

## Facing Our Dragons:

Wrestling with the Canon, Censorship, and Common Core through YA Literature

**W**hen Edmund Spenser's Redcrosse Knight faces the fiery heat of his evil foe, Error, in *The Faerie Queene*, the dragon spews more than fire and poisonous black smoke. Error vomits up stinking lumps of flesh, eyeless frogs, and, most important, books and papers. While Spenser was making his pronouncement against Roman Catholic propaganda being issued to malign Queen Elizabeth, he was also announcing his opinion about what should or should not be read. Over 400 years later, we are still struggling with that same question. Like the knight's struggles with his dragon and her evil vomit, English teachers have been wrestling with the canon for decades. What to teach and when to teach it have been subjects of debate in teachers' lounges and academic conferences for years. Now that question has been complicated by the addition of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS; National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010), with its emphasis on informational texts, so teachers continue the impossible balancing act of choosing between classics, young adult fiction, and informational texts. And those same teachers, in a fast-paced world of texting, tweeting, and Foursquare, must find a way to reach reluctant learners—to catch the spark that creates lifelong readers.

The challenges facing this generation of English teachers grow each day as standards-based curricula, high-stakes testing, and racing to the top become part of every school's initiatives. Now, more than ever, English teachers must challenge students with quality literature and exciting lessons while also addressing

the new Standards of Common Core and maneuvering through political agendas and external demands. But they must also choose literature that is worth a fight, as politicians and other censors—including teachers and students themselves—weigh in on the classroom materials debate. Today's English teachers may not have to wade through poisonous vomit to complete their quests, but they do often need shields and armor to protect themselves from the endless attacks on quality literary texts. Like the Redcrosse Knight, they must choose their weapons carefully, and like the fierce warrior, they may discover that fire can motivate heroism.

### That Time of Year—Textbook Selections

Every fall, as the leaves turn to gold and begin their swirling dance and the pumpkin patches and apple orchards lure us astray with the first hint of cool, we begin our annual struggle—textbook selections. We wrestle with the choices of texts like the Redcrosse Knight wrestled with his dragon. Only our task is much more pleasant, with fewer eyeless frogs and lumps of flesh; our task is choosing books for our young adult literature classes. Although we (Amy and Ruth) teach similar courses at the same university, we come to this task from two very different perspectives—Amy with her language and literacy degree, attention to big-picture policy issues, and a dissertation on Common Core; Ruth with her three English degrees, love for literature (maybe more than literacy), and a dissertation on Toni Morrison. But we

both truly love teaching our courses in YA literature, which is required for all of our English and language arts education majors, the next generation of English teachers. We just have trouble choosing books—not because we are unable to find quality texts, but because we find too many. And that struggle gets more complicated each year as we feel the need to incorporate texts, both fictional and informational, that are relevant not only to the Common Core but also to our students' lives.

The list of exemplar texts in Common Core was not intended to be used as a reading list, and the document clearly states that the lists “do not represent a partial or complete list” (National Governors Association for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, Appendix B, p. 2). Unfortunately, many school administrators have interpreted these exemplars as the definitive works for each grade level. So, perhaps with no intention to do so, the writers of Common Core have created a censored list. Teachers will need to study the document carefully and present an explanation of the lists to administrators, along with convincing arguments for the inclusion of other texts in the English/Language Arts (ELA) classroom. What is interesting to note about the exemplar texts is what has been left out of the list. Very few current-day authors are included, and there are even fewer young adult books. In addition, the secondary ELA lists include very few literary nonfiction texts, rarely any biographies or essay collections, and certainly no young adult LGBTQ books.

Our quest in this article, as it is in our young adult literature classes, is to take English teachers on our adventure—to explore the choices but also the reasons behind such decisions. How do we as English teachers find just the right tender to get the fire to catch—even for the cold of heart? We want to examine how to determine which books are “school worthy” while also contemplating some definitions of informational texts and standards for measuring worthwhile young adult literature. We also want to study the role of censorship, both internal and external, in the selection process, as we believe that attacks on quality young adult literature influence the choices of texts and, in turn, our classroom communities. As lovers of literature, we believe in the power of books to transform lives, we believe that our students need

to take ownership of their reading and their education, but we also believe that some of that classroom “ownership” can be taken away from an English teacher if he or she is not diligent on the journey.

## From Amy—Young Adult Text as Indulgence

I wonder if Miles Halter would thrive in a Common Core English language arts (ELA) classroom. Miles, the protagonist of John Green's *Looking for Alaska* (2005), is a reader of nonfiction; more specifically, he is a reader of biographies. Not seeking historical background knowledge to support other readings or satisfy his curiosity about beloved writers, Miles has only a quirky, personal reason for reading—finding famous people's last words. He declares that “it was an indulgence, learning last words. Other people had chocolate; I had dying declarations” (p. 11). Miles, then, views

his reading of biographies for his own purpose to be outside what is approved of as worthwhile reading. Miles's perception of his reading habits as outside the norm is not unusual, as Lesesne (2013) noted when she wrote about her student who felt that “the reading he did was not the same type of reading he saw in most of his ELA classes” (p. 66). What counts as worthy texts and purposes for reading in ELA classes continues to be contentious and challenged, particularly in secondary ELA, in part because of narrow purposes for literacy as defined by the Common Core State Standards and their perpetuation of the notion that older texts are more worthwhile.

The Common Core is clear in its purpose: to ensure college and career readiness in ELA by creating independent readers of complex text. Each of these goals is reasonable and worthwhile. The potential danger, however, is that we self-censor other purposes for reading beyond only future-oriented goals of readiness, and we ignore students like Miles Harter where they are and who they are now with their own purposes for choosing and using texts. Pondering the

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usefulness of canonical texts in contemporary classrooms, Wilhelm (2013) said, “If we are honest with ourselves as readers, we read for a wide variety of instrumental reasons, but also for varied and profoundly personal and ultimately delicious purposes tied up with pleasure. Pleasure, as we’ve found in our current study, is the central call of reading” (p. 57). Miles

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**Miles Harter exemplifies the pleasure that can be found in reading for “ultimately delicious purposes.” . . . Would Miles Harter be happy in a Common Core secondary ELA class?**

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Harter exemplifies the pleasure that can be found in reading for “ultimately delicious purposes” as he mines biographies for not-so-famous last words. Would Miles Harter be happy in a Common Core secondary ELA class? One might assume that because of the Common Core’s emphasis on informational texts, he might be, but we suspect that he would still see reading for his own purposes as an indulgence.

Teaching an undergraduate YA literature class that includes middle and secondary ELA education candidates, English majors, and others who took the class as an elective, I decided to indulge my students’ and my own varied purposes for reading as we explored YA nonfiction. Because of their limited experiences with nonfiction texts in ELA classrooms, many students equate nonfiction with textbooks and maybe newspaper articles, journal articles, and historical essays. One of the Common Core’s strengths is that it does not minimize the importance of nonfiction in students’ lives and offers a broad, albeit sometimes confusing, definition of informational nonfiction, which includes “biographies and autobiographies; books about history, social studies, science, and the arts; technical texts, including directions, forms, and information displayed in graphs, charts, or maps; and digital sources on a range of topics” (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010, p. 31). One of my goals for my YA literature students and me was to expand what counts as informational nonfiction as we pursued our own interests and explored what YA nonfiction looks like and where it can be found. I pointed students to the Young Adult Library

Services Association’s (YALSA) award winners for YA nonfiction and instructed them to choose a text to read (American Library Association, 2011). We chose texts based on personal interest in a topic, curiosity about how an author might approach a given topic for an adolescent audience, or a thematic connection to YA fiction we had already read.

One of my students chose Stone’s *The Good, the Bad, and the Barbie: A Doll’s History and Her Impact on Us* (2010) and loved it because it fed her interests in both Barbie and women’s issues. Another student chose Levinson’s *We’ve Got a Job: The 1963 Birmingham Children’s March* (2012). We had just read Curtis’s *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963* (1995), which this student knew she wanted to use someday in her own classroom, so she chose Levinson’s book because of her renewed interest in the Birmingham bombing and because she had never heard of the children’s march. When she shared the book with the class, they seemed as fascinated as she was.

While choosing a YA nonfiction text to read while my students were reading their own selections, I found YALSA’s 2011 winner for nonfiction, Angel’s *Rise Up Singing* (2010), the biography of Janis Joplin. I was happy and surprised to find this text for several reasons. I am a lifelong fan of Janis Joplin’s music and have always been intrigued by her life and death. However, I only listen to her music occasionally. I listen for really specific purposes—to simmer in a soulful tune or sing along in the car when I need to release my own energy or absorb Janis’s. I even have a decade-old poster of Janis Joplin in my office that still lies propped up against my filing cabinet because it does not seem to fit what has traditionally counted as proper English professor office décor. In short, Janis Joplin’s music is one of my indulgences. Not surprisingly, then, reading *Rise Up Singing* for school and sharing it with my students certainly felt indulgent. I think my students felt the same as they put down their textbooks and engaged with nonfiction texts they used to satisfy their own curiosity and purposes.

Do contemporary YA nonfiction texts answer the Common Core’s call for complex texts? *Rise Up Singing* meets the Common Core’s quantitative measure for complexity with a Lexile score of 1170, but the complexity of the text involves more than just the length of its sentences and the author’s choice of words. Because of its well-crafted telling of the

complicated life of Janis Joplin, a book like *Rise Up Singing*, with its themes of acceptance and rejection, freedom and addiction, triumph and tragedy, has the potential to turn someone on to reading for a lifetime and even change a person's life. Surely only a text of great complexity has that power.

We do not necessarily advocate that teachers make a book like *Rise Up Singing* a required text within their classrooms. With Janis's see-through blouse on the cover, the nude photo of her band in her bed on page 52, and the forthrightness with which Angel talks about Janis's promiscuity, drug use, and abortion, the book would almost certainly elicit challenges from parents and administrators alike. We do, however, think that teachers could broaden students' notions of what counts as reading and worthwhile texts by making YA fiction and nonfiction available to students in their school and classroom libraries. In the classroom, students could read YA nonfiction and related texts collaboratively in literature circles, share them with their classmates via book talks, or simply read them independently as they make connections with other texts and their own lives. Ultimately, our hope is that teachers will work to expand what counts as worthwhile texts and what counts as informational texts so that students will not see YA literature, be it fiction or nonfiction, and their reasons for reading it as merely indulgent.

The Common Core perpetuates on a national scale, intentionally or not, the notion that newer texts, be they fiction or nonfiction, are less worthwhile than older texts for school reading. Interestingly, the range of publication dates for ELA informational texts for grades 9–10 within the Common Core's list of exemplar texts is almost 200 years greater than the range for history/social studies informational texts. Within the ELA standards themselves, the only texts listed as examples of grades 9–10 informational texts include "Washington's Farewell Address, the Gettysburg Address, Roosevelt's Four Freedoms Speech, King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail" (CCSS, Reading for Informational Text 6–12, Standard 9, p. 40). The texts listed as ELA informational text examples for grades 11–12 also include only historical and legal documents. Likewise, very few contemporary authors and young adult works of fiction are included in the exemplar texts for secondary ELA. For example,

although the Common Core includes a story published in 2005 as an exemplar for grades 9–10, the median publication date for the 16 stories for that grade band is 1946. The median publication dates for drama and poetry are 1911 and 1896, respectively. In short, students in a secondary ELA class using only texts listed as examples named in the Common Core or texts like them would likely never read a text published in their lifetimes.

In secondary ELA classrooms, the prevalence and dominance of older, classic texts is nothing new (Applebee, 1993). Ostenson and Wadham (2012) posited, however, that young adult literature does have a place in the secondary Common Core ELA classroom because it can offer the complexity the Common Core values. They also noted that because YA literature is situated within the context of adolescents' lives, teachers do not need to spend as much time

ensuring students have the necessary background knowledge to read those texts. Others have also written about the different ways that YA literature can be used rigorously in secondary classrooms. Herz and Gallo's (2005) *From Hamlet to Hinton: Building Bridges between Young and Adult Literature and the Classics* is a notable text exploring the power of teaching young adult novels with classic works. Teachers' pairing of young adult literature with other older texts is an effective strategy that not only bridges two texts but also the past and the present.

As the Common Core readies students for a future of college and career, it censors and, in turn, prompts teachers and students to self-censor the present. Noting modern deference to the past, Foucault (1977) posited that "lacking monuments of our own making, which properly belong to us, we live among crowded scenes" (p. 159). The texts the Common Core offers as exemplars for secondary ELA reflect the "crowded scene" in which teachers and students may find themselves, a scene crowded by works from the past that

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may not reflect the texts and purposes for reading in which adolescents are most likely to indulge.

## **From Ruth—Censorship, Common Core, and Finding Truth in Fiction**

The battle against censorship began long ago and will likely continue far into the future. The lists compiled by the Office for Intellectual Freedom for the American Library Association contain a wide variety of texts from *And Tango Makes Three* (Richardson & Parnell, 2005), a top challenged book for several years in a

row, to *Brave New World* (Huxley, 1932) and *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Lee, 1960), both many years after their publication dates. Even *Fahrenheit 451* (Bradbury, 1951), a book about censorship, has been censored, so it is not really surprising that one of the responses to the release of Common Core has been more censorship—or at least attempts to do so.

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Recently Alabama and Ohio politicians have attacked Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (Morrison, 1970), a novel listed in the Common Core's exemplar texts for eleventh grade.

Interestingly enough, *The Bluest Eye* was the only text I ever had challenged in my 20 years of teaching grades seven through twelve. Almost 15 years ago, a district supervisor of our tiny Louisiana school system appeared at my classroom door. She explained that a parent had complained about my including *The Bluest Eye* on the summer reading list. The supervisor asked me only two questions—first, was the book required. I explained that the text was one of several choices for the twelfth-grade advanced placement class. I have always believed that students need to be allowed to choose their own books—especially for summer reading. Her second question was, “Have you read this book?” I answered, “I wrote my dissertation on Toni Morrison. Yes, I have read this book.” In those simpler times, when a teacher's right to choose was allowed, protected, and respected, she thanked me for my time and nothing more was said.

Over 30 years after her first novel's publication and Morrison's receipt of the Pulitzer and Nobel Prizes, and at least 15 years since my book challenge, Ohio's Board of Education President Debe Terhar called the book “pornographic” in her plea to have the text removed from the Ohio Common Core list (Gates, 2013). The novel, set in Morrison's hometown of Lorrain, Ohio, depicts graphic scenes of a father raping his daughter—scenes that some politicians have decided are too explicit for high school classrooms. Morrison ends the tragic tale of Pecola, the girl in search of the blue eyes that are sure to make her happy, with the words, “It's too late. At least on the edge of my town” (p. 206), a line that I have always taken as a call to arms for communities to stop these tragedies from ever happening again.

The challenge of Morrison's text exemplifies the kind of censorship that faces English language arts teachers every day as critics who are not trained in literary analysis, filled with moral outrage and agency, attack works of literature without ever understanding their beauty, their cultural context, or their social importance. Now, when I teach *The Bluest Eye* to my future educators, and we relate it to other important works like *Speak* (Anderson, 1999) and *Bastard out of Carolina* (Allison, 1993), I explain that they may not be able to teach the novel, depending on the constraints of their school systems. But I also tell them that it's still important that they read the book, because no matter how graphic or painful or offensive those scenes in fiction may be, there will be, without a doubt, real-life Pecolas in their future classrooms. The other irony from that challenge so many years ago is that every senior in that class chose to read *The Bluest Eye*.

Censoring *The Bluest Eye* is what we would call “old censorship.” This is the same kind of censorship that we have faced for many years—texts that are too explicit, too much language, too too. Ironically, books are quite often challenged for the very reason they were written—*To Kill a Mockingbird* (Lee, 1960) for “racism,” *Kite Runner* (Hosseini, 2003) for “religious viewpoint,” *The Hunger Games* (Collins, 2008) for “violence,” and *Crank* (Hopkins, 2004) for “drugs.” These kinds of challenges do make me question the general public's ability to interpret an author's purpose or intent. But censorship has many forms, sometimes displayed through petitions, book burn-

ings, and picket lines, sometimes through boycotts or tractor crushes, and sometimes through the simple act of presenting a list. The real censorship from Common Core is in what the document leaves out—in what texts and types of texts are not included.

But what about censorship for a text not because of its explicit language, but because of its topic? According to data from the Office of Intellectual Freedom, of the over 5000 challenges in the past decade, more than 3000 of them were challenged in school libraries and classrooms. And one of the most common reasons given for challenging a book—especially in the middle or high school classroom—is “homosexuality” (ALA, n.d.). Interestingly, very few books on the Common Core exemplar list contain anything that could be considered “homosexual” in content, and certainly none of the few young adult fiction titles contain LGBTQ characters or themes. In point of fact, the list carries its own type of censorship—simply because of what is left out. Of course, the exemplars are not meant to be a complete representation or recommendation of teaching materials; the text lists are only meant to indicate levels of difficulty and complexity. But the exclusion of all LGBTQ literature, especially titles from the young adult category and those written in the last decade, can only be viewed as either a purposeful act to censor America’s classrooms or an uninformed, outdated mistake.

Creating a spark for readers requires an attention to student needs and interests—not just for their possible future careers, but for the here and now. Adolescence is a complicated time in a young person’s life, and they need to find themselves in literature in order to invest themselves in reading. Educators and librarians must be aware of the needs of young people when making choices for the classroom and library reading materials. According to Common Core, “Such assessments are best made by teachers employing their professional judgment, experience, and knowledge of their students and the subject” (CCSS, Appendix A). That line gives educators the right to choose and the right to select quality, contemporary texts, but it also gives teachers great responsibility.

Perhaps the best place to start the exploration of LGBTQ books is with the Lambda Literary Award website’s list for children’s and young adult texts. Choosing texts from this list will assure teachers, even those unfamiliar with these books, that they are

selecting texts with sound literary quality. This year’s list, for instance, includes the top pick, *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* (2012), a Printz award winner by Benjamin Saenz, and *Every Day* (2013) by David Levithan, both excellent books with complex plots. But there are many other lists to consider when choosing YA fiction, such as the selections from the Printz Award, given each year to a text that is considered to be the best book written for teens in a given year. These lists are a great starting point, but teachers know that they must weigh many factors when choosing materials for the classroom; most would not teach a book simply because it is on an award list or just because it has LGBTQ themes.

Common Core “complexity of text” must also be factored into the decision. The texts that I consider for this analysis—*Code Name Verity* (Wein, 2012) and *October Mourning: A Song for Matthew Shepard* (Newman, 2012)—are certainly complex in storyline, topic, and character development, and they are both heavily rooted in reality. They are historical-not-so-fictional narratives—one told in a verse interpretation of court-proceedings/police-report interpretations and the other through a spy-and-war-story web of two points of view and many mysteries. These are not simple storylines. They present a complexity of narrative style, complexity of topic, and maybe more important, complexity of beliefs. Beyond these complexities, the two books also raise questions about informational texts. How do we classify fictional stories that are heavily researched and based in reality? What would we call a collection of poems based on real life? Can’t fictions still speak truth?

As we explore censorship and Common Core with our future teachers, we begin to realize the intricacies of these questions. To aid in this discussion of text complexity, I examine these two novels. *Code Name Verity* is the story of two young girls, one a pilot and the other a spy, caught in the action of World War II; the text by Elizabeth Wein was heavily researched

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through historical records, diaries, interviews, and nonfiction texts. *October Mourning: A Song for Matthew Shepard* is a verse narrative retelling of the events before, during, and after Matthew Shepard's death as interpreted and imagined by Leslea Newman through her readings of court documents, newspaper accounts, police records, and television interviews.

Both books contain LGBTQ themes, but neither has inappropriate language, sexual explicitness, or any of the other typical objections that lead to challenges.

Both books also contain intricate notes and clarifications to explain the real world background for many episodes in the texts.

Each author, in fact, was

a bit obsessed with her research. Wein, for instance, created authentic clothing from the period as well as dolls dressed in the clothes mentioned in the text, all pictured on the author's website. In addition, she read countless books about World War II pilots and combed over records for every detail. As a result, the text illustrates for students the use of nonfiction informational texts to create fictional informational texts. But the text also follows a very complicated narrative structure, with the stories of pilot and spy woven together throughout the book. The result is a fictional text packed with authentic information. So, does that make it an informational text?

*Code Name Verity* is more than a cleverly disguised war book. It is also a story of sacrifice, pain, and resistance. And love. More than anything else, this is a love story. The slow realizations that come to Maddie replicate the reader's discoveries. "It's like being in love, discovering your best friend," she writes (p. 68). And while some may argue that this is not a lesbian text, none could argue that these two characters do not love each other. As Maddie and Julie discover the secrets of each other's lives and the intrigue and danger of war, their friendship grows more intimate. During one harrowing bombing scene, Julie "squeezed Maddie around the waist and gave her a quick peck on the cheek. 'Kiss me, Hardy!' Weren't those Nelson's last words at the Battle of Trafalgar? Don't cry. We're still alive and we make a *sensational*

team" (p. 68). Whether it is or is not a lesbian text probably does not matter. The two friends love each other and sacrifice for one another. Their stories are shaped after the numerous pilots, spies, and brave women of World War II. Marjorie Ingall, reviewer for the *New York Times*, writes, "This is a rare young adult novel entirely about female power and female friendship, with only the faintest whiff of cute-boy romance. I'd tell you more about the 'Usual Suspects'-meets-'If on a Winter's Night a Traveler' plot, but then I'd have to kill you."

But this story of a girl pilot and her friendship with a girl spy is more than a friendship story. It's the story of resistance fighters, and wireless operators, and runway workers, and countless other men and women who gave their lives to the war efforts. And it's a story of great courage, although it begins with a confession of cowardice. "I am a coward," are the first lines of the novel. The narrator continues, "I wanted to be heroic and I pretended I was. I have always been good at pretending" (p. 3). But these girls are not really cowards. They face impossible obstacles and make incredible sacrifices for each other. In the end, students will learn from their bravery and quick thinking and honor, but they will also gain a tremendous amount of information—information about planes, flying, airstrips, World War II, clothing, the Gestapo, spies, the English Channel, Scotland, and even ballpoint pens. Elizabeth Wein, a pilot herself and a thorough researcher, packs history into every page of her novel, and follows the text with an afterword to explain her research. Doesn't that make this an informational text? Why would we limit ourselves or our classrooms to nonfiction for the information gathering?

Another remarkable book with meticulous research is Leslea Newman's *October Mourning: A Song for Matthew Shepard*. Newman chose to retell the story of Matthew Shepard's death and the events before and after through a verse narrative. She combed the details provided by court records, police reports, and interviews and retells the story in beautiful poetry, experimenting with different verse forms for each passage. The result is a deeply moving text that tries to capture multiple points of view, including the fence itself. The opening passage from "The Fence (before)" paints a peaceful scene from before the attack. "Out and alone/on the endless empty prairie/the moon

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bathes me/the stars bless me” (p. xv). After several poems from other inanimate objects, including the truck driven by the attackers, the pistol used to beat him, and the clothesline used to bind him, Newman brings us back to “The Fence (that night).” Her haunting opening lines capture the emotion, “I held him all night long/He was heavy as a broken heart” (p. 16). The final lines create a painful visual and echo the emotional beginning: “I cradled him just like a mother/I held him all night long.” Newman’s experimentation with language and form as she continues to retell the story make for interesting class discussions and might inspire students to explore their own creative writing.

Newman documents her careful research by listing the specific resource(s) for each poem, but she also includes a disclaimer. The events are real, much of the language is real, but she makes it clear that she adds her own interpretation and creates monologues from written records. So, included in the text are poems from the point of view of fraternity boys, students, parents, court officials, a drag queen, and many other community members. Each point of view helps to develop the story. Many of the events, however, that may seem like pure creative license have a basis in reality. For instance, in “The Doe,” on page 20, she writes, “I smelled/fury/terror/sorrow/blood” and finishes the passage with the magical line, “I snuggled/ beside him/and struggled/to keep him/warm.” Most would assume that this scene is a total imaginative creation, but Newman’s notes explain that the poem was based on Judy Shepard’s memoir that references the record from the officer who found him. “When Officer Reggie Fluty arrived at the fence, a large doe was lying near Matthew Shepard, ‘as if the deer had been keeping him company through the night’” (p. 95).

Newman’s book is an excellent example of how a writer uses informational texts to create fiction—to recreate reality. Like *Code Name Verity*, this book is heavily researched, and like Wein, Newman is careful to explain her sources and her own interpretations. These two powerful texts provide students with information and important elements of history through creative approaches. Unfortunately, they may never make it into some classrooms or into the hands of some young adults since they deal with LGBTQ themes and do not fit the restrictions of the Common

Core list. These two books will need teachers who, like the characters in the texts, are willing to fight and maybe even sacrifice—teachers who understand the importance of resisting censorship, both internal and external, teachers who can battle the dragons and help young people find themselves in the story.

## A Call to Action

Traditional censorship will most likely always exist, and standards like the Common Core will create lists that must, by nature of being lists, include and exclude a variety of texts.

We as ELA teachers can find ways to ensure that the texts we bring into our classrooms represent the contexts, voices, and purposes of not only the future college students and workers in our care, but the students sitting before us in the here and now. Questioning the prevalence and influence of canonical texts in classrooms, Wilhelm (2013) asked, “What about a person’s individual right to forge their own life, including reading that might give that life pleasure, nuance, delight, while abetting conversation and friendship, as well as enriching one’s emotional and psychological experience?” (p. 57). To ignite the flame of lifelong reading in our students, we must honor reading practices that bring students pleasure and satisfaction, not as an indulgence but as a right.

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