

Stories from the Field

Editor's Note: *Stories from the Field* invites readers to share a story about young adult literature. This section features brief vignettes (approximately 300 words) from practicing teachers and librarians who would like to share their interactions with students, parents, colleagues, and administrators around young adult literature. Please send your stories to alan-review@uconn.edu.

Balancing the Barrage of Brit-Lit

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My high school senior English teacher was an 83-year-old monk who had been teaching for 65 years. I'm not sure how long before 1995 he had memorized the 1964-copyrighted British Literature textbook, nor am I sure how long he had been using seating charts to remember students' names. I am sure that Brother Alfred loved teaching English and did not think of "Young Adult" as a category for "Literature."

When I became a senior English teacher in 2008, I faced my own struggles with YAL. Though I incorporated YA pieces in the freshman and junior curricula I had taught since 2002, I viewed British literature as a revered canon; my initial text selections reflected that.

I soon learned my students disagreed.

As my students met my Brit-Lit barrage with resistance instead of reverence, I considered their concerns, my prior teaching experiences, and my time as a high school senior. Brother Alfred and V.C. Andrews were two of my greatest teachers. I remembered how

the rapture of reading *my* books, coupled with my reverence for classic texts, led to my love of English.

This reflection yielded compromise: I transformed the chronological curriculum into a thematic one by supplementing representative pieces from each historical period with thematically and stylistically similar YA pieces. For example, I have had students thematically and stylistically compare the rap "Dear Mama" by 2Pac Shakur to the ballad "Barbara Allen" while contrasting the rap's and the ballad's narrative structures in terms of audience and purpose. However, I have struggled with incorporating student choice.

This past summer, I learned that student choice largely defines YA. I then realized that my fondest YA experience occurred when my honors students asked to read *Frankenstein* with me because none of us had read it. Abandoning the teacher-planner role, I participated as a reader *with* my students. I unwittingly combined the rapture of choice and reverence of classics. I will ground myself in that experience as I continue to incorporate YA in British literature. I think Brother Alfred would be proud.

Moments of Connection

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There have been many moments throughout my teaching career when I have thought, "I am so blessed by this job." And when I connect with a student over

literature, I feel extremely fortunate that I get to be that teacher—the one with whom the students share what they are reading, and thus, a little piece of themselves.

With no prescribed reading program in place at my school (thank goodness), my colleagues and I developed ways in which we could somehow track our students' outside reading in a way that was meaningful to all involved. I'm still not sure whether we were ever truly successful, but our intentions were good; we only wanted our students to love to read as much as we do! But teachers know that is a hard goal to reach. More often than not, students do not enjoy reading in the ways we English teachers wish

they would. Yes, there are those who keep a book constantly open under the desk and “read like a wolf eats,” but more common are the students who would rather do anything but read.

Of all of methods tried, the best connections came when I simply talked to the students about what they were reading. You could tell how excited some of them were by their level of animation and the sparkle in their eyes. And the best parts came when a student said of a book I recommended, “I never even liked reading before.” Or “The only series I ever liked was *Twilight*.” And then they proceed to check out the next book in the series, right from my classroom library. Now that's a literary connection.