballistic. (p. 185)

Despite their difference of opinion about the ethics of warfare, Katniss does not challenge the men or attempt to prevent their work. Readers may decide that her response, "Cruel, but to the point," legitimizes the plan. Her silence at this moment avoids discussion of the plan's immorality or the ethics of using the same tactics as the Capitol. Her silence allows readers, again, to avoid making connections between the text and America's use of torture and twelve years of war by diverting the narrative and minimizing reader discomfort.

Despite her courage, strength, and training, Katniss's gendered performance is also visible in her physical and sexual vulnerability. The bow and arrow symbolically link Katniss to Artemis, the virgin huntress and goddess of transition who guides young boys and girls to adulthood, but it also protects her from direct contact with bloodshed. In *The Hunger Games*, she is quickly overpowered by the knife-wielding Clove. In contrast to Katniss, Clove is aggressive and sexual.<sup>6</sup> Clove sits astride Katniss and taunts her with references to Peeta, her "Lover Boy." Cato has promised to let Clove "have" Katniss so that she can give the audience a "good show" (p. 285). Clove uses her knife in a suggestively phallic way to threaten Katniss: "I clamp my teeth together as she teasingly traces the outline of my lips with the tip of the blade" (pp. 285–286). Helpless, Katniss is rescued by Thresh's powerful masculinity.

After Thresh kills Clove, Katniss uses her gender to avert Thresh's attack. She reminds him that she nurtured his fellow tribute, Rue. I "'buried her in flowers' I say, 'and I sang her to sleep' . . . . 'To death. I sang until she died'" (p. 288). The contrast in this scene alludes to the virgin/whore dichotomy and

draws attention to the muted role of sexuality in the series. Despite their freedom from parental control and the harsh reality of their world, neither Katniss, Peeta, nor Gale succumb to desire or use sexual pleasure as a means of escape.

Although Cato's death is described in detail over the course of four pages, references to sexual desire or activity in the Hunger Games is almost nonexistent. There are chaste kisses and a brief allusion to sex and power in Finnick's back story—he has been threatened into prostitution—but the traditional romance triangle reassures readers and avoids uncomfortable questions that might arise about Katniss's sexuality.

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**Educators who choose to engage dystopian literature must also be prepared to make the connections between the text and American culture explicit.**

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Who will Katniss choose? The kind, thoughtful, handsome Peeta? Or the rebellious, impulsive, tall-dark-and-handsome Gale? Questions about gender politics and power, and the fate of Panem, are smoothed over by the love triangle; the only question that matters is resolved on the last pages of the last chapter of the last book. In the epilogue of *Mockingjay*, Katniss fulfills the role

of literary heroine by committing to Peeta and bearing his children. Hope is restored through the heterosexual nuclear family.

### **Beyond Sensation**

Journalist and author Darer Littman (2010) draws direct parallels between the citizens in *Mockingjay* and Americans during the Bush presidency. This moment in time, she writes, is an example of when “the American public preferred to lose themselves in ‘reality tv’ than pay attention [to] the erosion of civil liberties during the War on Terror; ‘asking no more’ in the way of evidence from their government when confronted by policies that so clearly contradict our laws and our national values” (p. 175). Darer Littman asserts that *The Hunger Games* is “a brilliant book for our time” and hopes that “it will encourage all of us to become more politically aware and active, and not to ever allow ourselves to risk the erosion of our de-

mocracy and civil liberties for *panem et circenses*” (p. 178). In contrast, Muller (2012) asks whether there is “a danger that the texts become what they condemn, a simulacrum that eventually fails to move beyond its own terms of reference” (p. 62). Reader and fan response supports Muller's analysis: the series evokes that which it seeks to condemn.

However, Collins's message that audiences play a role in perpetuating violence and that citizens must not be passive when faced with oppression is valuable for young adult readers. Therefore, educators who choose to engage dystopian literature must also be prepared to make the connections between the text and American culture explicit. This includes domestic and foreign policy and entertainment culture. Dystopian literature “is largely the product of the terrors of the twentieth century . . . [such as] exploitation, repression, state violence, war, genocide, disease . . . and the steady depletion of humanity through the buying and selling of everyday life” (Moylan, as cited in Booker, 2013, p.4). Interrogating the text, as opposed to consuming it, requires acknowledging the political impulse of dystopian literature and actively resisting the passive reading the books create. Readers of the Hunger Games series should consider propaganda and news reporting, discuss what the use of torture at Abu Ghraib means to America, and discuss how the government's decision to not show images of coffins returning from Iraq and Afghanistan alters our perception of war. Teachers need to talk with students about the bombing at the ending of *Mockingjay* and consider what the consequences are for accepting assassination of a leader. Simulating the odds of a Reaping or performing Tribute interviews are safe ways to engage the text, but these activities will not move readers past the sensation of the story.<sup>7</sup> Instead, readers excited by the physical, mental, and emotional carnage of Panem will continue to consume reality television, paint their nails in Capitol colors, and view reports of war and poverty on television as another form of entertainment.

When readers understand what is at stake in Collins's text, and make explicit connections to twenty-first century culture, then they will no more play at the Hunger Games than play at the release of the infant in *The Giver* (Lowry, 1993), the enslavement of African Americans in *Kindred* (Butler, 2004), or the sexual exploitation of women in *The Handmaid's Tale*

(Atwood, 1998). Reading against the text, reading self-reflectively, and looking critically at one's culture and political institutions are not easy at any age; neither is dystopian literature.

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## Endnotes

1. Scholastic reported in 2012 that *The Hunger Games* had been on the *New York Times* bestseller list for over 200 consecutive weeks and that there were over 50 million copies of the book in print (Scholastic, 2012).
2. Dr. Julia Klimek of Coker College first brought the Capitol Nail Colors advertisement to my attention.
3. My reading is influenced by Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*.
4. See Clark, 2010, "Crime of Fashion."
5. Borsellino offers a strong argument about the importance of love.
6. Katniss and Clove are not the only women who reinforce traditional gender roles. Katniss's mother, subject to crippling depression, and younger, emotional sister, are nurturing healers who remain undeveloped characters. Coin, with her two sides, evokes the stereotype of the older woman threatened by the younger, more beautiful woman. Coin reinforces fears about women in positions of power, for she, ultimately, is more depraved than President Snow. She orders the horrific carnage that concludes the series, makes sure Prim is part of the emergency response force, and seeks to re-instigate the Hunger Games using children of the Capitol.
7. These are from a sampling of activities suggested by online teacher resource sites, blogs, and Hill (2012).

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## Search for New Editor of *Voices from the Middle*

NCTE is seeking a new editor of *Voices from the Middle*. In May 2016, the term of the present editors (Doug Fisher, Nancy Frey, and Diane Lapp) will end. Interested persons should send a letter of application to be received **no later than August 29, 2014**. Letters should include the applicant's vision for the journal and be accompanied by the applicant's vita, one sample of published writing (article or chapter), and two letters specifying financial support from appropriate administrators at the applicant's institution. Applicants are urged to explore with their administrators the feasibility of assuming the responsibilities of a journal editor. Classroom teachers are both eligible and encouraged to apply. Finalists will be interviewed at the NCTE Annual Convention in Washington, DC, in November 2014. The applicant appointed by the NCTE Executive Committee will effect a transition, preparing for his or her first issue in September 2016. The appointment is for five years. Applications should be submitted via email in PDF form to [kaustin@ncte.org](mailto:kaustin@ncte.org); please include "Voices from the Middle Editor Application" in the subject line. Direct queries to Kurt Austin, NCTE Publications Director, at the email address above or call 217-328-3870, extension 3619.

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## Girls Who Kill:

### The Changing Face of YA Warrior Heroines

In January of 2013, US Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta announced that the ban on women serving in ground combat units had been lifted (Cloud & Perry, 2013). This pronouncement opened up a possible 230,000 combat jobs to women in the armed forces, including roles in infantry, armor, and field artillery. According to Panetta's directive, the services may require basic fitness requirements for combat roles, but these must be gender-neutral.

This historic decision came even though a number of groups continued to oppose the idea of putting women in harm's way. The executive president of the Family Research Council, Jerry Boykin, called the policy "another social experiment" that would add additional stresses to army commanders (Ramirez, 2013, para. 8). Elaine Donnelly, president of the Center for Military Readiness, argued that "women do not have an equal opportunity to survive or help fellow soldiers survive in direct ground combat" (cited in Cloud & Perry, 2013, p. 13). Nevertheless, senators on both sides of the aisle, including John McCain and Nancy Pelosi, endorsed the move as long overdue. With this directive, one of the last explicit gender restrictions for females in the United States has been lifted. Now women can kill and be killed in front-line combat, just as their male counterparts can.

The American public has gradually shifted its mood to support female combatants. In a 1977 poll, 74% of the civilians polled agreed that "men rather than women should bear arms" (Segal, Kinzer, & Woelfel, p. 472). In contrast, a 2013 poll by Quinnipiac University found that 75% of Americans surveyed support the idea that women who wish to engage in combat

should be able to do so (Edwards-Levy, para 2). And, more important, 85% of respondents under age 30 supported the idea of women in combat.

The shift in public sentiment is no doubt a result of the general movement toward increasing equality for women dictated by legal battles and court decisions. In fact, the lifting of the ban on women in combat came about after a suit by the American Civil Liberties Union in November of 2012 (Dao, p. 8). The suit was filed on behalf of four servicewomen and the Women's Action Network, a group that works to effect equality in the military.

### Young Adult Literature and Female Combatants

How has this issue been played out in young adult literature? Rachel Brownstein, in her text *Becoming a Heroine: Reading about Women in Novels* (1982), wrote, "Generations of girls . . . have gone to fiction to escape a stifling or boring or confusingly chaotic reality, and have come back with structures they use to organize and interpret their feelings and prospects" (p. xvii). The sea change in attitude toward American women serving in combat has also played out in young adult literature. How have these texts helped girls "structure their feelings and prospects" about fighting and killing? And how has that changed over the past three decades, as public sentiment shifted?

Early fantasy young adult literature typically featured male warriors as protagonists, but, in the 1980s, YA authors began introducing young heroines who killed. Two texts in particular caught the atten-

tion of readers and critics: *Alanna*, by Tamora Pierce (Book One of the Song of the Lioness Quartet series), published in 1983, and *The Hero and the Crown*, by Robin McKinley, published in 1984.

In order to understand how young adult literature has impacted girls' "feelings and prospects" about

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**It is interesting to interrogate the texts to understand the conditions under which the girls become killers and the effect of that role.**

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killing, it is instructive to examine these texts, especially as they contrast with newer fantasy texts that feature "killer girls," such as *The Hunger Games*, by Suzanne Collins, published in 2008, and *Graceling*, by Kristin Cashore, published in 2009. In particular, it is interesting to interrogate the texts to understand the conditions under which the girls become kill-

ers and the effect of that role. Questions we can ask include:

- Do the girls wish to become killers, or is it forced upon them?
- Is it difficult to become a killer, or does it come easily?
- Who are the victims? Do they "deserve" to be killed?
- What is the effect of killing on the psyche of the young women?
- Is there a "balance" or redemptive role to the act of killing that is required or sought by the young women?
- Have these elements changed over the 25 years? And if so, how?

**Early Texts: *Alanna* and *The Hero and the Crown***

The two earlier works of fantasy, *Alanna* and *The Hero and the Crown*, are both high fantasy set in fictional realms with elements that loosely resemble medieval times, such as castles and nobles and knights. *Alanna* is one of boy-girl twins born to a noble lord who has lost his wife and lives in a world of books, barely acknowledging his offspring. When the twins turn 11, their father decides to send them off to boarding school; more specifically, *Alanna* will attend a convent to learn wifely skills of "sewing and dancing"

(p. 2), while Thom will be trained as a page, squire, and then knight in the royal court.

*Alanna*, however, has the urge and the talent for fighting (she has been taught the basics alongside her twin), while Thom only wishes to become a magician and sorcerer. Because sorcery is taught to boys at the convent, *Alanna* conceives of a reckless plan: the children will switch places and pretend that they are both boys. Using threats and pleas, the twins are able to convince their respective chaperones that this is a good plan. *Alanna* cuts her hair and dresses in Thom's clothes, and she and Coram, her manservant and teacher, head for the royal palace.

The text follows *Alanna*'s progress in becoming a page and, by the end of the book, a squire to the prince of the kingdom. It is not easy for *Alanna* to achieve either of these. She is by far the smallest and least muscled of all the boys in training (no surprise), and although she is talented, she must work much harder to achieve the same level of skill. She almost leaves her training after the first few days, until Coram accuses her of being a "soft, noble lady" (p. 49).

"I'm not a soft noble lady!" *Alanna* cried. "But I'm not crazy either! I'm going from sunrise to sunset and after without a stop, and no end in sight. My free time's a joke—I'm out of free time before I get to the third class of the morning. And they expect me to keep up, and they punish me if I don't. And I have to learn how to fall; I'm learning the stance with the bow all over again when I was the best hunter at Trebond, and if I say anything I get more work." (pp. 49–50)

Ultimately, *Alanna* stays, and she gradually becomes stronger and more skilled. But she makes an enemy of one of the older boys, Ralon, who bullies her, finally resorting to beating her physically whenever he has the chance. Her many friends at court, including Prince Jonathan, try to defend her, but she insists on doing her own fighting. She asks Coram for extra sessions in wrestling and boxing, and she asks her village friend George, who is the ringleader of a gang of thieves, for training in street combat. Gradually *Alanna* becomes stronger and more resilient, until at last she can challenge Ralon directly. She accuses Ralon of being a "Liar. Sneak. Coward. Bully." (p. 86) and in the ensuing fight, she gouges his eyes, punches his stomach, and finally breaks his nose. The fight ends with *Alanna* stating, "Never touch me again. If you do, I swear—I swear by Mithros and the Goddess—I'll kill you" (p. 87). We now see that *Al-*

anna has become a warrior, clearly capable of killing, though it is unclear if she would do so.

At this point in the text, Alanna's other gift is revealed. The reader has known from the beginning that Maude, the village healer, believes that Alanna has a special gift. Maude tells her, "You've a gift for healing. It's greater than mine, greater than any I have ever known. And you've other magic, power you'll learn to use. But the healing—that's the important thing" (p. 9). When Alanna laughs, not really believing Maude's words, Maude reminds her of what a knight does.

"Have you thought of the lives you'll take when you go off performing those great deeds?"

Alanna bit her lip. "No," she admitted.

"I didn't think so. You see only the glory. But there's lives taken and families without fathers and sorrow. Think before you fight. Think on who you're fighting, if only because one day you must meet your match. And if you want to pay for those lives you do take, use your healing magic. Use it all you can, or you won't cleanse your soul of death for centuries. It's harder to heal than it is to kill. The Mother knows why, but you've a gift for both." (p. 10)

This gift becomes apparent when Alanna's friends—nobles, pages, and squires—fall deathly ill due to a fever that sweeps over the kingdom. Alanna is afraid to use her magic to heal them, because she is not sure she can control it. But when Prince Jonathan becomes sick, she uses all her healing powers to save him.

Alanna has not killed anyone yet, but she has begun to balance the scale by healing Jonathan. Her first—and only—killing in the text occurs when Jonathan invites her to accompany the knights and squires to an outlying desert city. Jonathan and Alanna discover that there are ten "Nameless Ones"—giant, immortal spirits called the Ysandir—who inhabit the Black City, and who are anxious to feed on Alanna and Jonathan. Alanna and Jonathan use their combined strength and magic to defeat the Ysandir, killing them all with Alanna's magical sword and the spells that Alanna and Jonathan have learned. After a sword fight in which Alanna's superior skills defeat the immortals, the final two Ysandir "flared up like a giant torch as everything went black" (p. 257).

By the conclusion of the first book of the series, Alanna has not killed any humans (though she has threatened to). Clearly, the "Nameless Ones" were

evil spirits who feasted on humans and so needed to be dispatched. However, this changes in the later books of the series. In the second book, Alanna has her first taste of battle: she kills human soldiers who are threatening the kingdom of Tortall and her prince Jonathan. She also demonstrates her prowess as a sword fighter, and by the final book, she is an aggressive fighter who kills her opponents competently.

Alanna does not like the effects of war, but she does love being a knight. She does not react to having killed soldiers herself, nor feel guilty that she has caused their deaths. The first soldier she kills is described in this way:

Gripping Moonlight's reins in her teeth, she guided the well-trained mare with her knees alone, watching for an opening. As the knight lifted both arms to deliver the blow that would shatter her shield and her arm, she saw her chance. Swiftly Alanna slid Lightning into the opening between the knight's arm and chest armor, thrusting deep. With a gasp of surprise, her enemy fell from his horse, dead.

Alanna had no time now to stop and think about the first man she had killed. Jon was still in danger. (pp. 105–106)

Later, in book two (*In the Hand of the Goddess*, 1984), after she kills an evil wizard who was Jonathan's beloved uncle, she reflects,

... Roger's death was bad, she thought, but life could be much, much worse. Perhaps I'll live and be happy, after all.

She let out a whoop of sheer exuberance and kicked Moonlight into a gallop. "C'mon, Caram!" she cried, galloping past him. "Let's go find an adventure." (p. 241)

Thus, Alanna reacts to her killings by avoiding dwelling on the act, and she constantly seeks out new adventures where she can use her lethal skills.

Aerin, the heroine of McKinley's *The Hero and the Crown*, has much in common with her younger counterpart, Alanna. Aerin is also noble; in fact, she is the king's daughter, though from a second marriage to an outsider who was suspected of being a witch. Aerin does not appear to have the usual gifts that accom-

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**Alanna reacts to her killings by avoiding dwelling on the act, and she constantly seeks out new adventures where she can use her lethal skills.**

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pany nobility in her kingdom, Damar. This lack, along with her people's suspicion of her mother, makes her an outcast. Yet Aerin longs to be a knight worthy of fighting in her father's army. She asks her cousin Tor for secret lessons, and she works diligently to master the arts of battle:

She took pride, in a grim sort of way, in learning what Tor taught her; and he need not know the hours of drill she put in, chopping at leaves and dust motes, when he was not around. She made what she considered to be obligatory protests about the regular hiatuses in her progress when Tor was sent off somewhere, but in truth she was glad of them, for then she had the time to put in, grinding the lessons into her slow, stupid, giftless muscles. (pp. 44–45)

While she is in training, Aerin befriends her father's lamed warhorse, Talat. Although Talat has been put to pasture and assumed to be permanently

disabled, Aerin patiently restores him to fighting condition and he becomes her steed. Aerin then discovers a recipe that makes her impervious to flames, which launches her career as a dragon-killer and allows her to exterminate the small but destructive beasts that infect the kingdom. However, there is one "old" dragon left in the kingdom—Maur, the

black dragon. Aerin challenges and defeats the huge, malevolent dragon, but it nearly destroys her.

Although this feat grants her respect and value, she can only be restored to health by visiting the land of a magical immortal, Luthe. Luthe cures her and tells her of her destiny; she is indeed gifted, and she is the only hope of saving Damar from the evil wizard Agsded. Although Aerin has fallen in love with Luthe, she knows that her destiny is to save her people. So Aerin climbs the Black Tower and confronts Agsded with her magical sword Gonturan (a gift from Luthe) and a drop of Maur's blood. In defeating Agsded, Aerin earns the Hero's Crown, a magical, protective artifact that was lost to the Damar kings years ago.

After defeating the wizard, Aerin returns to her homeland, only to find it under siege from the Northern armies. The Northerners are only partly human,

but they are strong fighters. Aerin charges through the soldiers in order to get to the besieged castle, wielding Gonturan and its blue flame:

The blue dazzled Aerin's eyes too, but it was a useful sort of dazzlement because it seemed to break the Northerners' clumsy movements into arcs whose sweep she could judge so precisely that as they tried to escape her she knew just where to let Gonturan fall across them. She did not think of how many she killed or maimed; she thought of them only as obstacles that must be overcome that she might rejoin her own people (p. 215)

Aerin successfully delivers the Hero's Crown to Tor, and together they defeat the Northern army. Tor asks Aerin to marry him, and she agrees, loving both Tor and her country. Moreover, because she has been made immortal by Luthe, she knows that some day she will return to him as well.

Referring back to the questions asked earlier, it is clear these 1980s texts have many similarities.

- *Do the girls wish to become killers, or is it forced upon them?* Both heroines absolutely do want to become warrior knights and fight for their king and country. They have no doubts about their commitment to this goal.
  - *Is it difficult to become a killer, or does it come easily?* Both Alanna and Aerin have to work extremely hard to obtain the skills necessary to fight. They both are taught these skills by men they trust and will eventually love.
  - *Who are the victims? Do they "deserve" to be killed?* In both texts, the victims of the killings are either not human or are marauding forces that must be destroyed in order to save the realm. Alanna only kills a group of evil spirits who are threatening to eat both her and Prince Jonathan, obviously in self-defense. Even in the later books in the series, Alanna only kills to save the people she loves from destruction.
- Aerin kills many creatures, beginning with small dragons that are terrorizing and killing the country people, and graduating to a huge evil dragon, an evil sorcerer, and a whole army of "Northerners," who retreat from the battlefield "fleeing as best they could, on three legs, or four, or five" (p. 219). And, of course, all of these creatures are threatening to kill Aerin's people.
- *What is the effect of killing on the psyche of the young women?* Both Aerin and Alanna are forced

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**In both texts, the victims of the killings are either not human or are marauding forces that must be destroyed in order to save the realm.**

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to battle evil beings almost to the death, and it saps both their energy and their physical strength. They are wounded physically, but they suffer literally no psychic damage. They do not dwell on their killings, or explore the effect of the killing on themselves or on their enemies. In fact, the killings validate their long years of training and their commitment to their role as warrior.

- *Is there a “balance” or redemptive role to the act of killing that is required of the young women?* The two young women also have a corollary gift that balances their roles as killers: both are healers, although this is much more evident in Pierce’s text. Aerin reveals her role as a healer by nursing the warhorse Talat back to health; also, after the battle with the Northerners, McKinley writes:

Aerin and Tor were among those still whole, and they helped as they could. No one noticed particularly at the time, but later it was remembered that most of those who had felt the hands of the first sol, her blue sword still hanging at her side, or of the first sola, the Hero’s Crown still set over his forehead, its dull grey still shadowed with red, recovered, however grave their wounds. (p. 220)

Yet neither Alanna nor Aerin seek out or expand their role as healer. They do not express guilt when they kill their enemies, nor do they feel a need for redemption for slaughtering other beings.

### Later Texts: *Graceling* and *The Hunger Games*

How does this compare to the texts written 25 years later? Both *The Hunger Games* (Collins, 2008) and *Graceling* (Cashore, 2009) offer interesting comparisons. *Graceling* is set in a fantasy medieval world similar to that of Aerin’s and Alanna’s world, but *The Hunger Games*, the first in a trilogy, plays out in a dystopic American society of the future. However, the magic that infuses the other three texts is replaced by technology of the future that serves a similar function: it allows evil and greedy characters to attain inordinate power that calls warriors to fight against it. In all the books, the warrior is a young girl or woman who heeds the call.

Unlike the heroines of the earlier books, neither Katniss (*The Hunger Games*) nor Katsa (*Graceling*) want to be fighters and killers. Katniss is a teen who lives in one of the poor districts of a splintered,

post-apocalyptic America, ruled by a small elite who won the civil wars. Katniss’s district is so poor that the people are starving, and, when Katniss’s father is killed in a mine accident and her mother sinks into depression, only Katniss’s hunting ability keeps her family alive. Katniss is a skilled huntress, having learned how to use a knife and bow from her father, and then developing more skill under the tutoring of her friend Gale. Her prowess becomes even more critical once Katniss’s sister is chosen by lottery to participate in the titular “Hunger Games,” and Katniss volunteers to take her place. The Games are a bizarre Romanesque spectacle that is hosted by the Capitol once per year. In the games, two young people from each of the subordinate districts are randomly chosen to fight to the death in an arena that is created and controlled by technology.

Katniss is terrified of the Games, and appalled by the thought that she will have to kill others. But her hunting partner, Gale, reassures her that she has the skills to fight:

“Katniss, it’s just hunting. You’re the best hunter I know,” says Gale.

“It’s not just hunting. They’re armed. They think,” I say.

“So do you. And you’ve had more practice. Real practice,” he says. “You know how to kill.”

“Not people,” I say.

“How different can it be, really?” says Gale, grimly. (p. 40)

Katniss’s skills prove invaluable in the Games, and she does have to kill other young people. Her first victims are killed indirectly by her when she throws a deadly wasp’s nest into a group of opponents, and two are stung to death. But Katniss’s first real killing occurs after her ally, the young girl Rue, is speared by one of the male contestants:

The boy from District 1 dies before he can pull out the spear. My arrow drives deeply into the center of his neck. He falls to his knees and halves the brief remainder of his life by yanking out the arrow and drowning in his own blood. (p. 233)

Katniss reacts to the killing of the boy by remembering Gale’s question: “How different can it be, really?” She responds internally:

Amazingly similar in the execution. A bow pulled, an arrow shot. Entirely different in the aftermath. I killed a boy whose name I don’t even know. Somewhere his family is

weeping for him. His friends call for my blood. Maybe he had a girlfriend who really believed he would come back. . . .

But then I think of Rue's still body and I'm able to banish the boy from my mind. At least for now. (p. 243)

During the games, Katniss only kills one more opponent, the fierce competitor Cato; she wounds him, and he falls to be eaten by "muttons." Though Katniss has killed ordinary, blameless children, she

has done so to save her own life. She balances the killing somewhat by her efforts to protect Rue and also by saving the life of her district partner Peeta, nursing him from horrible wounds inflicted by Cato. In addition, Katniss's motivation becomes political during the text when she realizes that her true enemies are the corrupt

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**She has suffered horrible psychological damage as a result of her killings, and she obsesses on them through nightmares and constant self-blame.**

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rulers of the Capitol who sacrifice children's lives for entertainment. She thinks:

Gale's voice is in my head. His ravings against the Capitol are no longer pointless, no longer to be ignored. Rue's death has forced me to confront my own fury against the cruelty, the injustice they inflict upon us. But here, even more strongly than at home, I feel my impotence. There's no way to take revenge on the Capitol. Is there? (p. 236)

In the subsequent books in the trilogy, *Catching Fire* (2009) and *Mockingjay* (2010), Katniss uses her status as victor of the Hunger Games to assist the districts in staging an uprising against the Capitol. In book two, she is once more sent into the Hunger Games, and she has to kill several innocent contenders. In book three, she becomes a "soldier" in the fight against the Capitol and leads troops into rebellious combat. More important, she expresses her determination to "kill President Snow," who is the leader of the Capitol. And, in a shocking twist, she assassinates the rebel leader Coin when she discovers that he engineered a surprise attack that caused many young rebels, including Katniss's sister Prim, to be killed.

Katniss escapes punishment because she is considered mentally unbalanced at the time, and indeed she is. She has suffered horrible psychological damage as a result of her killings, and she obsesses on them

through nightmares and constant self-blame. In book two, *Catching Fire*, Katniss reflects,

Nightmares—which I was no stranger to before the Games—now plague me whenever I sleep. . . . I relive versions of what happened in the arena. My worthless attempts to save Rue. Peeta bleeding to death. Glimmer's bloated body disintegrating in my hands. Cato's horrific end with the mutations. These are the most frequent visitors. (pp. 53–54)

In book three, *Mockingjay*, Katniss leads a small group of rebels into battle, and most are killed. She anguishes,

To believe them dead is to accept I killed them. . . . My plot to assassinate Snow seems so stupid now. So stupid as I sit here in this cellar, tallying up our losses, fingering the tassels on the silver knee-high boots I stole from the woman's home. Oh, yeah—I forgot about that. I killed her too. I'm taking out unarmed citizens now. (p. 323)

Katniss tries to kill herself, but is prevented from doing so, though she continues to entertain thoughts of suicide throughout the book.

Katsa, the young heroine of *Graceling*, is an assassin. Born with a "grace" that makes her a superior fighting machine, she discovers her unique power at the age of eight. While at court, she is accosted by a distant cousin who comments on her mismatched eyes, a sign that one is graced:

She'd scowled at the man and turned away. But then his hand had slid toward her leg, and her hand had flown out and smashed him in the face. So hard and so fast that she'd pushed the bones of his nose into his brain. (p. 9)

Katsa immediately is feared by all. Whispers abound at court: "'Watch out for the blue eyed green eyed one,' they would whisper to guests. 'She killed her cousin, with one strike. Because he complimented her eyes'" (p. 10).

However, King Randa, Katsa's uncle and guardian, recognizes Katsa as a powerful asset. She is forced by him to intimidate, hurt, maim, or kill those who challenge his authority. Katsa is haunted by her fate: "She was picturing the arms she'd broken for her uncle. The arms, bent the wrong way at the elbow, bone splinters sticking through the skin" (p. 119). As a child, Katsa questions neither the king's power over her, nor her role as a killer, but she grows to hate her missions of bullying and torture. She reflects on her role:

Randa would send her on another strong-arm mission. He

would send her to hurt some poor petty criminal, some fool who deserved to keep his fingers even if he was dishonorable. He would send her, and she must go, for the power sat with him. (p. 119)

However, Katsa rebels as she matures. She creates a “Council” of friends who secretly assist those who have been wronged. And once Katsa meets another graced fighter, the Leonid prince Po, she realizes that she cannot keep hurting innocent people.

Katsa finally snaps when she is sent to force a noble to marry his daughter to a dangerous man. She resolves, “She would not do it. She wouldn’t torture a man who was only trying to protect his children” (pp. 131–132). Po urges her to confront the king. Following Po’s advice, Katsa successfully defies her uncle and leaves the court. Prince Po becomes her ally and lover, and together they confront and defeat a sinister ruler, King Leck, who is corrupting his kingdom. Katsa gradually comes to terms with her grace; she finds that it is more a gift of survival than of killing, and can be used for good as well as evil. Katsa decides that she wants to teach young girls to defend themselves, and train them throughout the kingdom. When challenged on why she would do that, she explains, “It seems better for me for a child to have these skills and never use them, than not have them and one day need them . . .” (p. 401).

So how do the heroines of these later texts compare to their earlier counterparts?

- *Do the girls wish to become killers, or is it forced upon them?* In stark contrast to the earlier works, neither Katniss nor Katsa wish to kill anyone. Katniss is forced to fight for her life when she takes her sister’s place in the Hunger Games, and Katsa is born with incredible fighting powers. Both girls resist the killing act as much as possible, though when confronted with the need to kill, they do it.
- *Is it difficult to become a killer, or does it come easily?* The later heroines differ markedly from their earlier, hard-working predecessors. Both Katniss and Katsa are gifted killers. They excel at fighting, and do not have to work especially hard at it. Katsa, of course, is born with a fighting “Grace.” And when Katniss is trained to join the rebel army, she is able to accelerate through the training because of her natural skill.

- *Who are the victims? Do they “deserve” to be killed?* In the more recent texts, the stories begin with the girls killing innocent victims. In Katniss’s case, she must kill other young tributes to survive the Hunger Games, even though it repulses her. Katsa tortures, maims, and even kills citizens who have angered her uncle, believing that she must obey his commands. Clearly, their initial victims do not deserve to be killed, because they are innocent. In both texts, however, the girls also choose to assassinate in cold blood an evil ruler who they have discovered is a cruel tyrant. Both types of killings are chillingly different from the battle exploits of Aerin and Alanna, who kill to save their lands and people, usually in a battle against an obviously evil force or in a combat situation where they are fighting beside their companions-in-arms.
- *What is the effect of killing on the psyche of the young women?* The earlier heroines, Aerin and Alanna, do not seem to suffer any psychological damage because they kill; if anything, they feel stronger because of their service. On the other hand, Katniss and Katsa suffer constant trauma from the killing they have done. They have nightmares, obsessively remember their role in the killings, and experience self-hatred due to their acts. In modern psychiatric terms, they exhibit symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.
- *Is there a “balance” or redemptive role to the act of killing that is required of the young women?* In the two later texts, both girls are preoccupied with trying to repair the damage they have done. Katniss becomes a willing symbol of the rebellion because she knows it will help prevent future Hunger Games, and thus avoid the kind of killing she has experienced. Katsa creates an underground “Council” of brave comrades who try to right the wrongs perpetuated by her uncle. This is markedly absent in the earlier texts. Although both Alanna and Aerin do have healing gifts, they do not actively seek out ways to use them, and they do not feel the need for expiation. As a contrast, the redemptive role for both Katniss and Katsa involves not the typical woman’s role of healing/nurturing, but is instead a leadership role in a political battle that seeks to end killing.

## Summary and Discussion

So, in summary, how have the YA warrior heroine books evolved in 25 years, at least as seen through the lens of these four texts? And how does that inform the young American women who now are allowed to participate on the front lines, and who will be expected to kill enemy soldiers and, perhaps, innocent civilians as well?

Table 1 contrasts the texts under discussion. The texts written in the 1980s, *Alanna* and *The Hero and the Crown*, continued the long fantasy tradition of the brave knight riding into battle to save king and country. Despite America's recent military defeats in Vietnam during the 1970s, the books still hearkened to the idea that killing for one's country is noble and good. Thus, Aerin and Alanna, the warrior-heroines of those texts, accrued increased status and acceptance once they had equaled their male counterparts. The texts validate the choice of women to become soldiers and heroes, as long as they are battling what is clearly evil and "other." The girls have few self-doubts or recrimination about the killings. Moreover, it is clear that this change in gender role will require incredibly

hard work and self-discipline, but that the girl will eventually make herself into the equal of a male hero, while still practicing the arts of womanhood—healing and nurturing—in addition to fighting.

On the other hand, the two books written in 2004 and 2005 paint a very different picture. The girls in these texts, Katsa and Katniss, do not volunteer to fight and kill (at least not initially), and they experience trauma and remorse for their killings. They seek to redeem themselves by politically leading the fight against evil and using their skills to teach others. Their goal is not so much to defeat evil, but to put an end to killing. They are equally (or more) gifted than their male warrior counterparts in the art of fighting, yet they detest the acts that they must perform.

How does this connect to the idea that the United States, for the first time, is allowing women into combat? The initial fantasy heroines, portraying young girls as noble and desirable warriors, surely contributed to and reflected the entry of women into the Armed Forces. As the United States shifted to an all-volunteer force in 1973, young girls joined up in droves, in all probability seeking the kind of heroine status so beautifully depicted by Pierce and McKinley. But the

**Table 1.** A snapshot of how warrior heroine books have evolved over 25 years

Question	<i>Alanna</i>	<i>The Hero and the Crown</i>	<i>Graceling</i>	<i>The Hunger Games</i>
Do the girls wish to become killers, or is it forced upon them?	Alanna desperately wants to become a knight, even pretending to be a male.	Aerin fervently wants to become a knight and trains in secret.	Katsa feels cursed by her "gift" of killing.	Katniss has no wish to fight anyone.
Is it difficult to become a killer, or does it come easily?	It is very difficult for Alanna to master the skills of her male peers.	Aerin has to work ceaselessly to learn the craft of fighting.	Katsa is born with a superb ability to fight and kill.	Katniss easily learns to kill animals and has natural abilities in fighting.
Who are the victims? Do they "deserve" to be killed?	All the victims are evil; in the first book, they are non-human.	Aerin only kills dragons, evil wizards, or partially human beings.	Katsa hurts or kills her uncle's enemies, even though they are innocent.	Katniss is forced to kill her peers, although they are innocent.
What is the effect of killing on the psyche of the young women?	Alanna does not feel guilt or shame; she is proud of her victories.	Aerin feels justified in her killings as they save her kingdom.	Katsa suffers terrible guilt and shame due to her actions.	Katniss endures nightmares and trauma because of her killing.
Is there a balance or redemptive role to the act of killing?	Alanna has a healing gift, though she does not seek to enhance it.	Aerin has gifts of healing, but does not use them often.	Katsa tries to atone for her killings by creating a council for the good.	Katniss becomes a symbol of freedom from oppression.

US military battles since 2001, along with the accompanying explicit media coverage, have undermined the myth of the untainted warrior. Everyone now understands the high cost of killing, especially when so many innocent civilians are inevitably harmed. How will girls handle the mental disorders and suicide attempts that plague returning veterans? Girls today need models like Katsa and Katniss to prepare themselves for entering combat. Innocent bystanders will be killed, there will be collateral damage, and there will be a high psychological cost to killing.

Jessica Stites, in her 2010 article “Kickass Girls and Feminist Boys,” argues that:

For many of us destined to become feminists, there’s a period when gender roles become ill-fitting and maddening, but we’re not sure why. At that crucial moment, certain books can offer refuge or escape—or provide our fist “click!” moment, when we realize the problem’s not us; it’s society, and we’re not alone. (p. 36)

The warrior-heroines of early YA fantasies excited girls’ imaginations and made them yearn to fight for country, glory, and adventure. They offered girls an escape from typical boundaries of gender restriction. On the other hand, the modern female killers of YA fantasy novels allow girls to understand and prepare for the actuality of becoming a combat warrior. They reveal the cost of killing, and the pain it can bring.

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# Construction and Depiction of Identity in Young Adult Novels with Digital Communication Technologies

**T**eens' lives are permeated by their own digitally mediated participation in social worlds through the use of media such as Twitter®, YouTube®, Facebook®, text messaging, emailing, and social networking sites (Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010; Livingstone, 2008; Williams & Zenger, 2012). The 2012 revision of the International Reading Association's (IRA) position paper on Adolescent Literacy recognizes the growing importance of digital media in the lives of teens and the ways those media are "transforming how adolescents use literacy to construct both their online and offline identities" (p. 7). These online social worlds provide today's adolescents with new ways of exploring and expressing their identities through evolving types of literacy practices. Teens' use of digital media should be conceptualized as part of their fluid and dynamic identity development in a world of networked technologies.

## **Young Adult Literature and Constructions of Identity**

In young adult (YA) literature, the exploration of identity development has always been a common trope. Today, increasing numbers of novels include digital communication within their narratives, either as snippets embedded within traditional narrative or as books comprised solely of digital messages (Koss & Tucker-Raymond, 2010), reflective of the current influx of digital media in the lives and identities of adolescents.

The construct of identity development, so central to YA literature, is now being explored through characters using digital media as a part of their everyday lives. These novels depict characters' uses of digital media as venues for their identity play, construction, and development. They describe how adolescents position and present themselves as people, including how they develop online profiles and engage in online interactions, which also opens the door to exploring issues of reliability. Are individuals truly who they say they are online? Are they manipulating personal facts in order to be a better version of themselves? Are they pretending to be someone else? For what purposes are they creating their online selves?

As new literacies continue to impact the daily lives of teens, an examination of characters' in-text identity constructions is a way to encourage comparisons with teens' real-life identity explorations. Awareness of how these identity construction practices are represented in fictional literature can help teens critically analyze the types of digital media they use in their own lives and how online identity constructions are changing the ways people express and understand themselves and others in both off- and online spaces (Koss & Tucker-Raymond, 2010; Bean & Moni, 2003). Although digital media is an integral part of many teens' daily lives, teens rarely are given the opportunity to actively discuss and unpack the significance of this in school, especially in regards to identity construction.

This article discusses intersections of adolescents' digital media and identity practices within YA literature by exploring the ways fictional characters, as portrayed in YA novels, construct their identities in online spaces. It presents a literary analysis of six exemplar novels that explore how fictional teen characters use online literacies, specifically social networking sites, chatrooms, and blogs, to construct and represent their online selves.

## Context of the Study

Youth identities, as constructed through representations of digital technologies in six realistic fiction YA novels published between 2007–2010, were analyzed as a way of identifying the identity constructs portrayed in the novels in order to ultimately share them with teens. Novels selected for this study were a part of a larger study looking at overall types of digital communications represented in YA novels with the intent of identifying which characters were using digital communication, how and why they were using it, and how digital communication was represented overall (Koss & Tucker-Raymond, 2010). The larger study focused on the structure and types of digital communications included in the books, including the

organization of the novels, the writing conventions used, and the reasons the digital communication was used by the characters. The study aimed to present an overview of how digital media was being infused into YA literature.

During the larger study, in addition to the structure of the novels, the ways in which the characters were using the digital technologies to construct and present their identities stood out. Several meta-themes related to characters' digital technology usage and adolescent identity development began to emerge (Glaser, 1965), specifically teens using digital technologies to: a) maintain social status, b) position themselves as part of a group, c) find acceptance, d) find romantic relationships, e) hide one's true self, and f) be anonymous.

In order to examine more closely characters' identity motivations, as depicted by the novels, we selected six focal novels we felt exemplified these themes, given their primary plot emphases on the processes and implications of constructing identity via digital media. Also, novels written more recently were intentionally selected to best represent current adolescent literacy practices. (See Table 1 for a list of additional novels that incorporate themes of digital media and identity construction.) The six novels were then analyzed by focusing on the interpersonal discursively constituted relationships in which the main characters engaged (Harré & Gillet, 1994). As Hobbs (2011) has written, "Issues of representation come into play when people use digital images of themselves and their peers to represent their personal and social experiences . . . . What we do online affects our identity, our self-esteem, our relationships, and our future" (p. 17).

In this analysis, we focused on identity construction, or how characters position, present, and represent themselves through forms of digital technology as purposeful types of people and how these representations impact the way teens see themselves and idealize themselves within their social worlds. We also focused on issues of online truth telling and identity

**Table 1.** Additional YA titles with digital communication technologies

Title	Author	Copyright
<i>Butter</i>	Lange, E. J.	2012
<i>Exposed</i>	Vaught, S.	2008
<i>Little Blog on the Prairie</i>	Bell, C. D.	2010
<i>Miss Fortune Cookie</i>	Bjorkman, L.	2012
<i>My Invisible Boyfriend</i>	Day, S.	2011
<i>My Life Undecided</i>	Brody, J.	2011
<i>serafina67 *urgently requires life*</i>	Day, D.	2008
<i>Seth Baumgartner's Love Manifesto</i>	Luper, E.	2010
<i>Something to Blog About</i>	Norris, S.	2008
<i>thejuliangame</i>	Griffin, A.	2010
<i>This Girl Is Different</i>	Johnson, J. J.	2011
<i>Tweet Heart</i>	Rudnick, E.	2010
<i>Unfriended (Top 8 - Book 3)</i>	Finn, K.	2011
<i>Want to Go Private?</i>	Littman, S. D.	2011
<i>What Boys Really Want</i>	Hautman, P.	2012
<i>What's Your Status (Top 8 - Book 2)</i>	Finn, K.	2010

manipulation in the novels, recognizing that an important part of identity development is the manipulating of personal facts to present different possibilities—either idealized projections or some degree of substitution—for offline selves. A closer examination of the novels allowed each theme to be unpacked in depth and in turn. In the following sections, each of the six themes is explored through one of the focal novels and is contextualized with research on adolescents' digital media usage.

## Reasons to Construct and Online Identity

Digital communication as a particular, but integrated, practice of characters' daily lives was reflected in all

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**Private jokes were outwardly shared to show the closeness of a friendship, comments were left to cause drama, and romantic notes were posted as a sign of affection.**

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titles, much like digital technologies are integrated into real adolescents' lives and identities (Leander & McKim, 2003; Lewis & Fabbos, 2005). This analysis examines how teen characters communicate digitally, thus constructing dynamic, networked, and social personal identities, and how they test the very meaning of identity by creating online personas to meet and communicate

with friends and unknown others.

### To Maintain Social Status

As one part of their identity-building repertoire, teens often negotiate and maintain social status via social networking websites (Cox Communications, 2012). On such websites, the acts of posting status updates, keeping up a personal profile page, sending and receiving comments, and assembling an acceptable friend list are key components of a teen's relationships and social status. This ritualized focus on social networking sites as a way to maintain social status was a central part of the plot in the novel *Top 8* (Finn, 2008).

Popular girl and main character Madison relied on her Friendverse page as a part of her social life and offline social standing. As she stated right in the beginning of the book, setting the stage for the im-

portance of the social networking site Friendverse in her social life, "Friendverse was crucial. . . . Friendverse was a necessity" (p. 13). She took great care in her profile picture, her top 8 friends, and her shared personal information. As described by Stone (in Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008), "the construction of an identity is . . . a public process that involves both the 'identity announcement' made by the individual claiming an identity and the 'identity placement' made by others who endorse the claimed identity" (p. 188). The presentation of self on a social networking site influences how a person is perceived and classified in the social network.

A key part of Madison's identity-announcing practices was her ability to be visible on Friendverse by posting comments, photos, and private jokes on her personal page and on those of others in her network of friends. Who was in her network was critical and signified her popularity, replicating in fiction the importance of a teen's online profile page and one's social standing (Williams, 2008). Comments and posts were crucial, too, as the act of sending a comment was carefully crafted with the knowledge that others would read it. Private jokes were outwardly shared to show the closeness of a friendship, comments were left to cause drama, and romantic notes were posted as a sign of affection and ownership. Friends and significant others were expected to read, post, and comment, and offense could be taken if such reactions to posts were not provided (Cox Communications, 2012).

When describing the importance of how her friends were presented on their personal pages and their correlation with their relationship status, Madison stated, "My friends and I took our Top 8s seriously. It had been a big deal when I'd moved Justin to my number one spot . . ." (Finn, pp. 29–31), signifying that they were in a serious relationship and that she put her boyfriend above all others. This was an important convention in the "rules" of Madison's social network and a key identity announcement. Her status and page updates were carefully scrutinized by her peers, and significant changes were noticed. For example, shortly after Madison updated her page moving her boyfriend in her friend rankings, a friend commented, "You changed your status! And I see you updated your Top 8—and put Justin in the number one spot! I guess this means you two lovebirds are official!" (p. 3). As a result of the importance and



close scrutiny social networking site updates signified, Madison took care to present herself as the popular girl she was and wanted to remain. She was conscious of following social norms, because the “goal [of the careful creation of a personal social networking page] is to look cool and receive peer validation” (boyd, 2006, para. 1), a crucial component of maintaining social status.

When Madison went on vacation, someone hacked her Friendverse page and wreaked havoc on her relationships due to jealousy over Madison’s popularity status. Her friends and classmates quickly accepted the falsified hurtful posts as truth, knowing the importance and careful thought behind each post. They assumed information provided by an individual was reliable, as they knew the person behind the posts. In other words, such announcements, authorized or not, were endorsed by others. Because of their existence on the Web, they are permanently stored, existing into perpetuity—pasteable, postable, and judgmental. As one “friend” wrote in the comments soon after Madison was hacked, “Okay, Mad, we’ve been friends for a long time. So what’s up with writing about the TOTAL MISTAKE I made at camp last summer that you swore you’d never tell anyone about? Apparently, that didn’t include BLOGGING about it. Thanx a lot, Mad. Really” (p. 27). No attempt was made by this friend or others to consider that Madison was not the person behind the posts. If it was on Friendverse, it was truth.

When she returned home, Madison needed to face the consequences of the fabricated posts, attempt to repair friendships, and reclaim her social status. Group status can be fragile, and online perceptions can color offline relationships. It took offline conversations, a Friendverse bulletin, and an online group apology, but ultimately, fictional Madison and her friends realized the power of how one can be represented in an online profile, how the truth can be twisted, and how to learn when to trust that what is shown online is also true offline.

### **To Position Themselves as Part of a Group**

Feelings of belonging are a crucial part of adolescent identity development (Mazarella, 2005; Thiel, 2005). Teens want to fit in and be accepted, and group affiliations help to define identity. In *Top 8*, Madison defined her group via her network of friends on a

social networking website; others find different types of online social networks from which to find self-validation. Many teens seek offline groups to belong to, such as school or religious groups; in fact, some young people situate their identity building in deep involvement with one group, such as being a member of an athletic team. For teenagers, membership in such social groups can be tenuous.

Breaking into groups can be difficult. Group membership implies that others recognize and ratify a potential member as legitimate, that they

“place” that person in the group. Such placement by others makes clear the dialogic and discursive nature of identity work.

The novel *The Rule of Won* (Petruca, 2008) tells of an enigmatic new student who forms an almost cult-like group called “The Crave,” based on a controversial self-help

book that promotes the power of positive thinking. The group presented itself as all-inclusive; its initial members were those who wished to be a part of something but who belonged to no other school group. By joining The Crave, these fictional students who felt on the fringe of their social worlds quickly found themselves an integral and accepted part of a group.

Although membership was initially open, the group members began segregating themselves in order to feel special, even elite—a new feeling for many of the group members. The leader of the group created an online blog as a venue for group members to be involved. Participants in the blog shared their offline identities, but used the online space to position themselves as members of the group and establish their social standing. “I’ve set up a private message board. Sign in with the password, real names only, and please don’t share it with anyone outside the Crave” (Petruca, 2008, p. 22). The blog became a tool for segregation, identity, and status. Through the blog, people began claiming membership in the elite group, and friendships and feelings of belonging emerged in the online and offline world.

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Initially all seemed to be going well. One school loner began to blossom, “I really want to thank everyone for saying hello to me whenever they see me; it really lifts my spirits! After being so unpopular for so long, I’m so happy to have a bunch of new friends . . .” (p. 96). But after initial friendships developed, the group took on a life of its own and started to grow. The initial members started to lose the feeling of being special, and their sense of belonging was com-

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**Finding peers to connect with in an online, semi-anonymous manner allowed these fictional teens to share and even boast about some of their suicidal thoughts.**

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promised. “It’s great that the club is getting big and all, but for some people it makes it really hard to talk about certain people because now those certain people are members and listening in. So, I’m wondering if we can limit the membership or maybe have a separate meeting just with the original Cravers?” (p. 135). The use of a private, password-protected blog as a way to claim membership in and position oneself as a member of a group was reliant on the group remaining small and exclusive. When the group became too large, posts on the blog switched from being primarily positive messages celebrating group belonging to negative messages complaining about other group members, particularly those newer to the group. The blog became the antithesis of its original intention. Private online content impacted offline social standings and group memberships. What initially began as a means for finding a group in which to belong ultimately transitioned into an unsafe place where many did not feel accepted.

### **To Find Acceptance**

As discussed above, group belonging is a crucial part of a teen’s identity. Many teens, in particular those with few friends and relationships, feel alone, unable to become part of real-life offline groups. In *The Rule of Won*, teens joined online groups where they knew the other group members in their offline worlds. A common alternative to that is joining online affinity groups where the teens do not already know the members. Going online to find friends or others who

feel similar to oneself is a natural extension of teens’ digital worlds and a way to find acceptance. Online chatrooms are one venue used to find others in similar mental or social states. Chatrooms are online social forums based on common interests, and in such spaces, “a socially constructed and shared culture develops” (Borzekowski, 2006, p. 5). The sites are not used for popularity status, but as a way for teens to connect with others and to find peer validation.

The Kaiser Family Foundation (Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010) found that 18 percent of “discontented teens” (those who were lonely, had few friends, or were frequently in trouble) used online media, such as chat rooms, to reach out to similarly minded people. Teens go online to find unknown others as a way of making connections and to help them feel that they are not alone, as depicted in the novel *Crash into Me* (Borris, 2009).

In *Crash into Me*, four depressed teens who were contemplating suicide because they felt alone and misunderstood found one another in a suicide chatroom, formed a tenuous group, and created a suicide pact. By keywording “suicide. mspace friends” (p. 53), the teens found peers to connect with and confide in about sensitive and personal matters. Online, they were able to interact in ways impossible in their offline lives. “It’s so much easier to talk to people on the computer. You don’t have to look at their faces. You can walk away. You can write whatever you want and then turn the computer off. I like it that way. Farther away from people” (pp. 3–4), yet closer to others at the same time.

Finding peers to connect with in an online, semi-anonymous manner allowed these fictional teens to share and even boast about some of their suicidal thoughts; it acted as a means of finding peer validation and then friendship. They bonded over their perceived causes of depression and isolation, including negative family situations: “my father is so demanding and i can’t do anything right . . . at least your dad wants something for u. mine left when i was 2” (p. 64). It was accepted, a way of establishing a connection, to discuss if and how others had actually tried committing suicide. “[H]ow serious of a suicide attempt did u make w/pills, Owen? . . . y do u ask? . . . b/c i think i really almost died. i wanted to know if anyone else did too” (p. 66).

Once their initial group was established, they were able to reach out and share that they felt alone and to see if others felt the same way, “ever feel really close to someone? . . . not really . . . that’s what i want. what’s missing in my life” (p. 107). The remoteness of each person’s connection to the online space created a context in which identity announcements could be made safely and, perhaps, be validated and returned. By bonding over their aloneness and death wishes, they became a group.

The online space provided a contained place for participants to take on identities as members of the “suicide club” (p. 60) and, in doing so, allowed them to meet offline, ostensibly to take part in their suicide pact. When one member attempted to go through with their plan, the teens realized that they had made a connection over the Web and that they were no longer alone. One character realized he did want to live and that “I want my *friends* [emphasis added] to live” (p. 255). The Web was used by fictional teens to find and become part of a group for bonding, finding friendship and acceptance, and ultimately finding the will to live.

### **To Find a Romantic Relationship**

In addition to using digital media to position oneself as a part of a group or as a representation of one’s popularity, characters in some YA novels go online to find romantic relationships using online dating or social networking sites. Research has found that youths actively explore identity online to overcome shyness or to make friends and facilitate social and romantic relationships (Valkenburg, Schouten, & Peter, 2005). Online dating has become commonplace, and using social networking sites to expand one’s social circle is socially acceptable (Matsuba, 2006; Pempek, Yermolayeva, & Calvert, 2009). *The Girlfriend Project* (Friedman, 2007) depicted such use of online media and the creation of an online persona as a venue for finding a significant other.

In this novel, main character Reed blossomed the summer before senior year from “dork” to “hottie,” but his shyness and lack of self-confidence prevented him from interacting with girls face-to-face. His friends encouraged him to create [www.thegirlfriendproject.com](http://www.thegirlfriendproject.com), a website designed for him to elicit dating advice and find a girlfriend in his offline world. For Reed, and other real-life teens, being online can be less threatening than talking to a romantic interest in

person. Creating an online profile and interacting with others online can allow one to be oneself without the immediate fear of rejection. The website was “. . . perfect! You get the answers you want, and you possibly get more dates out of it too” (p. 67).

Reed was straightforward about who he was and positioned himself as a teen boy looking for relationship guidance. “Reed Walton, Ultimate Nice Guy . . . needs your help. Answer these questions so he can become an expert on dating. Maybe he’ll even pick you to be his girlfriend!” (p. 67). Through the website, he gained multiple perspectives about perplexing dating questions such as “Would you kiss or date someone you didn’t like? . . . Would you ever date someone you work with?” (p. 67) . . . and “Should girls ask out guys?” (p. 101). In the process, he grew into his new self, gained confidence, went on dates, and just possibly found true love. Reed used the Internet as an extension of his offline world, a safe way to learn about dating, explore his developing sense of identity as a potential romantic partner, and as a safety net from in-person rejection. Using the blog, he could present himself in ways fluid and continuous with his offline identity behind the safety of the computer screen. This allowed him to experiment with his self-representation without the burden of rejection. To those who did not know him, these announcements about himself allowed others to endorse, or place, the person he was unable to share face-to-face.

### **To Explore Different Representations of Self**

One danger of going online to meet new friends or find a relationship is that one never knows how one’s online and offline identity announcements will be endorsed by others (Stone, in Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008). Many novels include discussion of how easy it is to shift representations of one’s identity when solely communicating through digital media. One can create different representations of one’s identity throughout the course of an online communication, either by intentionally posing as someone else or by omitting major aspects of one’s own life (Livingstone, 2008).

In *The Kingdom of Strange* (Klinger, 2008), lonely girl “Thisbe” hoped to find a female friend during a class email-based pen pal assignment. She incorrectly assumed her partner “Iphis,” was a girl. Iphis did nothing to correct this misconception, as he was

also looking for a friend, and a growing friendship was shattered and repaired as secrets were revealed. After their initial exchange, Thisbe, assuming she was interacting with a girl, says, “Oh my gosh. Someone actually posted. She seems nice. She seems normal, i.e., slightly weird. And is she a *she*? Must be. I don’t

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**Thisbe processed why the gender of Iphis (aka Jason) actually mattered. She realized that one can read into others’ online communications what one wants to read.**

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see any boys liking that dance” (p. 28). She wrote subsequent posts referring to Iphis as her “Lady-in-waiting” (p. 50), and Iphis never wrote anything to dissuade her, implicitly endorsing an identity as a girl. Thisbe also often set text apart using asterisks, with text including female pronouns inside reflecting what she was doing at the time—“\*she speaks in a tiny, tiny, small voice\*” (p. 50). In all communication, Iphis, even when using asterisks, never used pronouns, and instead typed gender neutral responses—“\*looks attentive and sprouts a few extra ears\*” (p. 50).

Once the secret was discovered, Thisbe processed why the gender of Iphis (aka Jason) actually mattered. She realized that one can read into others’ online communications what one wants to read. Thisbe wanted to believe the person she confided to on the other end of the computer screen was a girl, and until the truth was revealed, the hidden identity was assumed. “You can’t always believe what you see, hear, feel. I didn’t hear what Iphis was trying to tell me for weeks. There were so many clues” (p. 244). In the end, Thisbe and Jason had to renegotiate their identities with each other, “Thisbe, it’s me, Jason. New ID, same person as before, different person from the one you imagined” (p. 265). Identities online are multilayered, constructed through semiosis, which is always partial. In this way, Iphis can inhabit two identities at once, the offline identity as a boy who makes gender-neutral identity announcements, and the online identity as a girl who is endorsed by others.

**To Be Anonymous**

When teens are struggling to figure out who they are and where they fit into the social structure, they

may need to try on new identities and explore what it might be like to be someone else, or even just a cooler version of themselves. As discussed above, they may project an online identity by omitting aspects of their offline selves. Conversely, in some cases, such as blogs, teens are more truthful about themselves in their online communications than they might be in real life (Huffaker & Calvert, 2005), or they might mask their offline identities to share secret information in an anonymous way. Creating an online blog and presenting a different image or persona is one way to “safely” experience the idea of being someone else.

In *TMI* (Quigley, 2009), protagonist Becca had a tendency to overshare and got in trouble with her friends by revealing too much personal information to others. She needed an anonymous outlet, so she created a blog portraying herself as the glamorous Bella, reinventing an ideal fantasy life in her mind. “I could start my own blog. The blog would be the perfect platform to cater to my oversharing needs. I could freely dole out too much information while sparing my [loved ones] the obvious burden of listening. What’s more, the blog would give me a chance to reinvent myself as someone far more sophisticated. . . .” (pp. 54–55). Becca created Bella, and Bella told it like it was, or maybe just embellished everything a little bit.

Through her blog, she explored the boundaries between appropriate and inappropriate sharing, and figured out how to remain true to herself while protecting her own and her friends’ secrets. Or so she thought. When her blog was discovered and her secret identity revealed, Becca was mortified that her intimate thoughts were revealed to those who knew her, and that she had shared some extremely private information that would hurt people she knew in real life. She deleted all of her previous blog posts and posted a new one in the hopes that people she knew in real life would read it and begin to understand why the blog was created.

“Bella had an interaction today that has left her quite anxious. She’s afraid that someone she knows has discovered this blog . . . . Bella knows that the Internet is simultaneously public and anonymous, which is what makes it so exciting and interesting. However, Bella fears her identity is not as well hidden as she initially thought. This blog was meant to be a tool to help Bella share her secrets in a healthy way . . . . So what is to be done? If anyone out there reading this actually knows Bella, she urges them to show her a little compassion.” (pp. 203–204)

In the end, she was surprised at the support of her loved ones who respected her decisions and her personal online explorations. A family member who read the blog told Becca, “You don’t need to be embarrassed. I really respected your decision to try to change. I figured that your blog was a positive outlet for you” (p. 233). This sentiment was likewise expressed by Becca’s friends who, although upset, were able to see why Becca created the blog and appreciated the attempt at anonymity. Ultimately, Becca learned that nothing online can ever truly be anonymous, and that she needed to be accountable to the offline identity endorsements that were more consequential to her everyday life than her blog

## Discussion

In our initial textual analysis of YA novels that incorporated digital communication technologies, we noted that digital media is used by characters in novels to position themselves as certain types of people. We identified the structural ways in which digital technologies were being infused into YA literature and the language practices being used by characters. This provided an opening for discussion of the types of digital media used by teens and the ways they write digitally to different people in their lives. This analysis looks past the structure and overall content and examines, specifically, characters’ identity motivations and explored constructions.

Through the examples above, we explored the different ways fictional teen characters in six YA novels used digital media to maintain social status, position themselves as a part of a group, find acceptance, find a romantic relationship, explore different representations of self, and be (or not be) anonymous. *Top 8*, *The Rule of Won*, and *Crash into Me* depicted how social networking, blogs, and discussion board groups can confirm a user’s popularity, group belonging, and feelings of acceptance; *The Girlfriend Project* portrayed how one can use the Internet to find a romantic relationship; *The Kingdom of Strange* considered not knowing who is on the other end of an online communication, and how omissions and identity portrayals are not always what they seem; and *TMI* discussed how people can use the Internet as a mask to share information while remaining anonymous. These examples underscore the ways digital communication

technologies can provide today’s adolescents with new ways of expressing, exploring, and asserting their identities. For teens who have grown up in a world surrounded by digital communication technologies, these identity-forming activities are a logical part of their budding exploration into different identities.

Young people announce identities for themselves online and offline in different ways. Their announcements, how they are endorsed by others, and how they endorse others online matter for how they live their lives offline. The networked, potentially anonymous, and layered dimensions of online communication offer ways for young people to announce themselves in particular ways—as members of affinity groups and as types of people. In most of the examples from the novels, online social worlds were extensions of offline worlds, and online identity announcements had serious repercussions for offline interactions. Yet, the remote and semi-self-contained attributes of online affinity groups and the cover of blogs meant that characters could make identity announcements they would not safely make offline.

Young adolescents often experiment with identity announcements online in emergent ways. Since identities are socially constructed and fluid, literacy educators and their students are encouraged to discuss how these identities are being constructed, manipulated, and expressed through online and offline interactions. Examining these activities can help teens understand how online identity constructions are changing the ways people express and understand themselves and others within the larger social context. How is the fictional characters’ digital media usage similar to their own usage? Young adult literature is a springboard for such discussions. (See Table 2 for a list of discussion questions correlated to each YA novel and theme.)

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**The networked, potentially anonymous, and layered dimensions of online communication offer ways for young people to announce themselves in particular ways—as members of affinity groups and as types of people.**

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**Table 2.** Discussion questions per YA novel/theme mentioned

Theme	Questions
Top 8: To maintain social status	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What do you think about when you make or add to your profile page? What choices do you have to make?</li> <li>• How do you decide who and what to respond to on social networking sites?</li> <li>• How can negative posts and comments impact how a person feels about him or herself?</li> <li>• How can negative posts or comments impact how a person is seen offline?</li> </ul>
<i>The Rule of Won</i> : To position themselves as part of a group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do you write, read, or comment on blogs? If so, what types? If not, why not?</li> <li>• Do blogs connect to your offline lives?</li> <li>• Are the blogs you read, write, or comment on open to all or exclusive to members of an offline group?</li> <li>• What does a person's blog say about them?</li> </ul>
<i>Crash into Me</i> : To find acceptance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How is writing for a computer screen different from talking to someone in person?</li> <li>• What types of topics are easier for you to write about and share online than discuss in person? Why?</li> <li>• Where do you find friends? Are there stigmas associated with finding friends online?</li> </ul>
<i>The Girlfriend Project</i> : To find a romantic relationship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have you ever met someone online?</li> <li>• Do you think it is okay to date someone you meet online?</li> <li>• Have you ever flirted with anyone online you never met face to face?</li> <li>• Would you send someone you didn't know a picture of yourself?</li> </ul>
<i>The Kingdom of Strange</i> : To explore different representations of self	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What choices do you make when representing only parts of yourself to others?</li> <li>• Are you ever misleading anyone by the way you portray yourself, either intentionally or unintentionally?</li> <li>• Is it easy to change who you are online? Do you need to keep the lie going to keep the relationship going?</li> <li>• How are these choices different when meeting someone face-to-face rather than online?</li> </ul>
<i>TMI</i> : To be anonymous	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do you present yourself differently when you have a known versus an unknown audience?</li> <li>• When and where online should you share information about yourself and your families or friends?</li> </ul>

Through reading and discussing these novels, young adolescents can examine the ways they present themselves and explore their real-life identities in their online worlds. The depiction of these technologies in YA novels provides a way to examine how these constructs are being used as fictional teens form identities both on- and offline; after all, we know that teens often look to books to relate to characters and explore how others might grapple with issues and events similar to ones they are experiencing in their own lives in ways that locate questions of identity (Koss & Tucker-Raymond, 2010; Bean & Moni, 2003). Building on Bean and Moni's discussion of how teen readers of young adult literature can use the characters in literature to "better understand how they are being constructed as adolescents in the texts and how such constructions compare with their own attempts to form their identities" (p. 639), this article extends

the discussion of identity in YA literature to include the impact digital technology communication has on many modern teens' identity development.

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# Text Complexity and “Comparable Literary Merit” in Young Adult Literature

**R**esearch shows that reading necessitates increased *independence* and *complexity* in college and in workforce training (Achieve, 2007; Stenner, Koons, & Swartz, in press). Architects of the Common Core State Standards (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010) understand this and point to the need for sustained exposure to expository texts and scaffolding across K–12 for reading and understanding it. This can help students develop important reading strategies that can be applied across various texts and contexts (Afflerbach, Pearson, & Paris, 2008; Kintsch, 1998, 2009; Perfetti, Landi, & Oakhill, 2005; van den Broek, Lorch, Linderholm, & Gustafson, 2001; van den Broek, Risden, & Husebye-Hartmann, 1995). The authors believe that attention to complex choices in reading selection over time in K–12 schooling will help prepare students for the demands they will face in the workforce and in college.

While teachers are making curricular adjustments to meet the challenges presented by the new Standards, they are also assimilating how past practice can still fit. This study takes a close look at how the Common Core English Language Arts Standards, Anchor Standard 10 for Reading (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.10), proffers that having a specific type of reading capital can lead students to success in life. Drawing on prior research then (Miller & Slifkin, 2010; Miller, 2013), this study demonstrates how *some* YA lit—which is a high-interest tool that mediates learning (Engels & Kory, 2013; Kornfeld & Prothro, 2005; Miller, 2005a; Stallworth, 2006; Sturm & Michel,

2009), but which is curiously absent from within the 9th–12th-grade Exemplar Texts—can also hone specific requisite knowledge and skills that prepare students with literacy practices for career readiness.

## Text Complexity

### Rationale

Authors of the Common Core argue that K–12 texts have declined “in sophistication, and relatively little attention has been paid to students’ ability to read complex texts independently” (Common Core, 2010), a step deemed necessary for college readiness. Most texts required for postsecondary courses fall within a Lexile range of 1200L to 1400L (Williamson, 2008), while most high school textbooks are in the 1050L to 1165L range. This 250L difference between the ranges of reader ability and text complexity can generate a comprehension gap of almost 50% for the incoming college freshman, which can create a backlog of other types of problems for students as they move into upper division courses (e.g., failed expectations, poor grades, negative self-concept leading to possibly dropping out; see Au, 2000; Schreiner, Louis, & Nelson, 2012).

Such research makes a strong case for increased Text Complexity. It also reveals that results of first-year college students’ ACT scores in the 2006 report *Reading between the Lines* demonstrated that those who achieved or exceeded a benchmark score of 21 out of 36 in the reading section had a 50% chance of earning a grade of “B” or higher in US history or psy-



chology, both of which are reading-intensive courses. The results suggest that the clearest differentiator for students' success in this section is predicated on their ability to answer questions associated with complex texts. These findings remained consistent across gender, racial/ethnic, and socioeconomic categories.

Additional research demonstrates that students who enter college with serious gaps in their reading abilities, especially expository materials (which many college professors assign) are not prepared for independent complex reading tasks in college or in the workforce. Although this research does not focus on the career readiness rationale of the Common Core, Greene (2000) asserts that the shortage of basic US literacy skills creates a \$16 billion per year deficit in decreased productivity and remedial costs for businesses, universities, and underprepared high school graduates. The Common Core, as a whole, is expected to fill in such gaps and to sufficiently prepare students for college and careers.

**Anchor Standard 10 for Reading:  
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.10**

When we step back and look at the actual wording for Anchor Standard 10, Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.10, it reads, “Read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently” (Common Core State Standard), 2010. Explicit in this Standard is that teachers are expected to help readers become more proficient in reading increasingly

complex texts through the grades or to read texts with more rigor over time, while they also are expected to help students meet each year's grade-specific Standards and retain or further develop skills and understandings mastered in preceding grades. In other words, teachers must help students “catch-up” each year if they're reading below grade level, and somehow advance students into a proficiency status for the next grade.

The suggested text types to help students advance include literature (e.g., stories, dramas, and poetry) and informational texts (see Table 1). When we glance at this table and observe which types of texts are excluded, YAL among others, or review the suggested but not prescriptive list of Exemplar Texts (Connors, 2013) in Appendix B (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010), it can be argued that the table and the list have the potential to secure the marginalization of YAL from ever entering the 9–12th-grade language arts classroom or the AP literature classroom (where YAL tends to be attenuated; Miller, 2013). In fact, a quick glance at the list of 9–12th-grade “Exemplar Texts” shows only one YA text, Zusak's *The Book Thief* (2006), which many have agreed is a crossover text for adults (it is sold in both the YA section and adult fiction sections in mainstream bookstores) because it is a multilayered text and is based on compelling real-life historical events about the Holocaust. In noting this pervasive absence of YA, I turn to the authors of the Common Core to try to understand how

**Table 1.** Students in grades 6–12 apply the Reading Standards to the following range of text types, with texts selected from a broad range of cultures and periods (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010).

Literature			Informational Text
Stories	Dramas	Poetry	Literary Nonfiction and Historical, Scientific, and Technical Texts
Includes the subgenres of adventure stories, historical fiction, mysteries, myths, science fiction, realistic fiction, allegories, parodies, satire, and graphic novels	Includes one-act and multi-act plays, both in written form and on film	Includes the subgenres of narrative poems, lyrical poems, free verse poems, sonnets, odes, ballads, and epics	Includes the subgenres of exposition, argument, and functional text in the form of personal essays, speeches, opinion pieces, essays about art or literature, biographies, memoirs, journalism, and historical, scientific, technical, or economic accounts (including digital sources) written for a broad audience

and why particular text types are privileged and how text *quality* is determined:

While it is possible to have high-complexity texts of low inherent quality, the work group solicited only texts of recognized value. From the pool of submissions gathered from outside contributors, the work group selected classic or historically significant texts as well as contemporary works of *comparable literary merit* (emphasis author), cultural significance, and rich content. (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010)

## A Rationale for Connecting YAL to the CCSS

### Developing a Rationale

We know from past research that students enjoy YAL (Dozier, Johnston, & Rogers, 2006; Kornfeld & Prothro, 2005; Miller, 2005a, 2005b, 2008; Stallworth, 2006; Sturm & Michel, 2009), that some YAL is more layered than others (Miller, 2013), and that teachers use it in classrooms for multiple purposes (e.g., book groups, independent reading, whole-class discussions, pairings with the canon, and as a scaffold for building to more complex texts). Because aggregate research does make a strong case for the inclusion and centering of YAL in English classrooms, it is critical to understand how to strengthen a rationale for its textual complexity, especially now that it is almost entirely excluded from the list of 9th–12th-grade “Exemplar Texts” where privileged types of reading are favored.

### Building the Rationale for CCSS through an AP Lit Study

Question 3, the open question on the AP English Literature and Composition exam, begins with a prompt. To help students decide on a context for their response, the prompt is accompanied by a list of approximately 36 possible canonical texts from various time periods from which students may select; students are also given the option to select a text from their own memory—one of “comparable literary merit.” An interesting phenomenon occurs, however, when students draw from YAL and graphic novels in order to answer the question: they tend to be poorly evaluated by some readers *because of their text selections*, not on the quality of their essays, often receiving a 4 or lower (not a passing score). This evaluation stems, in part, from the phrase “similar (or comparable) literary

merit,”<sup>1</sup> which obviously presents ambiguities about what constitutes a text of literary merit.

Taken together, this monopoly, now spanning almost 60 years, wields copious power to impact, shape, and privilege certain type of texts and attitudes about what quality texts are and will continue to be and mean in English language arts classrooms around the country. Based on this follow-up study, what has emerged as the key issue facing current AP English literature teachers and 9th–12th-grade language arts teachers is what I call the *YA Text Complexity and “Comparable Literary Merit”* dualism.

## The Problem with “Similar Literary Merit”

### Understanding Question 3

This study extends ongoing research (Miller & Slifkin, 2010; Miller, 2013) from my 13 years of attending the AP English Literature and Composition reading—first as a reader and now as a table leader—where I have observed this scoring phenomenon through conversations with well over 200 readers, table leaders, question leaders, and my participants in Advanced Placement Summer Institutes (APSI). Because it’s the students who are ultimately impacted by these scores (and the beliefs that impact the scores), it became critical for me to understand the root cause of such widespread injustices. By speaking directly with classroom AP literature teachers and turning to documents from the College Board and the CCSS, I was able to ascertain and make meaning of the risk teachers face in teaching YAL in an AP English Literature and Composition classroom, or in encouraging students to use a YA text to answer the exam question.

During the initial phase of the study, Miller and Slifkin (2010) reflected on 1) how the historical phrasing of “similar literary quality” has impacted teacher beliefs about including YAL in an AP English classroom, and 2) how this phrase was generating ambiguous responses from readers at the exam. We looked at 10 years of the exam—over 216 titles from 1999–2008—and noted that only two YA texts have ever appeared, and those appearances were only on Form B of the exam, which is sometimes given outside the United States or is used if the exam must be delayed. Those texts included *Push* (Sapphire, 1996) in 2007 and *House on Mango Street* (Cisneros, 1991) in 2008

and 2010. It should be noted that in an unprecedented move this year, Question 3 on the 2013 AP English literature exam included two YA books in its list of possible texts to select from: *Purple Hibiscus*<sup>2</sup> by Adichie (2003) and *House on Mango Street* by Cisneros.

Throughout this study, pre-AP and AP English teachers spend a week at an APSI where I introduce them to theories (reader-response, critical pedagogy, social constructivism, sociocultural theory) and pedagogies as they link to AP curriculum. This is done purposefully in order to prepare teachers to teach *beyond* the test rather than *to* the test. I have a contractual obligation to provide teachers with College Board materials and to help prepare them to teach AP, but I have leeway about how I approach that. For seven summers now, at different APSIs, I have engaged my participants in an in-depth study of Anderson's *Speak* (1999), and we pair it with the AP English literature and composition curriculum. Teachers take pre- and post-introduction surveys about their attitudes toward including YAL in an AP English classroom.

In "AP Gatekeeping: Exploring the Myths of Using YAL in an AP English Classroom" (Miller, 2013), I look more deeply into the myths of using YA in an AP English classroom and discuss why so many teachers have bought into them and how these myths impacts their textual choices and discussions with students. In an effort to ascertain which myths teachers have ascribed to, I sent out the article to current AP English literature teachers, professors in English Education who teach YAL or children's lit, preservice English teachers, former APSI participants, and AP literature readers and table leaders who attend the reading, requesting that they read the manuscript and reflect on any part of it that spoke to their classroom practices. The responses from participants and their obvious concerns about text complexity and the types of literature they were expected to cover contributed to my interest in the emergent issue of the *YA Text Complexity and "Comparable Literary Merit"* dualism. As a result, I built taxonomies to carefully scrutinize the wording of Anchor Standard 10 for Reading and revisited the findings in Miller and Slifkin (2010).

### **Understanding the YA Text Complexity and "Comparable Literary Merit" Dualism**

When I began this study in 2008, I focused on the phrase "similar literary merit" (Miller & Slifkin, 2010)

and teachers' predispositions and beliefs about YA's place in an AP English literature classroom or as a selection for the exam. Interestingly, the term "Text Complexity" was never mentioned by participants as a reason for their hesitation to use, or encourage the use of, YA. Instead, their hesitation was most often attributed to their belief that YAL was *not layered*. For participants, *not layered* meant that the plot was sequential, stylistic techniques were attenuated, diction was often informal, and syntax was simplistic. A *layered text* (often a text of prestige), to the contrary, would vary in grammar and writing style, would include multiple stylistic techniques, narratives, and themes, and would inspire various levels of interpretation.

Since the vetting of the CCSS in 2010, and due to the emphasis on increased inclusion of informational texts across a student's academic coursework, determining and selecting texts with increased textual complexity has become an issue of even greater salience for classroom AP English literature teachers. In particular, the wording in Reading Standard 10 for the English Language Arts posits similar concerns to those in the phrase "similar literary merit." For those AP English teachers who devalue or won't use YA, Reading Standard 10 bolsters their argument and provides hesitant teachers with new, "acceptable" language to validate their hesitation.

With the adoption of the familiar phrase *comparable literary merit* by the CCCS to describe other quality texts teachers can select, they, along with the College Board, are gatekeepers who *do* influence teachers' predispositions about what types of texts are quality texts. Similar to the College Board's English Literature course description (2008), which suggests that AP English Literature and Composition curriculum is not prescriptive, the authors of the CCCS share that, "The

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**It should be noted that in an unprecedented move this year, Question 3 on the 2013 AP English literature exam included two YA books in its list of possible texts to select from: *Purple Hibiscus* by Adichie (2003) and *House on Mango Street* by Cisneros (1991).**

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[text] choices should serve as useful guideposts in helping educators select texts of similar complexity, quality, and range for their own classrooms. They expressly do not represent a partial or complete reading list.”

While each document *does* leave the door open for teachers to select materials not offered in either of their documents, unless teachers are aware that they can select other texts, and unless they understand the highly ambiguous phrase “*similar/comparable literary merit*,” they are likely to default to what is described (or what administrators encourage them to do) in these respective documents. As noted by a participant in the study who works to ensure that students exit an English Education program understanding the potential power of YA:

I introduce preservice English teachers to effective, powerful YA[L], YA[L] that addresses real issues, includes complex and challenging content, and often linguistic and stylistic beauty. I think it is one of my jobs to attempt to dislodge college students from their stereotypical thinking about “classic” versus “YA[L]” literature. I want them to read at least one YA[L] book that challenges their thinking, that they could see teaching in a high school class. I want them to know that there is quality YA[L] out there that can not only count as “complex texts,” but that can also encourage reader identification, empathy, and critical self-reflection. One book may not be enough to change preservice teachers’ minds, but I hope that it will be enough to urge them to speak out if, in the future, they hear a colleague say that YA[L] is not worthy for inclusion in an AP course. I want them to say, “Oh, I think it is. Let me give you an example . . . .”

Another English Education professor wrote, “I feel [students] have a right to know about the prejudices against YA, but more important, they need to educate themselves about YA, graphic novels, audio texts, nonfiction, and anything else that can engender (or maintain) a love of reading in their students.” Notwithstanding, if English teachers are provided concrete tools (see Table 2) to understand how to determine text complexity, they can make a case for inclusion of YAL in their classrooms; however, as findings indicate (Miller & Slifkin, 2010; Miller, 2013), until the College Board defines “*similar/comparable literary merit*,” AP English teachers are likely to be trepidatious about using YAL or encouraging students to select a YA novel to respond to question 3.

## How to Determine Text Complexity and “Similar Literary Merit”

In order to understand how to determine text complexity, teachers can turn to the Common Core Standards website (<http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/standard-10-range-quality-complexity/measuring-text-complexity-three-factors>). Teachers are offered a triangulation of definitions to help them understand a text’s complexity: qualitative evaluation of the text, quantitative evaluation of the text, and matching reader to text and task. Teachers are also encouraged to turn to Appendix A for more specific instructions to determine a text’s complexity.

The writers of the Common Core define the *qualitative evaluation of the text* as “levels of meaning, structure, language conventionality and clarity, and knowledge demands”; the *quantitative evaluation of the text* as the “readability measures and other scores of text complexity”; and the *matching reader to text and task* as “reader variables (such as motivation, knowledge, and experiences) and task variables (such as purpose and the complexity generated by the task assigned and the questions posed)” (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). Building on these areas, I offer a more in-depth and detailed application for obtaining textual complexity.

Teachers can ascertain a reader’s level, determine text complexity, and account for “similar/comparable literary merit” through the exercises I created in Table 2. (Table 3 is a practice in application for Table 2.) The Lexile range (L) is a fairly fixed “measure” of either an individual’s reading ability or the difficulty of a text. For the Common Core, the (L) for 9th–10th grades is 1080–1305, and for 11th–12th grades is 1215–1355 (prior ranges for 9th–10th grades were 960–1115 and for 11th–12th grades 1070–1220). These ranges are new and reflect how researchers understand the aggregate impact that the Common Core can and should have on readers over time.

## Implications for Classroom Practice

A challenge presented here to teachers is to develop additional assessments for how Lexile ranges, background student knowledge, and experience match up with rubrics and criteria that can measure both

**Table 2.** As a group, teachers should look at these three areas together and have conversations with students to determine text complexity and “similar literary merit.” Many of the tools for determining the quantitative measure for text complexity are still being developed and will be released in the near future.

Text Complexity	What This Means	What Teachers Can Do
<p><b>Qualitative Evaluation of the Text</b></p>	<p>•<b>Levels of Meaning (Layering)</b>— can vary based on type of text and levels or layering of ideas</p> <p>•<b>Structure</b>— how a text is organized and the sequencing of how story lines are revealed</p> <p>•<b>Language Conventionalilty and Clarity</b>— how an author uses or manipulates language to produce an effect</p> <p>•<b>Knowledge Demands</b> how an author challenges a reader to tap into one’s life experience, or must access and recall cultural/literary and content/discipline knowledge in order to unpack meaning in a text.</p>	<p>•Develop rubrics that account for a continuum of complexity (e.g., meaning, multiple narratives and themes that inspire various levels of interpretation), structure, language conventionality and clarity, and knowledge demands. Create clear criteria on a continuum of low to high complexity and assess different types of literature. <b>Rank</b> types of literature against each other and even against the same type. Consider canonical texts, various expository pieces, informational texts, YA, Hip-Hop Lit, graphic novels, and anime.</p> <p>For <b>structure</b>, consider inclusion of conventional structures, chronology of story line, flashbacks, foreshadowing, types of figurative language allowing for distortions or interruptions in text (allusions, metonymy, apostrophe, allegory), space-time distortions, and inclusion of graphics.</p> <p>For <b>language conventionality and clarity</b>, consider how authors use and vary diction such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•monosyllabic/polysyllabic</li> <li>•colloquial/informal/formal/old fashioned/slang</li> <li>•denotative/connotative</li> <li>•concrete/abstract</li> <li>•euphonious/cacophonous</li> <li>•jargon/dialect</li> <li>•Black English Vernacular</li> </ul> <p>And consider how authors use and vary syntax such as:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. sentence length</li> <li>b. sentence pattern <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•declarative/imperative/exclamatory/interrogative</li> <li>•simple/compound/complex/compound complex</li> <li>• loose/periodic</li> <li>• balanced</li> <li>• order: natural, inverted, split</li> <li>• juxtaposition</li> <li>• parallel structure</li> <li>• repetition</li> <li>• rhetorical questioning</li> </ul> </li> <li>c. arrangement of ideas in a sentence</li> <li>d. arrangement of ideas in a paragraph</li> </ol> <p>*<b>For further consideration:</b> Consider variations of theme, diction, and syntax by time period (Ancient World, Medieval Period, Elizabethan Age, Renaissance, Puritan Age, Pre-Romantics, Victorian Age, 20th and 21st Centuries)</p> <p>For <b>knowledge demands</b>, consider how much personal background or cultural/literary or content/discipline knowledge is required in order to help students understand a text. Consider how understanding stylistic techniques and time period and historical contexts can support a student’s comprehension on the text.</p>

*continued on next page*

Table 2. Continued

<b>Quantitative Evaluation of the Text</b>	Texts have a Lexile range (L) that suggests the level of complexity and readability of a text by grade level. These scores are subjective and must be looked at in relation to other factors of student growth. A score must be crystallized with other student artifacts.	Speak with district reading specialists or literacy coaches for support in determining how to obtain one of these tests: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level test;</li> <li>•Dale-Chall Readability Formula;</li> <li>•MetaMetrics;</li> <li>•Coh-Metrix*</li> </ul>
<b>Matching Reader to Text and Task</b>	Teachers should consider student knowledge, motivation, and experiences and determine how they align to the assigned task (e.g., purpose, task complexity, and questions posed).	Can create questionnaires and reading surveys as well as interview students to ascertain possible interest or engagement with a text.

\*Each of these tests measures different types of information. It is important that a school district determine a measurement that would fit the needs of a particular student body.

“similar literary merit” and text complexity (Table 3). From there, as we develop from our own practice our knowledge of how developing readers who have strong comprehension tools can demonstrate their learning, we can actually assess text against text and bolster a rationale for moving YAL from periphery into center.

Consider what it would be like to make a case that YA texts can hold their own against canonical texts. Consider how Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* stands with Oates’s *Big Mouth and Ugly Girl* (2003), how Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* (1987) stands with Crowe’s *Getting Away with Murder: The True Story of the Emmett Till Case* (2003), or how Diaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007) stands with Danticat’s *Behind the Mountains* (2004) (see Table 4). What could a crystallization of measurements look like? I think we might just find some answers as we de-center the research as privileged and instead account for the voices of teachers and students in the process of rubric and criteria development. It is possible that YAL leads to increased reading comprehension with complex texts, perhaps even more effectively than some classic texts.

**Cautions about Standard-Driven Teaching**

We can challenge our current culpability as researchers and classroom teachers who adopt research or past practices around colonizing language that absent or sideline textual choices like YA. We have agency

to dislodge ourselves from those who believe that “venerated” institutions are the *preferred*, superior, and normative legislator for values and morals because of their power to grant and reproduce intellectual, academic, ableist, gendered, classed, religious, environmental, ethnic, linguistic, and heteronormative capital within dominant culture. A person in the study noted: “I worry that people who know very little about teaching, reading, learning, motivation, engagement, and writing are ‘reforming’ classrooms that were much better before they stuck their nose into them.” While research can certainly inform practice, we must consider who is benefiting and profiting from it. We must support our teachers by calling into question, as in this case, literary gatekeeping monopolies that continue to have great social power institutionally to reinforce and sustain hierarchies of literary textual choices.

Evidence suggests that this Millennial generation greatly benefits from reading YAL in and outside of the classroom and infers that we can’t afford to blindly adopt or accept the lack of definition of “similar literary merit” or accept the research that has informed text complexity for the Common Core. Rather, we have to go beyond Text Complexity (Frey, Lapp, & Fisher, 2012) and teach beyond the Common Core (Beach, Thein, & Webb, 2012). We must continue to pay attention to the needs of the Millennial generation. We have to know our students, understand their interests, scaffold instruction to help them develop,

**Table 3.** Evaluating YAL to determine text complexity and “comparable literary merit”

Criteria for Qualitative Evaluation of a Text	Low	Medium	High
<b>Levels of Meaning (Layering)</b> —how ideas or meaning are embedded in characters, diction, syntax, figurative language, themes, archetypes, point of view, tone, plot, and context	Text has a couple of narratives and themes, and levels of interpretation are limited	Text has a few narratives and themes, and levels of interpretation are somewhat predictable	Text has multiple narratives and themes that inspire various levels of interpretation
<b>Structure</b> —how a text is organized and the sequencing of how story lines are revealed	The story line chronology is mostly linear but may include some flashbacks, foreshadowing, or different types of figurative language. Graphics or pics may be used to further the plot.	The story line chronology includes some uses of flashbacks, foreshadowing, different types of figurative language that allows for some distortions or interruptions in text (e.g., allusions, metonymy, apostrophe, allegory), and may include space-time distortions.	The story line chronology can include but is not limited to multiple uses of flashbacks, foreshadowing, multiple types of figurative language allowing for distortions or interruptions in text (e.g., allusions, metonymy, apostrophe, allegory), and space-time distortions.
	<b>Low</b>	<b>Medium</b>	<b>High</b>
<b>Language Conventionalities and Clarity</b> —how an author uses or manipulates language to produce an effect			
<b>Diction</b> —how an author uses words to convey meaning. Diction can contextualize a time period, a region, or a culture.	The author may vary diction but limits it to two or three characters: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•monosyllabic/polysyllabic</li> <li>•colloquial/informal/formal/old fashioned/slang</li> <li>•denotative/connotative</li> </ul>	The author varies types of diction and may use contrasting language to convey characterization: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•monosyllabic/polysyllabic</li> <li>•colloquial/informal/formal/old fashioned/slang</li> <li>•denotative/connotative</li> <li>•concrete/abstract</li> <li>•euphonious/cacophonous</li> <li>•jargon/dialect</li> <li>•Black English Vernacular</li> </ul>	The author varies multiple types of diction and uses contrasting language to convey characterization: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•monosyllabic/polysyllabic</li> <li>•colloquial/informal/formal/old fashioned/slang</li> <li>•denotative/connotative</li> <li>•concrete/abstract</li> <li>•euphonious/cacophonous</li> <li>•jargon/dialect</li> <li>•Black English Vernacular</li> </ul>
<b>Syntax</b> —how an author uses sentences to convey meaning	The author limits variations in syntax and may only vary it for two–three characters or settings. The text does not rely on syntactical conventions to deepen the storyline.	The author somewhat varies syntax in order to develop plot and characterization, but does not overwhelm the text with usage variations. Sentences and structure can include variations in: a. sentence length b. sentence pattern <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•declarative/imperative/exclamatory/interrogative</li> <li>•simple/compound/complex/compound complex</li> <li>• loose/periodic</li> <li>• balanced</li> <li>• order: natural, inverted, split</li> <li>• juxtaposition</li> <li>• parallel structure</li> <li>• repetition</li> <li>• rhetorical questioning</li> </ul> c. arrangement d. arrangement of ideas in a paragraph	The author purposefully varies syntax in order to develop plot and characterization. Sentences and structure can include variations in: a. sentence length b. sentence pattern <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•declarative/imperative/exclamatory/interrogative</li> <li>•simple/compound/complex/compound complex</li> <li>• loose/periodic</li> <li>• balanced</li> <li>• order: natural, inverted, split</li> <li>• juxtaposition</li> <li>• parallel structure</li> <li>• repetition</li> <li>• rhetorical questioning</li> </ul> c. arrangement d. arrangement of ideas in a paragraph

*continued on next page*

**Table 3.** Continued

<b>Time period</b> —different time periods a story can take place include: Ancient World, Medieval Period, Elizabethan Age, Renaissance, Puritan Age, Pre-Romantics, Victorian Age, 20th and 21st Centuries	The time period does not impact comprehension because context clues are surface and provide thorough description of historical/political/cultural/economic/gendered issues. Time period may impact authors' choices of diction and syntax, but context clues offer readers thorough comprehension support.	The time period impacts comprehension but context clues give way to historical/political/cultural/economic/gendered themes presented in the text. Time period does impact authors' choices of diction and syntax, but context clues offer readers comprehension support.	The time period must be considered in order to fully comprehend historical/political/cultural/economic/gendered themes presented in the text. Time period impacts authors' choices of diction and syntax.
	<b>Low</b>	<b>Medium</b>	<b>High</b>
<b>Knowledge Demands</b> —how an author challenges a reader to tap into one's life experience, or reader must access and recall cultural/literary and content/discipline knowledge in order to unpack meaning in a text			
	Reader needs limited background knowledge, or awareness of cultural/literary and content/discipline events or understandings of how and why authors use stylistic techniques, and time period and historical contexts to unpack textual meaning.	Reader must have some background knowledge, comprehension of cultural/literary and content/discipline events, and some understandings of how and why authors use stylistic techniques, and time period and historical contexts to unpack textual meaning.	Reader must have extensive background knowledge, comprehension of cultural/literary and content/discipline events, and complex understandings of how and why authors use stylistic techniques, and time period and historical contexts to unpack textual meaning.

**Table 4.** Examples of textual complexity

<b>Text</b>	<b>What Speaks to Its Textual Complexity</b>	<b>Notes</b>
<i>Big Mouth and Ugly Girl</i>	Levels of Meaning	Adult and student perspectives
	Structure	Written through multiple voices, includes various subplots, quick pacing, multigenre
	Language Conventionality and Clarity	Unpacks the power of sarcasm and its impact on others; filled with irony; cacophonous diction
	Knowledge Demands	Deals with bullying; media's contribution to stereotyping; self-loathing body size, marginalization, post-Columbine and school violence; can be used to segue into modern day bullying
<i>Getting Away with Murder: The True Story of the Emmett Till Case</i>	Levels of Meaning	Inferences and connections can be made across multiple contexts of injustices
	Structure	Reveals true accounts (nonfiction), uses primary documents, includes photographs, flashbacks, multiple narratives
	Language Conventionality and Clarity	Formal and informal, concrete and cacophonous diction
	Knowledge Demands	Deals with post-civil rights issues, injustice, racism, kidnapping, torture, segregation; can be used as a stepping off into modern civil rights issues around Trayvon Martin
<i>Behind the Mountains</i>	Levels of Meaning	Inferences and connections can be made across multiple social and historical contexts
	Structure	First person, innocent eye, point of view, multiple contexts (New York and Haiti), written as diary entries
	Language Conventionality and Clarity	Rich in metaphor, connotative diction, visual imagery, uses some Haitian creole
	Knowledge Demands	Deals with immigrant experience, violence, students whose first language isn't English, learning difficulties; can be used as a jumping off point to struggles for ELL students or immigrants to find their place in American society



and then apply learning and reading strategies across a range of texts and styles so that the strategies we teach become the skills they automatically apply to new situations. As noted by Afflerbach, Pearson, and Paris (2008), “[R]eading skills operate without the reader’s deliberate control or conscious awareness . . . . This has important, positive consequences for each reader’s limited working memory” (p. 369). In other words, teaching reading well need not necessitate the exclusion of texts that adolescent readers can relate to and care about, nor should their reading capital be limited or gate-kept by what test preparers or the Standards deem as worthy of merit.

In order to demonstrate how YAL might qualify as text understood to have high text complexity and “comparable literary merit,” Table 3 has been assembled. A teacher might consider these steps in order to make an assessment:

- Select a YA text (might also consider asking students to do this as an exercise);
- Based on the categories and definitions in the left column, compare the text against the headers of “low,” “medium,” and “high”;
- If a measurement falls on the cusp between any two areas, it can have a +/- factor;
- Assemble a score of high, medium, or low (if a text is high- or medium +, review with student);
- Determine the Lexile Band for the text;
- Have candid conversations with students about background knowledge, motivation, and experiences, and how they align to the assigned task; then match reader to text and crystallize artifacts;
- If a text has high text complexity, it also has “comparable literary merit.”

In following the steps above, if a text qualifies as having high or medium-high text complexity, it can also be considered of “comparable literary merit.” Ultimately, by taking into consideration the Lexile Band for the text; having candid conversations with students about background knowledge, motivation, and experiences, and how these align to the assigned task; and matching reader to text, the decision about the quality of the text will reveal itself.

### Concerns about Sidelining YA

The Anchor Standard 10 for Reading has the potential to operate as a tool that reinforces particular perspec-

tives about what constitutes quality texts and that can continue to shape and privilege certain beliefs around reading. This perspective, if not carefully challenged, has the potential to reinforce a colonizing ideology in which students exit school with a type of reading canon that is situated in an “official knowledge[-type]” ideology (Apple, 2002). The underlying premise is that such a canon will help them meet the academic and financial challenges they’ll face in life. This colonizing ideology operates as a means to lock students into a type of citizenship that reifies a highly competitive global marketplace of goods, services, and ideas. Bhabha (1995) calls this a form of *splitting*, where relationships of the “colonized” to institutions and apparatuses of power emphasize the inadequacies of the “colonized” as dependent on institutions for political and economic success.

Unless teachers interrogate standards, how they are written, and by whom they are written, they “vulnerabilize” The Millennial Generation into embodying specific types of cultural capital without their knowledge or consent (unless made transparent by educators or those in the know). This ideology instills within them a compliance and dependency complex (Lesko, 2012) in relation to those who operate in more powerful spaces. Because they have acquired a particular reading capital, or a type of reading norm, they sustain and maintain a type of Democratic citizenry. Our take-away from the CCSS is that teachers must be mindful about how what is and isn’t named by the Standards has widespread potential to shape future generations. As literacy researchers, it seems feasible that we can rupture a splitting and dependency complex so youth can become lifelong lovers of all types of reading and not automatons whose sole purpose for reading is to become laborers.

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## Notes

1. The phrase also shows up as “similar literary merit” and “similar literary quality” (Miller & Slifkin, 2010). I vary its usage based on its use in different contexts, although they mean the same thing.
2. *Purple Hibiscus*, like *The Book Thief*, is considered a crossover text and is found in adult fiction in the several book stores I surveyed.

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## Call for Nominations: James Moffett Award

NCTE's Conference on English Education offers this award to support teacher research projects that further the spirit and scholarship of James Moffett. Moffett, a great champion of the voices of K–12 teachers, focused on such ideas as the necessity of student-centered curricula, writing across the curriculum, alternatives to standardized testing, and spiritual growth in education and life. This award is offered in conjunction with the National Writing Project.

Applications for the Moffett Award should be in the form of a proposal for a project that one or more K–12 classroom teachers wish to pursue. The proposal 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 connection to the spirit and scholarship of James Moffett; initial objectives for the study (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 researcher 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 2014 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, 2014**. 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.

# From Fire and Thorns to the Bitter End:

An Interview with Young Adult Author Rae Carson

**L**ike many emerging authors, Rae Carson entered the writing world by way of various other life experiences. Moving around a great deal as a child gave her an insight into life and how to handle herself in various school and, later, social situations. So from cheerleading to actually playing flag football, from college to a variety of adult jobs, Rae emerged from adolescence into adulthood with a take-charge attitude.

Although some of these attributes appear in Elisa, her main character from *The Girl of Fire and Thorns* (Greenwillow, 2011), Rae stated in this interview that she is actually more like the character of Elisa's confident older sister, Alodia. The journey from adolescence to published author of a successful trilogy—beginning with *The Girl of Fire and Thorns* (September, 2011), continuing with *The Crown of Embers* (Fall, 2012), and ending with *The Bitter Kingdom* (August, 2013)—has launched her career as a young adult writer. Creating the fantasy kingdoms of Orovalle and Joya d'Arena has drawn teen readers immediately into the fantasy adventure of battling royal families.

Rae was invited to the 2012 ALAN Workshop in Las Vegas as a participant in the opening panel on Fantasy with Maggie Stiefvater, Shannon Hale, and Kristin Cashore. As the Moderator/Chair of this panel, I first met Rae through the communications necessary to organize the panel. I learned that she lived close to me, so we met for lunch to begin a further exploration



of her work. Hearing her tell so much of the story behind the story, I felt it needed to be shared. The result is this *ALAN Review* article.

Each member of the ALAN fantasy panel writes about strong female characters that are plunged into complex worlds of high fantasy, so that was our starting point as we met that day. Rae talked about giving her lead character a Godstone—a precious jewel bestowed only every one hundred years to one child born into this conflicted and warring world. The as yet unleashed power of the Godstone begins in *The Girl of Fire and Thorns*. This was Rae's debut into young adult fiction, and it was quickly recognized, earning nominations for the William Morris Award as well as the Cybils, the Andre Norton Awards, the Publisher's Weekly Flying Start, and ALA's Top Ten Best Fiction for Young Adults.

**KSH:** Let's begin with your background and preparation to become a writer. You have told me writing has always been part of your life. What choices and decisions did you make to prepare yourself to become a writer?

**RC:** I've been writing my whole life. At first it was all thinly disguised Star Wars fanfiction. It evolved into stories about little girls whose parents make them wash dishes, who then rebel against this egregious oppression and run away to have adventures and find their *real* parents, because they were

secretly *adopted*. Now, of course, all my writing is *high literature*. (Sword fights! Magic! Kissing!) My most profound growth as a writer came when I joined an online critique group. What a harrowing, terrifying, wonderful experience that was. *The Girl of Fire and Thorns* is the first book I ever finished, but it came after years and years of honing my craft on throwaway projects.

I was a Social Science major in college, with an emphasis in secondary education. I took as many courses on the American colonial era and westward expansion as I could. This turned out to be wonderful preparation for writing fantasy novels. Studying the prime movers of history—economics, religion, sociology, etc.—and how they both shape a nation and place that nation in an international context helped me build the *Fire & Thorns* universe.

In fact, when teens ask for writing advice, I tell them not to hesitate to major in something besides English or Literature if their passion lies elsewhere. The craft of writing can be honed without formal education through dedication and practice. But I've heard from a lot of teens who are put off writing—and even reading—because they believe these activities to be within the strict purview of English classes. Mathematicians and scientists read and write, too! I'd love to see more middle and high school teachers who are not teaching English develop classroom libraries. Our message to kids should be that reading is for *everyone*.

**KSH:** Would you talk about *The Girl of Fire and Thorns's* journey to publication? It was nominated for a William Morris Debut Novel award and received starred reviews. Could you talk about working with an agent and then an editor?

**RC:** Getting published was a long, difficult road. I wrote *The Girl of Fire and Thorns* back in 2005, and publishers weren't sure what to do with it. It was roundly—though narrowly—rejected on the adult market. I suggested to my then-agent that it might be a young adult novel. She disagreed, and this book languished on my hard drive for years.

One day, a visit to my local bookstore revealed that the market had changed. The young adult section had exploded! A few trips to the

library later, I was convinced that my book was indeed a young adult novel. With encouragement from some friends, I decided to end my relationship with my current agent and seek a new one. Holly Root agreed to represent me, and she is wonderful. This time, the book had multiple offers and sold within twenty-four hours of submission.

My editor is Martha Mihalick of Greenwillow Books. Martha is amazing. She pushes hard for me to always reach that next level of perfection. At the same time, she is committed to making sure my books conform to *my* vision for them. Sometimes, we get on the phone to talk out a particularly tricky point. We always go through several rounds of edits, which is how I prefer to work. I find that by fixing certain things, I'm able to pull back layers and see my way clear to other necessary changes. Revising, for me, is both the hardest and most gratifying part of the process.

Authors get all the credit when our books turn out well, but there is an invisible team behind every book. I'm incredibly lucky to have an agent who matched me to the right publisher, and a talented editor who helps me bring out the best in my stories.

**KSH:** From your website and companion blog, you seem to enjoy “talking/blogging” to your audience. What are your thoughts about reaching your audience through social networking? Do you read all your blog comments? (<http://www.raecarson.com/>)

**RC:** I tend to get personal on Twitter (@raecarson) and Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/raecarsonbooks>). I decided a long time ago to be unfiltered and wholly myself in these areas of social media. I've been very happy with the results of this decision. I feel that I get lots of interaction and loyal support. So I'm grateful for my Twitter and Facebook followers every day. The website feels more like “official Rae” to me, so I reserve it for strictly book-related things. I read all the comments I get on Twitter, Facebook, or my website, though I don't always have time to respond to each one.

**KSH:** Are there any books that are special to you as a reader?

**RC:** *Island of the Blue Dolphins* will always have a special place in my heart. I read and reread that book to tatters as a kid. I still have the first two paragraphs memorized, and I blame Scott O'Dell for my obsession with survival.

Another book that holds great meaning for me is Karen Cushman's *The Midwife's Apprentice*. My mom became pregnant when I was 22 years old. It was a difficult, late in life pregnancy, and for various reasons she chose to give birth at home assisted by a certified nurse midwife. So leading up to the big day, I called her up, told her to lie down and rest, and I read *The Midwife's Apprentice* to her over the phone. She loved it. My baby sister was born in January, exactly a year after that book won the Newbery Award. I was present during the birth, and I gave the midwife a heart attack by yelling Cushman-isms like, "Push, you cow!" This is how I learned that a woman who laughs mid-contraction sound much like a honking goose. (If you're reading this, Mom, I'm still sorry!)

Recently, I've enjoyed Wein's *Code Name Verity*, which is a tour de force of plotting, and Roth's *Divergent*, which showcases some of the most masterful action prose I've ever read. A book I got a sneak peak at and am looking forward to sharing with everyone else this fall is Alison Cherry's *Red*, a satirical portrayal of conformist society that still manages to convey so much warmth and charm.

**KSH:** Schools and teachers often invite authors to their classrooms or for workshops. What are some school visits or presentation experiences you have enjoyed that might provide insight for teachers who are planning author visits?

**RC:** I had a fantastic visit to Oklahoma City this year, hosted by the Metropolitan Library System. I spoke to several classes about the process of becoming a published author and my own personal journey to publication. It was a blast. Many teens in my audience were future authors. Even more were passionate readers. The questions they asked demonstrated a tremendous ability to grasp complex literature and fully interact with it. The most powerful lesson I've learned while visiting schools and libraries is to never underestimate a teen reader.

This spring I also taught a workshop about turning personal passions into story ideas. Teens' capacity for introspection is enormous, possibly because this is the stage of development where teens become aware of themselves as active participants in the identity-forming process. So we talked about the things we loved/hated/were fascinated by and how to turn those things into fiction.

Connecting with readers is very important to me, even from a creative standpoint. I find it refreshing and inspiring to emerge from my author cave and interact with my audience. I admit, it can be harrowing; teens are as gloriously unpredictable as the weather here in Ohio. But there is nothing more amazing in the whole world than having a teenager shyly approach me after a talk to say, "I feel like you wrote this book just for me."

I've started experimenting with Skype. Just about every author I know would love to do more school visits, but the travel involved reduces precious writing time. Skype seems to be a good compromise. It allows me to connect with readers without having to do laundry, pack, and jump on an airplane. I hope to do more of this in the next year.

**KSH:** Are there any themes you specifically set out to emphasize or others that developed as you really got into the storyline and plot? On your Greenwillow blog, you discuss body image in great detail. Can you speak to that a bit more?

**RC:** I set out to write a story about claiming one's own destiny and self-perception. Everything else is tangential to that—even the "body image" aspects. Throughout the course of the trilogy, Elisa learns to claim her own identity instead of letting it be formed by the judgments of others. This holds true whether it is her appearance, her faith, or her ability to rule.

Body image, though, is such a hot button issue that it tends to attract a lot of focus. A common question I get when I'm talking to readers in person is, "Exactly how fat is Elisa?" For some reason, this is very important to people! I try to remind readers that "fat" is a perception that varies individually, that one person's idea of "fat" might be totally different from another's. I have an ex-boyfriend, for

instance, who thought a size 6 was too fat. What a jerk. It was this idea of perception that I was trying to play with. At the story's outset, Elisa perceives herself as fat. But her perception changes. Is it because she truly changes outwardly? Or is it because she comes to see herself differently? In my mind, it's a little of both. But the important thing to me is that she is eventually able to wrest her identity away from others and own it herself.

**KSH:** At the ALAN Workshop last fall, part of the panel discussion dealt with strong female characters. Would you talk about your strong female characters and developing their strengths?

**RC:** When I was 4 years old, the first Star Wars movie blew my mind. I especially loved Princess Leia. I dressed as Princess Leia, complete with shiny hair buns, for Halloween two years running. But Leia got rather insipid once she fell in love, which I didn't like. So even though I continued to dress up as Princess Leia, I secretly wanted to be Luke Skywalker. I wanted to have a light saber and join the rebellion and train with Yoda to use the Force.

I think a lot of little girls are in this position. We want to be Harry Potter and Percy Jackson and Aragorn. We want to fight battles and end up king of everything. Not because we're tomboys, but because we want to be just as *powerful* and *victorious* as these characters. Unfortunately, from a very early age we're taught in thousands of subtle and insidious ways that we're sidekicks. Decoration. Afterthoughts. Defined by the boy who loves us, our worth based on how physically attractive we are to others. The worst stories, for me, are those that show a girl falling in love, like Princess Leia in *The Empire Strikes Back*, and consequently giving up her power and identity. So *The Fire and Thorns* trilogy is my Luke Skywalker story. Except instead of the Force, there is magic navel bling.

**KSH:** The world and language of your books seem to have strong Spanish influences. How did these Spanish overtones end up in your book?

**RC:** When I started writing these books, I lived in California's Central Valley, an agricultural Mecca heavily populated with first- and second-generation

Spanish speakers. I decided to teach myself Spanish, which turned out to be less intimidating than I feared, simply because the Latino American culture is one of hospitality, sharing, and warmth. So the Spanish influences arose naturally from my immersion in the culture, as well as a desire to honor the friends and neighbors who welcomed me into their homes, caught me up on the latest *telenovela* developments, and taught me how to make tamales.

**KSH:** Discuss "plunging into the world of self-publishing" and creating your short stories that are available online only. Your website refers to a free short story, *Dangerous Voices*.

**RC:** It's very important to me that I understand my chosen industry and its ongoing developments as well as possible. So I self-published a short story and offered it for free—just to learn about the process and test the system. It was a huge success, with over 100K downloads in less than 5 months. I've since removed it from Amazon, but I think I'll make a point of providing free content for readers on a regular basis.

I'm very happy with my publisher. I'm in a great situation, with an editor I love and a marketing team who has my back. So I have no plans to self-publish for profit anytime soon. If I do, it will be because I have a project that I feel is uniquely suited to self-publishing, i.e., something experimental that might be outside my established reader-market. It would be a business decision made in full disclosure with my current publishing team.

**KSH:** You have also written some online-only novellas based on characters from the world of your books, including "The King's Guard," "The Shattered Mountain," and "The Shadow Cats." Could you discuss writing this short form of fantasy?

**RC:** Yes, all three novellas are set in the *Fire & Thorns* universe, published by Greenwillow/HarperCollins. The first novella, "The Shadow Cats," was my publisher's idea. They noticed that *The Girl of Fire and Thorns* was doing particularly well in e-sales, and decided to try releasing an e-only story as an experiment. I thought it was a great idea. So I wrote a story about a secondary character that fleshed

out the world from her perspective. HarperCollins sold it via online retailers like Amazon and Barnes & Noble for a fraction of the price of a whole book. The story sold well enough that we decided to do more, which is how “The Shattered Mountain” and “The King’s Guard” came about.

It’s funny . . . with the first one I struggled quite a lot, simply because writing at a shorter length is a completely different art form. I’m very proud of it, and I’m delighted to share it with readers. But I feel strongly that the lessons I learned while writing “The Shadow Cats” allowed me to do a much better job with “The Shattered Mountain” and “The King’s Guard.” The third novella is about Hector, who is a major character in the trilogy and a POV character in *The Bitter Kingdom*. So it also helped that I already had his voice in my head when I wrote his story.

**KSH:** Currently, you are working on a new series entitled, “*The Goldscreyer Saga*.” Is this the working title or the final name for the series? What inspired it?

**RC:** Yes, that’s the working title, but by no means final. It’s an historical fantasy trilogy set during the California Gold Rush, and it chronicles the adventures of Lee Westfall, a 16-year-old girl with the magical ability to find gold. The first book is a wagons west story—kind of like *Little House on the Prairie* except on steroids, because magic! And murder! (And dysentery!)

It’s a fascinating time period. The California Gold Rush had profound sociological and economic ramifications, not just for the United States but internationally. It also has interesting implications for feminist theory—it remains one of the only times/ places in history where women had equal economic opportunity to that of men. I’m looking forward to exploring all of that.

Another thing that fascinates me about the era of westward expansion is the romantic idea of “the rugged individual.” But my research into the Gold Rush is showing this to be pure myth. Not everyone was a Charles Ingalls, hacking a living out of the earth with his own two hands. In fact, an adult reread of the *Little House* books clearly shows

his utter dependence on kindly neighbors. Humans are social creatures, and our greatest achievements—and even our morally atrocious ones, like displacing a native population to realize our “manifest destiny”—have always been team efforts. So my Gold Rush trilogy will feature a large, ensemble cast of pioneers who rush west for different reasons but must come together in order to survive and thrive.

**KSH:** This last question is about *The Bitter Kingdom*, the final volume in the Fire and Thorns trilogy just released last August. What can you tell readers about saying goodbye to this first experience at a very successful YA trilogy? Do you have plans for a book tour?

**RC:** Saying good-bye is hard. I’ve lived with these characters for years, and they feel like close friends. Of the three books, *The Bitter Kingdom* was the hardest to write because I had so many details and themes to bring full circle. At the same time, I’d been cogitating on them for so long that it was an absolute joy—maybe even a cathartic relief—to finally craft the conclusion I’d been planning. For me, the level of satisfaction gained from a creative endeavor is directly proportional to its difficulty, which means I feel very satisfied!

Trilogies, it turns out, are as different an art form from novels as novels are from short stories. An entire trilogy arc requires tremendous investment and patience, from both author and reader, and I’m so grateful for every reader who has weathered this journey with me.

In late September, I’m hitting the road for the HarperCollins Children’s “Dark Days” group tour. Dates and locations haven’t been announced yet, but I do know there will be five of us, all promoting our latest science fiction and fantasy novels for teens. This is my first official tour, and I am thrilled, akin to a little kid who can’t wait for Christmas. It feels as though this tour will mark a transition, when I can finally say “I’m done!” and move on to new things. The Fire and Thorns stories are ending, but mine, I hope, are just getting started.



## Conclusion

Rae Carson's *The Girl of Fire and Thorns* trilogy joins the ranks of Kristin Cashore's enticing *Seven Kingdoms/Graceling* series, Shannon Hale's *Princess Academy*, Rachel Hartman's *Seraphina*, Catherine Fisher's *Incarceron*, Robin McKinley's *Damar* series, Tamora Pierce's *Alanna* and the *Beka Cooper* series, and other wonderful fantasy worlds where girls take a strong stance as decision makers and powerful influences in the forces of the universe. Young adult readers will observe these female characters develop into the courageous women they eventually become through the challenges created by Rae Carson and other authors who build these compelling and unique fantasy worlds.

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## Shannon Hitchcock:

A New Voice in Historical Fiction

**S**hannon Hitchcock recently published her debut novel, *The Ballad of Jessie Pearl*. It is an engaging story that features a relatable protagonist, offers genuine depictions of illness and grief, and captures the essence of rural North Carolina. *Publishers Weekly* says the historical fiction book is honest and “gently and lovingly written.” *Kirkus Reviews* agrees, while pointing out how the book “neatly captures a full flavor of the setting and period” and contains “authentic-sounding dialogue.”

When the novel begins, 14-year-old Jessie is helping her sister Carrie give birth. Frightened, Jessie finds comfort in the memory of her deceased mother’s hope for her future. Of her three sisters, Jessie is the one committed to fulfilling their mother’s dream of having a teacher in the family. However, several matters complicate her decision, including mores of the twentieth century that suggest women should dream about motherhood, not careers. When Carrie contracts tuberculosis, Jessie’s devotion to family dictates that she put off graduating from the eighth grade and tuck ideas of attending a teacher’s college away. Through Jessie and her sisters, readers see how women impacted by tuberculosis in rural North Carolina might have lived and made decisions about matters that remain important today, such as first love, career choices, friendship, and devotion to family.

My agrarian background, North Carolinian roots, and interest in historical fiction drew me to *The Ballad of Jessie Pearl*. Curious about the route a children’s



literature author might take to become a young adult novelist, I interviewed Hitchcock to learn how *The Ballad of Jessie Pearl (Ballad)* developed from conception to publication. What follows is a profile of Hitchcock developed from a telephone interview, e-mail exchanges, and other sources about the author. Undocumented quotations attributed to Hitchcock come from personal communication with me.

### **Before *Ballad***

Shannon Hitchcock grew up on a large farm in East Bend, North Carolina, where *Ballad* is set. Hitchcock says she was a struggling reader in elementary school until two teachers intervened. One of them patiently taught her to read while the other inspired her with biographies of women as varied as Betsy Ross and Annie Oakley. After that, Hitchcock became an avid reader. Historical fiction and biographies were her favorite:

I loved all of the Little House books. I loved any kind of biography. I was always reading biographies. [And] I liked *Heidi Grows Up* by Charles Tritten. Actually, my favorite book as a child was called *Requiem for a Princess* by Ruth M. Arthur. I actually found myself a copy on Amazon . . . a couple of years ago and purchased it. That book has stayed with me probably since I was in fourth grade. I read it as a library book, and I used to check it out over and over. I loved it so much. I started thinking about it as an adult after I got back into children’s literature, and I thought, *I wonder if I can find that book*. I’m happy to say it’s just as good now as it was then.

Hitchcock's love of reading coupled with her family's interest in storytelling influenced her. She laughs and says, "[I told] one of my friends, 'Listen, my family likes nothing better than sitting around telling big lies.'" At a young age, her sister Robin began looking to her for engaging stories. Hitchcock obliged and used their adventures with horses to concoct tales dubbed "The Carolina Cowgirls." Years later, her sister's untimely death in a car crash served as the impetus for Hitchcock to put her career as an accountant aside and pursue her dream of becoming an author.

She says she reconnected with literature for youth when her son was born. "I started reading to him, [and] I started falling in love with children's literature again. I had always loved it when I was young, but you know you get out of it and you start to read adult things." As her son grew older, she continued to read with him: "If he was reading something for school, then I would read it, too."

Hitchcock says she loves writing for youth, and she believes the books read during childhood are significant and life changing. She has been writing for children for over ten years, and laughs as she explains that her journey to publication has been circuitous:

I struggled for a number of years on my own. I didn't know how [to write for publication]. I had not gone to school to be a writer. I didn't have a journalism degree or an English degree or any of that. I have an accounting degree. So I didn't know what I was doing. I was just writing stuff and sending it off to New York houses and thinking that somebody was going to publish it. I was just ignorant about the process. I did that for a number of years until I saw a little blurb about the Institute for Children's Literature. If I had just been smart enough when I first started to say, "I have a dream; I want to do this thing, but I don't know how, but there are people that have gone ahead of me that have figured it out" and sought out some of those people to begin with and taken a couple of classes. If I'd just prepared myself better, I could have skipped some of the anguish, but it was just ignorance on my part. I didn't really know anybody who was a professional writer, and I didn't have any formal training in it, so really all I had was being a girl who loved books and somebody who had always scribbled and liked to write. And it just took me a lot longer than it probably had to.

The correspondence course delivered through the Institute for Children's Literature taught Hitchcock how to write stories for children's magazines. Her teacher suggested that she join the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators (SCBWI), so Hitchcock

got involved and took what she learned and wrote a number of stories that have appeared in *Highlights for Children*, *Cricket*, and *Ask*.

Her involvement in the SCBWI fueled her interest in young adult literature. While attending conferences sponsored by the SCBWI, she became inspired by Karen Hesse's *Out of the Dust* and Kirby Larson's *Hattie Big Sky*. Hitchcock says, "I just love all of these historical books, and that's the kind of thing I liked when I was growing up, too. I think that's a real clue. If you loved it growing up, that kind of book is probably the kind of book you would enjoy writing as an adult." Hitchcock started

to wonder if she could write fiction for young adults: "I wondered if instead of or in addition to doing . . . magazine articles, I could write something like [young adult literature], and so I started [writing]. I actually have a drawer full of such manuscripts."

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**Hitchcock's love of reading coupled with her family's interest in storytelling influenced her. . . . "my family likes nothing better than sitting around telling big lies."**

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## From Family History to Historical Fiction

### The Seeds of a Story

*Ballad* was one of the manuscripts in Hitchcock's drawer. When her son was in the eighth grade, he was assigned a project in history class that required him to learn more about his family (Craven, 2013). While doing research, he uncovered details about the family that Hitchcock was unaware of, particularly the story about her great-grandmother's sister, Crawley Hennings, who died of tuberculosis, leaving her husband and infant son behind. The idea of her grandmother, who was 14, taking on the responsibility of raising a child perplexed Hitchcock and her son, who was 14 years old at the time. Hitchcock recalls,

All I had really were a few basic little things: I had that my grandmother's sister was twenty, and shortly after giving birth was diagnosed with tuberculosis, that she died, and left a ten-month-old baby and a letter planning her own funeral. Then the elder sister, Anna, also got sick from tuberculosis, and because [Crawley] had died at home, Anna wondered if she went away to the sanatorium if she would stand a better chance. She did go away to a sanatorium. She actually

did come home, and she lived to be an old woman. When all of that happened, my grandmother was fourteen, and she in fact took her sister's baby and raised him for about two and a half years until his dad remarried. So that was the basic outline that I had and that was really all I had.

Hitchcock began to imagine what raising a child in rural North Carolina might have been like for a teenager with a bright future. She turned to her par-

ents, who had both grown up on farms in North Carolina during the 1930s and 40s, for answers. Hitchcock's mother had read the letter Crawley left behind numerous times because her mother had kept it in a bureau beside her bed, but over the years, the letter was misplaced. Hitchcock says, "I have never seen

the letter and nobody seems to know where it is anymore. I've heard rumors that it's in a safe in Savannah, Georgia, but I had no access, so I just made up a letter."

### Setting and Structure

With the basic details of her family's story in place, Hitchcock began to plan the novel. She knew she wanted to set *Ballad* in and around her grandmother's house. Hitchcock says, "My grandmother lived in it actually until the day she died, so I was very familiar with the house." Both of Hitchcock's grandparents were tobacco farmers, and she grew up on a tobacco farm—though most of the process had been automated during her childhood. She began to outline the novel around the tobacco harvest and other agricultural events. Hitchcock decided that the novel would take place over the span of three years, so she developed an outline from January 1922 through the spring of 1924. She says plotting the novel involved "filling in what would have been going on on the farm during each month because I knew that it was going to have to revolve around the farming seasons . . . . They would be shucking corn in November. Trying to cut wood and get ready for the winter. That was the next step, kind of just filling in the calendar."

### History Is in the Details

The details gathered from her parents about living on a farm during that time proved invaluable: "[My parents] were able to tell me about the outhouse. They were able to talk to me about how if you needed something to be spread in the community, you went to the general store. Nobody had a telephone. And so those kinds of things that are in the book really came from my parents' memories." Other details came from sources Hitchcock used while engaged in research for the book:

There was a woman who was a schoolteacher in my hometown. Her name was Ms. Irma Robinson. Ms. Robinson had self-published her memoirs, but they were just delightful! There were just little snippets of what she remembered about growing up. She talked about a Christmas Eve service that was lit by kerosene lamps. Whenever I wrote the scene about the Christmas Eve service, I used a lot of the details from her book because she talked about hanging oranges on the tree with twine. I thought, *Ooh, that's different*. [Ms. Robinson] talked about the minister's face being backlit by kerosene lamps and that kind of thing. I just thought they were authentic, but really unique, details that I could use.

In order to develop scenes to indicate the severity of tuberculosis during a time when treatment was unavailable, Hitchcock turned to memoirs written by people who had actually lived in sanatoriums: "This woman [Betty MacDonald] wrote a book called *The Egg and I* based on being on a poultry farm; then she developed tuberculosis and she wrote *The Plague and I*. She was a wonderful writer, and I got a lot of wonderful details about what the disease really would have been like by reading her book." Hitchcock wanted to know more about how the disease impacted women's lives, so she turned to *Living in the Shadow of Death: Tuberculosis and the Social Experience of Illness in American History* by Sheila M. Rothman. Hitchcock maintains,

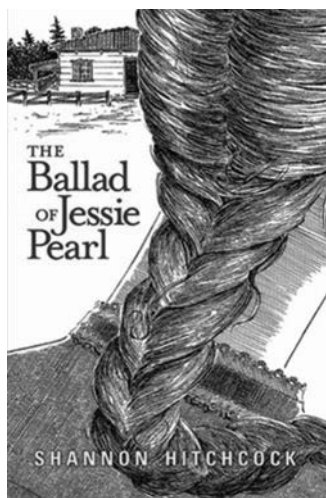
[*Living in the Shadow of Death*] is actually a scientific study, if you will. [Rothman] went through a lot of journals of people who had tuberculosis. Her book, more or less, tries to tell from a woman's perspective what it was like to try to manage the household when you had this disease. I got a lot of details from that book. For example, if a woman hadn't been diagnosed yet, but had tuberculosis and then got pregnant, the symptoms could be masked so that she would appear very well during the pregnancy, but after she gave birth, it would just come with a vengeance. That was really a model from what had happened in my family

for the character that became Carrie in the book. [Carrie] was well during the pregnancy and then afterwards got very sick and died when her son was ten months old. So [reading about how tuberculosis affected pregnant women] was really helpful to me.

During the six months she spent researching, Hitchcock also read materials from the historical society in East Bend, North Carolina, and novels set in North Carolina: “I read *Look Homeward, Angel* by Thomas Wolfe again because it’s the same time period. It’s [set] in the 1920s, and it also has quite a bit about tuberculosis in there because it’s set in Asheville. After that, I just started to write kind of through trial and error.”

### Road to Publication

*Ballad* found a home when Hitchcock went to a Highlights Foundation workshop and met Stephen Roxburgh. Roxburgh, who had recently formed his own publishing company called Namelos, was tasked with



commenting on Hitchcock’s manuscript. Hitchcock explains, “[Stephen Roxburgh] had read [my manuscript] before I got there and had marked it up. When I sat down with him, he said, ‘You know, this novel is delicious, and it’s exactly the kind of thing I’m looking to publish,’ and I was shocked!” It took time before *Ballad* was ac-

tually ready for its debut. The period from conception to promise of publication seemed long. Hitchcock had spent six months researching, four months writing, six months percolating while the draft sat in a drawer, and now, she had found a publisher.

### More History to Tell

There are other manuscripts sitting in Hitchcock’s drawer waiting for a home. Most of them are historical fiction. In fact, Hitchcock says she thinks historical fiction “will be the genre that I always come back to.” She’s working on a historical novel now based

on something else that happened to her family. During the 1960s, Hitchcock saw her sister get hit by a vehicle. Though it was not her fault, she began to ask, “What if?” What if she wrote a book in which a similar situation occurred and it was the protagonist’s fault? Hitchcock says, “I started throwing in other things that were going on in my hometown during the 1960s.” For example, one of the teachers who turned Hitchcock into a reader was Pauline Porter, an African American hired to work in Hitchcock’s newly integrated school in East Bend, North Carolina (Craven, 2013). Reflecting on her planning process, Hitchcock laughs and says, “I was off to the races, so we’ll see how [the draft] turns out.”

During a time when most recently published titles are labeled fantasy or science fiction, it is exciting to hear that Hitchcock plans to write another piece of historical fiction. And it sounds as if it will be as poignant as her debut novel.

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# Content Analysis of Adolescent Literature Related to Bullying

**A**dults are often indirectly involved in bullying, and “teachers are probably the most likely to witness bullying situations while both teachers and parents often hear about incidents after they occur” (Moulton, 2010, p. 23). Due to the high prevalence of bullying among adolescent youth and the significance that adults play in these situations, a content analysis of 10 adolescent literature novels was completed using our guiding question: *How do adult characters interrupt, or fail to interrupt, bullying as portrayed in adolescent literature?* We also define bullying, consider and present background information on adult intervention related to bullying, and discuss how literature in schools can be used as a tool to combat bullying through meaningful and intentional conversations. Ultimately, we present a content-analysis-based study and the results of our 10-book investigation into adult intervention and involvement in fictitious adolescent literature.

## Contextualizing Bullying

### Our Definition

The term bullying has many definitions and connotations associated with it. Bullying is a complex, multilayered issue that can be characterized in a variety of ways. Some researchers emphasize that bullying can include physical, verbal, and/or social/emotional harassment (Ellis, & Shute, 2007; Hazler, 1996; Suniti Bhat, 2008), while others believe bullying involves repeated taunting and the imbalance of power between individuals or groups (Holt & Keyes, 2004; Olweus, 2001; Rigby, 2004). For the purpose of this study, we

are using Bott’s (2004) definition of bullying from *The Bully in the Book and in the Classroom*, which states, “Bullying is the collective term that covers all forms of harassment” (p. xviii). This broad definition encompasses a wide variety of bullying without limitations and does not confine bullying to any one particular form. When asked to define bullying, some middle school students describe it as being treated badly to make someone else feel better. It can be physical or verbal, but it all hurts.

### Prevalence of Bullying

Reported prevalence rates of bullying vary significantly. Although it is difficult to know exactly, researchers (Nansel et al., 2001; Pellegrini, Bartini, & Brooks, 2001; Stockdale, Hangaduambo, Duys, Larson, & Sarvela, 2002; US Department of Education & US Department of Justice, 2010) report anywhere from 15% to 80% of today’s students have experienced involvement in bullying, either as the bully or the victim. Bott (2009), Coloroso (2008), and Harris and Petrie (2003) argue that nearly 100% of today’s students have experienced bullying if you consider and include the role of bystander. This widespread phenomenon begins in elementary school and continues through high school (Crothers & Kolbert, 2004; Hillsberg & Spak, 2006; Quinn, Barone, Kearns, Stackhouse, & Zimmerman, 2003), but it appears to reach a peak during the middle school and adolescent years (Ma, 2002; Nansel et al., 2001; Roland, 2002).

One bully-related study with a sample size of over 15,000 middle and high school participants showed that 29% reported moderate to frequent involvement

in bullying; this includes both bullies and victims (Nansel et al., 2001). Also, the School Crime Supplement to the National Crime Victimization Survey found that “about 14% of 12- to 18-year-olds reported being the targets of bullying during the six months prior to the survey” (DeVoe & Kaffenberger, 2005, as cited in Moulton, 2010, p. 12). These data demonstrate that bullying is prevalent in schools across the United States, and researchers (Beane, 2005; Bott, 2004, 2009; Esch, 2008; Henkin, 2005; Hillsberg & Spak, 2006; McNamara & McNamara, 1997; Ross, 1996) provide evidence that bullying is a prevailing theme in children’s and adolescent literature as well.

### Adult Intervention

To combat the problem of bullying in today’s schools, researchers (Carney, Hazler, & Higgins, 2002; Entenman, Murnen, & Hendricks, 2005; Malecki & Demaray, 2004; Orpinas, Horne, & Staniszewski, 2003) have argued for developing a positive school/community culture that is unaccepting of bullying behaviors. This requires the adults, teachers, administrators, school staff, and parents to intervene when bullying situations arise and to teach preventative techniques. This much-needed adult intervention is ideally mirrored in fictional literature and serves as the rationale for analyzing adolescent texts to identify how the adult characters behave in response to incidents of bullying. Perhaps as students meet caring adults through books, they will recognize the importance of allowing adult involvement with bullying in the classroom.

Teachers, counselors, and other school personnel serve on the *front lines* in our schools, making them uniquely positioned to influence the classroom climate. Their decision to intervene, or not, directly affects both bully and victim. Rigby (2004) explains that teachers can use their classroom position to identify “individuals who are likely to become ‘problems,’ that is, children who appear predisposed to act aggressively without concern for the well-being of others or have characteristics that suggest that they are more likely than others to be victimized” (p. 290). Teacher-directed intervention programs appear to be more successful than programs situated outside of school settings at identifying and decreasing the isolation of students at-risk with bullying (Peterson & Skiba, 2001).

Nevertheless, researchers (Atlas & Pepler, 1998; Ellis & Shute, 2007; Hargrove, 2010; Hazler, Miller,

Carney, & Green, 2001; Langdon & Preble, 2008; Mishna, 2004; Olweus, 1993; Varjas et al., 2008) have found that teachers do not always intervene during negative student interactions such as bullying. According to Atlas and Pepler (1998), teachers frequently do little to interrupt, and often completely ignore, bullying. This lack of teacher intervention may be due to the fact that many times students do not inform teachers that they are being bullied (Crothers & Kolbert, 2004). Studies suggest that victims of bullying are reluctant to report such incidents to adults

(Fekkes, Pijpers, & Verloove-Vanhorick, 2005; Mishna, McLuckie, & Saini, 2009), because they are fearful that adult intervention would potentially escalate the problem (Craig, Henderson, & Murphy, 2000; Crothers & Kolbert, 2004; Espelage & Asidao, 2001; Smith & Shu, 2000).

Even though bullying frequently occurs at school, it appears that students do not feel comfortable telling the adults in this environment. Instead, a victim of bullying is more likely to tell a family member (Smith & Shu, 2000). This gives parents a unique opportunity to intervene on behalf of their child. Numerous researchers in the field, including Griffith, Lazar and Slostad, and Mandel have proclaimed that parent involvement during bullying incidents has a positive impact on maintaining and/or improving student academic achievement (as cited in Hall, 2008).

Clearly, intervention from adults such as parents, teachers, counselors, and other school personnel is a proven approach to decreasing and preventing the problem of bullying. For a teen that is experiencing the problem of bullying—whether as bully, victim, or bystander—adolescent literature can be one source of information about dealing with the problem of bullying and the role adults can play. But, are adult interventions in text being portrayed as helpful? Will teens form an accurate picture of adult intervention from the roles personified in text? Can teens learn from adolescent literature *how* to use adult intervention to confront the problem of bullying?

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## Can teens learn from adolescent literature *how* to use adult intervention to confront the problem of bullying?

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## The Study

### Purpose

The purpose of this study is to fill a gap in the current research by conducting a content analysis of adolescent literature to identify how texts portray the intervention of adult characters during bullying incidents. Previous content analyses have focused only on bullying in children's literature, but did not focus specifically on the role of adult intervention in the text. Recognizing the widespread problem of bullying, its prevalence in middle and high school, and the lack of research in this area, a content analysis of adult character intervention in adolescent literature is needed.

### Content Analysis and Book Sample Selection Criteria

Using content analysis allowed for close examination of the role(s) adults play in the selected texts. The analysis documented 1) the type of bullying (physical, verbal, or social); 2) the role, if any, that adults played in the bullying situation; 3) the triggers that prompted adult intervention; 4) the specifics of the adult involvement in the bullying occurrence (ignoring, active intervention, passive support; and 5) the results of this interaction.

There are many pieces of adolescent literature written on the topic of bullying. To narrow our list, we used Bott's (2004), *The Bully in the Book and in the Classroom* and analyzed the 10 books listed in the chapter titled "Middle School: The Peak Years Grades 7 and 8." Each researcher analyzed three books for a total of nine books. To establish a shared analysis perspective, the researchers initially read and analyzed one common text from the list. In total, all 10 titles from Bott's (2004) middle school chapter were reviewed. We recognize this is a selection of texts within a large and continually growing category of books. Our intent was not to focus solely on these books, but instead to help prevent bullying by providing some guidelines and examples for educators and others to use to examine and analyze texts related to this topic.

### Data Collection and Findings

#### STARGIRL: ANALYSIS OF THE TEXT

A majority of the bullying in *Stargirl* (Spinelli, 2000) is social rejection, although there are a few instances of

physical and verbal abuse. The primary adult character is a neighbor friend, Archie, who takes the role of a teacher outside of school. Although there is not one specific bullying incident where Archie steps in, he does offer advice as a passive supporter when Leo voices his concern about Stargirl drawing attention to herself and being ignored by students.

When Stargirl is a guest on the school-sponsored show called "The Hot Seat," things really heat up. This show has a group of students on "the jury" who can ask any question to the guest; they are supposed to only ask questions and not make judgments or statements. Hillari and other members of the jury berate Stargirl with insulting questions and harassing statements. As the jury continues to harass Stargirl, Mr. Robineau, the school sponsor of the show, decides it is getting out of hand and actively intervenes. He stops the abuse and the taping of the show, and does not allow the show to be aired. Table 1 presents a further breakdown of the adults' interventions, involvement, and the results of their interaction.

#### THE SHADOW PLACE: ANALYSIS OF THE TEXT

The main characters in Tanzman's (2002) book, *The Shadow Place*, include a middle-school-aged boy, Rodney Porter, who is a loner and outcast except for his one friend, Lissa, who serves as the narrator of the story. While being socially bullied at school is hurtful to Rodney, his life at home is much worse. He lives with his verbally abusive father who is also the local baseball coach. This text does not have any adult characters who intervene when bullying takes place (see Table 2). At moments, it seems as if Lissa's parents will step in, but instead they ignore the situation and do nothing. Lissa and both of her parents witness verbal and slight physical abuse. Rodney's father never physically hits his son in front of anyone, but the neighbors see signs of abuse. Instead of interfering, Lissa's mom makes excuses for Rodney's father's actions. When Rodney's dad publicly "explodes" and yells at Rodney at a baseball game, not one adult steps in. When Rodney is at his wit's end, he runs away, and Lissa finally tells her parents what Rodney is doing.

Although *The Shadow Place* does not have examples or role models of adult characters stepping in to help during the bullying situations, it does show youth that they can make a difference in bullying by being aware of their friends' actions and questioning incidents that look suspicious. The book can also be



**Table 1.** Content of bullying and adult involvement in *Stargirl*

Book Title	Type of bullying	Role of adult character	Trigger to adult intervention	Specifics of the adult involvement	Results of adult interaction
<i>Stargirl</i>	Social shunning by entire student body. Small amount of physical and verbal abuse	Neighborhood friend named Archie	Not one specific incident led to Archie intervening. Leo mentioned Stargirl being ignored and they discussed reasons why and how to help.	Archie provides passive support by talking to Leo, and Leo tries to help Stargirl act more “normal” to be accepted by the student body.	Leo somewhat accepts Stargirl
	Verbal by Hillari Kimble and the jury on the “Hot Seat” set	School teacher, Mr. Robineau	Students verbally assault Stargirl while in the “hot seat.”	Actively intervenes by stopping the show that was being taped	Stargirl continues to be shunned until the end of the book.

**Table 2.** Content of bullying and adult involvement in *The Shadow Place*

Book Title	Type of bullying	Role of adult character	Trigger to adult intervention	Specifics of the adult involvement	Results of adult interaction
<i>The Shadow Place</i>	Parental—verbal and physical abuse from father	None—other adult characters assumed father character was doing what was right for his child.	There was no adult character intervention even when a youth tried to tell adults.	Adult characters ignored the signs of parental bullying.	None

used as an example to show youth that they may have to point out bullying explicitly to adults to entice them to intervene.

**THE LOSERS’ CLUB: ANALYSIS OF THE TEXT**

Lekich’s (2002) *The Losers’ Club* has three main characters. Alex, the narrator, is a boy with cerebral palsy, which forces him to walk with crutches. Manny, whose real name is Rupert, is a short, overweight boy, and Winston is an Asian academic slacker, whose parents are wealthy and work in Hong Kong most of the year. Jerry Whitman, a popular student described by the school administration as a golden boy, bullies all the school’s losers and steals their lunch money weekly.

Throughout the story, there are situations where adult characters can and do intervene; however, it is usually not directly related to the losers getting bullied (see Table 3). Harry, a neighbor, has both indirect and direct involvement with the bullies. When Jerry and his “goons” follow Winston home one day and harass him, Harry actively intervenes. The end result

of the confrontation is that Jerry and his friends leave Winston alone for the time being. Other examples of adult characters intervening include Mr. Sankey, the apartment manager where Alex and his father live, who lends an ear to Alex during some trying times, and Mr. Winecki, the school custodian, who occasionally provides a refuge from the bullies on campus.

This text shows that adults can provide support in a variety of ways for youth who are bullied. Harry’s character has the most direct impact, both with the boys and as a deterrent against the bullying. However, it is clear that the other adult characters also played a role in stopping the abuse that was happening. The story is told from a high schooler’s perspective, but it would best be used with upper elementary or middle-school-aged students because the story line is a bit juvenile.

**HIDDEN TALENTS: ANALYSIS OF THE TEXT**

In the story *Hidden Talents* by Lubar (1999), Martin, a loud-mouthed, trouble-making middle schooler is sent to an alternative boarding school after being expelled

**Table 3.** Content of bullying and adult involvement in *Losers' Club*

Book Title	Type of bullying	Role of adult character	Trigger to adult intervention	Specifics of the adult involvement	Results of adult interaction
<i>Losers' Club</i>	Verbal, physical, and emotional	Multiple adult characters  Mrs. Loomis, geometry teacher	No specific incident. Mrs. Loomis held the boys to high standards. She would stop by homes when students were struggling.	Mrs. Loomis questioning the boys forced other adults to step in due to lack of parental support of one of the main characters' parents.	Because of Mrs. Loomis, Harry, another adult, gets involved to help the boys.
	The main bully character, Jerry Whitman, would take all "losers" money every week.	"The Beast" Harry Beardsley, loser neighbor	Neighbor kids ask him to help with adult supervision. Then he sees the bullying happen.	"The Beast" actively intervenes by confronting the bullies in Winston's front yard. He helps the losers set up the holiday display. Provides moral support.	Eventually the bullies lose, but it is not from one adult interacting with them.

from multiple other schools. He and a group of other misfit students at this school befriend each other while trying to avoid the wrath of the school bully, Lester Bloodbath. The teachers at the school are also a group of interesting misfits. They try a variety of unique teaching methods to reach their students.

This text has many adult characters, including parents, school administrators, and teachers. However, none of them ever seem to notice or be concerned with bullying (see Table 4). One would believe, especially at a school with students who were expelled from previous schools, that teachers and administrators would look for and address the issue of bullying. Instead, they all choose to ignore it. This book's bully character is discussed throughout the story, but there

is no mention of teachers acknowledging even the possibility of bullying in the school.

Although the story line and certain aspects of this text are entertaining, it is not a good example of how adults can and should intervene in instances of bullying.

***THE SKIN I'M IN: ANALYSIS OF THE TEXT***

Flake's (1998/2007) book, *The Skin I'm In*, is about Maleeka, a 13-year-old middle school student. Maleeka is harshly teased by her peers for the darkness of her skin, her homemade clothes, and her good grades. Maleeka's classmates see that the color of her skin is darker than theirs and decide to make negative remarks about this. In order to alleviate the continuous bullying, Maleeka develops an alliance with

**Table 4.** Content of bullying and adult involvement in *Hidden Talents*

Book Title	Type of bullying	Role of adult character	Trigger to adult intervention	Specifics of the adult involvement	Results of adult interaction
<i>Hidden Talents</i>	Verbal and physical	Many teachers, but none ever become involved enough to intervene in the bullying, even though the principal is aware it is happening.	None. Adults ignore and do not intervene.	Adults at an alternative boarding school never seem to notice or address the idea bullying might take place.	None. No interaction.

girls in her school. It is through this relationship that Maleeka finds herself doing classroom assignments for one of the girls in exchange for nice clothing. She also makes bad choices that get her in trouble in her attempt to fit in and be accepted. Such decisions backfire, and she finds herself in more trouble.

Maleeka’s new English teacher, Miss Saunders, realizes her academic potential and encourages her to write. From the beginning, Miss Saunders makes a point to highlight Maleeka’s skin qualities by contradicting the bullying statements of her classmates. Maleeka sees the success and confidence Miss Saunders exhibits and admires her ability to rise above the color of her skin.

Miss Saunders provides active intervention that stops the bullying against Maleeka (see Table 5). It is through her guidance and communication that Maleeka begins to realize her potential and sees how she needs to be true to herself. Miss Saunders helps Maleeka realize that her skin color is not what defines her. This story is a good example of how adult characters can be actively involved and model behaviors for youth to help them work through issues related to bullying.

**TANGERINE: ANALYSIS OF TEXT**

Bloor’s *Tangerine* (1997) is the story about Paul Fisher, a legally blind twelve-year-old. The Fisher family moves to Tangerine, Florida. It is in this town that Paul becomes the brunt of his brother Erik’s negative and malicious actions, and Paul finds the courage to finally confront his parents’ secrets about their oldest son’s behavior.

The character Paul does not communicate to his parents about the physical and verbal bullying he is subjected to by his brother. Research points out that victims of bullying rarely communicate the aggressions

against them to adults (Fekkes, Pijpers, & Verloove-Vanhorick, 2005; Mishna, McLuckie, & Saini, 2009). In addition, he does not share his awareness of his brother’s bullying actions toward other kids. His hesitation to talk to his parents comes as a result of his parents’ admiration of Erik’s abilities in sports.

At one point in the story, Paul convinces his parents to enroll him in Tangerine Middle School; it is at this new school that Paul becomes part of the soccer team. Despite his disability, he takes the position of goalie and develops new friendships. He also becomes more aware of his brother’s shortcomings.

A turning point in the story is when Paul states, “But I can see. I can see things that Mom and Dad can’t. Or won’t” (p. 4). Paul’s statement reflects his frustration with his parents as they seem indifferent and ignore his brother’s bullying actions. Toward the end of the story, Paul decides to confront his parents, who seem blind to Erik’s bullying and who focus solely on what he does well. Paul wants to discuss the events that caused his impairment and exactly how Erik might have been involved. His parents state, “We wanted . . . to keep you from always hating your brother” (p. 257). Their explanation reinforces the idea that they have been protecting their oldest son (see Table 6). Through characters in this text, it is easy to see why some students choose not to tell adults about the bullying they are experiencing.

**DROWNING ANNA: ANALYSIS OF TEXT**

*Drowning Anna* by Mayfield (2002) is a story about a girl who moves to a new school. Upon arrival, Anna is befriended by Haley Parkin, the most popular girl at school. Everyone wants to be friends with Haley because she is outgoing, but they are also afraid of her. As Anna starts to become just as popular as Haley, Haley begins to verbally and emotionally bully her.

**Table 5.** Content of bullying and adult involvement in *The Skin I’m In*

Book Title	Type of bullying	Role of adult character	Trigger to adult intervention	Specifics of the adult involvement	Results of adult interaction
<i>The Skin I’m In</i>	Verbal and physical	Miss Saunders, English teacher	Other students tease Maleeka about the color of her skin.	Miss Saunders is actively involved and complements Maleeka for the color of her skin and scholarship abilities.	At the end of the story, Maleeka finds herself with regained self-esteem and proud of her accomplishments. She is happy to be who she is.

**Table 6.** Content of bullying and adult involvement in *Tangerine*

Book Title	Type of bullying	Role of adult character	Trigger to adult intervention	Specifics of the adult involvement	Results of adult interaction
<i>Tangerine</i>	Verbal and physical	Parents	No adult intervention	Paul's parents ignore many situations where his brother Erik bullies him and others.	Paul's parents expected that by hiding the truth from Paul, he would not hate his brother Erik. He feels betrayal for their lack of intervention.

The reasons for Haley's attacks appear to be unknown to others, as expressed by Anna's friend Melanie when she mentions, "Haley Parkin goes off on people. I don't know why. Perhaps she gets bored with them. Perhaps she can't stand competition" (p. 12). After isolating Anna, Haley starts to deliver physical attacks against her. However, nothing changes because teachers never suspect this behavior of Haley, and she never gets caught.

With the constant bullying and increasing feelings of loneliness, Anna starts to cut herself and voice her thoughts of suicide to her friend Melanie. Anna's parents discover the struggles their daughter has been going through as Anna's mother finds her "lying on the floor with her knees crooked to her chest, like a fetus. She is motionless" (p. 23). Anna's parents attempt to help by approaching her teachers to find ways to make the bullying stop. However, these communications are ignored, and Anna continues to be the target of Haley's bullying. This book demonstrates that while adult characters may step in and try to help, sometimes their actions do not solve the problems or stop the bullying (see Table 7).

#### **THE REVEALERS: ANALYSIS OF THE TEXT**

The members of *The Revealers* (Wilhelm, 2003) club, Russell, Elliott, and Catalina, have personally experienced physical, verbal, and social bullying, and they use the platform of an online newsletter to tell the story of other victims of bullying. Adult intervention is a key part of the storyline, featuring parents, teachers, administrators, and community members. Russell's mother, several teachers, and community members encourage The Revealers club to continue sharing the stories of bullying victims through the online newsletter project. This adult encouragement seems to empower all students by giving them an avenue to share their voice.

Not all adults are encouraging; however; the school principal and another parent do not necessarily advocate on behalf of the bullies, but their actions attempt to silence the victims. These adults try to shut down the online network that The Revealers club is using to post the stories of bullying victims. Table 8 presents additional results of adult intervention and involvement.

**Table 7.** Content of bullying and adult involvement in *Drowning Anna*

Book Title	Type of bullying	Role of adult character	Trigger to adult intervention	Specifics of the adult involvement	Results of adult interaction
<i>Drowning Anna</i>	Psychological, verbal, and physical	Parents	Anna begins to withdraw from her parents, and her behavior escalates to cutting herself. She also attempts to commit suicide.	Anna's parents are actively involved and try to seek the help of the teachers and principal at her school. The teachers and administration ignore this.	The parents' visit to the school does not stop the harassment by Haley.

**Table 8.** Content of bullying and adult involvement in *The Revealers*

Book Title	Type of bullying	Role of adult character	Trigger to adult intervention	Specifics of the adult involvement	Results of adult interaction
<i>The Revealers</i>	Physical	Russell's mom	Russell's mom noticed his injuries and inquired about the bullying incident.	Russell's mom provides passive support by encouraging him to take the scientific approach to solving the problem.	Russell takes the advice to handle the problem in a scientific manner. This leads him to a friendship with Elliott and Catalina.
	Physical  Elliott was physically bullied when his crutches were kicked out from under him.	Mrs. Capelli, school principal	Russell's mom called the school principal  Mrs. Capelli heard Elliott curse at the bully who had just tripped him.	Received phone call and it was ignored.  Mrs. Capelli verbally reprimanded Elliott for using a curse word.	No action was taken as a result of the parent phone call.  Mrs. Capelli gave both Elliott and Russell detention for their involvement, but no punishment was given to the bully.
	Bethany, the true bully, appeared to be the victim of bullying by The Revealers through a written note accusing her of cheating.	Mr. DeMere, Bethany's father	Bethany reported the note to her father at home.	Mr. DeMere was actively involved and came to the school to confront the principal and the member of The Revealers club.	The school principal revoked the online network privileges of The Revealers club, preventing them from continuing to tell stories of bully victims.
	Physical, verbal, social bullying of The Revealers club and the stories they reported through their online newsletter	Mr. Dallas, the teacher responsible for student access on the school network	The Revealers club sought out the advice of Mr. Dallas on how to send the newsletter out to everyone via the network.	Mr. Dallas provided moral and passive support by encouraging The Revealers club to send out the newsletter.	The Revealers club submitted their newsletter project to the Creative Science Fair because of the encouraging words of Mr. Dallas.

**THE GIRLS: ANALYSIS OF THE TEXT**

*The Girls* (Koss, 2000) highlights the turmoil of bullying written from the unique perspectives of five girls, each involved in a middle school clique. Maya, Renee, Darcy, Brianna, and Candace were the best of friends until the day that Candace, the unofficial clique leader, decides that Maya is *out*. Based on Candace's verdict, Darcy hosts a sleepover and invites everyone but Maya. At the sleepover, Renee, Brianna, and Darcy begin to question why Maya had been excluded from their group, and they eventually begin to recognize Candace as a bully.

Although adults do intervene throughout the text, the problem of creating and belonging to a clique is not completely resolved. In this story, several mothers intervene, but not all step in to stop the mistreatment

of Maya. Both Brianna and Renee's mothers knew of the bullying, but did little to discourage it. They communicated to their daughters that the responsibility for hurting Maya was with Darcy and Candace, and there was no need to feel guilty. Maya's mother intervened to defend Maya from further bullying when she confronted a prank phone caller. She also encouraged Maya and gave her valuable advice on how to handle the social exclusion at school. Because Darcy was acting as the bully, her mother intervened to correct this inappropriate behavior. She grounded Darcy and required her to apologize to Maya.

The only school adult to intervene in the bullying problems was the school nurse. She did not set out to intervene in the social bullying situation, but she served as a listening ear when Brianna explained

the whole story. Eventually the nurse asked three very simple questions encouraging Brianna to think about the right way to proceed with Maya. It is this conversation that leads Brianna to apologize. For more analysis see Table 9.

**THE MISFITS: ANALYSIS OF THE TEXT**

*The Misfits* (Howe, 2001) tells the story of four friends who rely heavily on each other to survive seventh

grade. Known as The Misfits around school, Skeezie, Addie, Joe, and Bobby are mocked and ridiculed by the other students. Collectively, they have been called almost every name in the book—Fatty, Dork, Fairy, Dweeb, Loser, Dummy, Slimeball, Freak, Beanpole, Nerdette, Brains—just to name a few. Through a series of events, Addie decides it would be a good idea for The Misfits to run for student council. Although the Misfits’ No-Name Party did not win the student

**Table 9.** Content of bullying and adult involvement in *The Girls*

Book Title	Type of bullying	Role of adult character	Trigger to adult intervention	Specifics of the adult involvement	Results of adult interaction
<i>The Girls</i>	Social—Maya is not invited to Darcy’s sleepover.	Brianna’s mother	Maya called Brianna to see if they could come over.	Brianna’s mom took the phone call and explained that Brianna was headed over to Darcy’s and inquired if Maya was headed there as well.	Maya learned that she was being excluded from the group. Brianna’s mom ignored the situation and did not do anything to help Maya.
	Social—Maya is not invited to Darcy’s sleepover.	Renee’s mother	Renee discusses the sleepover with her mother and mentions that Darcy invited everyone except Maya.	Renee’s mom supports Darcy’s decision not to invite everyone.	Reinforcement of girl bullying.
	Social and verbal—Maya receives a prank phone call from Darcy during the night of the sleepover.	Maya’s mom and dad	Maya’s parents are alerted to the bullying when Maya receives a prank phone call from one of the girls at the sleepover.	After the phone incident, Maya’s mother provides passive support and tells Maya just to ignore the girls and go back to school the next day.	Maya returns to school the next day and takes her mother’s advice to avoid and ignore the clique as much as possible.
	Social—Maya receives a prank phone call from Darcy during the night of the sleepover.	Darcy’s mom	Darcy’s older sister Keloryn tells their mother about Darcy’s bullying behaviors.	Darcy’s mom actively confronts her about the bullying and voices her disappointment.	Darcy is grounded as a result of her actions and eventually she does apologize to Maya, but it does not appear to be heartfelt—just a formality.
	Social and verbal—Brianna is excluded from Candace’s clique as well.	School nurse	Brianna is feeling sick because she needs to apologize to Maya. While in the nurse’s office, she confesses these feelings to the nurse.	The nurse asks Brianna what she thinks she should do, what her parents would want her to do, and what the right thing to do would be.	Brianna is forced to self-reflect and eventually she decides to face her fear of apologizing and talk to Maya.

council election, The Misfits were able to communicate the message about the harm name calling causes, and the principal adopts their idea for a No-Name Day.

The social and verbal bullying that takes place through name calling is central throughout the text, but the adults do very little to prevent it. By not intervening, they inadvertently send the message that name calling is allowed throughout the school. After The Misfits begin the No-Name Party, a few adults encourage them to continue speaking out on behalf of other victims of name calling, as presented in Table 10.

### Conclusion and Implications for Practice and Research

Several findings emerge within the content analysis of these adolescent novels. In some of these stories we see caring adult characters willing to actively intervene to stop incidents of bullying. Such is the case of Harry, in *The Loser's Club* (Lekich, 2002), who direct-

ly challenges Jerry and his friends, and consequently they leave Winston alone. Adult characters can also provide encouragement and verbal support to victims of bullying and, in some instances, they become role models for those being bullied. For example, Miss Saunders, in *The Skin I'm In* (Flakes, (1998)/2007), becomes the support that Maleeka needs to begin to see herself as a valuable individual with great potential. In *The Misfits* (Howe, 2001) and *The Revealers* (Wilhelm, 2003), we see adults providing passive support by encouraging students to represent the voice of bullying victims at large. Although the adults do not step in and interrupt the bullying taking place, their endorsement of the victims demonstrates their support.

On some occasions, however, adult characters seem disconnected from the bullying. For instance, Rodney, in *The Shadow Place* (Tanzman, 2002), is the victim of bullying at the hands of his classmates and his own father, who is physically and verbally

**Table 10.** Content of bullying and adult involvement in *The Misfits*

Book Title	Type of bullying	Role of adult character	Trigger to adult intervention	Specifics of the adult involvement	Results of adult interaction
<i>The Misfits</i>	Verbal—Name calling	Various teachers	No intervention	Teachers ignore action and do not intervene.	Name calling continues between students.
	Social—Embarrassing a student in front of peers	Ms. Wyman, classroom teacher	Addie, a main character, sits on a whoopee cushion.	Ms. Wyman is actively involved and verbally reprimands the suspected bully. However, she assumes guilt of the wrong person.	The real bully is able to continue unnoticed.
	Verbal	Mr. Kellerman, store manager at Bobby's place of employment	Mr. Kellerman walks Bobby home after work, and they discuss the recent death of Mr. Goodspeed's mother.	Mr. Kellerman confides in Bobby that he had been called names in school as well.	Bobby begins to see name calling as a problem that faces more than just his group of friends, The Misfits.
	Verbal	Mr. Kiley, school principal	Student council campaign and election results	Mr. Kiley calls The Misfits into the office and explains that their No-Name Party idea has real value even though they lost the election.	Mr. Kiley chooses to use the No-Name Day idea at the middle school from then on.

abusive. However, the adults around him, who in multiple instances witness the bullying, chose to ignore it and do not intervene or try to stop the abuse. It takes the intervention of Lissa, Rodney's friend, to make the adults realize they need to step in and act on the situation. This is also the case in the text *Hidden Talents* (Lubar, 1999), where bullying takes place in the school and not one teacher seems to notice or intervene.

Through this content analysis, we also found that adolescent literature reflects the frustrations experienced by victims of bullying and their hesitation to communicate the harassment to adults. For example, Anna, in *Drowning Anna* (Mayfield, 2002), experiences increased bullying after her parents try to intervene. In *Tangerine* (Bloor, 1997), Paul's disappointment increases as his parents do not stop his brother's verbal harassment of him and other kids.

Our findings about adult character intervention from our content analysis seem to mirror the major concerns from our review of research about adult intervention in bullying (Entenman et al., 2005; Esch, 2008; Hillsberg & Spak, 2006; Moulton, 2010; Quinn et al., 2003)—that educators often fail to adequately intervene. The lack of action on the part of educators reinforces and institutionalizes school harassment and bullying, whether it is verbal, social, psychological/emotional, or physical. However, when adults in schools do intervene, either actively or passively, there are often positive results, although this did not always manifest itself in the adolescent literature we reviewed.

What is more, after analyzing this selection of adolescent literature, the researchers see that not all texts portray adult intervention in a positive light. Teachers are urged to use caution when choosing texts to use with students. We believe carefully chosen texts can provide teachers with meaningful opportunities to engage students in recognizing the important role of adults in bullying intervention and prevention. Perhaps as students meet caring adults through these books, they will be encouraged to rely upon and confide in the caring adults in their own lives.

Finally, this type of analysis of children's and adolescent literature—which looks for 1) the type of bullying (physical, verbal, or social); 2) the role, if any, that adults played in the bullying situation; 3) the triggers that prompted adult intervention; 4) the specifics

of the adult involvement in the bullying occurrence (active, passive, or nonexistent); and 5) the results of this interaction—can be utilized in a variety of settings and with many other books to aid in preventing various types of bullying. For instance, at the classroom level, teachers could use this 5-point content analysis structure to determine which books to read to children or have children read in their classrooms. At the school level, school librarians could conduct similar analyses in order to recommend to teachers which books demonstrate anti-bullying messages and intervention types.

Alternatively, school leaders (principals, department chairs, grade-level leaders, etc.) could create teacher "book clubs" to evaluate fictional literature using this same structure; such evaluation could help teachers determine what students in a given grade might read, or have an option to read, as part of a schoolwide, anti-bullying campaign. Further, at a community level, parent-teacher organizations could use the same 5-point analysis to review texts for donations to school libraries or to develop a school/parent, anti-bullying awareness movement.

Finally, college and university teacher education instructors could utilize our content analysis method to have their preservice teachers analyze literature as a class exercise. This could be valuable background for preservice teachers entering the K-12 classroom environment, giving them an awareness of bullying, familiarity with related literature, tools for identifying literature that offers anti-bullying messages, and coping mechanisms for their K-12 students who might be dealing with this issue.

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## Call for 2014 Outstanding Middle Level Educator in the English Language Arts Award Nominations

The Outstanding Middle Level Educator in the English Language Arts Award (formerly the Edwin A. Hoey Award) recognizes exceptional English language arts teachers in grades 6–8 who have demonstrated excellence in teaching and inspired a spirit of inquiry and a love of learning in their students. The language arts magazine *Scholastic Scope* sponsors this award.

Nomination information can be found on the NCTE website at [www.ncte.org/awards/middle-educator](http://www.ncte.org/awards/middle-educator) and must be submitted by **May 1, 2014**. Results will be announced in Fall 2014, and the award will be presented at the 2014 Annual Convention in Washington, DC, at the Middle Level Luncheon.

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# The Portrayal of Bullying in Young Adult Books:

## Characters, Contexts, and Complex Relationships

**B**ullying is being increasingly viewed as a critical public health issue affecting too many children in their formative years (Liu & Graves, 2011). This pervasive problem finally has gained the much-needed attention of educators at local, state, and national levels and has resulted in a plethora of resources, including programs for teachers and parents, brochures, and other informational sources addressing this problem. However, bullying is a complex issue that has no easy solutions for educators and parents. This complexity is illustrated in Walton's (2005) definition of bullying as a "construction embedded in discursive practice that arises from a network or system of institutional, historical, social, and political relations . . . rooted in complex and overlapping constructions of power, language, culture, and history" (p. 61). The issue of bullying is addressed as a theme in young adult literature. In this article, we focus on the representation of bullying in current young adult books with the anticipation that such information can serve important instructional purposes.

Young adult books appeal to adolescent readers by addressing the issues, topics, and concerns relevant to these readers. It is not surprising, then, to find bullying as a theme in both recent and older books. Some problem novels of the 1970s, such as *The Chocolate War* (1974) by Robert Cormier and Judy Blume's *Blubber* (1974), addressed this topic. In *The Chocolate War*, a book geared for older adolescents, bullying is embedded in the twisted, psychological games Archie uses to manipulate and control people. Judy Blume's *Blubber* uses her characteristically direct approach of addressing unspoken issues to highlight the cruelty

of name calling to young adolescent readers. The outcomes in both books depict a stark realism that invites serious reflection about the actions of others. The plethora of contemporary young adult novels has continued to confront bullying headlong in realistic ways that also invite serious reflection (Larson & Hoover, 2012). These novels, as well as the many informational books, nonfiction narratives of true stories, and videos depicting actual events, indicate the gravity of this issue and direct attention to finding solutions to this pervasive and long-standing problem.

Many young adult books that feature bullying as a theme adhere to the characteristics of those described by Nilsen and her colleagues (Nilsen, Blasingame, Donelson, & Nilsen, 2013). For example, the books we examined were primarily told from the perspective of the bullied teen. Another characteristic, where the protagonist ultimately is responsible for making changes, is also clearly depicted in the books we examined, especially in light of the negative or diminished role of parents and other adult figures in addressing the issue of bullying. Also, at some point, the character may have a "eureka" moment of self-discovery that sets in motion much needed changes. The fast-paced events, even with the prevalence of numerous flashbacks, as well as the realistic emotions portrayed by the major character in dealing with the bullying, are in line with text features that appeal to adolescent readers.

Bullying in some form or another is pervasive in many young adult books. While bullying may not be the major theme, many contain some minor episodes of bullying or the subject of bullying is casually mentioned or embedded in the storyline. For example,

embedded bullying occurs in *The Private Thoughts of Amelia E. Rye* (Shimko, 2010). While the central theme of the book deals with Amelia's search for love and acceptance by her family, in one episode she and her African American friend Fancy are attacked by three boys who are bullies. In their attack on the girls, they viciously cut off Fancy's braids. Yet, Fancy moves above the bullying and turns the incident around as a way to now have a trendy short haircut. In this case, the bullying appears to be a commonly expected aspect of growing up and serves to strengthen the ties of friendship rather than lead to more negative consequences.

In other young adult books, bullying plays a more central role. To gain a deeper understanding of how bullying is represented in these particular books, we posed the following overarching question to guide our inquiry: *In what way is bullying portrayed in current young adult books with the protagonist as the bullied target?* We limited our analysis to major characters who were bullied victims, given the sheer volume of books about bullying. For example, some young adult books take the perspective of the bully, such as in *Scrawl* (Shulman, 2010), and others provide multiple perspectives (including the victim's), as in *Poison Ivy* (Koss, 2006). We were interested in the bullied character's perspective and how these books might help readers identify with the characters and ultimately develop a deeper understanding of this serious issue. In the following sections, we first explain our project and findings and then provide explicit instructional suggestions for teachers based upon these findings.

## The Study

### Methodology

Using content analysis procedures, we closely examined 21 young adult books published within the past ten years. We perused lists of books about bullying from a variety of sources, including recommendations from YALSA (Young Adult Library Services Association, a division of the American Library Association), published articles from peer-reviewed journals, such as *The ALAN Review* and *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, and online reviews from reputable websites that promote young adult literature (see Table 1 for the book list).

The analysis consisted of an in-depth examina-

tion of each book and involved careful note taking of particular issues related to bullying. We documented information about specific bullying episodes, the types of bullying represented, the characters involved, the reactions, the repercussions, and subsequent outcomes. From this information, we developed a category system for use with analysis across the different books. We then carefully read the notes in each category to find emerging themes about the representation of bullying in the selected books. In the following sections, we discuss what we found about the types of bullying represented in the books, the characters, the different contexts in which bullying occurred, reactions to the bullying, complex family relationships, and outcomes. We also include guiding questions for each theme to help teachers conduct class discussions.

### Types of Bullying

It is extremely important that teachers have knowledge about the types of bullying represented in these books. There is evidence that 80% of students claim that middle school teachers are unaware of the bullying that occurs in school contexts (Swearer & Cary, 2003). Bullying comes in various forms, including abuse that is physical, verbal, relational, or cyber (Liu & Graves, 2011). Physical abuse is clearly observable, and verbal abuse can be words that intimidate, threaten, or slander the victim. A more subtle form of aggression is relational bullying—acts that are detrimental to a person's relationship with others. These acts can be spreading rumors, socially excluding someone from group activities, and playing psychological power games to control others. In recent years, verbal and relational abuse have appeared on the Internet through social networking and cell phone bullying (i.e., cyberbullying).

In the 21 books we perused, we found evidence of these four types of bullying—verbal, physical, relational (e.g., spreading rumors), and cyberbullying—with most books containing more than one type. Verbal abuse from name calling was prevalent in the majority of the books, while actual physical abuse occurred in more than half of the books we examined. *Leverage* (Cohen, 2011), *Everybody Sees the Ants* (King, 2011), *The Julian Game* (Griffin, 2010), *Shine* (Miracle, 2011), and *Lessons from a Dead Girl* (Knowles, 2007) contained episodes of sexual abuse, with *Burn* (Phillips, 2008), *Bad Apple* (Ruby, 2009),

**Table 1.** List of young adult books with bullying themes

<b>Title of Book</b>	<b>Description</b>
<i>Thirteen Reasons Why</i> by J. Asher	After committing suicide, Hannah Baker leaves a legacy of 13 audiotapes for her friends and people in her life to hear about the 13 reasons that contributed to her death.
<i>The Dark Days of Hamburger Halpin</i> by J. Berk	Moving from a deaf school to a regular high school, 16-year-old Will Halpin must deal with the adjustment to a new environment, harassment and bullying from some students, and even a mystery to solve when a popular football player is murdered.
<i>Hate List</i> by J. Brown	Sixteen-year-old Valerie is left to pick up the pieces of her life after her boyfriend goes on a shooting spree at school killing others and then himself.
<i>The Truth about Truman School</i> by D. H. Butler	When Zebby, a writer for the school newspaper, becomes annoyed with the writing restrictions of the newspaper advisor, she and her friend Amr create their own online newspaper where anything can be posted—a situation that leads to cyberbullying and serious consequences.
<i>Leverage</i> by J. C. Cohen	Danny, a talented gymnast, and Kurt, a strong football fullback who has deep emotional scars, find themselves embroiled in the despicable hate crimes of three football players and know that they must overcome their own fears to do what is right.
<i>This Is What I Did</i> by A. D. Ellis	When eighth-grader Logan moves to a new school across town, he is bullied for an incident that occurred at his previous school and finds support from a daring, unconventional girl and a professional counselor.
<i>The Julian Game</i> by A. Griffin	Ray, a new scholarship student, and her friend Natalya create an online girl named Elizabeth. Problems arise when popular girl Ella uses Elizabeth to get back at her ex-boyfriend Julian.
<i>Everybody Sees the Ants</i> by A. S. King	Having been victimized by a bully since age 7, 15-year-old Lucky develops a new understanding about confronting the bully through dreams about his grandfather, who was missing in action during the Vietnam War, and from his trip to an aunt and uncle’s home, where he meets a new friend, Ginny.
<i>Lessons from a Dead Girl</i> by J. Knowles	Subjected to an abusive relationship with Leah since grade school, Laine recounts the unhealthy experiences of when Leah repeatedly coerced Laine into “playing house” and “practicing” being adults—a recounting done after Leah dies in an automobile accident.
<i>Poison Ivy</i> by A. G. Koss	Having withstood the merciless bullying of three popular middle school girls for a long time, Ivy agrees to participate in a mock trial during the American Government class—a trial in which she is the plaintiff accusing the three girls of their despicable behaviors.
<i>Shooter</i> by W. D. Myers	The involvement of teens Carla, Cameron, and Len in a school shooting unfold through newspaper reports, interviews with psychologists, and Len’s personal journal.
<i>Shine</i> by L. Myracle	Sixteen-year-old Cat is determined to find out who brutally attacked her gay friend, Patrick, and left him tied to a pump at a nearby gas station where he worked.
<i>By the Time You Read This, I’ll Be Dead</i> by J. A. Peters	After several unsuccessful suicide attempts, Daelyn, who has been mercilessly bullied all of her life because of her weight, is now determined to get it right by seeking aid on a website.
<i>Burn</i> by C. Phillips	Deadly consequences occur after Cameron is bullied and physically assaulted during his freshman year in high school.
<i>Freak</i> by M. Pixley	Bright, unconventional, and somewhat of a free spirit, 12-year-old Miriam, when bullied by the popular girls at school, finds courage to change this situation.
<i>Bad Apple</i> by L. Ruby	In her junior year of high school, Tola becomes a victim of bullying after she is accused of having an inappropriate relationship with her art teacher.
<i>Okay for Now</i> by G. D. Schmidt	In 1968, when Doug and his family move to a new town in New York, Doug must contend with his abusive, bullying father, a brother who is also a bully, the trials and tribulations caused by the eighth-grade teachers at school, a wounded older brother recently home from the Vietnam War, and his emerging artistic talent.
<i>Borderline</i> by A. Stratton	Faced with constant bullying at school because he is a Muslim, 15-year-old Sami’s home life begins to spin out of control when his father is arrested for terrorism.
<i>Some Girls Are</i> by C. Summers	After being sexually assaulted by the boyfriend of a popular girl, Regina is ousted from the popular crowd and then faces bullying and cyberbullying from others.
<i>The Chosen One</i> by C. L. Williams	When 13-year-old Kyra finds out that the leaders of the polygamous cult community in which she lives will force her to become the seventh wife of her uncle, she is devastated and tries to thwart these plans despite the threat of repercussions to her family.
<i>Story of a Girl</i> by S. Zarr	At age 16, Deanna is still facing the repercussions—the name calling from classmates and the suspicions of her father—of being caught by her father with 17-year-old Tommy in the backseat of his car when she was 13.

and *The Chosen One* (Williams, 2009) including some incidents of actual physical violence involving the protagonists.

The aggression shown in the various types of relational bullying was evident in virtually all of the books. Examples include conditional friendships in *Lessons from a Dead Girl* (Knowles, 2007) and *The*

*Julian Game* (Griffin, 2010); relentless taunting in *Freak* (Pixley, 2007), *By the Time You Read This, I'll Be Dead* (Peters, 2010), and *Bad Apple* (Ruby, 2009); spreading of rumors and gossip in *Some Girls Are* (Summers, 2009) and *Thirteen Reasons Why* (Asher, 2007); and marginalizing and excluding

others in the *Hate List* (Brown, 2009) and *The Julian Game* (Griffin, 2010). Cyberbullying was a major issue in *The Julian Game* (Griffin, 2010), *Some Girls Are* (Summers, 2009), and *The Truth about Truman School* (Butler, 2008). This form of bullying is currently the most virulent form because it is always present in the victim's life (Cart, 2010).

The gravity of relational bullying is clearly illustrated in the emotional abuse experienced by Hannah in *Thirteen Reasons Why* (Asher, 2007). Hannah Baker's story leading up to her suicide unfolds through a series of audiotapes she recorded before she took her life. The tapes are sent to all the students who Hannah felt played a part in her life. Rumors set in motion a series of events that take Hannah Baker to a place in her mind where she can no longer find the courage and will to continue living.

The emotional abuse suffered by Hannah begins with a simple kiss from Justin and then becomes blown out of proportion as Justin embellishes his conquest of Hannah and ruins her reputation. Other boys in the school capitalize on these rumors, such as Alex who voted Hannah as "Best Ass in the Freshman Class." Then there is Tyler, the peeping Tom outside Hannah's window who makes Hannah feel unsafe, and Marcus, who makes a sexual advance toward Hannah and then calls her a tease. Hannah feels used when girls like Courtney pretend to befriend her only to get a ride to a party. In another event, Hannah rides

home with Jenny the cheerleader who runs into a stop sign and knocks it over. Jenny decides to keep on going and not report the incident. Heavy guilt settles over Hannah when she fails to do anything herself about reporting the incident, which ultimately results in someone getting killed at that intersection. The cumulative effect of this constant emotional abuse is too much for Hannah to bear and thus leads her to suicide. The events in this book are representative of the cumulative effects of bullying that often lead to dire consequences—something we have seen in several of these books.

To guide a class discussion about the types of bullying in a book, the teacher can use prompts such as the following:

- What types of bullying did you notice in the book?
- Under what circumstances did a particular type of bullying occur?
- In what other ways could the target (the character who is bullied) have reacted? Would that have helped the situation?

(Note: In-text bibliographic information on the young adult novels will not be added after this point in order to avoid unnecessary repetition.)

### The Characters

Collectively, the books we examined contained a variety of protagonists representing both genders and an age range from middle school to high school. Across the books, the main characters were not really part of the popular school cliques. One exception was Regina Afton in *Some Girls Are*. Regina was initially part of the popular crowd until sexually assaulted by the leader's boyfriend and then branded as a sexually promiscuous girl and boyfriend stealer.

The main characters in the books we examined were also quite different from each other. Some were just average teens with no obvious reasons for the bullying, such as Lucky in *Everybody Sees the Ants* and Logan in *This Is What I Did*. Other characters were on the fringe of the school culture, but they react in drastically different ways to the bullying. For example, Valerie (*Hate List*) writes a list of those people who treat her and boyfriend Nick badly; the result is a blood bath at school when Nick begins shooting those on the list. On the other hand, Ivy (*Poison Ivy*) comes across as an introvert and loner who just wants to be left alone.

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## The aggression shown in the various types of relational bullying was evident in virtually all of the books.

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For other characters, physical differences lead to bullying, such as weight problems for Daelyn in *By the Time You Read This, I'll Be Dead*, deafness for Will in *The Dark Days of Hamburger Halpin*, and Sami's Muslim religion in *Borderline*. In one book, *Shine*, a character was victimized because of his sexual orientation. In still another book, the bullied characters happen to be talented gymnasts tormented because of their size. In *Freak*, 12-year-old Miriam is a bright, free-spirited, unconventional young adolescent who is tormented by the popular girls in middle school. Her interest in Shakespeare and love of poetry seem to set her apart from the rest, and she becomes a target of bullying.

Overall, the characters in the books we analyzed were a variety of adolescents dealing with issues that confront many teens today—issues ranging from self-identity to social and cultural differences. Teachers can help students focus on the characters who were on the receiving end of bullying and those who are the bullies by asking the following guiding questions:

- How would you describe this character?
- Why was this character on the receiving end of bullying?
- When comparing characters across more than one book, how are they alike and how are they different?
- How would you describe the bullies?
- Why do you think they bully others?

### The Contexts in Which Bullying Occurs

In our perusal of the books, we paid attention to the situations in which bullying behaviors occurred. As such, we noted that the situated contexts in which the main characters found themselves differed greatly. Given the variability of the contexts, we use somewhat overlapping categories to describe these situations. These categories include: 1) particular events, 2) social and cultural contexts, 3) relationships with peers, and 4) physical appearance.

#### PARTICULAR EVENTS

In several books, a single event changed everything for the protagonist and incited bullying. For example, in *Story of a Girl*, 16-year-old Deanna continues to face the repercussions of what occurred in eighth grade when her father caught her having sex with a 17-year-old. This one single event, made public by the young man, leads to name calling from others and

cold contempt from her father. Similarly, the character Tola in *Bad Apple* is bullied by classmates after she is accused of having an inappropriate relationship with her art teacher—accusations based upon one accidental encounter with the art teacher at a museum. Hannah Baker in *Thirteen Reasons Why* also leads us to believe that Justin's simple kiss at the playground is blown out of proportion, resulting in rumors that damage her reputation and hound her relentlessly to the point of suicide.

#### SOCIAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXTS

In addition to single events, particular social contexts gave rise to events that resulted in bullying behaviors in a few of the books we read. In *Leverage*, the football players and gymnasts must share the school's gymnasium and locker rooms, an administrative ruling that angers football players. In this context, three football players resort to unspeakable hate crimes against the gymnasts, who, in turn, find ways to retaliate after one gymnast takes his own life. The social context in which bullying occurs is dramatically different in *The Chosen One*. In this case, the context is a polygamous cult community where the Prophet and his band of leaders control the actions of all the people. Thirteen-year-old Kyra is told that she must marry her uncle who already has six wives. She is threatened, bullied, and even beaten as she tries to thwart the Prophet's control over her family and her life.

Bullying also occurred for those who were not part of the mainstream culture. For example, in *Borderline*, it is Sami who is bullied because he is a Muslim; in *The Dark Days of Hamburger Halpin*, Will is bullied because he is deaf. The social context of cyberspace is evident in *The Julian Game*. Raye, who is intelligent and a scholarship recipient, along with her only friend Natalya, an independent, free thinker outside the popular crowd, create a confident "cyber-girl" named Elizabeth who interacts easily with boys, ultimately leading to the physical bullying of Julian, a former boyfriend of the leader of the popular group.

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**Overall, the characters in the books we analyzed were a variety of adolescents dealing with issues that confront many teens today.**

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Raye herself becomes a target of bullying when Ella and Julian reconcile.

#### RELATIONSHIPS WITH PEERS

In several books, bullying occurred in relationships with a single character or with multiple characters. In *Everybody Sees the Ants*, Lucky is bullied time and again mainly by one character, Nader. The bullying starts when the boys are seven years old and continues into high school. Lucky is subjected to not only name calling, but also physical, humiliating acts that Nader administers to Lucky. Nader becomes the bane of Lucky's existence, as illustrated in the following excerpt when Nader encounters Lucky in the men's room at the community swimming pool:

He pushes me onto the concrete and puts his knee in the middle of my back, the way cops on TV do. He turns my face to the side and presses my cheek into the baking cement. I can feel it burn my skin. . . . Nader begins to move my face across it—slowly scraping me against sandpaper. (pp. 50–51)

In *Lessons from a Dead Girl*, the protagonist Laine is also a victim of one character, Leah. In fifth grade, Leah, popular and pretty, befriends quiet and introverted Laine. The basis for this friendship is suspect, however, as Leah coerces Laine to secretly “practice” playing house and having boyfriends in Laine's toy closet. This abusive friendship continues until high school, when Leah still torments Laine with their secret. In both books, the protagonists feel overwhelmed and powerless to change the way in which a single person dominates their lives.

In some cases, the protagonist's relationships with multiple characters lead to devastating endings. In the *Hate List*, for example, Valerie and boyfriend Nick are marginalized students outside the mainstream of high school cliques. Their standing in school thus subjects them to the taunting, bullying, and ill will of other students. As a result of these negative relationships with others in the school, Valerie, with input from Nick, develops a list of those students who make their lives miserable, as illustrated in the following excerpt:

I think at one time we may have had this idea that the list would be published—that we would make the world see how horrible some people could be. That we would have the last laugh against those people, the cheerleaders who called me Sister Death and the jocks who punched Nick in the chest in the hallways when nobody was looking, those

“perfect kids” who nobody would believe were just as bad as the “bad kids.” We had talked about how the world would be a better place with lists like ours around, people being held accountable for their actions. (p. 135)

#### PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

The protagonists' physical appearance often served as a catalyst for the bullying. In both *The Truth about Truman School* and *By the Time You Read This, I'll Be Dead*, the protagonists at one time were overweight, yet the contexts in these books were very different. Middle school student Lily, in *The Truth about Truman School*, was overweight in earlier grades, but had lost much of the weight by the time she entered middle school. The cyberbullying begins when someone posts an old school picture of her on the online newspaper. On the other hand, the situation with Deanna in *By the Time You Read This, I'll Be Dead*, is far more dire; the teasing and relentless taunting throughout elementary school because she was overweight cause Deanna to make several (unsuccessful) suicide attempts. In contrast, freshman Cameron in *Burn* is a small, slight young man with long hair. At the beginning of the school year, when he and his mother arrive at the sports orientation meeting a little late, the coach mistakes him for a girl and directs him to the girls' orientation with everyone watching. Although the coach apologizes for his mistake, the damage is already done and the bullying is relentless.

To focus on the actual bullying event(s), teachers can initiate class discussion by asking the following questions:

- Where does the bullying come into the story?
- Were there cultural issues involved in the bullying?

#### Reactions

Across all books, the bullied protagonists had similar reactions to the events that befell them. All experienced humiliation and feelings of powerlessness at the hands of those who bullied them. Furthermore, many of these characters had strong feelings of self-loathing and very low self-esteem leading to severe depression in some instances. Similar across the books were the reactions of others to the bullying events, as well as the advice offered to the bullied targets. Mainly, others characters, even friends, took little or no action and either offered no advice or told the protagonist to ignore or deal with the bullying. We saw this occur



time and again in many of the books where no friend helped and no allies stepped in, such as *Everybody Sees the Ants* and *Bad Apple*.

Class discussion about character reactions to bullying can be initiated with the following questions:

- How did the character react to the bully?
- When comparing characters across more than one book, how were their reactions similar or different?
- How did others in the story react to the bullying? Was this effective?
- Were there innocent bystanders? Were there allies?
- What other actions could have been taken? Who else could have helped?

### Complex Family Relationships

Similar to the portrayal of parents in young adult literature in general, the parents in these books about bullying often played less than stellar roles and were not depicted as strong role models or supportive adults. In the books we analyzed, parents as characters fell on a continuum from little, if any, presence to a highly visible presence, albeit not necessarily a strong, supportive one. We categorized the role of parental figures into three somewhat overlapping categories: 1) minimal with little or no advice to the bullied protagonist, 2) overall dysfunctional family, and 3) parents as victims.

#### MINIMAL OR NO ADVICE AND SUPPORT

The parents provided little or no support to their bullied child in several of the books we read. In *13 Reasons Why*, Hannah's parents were barely mentioned, with the same occurring in *Leverage*. While the parents of both Leah, the bully, and Laine, the bullied, are visible in *Lessons from a Dead Girl*, their influence on the abuse are minimal. In *The Truth about Truman School*, parents only appeared at the end when Lily, the bullied student, disappears.

Miriam's parents in *Freak* were surprisingly different. At the beginning, we find that the parents have created a democratic family structure where they and their two daughters vote to determine whether or not senior Artie can stay with them for a year while his parents go overseas. In this type of atmosphere, we begin to believe that the parents would provide strong support for their daughters. Yet, that is the not the case as the story moves along. They become involved in their own world of work, and Miriam does

not want to bother them with her problems. Even her sister Deborah, who is two years older, serves only to remind Miriam that she needs to "grow up" and become more like everyone else. As a result, the family provides minimal support for Miriam.

#### OVERALL DYSFUNCTIONAL FAMILIES

The protagonists in several of the books we examined had dysfunctional families in which the resulting tensions were not helpful in addressing the bullying or, for that matter, rendering the parents aware of the bullying. While the parents

in *Bad Apple* and *Everybody Sees the Ants* took action against the bullying, their efforts were not productive. In *Bad Apple*, Tola's mother becomes an outspoken, aggressive parent in trying to get the innocent art teacher fired. In *Everybody Sees the Ants* Lucky's mother, aunt, and uncle all try their best to help Lucky, while his father only tells him

to ignore the bullying. Valerie's mother in the *Hate List* becomes overprotective, hovering over Valerie in fear that she might commit some heinous act, such as hurting others or even committing suicide herself.

In some instances, the parents were dealing with other life issues, such as loss of a job, and were focused more on that than their families. As mentioned previously, in *Story of a Girl*, Deanna's father had caught her in the back seat of a car with 17-year-old Tommy when she was only 13—an incident that rapidly became public knowledge at school. This event occurred at a time when her father had recently lost his job. For the next three years, Deanna's father treated her with hostility, contempt, and much suspicion while keeping conversations with her at a perfunctory level. Now at 16, she continues to face the taunting and crude comments from students at school with no help from her parents. Redemption finally comes for Deanna at the end of the book when her father takes steps to mend their relationship. After a tense conversation at breakfast, Deanna blurts out, "You're always going to hate me," I said, really sobbing now,

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**The parents in these books about bullying often played less than stellar roles and were not depicted as strong role models or supportive adults.**

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‘for something I did when I was thirteen?’” (p. 158) Nothing changes in their relationship until weeks later when again at breakfast time, her father offers her a spoon, asks about school, and mentions the possibility of buying an old car for her. This turning point in Deanna’s relationship with her father and in her own thinking is evident in the following:

It came down to the smallest things, really, that a person could do to say I’m sorry, to say it’s okay, to say I forgive you. The tiniest of declarations that built, one on top of the other, until there was something solid beneath your feet. And then . . . and then. Who knew? (p. 187)

In one book, however, the parent is the bully. Thirteen-year-old Doug in *Okay for Now* by Gary Schmidt is bullied by his father in shameful, despicable ways. For example, at one point in the story, the father, in a drunken stupor, forces Doug to get a tattoo that reads “Mama’s Baby.” When Doug’s gym shirt is ripped off of him in class, everyone around sees the tattoo, adding to his humiliation and hence further bullying.

#### PARENTS AS VICTIMS

Parents as victims were also evident in some of the books. This was especially apparent in the *Hate List*. After Valerie’s boyfriend Nick goes on a shooting spree at school killing students and himself, Valerie is left to pick up the pieces of her shattered life. Her father openly vents his contempt and disgust toward Valerie and becomes involved in an illicit affair with a co-worker. His infidelity toward his wife and his resentment toward Valerie indicate that he himself feels like a victim of the school shooting.

The parents are also victims in *The Chosen One* when the Prophet, the leader of the cult community, threatens dire consequences on Kira’s family if she refuses to marry an old uncle. In both of these books, the parents can be seen as victims due to circumstances involving their children. However, in *The Shooter*, there is an episode in which one main character, Len, who is bullied at school, observes his own father being chastised or bullied by his boss. In addition, the father in *Borderline* also can be seen as a victim when he is arrested for being part of a terrorist plot mainly because of his Muslim beliefs. In *Burn*, Cameron’s mother, along with Cameron and his brother, are physically and verbally abused by the father. Although

the parents eventually divorce, the residual effects of the abuse follow them to a new location.

Guiding questions for class discussion about family relationships can include the following:

- Did family members attempt to help with the bullying issues? Why or why not?
- What else could they have done?
- What other family members could have helped?

#### Outcomes

The story endings across the books we analyzed were also varied. In some instances, the outcomes were positive for the main characters. For example, in *Leverage* and *Everybody Sees the Ants*, the main characters prevail at the end by standing up to the bullies. In others, the end result was very sobering when characters saw no way out except to take their own lives, as in *Thirteen Reasons Why* and *Shooter*. In *Burn*, abused Cameron ends up murdering an innocent young man who happened to witness Cameron being bullied and physically abused. In still others, we are left wondering about the characters, such as in *By the Time You Read This, I’ll Be Dead*.

In a discussion about story outcomes, the teacher can use the following questions:

- Was the ending to the book realistic?
- How else could the book have ended?

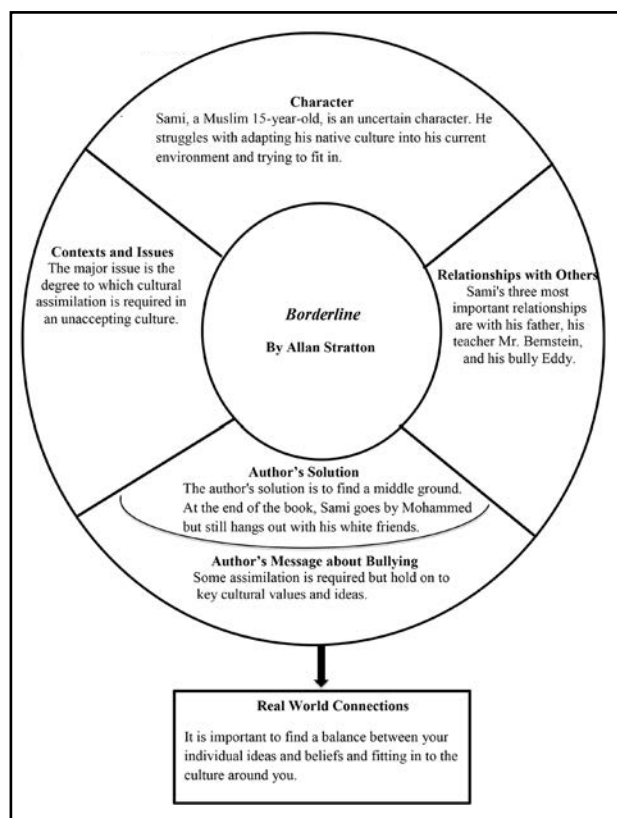
#### Teaching Implications

The National Council of Teachers of English recently passed the Resolution on Confronting Bullying and Harassment (2012) in which NCTE strongly supports the use of a variety of resources, including young adult books, to help students deal with these issues. We believe that the books we have read provide a realistic portrayal of bullying and harassment and, hence, can serve as valuable instructional tools for helping teachers address these problems that occur too frequently in the lives of adolescents. In addition to the guiding questions provided for each theme discussed above, there are many effective instructional ideas available for teachers to use in conjunction with these books.

Given the seriousness and complexity of the theme of bullying in young adult books, we believe that teachers should not only capitalize on the use

of classroom discussions, but should also use writing opportunities to help students think more deeply about bullying. If the focus is on one particular book, teachers can use the analysis circle in Figure 1 as a springboard for discussion. The analysis circle directs students to think about the themes that resonated in this study—the character, the contexts, and the complex relationships with others. The circle also directs students to think more deeply about the issues of bullying in regard to real-world applications, especially on a personal level.

Another activity is the responsibility pie chart described by Gallagher (2004). This type of chart requires students to think about who is responsible for the events in the book. Students then illustrate how the responsibility may be shared and weighed across multiple characters in the pie chart. Both the analysis chart and the responsibility pie chart can prepare students to engage in class discussions in which they support their views.



**Figure 1.** *Borderline* analysis circle; developed by Travis Witsman

Teachers can also have students engage in rich literature discussion groups in which students read multiple books with bullied protagonists. Class discussions can then focus on the critical analysis of many facets of these stories. For example, from a text perspective, teachers can direct students to consider the ways in which the authors capture the bullying events and even the types of bullying represented. Students can engage in talk about the situated context in which bullying arises and even

the role of friends, teachers, parents, and other characters in the story and how they react to the bullying. In addition to using the guiding questions mentioned after each theme, teachers can also have students complete a synthesis chart as depicted in Figure 2. The chart enables students to compare and contrast these stories about bullied teens. Suggested questions for the synthesis chart are the following:

- How would you describe the bullied victim? The bullies?
- What types of bullying are inflicted upon the character?
- What are the situated contexts or conditions under which the bullying occurs?
- What advice is given to the target of the bullying? How helpful is the advice?
- Who are the allies of the targets of bullying? Who could have been the allies?
- What are the outcomes concerning the bullying? How has the character changed?
- What is the role of the parents?
- What message is the author trying to convey about bullying?

Such discussions can then perhaps lead to a focus on real life and the bullying that the students themselves may have witnessed or experienced. At this point, the teacher can ask serious prompts that ask students to think about assuming the role of ally for a bullied student and role playing ways in which to

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**Students can engage in talk about the situated context in which bullying arises and even the role of friends, teachers, parents, and other characters in the story and how they react to the bullying.**

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Books	<i>Everybody Sees the Ants</i>	<i>Hate List</i>	<i>By the Time You Read This, I'll Be Dead</i>
Describe the target of the bullying.	Fifteen-year-old Lucky, an average teen, has been bullied by one boy, Nader, since they were seven years old. No reason is given except that Nader needs to feel empowered.	Valerie and her boyfriend Nick are marginalized students dealing with name calling and relational bullying because they do not belong to the popular crowd.	In elementary school, Daelyn was always teased and bullied about being overweight. Now older, she has made several unsuccessful attempts to kill herself.
<b>Synthesis statement: What can you say about these characters?</b> The characters are different and are bullied for different reasons.			
What advice is given to the target of the bullying?	Lucky's father tells him to ignore the bullying and avoid situations that might lead to bullying. Lucky's uncle wants him to build muscles, and his aunt offers to give him anxiety pills.	Before the shooting, no advice seems to be forthcoming about the bullying. After the school shooting, Valerie returns to school. Some students avoid her, but one victim of the shooting and former bully, Jessica, tries to befriend her.	Daelyn receives no apparent advice from anyone.
<b>Synthesis statement:</b> The advice from others does not appear to help any of the victims.			
What are the outcomes concerning the bullying? How has the character changed?	Lucky reaches a point where he realizes that he himself must stop the bullying. At the end, he does stand up to Nader.	The outcome of the bullying was the school shooting, resulting in the deaths of several students and the suicide of Valerie's boyfriend Nick. After the shooting, Valerie has to come to terms with her life. She graduates from high school and then leaves.	Daelyn tries hard to resist the friendship of Santana, a young man with a terminal illness. She cries when he asks her to share his birthday with him—a sign that she may be changing her mind about taking her life. However, the author leaves the ending open for interpretation.
<b>Synthesis statement:</b> The outcomes are somewhat positive, with the hope that the characters will move beyond past bullying events.			

**Figure 2.** Example of synthesis chart

alleviate bullying situations. Students can also assume these roles as they write a poem in two voices—from the voice of the bullied and from the voice of the ally. In addition, discussions can also be held before or after students write narratives recounting real episodes of bullying.

## Final Thoughts

The ways in which bullying is depicted in young adult books are complicated and reflect Walton's (2005) view of bullying as a societal issue deeply ingrained in positions of power, language, culture, and history. We found that the characters, situated contexts, and relationships with others were all complex, yet served

as a mirror of the real world. Therefore, we believe that how the characters saw themselves and how they reacted to their situations are worth talking about in classroom settings. The positive outcomes in most of the books can even provide a spark of hope for those who are real victims of bullying. In *Borderline*, for example, a teacher, Mr. Bernstein, offers Sami this advice: "We can't choose what life throws at us. But we can choose what we do about it. Our choices are who we are. And who we are—that, no one can take away from us" (p. 209). Our responsibility as educators to address bullying is summarized in the words of Bott (Bott, Garden, Jones, & Peters, 2007): ". . . for too long we have supported the Don't Look philoso-

phy, and the problem has NOT GONE AWAY. Your assignment is simple: Do Something” (p. 50). We can use young adult books in our classrooms to help us do that “something.”

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## When Institutions Are Libel for Bullying

**T**here are students who bully and there are students who are targeted. Often there are bystanders who may or may not act to help the targeted individual. Most, it would seem, just watch and stay silent. The same is true in the adult world. There are adults who harass others adults, and there are adults who see what is happening and do nothing. By doing nothing, they support the harassment. In schools, there are students who have witnessed a bullying event and do not get involved; worse, and far too often, there are staff members who fail to act after witnessing some form of harassment.

To witness bullying/harassing behavior and not intervene is sometimes understandable of students who fear retaliation, but when an adult sees someone being bullied, all the key players—the targeted student, the student observers, and even the bully—likely believe that the adult will intervene if s/he thinks the action is wrong. Lack of action, therefore, leads those key players to conclude that the target must have deserved it, the bully was only doing what was needed, and the students watching

have no business interfering.

Sometimes the situation is even more complicated. When the harassment is not dealt with because the reputation of an organization—perhaps the senior class, the football team, or the whole school—would be tarnished, the environment promotes institutional bullying. More simply, when the individuals in charge support the harassment by being silent, the institution is libel.

I would like to introduce two authors whose books speak to this issue: Joshua C. Cohen (JCC), an American author of the book *Leverage*, and David Gregory (DG), an Australian author of the book *Fight to the End*. (Summaries of these books are in the sidebar on page 94.)

**DG:** The issue of institutional bullying in schools remains significant in Australia. The culture in schools is shaped and reinforced by teachers, who have immense power over the tone of the school. Since leaving college, I've met a number of former students who had been there at different times, and we had many of the same experi-

ences. The common factor was that the teachers knew about what was going on, but never did anything about it. Unfortunately, the school's nice reputation seems far more important than dealing with a horrible and destructive culture within.

**CJB:** Josh, why did you write *Leverage*?

**JCC:** I really like stories about underdogs and odd couples. I also love sports of all kinds, more as a participant than a bleacher creature. The actual story didn't come into place immediately, but all the surrounding elements and characters did. Then I read a horrible account about a football camp where the seniors attacked the freshmen in much the same way I describe in my book. Something about that news account spoke to me, and I really wanted to give voice to the victims and witnesses of an assault who believe, due to institutional circumstances, they must remain silent. It's a powerful fear and, as you hinted, despotic regimes operate more by the threat of terror than actually committing the acts of

terror themselves. That we can be cowed so easily and repeatedly, I find fascinating as well as horrifying.

**CJB:** When I first read *Leverage*, Josh, I was immediately hooked by the two main characters. Both were instantly endearing, but I could feel the danger ahead of them.

David, why did you write *Fight to the End*?

**DG:** I wrote *Fight to the End* because it was a good way of dealing with a situation that had almost crippled me personally, and I wanted to give the reader a sense of hope. The worst thing about being a teenager and being bullied is that you feel so isolated and alone, and you don't realize that life isn't all like this. I hoped to provide a narrative that still demonstrates a glimmer of hope, in spite of what may seem an overwhelming situation.

**CJB:** I couldn't help but wonder if your dedication—*In memory of Darren Steele 1983–1998*, was a driving force that helped you complete the book.

**DG:** Talking about the dedication is very hard for me. Although I never knew Darren Steele, who was an English boy in high school around the same time I was, I read the newspaper articles over and over again, how he was relentlessly bullied and eventually committed suicide. The story touched me so much. The school knew what was going on yet did nothing to stop it. I wish I could have been there for Darren and been able to be

that hand on his shoulder to let him know he was safe and that everything was going to be ok. Maybe he'd still be here.

**CJB:** I can understand and relate to that need to somehow honor a person in a way that will remind people of what he endured. The word *bullycide* came into being in 2002 when researchers Neil Marr and Tim Field published *Bullycide: Death at Playtime—An Expose of Child Suicide Caused by Bullying* in which they presented their research on British children who had killed themselves because bullying made life more painful than dying. Marr and Field reported Britain's first bullycide was 11-year-old Steven Shepherd in 1967. The youngest bullycide in Britain was 8-year-old Marie Bentham; she hanged herself with her jump rope from her bedroom doorknob. Darren Steele committed bullycide and you, David, have honored him.

Josh, tell me about your main characters. How did they come to be?

**JCC:** I really wanted to write a story that paired two individuals who, on the surface, seemed like polar opposites from each other. As I said, I love odd-couple pairings in literature and the movies, and I really wanted to pursue this in my own writing. Delving further, I wanted one boy, Danny, to be unusually small, so to the outside world he seems like a little runt, but on the inside he is prideful and feisty. The other boy, Kurt, is someone who, to the outside world, looks like the

Incredible Hulk and is expected to act accordingly. But because of Kurt's history of abuse, he's really like a whipped dog that simply wants to avoid confrontation at all costs—except when he's on the football field and can unleash all of his pent-up frustration and rage.

**DG:** Much of the character of Michael is based on my experiences at school. It was actually in my Year 11 that I wrote the first draft of the story. Much of what happened there formed the basis for the character of Michael. I found it to be a very good way of dealing with what was going on at school. The character of Xavier is based upon a friend of mine who I met a couple of years after school. At this point, I became quite serious about telling the story of bullying and adapted this friendship to the situation of my school experience.

**CJB:** I kept looking for a solid adult role model in these two books, and with the exception of Deputy Forbes in David's book, I really could not find one. Adults are often eliminated from YA books. Why is that?

**DG:** Sadly, there were no solid adult role models in my school, and the character of Forbes is again a literary fiction, which I added because I wanted to provide the reader with a sense of hope that someone would listen, someone would intervene. Where there is a toxic culture, there needs to be a person who stands up and says enough is enough. I believe the solid adult

role models are eliminated from many YA books because teenagers feel alienated and unable to trust adults. The support of a friend or a peer is much more powerful than the intervention of an adult. From my point of view, despite the good intentions of Forbes, it's still the boys who are forced to deal with the problems themselves, which I believe is often the case.

**JCC:** For me, looking back at high school and middle school, adults felt pretty secondary from the moment you got on the school bus until the time you arrived home—which was most of your waking hours. You could have the most supportive and loving parents in the world, but that didn't really mean squat if you were alone in the school hallway getting roughed up by some older kids or being singled out in the lunchroom for humiliation. So when I write a story set in high school in the voice of teens, I purposely put the adult figures in the background, because I think that's how most teens view them. Of course adults—especially parents and teachers and coaches—have a *huge* impact on the lives of teens, but from the teen's perspective, we adults simply don't get it.

**CJB:** There are adults in each book who betray the main characters and the responsibilities that come with their jobs in such a way that it is institutional harassment. Do you see examples of this in your countries and around the world? In the US, the Penn State coverup comes to

mind—which I know came after your book was written, Josh.

**JCC:** I find the Penn State situation so maddening and so awful *precisely because* they were adults (and not teens) abdicating their authority and willing to look the other way. When I read about the assistant coach Mike McQueary walking in on a ten-year-old boy being raped by the assistant coach Jerry Sandusky and being so shocked by the scene that he couldn't speak and simply left—*left the boy alone with this monster!*—I can't really convey how much of a moral failing this is. McQueary's excuse later was that he was in fear of losing his job, and he didn't want to make waves. How about the boy being attacked? So what does he do? He reports it the next day to the head coach, and the head coach passes the report up the line. No one thought to actually confront the monster Sandusky, because no one wanted to tarnish the image of Penn State football.

As you mention, CJ, all of this came to light well after my book, *Leverage*, was published, and it makes me just shake my head and think that the world doesn't seem to learn any lessons. Transparency should be a requirement in any institution where adults or older kids are interacting with children too young to understand how they can be bullied, intimidated, and threatened into silence. That means, for instance, not allowing vulnerable kids alone with adults in windowless rooms or other spaces where they can not be easily monitored.

**DG:** From my own experiences at school and in two schools in which I have worked, I found there to be an attitude that kids can sort out the problems themselves, or "it's ok to turn a blind eye to certain people and behaviours." This certainly shaped how I developed the narrative of betrayal and alienation. What frustrated me was the fact that it occurred time and time again in each of these schools. The desire to promote the public face of the school as caring was more important than actually caring for the students, which really disturbed me as it should everyone.

I see stark and disturbing parallels to other incidents of institutionalised bullying in the case of Penn State. People seem to put more effort and energy into covering up a toxic culture of abuse rather than dealing with it head on. The principal of my school made a comment to my parents a couple of years after I left. He said, "If he had stayed any longer, he would have had to start formal proceedings against some staff members." This is an abhorrent comment, similar to the pathetic responses of the staff at Penn State, especially when put in the context that he actually knew what was going on at the school. He knew the staff involved and the extent to which they were involved, yet he failed to do anything about it, which was also later proved in court. The desire to cover up hideous behaviour to "protect" an image of the staff involved and the organisation as a whole, rather than helping



protect students, is something that sadly keeps repeating itself.

**CJB:** Both of your books are very visual for me—almost like watching a movie. Was that your intent or did it just happen?

**DG:** I never really intended for the story to develop that way, but when it did, I thought it worked well, and I actually rewrote several parts to follow this style. It is a way of reading I have always enjoyed, and I guess that rubbed off on me when I started to write.

**JCC:** I tend to see book chapters as scenes. If I can't imagine it occurring in front of my eyes, I have a hard time breathing life into it so, yes, it was intentional on my part—at least on a subconscious level.

**CJB:** Josh, in the rock-jumping scene in your book, and in your book *David*, when the boys escape—first to Michael's house and then when they escape even farther away—I felt such a rush of freedom, and I realized the tension I felt just reading these books was so small compared to what the characters were living. Was that your intention in these scenes? Did you need to give the kids some relief, some fun?

**DG:** With such a dark and troubled storyline, there had to be the release, an escape, a way out. Ultimately, there had to be hope. The real personalities of Michael and Xavier never come out until they escape from school. The way in which it cripples their sense of self-worth and their

ability to be themselves, for me, is central to the issue of bullying. Bullying damages lives in so many ways and can render bright, happy kids into emotionally troubled young adults. Getting away from the torment of school meant that the boys could finally be themselves. I wrote the escapes quite dramatically not only because of how important this was in saving both boys from the abuse at school, but to also reinforce the fact they had to take it upon themselves to do something about the situation they were in. Their escape was empowering.

**JCC:** Yes! That was exactly what I wanted to convey. I also wanted a scene where Kurt understands that he can bond with these other guys (gymnasts) through their mutual appreciation for their beautiful surroundings and the physical challenges posed by this rock quarry on a glorious autumn day. In this scene, Kurt gets a chance to form friendships built on trust and camaraderie through rock climbing and not built on intimidation and fear that you must fall in line or be an outcast. The rock quarry scene also underscores how the later outing with his football captains on a hunting trip—also outdoors but on a cold, ugly day—conveys the exact opposite feeling when he is around these “teammates” who feel more like predators.

**CJB:** On a side note, I loved the scene when Kurt—the big, musclebound football player—asks the guys on the gymnastics team to teach him to do a

back flip. When he makes a touchdown, he will celebrate with that dazzling flip!

In closing, what is your hope for your two incredible books?

**JCC:** I hope that whoever reads this book is, first and foremost, entertained by an intense tale of courage in the face of real and unexpected adversity. I hope the book connects to readers and encourages a sense of empathy for two odd-duck boys who might otherwise be ignored or disdained. One of the great things about literature is its ability to let a reader walk in someone else's shoes for a bit. Our ability to empathize with others really is a sign of our own humanity and can solve a lot of problems on its own. My book, hopefully, provides a stepping stone in that direction.

**DG:** I hope that young people can read my story and get a sense of what is right and wrong in terms of how to treat others. Whilst it may be a bit too confronting for victims of bullying, for the bystander, I think it provides a valuable insight into how much hurt can be felt from bullying. Maybe next time a bullying incident happens, someone will step in and say enough is enough.

*Former high school English teacher **cj Bott** is an educational consultant on issues of bullying and harassment with a focus on prevention. She believes reading books that deal with bullying is the best way to help even our youngest students to see the injustice in supporting harassing behavior. Her books and website present hundreds of titles for children and teens that enable young people*

to think about what they need to do before they are involved in or witness bullying. More information can be found at her website, [www.bulliesin-books.com](http://www.bulliesin-books.com).

Australian author **David Gregory** is involved in many things. He works with a number of schools in their residential outdoor education programs and is currently a director of outdoor education with a Melbourne school. David, a keen snow skier, is also heavily involved in Australian

politics. In 2008, David took Farrer Agricultural High School (the school he attended) to court over bullying and was successful in proving systemic failure and the existence of a culture of abuse riddled throughout the school. David has since worked extensively with students, staff, and parents to examine ways of identifying and dealing with bullying within the school context.

**Josh Cohen** grew up in Minnesota as an avid fan of and participant in

many sports, including Taekwondo, rock climbing, track, (pee-wee) football, the other football (soccer), gymnastics, and dance. His extensive training in gymnastics and dance enabled him to tour the world with dance companies such as MOMIX and musical theater shows such as West Side Story. He currently lives in New York City with his wife and young daughter. He also, unfortunately, remains a loyal fan of the Minnesota Vikings.

## Summaries of *Leverage* and *Fight to the End*

*Leverage* (Joshua C. Cohen, Dutton, 2011)

Available on Amazon, Kindle, and in USA bookstores; for more information go to [leverage.thebook.com](http://leverage.thebook.com)

Two athletes, Kurt Brodsky and Danny Meehan, tell their stories about Oregrove High School. Kurt, a big, quiet boy new to the school and on the football team, has had a lonely, fear-ravaged, and horribly abusive past that causes him to stutter when he speaks. His new foster home is safe, and that is a miracle for him. Coach Briggs has given Kurt's foster mother extra cash to buy a TV so they can watch the replays of the school's football games on the community channel, because football is what this town is all about.

Danny, small but filled with dreams and the steps needed to climb them, can fly, and he does just that on the gymnastics team where he shows everyone his amazing skills. Everywhere else in the school he hides because the football team stomps on guys his size. To them, he is a joke. But Danny works hard all year; he even has a personal trainer during the summer because he wants a college scholarship.

The two become friends through two events: Kurt watches Danny's gymnastics team practicing and asks them to teach him the back-flip so that he can perform one in the end zone if he ever gets to make a touchdown, and both Danny and Kurt witness the rape of one of Danny's teammates by several of Kurt's teammates.

*Fight to the End* (David Gregory, William Watson & Sons, 2010)

Available on Amazon, Kindle, and iTunes

Set in an Australian private boys' school, Michael, year eleven, and Xavier, year nine and new to the school, become best friends because everyone else in the school hates and harasses them, particularly the senior boys, but also the staff and the administration. Deputy Forbes, also new to the school, is the only one who questions the abuse.

Michael Anderson lives off campus with his adoptive parents who do not want to be bothered with him and who always assume any problem is Michael's fault. When he first started at this school, Michael was actively involved in academics and interested in debate, and when the bullying started, he followed the rules and filed the necessary report time after time, only to have Mr. McGrain, Head of [student] Welfare, tell him that he was the problem and had better learn to get along with the senior boys. Of course, the harassment not only continued, it escalated.

Xavier Green has just entered the school; his parents are very involved with a new business and his father travels quite a bit. Xavier finds Michael an interesting guy, even though he has been warned to not socialize with him. However, Xavier realizes that Michael is someone who shares his intellectual interests. As their friendship grows, the senior boys extend their harassment to Xavier, which is exactly what Michael was afraid would happen.

## Enhancing the Canon with Historical Fiction and Informational Texts

**M**y (Jackie) son's fourth-grade teacher sent home a note about the books he would be reading this year:

We will begin exploring the genres of literature. We will then dissect the genres even further by analyzing books and noting characteristics that are present in genre subsets in order to identify the genre. For example, understanding that historical fiction is realistic fiction set in a different time period.

Curious about the role realistic fiction was going to play in the new Common Core State Standards (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). I contacted three colleagues to see what their feelings were on this topic. As a result of the CCSS's push for more informational texts, teachers will, no doubt, be scrambling to find examples of charts, graphs, statistics, first-person accounts of events, as well as other primary sources from multiple academic disciplines. They might choose to include a fireman's account of responding to the 911 attack or a scientist's account of her participation in the human genome project. The English/Language Arts (ELA) canon will be expanding in potentially new and exciting ways as students come into contact with types of texts they may not have

read in previous ELA courses. However, with the canon expanding to include more informational texts, teachers will inevitably have to abandon other texts. While the CCSS claims that their lists are not exclusive, it would be easy to see these lists as "checklists."

The CCSS list of exemplar texts for grades 6–8 is broken into four genres—stories, drama, poetry, and informational texts. While this implied canon expands the possible range of topics and concepts covered, it does so at the expense of the interdisciplinary focus the new "Comprehensive Curriculum" hopes to promote. There is a notable thematic disconnect among the exemplar titles as the list apparently tries to cover a wide range of topics from the Holocaust to slavery. Teachers looking to find their favorite historical fiction novels to teach will find only one suggestion: *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (Taylor, 1976).

The CCSS's suggested list promotes the isolated teaching of texts as opposed to an integrated approach. Informational texts should not be randomly included in the curriculum when, instead, the planned inclusion of such texts can enhance and enrich novel units with a piece of historical fiction at their center. Examining the

expanded canon, then, becomes less of a vice and more of a virtue because of the increased interdisciplinary possibilities. Given that many middle schools teachers frequently teach units with historical novels, more emphasis should be on careful selection of informational texts to teach in conjunction with these stories. In this article, we offer ways to incorporate the teaching of informational texts with three commonly taught historical fiction novels.

### What Is Historical Fiction?

As my son's teacher notes, historical fiction can be tricky to define. Bucher and Hinton (2009) define historical fiction as a novel that is set in the past (at least one generation, which could be defined as approximately 15 to 20 years) in relation to when it was originally written (pp. 213–214). Recognizing that some stories are obviously historical fiction because they are set in the distant past, Cole (2009) wonders: "How much time must pass before an event becomes history? A decade? Five years? One day?" (p. 239).

In addition to discussing the temporal distance that might position historical novels, Nilsen, Blasingame, Donelson, and Nilsen (2013) suggest other important

qualifications: “[Historical novels] should be historically accurate and steeped in time and place. . . . Historical novels should give a sense of history’s continuity, a feeling for the flow of history from one time into another” (p. 258). For middle school students, the future is often next Friday and the past was lunch the day before. As they mature and grapple with complex ideas and their own place in the world, students can benefit from a unit that encompasses a quality young adult historical novel and accompanying informational texts; such a context can provide them with an avenue of inquiry (Wilhelm, 2007) into how the issues of the past connect to the events of the present.

While the CCSS document groups all genres of fiction into a category labeled “stories,” we hope that this classification includes short stories, novels, and other narrative forms in a wide range of genres. The “stories” category might include realistic fiction, fantasy fiction, science fiction, historical fiction, and many others that both students and teachers find interesting and accessible. However, among the limited titles suggested, we find historical fiction woefully underrepresented, especially as we examine the push to include more informational texts across the curriculum. Many teachers might seem overwhelmed if they feel that including informational texts means developing new units that might be difficult to fit within an already packed curriculum. On the other hand, using informational texts as part of an historical fiction unit can enhance the curriculum as teachers strive to address the additional requirements.

## **The Interests and Development of the Middle Level Student**

In *This We Believe* (National Middle School Association, 2010), the Association for Middle Level Education highlights that middle school students experience a great deal of flux as they develop physically, cognitively, morally, psychologically, socially, and emotionally. These issues play a role in how they interact and learn in a school setting. For example, cognitively, they “are intensely curious and have a wide range of intellectual pursuits” (p. 56), while at the same time, they often “show disinterest in conventional academic subjects, but are intellectually curious about the world and themselves” (p. 57). While they may be “quick to see flaws in others, but slow to acknowledge their own faults” (p. 58), they are “idealistic, desiring to make the world a better place and to make a meaningful contribution to a cause or issue larger than themselves” (p. 58) and “often show compassion for those who are downtrodden or suffering” (p. 58).

Combining the sense of curiosity with their sense of social justice that stems from their moral development can prove productive during units based on *The Watson’s Go to Birmingham—1963* (Curtis, 1995), *The Outsiders* (Hinton, 1967), and *Number the Stars* (Lowry, 1989) when those units are supported by a variety of informational texts.

### ***The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963***

Taught alone, *Watsons* (Curtis, 1995) is a powerful novel that

treats important themes, including sibling rivalry, family values and struggles, friendship, schooling, and racial tensions. The overarching narrative begins with a comic tone as the Watsons, an African American family, manage a lower middle class existence in Flint, Michigan. Their situation is emblematic of the migration of the black workers from the rural south to the industrial north with its suggestion of better pay, better opportunities, and a taste of the American dream. The family plans to take Byron, the oldest son who is struggling with obedience and parental authority, to Birmingham for an immersion in family values. Their reverse migration, however, is a nonstop car trip back into the Deep South and an intense reminder of racial segregation.

An Internet search on *Watsons* provides an abundance of informational texts that meet the mandates of CCSS and enhance the novel, providing both information and supplemental reading activities. The title foreshadows the Birmingham Church bombing of September 15, 1963, an event that left four African American girls dead and others wounded. The tragedy occurred a month after Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech (August 23, 1963) and preceded the assassination of President John F. Kennedy by two months. These events are landmarks of a turbulent decade embroiled in the war on poverty, the Vietnam War, civil rights legislation, and the pulsation of rock and roll.

We suggest three informational texts that promote the themes associated with the Birmingham

bombing. Martin Luther King Jr. offered a speech, *Eulogy for the Martyred Children*, at the funeral for three of the murdered girls. This speech connects to King's other speeches and to the novel's theme of racial inequality. A second text would be Junie Collins Williams's (2012) account of surviving the bombing. Her sister, Addie Mae Collins, died, and until recently, Junie has avoided talking about this painful event. The third informational text could be the *New York Times* article (Sitton, 2010) which covers Governor Wallace's reaction to the tragedy as well as naming public figures that students could research.

Informational texts to support a unit on the *Watsons* (Curtis, 1995) might focus on the bombing and subsequent events that followed. Other informational texts could also be linked to the novel, depending on how the teacher develops the unit's inquiry. Linking a funeral eulogy, an eye witness account, and a prominent newspaper's report demonstrate how three informational texts can enhance a well-established historical fictional text.

### ***The Outsiders***

In *The Outsiders* (1967), S. E. Hinton captures the anger, love, and sadness of a group of young men. Set in Oklahoma during the sixties, it is a story about two rival gangs divided by socioeconomic class—the Greasers and the Socs. Narrator Ponyboy Curtis finds himself on the run after a particularly violent fight. The novel, in many middle school teachers' curricula, addresses topics important to adolescents, including bullying, making a difference, and finding one's purpose in

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## **With references to Corvairs, T-Birds, The Beatles, and Elvis Presley, Ponyboy's world is removed from today's generation.**

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this world.

While *The Outsiders* (Hinton, 1967) could be considered an example of realistic fiction, Bucher and Hinton (2009) allow us to treat it as historical fiction with our students today. With references to Corvairs, T-Birds, The Beatles, and Elvis Presley, Ponyboy's world is removed from today's generation. Informational texts for a unit on this text might introduce students to the political and social climate of the sixties as well as the many cultural references found in the novel. Teachers might show a documentary, such as "Time Machine: On America's Love Affair with the Car" (Arts and Entertainment, 1993) to contextualize this era's cultural infatuation with the automobile. By using this documentary, students could watch and analyze advertisements for some of the cars mentioned in the novel. Situating the novel in its historical context will provide additional levels of connection for the students. Because the book was such a controversial text when it was first published, a culminating activity might be for students to examine, respond to, and evaluate opinions from book reviews written when the book came out and others writ-

ten in recent years.

Burke (2008) offers advice for those teachers wishing to keep a powerful historical fiction text in their curriculum while also incorporating more informational texts. Referring to Applebee's (1996) concept of conversation, Burke advocates approaching the teaching of a novel by focusing on a larger theme or literary element to open up spaces for expository, narrative, dramatic, and poetic texts. Because "each text offers information in a different way and serves a different purpose" (p. 44), he advocates that there does not need to be an established, sequential way of organizing these texts. Instead, as each additional text is folded into the unit, its genre, purpose, and structure should be introduced and discussed.

### ***Number the Stars***

Lowry's (1989) *Number the Stars* is an example of historical fiction that has developed a key place in the middle school canon when teaching about the Holocaust and World War II; it often serves as a companion to the play, *The Diary of Anne Frank* (1989), which is on the exemplar list under Drama. The novel, set in Copenhagen, Denmark, in 1943, is told from the perspective of Annemarie Johansen. The political struggles and human rights issues that are difficult for students to understand are made personal as students see what Annemarie, her friends, and her family endure. *Number the Stars* does what good historical fiction does: it immerses readers in the culture and events of the time period, embedding key dates, facts, and events in the narrative;

it makes abstract concepts such as suffering and persecution personal through characters that struggle in challenging times. The historical events are complicated by showing multiple points of view around the issues. Additionally, Lowry's Afterword provides information about the historical and personal sources used in the construction of the novel.

Annemarie says, "The whole world had changed. Only the fairytales remained the same" (Lowry, p. 17) as a way to illustrate how the changes, the war, the loss of family, and the disappearance of friends had affected her world. The events in the novel become springboards for research for the students; often they ask, *Did the Nazis really send people to concentration camps? Did King Christian really ride around Denmark on a horse? Were there soldiers stationed in many towns in Europe? Were there resistance fighters?* These questions grow out of a desire for more specific information and encourage readers to turn to informational texts for additional knowledge.

This initiates Applebee's concept of conversation—between texts, between readers, between ideas—and builds on Burke's explanation that "texts offer information in a different way" (p. 44). When texts, both fiction and informational, work together, they provide meaningful learning for the students. Numerous documentaries about World War II, concentration camps, Anne Frank, and other topics related to the Holocaust support this text. Additionally, there are websites and books with first-person accounts of resistance fighters, concentration camp survivors, and

soldiers that provide additional information to students.

## Conclusion

After writing this article, we realized that we are arguing to keep the existing canon of young adult historical fiction currently found in many middle school ELA classrooms, with the idea that these are texts with which students and teachers already engage. Selecting informational texts can enhance that engagement and provide students with additional experiences with another genre and build collaborative partnerships across disciplines. Building on the idea that supplementing powerful historical fiction with equally powerful informational texts, we are hopeful that with a little extra thought and work, we can enhance and enrich our students' experiences with novels that we find to be relevant, challenging, and engaging.

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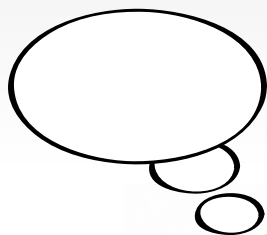
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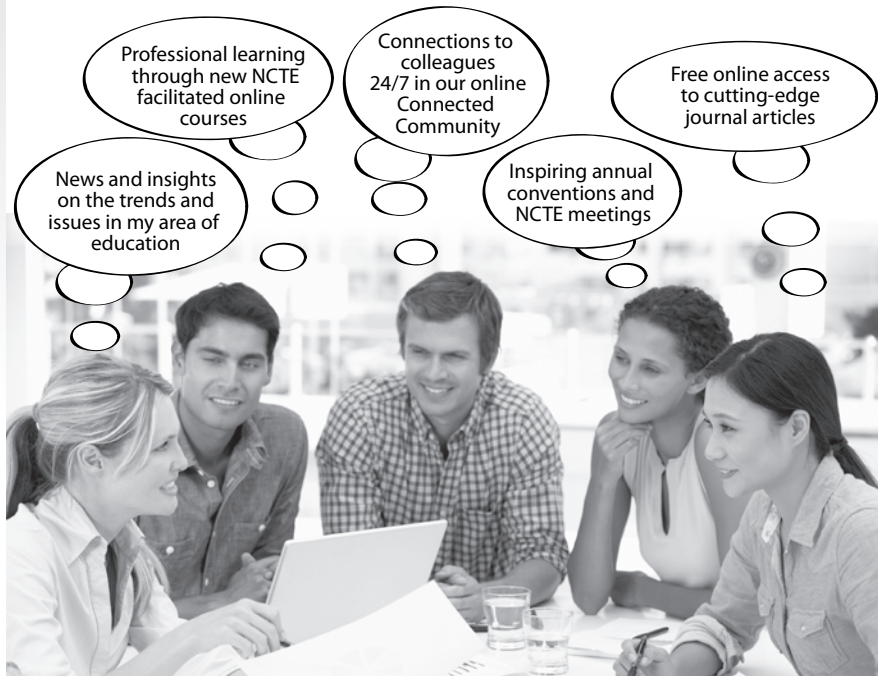
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