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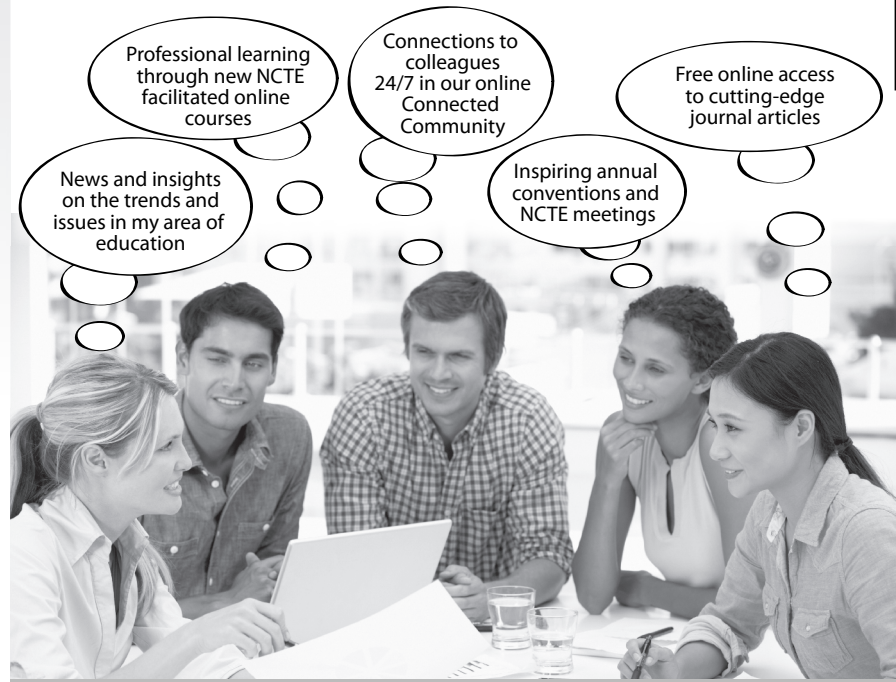
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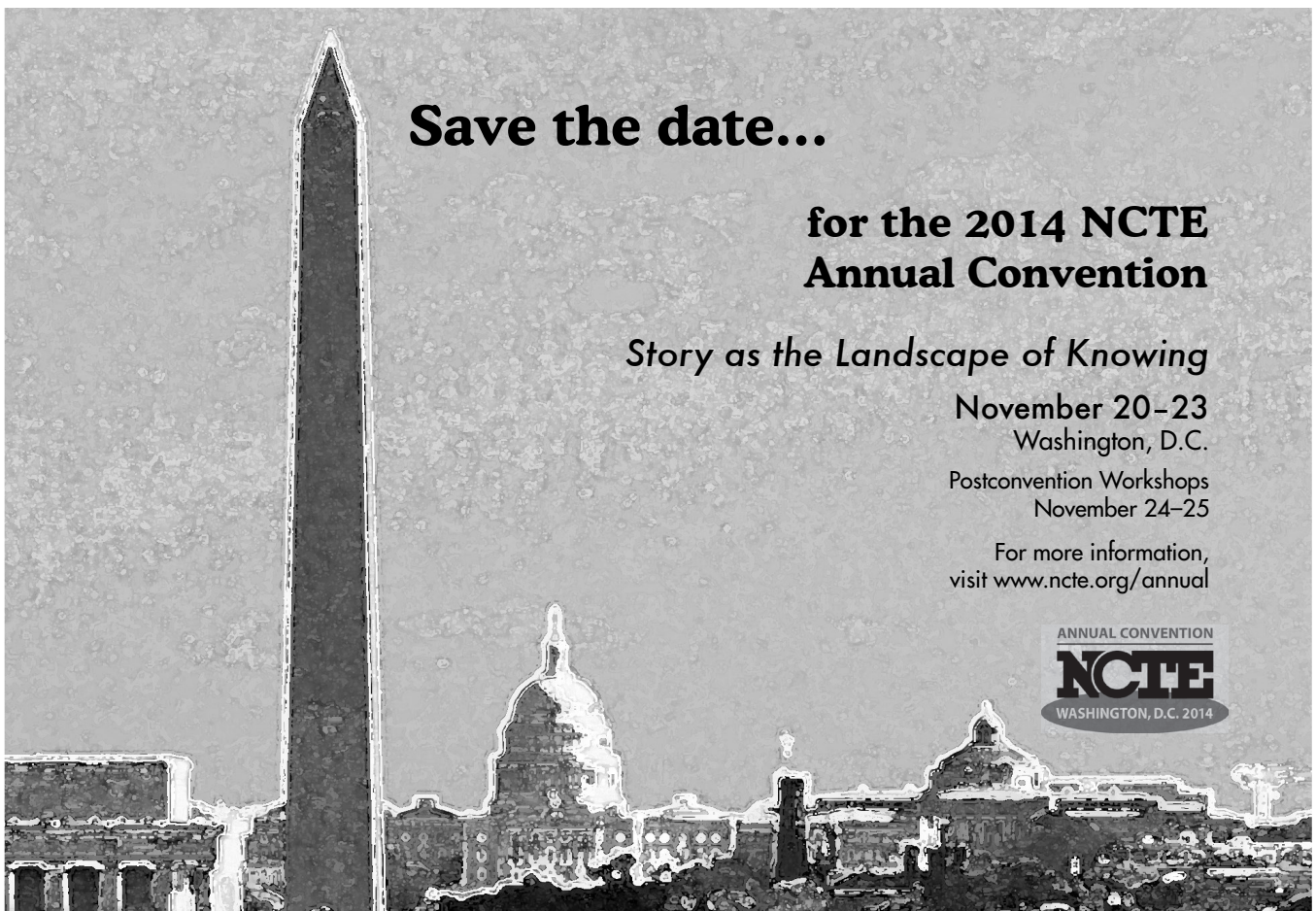
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<p><b><i>Across a War-Tossed Sea</i></b> by L. M. Elliott Disney's Hyperion Books, 2014, 256 pp., \$16.99</p> <p>Charles and Wesley are two brothers from London navigating the cornfields, rivers, and dirt roads near Richmond, Virginia. The two blokes were sent to America to live with a farming family as refuge from the Nazi's attacks on their homeland during WWII. While they work and play alongside the Ratcliff children, they must not only steer through unfamiliar Americanisms but an eerie isolation from the battle across the sea that makes both feel ashamed for and resent where they are.</p> <p>The young boys fight a war of their own on American soil—against prejudice for Brits and blacks, attention-seeking bullies, and the temptation to make the German POWs who work on the Ratcliff farm suffer. Along the way, though, they unite with members of their new family, a young black boy named Fred, and even a Native American, realizing that they can learn a thing or two from “how things are done here in America” and that the impact of WWII is not as far-off as they believed.</p> <p>Ann Marie Dvorak Nashville, TN</p>	<p><b><i>Allegra</i></b> by Shelley Hrdlitschka Orca, 2013, 268 pp., \$11.25</p> <p>Allegra isn't like the other girls. Even when she transfers from a public high school to a performing arts academy, she still finds herself at odds with her peers. But when her young, attractive music theory professor, Mr. Rocchelli, begins to take an interest in her, Allegra finally starts to feel like she belongs. She even puts dance, her true passion, on the backburner to pursue a special music composition project with Mr. Rocchelli. As Allegra's personal life begins to crumble, she discovers a love for composing music that threatens to ruin everything she has left . . . especially when she realizes that she's falling for Mr. Rocchelli at the same time.</p> <p>Though this novel is set in a performing arts school, it doesn't concern itself with petty drama. Instead, it focuses on the complex mind of an extraordinary teenager and, even more, the emotional roller coaster that is one's first love.</p> <p>Stacey Oswald Vero Beach, FL</p>
<p><b><i>Audacious</i></b> by Gabrielle Prendergast Orca, 2013, 327 pp. \$19.95</p> <p>Raphaelle wants to leave her troubled past behind. When her family moves, she decides to reinvent herself as Ella, a girl who follows rules and fits in. Ella's new identity works at first. She excels in art and develops a crush on Samir, a boy in her art class. But when both are asked to create art pieces for a schoolwide show, they create controversy as well. A nude self-portrait and a politically charged painting lead to trouble, and Ella wonders if she can ever leave behind her rebellious Raphaelle personality.</p> <p>Written as a series of poems, <i>Audacious</i> explores the angst of being a teen. Ella faces issues regarding family, disease, politics, religion, and love as she navigates her new school and the potential selves she could become. Readers will question what truly audacious behavior looks like as they follow Ella through her decisions and mistakes.</p> <p>Laura Cockman Fishers, IN</p>	<p><b><i>Confederates Don't Wear Couture</i></b> by Stephanie Kate Strohlm Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013, 224 pp, \$8.99</p> <p>Libby Kelting is a history nerd set to spend the summer with her boyfriend, Garrett. However, her best friend Dev throws a kink in her summer plans when he recruits Libby as his assistant in selling “Confederate Couture” during a Civil War reenactment in Alabama. Southern boy Beau guides Libby and Dev through the hardcore world of reenactments. Unlike her boyfriend Garrett, Beau is a history buff and can waltz. As Libby falls further into the 1860s with Beau, she begins to question her future with Garrett.</p> <p>Ultimately, Libby must make a decision that goes deeper than the stereotypical differences of the North and South. Boy Scouts, ghosts, and <i>Gone with the Wind</i> references frame Libby's choice—living in the past or the future. With the help of a fabulous Dev-created wardrobe and Dev himself, Libby will take on the South and find love on a battlefield.</p> <p>Jaime Grimsley Crossville, TN</p>

<p><b><i>Grim</i></b> edited by Christine Johnson          Harlequin Enterprises, 2014, 480 pp., \$16.99          ISBN: 978-0-373-21108-1</p> <p>Fantasy/Short Stories</p> <p>A girl's psychic abilities lead her to a classmate's unlikely murderer. A young man embarks on a perilous quest to break a maiden's curse, only to face a surprising confession when his journey concludes. A woman finds herself caving in to the sincerity of her captor, even as she struggles within the confines of her prison.</p> <p><i>Grim</i> takes the reader through the voices of 17 protagonists as they tackle the timeless, often grotesque, predicaments first presented in fairy tales from various cultural traditions. The short stories range from meticulous retellings of classic tales to loose interpretations, and take the reader from enchanted high schools to spaceship communités. Steeped in courtships and vice, temptation and sacrifice, <i>Grim</i>'s short stories transform enduring questions about human identity and virtue into tales of contemporary relevance.</p> <p>Jacinda Lee          Shanghai, China</p>	<p><b><i>Don't Look Back</i></b> by Jennifer L. Armentrout          Hyperion, 2014, 367 pp., \$16.99          ISBN: 978-1-4231-7512-4</p> <p>Murder Mystery</p> <p>After being missing for four days, Samantha wanders out of the woods covered in dirt and blood. Before she disappeared with her best friend, Cassie, everyone said she had everything: wealth, popularity, the perfect boyfriend. But she can't remember any of it. As she goes back to school and tries to put her life back together, she begins to realize that she has no desire to be who she was because the old Sam was the meanest girl in school. Being completely separated from who she was, Sam starts to have feelings for the wrong boy, and she has to face the fact that she can't remember what happened to the missing Cassie.</p> <p><i>Don't Look Back</i> is a gripping young adult novel that will keep the reader coming back to find out what happens to Sam and why she lost her memory.</p> <p>Caroline Newman          Nashville, TN</p>
<p><b><i>Heartbeat</i></b> by Elizabeth Scott          Harlequin Teen, 2014, 240 pp., \$16.99</p> <p>Young Adult Fiction/Romance          ISBN: 978-0-373-21096-1</p> <p>Ever since her mother's stroke, Emma's life has deteriorated. All the things that Emma once cared about—academic success, family, and friends—seem meaningless now that her mother and an unborn baby are being kept alive by hideous machines. No one seems to understand the grief and hatred that rages inside Emma, except the bad boy Caleb Harrison, who is hiding a few of his own tortured secrets. As Emma begins to connect with the surprisingly caring Caleb, she begins to realize that, even after death, it might just be possible to learn to love and live again. In <i>Heartbeat</i>, Elizabeth Scott weaves together an authentic narrative voice, raw emotion, and a cast of deeply flawed characters for an unforgettable story about overcoming grief, finding hope, and relearning to love.</p> <p>Diana Liu          Nashville, TN</p>	<p><b><i>Heaven Is Paved with Oreos</i></b> by Catherine Gilbert Murdock          Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013, 201 pp., \$16.99          ISBN: 978-0-547-62538-6</p> <p>Young Adult Fiction/          Romance</p> <p>Almost ninth grader, Sarah Zorn, likes the following things: walking her grandmother's dog, Jack Russell George; eating her favorite food of all time, Oreos; and conducting scientific experiments with her best friend (and pretend boyfriend), Curtis. However, once fake dating leads to some real, complicated feelings, Sarah isn't quite sure how to deal with the suddenly moody Curtis. When her kooky grandmother invites her on an adventure to Rome, Sarah agrees immediately, hoping for a much-needed distraction. But as Sarah discovers the many wonders of Italy, she also unexpectedly uncovers a few secrets that will soon change her outlooks on both family and love. Written as a series of journal entries, Catherine Gilbert Murdock's <i>Heaven Is Paved with Oreos</i>, captures the heartbreaking, yet funny journey of a precocious young girl's foray into the world of broken hearts and first loves.</p> <p>Diana Liu          Nashville, TN</p>

<p><b>High &amp; Dry</b> by Sarah Skilton Amulet Books, 2014, 258 pp., \$16.95</p> <p>Charlie has not stopped drinking since Ellie broke up with him. He knows alcohol impairs his ability to play on the high school soccer team, but he does not realize how much it impairs his social relationships until he shows up drunk and uninvited to a choir party. At the party, when someone causes a choirgirl to overdose on LSD, accusations of the crime fly toward Charlie. Now Charlie must investigate to find which of his classmates had a real motive to drug somebody and how the students gained access to the illegal hallucinogen.</p> <p>The mystery intensifies as clues lead Charlie to realize many students, teachers, and their families may be tangled up in the crime. As Charlie finds information that implicates many people he knows, he must decide—with a sober mind—what must be done to protect the people around him.</p> <p>Laura Cockman Fishers, IN</p>	<p><b>Hot New Thing</b> by Laura Langston Orca, 2014, 131 pp., \$9.95</p> <p>Half White and half Chinese, Lily finds herself not being recognized by either side of her family. Plus, her dream of acting and school do not seem to mingle well in her parents' eyes. With her Chinese grandmother's help, she sets out from Vancouver to Hollywood to fulfill her dream after being discovered by a big-name director. When she thinks she is finally reaching her long-dreamed career, she discovers that she might need to make sacrifices that would take her entire body away. Standing on her own ground, she finally finds a balance between her dream, family, and identities.</p> <p>Through her lively first-person narrative, Langston brings her readers to a teenage girl's inner world revolving around family, friends, dreams, and the road of finding identity. With Lily's words, readers see the bright and dark sides of real-world Hollywood, and contemplate racial and identity issues with which Lily struggles as well.</p> <p>Wanqing L. Apa Beijing, P. R. China</p>
<p><b>Lies We Tell Ourselves</b> by Robin Talley Harlequin Enterprises, 2014, 384 pp., \$17.99</p> <p>One of ten brave Black students in Virginia, Sarah takes part in a crucial step toward ending segregation in her southern town—school integration. At her new school, Sarah is confronted with both physical and verbal abuse from almost everyone she encounters, and she must learn to ignore this cruelty in the hallways.</p> <p>Linda, one of the most popular girls in school, comes from an influential family in town. Raised with segregationist ideals, Linda views the integration endeavor as superfluous and agitative. What these two girls learn about each other and themselves while working on a project together is life-changing.</p> <p>Told from the perspectives of these two high school seniors, <i>Lies We Tell Ourselves</i> illuminates the very real experiences of the civil rights movement from opposite lenses. Talley's compelling novel does an excellent job of portraying the sentiments of the segregated South while helping readers identify with the narrators.</p> <p>Aleezah Meralli Coral Springs, FL</p>	<p><b>Lost in Thought</b> by Cara Bertrand Independent Publishers Group, 2014, 282 pp., \$11.95</p> <p>Lainey Young is going crazy. She has migraines and fainting spells . . . brought on by her visions of deaths in the past and future. After moving to a new school in an attempt to “cure” her problem, she soon finds out that her visions of death are not a sign she's having a mental breakdown—though her budding relationship with local heartthrob Carter Penrose is enough to drive every female around her insane with jealousy. Lainey learns that she is Sententia, a person with psychic gifts beyond the usual.</p> <p>As Lainey tries to navigate the new challenges of friends, boys, and school, she also faces the difficulty of coming to terms with her extraordinary gifts and their mysterious source. The more Lainey learns about her family history and her own abilities, the more the consequences of her discoveries threaten her newfound home.</p> <p>Katie Thyen Carmel, IN</p>

<p><b><i>My Beautiful Hippie</i></b> by Janet Nichols Lynch      Coming of Age/Historical Fiction  Holiday House, 2013, 186 pp., \$16.95      ISBN: 978-0-8234-2603-4</p> <p>A brief interaction with a hippie named Martin while on her way to purchase Cool Whip sends 16-year-old Joni into a lovesick talspin that will change not only her summer but will cause her to question her formerly bland way of life. It is up to Joni to choose either a path of security or one of nonconformity, which she believes will help her “find herself” in the midst of such a chaotic time in American history.</p> <p>Readers will immerse themselves in a colorful, radical, yet turbulent world defined by the “Summer of Love” of 1976. Set in the vibrant Haight-Ashbury District in San Francisco, the novel offers an educationally enriching experience while still presenting the coming-of-age tale through an untraditional lens. The characters display memorable qualities that live on after finishing the novel. While some content is for mature readers only, it still holds much instructional value.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Alexandra Saclarides Nashville, TN</p>	<p><b><i>Muckers</i></b> by Sandra Neil Wallace      Historical American Fiction  Alfred A. Knopf, 2013, 274 pp., \$16.99      ISBN: 978-0-375-96754-2</p> <p>Harley, a mining town in Northern Arizona created by the company Eureka Copper, may soon be the casualty of a declining ore yield. The town’s high school is already scheduled to close at the end of the 1950–51 academic year. Many of the town’s residents are also treated as if they are expendable, not unlike the Hatley High Muckers’ football field, which is made of slag—a waste gravel leftover from the smelting process. As the Muckers prepare for the school’s last gridiron campaign, the teams’ lofty dreams appear to exceed their numbers, their size, and realistic expectations.</p> <p>Will Felix “Red” O’Sullivan, Hatley High’s quarterback, and his teammates summon the strength for one final, memorable football season?</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Paul E. Binford Baton Rouge, LA</p>
<p><b><i>On a Scale from Idiot to Complete Jerk</i></b> by Alison Hughes      Juvenile Fiction  Orca, 2014, 144 pp., \$9.95      ISBN: 978-1-4598-0484-5</p> <p>J. J. Murphy has finally finished his science fair project. He’s gathered the data and is ready to weigh in on the matter of what makes idiots and jerks the way they are. Doing this in a “sciencey” way, he makes sure to provide plenty of graphs and case studies as he asks the big questions: Can family members be Jerks? How about babies, old people, and even animals?</p> <p>J. J. provides more rigor than usual for an ordinary middle school science project. Filled with definitions and examples, <i>On a Scale from Idiot to Complete Jerk</i> gives a comprehensive outlook on who idiots and jerks are and why some people qualify but not others. But underneath this cerebral exterior lies a lighthearted investigation into the people J. J. Murphy interacts with and the things they do to bother the rest of mankind.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Anthony DeMaio Memphis, TN</p>	<p><b><i>Pinned</i></b> by Sharon G. Flake      Realistic Fiction/Diversity  Scholastic Press, 2012, 228 pp., \$17.99      ISBN: 978-0-545-05718-9</p> <p>Though able and disabled in key aspects of their lives, ninth graders Autumn and Adonis could not be more different. Autumn splits her time between being an aspiring baker, accomplished wrestler on an all-male team, and loyal friend. Adonis, on the other hand, shines as a math tutor, manager of the wrestling team, and volunteer at the library. Autumn struggles intellectually with reading, leaving her in a constant precarious state with her teachers and parents, not to mention her own confidence; Adonis struggles physically with a disability that has left him in a wheelchair, rendering him stoic and detached from peers. Both become entwined in a relationship that will forever test the boundaries of their own self-control and discovery.</p> <p>Told from alternating voices, <i>Pinned</i> gives a voice to the daily struggles and triumphs of adolescents with special needs, asking readers to empathize and consider difference in a nuanced light.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Charlsie Wigley Anniston, AL</p>



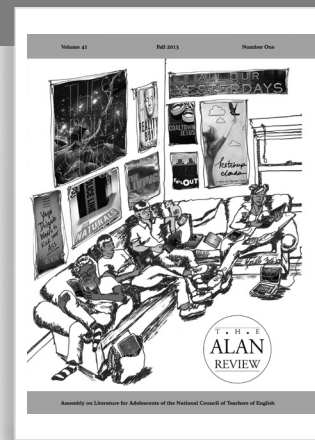
<p><b><i>Remember Dippy</i></b> by Shirley Reva Vernick Cinco Puntos Press, 2013, 226 pp., \$9.95</p> <p>Johnny expects a boring summer when his mom drops him off to stay with Aunt Collette and his cousin Remember. Now his summer job is to watch Remember, who has Autism, while Aunt Collette works. Getting to know Remember well is difficult for Johnny at first, but as the summer progresses, Johnny learns how to be friends with Remember despite their differences.</p> <p>As Remember and Johnny grow closer, they have many summer adventures together: finding a lost ring so the owner of their favorite restaurant can propose, saving a kid from swimming in dangerous riptides, and helping a sick old neighbor back on his feet. Through their relationship, Johnny and Remember learn to be kinder, more helpful people, and stories of their summertime adventures may just inspire readers to reach out to the many different people in their own communities as well.</p> <p>Laura Cockman Fishers, IN</p>	<p><b><i>Summer of the Mariposas</i></b> by Guadalupe Garcia McCall Lee &amp; Low Books, 2012, 352 pp., \$19.99</p> <p>Affected by the instability of an absent father and an overworked mother, <i>Summer of the Mariposas</i> shares Olidia and her four younger sisters' work to understand their lives and the world around them. It takes the help of a decaying dead man and La Llorona, the ghost of a mother accused of killing her children, for the girls to realize that a journey does not make sense until it is over.</p> <p>McCall carefully interlaces the vibrancy of Mexican folklore with the classiness of the canonical to remind readers of the sameness of the human experience, despite the passing of time. She speaks to the cynic in readers and dares them to believe in magic and its power to save.</p> <p>Arelí Barron Houston, TX</p>
<p><b><i>The Candy Smash</i></b> by Jacqueline Davies Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013, 232 pp., \$15.99</p> <p>In this continuation of the Lemonade War series, Valentine's Day is coming up for the fourth graders in class 4-0, but siblings Evan and Jessie Treski are not ready. Jessie needs to find a big story for her new newspaper, the <i>4-0 Forum</i>. Evan needs to finish his love poem assignment without revealing his crush on Megan. When somebody starts leaving candy hearts with personal messages in each student's desk, Jessie sees a lead into writing an exciting story, while Evan only sees embarrassment.</p> <p>As Jessie investigates the mystery, she finds the story she has been searching for, but writing it may expose her classmates' secret crushes. Readers will be able to relate to Jessie's and Evan's exploration of grade-school love and writing. Throughout the book, readers will learn about poetry and news alongside the siblings and pick up writing techniques to try on their own!</p> <p>Laura Cockman Fishers, IN</p>	<p><b><i>The Deepest Blue</i></b> by Kim Williams Justesen Tanglewood, 2013, 288 pp., \$15.99</p> <p>Mike has not had contact with his birth mother in years. He sees his father, who has raised him, as his best friend, and he sees his father's girlfriend, Maggie, as the best example of what a mom should be. When Mike's dad tells him of plans to propose to Maggie, Mike imagines the whole family he has dreamed about. Mike's father goes to buy a ring, but a car accident prevents him from ever returning. In the aftermath of his tragic death, Mike and Maggie must learn to move forward together.</p> <p>Legal drama ensues when Mike's absent birth mother appears to try to take him to live with her new family. Mike must fight to be adopted by Maggie. During the battle, he recalls painful memories of his childhood, and he must learn how to accept and move beyond tragedy with the help of loving friends and family.</p> <p>Laura Cockman Fishers, IN</p>

<p><b><i>The Inventor's Secret</i></b> by Andrea Cremer Philomel Books, 2014, 372 pp., \$18.99</p> <p>Fiction/Steampunk ISBN: 978-0-399-15962-6</p> <p>After the failure of the American Revolution, the revolutionaries must go underground. Charlotte is a 16-year-old girl living in the Catacombs, preparing for the day when she too will join the Resistance and fight for freedom from the British Empire. When Charlotte rescues a strange boy with no memory of who he is from the woods, it sets off a chain of events that will change her life. She is thrown undercover into New York's elite society, where she must not only do her duty to the Resistance, but discover what it means to fall in love.</p> <p><i>The Inventor's Secret</i> is an intriguing start to a series that raises the question of what it means to be human while still acting as a juicy page turner riddled with teen angst, plot twists, and sexual tension.</p> <p>Madelin Otterbein Coralville, IA</p>	<p><b><i>The Killing Woods</i></b> by Lucy Christopher Scholastic, 2014, 384 pp., \$17.99</p> <p>Mystery/Thriller ISBN: 978-0-545-46100-9</p> <p>A young girl is found dead. The worst part is that everyone blames Emily's dad. It's true he's an ex-soldier. Sure, he might be suffering a little PTSD. But when he comes out of the forest that surrounds their house holding Ashlee's corpse in his arms, he couldn't be the one who did it. . . could he?</p> <p>Emily teams up with Damon, the dead girl's boyfriend, as they try to uncover the identity of the murderer. Emily teams with the strength of a realistic protagonist, while Damon's accounts contain the barest hints of his own dark secrets. As they investigate the dark woods together, they realize the trees contain their own life, their own sacred evil that whispers of the deeds that have occurred amongst them. This deceitful mystery contains mystical elements of the classic fairytale, yet all the chilling suspense of a thriller.</p> <p>Jonathan W. Thurston Jackson, TN</p>
<p><b><i>The Testing</i></b> by Joelle Charbonneau Houghton Mifflin, 2013, 325 pp., \$17.99</p> <p>Young Adult/Dystopian/Science Fiction ISBN: 978-0-547-95910-8</p> <p>Newly graduated Malencia (Cia) Vale hopes to receive the high honor of being selected to participate in The Testing, the United Commonwealth's branchid for choosing future leaders from the most promising graduates of all the civilization's colonies. When Cia learns she will travel to Tosu City to partake in The Testing, her father, himself a former Testing candidate, shares with her his nightmares, ominously foreshadowing what Cia may encounter in her experience. Although her father cautions her to "trust no one," even his warnings cannot prepare Cia for the trials she will face in The Testing.</p> <p><i>The Testing</i> offers a thrilling picture of a dystopian civilization whose government tests the limits of its youth in every way. Charbonneau's gripping account of Cia's struggle to contend with the challenges she faces throughout The Testing invites the reader to question what actions he or she might take if forced into Cia's position.</p> <p>Leslie Douglas Nashville, TN</p>	<p><b><i>The Screaming Staircase</i></b> by Jonathan Stroud Disney Hyperion, 2013, 374 pp., \$16.99</p> <p>Fantasy / Adventure ISBN: 978-1-4231-6491-3</p> <p>Ghosts have been appearing in London, and not all of them are harmless. When a haunting becomes dangerous, people call in agencies of kids with psychic abilities to investigate. Lucy, Lockwood, and George make up Lockwood &amp; Co., an agency desperately in debt after a destructive mistake in fighting a ghost. They accept an offer to explore Combe Carey Hall in exchange for paying off their debt. No agent has ever survived its deadly Red Room or Screaming Staircase, but Lockwood &amp; Co. have one night to try.</p> <p><i>The Screaming Staircase</i> introduces the Lockwood &amp; Co. series with equal parts horror and humor. Readers will wonder about the origin of London's ghostly problem, the background of A. J. Lockwood and his agency, and how Lockwood &amp; Co. will solve mysteries to defeat fearsome foes—both living and dead—before they become ghosts themselves.</p> <p>Laura Cockman Fishers, IN</p>

<p><b><i>The Sultan's Tigers</i></b> by Josh Lacey Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013, 298 pp., \$16.99</p> <p>Fiction/Action and Adventure ISBN: 978-0-544-09645-5</p> <p>Tom Trelawney is a teenaged thrill seeker who feels out of place in his suburbanite family. When Tom and his Uncle Harvey discover that one of their ancestors stole a Sultan's bejeweled tiger statue hundreds of years ago, they set out for India to find the treasure. Along the way, they encounter mercenaries and a billionaire who will do anything to obtain that jewel-encrusted tiger. Tom and Uncle Harvey must figure out a way to get the treasure and escape India alive.</p> <p><i>The Sultan's Tigers</i> is everything you want out of an adventure novel—thrilling chases, brutal fights, clever getaways, and even narrower escapes. However, the novel is unique for taking place in India. Lacey does a great job of depicting India's landscape, lifestyle, history, and culture. Furthermore, Lacey hardly spares the details in his writing, which makes for a fast and exciting read.</p> <p>Christopher McMichael Austin, TX</p>	<p><b><i>The Upside of Ordinary</i></b> by Susan Lubner Holiday House, 2012, 136 pp., \$16, 95</p> <p>Television/Family/Reality TV ISBN: 978-0-8234-2417-7</p> <p>Fame and stardom. Those are 11-year-old Jermaine Davidson's main goals in life. And what better way to achieve fame than to film a reality television show of her family and friends? Jermaine is excited at first, but soon realizes that her life is pretty boring. She needs to spice it up, so Jermaine creates some thrilling events that make her life appear more action-packed for the camera.</p> <p>While amusing, this story proves the extreme selfishness of teens. Jermaine's actions produce humor, yet they hurt a lot of people on the way. Readers see Jermaine's relationships with her mother and best friend take a turn for the worse. Jermaine also risks a lot, like almost letting her house catch on fire, just to try and enrich her reality show. This novel takes readers into the crazy mind of a tremendously ambitious teenager and does not disappoint us.</p> <p>Eleni Artemas Chicago, IL</p>
<p><b><i>Tides</i></b> by Betsy Cornwell Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013, 294 pp., \$16.99</p> <p>Fantasy ISBN: 978-0-547-92772-5</p> <p>Noah Gallagher has the perfect summer planned out. He and his younger sister Lo have managed to stay at their grandmother's cottage on the Shoal Islands, and Noah has the internship of his dreams working as a marine biologist. Yet this is all interrupted when Noah meets Mara, a mysterious and enchanting girl unlike any he has ever met. As the Gallaghers' magical summer unfolds, so do everyone's secrets. But when Mara finally shares the truth about her family, she unknowingly places everyone she cares about in danger, leaving Noah to choose between his dreams and the people he loves. Told with charm and magic, Cornwell's adventure explores the challenges of family, love, self-discovery, and growing up in a world full of the unexpected.</p> <p>Ryan Logie New Canaan, CT</p>	<p><b><i>Unforgotten</i></b> by Jessica Brody Farrar, Straus &amp; Giroux, 2014, 399 pp., \$17.99</p> <p>Sci-fi/Romance ISBN: 978-0-374-37990-2</p> <p>Thanks to Zen, Sera has finally escaped Diotech, the futuristic company that created her. However, Sera's nightmares remind her that they can never be safe. Sure enough, Kealan, a Diotech agent, discovers the pair hiding in another century. When Zen becomes sick and Kealan has information about his cure, Sera has no choice but to cooperate with the people she vowed to hate. Sera embarks on a mission to save Zen's life, and in the process discovers secrets about her past that will determine the course of her future. Sera knows she is different. She isn't human, and yet she still struggles with human doubts and emotions. Sera wants to be in control of her own fate instead of existing to benefit someone else. And yet, in the end, Sera accepts that she cannot run from Diotech forever and sacrifices her own freedom to protect the ones she loves.</p> <p>Hope Winburn Nashville, TN</p>

<p><b><i>Vampire's Kiss</i></b> by Veronica Wolff Penguin Books, 2012, 320 pp., \$9.99</p> <p>Teen Fiction/Fantasy ISBN: 978-0-451-23572-5</p> <p>Annelise Drew is having a weird semester. Her two best friends seem to be avoiding her and the guy she has a crush on may or may not have a crush on someone else. Her courses make no sense (who needs conversational High German?) and it looks like some of her classmates want her dead. To top it all off, she has been getting a lot of attention from one very mysterious, very attractive vampire. . . .</p> <p>The second installment in the Watchers trilogy, <i>Vampire's Kiss</i>, follows Drew as she continues on her path to becoming a deadly agent for the undead. Filled with plenty of action and all of the romantic suspense that we have come to expect from its genre, this book will quench the bloodthirst of any reader—and it might just teach a lesson or two about friendship along the way.</p> <p>Matt Cutler Nashville, TN</p>	<p><b><i>Young Jerry Ford: Athlete and Citizen</i></b> by Hendrik Booraem V William B. Eerdmans, 2013, 138 pp., \$14.00</p> <p>History/Biography ISBN: 978-0-8028-6942-5</p> <p>In September of 1912 in Harvard, Illinois, Leslie King Jr. was born. This book examines the many changes (including a name change) that Leslie would undergo before entering adulthood as Jerry Ford, a man who would later go on to become President of the United States. Booraem focuses exclusively on Ford's early years from birth to the end of high school. We are invited to see Ford both as a growing individual and as a citizen during a fascinating time in American history.</p> <p>Overall, the book offers a commendably detailed portrait of the young Ford. That said, with the exception of a tumultuous relationship with his biological father, Ford's story offers little in the way of surprises. Those already interested in Ford will find here a treasure trove of information about the roots of Ford's political persona, but non-history buffs may find the intense attention to detail a tad tedious.</p> <p>Dan King Cherry Hill, NJ</p>
<p><b><i>Your Constant Star</i></b> by Brenda Hasiuk Orca, 2014, 236 pp., \$12.95</p> <p>Realistic Fiction ISBN: 978-1-4598-0368-8</p> <p>When Bev Novak finds herself pregnant, she seeks support from her childhood best friend, Faye, from whom she has long been estranged. With Bev's boyfriend, Manny, a stoner with a heart of gold, this unlikely trio attempts to navigate the complexities of choosing adoptive parents for Bev's unborn child.</p> <p>Brenda Hasiuk's honest and smart portrayal of the emotional lives of these three Canadian teens is both compelling and refreshing. Readers will easily connect with this story that boldly resists clichés familiar to the genre as it simultaneously tackles difficult topics like teenage pregnancy, mental illness, and family conflict. <i>Your Constant Star</i> explores both the particular beauty and brutality of life as a young adult, suggesting that perhaps these things "are just two halves of the same whole."</p> <p>Kenan B. Kerr Gastonia, NC</p>	

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**SUBMITTING THE MANUSCRIPT.** Authors are to submit manuscripts electronically to 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.

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

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

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

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

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## From the Editors

In preparing for this issue, our last one as editors of *The ALAN Review*, I looked back through my saved emails from the spring of 2009 when we were preparing to take over *TAR* duties. There were the emails of introductions, of budgets, of permissions, and of questions—lots and lots of questions from Steve, Melanie, and me. In my first few interactions with our new editorial team—Wendy Glenn, Ricki Ginsberg and Danielle King—I’ve noticed how many of those I could answer simply by cutting and pasting from previous editors Jim Blasingame and Lori Goodson’s responses. In looking back at their final issue’s introduction, as well as that of former editor Pamela Sissi Carroll (Blasingame and Goodson’s on being intimidated, Carroll’s on remembering), I can’t express as eloquently as they did the joy and honor we feel after spending the last five years contributing to this important field.

Before I describe the exciting contents of this issue, I would like to give thanks. There’s not enough space for me to thank everyone, so I must limit myself to thanking the several graduate students who have been of tremendous help over the past five years. Many have left our university and have their own classrooms now; they are Karin deGravelles, Cord McKeithen, Heather Durham, Shannon Pope, Sybil Durand, and Leylja Emiraliyeva-Pitre. I would also like to thank Michelle Zoss who has designed our past five covers that have captured the growing nature of reading—from the book to the digital book to the audio recording to the tablet. Thank you. And, of course, a huge thank you to Carol Schanche, our editor, who

has been so wonderful.

I (Jackie) have a ten-year-old son who loves watching Spongebob cartoons. In many episodes, Spongebob hurls himself into each new endeavor proclaiming, “I’m Ready, I’m Ready.” In the spirit of Spongebob, the three of us are going to share with you what we’re ready for now that our tenure as editors is coming to an end.

*I’m ready to read what my son will be reading.*

He’s just now getting into young adult literature. He’s read J. K. Rowling, Rick Riordan, Ridley Pearson, R. J. Palacio’s *Wonder*, Cynthia Lord’s *Rules*, and Chris Grabenstein’s *Escape from Mr. Lemoncello’s Library*. Someday it will be *Hunger Games*, *Speak*, *Monster*, *Boy 21*, and whatever work captures the public’s attention for whatever mysterious reason that draws us to vampires, basketball games, and boarding schools. Those involved with *ALAN* know to listen to what our students tell us about what they are reading, and we know how to listen to be able to recommend titles back to them. Many of the contributions to *TAR* during the past five years speak to the magic of sharing and discussing a good book.

*I (Melanie) am ready to challenge my students to see what those of us who love YAL see in it.*

I teach several young adult literature classes. In each incarnation of the class—whether it is a focus on race, class, gender, and sexual identity in YAL, or the appropriation of mythology or Shakespeare in YAL—I watch the students fall in love with the texts they read. They become passionate advocates of these texts; now I want them to be able to critique them,

to push the field forward, to both celebrate the books and challenge them. The field of YAL has become increasingly diverse, artistic, experimentative, and thoughtful. I want to challenge my students to keep that momentum going and growing.

*I'm ready to advocate for digital and multimodal young adult literature.*

Working with middle school readers in several after-school and weekend reading programs, I have watched them read both print texts and multimodal texts. Right now, we're reading one of Patrick Carman's novels, and the students are fascinated both with the story and with the novelty of the two media formats. As many young adult authors take up the digital and multimodal writing challenge, I look forward to reading and sharing a new form of storytelling with kids.

*I'm ready to see what is next.*

I'm not ready to say goodbye to the amazing people with whom I have worked at ALAN. The past five years as editor has been an amazing journey for the three of us. While our tenure as editor of *The ALAN Review* is ending, our commitment to the field is not. I am ready to see what the next stage in the work is for me and for Jackie and Steve.

*I (Steve) am ready to visit more schools and reconnect with past English education students who are teaching in the field.*

It has been wonderful communicating with all of the various contributors to *The ALAN Review* over the last five years. However, it does take time—time that has too often kept me away from visiting the classes of students who have graduated over the last five years. They occasionally send emails telling me about how their students respond to Crutcher, Voight, Green, Lipsyte, Myers, Myracle, Anderson (MT and LH), Sachar, Levithan, and numerous others. I want to watch the magic in the classroom. I want to see what my former students, now colleagues, are doing with young adult literature. How are they using YA literature to explore the ins and outs of the Common Core State Standards and to engage reluctant readers? I am also interested in what pedagogical strategies, including YA literature, they are using to accomplish their goals. After all, these preservice teachers and master's students are the ones who responded enthusiastically to the books in YA courses, methods classes, or as part of one-to-one discussions. Many *TAR* articles in

the last five years have explored what teachers do in their classrooms. It is time I took a closer look.

And, now, we're ready to introduce this issue.

The theme for this issue is how to teach young adult literature in an age of censorship and Common Core, and as usual, our authors and reviewers decided what we should include in this issue. These articles touch upon teaching in an age of Common Core and censorship, but not in overt ways.

Two articles, one by Kristine E. Pytash and Richard E. Ferdig and the other by Gretchen Schwarz, examine the role that *The ALAN Review* has played in the field of young adult literature. Pytash and Ferdig note the trends of articles published in *TAR* since 2005 and Schwarz asks us as a field to evaluate young adult literature in order to identify works our students should be reading.

The article by E. Suzanne Ehst and Jill M. Hermann-Wilmarth as well as the one by Donna L. Miller call for continued conversations and contemplations on the ways we incorporate young adult literature with characters from non-Western cultures and assist students in connecting their out-of-school experiences with those found in the classroom. In the end, both pieces demonstrate spaces for these texts within the CCSS and show that stories can serve as bridges between students' own experiences and the effect of those experiences on who they are becoming as adolescents.

Graphic novels also deserve consideration in an age of Common Core and censorship. Both the article by Ashley K. Dallacqua and Dorothy J. Sutton and the one by Bucky Carter provide productive, useful approaches for teachers while tackling issues of critical literacy, adolescence, and the genre itself.

Choosing which texts to teach, recommend, or share is becoming an escalating problem in an age of Common Core and censorship. Ruth Caillouet and Amy Davis Sanford explore the joys and troubles associated with choosing texts to read in young adult literature courses while Jennifer Miller examines the magic that infuses the reading of a book when teenagers get to interact with the author.

We have always been fortunate to feature pieces by authors of young adult literature in *TAR*, and the two Author Connection columns by Nancy Garden and Lyn Miller-Lachmann speak to the craft and care



that go into writing stories about LGBT characters and characters with disabilities. In this issue's The Publisher's Connection, Jerry Weiss provides current commentary on the state of booksellers and a comprehensive list of current titles that are worth reading. In The Research Connection, Laura May, Melanie Hundley, and Teri Holbrook examine the Common Core's focus on informational texts and analyze several biographies on President Obama. In The Classroom Connection,

Matt Skillen and several of his students share their experiences at last year's ALAN Conference. I love that one student describes it as a reunion, because I feel that way each year. Our two Stories from the Field feature what Hipple characterizes as the "It's the THAT, teacher."

Finally, we're ready to see what comes next for ALAN, beginning with the new editorial team and next year's conference!

## Call for Manuscripts

### Submitting a Manuscript:

Manuscript submission guidelines are available on p. 2 of this issue and on our website at <http://www.alan-ya.org/the-alan-review/>.

### Summer 2015: (Re)membering and (Re)living: Probing the Collective and Individual Past

Stories are dynamic, told and heard, accepted and revered, rejected and rewritten by readers who draw from their experiences and understandings to garner meaning from the words on the page. In young adult texts, fiction and nonfiction, historical and contemporary and futuristic, this dynamism can encourage the critique of our collective past, helping us question assumptions about what came before and reconsider our responsibilities to the present and future. These texts can also help us consider the adolescent experience across time and place and explore the similarities and differences that shape reality as young people navigate and draft their own coming-of-age stories. This universality can foster a connection to others and reinforce our shared existence as members of a human community. And yet, these texts can give emotional reality to names, dates, and other factual information, letting us imagine the voices of those who lived in other places and times, voices that have sometimes been silenced in official accounts of history, ideally inspiring us to honor these voices and generate a better future. Through these stories, we might come to reject a single narrative and develop empathy for individuals we never knew—and those we did and do and will.

In this issue, we welcome articles that explore the relationship between young adult literature, history, stories, and readers. We acknowledge that "every living soul is a book of their own history, which sits on the ever-growing shelf in the library of human memories" (Jack Gantos, *Dead End in Norvelt*). And that, "If you stare at the center of the universe, there is coldness there. A blankness. Ultimately, the universe doesn't care about us. Time doesn't care about us. That's why we have to care about each other" (David Levithan, *Every Day*). Stories matter in this caring: "I leapt eagerly into books. The characters' lives were so much more interesting than the lonely heartbeat of my own" (Ruta Sepetys, *Out of the Easy*).

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 **November 1, 2014**. Please see the ALAN website (<http://www.alan-ya.org/page/alan-review-author-guidelines>) for submission guidelines.

## Using *The ALAN Review* to Help Understand the Past, Present, and Future of YA Literature

**W**endy Glenn used her Fall 2011 President's column in *The ALAN Review (TAR)* to make important observations about the field of young adult literature. For instance, she argued that young adult (YA) authors have always tackled matters of consequence, such as addiction, family dynamics, and gender (p. 7). She noted the field has welcomed new perspectives, specifically from those who have been historically marginalized (p. 8). And, she highlighted the ability of YA authors to use new forms and technologies to engage readers in diversity, culture, and communication (p. 8–9). Her conclusion was that whatever lies around the bend, the YA field was prepared to “withstand the winds of change” (p. 10).

As we consider what lies ahead for the field of YA literature, it is important to pause and take stock of what we currently know. In fact, this was the impetus for an analysis of articles published in *The ALAN Review* from 2005–2011. The goal of this analysis was to determine whether there were any enduring trends over those seven years and whether there were any key indicators that might help us consider current trends and where the field is heading. Additional value derives from this investigation's ability to set a meta-analytic baseline, helping us step back and examine who we are and what we write.

Literature syntheses highlight past trends and provide insight into the issues that have been important in the field. They stimulate conversations about what the field has valued and will continue to deem

important. Literature reviews can also highlight what is missing from the literature. Acknowledging the gaps in the field's knowledge base allows the community to consider why these gaps exist and what new questions should be raised. These discussions provide opportunities for reflection on the goals and values of the community. As the leading journal dedicated solely to the scholarship of YA literature, an analysis of *The ALAN Review* provides an interesting picture of the field's landscape. Rather than an historical examination of all of the journal's issues, this review offers a snapshot of a recent timeframe in order to engage the community in conversations about potential avenues of future scholarship.

It is important, also, to remember that discussions of what articles were published in *The ALAN Review* differ from discussions about what YA literature is being published. While there might be overlap, the mission of *The ALAN Review* (as published on page 2 of each issue) is to publish “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” (¶ 2).

In this article, we first present an overview of the categories that emerged within the analysis. We then dive deeper into each category to emphasize trends. The article concludes with a discussion on the future, highlighting implications from each category.

## An Overview of TAR articles

There were 229 articles published in *The ALAN Review* between 2005 and 2011. For this review, “articles” include submitted manuscripts, author interviews, research connections, and the publishers’ connections. Two editorial teams (Goodson & Blas-ingame until Summer 2009, and Bickmore, Bach, & Hundley beginning Fall 2009) are represented in this review. While the purpose of a peer-reviewed journal is to have a representative body of work, editorial teams often guide the direction of the journal. Therefore, *The ALAN Review* not only represents a slice of what YA literature is being published, but also the scholarship surrounding YA literature and the decisions of the editorial team, including those who review for the journal.

In order to complete this literature synthesis, we spent a significant amount of time re-reading each article, creating categories, reviewing categories, and assigning the reviews to categories. We asked ourselves: *What is the focus of the article? What is the author trying to communicate to readers? What are the goals of the article?* We used these questions to guide our placement of articles. For instance, Daniels (2006) discussed how literary theories could be used to analyze YA literature. We assigned Daniels article to a category called *Theory*. We then moved to the next article, constantly comparing our category assignments and definitions as we progressed.

This led to an arranging and rearranging of not only the articles, but the categories themselves. For example, initially we had the following categories: 1) Using YA literature in schools and libraries, 2) Engaging young adults in YA literature, 3) Using YA literature with preservice and inservice teachers, and 4) instructional approaches for YA literature. As we looked across these categories, we recognized the articles had the similar goal of engaging readers in YA literature. We decided to collapse these categories into one section, *Engagement*, so that we could examine if there were similarities in how educators and librarians were engaging readers in YA literature across contexts and age groups.

The obvious danger in such a broad categorization scheme is that one article might fit multiple categories; therefore, articles might have a similar focus but be in separate sections. For example, we

placed Adomat’s (2009) article featuring YA books with young adults with disabilities in the *Adolescents’ Lives* category, while Menchetti, Plattos, and Carroll’s (2011) article that explored preservice teachers’ interactions with YA literature that featured young adults with disabilities was placed in *Engagement*. In this particular case, we made this distinction by asking ourselves, “Was the author trying to provide insight on YA novels that focus on adolescents’ lives or was the goal to examine instructional approaches and implications?” Our

thinking behind this specific decision was that Adomat’s article examined the YA books themselves, and Menchetti et al.’s article examined preservice teachers’ interactions or engagement during reading. In order to make the placement, we consistently went back to reflecting on the main goals for the article and the author’s rationale for the article.

After reviewing all 229 articles, seven categories emerged:

1. *Adolescents’ Lives*: Articles that address specific aspects of YA literature and young lives (e.g., depression or pregnancy). These articles examine particular issues present in adolescents’ lives, events that impact their lives, and also how young adults identify themselves and these representations of identity in YA literature.
2. *Diverse Perspectives*: Articles focusing on YA literature that presents diversity. While this category might seem similar to adolescents’ lives, these articles emphasize how particular cultures are represented in YA literature.
3. *Engagement*: Articles that highlight the use of YA literature for engagement. The articles in this section explore the places and ways educators and librarians engage students in YA literature.
4. *Forms, Formats, and Genres*: Articles that specifically examine genres, forms, and formats.
5. *Important People*: Articles about or interviews with YA authors or those who influence YA literature.
6. *Significance of YA Lit*: Articles about the past and present significance of YA literature.

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***The ALAN Review* not only represents a slice of what YA literature is being published, but also the scholarship surrounding YA literature.**

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7. *Theory*: Articles that address theoretical perspectives or analyses of YA literature.

Table 1 highlights the categories and the total number of published contributions between 2005 and 2011; it also reports publications by year. If one were to examine the field by looking at the major categories of articles published in *The ALAN Review*, one could

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**Many members of ALAN work closely with young adults and are thus thoughtful about the literature that speaks to their lives.**

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conclude that we (researchers and educators in the field) have consistently appreciated the role of YA literature in *Adolescents' Lives*. We have also begun a strong trend toward understanding how young adults are reading and *Engaged* in YA literature both in and out of school. *Forms* is an area that has been important in some years and not in others. We have

paid less attention recently to the *Important People* in our field, at least in writing about them the last few years. And, although we and other organizations within our field have called for the importance of *Diverse Perspective*, the *Significance of YA Literature*, and the use of *Theory* to understand YA literature, it has not necessarily been a topic of focus in ALAN publications. This could be because all three play significant and ubiquitous roles in all publications, regardless of the overarching theme of the article. To answer these questions, we dug deeper into the articles published within each of these broader categories.

## Breakdown by Category

### Adolescents' Lives

Literature is often referred to as a window, a way for readers to reflect on life events and learn more about themselves. Many members of ALAN work closely with young adults and are thus thoughtful about the literature that speaks to their lives. This category (18.34%) examines articles written about young adults and the topics in YA literature considered relevant to their lives.

Over the seven years used for this analysis, the most written about issues were those surrounding sex, whether it be identification (gender), the consequence of the physical act of sex (pregnancy and parenthood), or orientation (LGBTQ). From 2005–2009, there was a significant focus on gender, sexual activity, and pregnancy. Authors examined particular titles that might speak to the female experience (Blackford, 2005; O'Quinn, 2008; Robillard, 2009; Sprague, Keeling, & Lawrence, 2006) or male experience (Glenn, 2006; Jeffery, 2009; Kahn & Wachholz, 2006; Madill, 2008). These articles raised questions about how we as adults select books based on gender and how these books may or may not perpetuate assumptions about femininity and masculinity. Tied to this theme were articles focused on sex, pregnancy, and parenthood. Over the course of four years (2005–2009), there were 6 articles about how the experience of pregnancy and parenthood was portrayed in young adult literature. The word “real” is used multiple times, by either the authors (Bittel, 2009) or pregnant/parenting teens (Hallman, 2009). These articles highlight the tension that exists between not wanting to misrepresent the

**Table 1.** A breakdown of *TAR* articles by category and year

	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	Totals
Adolescents' Lives	3	8	4	9	9	2	7	42
Diverse Perspectives	1	3	0	2	1	0	2	9
Engagement	4	7	9	9	7	9	10	55
Forms	6	1	2	1	11	8	2	31
Important People	14	11	14	9	5	4	7	64
Significance of YA Lit.	3	1	3	2	2	4	3	18
Theory	2	2	2	3	0	0	1	10

experiences of teenage parents and the moral tensions that authors may face.

Beginning in 2008, there was a surge in articles written about young adult literature with a Lesbian, Gay, Bi-Sexual, Transgendered, or Questioning (LGBTQ) perspective. This category had 8 articles published within the shortest time period (2008–2011). These articles advocate for young adults to read literature in which a character identifies as LGBTQ to help establish acceptance and understanding for young adults of all sexual orientations. The authors of these articles assert that LGBTQ literature is critically important because, as Hayn and Hazlet (2008) contend, “[T]alking openly about homosexuality in schools may be the one area of diversity still unaddressed” (p. 66).

Adolescence as a time of identity formation and coming-of-age was explored in 6 articles from 2006–2011. Authors examined ways that young adults might seek an identity and how “non-conformist” (Jones, 2006) YA literature might help young adults explore this idea of “self” (Bell, 2011; Insenga, 2011; Jones, 2006; Lautenbach, 2007; Zitlow & Stove, 2011).

While issues of sexual orientation, gender, sex, and identity represent young adults’ lives on a very personal level, beginning in 2005 and spanning through 2011, authors also looked at young adults’ lives on a more global scale. Throughout this time span, we found articles about war (Caillouet, 2005; Franzak, 2009), terrorism (Hauschildt, 2006), social inequalities (Tuccillo, 2006), genocide (Bannon, 2008), religion (Smith, 2009), and urban settings (Thomas, 2011) in young adult literature. The focus on these topics coincided with events like 9/11 and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

While the topics mentioned above found the most space in the pages of *The ALAN Review*, there were other topics covered that received less attention. For example, although adults often have important roles in YA literature, there were only 3 articles that provided an in-depth examination into their roles in YA literature (Town, 2006; Vincent, 2008; Cummins, 2011). Similarly, few articles examined health-related issues. For example, over the past seven years only 3 articles explored how young adults with disabilities are portrayed in YA literature (Adomat, 2009; Crandall, 2009; Pajka-West, 2007). Issues like body image (Quick, 2008) and mental health concerns (Phillips,

2005) lacked a strong voice. And surprisingly, despite the amount of media coverage surrounding incidents of bullying in schools, only 1 article focused on bullying in YA literature from 2005–2011 (Bott, Garden, Jones, & Peters, 2007).

### Diverse Perspectives

Literature has the power to shape lives by providing insights on humanity, culture, and experiences. Readers can grow to know someone, something, or someplace quite different.

The category of diverse perspectives is made up of articles that present and advocate for YA literature representing diverse populations of people. Although the total number is small, 9 total (3.9%), these articles were distributed somewhat evenly over the time frame of 2005–2011. Except for 2010, each year offered at least 1 article examining diverse perspectives in YA literature.

These articles examined representations of culture and considered whether stereotypes were being perpetuated through these texts. This required an examination of how the novel was crafted and how certain ideologies were represented.

Authors examined literature that included Native American (Bickmore, 2005; Metzger & Kelleher, 2008), Asian American (Loh, 2006), Mexican American (Saldaña, 2012), Hawaiian (Bean, 2008), and Latina (Medina, 2006) voices. Authors also examined literature portraying young adults who live outside of the United States (Kaywell, Kelley, Edge, McCoy, & Steinberg, 2006; Miskin, 2011; Westenskow, 2009).

### Engagement

Engagement in YA Literature contained a total of 55 articles (24%) spanning from 2005–2011. The purpose of this category was to examine how young adults are interacting with YA literature, the spaces created in schools and libraries for reading, and specific instructional approaches used to engage young adults in reading YA literature.

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**Rather than maintaining traditional print forms, YA literature has expanded to visual and media forms and formats.**

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Four specific subcategories emerged within *Engagement*. First, beginning in 2007, 15 articles featured instructional approaches for *teaching specific books*. For example, Gold, Caillouet, and Fick (2007) examined wordplay in *Holes* (Sachar, 1998). Other articles examined titles such as Julia Scheere's *Jesus Land* (Scherif, Arteta-Durini, McGartlin, Stults, Welsh, & White, 2008), Sharon Creech's *The wanderer* (Gold, Caillouet, Holland, & Fick, 2009) and M. T. Anderson's *Feed* (O'Quinn & Atwell, 2010). Articles about instruction often focused on specific topics. For instance, 3 articles explored how to teach YA literature with diverse perspectives (Bloem, 2011; Kuo & Alsup, 2010; White-Kaulaity, 2006). Nine articles in this subcategory were about instructing a diverse group of adolescents. This included

students who are incarcerated (Baer, 2011; Greinke, 2007), adolescents considered at-risk (Vasquez, 2009), and adolescents in AP English programs (Miller & Slifkin, 2010). Finally, there were articles about instruction that focused on instructors. Two articles examined preservice teachers' interactions with YA literature in teacher education courses (Menchetti et al., 2011; Stallworth, 2010), and 3 articles examined teachers' perspectives on YA literature and its significance in the English classroom (Gibbons, Dail, & Stallworth, 2006; Glenn, King, Heintz, Klapatch, & Berg, 2009).

A second subcategory within engagement focused on *choice and motivation for reading*. In 2006 and in 2007, 2 articles explored books that are considered controversial and why adolescents read those books (Enriquez, 2006; Sacco, 2007). Eight articles addressed how students become actively engaged in the literature; they also discussed how to present literature in ways that are appealing (Bodart, 2010; Frey, Fisher, & Moore, 2009; Holbrook & Holbrook, 2010; Martinez & Harmon, 2011; Tuccillo & Williams, 2005; Weiss, 2007).

A third subcategory described the ways in which students could *respond to literature instruction*. This included 2 articles about how students could use art

to respond to YA literature (Baer, 2007; Bleeker & Bleeker, 2005) and 6 articles about how technology was being used as a forum for students to present their ideas about YA literature (Hathaway, 2011) or to represent their interpretations of YA literature (Davila, 2010). Finally, there were articles that highlighted the connections between films, music, and YA literature (Brown, 2005; Seglem, 2006; Sitomer, 2008).

A fourth and final subcategory focused on *instruction outside of the traditional classroom*. Four articles spanning 2005–2010 examined the YA literature in libraries (Arnold, 2005; Bowen & Tuccillo, 2006; MacRae, 2007; Tuccillo, Goodman, Pompa, & Arrowsmith, 2007; Welch, 2010). Additionally, Salvner (2011) wrote an article featuring the Youngstown State University literature conference that gives students opportunities to read and discuss YA literature, to meet YA authors, and to engage in writing activities.

### **Forms, Formats, and Genres**

The field of young adult literature is continually changing, shifting, and growing. This is most recognizable when one begins to consider the explosion of new forms and formats over the past 15 years (Carter, 2008; Fletcher-Spear, Jenson-Benjamin, & Copeland, 2005). Rather than maintaining traditional print forms, YA literature has expanded to visual and media forms and formats. The influence of the arts, technology, and media has produced a constantly changing field—one in which authors, teachers, and researchers can defy classifications and restrictions of the term “genre.” This category boasts 31 articles (13.5%) written about the many forms, formats, and genres prevalent in the field of YA literature.

Although in 2005, authors were still examining more “traditional” genres, such as memoirs (Marler, 2005; Rogers, 2005) and historical fiction (Glenn, 2005), there began a trend to examine new genres, forms, and formats. Most notably, there was the immense popularity of graphic novels, which led to 7 articles from 2005–2011. Discussion focused on everything from their literary merit to defining graphic novels to promoting the benefits of the use of graphic novels in the classroom (Carter, 2008; Fletcher-Spear, Jenson-Benjamin, & Copeland, 2005). Authors used the space to point out that using the term “genre” to classify graphic novels was restrictive. Instead, they argued that graphic novels are forms or formats,

which include a variety of genres and topics.

While graphic novels seemed to have paved the way for the discussion about new formats of books, they do not represent the only shift in forms. In 2009, larger discussions in *TAR* began revolving around new formats and the influence of technology. Three articles explored books with new formats, such as free verse (Cadden, 2011); books written in blended, multiple formats, such as blogs (Olthouse, 2010); and intertextuality in books (Hathaway, 2009). Similarly, beginning in 2009, 6 articles were written about digital advances and YA literature. These articles included conversations about video games (Gerber, 2009), documentary films (Phillips & Teasley, 2010), and digital communication (Koss & Tucker, 2010). Authors used *TAR* articles to demonstrate how technology has allowed young adults to be producers and publishers of YA literature as evidenced by the rise of *fan fiction* (Mathew & Adams, 2009).

Despite these relatively “new” formats, 2009–2011 was also a popular time for traditional genres—such as fantasy, science fiction, and folktales—to be examined under the guise of how gender (Keeling & Sprague, 2009) and race (Hood, 2009) might influence the literature. And 1 article examined the increasing popularity of street literature (Brooks & Savage, 2009).

### Important People

This category recognizes the authors of YA literature and those educators who have significantly contributed to the field of YA literature. With 64 articles (27.9%), this is the largest category. The people featured in this section moved the field of YA literature forward and were advocates for both YA literature and young adults.

*The ALAN Review* includes *interviews* with authors and features about authors. These articles examine authors whose work has made significant contributions to the field of YA literature. From 2005–2011, 25 interviews were conducted with YA authors. These interviews provide glimpses into the authors’ writing lives, their inspiration for their novels, and their interactions with their young adult readers. While they might write a variety of genres, the majority of authors interviewed were known primarily for their fiction. For example, High (2010) interviewed Laurie Halse Anderson, who is well known for her fiction (e.g., *Speak*, *Wintergirls*, and *Twisted*) but also writes

nonfiction for younger readers (e.g., *Independent Dames*).

*The ALAN Review* also included *author feature* articles written about authors and their work. From 2005–2011, 15 articles explored YA authors, including analyses of their work. Similar to the subcategory of *interviews*, this subcategory seemed to be primarily dedicated to authors of fiction. For example, Walter Dean Myers has written over 50 fiction and nonfiction books, but he has been a National Book Award Finalist for his fiction books (e.g., *Monster*, *Autobiography of My Dead Brother*, and *Lockdown*). This category also includes one short story by Crowe (2008).

The Important People category also contained 6 articles that were adapted Keynote speeches and workshops from the ALAN conference and 10 articles that recognize people in the field who have won awards or done significant work as professionals, teacher educators, and publishers. Finally, since 2005, the field of YA literature, and literature in general, have unfortunately lost significant members of the community, such as Ted Hipple, Janet McDonald, Louise Rosenblatt, Paula Danziger, and J. D. Salinger. *TAR* honored these people and their legacies through 8 articles and retrospective pieces. These articles shared their lives, how they influenced YA literature and how they shaped the field.

### Significance

The 18 articles in this category (7.9%) explored the merits of YA literature, its significance in the literary community, and why it should be read and studied in the English language arts classroom. Although many articles featured in *TAR* included a rationale for why YA literature should be read, discussed, and valued, the main goal of these articles was to highlight the importance of YA literature. These authors provided overviews of the field and specifically arguments for the merits of YA literature.

From 2007 through 2011, 4 articles highlighted the *importance* of YA literature by analyzing books, topics, and trends. For example, in 2007, 2 articles

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**In 2009, larger discussions in *TAR* began revolving around new formats and the influence of technology.**

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(Smith, 2007; Stephens, 2007) explored what was happening in the field of young adult literature. They examined the current trends and a sampling of books that highlight these trends. Similarly, in 2011, 2 articles provided a historical and contemporary look at the field, including the top books from 1999–2009 (Glenn, 2011; Kaywell, 2011).

Also included in this category were 2 articles, published in 2005 and 2009, that argued for recognition of the “literary merit” of YA literature. For example, Soter and Connors (2009) argued that YA literature was indeed “literature,” was relevant to

adolescents’ lives, and has literary sophistication that should be recognized and valued. Two other articles published in 2010 and 2011 described authors’ passion for YA literature (Kienholz, 2010; Weiss, 2011).

A third subcategory of significance focused on the *benefits* of adolescents reading YA literature. For instance, 2 articles (Ha-

zlett, Johnson, & Hayn, 2009; Sitomer, 2010) discussed why young adults are engaged and motivated to read YA literature and a rationale for why middle school and high school teachers should include YA literature in their curriculum.

A final topic included in this category was Jerry Kaplan’s multiple *reviews of research projects* (e.g., overviews of doctoral dissertations). These reviews highlighted the important research that pushed the field of YA literature forward.

### Theory

One of the smallest categories represented (4%) in *The ALAN Review* contained articles using literary theories to analyze YA literature. Authors of these articles used a theoretical lens to examine a book. For instance, Daniels (2006) provided an overview of different literary theories and books that could be examined using these theories. He argued that the use of literary theories would help break barriers between the YA literature community and the broader literary community. While Daniels’ (2006) work provided

overviews of multiple theories, other authors analyzed novels through the specific lens of postmodernism (Bleeker & Bleeker, 2008; Nicosia, 2008) and through a feminist and gender lens (Tighe, 2005; Cobb, 2007).

From 2005–2011, 4 articles used other literary movements, theories from other fields, and other pieces of literature to provide a closer analysis of YA literature. For example, 1 article (Redford, 2006) used transcendentalism to analyze *Whiligig* (Fleischman, 1999) and *Stargirl* (Spinelli, 2000). O’Sullivan (2005) used the work of developmental theorists such as Piaget and Kohlberg to explore depictions of evil in Lois Lowry’s *Messenger*. Similarly, the Harry Potter series is the subject of an article (Garza, 2011) that explore how the books have various references to Biblical, Greek, and mythological literature.

The final 2 articles in this category explored instruction, but they were placed in this category because they were about teaching young adults literary theories such as Marxism (Scherff, Lewis, & Wright, 2007) and critical theory (Groenke & Maples, 2008). The goal of these articles was to examine the theoretical lens used to teach YA literature. These articles explored how young adults could learn about a specific theory and use it to facilitate a deeper understanding of the text.

### Implications

We suggested that a closer examination of seven years of *The ALAN Review* articles would provide an opportunity to review past scholarship and consider new directions. Arguably, the choice of a seven-year time frame may seem arbitrary. Our choice was based on the year we began to pay closer attention to potential themes and trends in *TAR*; we paused in 2012 to provide this snapshot in response to Glenn’s presidential observations. We hope that this analysis provides both immediate perspective as well as a baseline for those who wish to look further back or repeat this examination in the future.

A review of the past has clearly demonstrated that the field of YA literature has made exemplary efforts to be advocates for young adults and the literature close to their lives. It has also provided evidence of authors’ willingness to push against the norms and write about the topics *alive and well amidst the angst of youth*. Finally, this review has provided evidence

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## The field of YA literature has made exemplary efforts to be advocates for young adults and the literature close to their lives.

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supporting Glenn's (2011) claim that YA authors and those from the field find ways to speak out for the marginalized and the underrepresented. In doing so, they have created a voice and space for young adults and the literature they read.

We acknowledge that this review is not an objective view of the field of YA literature or the scholarly work surrounding YA literature. There are many factors that influence what is published in *The ALAN Review*: from what ALAN's members and TAR's writers find important enough to write about, to what the field as a whole—including the editors and reviewers—feels is significant enough to publish in *The ALAN Review*. This work, however, does provide a snapshot of the recent trends in the scholarship of YA literature.

Such a review has thus provided a look at past work, but it also provides implications for moving forward. As a community and as advocates of YA literature, we must ask ourselves if this represents what we believe about young adults and YA literature. Is this the work we want to continue pursuing? Or are there new avenues and areas in the field to explore and discuss? There are at least eight implications that might both paint a picture of the future and provide opportunities for those in YA literature to shape that future.

1. *Our work can provide complete opportunities to help young adults reflect on their lived experiences.* Articles that fell in the category of *adolescent lives* highlighted young adults' sexual identities as important to who adolescents are and how they are represented in YA literature. However, media-highlighted issues like body image or bullying were left relatively unaddressed in the pages of TAR during 2005–2011. Advocates for youth can continue to examine literature that provides opportunities to reflect on the lived experiences of our youth. This requires us to make sure young adults' voices and experiences are not only heard, but also respected. We have to be advocates not only for the literature they read, but for the lives they live. It is our responsibility to ensure that when we, as adults, analyze YA literature, we make certain young adults' lives are properly represented in the literature and that the literature is not creating stereotypes of who young adults might be.

2. *Our work can provide opportunities for all young adults.* The terms “young adults” or “adoles-

cents” encompass an enormous range of young people from different races, ethnicities, classes, spiritualities, sexual preferences, family structures, and unique worlds. Articles published in the category of *diversity* demonstrated TAR's commitment to representing the diverse range of young adult readers; however, the small number of such articles suggests the need for more in-depth examinations of literature with this focus. The small number might also suggest that, as some of the authors point out, there is not an abundance of YA literature written about these diverse perspectives (Loh, 2006). This might mean that the field needs both more YA literature encompassing diverse cultures and also more conversations about these books.

3. *Our work can provide opportunities for examining reading in multiple contexts.* The category of *engagement* offered evidence of TAR's historical recognition of teachers, librarians, and the ways in which young adults interact with YA literature. For instance, the inclusion of *Stories from the Field* (first featured in the Fall of 2009) gave teachers and librarians space to share vignettes of experiences with young adult literature. Future work should continue to explore what it means to “teach” YA literature. How do we engage students in meaningful and powerful instruction? Future work should continue to explore preservice and inservice teachers' experiences with YA literature and how their reading might push them to consider their interactions with young adults.

While there was scholarship surrounding YA literature in classrooms, there were very few articles published in this time frame that focused on reading YA literature in out-of-school contexts. The classroom is an important space—but not the only space—in which to utilize YA literature. Future articles could help promote the field by focusing on context. We should continue to explore the other spaces where young adults are engaged in reading and discussing YA literature.

4. *Our work can provide research and teaching*

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**The field needs both more YA literature encompassing diverse cultures and also more conversations about these books.**

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forays into new forms of YA literature. While we cannot dismiss the “traditional” print genres, the *form* category demonstrated the potential influence of technological advances and multimodality literacies on the field of YA literature. Technology is changing how authors are creating YA literature. And technology will

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**Technology is changing how authors are creating YA literature. And technology will continue to change how we view literature, providing new opportunities for delivery, interaction, and response.**

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continue to change how we view literature, providing new opportunities for delivery, interaction, and response. Authors, teachers, and researchers can help guide how students get access to material and how they move from consumers to producers. What will YA literature “look like” in 5, 10, or 15 years? What does this change in form and formats mean for the scholarship surrounding the field? How do the changes in form and format

influence the theoretical work that has explored how readers make meaning from text?

5. *Our work can provide access to new, diverse authors representing multiple genres.* The *author interviews and features* provided the field with an understanding of authors and educators who have demonstrated their passion and commitment to the field of young adult literature. A majority of the authors did work in fiction; additionally, there was a significant decrease in such publications in the last few years, which may be due to the change in the editorial team. Increased work in this area would not only draw attention to important writers but also to new genres and new forms of writing.

6. *Our work can promote the value of YA literature.* Many of the articles in the *significance* category noted that YA literature has been historically undervalued in our field. More articles and continued research could provide insight into just why YA literature is so important. We should ask ourselves how we can determine the value of YA literature and what research methodologies might best be used to answer such questions. As a community that represents YA literature, we must also ask ourselves what are the ways we continue to promote the scholarship of YA

literature? What should we be doing to make sure that YA literature and the scholarship surrounding YA literature are valued?

7. *Our work can guide theory development and use.* The *theory* category featured articles that used theories inside and outside of the field to explore the craftsmanship of YA literature. In addition to research on significance, articles that use literary theory or develop theory will also continue to promote the legitimacy of YA literature in the broader literary community.

8. *There is value in using multiple data points in examining and reexamining the direction of our work.* The previous seven implications have focused on the “so-what” of the content analysis of the articles published from 2005–2011. Those implications can be directly tied to the themes or categories that emerged from the longitudinal analysis. However, there will no doubt be readers who spend more time reflecting on the quantitative data available in Table 1. They will ask questions about why some categories did not appear or why other categories seemed to take such a leading role (e.g., *Important People* with 27.9%). A final implication of this work is the reminder of the importance of not just using data, but of using multiple points of data to inform our reflections.

Figure 1 visually highlights the same information found in Table 1. However, instead of representing simple percentages that might be found in a pie chart, Figure 1 highlights the number of contributions over the longitudinal scope of this article. We begin to see interesting trends with this perspective. Note, for instance, the relative growth over time of *Engagement* and *Significance* articles compared to the relative decline of *Important People* and *Theory*. See also the frequent return to issues of diversity. There are probably historical answers tied to these data trends, such as special issues of *The ALAN Review*. The point is that emerging themes can tell us how our work (as evidenced by publications in *The ALAN Review*) is attempting to influence the field. It can also show us the kinds of areas on which we have focused or failed to focus. In the end, it also reminds us that using multiple tools can help us reexamine when things were important and when they might need to be brought back to the surface. Examining the data in multiple ways can help us show how much research we have as well as how scholarship has changed over time.

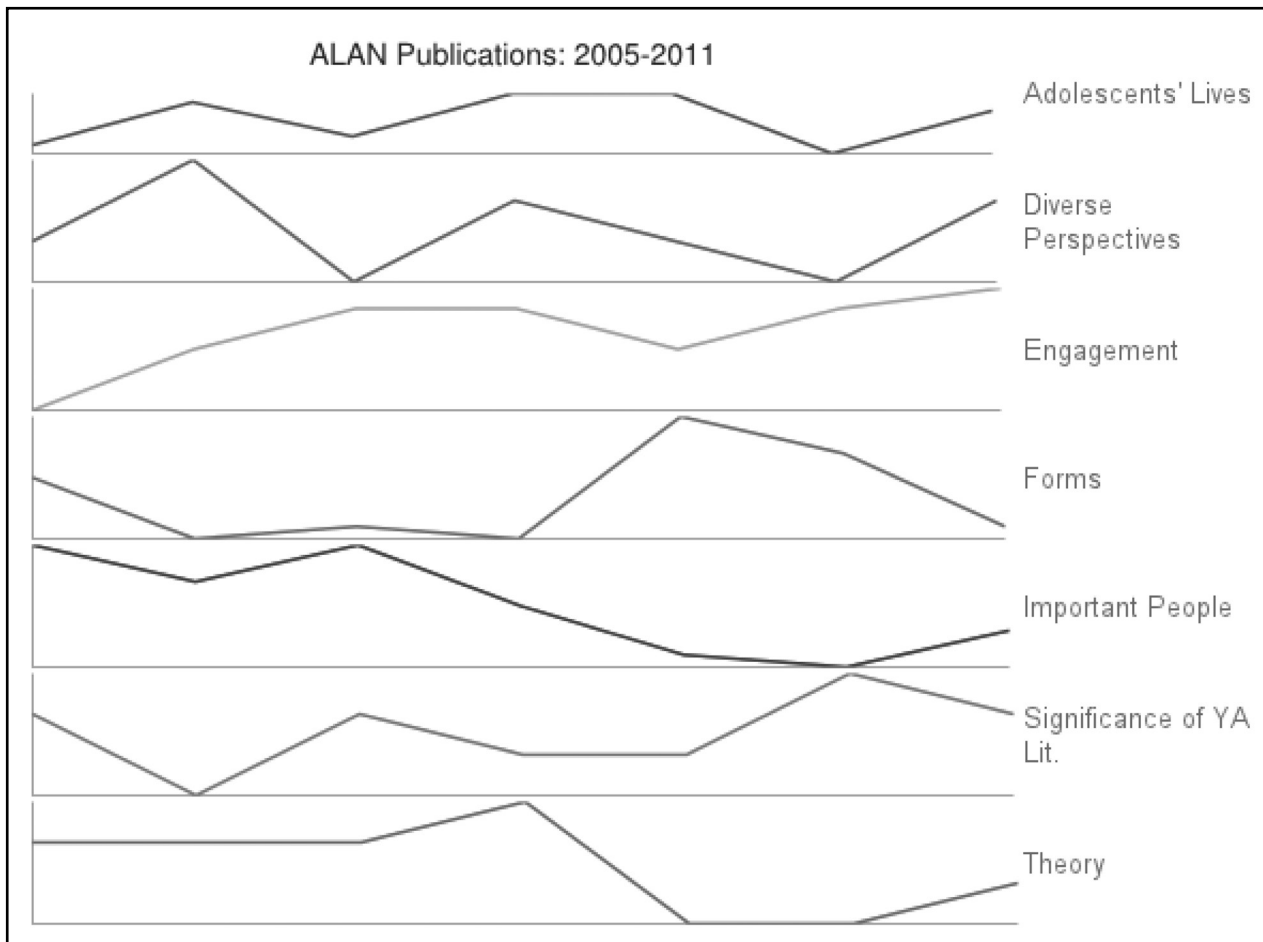


Figure 1.

## Conclusion

The eight implications highlighted in this article reflect a changing world that will continue to evolve independent of the works of those who advocate for youth and for YA literature. Said differently, technology continues to change how we get access to literature and how we engage with that text. Changes in world economies, health, and culture impact the angst experienced by our youth. And many fields argue for the value they have in engaging youth in these areas. Therefore, although our past has been fruitful, and indicators suggest we are indeed ready to stand the winds of change, these implications will not happen automatically. We have an opportunity to shape the field and to shape the lives of our youth using that which we value so much—YA literature.

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## Enough Apologetics:

Time to Be *Critical* of YA Literature

If young adult literature has finally come of age, then why do we still endlessly define it, defend it, award it, and argue for it, but seldom question it, critique it, admit sometimes (for good reasons) to disliking it, and argue *about* it? Even a cursory look at a database like Academic Search Complete or ERIC reveals journal articles that cover many diverse topics, but the great majority are laudatory, such as “Young Adult Literature and the Common Core: A Surprisingly Good Fit” by Ostenson and Wadham (2012), or “Border Crossings: Undocumented Migration between Mexico and the United States in Contemporary Young Adult Literature” by Cummins (2013), supporting the use of YA literature to encourage empathy and understanding.

NCTE (National Council of Teachers of English) and IRA (International Reading Association) journals, library journals, and other publications are replete with *mostly* supportive book reviews and recommendations. Positive articles and books make sense in education—readers, usually educators, are looking for what may work for them and their students. But shouldn't there be a place for bad and even mediocre reviews, too? A forum for disagreements about the meanings and value of diverse works? An opportunity to ask questions about the business of publishing YA books as well as various connections and implications across the media? Given the popularity and influence of such novels as the Harry Potter series, or the Hunger Games series, even among discriminating adult readers, and the lasting power of such young adult novels as *The Outsiders*, it is time to be *critical* of YA literature. The literature deserves it, as do scholars, educators, and young readers in the classroom and

out.

Sadly, censorship of YA literature remains a problem, and many educators still refuse to acknowledge the diverse richness offered by YA literature. However, advocates of YA literature too often remain protectionist. For example, Meghan Cox Gurdon, children's book reviewer for the *Wall Street Journal* (“My ‘Reprehensible’ Take on Teen Literature,” 2011), comments on the biting, outraged feedback she received from American Library Association members as well as some young adult authors when she wrote an essay titled “Darkness Too Visible” about the many young adult novels that are becoming more lurid, violent, and negative. She was accused of not understanding the real world of teens and even of advocating censorship, which she did not. Gurdon quotes one librarian, however, who says that educators are naïve if they think that kids don't believe adults condone bad or harmful behavior through such books. Gurdon concludes, “It is that question—the condoning of the language and content of a strong current in young adult literature—that creates the parental dilemma at the core of my essay. It should hardly be an outrage to discuss the subject” (A.15).

Indeed, why not discuss the subject with students, as well? Siegemund (2007), studying YA literature through author interviews and student, librarian, and teacher surveys, indicates that many see YA literature as valuable because students like to read it, no matter what the content, behaviors, or creeds that emerge. Siegemund states that the idea that students benefit simply from reading “has led to a booming market that feels entirely justified in publishing works whose purpose is to ‘engage’ young readers and instill

in them a 'love of reading' . . . while ignoring that what one reads does help one forge a moral map, a social map, a sense of one's place in the world and that therefore *what* one reads is of utmost importance" (pp. 420–421). Valuable literature should have

more to offer than what my college students term "relatability" or relevance. Even in our postmodern era when notions of "high culture" no longer dominate, ideas related to quality, moral behavior, and purpose deserve critical consideration.

Why and how should the field itself become more critical of young adult literature, and what kind

of "critical"? For many teachers and scholars, critical literary work means analysis, employing the basic terminology of literature to understand how the literature works. This kind of approach is clear in state educational objectives. The TEKS (Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills) online document for ninth-grade English, for example, lists the abilities to comprehend poetry, drama, and fiction, including such terms as point of view, figurative language, and flashbacks. Perhaps such knowledge is also seen as part of one's general "cultural literacy" (Hirsch, 1987). One Texas high school teacher with whom I have worked is collecting evidence that students can master such objectives just as well if not better when studied in YA literature rather than the standard canon. It seems that criticism as literary analysis continues to have a place.

Moreover, formal literary criticism, understood as "the reasoned consideration of literary works and issues" (2013, "Literary Criticism," *Britannica Online Encyclopedia*) based on literary theory, or "the set of concepts and intellectual assumptions on which rests the work of explaining or interpreting literary texts" (2013, "Literary Theory," *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* online) has already had an impact in the field of YA literature. Formal criticism may not be as influential or common in middle or high school as in college, but literacy criticism emerging from diverse theories is reflected in such books as Moore's *Interpreting Young Adult Literature: Literary Theory in the*

*Secondary Classroom* (1997), Appleman's *Critical Encounters in High School English: Teaching Literary Theory to Adolescents* (2000), and Latrobe's and Drury's *Critical Approaches to Young Adult Literature* (2009). In addition, we see scholars and teachers applying literary criticism to YA literature, as reflected in such articles as Schieble's (2012) "Critical Conversations on Whiteness with Young Adult Literature" and Hinton's (2004) "'Sturdy Black Bridges': Discussing Race, Class, and Gender." Such work encourages teachers and students to examine YA literature through different lenses such as critical theory or feminism, following Daniels's (2006) argument that "if we want YA literature to be recognized and appreciated as literature, then we should utilize the same theories with it we use with other literatures . . ." (p. 80). Literary criticism can be a powerful tool for understanding YA literature, human beings, and society, too. There is room for more of this kind of critical work.

What seems to be largely absent yet in most discussions or study of YA literature are questions of quality, purpose, ethical value, and worldview. YA literature textbooks such as *Literature for Today's Young Adults* (Nilsen, Blasingame, Donelson, & Nilsen, 2013) list suggestions for evaluating the realistic or "problem" novel, and insist that there be a "worthwhile theme" and "a way of dealing with the problems so that the reader is left with insights" (p. 121), but such suggestions are vague. Moreover, questions remain. Given the huge number of YA offerings published every year now, how can educators find out which are not so good, which are just mediocre, and which are much better than others? More important, how can students themselves learn to evaluate YA literature? How can they learn to think critically, choose to like and/or not to like a work, discover why, and agree or disagree with others?

Soter and Connors (2009) declare, "If we ever expect young adult literature to find a place in the classroom, then those of us who work in the trenches or who have a passion for thoughtful, smartly written books must be willing to subject it to the same high standards as we hold for adult literature" (p. 66). These standards include moral and cultural values as well as literary ones. Content matters. In fact, such critical reading might reveal to readers more about their own beliefs, ideas, and approaches to reading—what Schraw and Bruning (1996) call readers' "im-

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**What seems to be largely absent yet in most discussions or study of YA literature are questions of quality, purpose, ethical value, and worldview.**

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plicit models of reading.” Applying media or digital literacy to YA literature is one way of encouraging this kind of criticism.

YA literature has grown up in the digital age, and approaching it as a kind of media is one way to increase critical thinking. The standard definition of media literacy—the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and create various kinds of media for various purposes and audiences—certainly accommodates other kinds of criticism as well. What a media literacy approach adds is the idea that literature is created by certain people within a certain historical-social-economic context for certain reasons. Literature is not handed down on tablets of stone; it is a human creation that reveals much about not only its authors but the culture from which it comes. Thus, key questions to ask texts (suggested in the *Core Principles for Media Literacy Education* from the National Association of Media Literacy Education) include the following:

1. Who made the message and why?
2. Who paid for this?
3. What is left out of this that might be important to know [or consider]?
4. How might different people understand this differently?
5. What is my interpretation and what do I learn about myself from this?
6. What are the sources of the information, ideas, and assertions (if applicable)?

These questions may lead to a more complete critique of YA literature. For example, YA literature has an economic basis; publishers publish works to make money by selling books (and related products), not to improve the lives and education of adolescents. Thus, sex sells, as in the case of the *Twilight* series. Sex is a major subject for adolescent readers. Yet how is this relatively chaste but dramatically romantic version involving all kinds of absurd behaviors and the baddest of bad boys, a vampire, different from pulp fiction? What/who is left out of this series? Well-adjusted, happy, average, sane teenagers, to be sure. But what about a believable plot (even within the fantasy genre)? Beautiful or striking use of language? Complex ideas? Adolescent readers have the right to their own “guilty pleasures,” of course, as Gershowitz (2013) acknowledges. However, adolescent readers should understand that they are making choices. Students

should also understand the *business* of the media. The *Twilight* series is a money-making machine, as Gershowitz observes:

There are many, many of these volumes mooning all over the world in book form, not to mention e-iterations. Add to that the movie franchise plus the soundtrack and merchandise (action figures!). Mix in the tabloid coverage of on-again, off-again Kristen and Rob . . . sheer exposure adds to the series notoriety. (p. 84)

The number of YA books is growing because there is money to be made. Scholars, educators, and students need to ask themselves and one another how this

fact affects quality. Media literacy questions lead to bigger questions. Is the book literature or just mass entertainment? Is there a difference? What makes a book popular? What makes it important or lasting or part of the canon? Is the book better than or merely different from the film

version? What are the strengths and weaknesses of various storytelling media, from TV to epic poems to YA novels?

In addition, the key media literacy question about how other people might understand a text differently leads to deeper understanding and perhaps the ability to think outside of one’s own box. I am no fan of the *Twilight* series, and yet Robillard (2009) makes a thoughtful argument that these books are “certainly a departure from much of the other contemporary young adult literature. . . . Rather than extol the virtues of materialism, alcoholism, and tawdry, pervasive sex, *Twilight* is ultimately about sacrifice” (p. 17). Another reader may open one’s mind to other ideas, complicating one’s evaluation.

The question about sources of information and ideas can also aid a critical appraisal of YA literature. Some writers, such as Clare Vanderpool (*Moon over Manifest*, 2010), do extensive research for their novels, while other writers are not so careful. Historical accuracy deepens a work of fiction. Accuracy and reliability of information are also key in evaluating YA nonfiction. Are multiple, complex, and conflicting points of view acknowledged? Is technological content accurate? Do nonfiction works have reliable lists of

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**YA literature has grown up in the digital age, and approaching it as a kind of media is one way to increase critical thinking.**

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references? Media literacy expands the questions we ask of literature in the classroom. Hobbs (2011) defines digital or media literacy as including the following:

1. The uses of texts, tools, and technologies to access both information and entertainment [and persuasion].
2. The practice of message composition and creativity.
3. The ability to engage in reflection and ethical thinking. (p. 14)

Both more reflection about YA texts and thinking about ethics are important. Thoman's (1999) definition of media literacy declares it to be "the ability to create personal meaning from verbal and visual symbols we take in. . . . It's the ability to choose and select, the ability to challenge and question, the ability to be conscious about what's going on around us . . ." (p. 50). YA literature deserves such study.

It seems clear, then, that emphasizing critical thinking and media literacy with YA literature also has implications for those of us who teach YA lit. I can only speak for myself here. I need to do a better job of asking the difficult questions and encourag-

ing college students to do the same. When and how exactly should we include YA literature in high school English in our diverse communities? How should we involve parents? What about issues of violence or foul language? How can we argue that one book is better or more literary than another? Do some young adult novels normalize teen sexual activity or substance abuse? How does Hollywood treat YA literature? How do social media affect adolescent reading? Where can we find reliable information about authors and books, beyond Amazon? Many questions must be posed and openly discussed. Critical thinking demands that we examine the social and economic contexts of young adult literature, the marketing of YA literature, the

ways various literary theories may apply, the fans and fads, and the connections to and in other media.

Good literature comes in many forms and genres; so does rubbish. If we are sure that YA literature has come of age, offers good writing and thoughtful stories, is actually educational and does more than serve as therapeutic, then we need to stop coddling it. We need to encourage colleagues and students to read it critically. To study literature means finding it relevant and meaningful to me, yes, but challenging, too, stretching me to learn new things, to examine my own assumptions, and to value the literary arts in new ways. Criticism of various kinds of literacy, including media literacy, as well as unapologetic study of the controversies related to YA literature deserve to be strong in the field; how else can critical thinking find a place in schools? Less apologetics; more critique!

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## Troubling the Single Story:

### Teaching International Narrative through a Critical Literacy Lens

In 2009, Chimamanda Adichie delivered her popular TED Talk, “The Danger of a Single Story,” in which she both praised narrative as a means of exploring multiple worlds and cautioned against a reader’s tendency to view a single narrative as the definitive story of a particular people, culture, or country. As a former high school English teacher, Suzanne valued literature as a way to expose her mostly white, North American students to diverse cultures both within and beyond the United States. However, demands of the school system, testing, and the invisible pressures of preparation for the “next level” inadvertently led to a representational literature curriculum that bordered on tokenism: a Chinese American text here, an African literature unit there, a few weeks on the Harlem Renaissance. In an attempt to build intercultural awareness, Suzanne often used discussion questions that promoted a single-story mentality. For example, insert any particular text into this question template: “What do we learn about (country/culture) through (novel/story/poem)?”

At the elementary level, Jill, now more than a decade beyond elementary classroom teaching, well remembers the basal readers filled with abbreviated stories that were paced to fit into a “Minority of the Month” approach to multicultural education. In professional conversations with other teachers, both authors have found these to be common experiences; in well-meaning attempts to teach diverse literature, we risk presenting a series of single stories. Such pedagogy can generate stereotypes and, as Adichie says, “The problem with stereotypes is not that they

are untrue but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story.”

Now as teacher educators, we both want to instill in our preservice teachers a commitment to the transformative power of literature, but how do we do that while avoiding the pitfalls of tokenism? It is possible, we believe, to teach a single text about a particular country or ethnic group without letting that text become a single story. In this essay, we apply the Freirean (1970) notion of critical literacy to three recent young adult titles set amidst the prejudice, poverty, and war of three different countries to explore how a teacher might guide students to read both with and against the text (Damico, 2012). In other words, we value the awareness of cultures, politics, and history that each text provides, but we also understand the equal importance of applying questions of representation, voice, and power to the study of these novels. In the following discussion, we position the teacher as “problem-poser” (Shor, 1992), generating critical questions and leading discussions with students to learn about particular cultures while also resisting stereotypes and uncovering latent messages of Western superiority. We offer sample questions that aren’t necessarily to be used verbatim; rather, they describe a line of inquiry that teachers can adapt to their particular contexts.

The texts we examine are *In Darkness* by Nick Lake (2012), the 2013 Printz winner, which connects the story of Shorty, a Haitian gangster trapped beneath earthquake rubble, with Toussaint Louverture, leader of the Haitian slave rebellion; *Never Fall Down* by

Patricia McCormick (2012), a National Book Award finalist based on the true story of Arn Chorn Pond who lived through the Cambodian labor camps under the Khmer Rouge; and *My Name Is Parvana* (2012), the third in Deborah Ellis's acclaimed Breadwinner trilogy, which details the captivity of the teenaged Parvana by the US military in 21st-century Afghanistan and flashes back to her family's attempts to establish and sustain a school for girls. These three novels span developmental levels: McCormick's and Ellis's texts are appropriate for middle grades through early high school, and we recommend Lake's novel for upper high school. However, we treat them as a group in order to examine narrative patterns in international stories by Western writers and to provide a model for how a teacher can intervene in such texts to promote critical reading skills.

These texts invite readers to learn about the atrocities of war in regions of the world that might be unfamiliar, or that they have only heard about through news stories. The authors' depictions of these cultures are mediated by their own Westernized experiences, thus many Western youth will find the language and structure stylistically comfortable, accessible, and engaging. For this very reason, we find these texts both promising and troubling. Informed by their identities, the authors craft images of their protagonists that are "Othered" (Said, 1978), albeit unintentionally. While all literary characters are constructions of their authors to some degree, stories have colonial resonances when there is a stark power differential between the author and the subject. As such, these YA novels become a natural platform for students to critically explore Western appropriations of others' stories.

By applying a critical literacy framework to any one of these texts, student readers can develop greater intercultural understanding while resisting generalizations about that culture based on a single narrative. Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys's (2002) four-dimensional approach to critical literacy is helpful in developing a framework for this pedagogy. It comprises:

1. disrupting the commonplace,
2. interrogating multiple viewpoints,
3. focusing on sociopolitical issues, and
4. taking action and promoting social justice. (p. 382)

Books such as the three we attend to in this paper invite an initial, more obvious focus on the third dimen-

sion, sociopolitical issues: French-colonial powers in Haiti, the rise of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, and the history of the Taliban in Afghanistan. These are important pedagogical avenues to explore; however, allowing student learning to stop here misses critical exploration that is perhaps less obvious: the links between power and text production, the ways in which notions of the self and US identity might be troubled, and a reading of text that resists the comfort of "closure."

### **The Power of Story, the Story of Power**

Literature pedagogy easily unfolds around the story itself: students are asked to respond to, comprehend, analyze, and connect with aspects of plot, character, and setting. Critical literacy asks students and teachers to step back from the narrative and ask questions about a text's production. It implies an analysis and critique of the ways that language, power, sociocultural institutions, and texts transact (Shor, 1996; Dozier, Johnston, & Rogers, 2006). Or, as bell hooks (1994) concisely puts it, "Who speaks? Who listens? And why?" (p. 40).

Notably each of these three texts features a main character of color in a contested sociopolitical context, and each was written by a white Western author. Lake is a white British man; Ellis is a white Canadian woman; McCormick is a white woman from New York. While the author's nationality certainly does not discredit the text (each writer documents her/his research into and experience with the subject matter), it does raise questions about power and privilege in publishing. All three writers successfully raise awareness of international abuses and inequities through the stories they choose to tell; however, students might also engage the meta-textual question of how ethnicity, nationality, and class determine which stories are privileged and who gets to tell them.

This leads students to critical analyses of the textual decisions made by each writer. Textual critique "centers upon discerning included and omitted perspectives (e.g., whose voices are heard and not

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heard in a text) and identifying techniques authors use to position and influence readers (e.g., use of loaded words, emotional appeals, etc.)” (Damico, 2012, p. 13). For example, McCormick writes *Never Fall Down* in dialect using the voice of her main character, Arn, a native Khmer speaker, telling his story in English. McCormick, who spent two years interviewing Arn,

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**Linguistic analysis can bolster the discussion of a fundamental question: “Whose story is this? (How) can we ethically tell another’s story across differences of race, class, or gender?”**

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states in the author’s note that she wanted to capture his “own distinct and beautiful voice” (p. 216). In discussing authorial and narrative voice, teachers can ask, “Is this really Arn’s voice? What would change if McCormick wrote in Edited American English (EAE)? What judgments do we make about people based on how they speak?” Middle grade students might enter into this complex conversation by rewriting a passage in

EAE, reading both aloud and discussing their different reactions to the two.

To enrich the discussion, students might also employ close reading to note grammatical and syntactical inconsistencies. For example, McCormick creates Arn’s voice in part by eliminating the -s suffix to indicate plural nouns; however, at one point in the narrative, she writes, “A few *days* later, another big battle. Our *soldiers*, they run in every direction, scatter like rat” (p. 134, emphasis added). Other inconsistent linguistic features include the use of articles, inflection of third-person singular verbs, and use of prepositions. In addition to integrating grammar instruction with literary study, this linguistic analysis can bolster the discussion of a fundamental question: “Whose story is this? (How) can we ethically tell another’s story across differences of race, class, or gender?”

In reading Ellis’s *My Name Is Parvana*, students can also use close reading strategies to unpack questions of representation. One entry point into this discussion is the language used to describe Parvana’s treatment at the hands of the US military, particularly the physicality of the interactions as depicted in verbs. For example, when she is initially imprisoned,

Parvana is *led*, they *walk*, and she is *given a little nudge* into her cell (pp. 18–19). Even the harshest of her punishments, being forced to stand for hours on end, is linguistically softened: when she leans against the wall for support, the soldiers “*move* her away from the wall themselves” (p. 47). Subsequent discussion questions include, “What are the connotations of these verbs? Might an Afghani writer choose different language? What other perspectives of military prisoners are available? How do they differ from this particular representation?” Teachers can again invite younger readers into these cerebral questions through the hands-on exercise of acting out the language of the text: demonstrating what it looks like to lead someone, move someone, or give them “a little nudge.”

While in prison, Parvana references abusive photos she had seen from Abu Ghraib (p. 83), and if students are familiar with these images, they will note the stark contrast in Ellis’s representation of Western military prisons in the Middle East. While Abu Ghraib involves stories of humiliation, rape, and torture to the point of death, Parvana’s captors repeatedly attempt to balance interrogation with humane treatment and cultural respect. The challenge for students is to hold both these and other narratives simultaneously, to do the work of “interrogating multiple viewpoints” (Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002), and to acknowledge that “no one group is exclusively entitled to the privilege of representation” (Knoblauch & Brannon, 1993, p. 6).

Periodic addresses to the reader in Lake’s *In Darkness* lead to interesting discussions of the “audience invoked” (Ong, 1975; Ede & Lunsford, 2003) by the text. The few times that the narrator, Shorty, addresses the listener as “you,” it becomes clear that he/Lake assumes a privileged reader. For example, Shorty says, “You, maybe you live in a world where people don’t get shot. You think bullet holes in a person look like little circular holes, like red coins. They don’t” (p. 117). In describing his gang activity, Shorty says, “I was living in a place where it was common to eat mud. Don’t you judge me, motherf-----s” (p. 188). A subsequent discussion question asks why Shorty would assume the readers of his story live comfortable lives, free from the trouble of gang violence and poverty. What does this suggest about who has the privilege to read a novel, to consume violence and poverty vicariously but not experience it directly?

Perhaps student readers do indeed know what bullet holes look like, or have concocted desperate foods to quell hunger; perhaps not. However, in the dialectical exchange between reader and text, the reader is also constructed by the text, and this reality provides a way to trouble notions of the self through literature, a pedagogical move taken up in the next section.

## Troubling the Self

One temptation in teaching any of these texts is to build discussions primarily around the tragedies of “The Other” (Said, 1978), one that is constructed as distinctly different from oneself. In well-meaning attempts to understand the tragedies represented in these texts, it is possible that teachers reify notions of difference and Western superiority—“we” are the helpers and “they” are the helped. As teachers, we must be careful to disallow the tendency to characterize certain countries or ethnic groups only by their greatest tragedies and struggles.

A related danger of solely focusing on The Other as represented by the text is that for many Western students, notions of the self, particularly one’s national identity, remain untroubled. In exploring the pedagogy of remembrance, Simon, Rosenberg, and Eppert (2000) encourage movement beyond simply remembering past atrocities so that they are not repeated; instead, they promote a kind of learning in which the learners’ assumptions about identities are displaced and rethought. Remembrance, they claim, is not only a means for learning about the past, but asks us to confront *ourselves* as we are, “historically, existentially, ethically” in the present (p. 8). All three books provide such openings for reflexive questioning and critical discussion.

Interestingly, each text mentions the United States within the first pages of the narrative, emphasizing a strong international presence that is exercised for good or ill. This invites questions around international structures of power and privilege, whether through the discussion of Western literature mentioned in *My Name Is Parvana*, US rap in *In Darkness*, or former First Lady Rosalynn Carter in *Never Fall Down*. One striking claim of Adichie’s talk is that those with power circulate multiple narratives; they are not defined by a single story. The dissemination of Western politics and popular culture as depicted in each book

might lead to analysis of these types of questions: “Parvana reads a lot of Western literature; how much Middle Eastern literature do you read?” “What Haitian music artists do you listen to?” “With which Cambodian politicians are you familiar?” In other words, why is Western political and popular culture disseminated and consumed more widely than the culture of any of the three represented countries? What does this imply about power and privilege on a global scale?

Additionally, each novel elicits specific questions about the national myths of US justice, freedom, and benevolence.

Through the mystical connection between Toussaint Louverture and Shorty, Lake develops a strong link between the Haitian slavery of the past and the black poverty of the present. Is a reader in the United States willing to accept a similar connection between past oppressions and present-day inequities? Does such discussion uncover problems with pervasive meritocratic ideals? And how does each reader’s race, class, and gender influence the way they understand history?

In *Never Fall Down*, Arn’s initial reception in the US is far from welcoming. He experiences bullying in his new high school, including the racist epithet of “monkey” that is frequently tossed at him. This boy who has just lived through the decimation of his village, the brutality of labor camps, and the deaths of family and friends receives a welcome in his high school that challenges the romanticized emblem of the United States as a place of refuge for “[the] tired, [the] poor, [the] huddled masses yearning to breathe free” (Lazarus, 1883). In addition to troubling notions of US benevolence, teachers can direct students’ attention more locally toward themselves and their school to examine the question, “What kinds of difference do we tolerate? What kinds of difference do we marginalize? Would our school be a place of refuge for a new student like Arn?”

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**As teachers, we must be careful to disallow the tendency to characterize certain countries or ethnic groups only by their greatest tragedies and struggles.**

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Though *My Name Is Parvana* perhaps softens the treatment of military prisoners, it also blatantly challenges the US liberation narrative in 21st-century Afghanistan. Despite threats from the Taliban, Parvana and her family build and maintain The Leila Academy of Hope, a school for girls. After modest success and

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**In the teaching of these and other novels, we must allow the examination of suffering and inequities to continue despite the narrative's closure.**

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persistence through domestic threats, the school is bombed to rubble by the Western military, the most striking of several examples of Westerners bungling the culture and disrupting internal efforts toward progress. While students can clearly see the bombing of the school as a horrible error, this can also lead to questions of military intervention in general: "When should the United States military get involved in another country's internal conflicts? When justifying our involvement, to what degree do we trust our government's stated motivation? Whose interests are prioritized? When has the United States ignored international pleas for help?" This line of questioning is potentially enriched when grounded in a comparison of Ellis's fictional text to primary source material discussing US military operations in Afghanistan.

One final concern that bears mentioning relates to the plausibility of such teaching in schools with relative degrees of privilege. Knoblauch (cited in Knoblauch & Brannon, 1993) raises this very question with regard to his own students: "What do my students have to gain from a scrutiny of values and conditions that work to ensure their entitlement?" (p. 64). While a complete answer is not given, he offers this: "My students are self-interested, but they are not only that. They do seek The Good Life, but not at any cost. They cling to their myths, but they also learn and change" (p. 65). In other words, we do our students a disservice when we avoid difficult questions out of fear of potential resistance; we must be wary of constructing a "single story" of our own students.

### **Resisting Closure**

While all three books detail horrific circumstances, all three also have some semblance of a happy ending.

Shorty is pulled alive from the post-earthquake rubble; Parvana is saved from captivity just as she is about to be transferred to a potentially more brutal prison; Arn begins to build a new life in the United States. As teachers, we do want to foster in our students a sense of hope; however, Britzman (2000) cautions against allowing the happy ending of a survival story to cut short the reader's experience of mourning, conflict, and vulnerability. "The unfinished story is the story pedagogy must learn to tolerate" (p. 50), writes Britzman, and so in the teaching of these and other novels, we must allow the examination of suffering and inequities to continue despite the narrative's closure.

What might it look like to pedagogically resist closure? In part, it includes resisting the "single story" of triumph by taking the students beyond the studied text to uncover the real-world ways in which systemic injustices persist. For example, as the United States withdraws troops from Afghanistan, the teacher of *My Name of Parvana* can invite students to research the question, "What is the state of the country today? What has been the impact of Western militaries on citizens of the country? On the environment? On organizations labeled 'terrorist'?"

The teacher of *In Darkness* might ask her students to investigate the rebuilding efforts in Haiti that continue today. Specifically, students might note how different sources tell different stories about the progress of these efforts and the attempt to address poverty in the rebuilding. (Compare, for example, the United Nations Development Programme's optimistic online brief with a 2012 *New York Times* (Sontag) article announcing, "Rebuilding in Haiti Lags after Billions in Post-Quake Aid.") More generally, students might explore the ways in which natural disasters disproportionately affect the poor, using Hurricane Katrina and its effects on the Gulf Coast as a domestic example.

In extending the discussion of *Never Fall Down*, teachers might work with students to understand how genocide is woven into US historical narratives, at times reopening "closed" stories that position us as saviors. For example, how did US xenophobia and immigration policy further harm Jewish refugees during World War II? How do we continue to remember the genocide of indigenous tribes on US soil, particularly in students' home regions? How does fear-based storytelling about particular groups of people allow



well-meaning citizens, not unlike our students, to stand idly by in the midst of ethnic-based violence and prejudice? On a smaller scale, where is this happening around us?

In undertaking such lines of inquiry, students are encouraged to resist the temptation to “close the book” on tragedy and instead to engage as active participants against ongoing systemic inequities. As teachers, we can encourage our students to hold the hope of change and resilience alongside the realities of broken political, social, and economic systems.

Additionally, teachers and students can together explore other texts written from within the featured contexts, thus “interrogating multiple viewpoints” (Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002). The following list suggests shorter pieces that would pair well with these texts to emphasize a multiplicity of narrative perspectives:

- Excerpts from *Restrepo*, a documentary film by Sebastian Junger and Tim Hetherington, depict a US army platoon stationed in Afghanistan’s Korengal Valley. (The film should be screened and excerpted for contextual appropriateness.)
- “Landays: Poetry of Afghan Women” (Griswold, 2013), available online through The Poetry Foundation, features two-line folk poems about love, loss, sex, and war.
- Short stories from Edwidge Danticat’s *Krik? Krak!* (1995) explore the sociopolitical climate in Haiti from the perspective of women.
- The history of Haitian liberation is depicted by Walter Dean Myers (author) and Jacob Lawrence (illustrator) in the picturebook *Toussaint L’ouverture: The Fight for Haiti’s Freedom* (1996).
- Poetry in *Sacred Vows* (1998) by U Sam Oeur (author) and Ken McCullough (translator) not only gives additional windows into Cambodian history, geography, and culture, but also shows a different model of a Western English speaker collaborating with a Cambodian man to disseminate his story.
- Folktales and legends such as *Angkat: The Cambodian Cinderella* (authored by Jewell R. Coburn and illustrated by Eddie Flotte, [1998]) present a mythical Cambodia far removed from genocide and connect to Western readers through common folkloric motifs.

## Implications beyond the Stories

This way of approaching text goes beyond the pages of a book or the walls of the classroom. Recall that the fourth dimension of critical literacy named by Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys (2002) is not only a change in thinking, but involves action toward social justice.

Oftentimes this focus on action and the time it might take to achieve—as well as the time it might take away from other curricular goals—stymie this work. We think that it is possible, even preferable, to frame “action” in multiple ways. The action of critical literacy around the books considered here might mean engaging in a service learning/serve and learn project (Glickman & Thompson, 2009) such as letter writing, speech making, or spending time with and in communities of immigrants and refugees. Glickman and Thompson define service-learning as “an approach to and philosophy of teaching that encourages meaningful connections between school curriculum and community issues” (p. 10).

This approach fits neatly into a critical literacy frame, but it is not the only way to define action. As we learn from teacher Dana Frantz Bentley in Souto-Manning’s (2013) work, action doesn’t always have to look or feel like “big ‘take to the streets’ endeavors” (p. 71). It can include shifts in thinking that inform reading of both texts and culture well beyond one particular piece of literature. As Frantz Bentley observed when, after critical problem solving, students “enacted change in their own behaviors, words, actions, and interactions” (p. 71), the potential for “take to the streets” movement took root within them. When students and teachers are changed, when our thinking is transformed, when we can no longer approach humanity in the same way, action has indeed occurred.

We hope that teachers will explore these and other novels with a variety of settings, authors, and protagonists, as ways to encourage an ever-growing

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**As teachers, we can encourage our students to hold the hope of change and resilience alongside the realities of broken political, social, and economic systems.**

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ability to read both texts and the world critically, a transformation that opens the possibility for action. By positioning ourselves as thinkers and change agents, as question posers and resource providers, as co-inquirers and co-learners with our students, teachers can provide students with opportunities to learn multiple stories, to investigate their own histories and cultural assumptions, and to learn how to ask and answer questions that push ideas into action.

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# Building Bridges with Cultural Identity Literature

**W**hen headline news carries reports about racially motivated food fights at high schools where police have to be called in to subdue students with chemical spray (Winter, 2013), worry likely fills the minds of teachers across the country who strive to provide safe and secure environments for students. Some probably also wonder what more educators might do as bridge-builders or liaisons to allay such tension.

The Latin word for “bridge builder” is *pontifex*, a title originally used for a certain group of priests in ancient Rome who served as scholars, liaisons, and disciples or teachers. To make philosophy and theological principles more relevant to everyday life, the pontifex told parables or stories. Not only a tool for teaching, story is a means of connection. When we hear people’s stories, when we share intimate aspects of self and tribe and culture, when we accept new ways of knowing, we pierce the balloons of old thought to allow prejudice to dissipate. Until we hear such stories, it often doesn’t occur to us that others have a story of their own, that they are anything but the thieves or losers or infidels that we perceive them to be. Hearing another’s story has the potential to deflate our self-importance, making room for other perspectives. As a result of this potential, story serves as a pontifex.

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS; National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010) speak to such perspective building. Prior to their approval by the Montana Board of Education in May of 2011, Montana’s version of the CCSS were revised to reflect

the Montana State Constitution and Montana law (MCA 20-1-501). The inclusion of Indian Education for All (IEFA) in Montana’s version of the CCSS suggests that to be considered “educated” in Montana means, among other worthy tenets, to be knowledgeable of Native American tribes, cultures, and understandings connected to the area (Montana Office of Public Instruction, 2011). Montana students who are college and career ready in reading, writing, speaking, listening, and language reveal critical aptitudes:

Students are engaged and open-minded—but discerning—readers and listeners. They work diligently to understand precisely what an author or speaker is saying, but they also question an author’s or speaker’s assumptions and premises and assess the veracity of claims and the soundness of reasoning.

Students cite specific evidence when offering an oral or written interpretation of a text. They use relevant evidence when supporting their own points in writing and speaking, making their reasoning clear to the reader or listener, and they constructively evaluate others’ use of evidence (Montana Office of Public Instruction, p. 8).

Whether in Montana or in some other state, using cultural identity literature that targets the young adult reader can support both objectives while serving the critical role of bridge building. Besides highlighting these goals, this article recommends texts that lend themselves to such discussion.

## Cultural Identity Literature

According to a review of the research performed by Castagno and Brayboy (2008), culturally responsive

schooling builds a bridge between a child's home culture and the school. With their scholarship, Castagno and Brayboy build on the work of Moll, Amanti, Neff, and Gonzalez (1992), who shared the notion that when we incorporate cultural and linguistic identity in the classroom, we draw on students' "funds of knowledge"—those stores of information that all students bring to school. Castagno and Brayboy claim that such

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**Educators build this bridge, in part, by infusing the curriculum with rich connections to students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds.**

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a linking of home to school improves learning and achievement. They suggest that educators build this bridge, in part, by infusing the curriculum with rich connections to students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Cultural Identity Literature (CIL) is one vehicle for providing that connection. Teachers can best serve their students when they recognize

the specific home cultures of students who populate their classrooms and then choose books accordingly

I coined the term CIL to enlarge the traditional term *multicultural literature*, which many people use only to identify literature that is diverse in geography, race, or ethnicity. While there is no single definition of the term "multicultural literature" as it is applied to books for children and young adults, I prefer Gopalakrishnan's (2011) definition, which speaks to the purpose of multicultural literature: to validate "the sociocultural experiences of previously underrepresented groups, including those occurring because of differences in language, race, gender, class, ethnicity, identity, and sexual orientation" (p. 5).

Although social scientists don't agree on any one definition of culture, many of those who study culture (Gay, 2000; Gaitin, 2006; Banks, 2010; Erickson, 2010) identify determinants of culture similar to those named by Gopalakrishnan. When I select literature for potential course reading lists, I use the acronym CLEAR GREG to remind me of the nine common determinants of cultural identity. From the acronym, I can easily produce the list: Class, Language, Exceptionality, Age, Religion, Gender, Race (which refers to biological heritage), Ethnicity, and Geography. According to Gaitin, those nine factors determine our

way of thinking, feeling, believing, and behaving. As cultural markers, these factors shape one's identity, and a literature course can embrace greater diversity when it represents each aspect.

CIL can support unity by dispelling some of the myths and misperceptions about diverse cultures. As Anaïs Nin (n.d.) insightfully observed, "We don't see things as they are; we see them as we are." Based on past experiences, we think something should look a certain way, so we "see" it that way. Delpit (1995) also noted:

We do not really see through our eyes or hear through our ears, but through our beliefs. To put our beliefs on hold is to cease to exist as ourselves for a moment. . . . It means turning yourself inside out, giving up your own sense of who you are, and being willing to see yourself in the unflattering light of another's angry gaze. It is not easy, but it is the only way to learn what it might feel like to be someone else and the only way to start the dialogue. (pp. 46-47)

Nin and Delpit both observe how experience clouds our vision of reality, that what we see is filtered through cognitive bias. Every truth is refracted and discolored by the light of personal perception. Sir Francis Bacon called these *idols*—false images that defy scientific reasoning (Hall, n.d.). These obstructions include the human tendency to follow preconceived ideas about things, to harbor preferences, and to accept social conventions or the media as truth. Such tendencies lead to the type of blindness that Nin and Delpit describe. Although our impressions are real to us, we must remember that not everyone shares our reality; other realities exist.

Delpit proposes that classroom teachers lead the way in correcting our vision by offering diverse groups the opportunity to learn about each other. Such learning will involve confronting issues of power and privilege that dominate current social practices, asking questions about our world, seeing beyond stereotypes, and welcoming alternate ways of knowing and being. Preconceived notions about such subjects as gender, ability, and beauty affect not only how we react to others but also how we see them. With a "cultural lens" (Delpit, 1995), we aspire to sharpen or correct our vision, so that a photograph of a trailer home, a wrecked car in the backyard, and laundry hung on a line doesn't shout poverty and deprivation, but may instead speak of the pride a parent has after saving enough money to move out of a yardless apart-

ment into a trailer where an abandoned car provides a place for all the neighborhood children to gather and play out imaginative adventures. Through education and empathy building, we can cross the border into cultural understanding. A deeper, more complex understanding of culture should better prepare potential educators to teach in a multiethnic, multilingual, economically stratified society. Challenging our own biases and taking stock of our own values will provide opportunities to reflect on our own identity and possible privilege before we teach children from diverse backgrounds.

CIL provides an opportunity to view these issues from a different perspective, thereby inspiring empathy building. The power of such literature is in its ability to engage the reader and to break through barriers. After all, violence often traces back to fear, and knowledge provides an antidote to fear. If I can identify the sound in the dark, my insecurity generally dissipates. Well-crafted cultural identity stories can, for example, draw distinctions, reveal alternate perspectives, and flesh-out reality to such an extent that, by the story's end, we can see Western characters through non-Western eyes and decide if we like what we see.

CIL has potential to help youth of all ethnicities to understand their own culture and those of others. Young adult literature (YAL) is replete with titles that provide strong positive images to help young people prepare for inevitable encounters with negative ones. Adolescents often connect with CIL because they identify with the young adult characters who live lives parallel to their own and who struggle with similar conflicts and issues. The topics of these books are likely to reflect the diverse realities that young people face. One of those realities is difference.

Countless studies reveal the marginalization and harassment faced by students who are different, who do not fit mainstream definitions. This alienation may arise from varied families, distinct economic circumstances, diverse ethnicities, unfamiliar experiences, home settings, religions, and alternate lifestyles. Living on the social margins presents difficult challenges for youth. The alienation that some young people experience as a result of their differences can be ameliorated by books that communicate they are not alone in the world. Reflective of our increasingly diverse society, YAL's growing body of work represents dif-

ferent ethnic and cultural groups. Providing access to these texts potentially increases understanding of self and others because CIL can stretch our vision of ourselves and our world. A democratic English language arts curriculum attempts to reflect the experiences and history of all students, including those representing a range of ethnic and cultural identities.

Offering CIL is one way to address the issues of identity formation, reading motivation, and literacy development for today's youth. With studies of CIL, we ultimately promote and honor cultural identity.

When readers see themselves represented in stories, they realize that they matter, that their experiences count. According to Metzger, Box, and Blasingame (2013), "[I]mplementing curriculum of this kind is essential to establishing and maintaining equity in our society" (p. 58). Cultural relevance also plays a role in motivation to read. Because young adult literature has relevance, it communicates to readers in ways that the classics cannot. We foster literary literacy when we present students with engaging reading materials that reward meaningful analysis, demonstrate important connections with their lives, and legitimize their voices. Young adult books provide the opportunity to read, to write, and to argue about important issues in a modern context. We don't just want students to read novels; we want to expose them to multiple perspectives, to situations that encourage a critical stance so as to inspire wisdom that might lead to an improved way of living in the world.

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**When readers see themselves represented in stories, they realize that they matter, that their experiences count.**

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## Four Model Texts

### *The Shepherd's Granddaughter*

Authors like Anne Laurel Carter write about varied families, distinct economic circumstances, diverse ethnicities, experiences, home settings, regions, and lifestyles. In *The Shepherd's Granddaughter* (2008), readers meet Amani Raheem, a Palestinian girl who shares passions, ambitions, fears, values, and dilemmas familiar to most young adults. After developing an attachment to Amani's family and situation,

readers cheer when Seedo recognizes the world has changed and passes his shepherd's crook not to a son, but to a granddaughter. Along with Amani, readers mourn Seedo's death, and we grow angry at the Israeli land grab, at the settler's notion of God as a real estate agent, at the injustice endured as Palestinians lose

land they have worked for generations, as sheep are shot, and olive groves are bulldozed to ruin.

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**We also recognize the degree to which ethnicity is an important part of identity. Strong and loyal ethnic identity is necessary to maintain group solidarity, to provide a sense of belonging.**

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We also recognize the degree to which ethnicity is an important part of identity. Strong and loyal ethnic identity is necessary to maintain group solidarity, to provide a sense of belonging. Ethnic identity is the primary source of identification for Amani, who feels no need to identify herself differently and believes her "blood is mixed with the soil of the

land" (p. 150). In fact, she finds it emotionally difficult to sever her primary identity as a shepherd; as Seedo's granddaughter, she is carrying on a tradition in a place where the hum and thrum of olive presses lulls her to sleep and the smell of Sitti's shrak, a thin whole wheat bread baked over a domed griddle, reassures her that all is well in the world. Through her, we learn the history, culture, and contributions of Palestinian people. We hear the stories and legends about wolves and secret passages into the Firdoos; learn the names of foods like fellafel (the deep-fried balls of ground chickpeas) or mamool (the powdered sugar-dusted date and nut cookies); and discover the traditions that define the family, like eating and praying together, the wearing of kufiyyi (the traditional man's headscarf), or playing ghummayeh (hide-and-seek).

Readers further discover that people can change and that discriminatory ideas can be amended. For instance, Seedo initially sees Amani's mother—an outsider, a Christian woman—as an infidel, but he eventually realizes the depth of his son's love for her and, with time, he wipes anger from his heart—a lesson he passes on to Amani. She also finds good in a rabbi befriended by her father. This rabbi, Baba

befriends Jonathan, the Jewish son of an Israeli settler who sees defending the Holy Land with bulldozers and guns as contrary to the original Jewish vision of a safe homeland. Jonathan grasps how settlement and privilege for some is destroying the lives of others: "I can't stay in the settlement. Every day I think how your life must have been before. I imagine you grazing your sheep like that first day I saw you. No fences. No soldiers. No highways over your land. The settlement destroyed your life" (p. 204).

Amani comes to understand that conflict resolution requires cooperation and collaboration. Such alliances may form from unsuspecting sources, like a rabbi from Jerusalem, Christian peacemakers from the United States, and an Israeli lawyer from Tel Aviv. Stories such as Amani's help dispel stereotypes and magnify the harm in prejudice; they invite a non-militant stance to conflict. After reading, we realize that war isn't just headline news. Behind the CNN reports of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, real people are enduring terrible tragedies. With our own culture's special foods, traditions, and games, as well as our familiarity with loss, we also learn how similar humans are.

### ***Out of Nowhere***

Enniston, Maine, provides the backdrop for Maria Padian's novel *Out of Nowhere* (2013), which also explores the contemporary topic of cultural collisions. Padian's protagonist is high school senior and soccer team captain Tom Bouchard. Tom's quiet hometown becomes home to an influx of Somalian refugees who have survived a civil war and transatlantic migration only to face more conflict when certain townspeople exhibit less than hospitable reactions to their new neighbors. When the local soccer team—with the talent of its Somali team members—begins to win and threatens to take State, additional conflict ensues.

Padian's novel examines the truth that trouble and tragedy befall us all, although some people go out looking for them. At the coaxing of his partner in crime, Donnie Plourde, Tom agrees to vandalize the crosstown rival's spirit rock, a decision that gets him grounded along with 100 hours of community service at K Street Center. At the center, he learns the challenges, idiosyncrasies, and religious and cultural taboos of his Somali neighbors for whom he provides homework help. For Samira, Saeed, and Abdi, some

things are *haram* (forbidden); others are *halal* (acceptable).

Here, Tom also meets Myla, a Mumford College student dedicated to social justice. She exemplifies what Tom's dad calls "an angel in this world" (p. 254). Together, Tom and Myla provide a voice for those marginalized because of ignorance and fear. Tom realizes that "things get a little more complicated when you know somebody's story. . . . [I]t is hard to fear someone or be cruel to them, when you know their story" (p. 254). He also learns how well the truth stacks up against what people want to believe. Tom compares sparring with such people to boxing smoke: "I couldn't land a punch and I couldn't see clearly" (p. 320).

Through Tom, readers accept that life hurts and that it can be hard, but that unless we put aside our fury and have hope, life can't progress positively. After all, winning begins with attitude and with our choices. Inevitably life will throw curves that come out of nowhere, but these challenges are best met by adapting with grace, since raging only makes life harder.

### ***Of Beast and Beauty***

In her newest book, *Of Beast and Beauty* (2013), Stacey Jay has penned a fractured fairy tale that also functions as a cautionary one. Although the core of the story is based on the familiar *Beauty and the Beast* plot, Jay moves the conflicts beyond the traditional to warn contemporary society about the effects of intolerance and divisive philosophies and policies.

Somewhat satirical in her style, Jay creates a world in which the Dark Heart's magic has gained control via an ancient curse, and the only way to undo the curse is for one Smooth Skin and one Monstrous to build a relationship unfreighted by expectations and untempered by ulterior motives. If the two factions "can learn to love the other more than anything else—more than safety or prejudice, more than privilege or revenge, more even than their own selves—then the curse that division has brought upon our world will be broken and the planet made whole" (p. 4).

Privileged and protected but born with a taste for defiance, 17-year-old Isra Yuejihua of royal blood lives in the domed city of Yuan, but she is far from safe, since Yuan has its own monsters—among them

her father's most trusted advisor, Junjie, and perhaps her own father, who keeps her locked in a tower with only Needle as her companion. Isra also has other challenges, not the least of which is coping with her mother's death and a childhood accident that has left her blind since age four.

Brainwashed to believe that the Desert People are monsters and that she is an ugly mutation, Isra grows up caged and blind in many ways, thinking she is tainted and sullied, "the contemptible offspring of the king's mad second wife" (p. 73). When Gem, a Monstrous from the Desert, is taken captive while trying to steal roses from the royal garden, Isra begins to see beyond her parochialism and beyond the blinders created by those who supposedly love her, those who have taught her to see difference as something sad, strange, and frightful.

Pure of heart but plagued by dreams and able to communicate with the magical roses in the royal garden, Isra knows she's different and yearns to do something "truly extraordinary to lift [herself] above all [her] failings" (p. 73). In Gem, she finds a friend, a companion, and kindred spirit who himself suffers from mutations. Listening to Gem's legends, she discovers the beauty of another people who are far from monstrous. Having discovered the truth about difference and about true beauty, Isra decides to use her power to work against the cruel treatment of the banished, to thwart a world that judges outer mutation as a sign of a corrupt soul, of not being entirely human. When her father is killed, Isra is determined to be the kind of queen "who wants to make other people's lives better, who is willing to sacrifice for the people [she loves], who puts the good of the majority before the good of the few" (p. 211). With these aspirations, Isra serves as a pontifex.

Through Gem and Isra, Jay invites us all to examine our own ignorance: the darkness, the cages, the narrow worlds in which we sometimes live. Because of this book's fantasy slant, it speaks across cultures about this important message. The author also spends immense space in defining love. Although love can

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**Isra begins to see beyond her parochialism and beyond the blinders created by those who supposedly love her.**

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feel like home, it also represents everything strange and uncertain and unknown. It means being vulnerable and beholden and embracing pain. With her two protagonists, Jay challenges people to see without the blinders of ignorance, selfishness, and elitist attitudes and to love a little harder to avoid falling into darkness.

### *If I Ever Get Out of Here*

Besides winning a place on YALSA's 2014 list of Best Fiction for Young Adults and being an Honor Recipient of the American Indian Library Association's 2014 Youth Literature Award, Eric Gansworth's book is an honest look at culture, what it means to be marginalized, and how people with vastly different upbringings

and identities can clash. It also reveals music's power to tap knowledge, feeling, and insight as well as music's role in catharsis. Allusions to the Beatles abound in the book, with songs and riffs titling every chapter and with considerable history being shared about Paul McCartney's post-Beatles ventures.

With *If I Ever Get Out of Here* (2013), Gansworth has penned a story to rival that told about Arnold

Spirit by Sherman Alexie. That readers don't learn the name of Gansworth's protagonist until page 59 reinforces Lewis Blake's identity crisis and struggle to define himself. Set at the time of the country's bicentennial—a celebration that rubs salt in an old wound on the reservation—the story opens with Lewis submitting to the cutting of his braid, evidence since second grade of his Indianness. Lewis, who lives a complicated and lonely life, wants to be invisible when it suits him—to avoid the stares of store clerks and the whispers about wild or scary Indians from townspeople.

Hoping to pass as German, or even Italian, Lewis welcomes this change of identity, thinking that looking more like everyone else might increase his chances at friendship. As a "brainiac" who can speak his traditional Tuscarora language, Lewis has been tossed into junior high with 22 white strangers and struggles

to learn their social language and to fit in: "If I could find a good plastic surgeon . . . maybe I could ask for a few modifications, a pull here and there, some skin bleach and suddenly, I wouldn't be that kid from the reservation anymore. I would be like everyone else, a Dear Boy" (p. 31). Lewis does eventually find friendship with George Haddonfield, a "military base kid" who knows what it means to be on the outside. Despite their remarkable cultural differences, the two boys discover they have a lot in common, including their love for music and the Beatles.

But every time Lewis feels comfortable knowing he has blended in, he experiences the sensation of guilt, "like a garden slug working inside my belly, leaving its slime trail" (p. 49). In his identity struggle, Lewis connects with Paul McCartney. Just as McCartney fought for distinction with *Wings* and to escape the "Beatle Paul" label, Lewis wants to be Lewis Blake, not Indian Lewis: "I didn't have any objection to being known as an Indian, but couldn't I have my own life as just me? Or like McCartney, was I stuck being expected to play the songs of my first band for the rest of my life?" (p. 159). Lewis spends the better part of junior high struggling to navigate both the white world and the reservation, wondering whether he can have an identity in both. He doesn't want to choose one to hate and one to love.

Still, at school among white people, Lewis encounters indifferent teachers, isolation, and active violence from Evan Reiniger, a wiry-muscled, wildcat-eyed bully who is impervious to rules and robs Lewis of any safety or security at school. Unable to find an ally, Lewis quits going to school until he accepts that he needs to speak to Evan in his own language, the language of violence.

By the story's end, Lewis has learned lessons not only about identity and friendship, but also about poverty as a relative term. Armed with experiential learning and embracing his Uncle Albert's words—"Can't let your fears get the best of you, isn't it? . . . Gotta live the best way you can" (p. 272), Lewis's desire for escape dissipates.

## Discussing the Literature

As students engage dialogically to discuss this literature, teachers can encourage them to question an author's or speaker's assumptions and premises.

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**Gansworth's book is an honest look at culture, what it means to be marginalized, and how people with vastly different upbringings and identities can clash.**

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They can assess the veracity of the claims and the soundness of the reasoning, using life experience and additional research to confirm or refute the text. By citing specific evidence and supporting their points in writing and speaking, students experience the rigor, critical thinking, and communication skills prized by the new Common Core State Standards. While the CCSS specifically state a mandate for exploring multiple viewpoints, there is reasonable concern that they also minimize the importance of YAL. These books meet the critical components required by the CCSS while also appealing to adolescents.

Discussions might take place in a literature circle format. Literature Circles are temporary discussion groups whose members have chosen to read the same book or who have chosen to read different titles but on a similar topic, subject, or theme. The discussion engages members of a small group as equal and active partners in sharing ideas and constructing interpretations in the reading process. The main focus in Literature Circles is lively group interaction: debate, challenge, and give-and-take to build on shared ideas and interpretations. Some of the following prompts may invite dialogic exchange during Literature Circles:

1. In what ways does this text incorporate or reflect aspects of your own life? To what aspects do you especially relate or connect?
2. To what extent does this text help build an understanding of culturally diverse people?
3. How might the text express ironies or contradictions of popular beliefs regarding the people of this culture?
4. How does the text connect in theme and content with other works of literature?
5. How might this text conflict or compare with the stories mainstream writers often tell?
6. Comment on how this text represents the cultural, historical, or social diversity of the people it attempts to depict. Where does or doesn't the author "get it right"?

With such prompts, readers engage in lively discussion and scrutinize the nine identity elements and how they apply. While I prefer authentic discussion, where students lead with their own questions, concerns, and wonderings, a teacher might wish to explicitly employ the CLEAR GREG acronym to generate thought (see Fig. 1). Readers could also use

the acronym as a scaffold to explore their reading, considering the role Class, Language, Exceptionality, Age, Religion, Gender, Race, Ethnicity, and Geography play in a text.

All students will benefit if we take the time to learn about one another. CIL and dialogic exchange aren't panaceas, but as learning tools they do encourage cultural border crossing, seeing from multiple perspectives, challenging dominant modes of knowing, and producing knowledge from facts. With such bridge building, we hope to mitigate human cruelty and the tendency to hate, reject, or ignore what one

<p><b>C</b> = What conditions account for the class differences in the life lived by Lewis and that lived by George? How do their identities compare or contrast with your own socioeconomic status?</p> <p><b>L</b> = How does Lewis's knowing his native language, Tuscarora, both complicate and enhance his life? Uncle Albert's speaking patterns capture some of the local flavor of language on the Tuscarora Reservation: "Can't let your fears get the best of you, isn't it?" (p. 272) What idioms are culturally relevant to you?</p> <p><b>E</b> = The book discusses issues related to Lewis's being a brainiac and being in an advanced class. How does this label both privilege and/or hinder his life? How do labels like this or exceptionalities function in society?</p> <p><b>A</b> = Mostly this is a book about adolescents, but it also gives glimpses into the life lived by Uncle Albert and other adults. How does Lewis's age contribute to or account for some of his challenges in life? What role does Uncle Albert play in Lewis's life?</p> <p><b>R</b> = Consider the role music plays in the novel. In what ways, if any, is music tied to ritual and/or ceremony? How does music affect or influence Lewis's mind, body, and spirit? How might music foster cultural awareness or enhance one's heritage?</p> <p><b>G</b> = How does gender identity contribute to the novel? What gender boundaries, if any, are placed on Lewis and on George? If gender is a social construct, what gender definitions exist in the novel?</p> <p><b>R</b> = What motivates Lewis's desire for "skin bleach"? Why might skin color privilege or challenge a person?</p> <p><b>E</b> = What happens when Lewis tries to make friends at his new school with the teasing ways he used at his reservation school? Explain the conflict Lewis has about cutting his braid. How does George's being German play a role in the story?</p> <p><b>G</b> = Why might celebrating the United States Bicentennial not be a priority on the reservation? Based on the novel's portrayal, what does it mean to live on the Tuscarora Reservation? On an Air Force Base? What role does place play in shaping these two young men? How has place shaped your identity?</p>
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**Figure 1.** Using the acronym CLEAR GREG with *If I Ever Get Out of Here* (Gansworth, 2013)

doesn't know or has not yet tried to understand. Because some things are invisible until they happen to us, we may be blind to ignorance and hate as diseases until we are victims or until a story opens our eyes.

About education, Robert Frost said: "Education is the ability to listen to almost anything without losing your temper or your self-confidence." As young people engage in open-minded discussion, the goal is to achieve this level of education, to understand that difference isn't a defect and that there are many ways of thinking, feeling, believing, and behaving. With CIL, we begin to develop a culturally responsive mindset, a mindset that embraces alternate perspectives, is open to new ways of knowing, and recognizes the value of looking beyond the self. Culturally responsive schooling recognizes, respects, and uses students' identities and backgrounds as meaningful sources for creating optimal learning environments.

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## Critical Discussions:

Using Satrapi's *Persepolis* with High School Language Arts Students

Literature has the power to engage adolescent readers in other worlds, identities, and cultures. Quality and complex literature can be a base to ask critical questions, challenge social norms, and be part of genuine dialogue. This research study stems from an interest in graphic novels as quality and complex texts and their ability to encourage discussion around complicated topics. As multimodal, yet strongly visual narratives, graphic novels have the ability to tell stories and reach readers in ways different from other media. For educators seeking to engage deeply in critical discussions that challenge social norms and hegemonic discourse around cultural and gender identities, graphic novels such as *Persepolis* (Satrapi, 2003) can serve as a resource.

We entered into this study asking: *In a high school language arts classroom, how does reading and studying the graphic novel Persepolis contribute to readers' views of gender?* Working with ten diverse high school students in a small reading group, we observed discussions of *Persepolis*. These students came to this unit with varying reading levels, interests, and abilities. Further, it was an ethnically diverse group, with one particular student (Dee; student names are pseudonyms) who identified as American and Palestinian. She related to the text not ethnically, but as a Muslim female. These diverse perspectives directly affected how students read and discussed the text.

We selected the text *Persepolis* for a number of reasons. First, it stands on its own and is regarded by many as a piece of quality literature for classroom use (Connors, 2007; Harris, 2007; Schwarz, 2007; Versaci,

2008; White, 2010). Also, the content of *Persepolis* involves themes around gender roles and gender performance complicated by cultural expectations. We wondered if this graphic novel would allow for critical discussions not only because of its complex content, but also its graphic novel form. We found that drawing on this kind of critical, multimodal text shaped an environment conducive to critical dialogue, extending possibilities for addressing and altering negative discourses.

### Review of Literature

Scholarship has recognized a wide variety of adolescent literature that helps explore ideas of identity through critical discussion. Here we explore research around graphic novels specifically, as well as theory and practice regarding the use of literature to inform discussions of identities and as tools for critical discussions.

#### The Graphic Novel

The use of multimodal texts such as graphic novels to engage students in critical discussions is a topic that has gone unexamined until recently. The graphic novel is a medium of literature that is gaining legitimacy and value in an academic setting (Carter, 2007; Frey & Fisher, 2008; McCloud, 1993). Chute (2008, 2010) notes her interest in graphic narratives because of what they do differently. Focusing on Satrapi's *Persepolis*, she writes, "[W]hile its content is keenly feminist . . . we may understand the text as modeling

a feminist methodology *in its form*, in the complex visual dimension of its author's narrating herself on the page as a multiple subject" (2008, p. 94). The text's form provides a space for the reader *and* the author to witness to Satrapi's history; Satrapi is literally making what has been hidden visible (Chute, 2008).

The graphic novel medium, because of its form, also creates opportunities for reading and discussion that are unique from other media. Along with reading images and words, this medium is arranged in panels and gutters, providing physical and intellectual space to make meaning and connections with the narrative (McCloud, 1993). Scholarship also argues that the dynamic and complex nature of these kinds of texts brings welcomed challenges to

readers, as well as provides a supportive reading experience to struggling readers (Carter, 2007, Connors, 2013). Connors's empirical work with graphic novels (including *Persepolis*) and adolescent readers suggests reading these multimodal texts requires a "wealth of resources" to decode, analyze, and make meaning—skills that are often underestimated (2013, p. 48). His participants relied on both visual and textual content clues to talk about the texts. As Connors and others (McCloud, 1993) have suggested, we have found that reading graphic novels is not a passive process but one that is active and complex. Navigating textual and visual modes contributes to this process. Bringing graphic novels into an academic setting promises opportunities for meaning making and encourages dynamic discourse.

### **Literature as a Way to Explore Cultural and Gender Identities**

Literature has the potential to engage readers in identities—both their own and others. This research is informed by Sims Bishop's (1990) theories of literature as both windows and mirrors for adolescent readers, allowing them to see a world other than their own in a text, while still making personal connections to it. Using texts with characters that are not reflective of the

dominant sociocultural audience also affords minority readers experiences that can become "means of self-affirmation" (Sims Bishop, para. 1). It also makes space for non-minority students to learn and experience different ways of being.

Gender is often explored in scholarship related to adolescent literature and readers. Using literature in a classroom is a significant way for teachers and researchers to explore gender issues (Ma'ayan, 2012; Orellana, 1995; Rice, 2002). Our research is also informed by Connell (2009), who argues that gender is not a "fixed dichotomy" (p. 10), but rather is socially constructed and continuously changing and evolving. Further, individuals can challenge or trouble the binary categories of gender through their own performance (Butler, 2006). Texts like *Persepolis* challenge gender norms (Chute, 2008, 2010; White, 2010), thus demonstrating that literature can be a resource that both encourages discussions around gender stereotypes and binaries and offers examples of how gender can be performed differently.

### **Critical Discussions**

By starting critical conversations in the classroom early (Deprez, 2010), commonly held stereotypes have the potential to be addressed and altered. Critical literacy contributes to this analysis with its emphasis on interrogating oppression. Morrell (2008) writes, "Critical literacy... is necessary not only for the critical navigation of hegemonic discourse; it is also essential to the redefining of the self and the transformation of oppressive social structures and relations of production" (p. 5). Critical literacy and subsequent dialogue also allows readers to dissect how a text can "work to create transformation in the world" (Ma'ayan, p. 18, 2012). This dialogue can provide opportunities for students and teachers to personally connect with the literature and each other, and can ultimately serve as a starting point for "new way[s] of thinking" (Deprez, 2010, p. 481).

### ***Persepolis* as a critical text**

Graphic novels, apart from the value of multimodal resources in the classroom (Kress, 2003), provide unique and engaging reading experiences (Dallacqua, 2012a, 2012b) that can bolster critical dialogue (Lamen, Jewett, Jennings, Wilson, & Souto-Manning, 2012) that stems from critical literacy. The graphic

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## **Bringing graphic novels into an academic setting promises opportunities for meaning making and encourages dynamic discourse.**

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novel *Persepolis* is a critical text that lends itself to critical dialogue around gender and culture in high school language arts classrooms (Connors, 2007, 2013; Harris, 2007; Schwarz, 2007; Versaci, 2008). Connors (2007), in particular, used cultural criticism and the graphic novel *Persepolis* to create ways for students to deal with tension around cultural differences and make strong connections in similarities that seemed buried. *Persepolis* is also an exemplar text for “offer[ing] opportunities to teach critical literacy through ‘positioning and repositioning (placing the reader in an unfamiliar position in order to consider the larger world)’” (Fisher & Frey as quoted in White, 2010, para. 4).

The graphic novel medium also has the ability to engage readers in a way that makes it possible to approach political issues with empathy and set aside previously held biases (Juneau & Sucharov, 2010; White, 2010). “Because Satrapi’s story represents voices not often heard from the Middle East or Iran, both in terms of her gender and progressive politics, this graphic novel is particularly important to teach” as it addresses common stereotypes and single stories regarding Iran and what it means to be Muslim (White, 2010, para. 6). Therefore, we argue, like Connors and others (Chun, 2009; Juneau & Sucharov, 2010; White, 2010) that graphic novels such as *Persepolis* are critical texts that can be used as tools to approach critical discussions.

## The Research Study

### Research Methods

This qualitative research study was grounded in teacher action research methodology (Hubbard & Power, 2003). Classroom time for data collection consisted of four literature discussions, which were part of an English 11 class’s regular curriculum. (See Table 1 for a list of Common Core State Standards [National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010] this unit addresses.) We followed one small group of 9th-, 10th-, and 11th-grade students (10 participants) who were representative of the diversity of the class and the student body as a whole. Working with such a small group of students is one limitation of this study. Further, this was a group of enthusiastic students within an accelerated program. While this context is not represen-

tative of a traditional public school environment, we still believe this study serves as a valuable resource.

Overall, English 11 worked to develop themes regarding facets of identity such as race, religion, gender, and culture. Before in-class discussions, students independently read an assigned section of *Persepolis* and wrote open-ended, Socratic seminar questions regarding race, gender, and identity that could be used during the discussion. Students were explicitly directed to consider these particular themes when writing their questions (see assignment prompt in Figure 1 and a selection of student-written questions in Figure 2). These questions were compiled and distributed to the group during the discussion. The students discussed each quarter of the book over a four-day period, spread between two weeks. These discussions were videotaped and observed by the researchers; however, neither researcher participated in the conversations. After the group discussions, researchers analyzed the video footage. Each student participant was then interviewed (also videotaped) to question their engagement with the text and interaction in discussions further.

### Participants

This study takes place in a Midwestern public STEM school that is filled by a lottery each year. The students who attend come from urban, suburban, and rural districts as well as varying socioeconomic statuses, so the resulting student body is very diverse. All participants were enrolled in English 11 during the spring quarter of 2013. Ashley Dallacqua was not associated with this school, but with a local university. Dorothy Sutton was the English 11 teacher. It was stressed to the students and their parents that there would be no positive or negative consequences for participating in this study. The student participants for this project were identified based on consistent class participation (especially in a previous discussion of gender in Sophocles’ *Antigone*), documented in field notes by both researchers. We especially noted instances when students discussed their opinions in conversation with other group members. We did not select students based on perceived level of interest in reading or ability. Parent consent and student assent were obtained for all ten students. (See Table 2 for participant information.)

**Table 1.** Common Core State Standards addressed in this lesson

<b>CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.1:</b> Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.
<b>CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.2:</b> Determine two or more themes or central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to produce a complex account; provide an objective summary of the text.
<b>CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.3:</b> Analyze the impact of the author’s choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story or drama (e.g., where a story is set, how the action is ordered, how the characters are introduced and developed).
<b>CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.5:</b> Analyze how an author’s choices concerning how to structure specific parts of a text (e.g., the choice of where to begin or end a story, the choice to provide a comedic or tragic resolution) contribute to its overall structure and meaning as well as its aesthetic impact.
<b>CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.11-12.1:</b> Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.
<b>CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.11-12.2:</b> Determine two or more central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to provide a complex analysis; provide an objective summary of the text.
<b>CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.11-12.3:</b> Analyze a complex set of ideas or sequence of events and explain how specific individuals, ideas, or events interact and develop over the course of the text.
<b>CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.11-12.6:</b> Determine an author’s point of view or purpose in a text in which the rhetoric is particularly effective, analyzing how style and content contribute to the power, persuasiveness, or beauty of the text.
<b>CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.11-12.7:</b> Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in different media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively) as well as in words in order to address a question or solve a problem.
<b>CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.1:</b> Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 11–12 topics, texts, and issues, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
<b>CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.3:</b> Evaluate a speaker’s point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric, assessing the stance, premises, links among ideas, word choice, points of emphasis, and tone used.

While reading *Persepolis*, consider the roles of gender, race, ethnicity, religion, as well as other important facets of identity. For each volume of the text, prepare 4 Socratic seminar discussion questions—2 for each half. There are two volumes in *The Complete Persepolis*, so students need to prepare a total of 8 questions for the entire text:

- 2 discussion questions for pages 1–71 (“the veil” through “the sheep”)
- 2 discussion questions for pages 72–153 (“the trip” through “the dowry”)
- 2 discussion questions for pages 155–232 (“the soup” through “the croissant”)
- 2 discussion questions for pages 233–241 (“the veil” through “the end”)

**Sample Socratic seminar question for *Persepolis*:**

*On page 6, Satrapi claims she wants to be a prophet and compares herself with other prophets. She says, “I am the last prophet,” and five male prophets respond, “A woman?” What does this say about a woman’s experience with religion in Persepolis?*

When writing your questions, include a page number, some background information, and a question that can be discussed. Two questions are due on TaskStream by midnight. Type or paste your questions into the text field on TaskStream; do not attach a document.

**Figure 1.** Assignment prompt

After reading how she [Satrapi] and those around her reacted when the veil was introduced (pp. 3–5), how do you think you would have felt? Would it have been as much a joke to you as it was to the little girls playing on p. 3? Or would u have faught it and stood up for the right to have to wear a veil like the women on p. 5?

On page 74, when her mother was called horrible names while waiting at the side of the road, what does this say about womens position in society?

On page 79, The Trip Marjane states “I wanted to fight.” She stated this because Arabia declared war on Iran. This statement made by Marjane made me think, if the community was so sexist, what would they think of a women being a soldier?

On page 270, Skiing Marjanes friend states, “So whats the difference between you and a whore?” This I stated after they asked Marjane if she has done the sex act, and then Marjane has said she has. But her friends act surprised and angered. This made me wonder, if Marjanes friends did not want that kind of answer, why did they ask?

What do you think about a girl being a prophet?

On page 39, Satrapi’s mother slaps her and Mehri (the maid) across the face. How would this be perceived here in the United States during modern times?

**Figure 2.** A selection of student-written questions (slightly edited for readability)

**Table 2.** Participants

Participants (Psuedonyms)	Gender	Grade	Ethnicity
Cory	Male	10	White
Charlie	Male	9	American Asian
Dee	Female	10	American Palestinian
Emily	Female	9	White
Jess	Female	9	American Vietnamese
Lane	Female	9	American Vietnamese
Max	Male	9	White
Morathi	Male	9	American Somali
Samantha	Female	9	White
Sara	Female	9	White

### Analysis

We have several major sources of data for analysis: students’ Socratic seminar questions (which served as a baseline for students’ reaction and engagement with *Persepolis*), the videos of participants’ book discussions, videos of one-on-one student interviews, and our own research journals, making it possible to triangulate our data. Following the four in-class literature discussions, we began analyzing the video footage. As

we viewed the footage from each discussion individually, we drafted multiple analytic memos, recording all major themes and potential interview questions that could be directed to each participant. Next, we began indexing in order to determine the frequency of these themes, narrowing our data considerably by focusing on those that served as a vehicle for discussing gender. We created tables for each discussion that organized these themes and when they occurred during discussion, then began transcribing talk around these themes.

Our transcriptions and analytic memos served as the foundation for interview questions drafted for each individual participant. Together, the researchers interviewed each participant for one hour. We followed the script of our outlined questions, but also allowed for organic, tangential discussion when the opportunity arose. After individual interviews, we referred back to our field notes, beginning to distinguish emerging themes across our data sources. We recognized that students viewed the graphic novel form as significant to their reading and meaning making. We also noted how this text acted as a window and/or a mirror (Sims Bishop, 1990) for our students to examine issues of gender. We member-checked these broad themes with all ten participants. We also checked more specific findings with Dee individually because she experienced the book as both an American and as a Muslim Palestinian, making her a larger focus in our findings. All participants confirmed these emerging themes.

Following this member check, we entered into our next phase of analysis. Keeping our themes in mind, we began watching and rewatching the individual participant interviews. We made note of instances when participants took up the emerging themes of our study and transcribed those instances, leading us to form more specific conceptual categories (Hubbard & Power, 2003). The resulting categories we examine here are the value of the graphic novel form and how it fostered exploration in identity and oppressive discourses.

## Findings

The initial purpose of our critical discussions with *Persepolis* was to create a window through which

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**These discussions provided opportunities for students to explore their own identities as well as the identities of characters in the text and peers within the discussion.**

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students could engage with a world outside their day-to-day to explore gender issues. In many cases, that is exactly what happened. The graphic novel medium, because of its vivid images that combined with text content, contributed to students' understandings, discussions, and interpretations of the text. Students often responded to this window by comparing what was on either side of it, resulting at times in

an "us" versus "them" discussion. These discussions provided opportunities for students to explore their own identities as well as the identities of characters in the text and peers within the discussion. However, this identity talk also led to victimizing the central character of the story and those like her. Negative and potentially oppressive views held by the students surfaced and were troubled in individual interviews.

### The Value of the Graphic Novel Form

Data revealed that the graphic novel medium made a difference to the readers and their experiences with this text. While this autobiography is dense with historical references and tragic events, the participants agreed that the visual nature of the text made it more approachable as they were introduced to the story,

easier to read throughout, and ultimately more enjoyable. In writing a visual autobiography, the author is in a unique position to present her world as she wishes and in an in-depth way. During her interview, Dee shared, "I feel like you're actually seeing how the author wants you to see it to be, and not just like *your* image. But sometimes it's good to have your image. But if it's real-life situation . . . I think it's better to have it like this." Dee noted the value of experiencing an event that is autobiographical in the form the author intends, creating a reading experience that is both individual and communal (Gardner, 2012).

Several readers also noted that the more simplistic illustrations and lack of color (Chute, 2008) allowed them to handle the tragedy in the central character's life. One student noted that the events in Satrapi's life are complicated and complex, the opposite of the black-and-white depiction. The irony and symbolism in the lack of color in this text (Chute, 2008) was not lost on these readers. Instead, it allowed many of the readers to approach a new world, while still having space for interpretation.

As is typical in graphic novel formats, there are gaps or gutters that remain as empty space in between images, further contributing to the ways in which readers are part of the story (McCloud, 1993). In this space, student-participants needed to do work, to make connections, and interpret everything that was happening within this multimodal story. Using the medium of film as a point of comparison, Sara explains that while watching a movie, "you're being told exactly what's happening. In *this* way [through a graphic novel medium], it still gives you a little bit more interpretation." She acknowledged what is required of her as a reader as well as the freedom of interpretation that comes with it. We argue that this narrative, in this format, gave readers opportunities to enter into a new and different space where they could question and learn. Moreover, the simplistic artistic style made it possible for the readers to approach more tragic or complicated events, such as deadly bombings or drug abuse, in a way that did not destabilize them to the point where they were unable to engage with or analyze the text in a critical way.

As the students analyzed and discussed the text, both in groups and in interviews, they drew on the multiple modes the narrative offered. Readers used both words and images as they formed opinions,



supported those opinions, and made meaning around complex themes. We noticed that images played a role in discussions around gender and culture especially. Hair, make-up, and clothing were all visually prominent in the text and frequent topics throughout discussions. One student, Max, noted the small detail of characters' hair showing and how that influenced his interpretation of them, and further, his interpretation of cultural expectations placed on them. He discussed his surprise that certain minor characters would be so against Marjane using a contraceptive, drawing on images to support his thoughts: "It's surprising, 'cause like, even some of them now, in this picture, like almost all of them are showing their hair. (Max turns the book around to show the researchers what he is seeing.) So it's even more surprising then, 'cause they're being, they're going against the rules there, too." While the printed textual content does not refer to the women's hair coverage, Max has read both the text and image carefully, using it to support his claims that these characters are complex and, at times, contrary.

The printed text itself became a visual resource as well, as the author used font and exclamation points in a pivotal scene. Late in *Persepolis*, Marjane is running to catch a bus, and a man yells at her to stop running because she is making an "obscene movement" (Satrapi, 2003, p. 301). Max expressed that he was able to contextualize the people around this more intimate scene (although they are not shown on the page) due to the facial expressions, text font, and exclamation points that are used. Max described this scene as

. . . almost a power play because they're showing her, not her, but they are also showing the people around her [who are not visible in the image]. 'Cause I'm guessing they're not talking in a whisper, cause there are exclamation marks . . . In my opinion, anyways, it's a power play to show the others that are around them to not rile up . . . to be cautious.

Max critically read the text, images, and font, equating volume with power to control Marjane and others not pictured. Here both the visual text, along with images seen and unseen, were taken up by the readers as they made sense of the rules and restrictions placed on females and the hegemony that exists in the text. Further, Max actively engaged with the text, filling in the gutters and acknowledging images and motivations that were only alluded to visually, but never

physically drawn. By "assign[ing] feeling and motives to characters not otherwise stated in the text," readers "engage[d] in the sort of gap filling that Iser (1978) argues is characteristic of aesthetic reading" (Connors, 2013, pp. 40–41). Here, Max's analysis is in direct opposition to assumptions about reading graphic novels requiring less work or imagination.

*Persepolis's* form created a window for all readers to access, question, and discuss complex and unfamiliar topics. The multimodal literacies provided by the text encouraged readers to read actively and deeply in order to make meaning across panels. It also offered space for personal interpretation and connection. We argue that the graphic novel multimodal form used here to tell a complex and challenging story, both academically and thematically, supported the critical analysis that happened. This analysis led to critical discussions and valuable connections. Without both the content *and form* of this graphic novel, opportunities to address generalizations around women's physical beings (as discussed above) or subjects such as personal identity and gender hegemony around the veil (which will be discussed in the next sections) would not have come to fruition in the same rich and complex way.

### Identity

This unit provided students opportunities to explore the identities of the characters as well as their own, all of which are deeply rooted in definitions of culture and gender. Many students verbalized that they did not closely identify with the characters in *Persepolis*. Instead, they compared and contrasted the primary settings in the text, Iran and Austria, to their more familiar world in America. When asked to expand upon their dichotomizing these cultures, many students stated that they have little experience outside the US, and the comparison allowed them to place themselves within the text and within a different culture.

With a couple of exceptions, students seemed to view the world within this text as a window (Sims

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**The visual text, along with images seen and unseen, were taken up by the readers as they made sense of the rules and restrictions placed on females.**

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Bishop, 1990). Participants continuously situated their reading within American cultural norms. One of the aims of this work is to begin to trouble the binary between “us” and “them,” and *Persepolis*, we argue, allows for that kind of work. However, fully disrupting such engrained dichotomies takes time and, in our case, further intervention during individual inter-

views. Several discussions were enough to start this kind of talk, but were by no means the end. *Persepolis* did, however, engage students with another culture and illustrate their own lives as part of a larger human experience (Sims Bishop, 1990).

Dee, however, has dual citizenship in Palestine and America, so she contextualized the culture in *Persepolis* differently than most of the other students. In

her individual interview, Dee stated that comparisons cannot be drawn between America and a third-world country. Dee shared stories with us about her family’s experience with education and employment in Palestine and America, using *Persepolis* as the entry-point for discussion. While she chose not to share this in the whole-group discussion, she was able to find pieces of her own identity in the text, which she expressed to us in her interview.

Along with sharing personal anecdotes, Dee also discussed her role within the context of the group discussion. At one point she said:

I was the only one who was a Muslim girl in that room. I feel like I could make some connections to help make them understand a little more. I feel like I was, like, a connection person, I don’t know . . . . If they had, like, some doubt or thought or question as to why they [characters] did this and they weren’t really understanding it [the book], I felt like because I understand the situation so well . . . that I can just sort of help make connections.

Dee verbalized that while she had a lot of pertinent information to share, she did not want the discussion to be about her. It was clear that Dee saw a specific role for herself in the discussion.

I felt comfortable doing it because somebody has to do it. . . . I felt it was my role to do that . . . I don’t know if any

of them have traveled to a third-world country, because I’ve been to a third-world country before, because I wear a veil, because I’m a Muslim, because I’m the only Muslim girl there. I felt like I was there to sort of bring it back in a way and just, like, keep making connections . . . helping the students there understand it’s not the way the book portrays it. Because they [Satrapi] really portrayed it—all of that—it was portrayed in a negative way. Like, women were portrayed in a very negative way in the book, except for Marjane. But I felt like it was my duty to . . . shed some light on it.

Dee sought to trouble the narrow “negative way” women are viewed as a population in *Persepolis*, views and assumptions that carry into how she is seen and treated as a Muslim female. While Dee acknowledges her comfort level with being the “other” in this discussion, this positioning can be problematic, furthering the dichotomizing of American and other cultures. Still, Dee points out her ability to maintain power during discussions, choosing specific questions to pose to the group and holding back and/or offering personal information when she saw fit. During a group discussion about identity, Dee proclaimed,

Me, personally, I wouldn’t hide who I am. I’m very—I guess—I’m very proud of who I am and, like, I show it. When people ask me what my nationality is, I tell them, like, I won’t hesitate, and they’re like, “Oh, but you were born in America,” and I may have been born here but, like, my heart is in my home country.

While there are instances of Dee being othered in these discussions, she was proud to perform herself as a powerful female, Muslim, and Middle Easterner, regardless of the risk involved in doing this in a public space. *Persepolis* provided opportunities for Dee and the group to explore many *others* that get performed, troubling the expected identities (Butler, 2006). It also allowed Dee to see herself mirrored in a text and provided opportunities for her to be prideful of her identity within the group. This influenced group members and drew positive and negative opinions from participants, which we explore in the next section. Ultimately, this text provided opportunities for discussion that could draw attention to valuing and helping “change our attitudes toward difference” (Sims Bishop, 1990).

### Oppressive Discourses

The data revealed places where *Persepolis* was also a vehicle to discuss oppression in male-dominated societies. During group discussions, language regard-

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## She was proud to perform herself as a powerful female, Muslim, and Middle Easterner, regardless of the risk involved in doing this in a public space.

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ing the veil as oppressive or restrictive surfaced. Many students believed that because Marjane was forced to wear the veil, she became a victim of her government. Dee acknowledged during her interview that “their government overdid it, like, beyond overdid it, because if that was me, that would make me hate the veil if I had to be forced to wear it. ’Cause, like, right now—’cause it’s a choice, it’s not something, you know, you are forced to do.” Although the students recognized the force of the veil in this narrative, they struggled to differentiate norms in *Persepolis* and norms in their contemporary space. This led students to make broad assumptions, as some began to apply the victimization of veil-wearing Muslim women upon their classmates. During one class discussion, Samantha said, “[W]omen were seen as such . . . I don’t want to use the word tools, but like people that could be walked on, I guess, that they had to be worn—they had to wear veils to hide . . . to hide part of who they are . . . which I think is kind of sad because . . . as she grows up and figures out that you don’t want to hide who you are because that’s just dishonest.” Samantha explicitly described the veil as hiding identity, rather than a part of it, though her Muslim classmate, Dee, sat near her, voluntarily wearing a veil. When this was questioned in individual interviews, Dee explained, “Honestly, if I took it off, I wouldn’t feel complete [touches scarf continually]. It sort of separates me from the rest of the people, but I don’t think it hides my personality at all.”

While these views were expressed to the whole group on a smaller scale, neither Dee nor the other group members took up the topic of pridefully wearing a veil. This counternarrative of empowered Muslim women is often sidelined. In a similar way, Dee’s own counternarrative was quickly passed over for a new topic. Later in her interview, Dee also noted being “victimized” because of her clothing by other students in her school. However, Dee’s identity as both American and Palestinian allowed her to make the distinction between force and choice, especially within the context of discussing *Persepolis*. It is discussions like the ones that transpired during individual interviews that need to work their way into the whole-class setting in order to problematize single stories and cultural assumptions, such as the ones we were able to address about Muslim women as victims.

By discussing this text in a Socratic seminar

format, students were given power to lead the discussion, and these oppressive ideas were given space and consideration. While not being didactic, complicated and oppressive ideas were expressed and taken up. However, the participants did not always go far enough, resulting in undisrupted dichotomies and negative conceptions. We argue that this kind of critical discussion needs to be extended, troubled, and taken up more frequently in order to help shape students into global citizens.

## Implications and Conclusion

This research illustrates that both the text’s content and multiple modes contribute to its ability to encourage critical discussions around gender and cultural identity. Images combined with text afforded resources for readers to take up issues, ask questions, and make meaning. In an environment open for discussion, *Persepolis* also drew out attitudes around gender and culture that were both positive and negative. These topics can and, we argue, need to be addressed and troubled in a classroom or educational environment. Educators who are considering using a graphic novel to promote critical dialogue will benefit from including *Persepolis* due to its historical context and diverse topics. Many students stated that they would not have picked up an autobiographical novel set in the Islamic Revolution in Iran, but that the format of the graphic novel made this narrative accessible. Other texts that could fuel this kind of work include *Maus* (Spiegelman, 1997), *Fun Home* (Bechdel, 2006), and *Stitches* (Small, 2009). Each explores difficult topics, and the resulting classroom discussion would be fruitful.

Providing space for these critical discussions and complex texts brings to the surface topics of oppression and marginalization that can be combated, creating safer and more equitable spaces for adolescent readers. It is important that teachers emphasize parameters that will make students feel safe and comfortable enough to share in discussion. We referenced StudyGuide.org for a list of the “rules for Socratic seminar” (Socratic seminar student guidelines, n.d.). An abbreviated version of this resource can be found in Figure 3. We found that students were willing to take up difficult topics such as gender and cultural issues while still (even if unintentionally) maintaining

normative and hegemonic perspectives. While we had the opportunity to trouble these perspectives in individual interviews, the classroom teacher may consider entering the discussion in order to push these conversations further. Alternatively, the class may benefit from follow-up whole-class discussions addressing negativity. Bringing difficult topics into conversation is not enough. To fully challenge negative discourses and divisive conceptions of the world, educational contexts must continuously challenge and question these issues as they arise.

The structure of this study also implicates the importance of time and space for students to approach literature they can personally connect to, along with opportunities to speak out and share. Setting aside time to discuss this text with their peers and teachers allowed students to unpack complicated concepts that had been outlined in their baseline discussion questions. And while not all students would feel comfortable, this was something these students, especially Dee, took pride in. However, it also calls into question why Dee felt it was her “duty” to take on a particular role in discussion. This potentially problematic weight requires us, as researchers and educators, to reexamine school and classroom structures that could be marginalizing to Dee or other students. In order to prepare adolescents to be global citizens, single-story assumptions, such as the veil or other clothing being seen as “victimizing,” requires analysis through multiple perspectives and voices. Experiences like the

ones within this study develop abilities and attitudes that are inquisitive, working with and against social norms. When offered on a regular basis, though, reading and discussing texts like *Persepolis* can influence adolescents to be citizens who work toward unity that celebrates differences.

### Acknowledgments

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#### Guidelines for Participants in a Socratic Seminar

1. Refer to the text when needed during the discussion. A seminar is not a test of memory. You are not "learning a subject"; your goal is to understand the ideas, issues, and values reflected in the text.
2. It's OK to "pass" when asked to contribute.
3. Do not participate if you are not prepared. Be honest with yourself and your classmates.
4. Do not stay confused; ask for clarification.
5. Stick to the point currently under discussion; make notes about ideas you want to come back to.
6. Don't raise hands; take turns speaking.
7. Listen carefully.
8. Speak up so that all can hear you.
9. Talk to each other, not just to the leader or teacher.
10. Discuss ideas rather than each other's opinions.
11. You are responsible for the seminar, even if you don't know it or admit it.

**Figure 3:** Guidelines for Socratic seminar (adapted from StudyGuide.org)

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## Connie Swartz Zitlow Awarded the 2014 Hipple Award



Connie Swartz Zitlow is the recipient of the ALAN 2014 Ted Hipple Award. The award is named in honor of its first Executive Secretary and is given for meritorious service to the organization. Connie, a former ALAN president and longstanding ALAN member, has served on and chaired numerous committees for the organization, including the committee that formed the Presidents' Advisory Council (PAC). She has authored dozens of articles and multiple books on young adult literature and is co-recipient of the first Nilsen-Donelson Award for the best article in a volume year for *The ALAN Review*. She is also a recipient of an ALAN Foundations Grant. Connie is Professor Emeritus at Ohio Wesleyan University where she taught young adult literature and served as Director of Adolescence to its Young Adult and Multi-Age Licensure Programs.

For more information about the Hipple Award and for a list of past winners, please go to <http://www.alan-ya.org>.

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## ALAN Workshop

The highlight of each year is the annual ALAN Workshop. At this gathering, you'll meet with colleagues from across the country, receive copies of some of the best and most popular young adult titles, and get to hear from a host of young adult authors. The workshop is held each year in conjunction with the NCTE Annual Convention.

The 2014 ALAN Workshop will revolve around the theme "Is the Sky the Limit? Using Teen Literature to Forge Connections in a World with Disappearing Boundaries" and will be held in National Harbor, MD (outside of Washington, DC) from November 24-25. This workshop will, as always, be a celebration of great young adult authors and books, and the teachers and librarians who help get those books into young readers' hands.

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# Graphic Novels, Adolescence, “Making Spaces,” and Teacher Prep in a Graduate YAL Course

**P**olitical and intellectual forces are exerting pressures that may challenge the ecology—the space, place, and landscape—of Young Adult Literature (YAL) in English language arts teacher education curricula and in K–12 classrooms. A call for the January 2015 issue of *English Journal*, for example, asks stakeholders to consider what the authors call the “youth lens,” one that can “sit alongside feminist, queer, Marxist, and postcolonial approaches” and “views adolescence as a construct and calls attention to and critiques representations of youth” (NCTE, 2014). The call suggests a narrow contemporary view of adolescence that may guide future constructs of adolescence and YAL courses:

[W]e have yet to sufficiently examine how we view adolescence and how these views affect how we teach English. Typical ways of thinking about adolescence come from biological and psychological understandings (e.g., raging hormones, identity crisis). These lenses prevail in our thinking, representing the adolescent as a moody, self-centered, peer-oriented being that is different from adults in distinct ways. These deficit orientations position youth passively, present their life circumstances as demeaning, and fail to account for seeing this category, like others, as a social construct.

How, then, will challenging our notions of adolescence influence our construction of YAL and its courses? What are the ramifications for accepting “deficit orientations,” if the call is accurate in its claim?

## Forces at Play or Forces at Bay?

In “‘We Brought It upon Ourselves’: University-Based Teacher Education and the Emergence of Boot-Camp-Style Routes to Teacher Certification,” Friedrich (2014) also takes issue with education’s over-reliance on psychology-based notions of learning and development, seeing it as a reason why education programs are undermined by alternative routes to teacher certification. The “psy-field” lens has led to detrimental decisions driving methods, content, and curricula, “colonizing” teacher education, and “serving as the privileged lens through which content and learners are being led” (p. 5).

Rather than view child and adolescent psychology as representing absolutes, Friedrich suggests teacher educators observe the “psy-field” as one of many lenses needing examination, historicization, and contextualization within methods *and* content, which, Friedrich argues, are too often separated in current teacher education programs. YAL courses, often but not always housed in English departments, have been under scrutiny since they’ve existed, from without and within: Should they be literature courses and focus only through literary lenses? Should they be methods courses or hybrids? Friedrich’s concerns could offer support for blended approaches to YAL curricula, not to mention *graduate-level* YAL courses. The field has long been discussing ways to develop and offer such courses with appropriate curricular fit and rigor.

Furthermore, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS; National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010), with their oft-confusing and contradictory statements on exemplars, new ratios for fiction–non-fiction, and new definitions of *American literature*, *world literature*, and *informational texts*, may affect drastically the choices teacher educators make in YAL

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**If secondary teachers are forced into constricting curricula that represents a re-reification of the canon, what role will YAL play in students’ development in school spaces?**

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courses as they scramble to meet state-mandated edicts while keeping true to their own expertise. How many are changing their syllabi in response, making room for nonfiction or replacing salient YA texts with those favored by the politically powerful proponents of CCSS? Indeed, even our professional journals’ editors feel compelled to address the CCSS and the tensions they create for YAL (keep reading

this issue of *TAR* and see Fall 2013’s nonfiction focus, for example). In addition, if secondary teachers are forced into constricting curricula that represents a re-reification of the canon, what role will YAL play in students’ development in school spaces, and how might that affect the perceived need for YAL courses in ELA teacher preparation programs?

**Ecology, Erudition, and Experience in “Literature for Youth”**

In autumn of 2012, I spearheaded the initial offering of a graduate-level YAL course in which I and my students presciently (read “unwittingly”) addressed issues of curricula and purpose mentioned by Friedrich and, eventually, in the aforementioned *English Journal* call. We crafted a possible blueprint for a graduate-level YAL course and overtly challenged the underlying assumptions about textual complexity, quality, and learning inherent in the misguided CCSS. Herein I offer details about the course and how my students and I explicitly examined the need for YAL that blends literary and social science lenses in the ecology of teacher education and K–12 settings.

**About the Course**

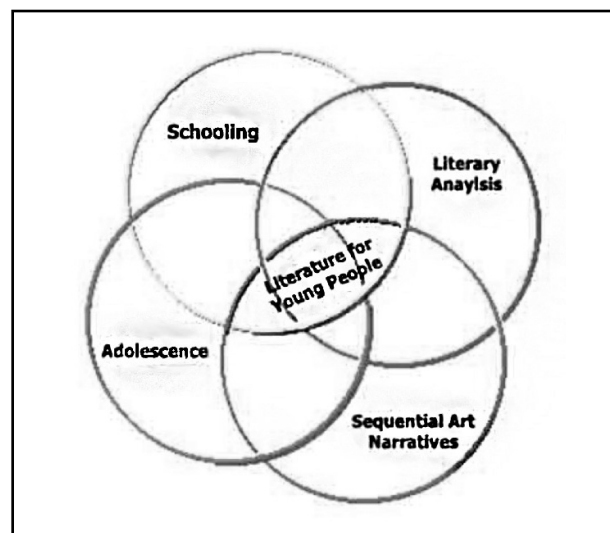
English 5340 “Literature for Youth” is a graduate-level course for students in the University of Texas at El Paso English Department’s recently revived MAT degree. The course serves both experienced K–12 ELA teachers seeking an advanced credential and many recently graduated students with no teaching experience beyond student teaching. My syllabus’s description of the course reveals its goals, very much reminiscent of those in the *EJ* call and Friedrich’s article:

This course will mine the intersections of adolescence, secondary education, and literary analysis through the intense study of and reflection on works of scholarly merit in the domains of the humanities and the social sciences and will provide literary texts through which various lenses, critical approaches, and concepts from that literature may be applied or explored. This section of the course focuses on the graphic novel as primary literary text.

The Venn diagram in Figure 1, sitting atop the syllabus, attempted to visualize for students how our various components would intersect.

In her “Strengthen the Profession” chapter of *Reign of Error*, Diane Ravitch (2013) argues that while in teacher education programs, students should:

... engage in a year of study of such subjects as cognitive science, literacy, child development and adolescent psychology, the sociology of the family and the community, cultural diversity, the needs of students with disabilities, the



**Figure 1.** A visual representation of the curricula for “Literature for Youth”



nature of testing, and the history, politics, and economics of education. (p. 275)

Here Ravitch does not run counter to Friedrich, who calls for the “psy-focus” to be considered *a* lens, not *the* lens. As English 5340 developed, my students illustrated for me that college-level Young Adult Literature courses, depending on how they are framed, are potential spaces, possible ecologies, where future teachers examine many of these subjects. That every YAL text we read was a comic or graphic novel, while not the focus of this essay, suggests that format and genre are still important concerns when developing YAL courses, but they needn’t be the primary ones. (Nobis [2013] recently wrote, “I don’t understand why we still so often have to debate the merits of graphic novels” [p. 31], and I have abandoned the apologetic stance that demands a constant recapitulation of defining them then defending them. That work has been done and is readily available. A good place to start would be this essay’s bibliography.) Below, I discuss inspirations, goals, and resources from the course and share student responses supporting my claim.

### Curricular Inspirations and Integrations

In planning the course, I drew upon my scholarly influences regarding young adult literature, namely Donelson and Nilsen, whose *Literature for Today’s Young Adults* (2005; see also Nilsen, Blasingame, Nilsen, & Donelson, 2012) has been a staple in how I situate students’ earliest framings of YAL, especially in terms of how to define and analyze such texts for quality and how to view them through allegorical lenses. I am also influenced by Kaywell (1997, 2000, 2010) and others (Lesesne, 2010; Herz & Gallo, 2005) who promote a complementary approach to integrating YAL into secondary classrooms. I find such an approach gels nicely with my aim of asking teachers to organize their instruction thematically or around big questions (Smagorinsky, 2008; Stern, 1995).

My own work informed my decision to integrate comics as the main texts, as I have found (as did Lapp, Wolsey, Fisher, & Frey, 2011/2012) that many educators aren’t using comics and may be unaware of the medium’s potential, despite available scholarship (Bakis, 2012; Bitz, 2009, 2010; Carter, 2007a, 2007b, 2012; Jacobs, 2007b; Monnin, 2009, 2013; Seglem, Witte, & Beemer, 2012; Schwarz, 2002). By asking students to read texts that qualified as YAL

and comics, I hoped to enhance their knowledge of both. Through exploring the comics’ young characters as exemplars of adolescent experiences in life and especially in school, I hoped to tap into the power of multiple-case sampling in order to, as Miles and Huberman (1994) suggest it should, “add confidence” to our findings as texts and conversations multiplied. As students moved across our seven general themes (see below), they were able to note nuances, but also to triangulate (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2008) similarities between textbook case studies, various adolescents’ actual and fictional experiences, and scholars’ opinions on facilitating successful schooling experiences for young people.

The second edition of Michael Sadowski’s edited collection *Adolescents at School* (2010)<sup>1</sup> braided together the strands and provided further critical framing and research. Sadowski often mentions Erikson’s theories of adolescent development (1968), and so too did our work in using young adult graphica to study “aspects of identity that can have profound effects on adolescents’ learning and school lives: race, ethnicity, immigrant status, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, social class, ability and disability, and spirituality” (p. 5). Indeed, beyond the initial frames provided by Donelson and Nilsen, the concepts of developmental moratorium and foreclosure (see Sadowski, p. 15) were among the first and most common through which students viewed characters. Both Sadowski and Donelson and Nilsen assert that the guiding question of young adults and young adult literature is “Who am I?” (Sadowski, p. 13). Donelson and Nilsen add Patty Campbell’s line, “And what am I going to do about it?” (p. 3).

Furthermore, while all texts are multimodal (Kress in Cope & Kalantzis, 2000, p. 187), I contend that comics are more multimodal than most (Groensteen, 2007, 2013; Jacobs, 2007a, 2013; Wolfe & Kleijwegt, 2012). I set a goal for these students to consider expanded visions of adolescents, schooling, and textuality to engage in what the New London Group calls “transformative practice” when they return to their classrooms. I wanted my students to be more

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**While all texts are multimodal, I contend that comics are more multimodal than most.**

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**I set a goal for these students to consider expanded visions of adolescents, schooling, and textuality to engage in what the New London Group calls “transformative practice” when they return to their classrooms.**

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informed regarding what it means to be an adolescent in contemporary American schooling; to note what tensions teenagers experience as they navigate and construct identities and differences and influence and are influenced in social spheres; to acknowledge comics’ ability to facilitate

literary, interpersonal, and intrapersonal connections within the classroom; and to consider how, as teachers, they might open, create, or facilitate spaces for students once they apply their new knowledge.

To meet those objectives, we studied chapters from the Sadowski text, along with other articles from education scholars and literary-based comics scholars, as well as roughly 25 graphic novels through six overlapping, reciprocal, and reflexive “identity themes”: Youth and the Middle East; Racial

Identity and Immigration; “Latinidad” and Chicano/a Identity; Gender; Sexuality and Faith; and “Disability.” Students furthered their individual interests by crafting a 30-source bibliography and 20-page research paper themed “Adolescence and [A Topic of Their Choosing].” In addition, we each posted several weekly entries devoted to our readings to a DelphiForum message board. We shared thousands of words over 982 messages. The forum became a prime learning space for us, and students were quick to relate that just as I and our authors were asking them to consider opening up spaces for adolescents who might not see themselves reflected or accepted in literature or in their school settings, I had “practiced what I preached” by creating a (multimodal) online space for open, frank discussion and sharing.

The class was comprised of 26 students—7 males and 19 females. The class was diverse, including individuals who identified as Black, White, Hispanic, Native American, and Asian American. Several identified as “mixed” at times, but as one race or ethnicity at others. They also identified as either straight or gay.

Twelve identified as having previous or current teaching experience.

After initial introductions to the course, basic “best of the best” tenets and themes of YAL, an overview of the Sadowski text, and a crash course in the scholarship on comics and literacy, students were asked to share what made them excited and anxious.<sup>1</sup> Many noted the course’s focus on graphic novels:

**Adri:** When I found out that the class was going to cover graphic novels, I was excited. I spent many years reading manga and comic books, and I knew graphic novels could be useful in a classroom setting, but I wasn’t too familiar with them. I’m hoping to see and better understand the effect that graphic novels can have on society, particularly our young ones, who cringe at a book with thousands of words, but who instantly become interested when there are pictures involved.

**Maria-Rebecca:** The first day of class really helped tie all sorts of loose ends that the syllabus had left. I am very interested in learning more about how young adult literature in combination with adult guidance can aid adolescents in developing an identity. I was surprised to learn that the coming of age theme was essential to young adult literature. I very much enjoy reading classic novels that treat the *bildungsroman* theme and am fond of using this type of reading as core or supplemental texts in lesson planning. I am most interested in exploring the graphic novel as a medium and learning how to incorporate them into my future classroom.

**Nadia:** I am concerned about the number of graphic novels that we have to read since I have never read one before and I am not sure what to look for and analyze in them. I believe once we start posting our ideas and responding to each other, all my worries will be put to rest.

**Brenda:** Like Nadia, I’ve only read one graphic novel (*Maus* [Spiegelman, 1986]), so I’m very excited about reading the variety of novels we have for this class. I like the idea of a Literature for Youth class actually using the books that young adults read. I am also looking forward to researching my topic and learning something new.

**Rebecca:** I am extremely excited about working with and reading all the graphic novels this semester because they are a medium which I have not had too much experience using as a teaching tool.

**Ashleigh:** I am most excited about the variety of graphic novels we will be reading, particularly the variety of races and experiences the texts will expose to us to as readers. Experiencing a life different than your own through text is one of the best qualities of literature, and I believe it is even more enhanced in the graphic novel art form. Beyond the reader-text experience, the novels will help me to better understand the diverse populations of students I will teach.

**Joshua:** I'm very interested in engaging in a new literary medium. This is my first opportunity to study the graphic novel in a classroom setting and I'm pretty excited to doing so. As an English and American Literature undergraduate, I spent my entire college career reading novels from the "canon of classic literature." I have very little personal experience in reading graphic novels, having only read *Maus* and a graphic novel interpretation of *Moby Dick*.

This data suggest that, early on, the class allowed several students to consider the graphic novel as school-worthy text for the first time. Especially, they appear intrigued at the "novelty" of comics in the classroom. A common rejoinder was for students to discuss anecdotes of interest or even confusion from peers or family regarding why "comic books" were appropriate space for graduate students, much less teens. Consider Ana's commentary from our first identity unit, "Youth and the Middle East":

I have to say that I was very moved and impressed by *Zahra's Paradise*. Moved, because it truly was "heartbreaking" as the review on the cover states, and impressed because of the symbolism and amount of analyzing that is involved in reading this graphic novel. There really is this sort of idea that because graphic novels have pictures, they are not very deep or should not be given that much value as literature, and I would say that *Zahra's Paradise* [Amir & Khalil, 2011] proves otherwise. I have to share this quick personal incident that happened to me this weekend. I decided to take the book to my choir practice for church because during the practice our director focuses on other voice parts

at times and so instead of just sitting there waiting during these times, I wanted to do some reading. I got into the book so much that I did not notice that I was supposed to be singing. Next thing I know, the director stops everyone and addresses me. "Ana," she says, laughing, "it's time to sing; let's put the cartoon book down, please!" Of course, I felt extremely humiliated, but this also showed me how just because my book had "pictures," it suddenly became a children's or "cartoon" book in my choir director's eyes.

Such responses ebbed from the message boards as students read more graphic novels, suggesting the very sensible possibility that if more teachers read more graphic novels, they might be more willing to open up space for them in their classrooms.

Our second identity theme was "Racial Identity & Immigration." Given the diversity of the participants and the fact that the course took place less than a mile from the US/Mexican border (border identity dynamics are often at play in my students' classes), it is worthy of special attention. Brandon makes clear connections between several of the graphic novels, including *Anya's Ghost* (Bros-gol, 2011) and *American Born Chinese* (Yang, 2006), in this unit and issues from the Sadowski:

Chapter three of the Sadowski book discusses some of the major themes of immigrants in American schooling. . . . One of the major themes of the chapter is, "[I]mmigrant children face the unique challenges of learning a new culture and negotiating different cultural contexts and expectations" (Suarez-Orozco, Qin, & Amthor, 2010, p. 53). We see this as a huge issue in both *Anya's Ghost* and *American Born Chinese*, where both Anya and Jin attempt to fit in, culturally and socially, with your typical American high school student: "A unique challenge faced by many immigrant youth is the need to live in different, often conflicting worlds that come with very different expectations. They are consistently exposed to two sets of norms—those of the country of origin and those of the receiving society" (p. 54).

Anya, Jin, and Danny all face this idea of conflicting worlds throughout the graphic novels. Anya has put in her time adjusting to the American way of life and still

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**A common rejoinder was for students to discuss anecdotes of interest or even confusion from peers or family regarding why "comic books" were appropriate space for graduate students, much less teens.**

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feels the separation of her American lifestyle from the Russian lifestyle she lives with at home. She initially denies friendship with Dima because of these ideals of separation between her American and Russian characteristics. Jin attempts to deny friendship with Wei-Chen because of these same ideals related to the work he has put into becoming American. Danny faces this

split in worlds as he battles his feelings against his cousin, Chin-Kee. Danny is the “true” American high school teenager, but is constantly reminded of his past by the annual haunting of his exuberant cousin.

The Sadowski chapter says, “For immigrant youth, how they negotiate different and often conflicting expectations plays an important role in their adaptation and development, both during adolescence and beyond,” and this is seen throughout both graphic novels as

each teenager attempts to create a personal identity (Suarez-Orozco, Qin, & Amthor, 2010, p. 55). The majority of the characters in these two graphic novels seem to be partaking in what the authors call “Relational engagement,” which is “the extent to which students feel connected to their teachers, peers, and others at school” (p. 62). “Social relations provide a variety of protective functions—a sense of belonging, emotional support, tangible assistance and information, guidance, role modeling, and positive feedback” (p. 62). The relationships that each of the characters build reflect what they are trying to create themselves into. Jin wants to become American in order to date Amelia; Anya wants to become American until she realizes the horror that Emily reveals to her; Danny wants to dismiss his Asian heritage because of the way Chin-Kee represents himself. All of the characters are interrelated, and most form some sort of relationship in order to produce their own identity.

Lisa, one of our veteran teachers (a literacy specialist) who became a role model for many peers in

the course, makes practical applications:

“There’s no place like home.” Yes, Dorothy, there is no place like home, and for many of our students, home is another place that is not in America. So, when immigrant students find themselves at school, how can educators help them transition from the school of their country to the school in the place they now call home? In “Adolescents from Immigrant Families” [the third section of the Sadowski text], relationships and adaptation in school are the focus of this study as it examines how immigrant students navigate and adapt to the social worlds of school and how their adaptation may lead to diverse educational outcomes (Suarez-Orozco, Qin, & Amthor, 2010, p. 52). As educators recognize that students’ lives outside the school influence their social and academic engagement in the classroom, teachers must find a way to bridge the gap between immigrant and native students’ experiences with stereotypes.

One way to close the gap is for teachers to provide opportunities for immigrant students to learn to adapt to cultural changes while providing classroom situations in which native students learn about the different cultures and customs that their new classmates bring from home. These ideas call for graphic novels such as *American Born Chinese* and *The Arrival* [Tan, 2006]—the first one because it speaks to the stereotypes that many immigrant students face while at school, and the second one because it depicts the plight of the immigrant en route to a “better life.”

The exposure of all the experiences shared in the narratives of these graphic novels supports the profound shifts that newcomer immigrant youth undergo as they struggle with who they are and the changing circumstances they are negotiating in relationships with their parents and peers (Suarez-Orozco, Qin, & Amthor, 2010, p. 63). Addressing stereotypes in this manner would provide all students with an opportunity to experience an immigrant’s challenges, fears, and hopes while fostering an environment of understanding and acceptance in the classroom for all.

Therefore, as Lee reminds us in “Model Minorities and Perpetual Foreigners”:

“[S]chools currently play an active role in perpetuating stereotypes; they also contain the seeds of potential change. Schools can make curricular changes that disrupt and challenge these stereotypes” (Lee, p. 82). The first step in this challenge is the teacher’s willingness to be aware of her students’ backgrounds and, thus, to make instructional decisions that include multicultural literature that mirrors the ethnic diversity in her classroom. Yes, there is no place like home . . . welcome to room 222 where your home has a place of honor. Please come in.

Bernie, another experienced educator, responds:

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**As educators recognize that students’ lives outside the school influence their social and academic engagement in the classroom, teachers must find a way to bridge the gap between immigrant and native students’ experiences with stereotypes.**

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I love this line that you wrote in your post:

“The first step in this challenge is the teacher’s willingness to be aware of her students’ backgrounds and, thus, to make instructional decisions to include multicultural literature that mirrors the ethnic diversity in her classroom. Yes, there is no place like home . . . welcome to room 222 where your home has a place of honor. Please come in.”

This line reminded me of a student I had about three years ago. He was a Korean boy named Jae, but he insisted on spelling it as Jay. I guess he wanted to Americanize his name because he said Jae was too difficult for teachers to remember how to spell. I never gave in to that spelling of his name. I remember one time, I was asking about his schooling back in Korea. I was curious as to how it was different from American schooling. He explained to me how students were studious and parents were very strict about their children achieving success in school. But then he said something like, “But that was in the past. I don’t want to talk about it because it’s embarrassing.” I stopped him right there and told him he should never be embarrassed about where he came from. He was Korean and that was part of him, his identity. I told him to be proud of everything that led him to be what he was.

Jae had lived in Mexico before coming to El Paso, and he was fluent in Spanish. He had also learned English while in Mexico because he had attended an American school over there. He was in my AP English I class and had the highest grade, not because he was the smartest, but because he was the hardest working student I had ever known. If he didn’t understand something, he would ask 100 questions until he did understand. He would come before and after school and even during lunch to get help if he needed it. This was not just with me, but with all his teachers. Even though he came to M.H.S. three weeks late, he kept up with the current work *and* made up the three weeks he missed before the end of the quarter.

My point here is that even though I saw evidence of Jae trying to “distance” himself “from the stigma of foreignness,” he kept true to his upbringing in regards to education. He was not about to let himself drop below a 98% in any class (Lee, 2010, p. 78). But I hope it was also in part because the teachers provided him with a safe environment, and his “relational engagement” was pretty high, including at home with his mother. Although his father was away on business much of the time, his mother seemed to have a big role in his life. She was his guiding force. He also had Korean friends outside of school. Because Jae had an emotional support network, he did live up to the model immigrant stereotype.

Jin of *American Born Chinese* seems the exact opposite of Jae. It seems the “relational engagement” that Suarez-Orozco, Qin, and Amthor (2010) write of was perhaps lacking in Jin (p. 62). There is hardly any mention of his parents, his teachers get his name wrong, his American peers make fun of him, and he doesn’t care to associate with those

of his own country. He seems pretty isolated, and so the “sense of belonging, emotional support, tangible assistance and information, guidance, role modeling, and positive feedback” are virtually lacking in his life (p. 62). Jin seeks to fill this void with as much assimilation into American culture as possible. He seeks out emotional support from Amelia, and the only way he can get that, he thinks, is by shedding his true identity.

Lisa and Bernie are exploring connections to classroom practice and realities that relate to what they noticed in the research and the “case studies.” Sadowski and his contributors often offer student biographies or situations as cases, too—yet another example of how my case approach matched well with *Adolescents at School*.

As we moved through other identity units, students repeatedly expressed one desired point of action—the need for teachers to facilitate spaces for adolescents to be themselves, regardless of or in some cases specifically based on their gender, sexuality, immigrant status, etc. This type of transformative practice among teachers is a key objective of the Sadowski text, but he worries that . . .

[s]tandardized tests, state curriculum frameworks, and other accountability-based measures have dominated the educational reform landscape for some time now, and these reforms may well have a place in setting the baseline levels of knowledge we want all students to demonstrate before they graduate our schools. But they also carry with them the risk of seeing each student not as a real person but as a number, a percentile ranking along a distribution of test scores, or a member of a group labeled “proficient,” “needs improvement,” or “failing” (p. 8).

Josh articulates his interpretation of tensions between policies and practice:

It is the teacher’s responsibility to allow students a tolerant space to express themselves. A way to do that seemed to be modeled nicely in class [Author’s note: I tried to move students beyond spaces of “tolerance” to spaces of “acceptance”]: Provide literature on a wide range of subjects that adolescent students could identify with and [expand] upon this literature to discussion involving the whole class. This

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**Provide literature on a wide range of subjects that adolescent students could identify with and [expand] upon this literature to discussion involving the whole class.**

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does sometimes create tension, but growth comes out of problematic situations.

The challenge then becomes how are teachers able to do this in an environment that seems more focused on standardized testing than on the individual student? How can educators foster this open space where a

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**In such boiler room environments, will teachers be able to facilitate spaces that weren't necessarily always present in the pre-Common Core classroom, either?**

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wide range of topics can be covered when they are challenged to prepare “most” students to pass a test?

Certainly NCLB, the Common Core, and the privatization movement, often cloaked in the rhetoric of academic improvement for all children, suggest a future for adolescents where sense of achievement will be connected almost solely to

standardized testing, as may be their teachers' and administrators' jobs. In such boiler room environments, will teachers be able to facilitate spaces that weren't necessarily always present in the pre-Common Core classroom, either? Many of my students were left with an “If not me, who?” ethos regarding creating in-class environments where all students felt represented, valued and valid. But, as Miles Myers (1996) forewarned, perhaps these spaces can't exist in school except as before- or after-school programs and clubs. I attest that thematic instruction or inquiry units may be one means of opening up dialogue with adolescents and that YA graphic novels can help students build connections between and among peers in ways that might facilitate acceptance and understanding.

However, we know that despite the benefits of thematic approaches, many teachers continue to teach using traditional modes. We have evidence that despite research on the benefits of YAL (Hazlet, Johnson, & Hayne, 2009; Rybakova, Piotrowski, & Harper, 2013) and graphic novels, teachers aren't incorporating such texts as much as they ought, nor are they maximizing their potentials. And when David Coleman, a major player in the construction of the English Language Arts Common Core State Standards, seems to support the notion that texts that build connective tissue between students' identities and lived

experiences need to take a back seat to informational texts and rhetorical writing because “[a]s you grow up in this world you realize people really don't *give a shit* about what you feel or what you think,”<sup>2</sup> how far can “If not us, who?” take an educator, especially a beginning teacher, in meeting Sadowksi and his contributors' ultimate goal?: “If we want all students to achieve—not just on tests but in the pursuits that are important in their own lives—then trying to understand as best we can who they are and where they are coming from may be the best place to start” (Sadowski, p. 8).

### **The Ecology of Claims**

I cannot say with certainty that all of my students are now more likely to integrate comics into their future classrooms, nor can I offer hard evidence that they will be successful at attempts to open up spaces for acceptance for all manner of adolescents struggling and striving to define themselves at crucial social and intrapersonal moments in their lives. Further, I can't offer evidence that those not teaching thematically or via guiding questions bought in to that approach. What I can offer is that my students did learn from the case approach in terms of making connections between academic scholarship, central characters from the comics, and the educational researchers' work. Furthermore, and perhaps of greater consequence to readers herein, many expressed a wish that they had been exposed to the adolescent identity research much earlier in their teacher education courses than the graduate level:

**Bernie:** I was just wondering how you all felt as teachers going into the classroom. Did you feel your education classes had adequately prepared you for dealing with adolescent issues in the classroom? On p. 222, John Raible and Sonia Nieto (in Sadowski, 2010) show how researcher Laurie Olsen “found that the great majority of teachers did not believe that they needed additional preparation to serve the new diversity at the school. Most reported that being ‘color blind’ was enough.” I wonder why this is? Is there something wrong in the way teachers are prepared, or should I say, unprepared, for dealing with the realities of a classroom? . . . [N]ot until my graduate classes was student identity ever stressed as an important pedagogical step in the

classroom. When I applied lessons in my own class that have students reflect on their identity, I saw the need in their lives for such discussion in the way they responded to the assignment, whether it was in writing or in a classroom conversation.

Amy frames her comments in relation to the “Racial Identity & Immigration” theme:

All that I’ve read this semester—about setting low expectations for immigrant students—makes it obvious that doing that to any child cripples them educationally. I’m afraid that even our undergraduate education programs do that at times because I have felt the sting of knowing that my bachelors degree did not fully prepare me to teach.

Other students speak more generally, but mention the course as a possible motivator of transformed practice:

**Cathy:** Like Bernie, I felt that my preparation going into teaching could have been better established through the courses I enrolled in and partook. I have a good understanding of what is required from me, but working under a teacher as an intern for 15 weeks is not the same as being the teacher. My responsibility as an intern was to grade papers and make copies. . . .

**Maria-Rebecca:** To be honest, I did not feel that my education classes adequately prepared me for dealing with adolescent issues . . . . Like Bernie, it was not until my graduate classes that student identity was stressed as an important pedagogical step in the classroom.

**Carissa:** The classes that I have taken at the undergraduate level did not at all prepare me for teaching. In fact, I thought they helped me to realize that I was not ready to be the kind of teacher that I wanted, therefore I continued on with my education and enrolled in graduate school. Although I am only finishing up my first semester, I feel like I have learned more in a semester than I did in four years!

**Emily:** I would argue that the education classes which I took prior to my internship did not provide as much preparedness as this graduate course has as far as instilling an explicit awareness of the many

dimensions which students are navigating within. The only teaching experience which I possess is the four months I spent interning in a sophomore English class during the spring of 2012. During this period, I learned an extraordinary amount about classroom management and student interactions which could only have been learned by physically being in the classroom with 30 very unique individuals, staring at me six periods a day.

However, I do wish that I could have known more about identity and its enormous effect on adolescents because I would have been a better teacher. Of course I was aware that students were dealing with personal problems regarding sexuality, disability, immigration, and even suicide; however, it is only through

*Adolescents at School* that I have learned the scope and magnitude of adolescent identity and ways to incorporate it into the classroom curriculum.

One of the most long-lasting lessons which I will take away from this text as a novice teacher is the necessity to create welcoming, safe spaces for dialogue where students can express themselves without fear of chastisement. These spaces will lead to improved learning because students, ideally, will be able to focus more on their studies than on their preoccupations. Secondly, I have learned the power of being a teacher advocate. A running theme through this text has been students relaying horror and success stories of teachers’ actions within their education. As an educator, I need to aggressively advocate for my students so that my classroom becomes a safe space, absent of intolerance and deficit perspective, so that my students may engage and receive the best education possible.

While many Young Adult Literature courses serve future ELA teachers, there is debate about whether they are best taught as literature courses or as methods

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**All that I’ve read this semester—about setting low expectations for immigrant students—makes it obvious that doing that to any child cripples them educationally.**

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courses, or as hybrids. Friedrich and others may suggest that a multi-lensed approach best serves the field and teacher education students. Furthermore, CCSS may necessitate such hybrids. (Scholarly articles are high-level nonfiction texts in and of themselves, after all, suggesting that YAL courses can keep the salient texts *and* address new foci on other text forms.)

## Conclusion: YAL as Essential, Ecological Sweet Tooth(?)

My ENGL 5340 students suggest studying YAL alongside research about adolescence and schooling, braided with talk of methods, and facilitated by understandings of adolescent identity and needed school ecologies. Through the texts and cases studied, students in the course saw the importance of teaching beyond tests and standards, be they Common Core State Standards, Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills, or State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness. They glimpsed the great need for teachers to understand not just YAL, but adolescents and how to use YA literature to facilitate enriching learning situations with teens that consider the self—the multiple selves, even—with informed, accepting teachers who do indeed give a shit what they think and feel and experience. My students gained a glimmer of cognizance that for preteens and teens, *that* is at the core of education; it is where we must seek transformative practice for preservice teachers, practicing educators, and their students. That we may have precognitively addressed growing concerns about the space, place, and landscape of YAL courses and curricula at the undergraduate *and* graduate levels and thereby offered possible solutions to our colleagues as they navigate new pressures and mandates? Well, that's just cake.

### Notes

1. To see a table of contents to help with references to specific chapters and contributors herein, visit <http://www.lib.muohio.edu/multifacet/record/mu3ugb3971413>.
2. To hear these words and get a feel of their context, visit <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pu6lin88YXU>.

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## 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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## An Author's Influence:

Investigating Student Response to a Novel and Motivation for Future Reading

**W**hat inspires you to read? I don't mean what motivates you to pick up a book rather than take a walk or watch TV. I mean, when you are ready to read and you are making your selection, what inspires you to choose a particular book? For me, it is often the author. I find an author I like, and I tend to read as much of his or her work as I can find. If I read a book I don't like, rarely will I revisit that author with another title. As I attend professional development conferences at the state level or nationally at NCTE and ALAN, I make it my mission to seek out all of the authors I can, because I know that I am motivated to read when I get to hear an author speak about his or her work and learn how the story came to be. I had never read anything by Matt de la Peña, Sarah Dessen, or Simone Eckles until I heard them speak about their work at a conference.

Unfortunately, students in K-12 schools lack the opportunities we have to go to conferences and hear authors speak. There are small events and festivals in different regions of the country, but this is not a widespread phenomenon. We are fortunate in Northeast Ohio to have the Youngstown State University English Festival. Celebrating its 35th year in 2013, students in grades 7-12 can spend a day on campus listening to authors and engaging in activities that celebrate reading and writing, but these kinds of opportunities are few and not every child can participate.

Pamela K. Coke's article "Developing Academic Kinship, Meeting Rock Stars: What ALAN and NCTE Offer English Educators" (2013) describes her notion

of academic kinship and provides a framework for the project I describe in this article. Teri Lesesne, in her book *Making the Match: The Right Book for the Right Reader at the Right Time, Grades 4-12* (2003), recognizes this same phenomenon when she talks about knowing the author as a motivating factor for middle school students. I have certainly come to count many authors as my academic kin, and I wanted to create that experience for students in my area. Without knowing the term, I wanted to help my students experience academic kinship with authors we chose to read. I wanted to give them a chance to meet an author face-to-face—in the classroom, not in an auditorium with hundreds of people—and I wanted them to be able to ask their own questions or discuss their responses to create such a kinship.

As part of the experience, I wanted to answer two primary research questions: *Do students' responses to a novel change after meeting the author, and does meeting the author influence students' motivation to read more by that author or any other author?* I was able to make that happen in the spring of 2012. I have a good working relationship in my local school district, and I was working with a strong group of women who taught seventh grade, so I felt confident they would be willing to take on this project with me. I gave them copies of *The Sledding Hill* (2005) by Chris Crutcher and, after reading it, they agreed to use this book with all of the seventh graders. I also suggested an author visit, feeling sure that Crutcher would be a "good fit" for the students. I proposed the

idea to Crutcher, and he readily agreed to participate. With funding from an ALAN research grant and some on-campus sources, we were off and running.

## The Story

*The Sledding Hill* (Crutcher, 2005) is the story of Eddie Proffit told through the eyes and voice of his best friend, Billy Bartholomew. The only problem is that Billy is dead and Eddie thinks he is being haunted.

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Not only has Eddie lost his best friend, but his father died the same summer. This double tragedy has driven Eddie inward. He does not speak, and he does his best not to interact with anyone, including his mother or the Reverend Tarter of the Red Brick Church who seems to be everywhere—as a teacher at school, at church, and in his home. The Reverend Tarter is a force to be reckoned with, and Eddie is doing his best to steer

clear, but the main conflict brings him squarely into the Reverend's path.

Eddie is taking a course in high school called "Really Modern Literature" taught by the librarian, Ms. Ruth Lloyd, where the class must read books by authors who are still alive. One of those authors just happens to be Chris Crutcher. Crutcher creates a fictional title, *Warren Peece*, which features a main character who is gay. When the Reverend Tarter finds out, he quietly organizes the youth group of the church and other followers in an attempt to ban the book from the curriculum. Eddie becomes a double agent, keeping his silence in the presence of the church members as they plot to remove the book from the curriculum, but secretly keeping his copy, reading it, and eventually crafting a plan to counter the one that is set to take one more thing out of his life.

## The Project

We began in January 2012. Students at Carter Middle School (school and student names are all pseud-

onyms) were given copies of *The Sledding Hill*. We began by examining the front and back covers and making predictions about the story. As students started to read the book in class, I pulled aside 30 of the 109 seventh graders for a series of individual interviews. I asked the teachers to help me select a representative cross section of males and females and an equal range among students who are avid readers and those who normally do not choose to read. Also included in that number were all of the students who are pulled out for intervention; they comprised a single focus group. I began by asking the students about their reading habits. In the first round of interviews, I asked students if they liked to read, what they liked to read, if they read when they had free time, and how they went about the task of choosing a book.

Regardless of whether the students labeled themselves as avid readers, somewhere in the middle, or those who did not like to read and only did so if required to in school, the majority of the students expressed a preference for mystery, fantasy, or science fiction. In their article "Tailoring the Fit: Reading Instruction and Middle School Readers," Ivey and Broadus (2000) found similar reading interests among the students they interviewed. They have conducted multiple studies and found that middle school readers prefer scary stories, sports books, comics, and magazines. Students in this study exhibited the same preferences, but added dystopian novels such as *The Hunger Games* (Collins, 2008). Students, especially boys, cited magazines related to their interests outside of school, like hunting, playing video games, and riding ATVs.

When asked how they chose a book to read, the answers were identical. They look at the cover, read the back or inside flap, and maybe read a little bit of the first couple of pages to decide. After hearing this response repeated verbatim by nearly every student, I asked the teachers why that might be. As it turns out, when these students were in elementary school, their library time became a "class," and the librarian had to "teach" them something, so she taught them how to pick a book. When I tried to delve deeper, the students struggled. They talked a lot about looking at the cover; many who preferred the fantasy/mystery/science fiction vein would say they would look for books with dark covers: blacks, reds, or purples. *The Sledding Hill* cover was yellow and green, the only

red in the lettering of the title itself. Most students said they would never have picked up the book on their own for that reason. Teri Lesesne (2003) also found that the cover of the book influenced student choices. “While length, book flap summaries, and blurbs did not seem to make much difference, students did indicate that they selected books (and rejected them) based on the covers. . . . The best book in the world will not circulate if the cover appears ‘dorky’ to your kids” (p. 33).

When asked about sources for books, selection was again limited. All of the teachers in this study had a small selection of books in their classrooms and many students started there. The school library was the next potential source. There is a branch of the county district library within the village where the school is located, and that was third in the number of responses, but transportation was often an issue for students who did not live within walking distance. Few students named home libraries or bookstores, brick and mortar or online, as a source for reading material.

Few students expressed a preference for realistic fiction; most did not understand the term when I asked, and then rejected it when I described it as books about teenagers set in current times facing problems that kids their age might face. In fact, only three expressed an interest in reading such books. I began to worry about the success of this project as I faced a group of students who were all telling me that had I not chosen this book and suggested it to their teachers for this project, they would never have picked it up on their own.

The unit of study took about six weeks in each teacher’s classroom. All three teachers read the book aloud to their students four or five days a week. The teachers agreed that if they did not read aloud, the majority of students would not read for homework. I was only able to provide one class set of books to each room, thus prohibiting every student from taking a book home. Reading aloud gave time for in-class discussion and clarification during the novel unit. This was helpful because *The Sledding Hill* is a complicated story. The narrator, Billy Bartholomew, is dead, and he is telling us the story of his best friend Eddie Proffit in the third person.

In the beginning, the students had difficulty keeping the boys straight and understanding who was talk-

ing when. Billy is the narrator, but we hear Eddie’s voice as he and Billy have conversations when Eddie is dreaming. Crutcher identifies these dreams by using italics, but the students had difficulty recognizing this visual cue. Because Billy was a ghost, he could move in and out of locations and even know what Eddie was thinking at times, making the narration even more complex and at times confusing for the students to follow. Finally, when the censorship plot was developing and community

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**When we were able to help her sort out the characters and their roles in the central conflict, she was able to enjoy the reading experience.**

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members began to take sides over the book, the students struggled to sort out which characters were on each side of the debate. As a support for the students, we developed a set of note cards with each character’s name and put them on the chalkboard as a kind of word wall so that we could help students

sort and categorize who was dead, who was alive, who was for *Warren Peece*, and who was against it. The complexity of the narrative and the difficulty in following who was talking was something that came up in most interviews. During the reading, students were expressing some confusion and frustration because they could not follow the story or the narrator, but by the end, they seemed to have sorted it all out, citing the support of the class discussions and teacher explanations as helpful. Sarah described her reading experience like this:

I liked the book at the beginning and then I understood it. Then in the middle, I didn’t get it as well . . . but then I got it at the end, and when we went over it in class and then all the questions we asked Chris Crutcher and I understood more. . . . I liked doing this, just reading it and going over it in class.

This student, like many others, responded to the story and the reading process in tandem. She enjoyed the book when she felt she understood what was happening, but when the complexity of the narrative interfered with comprehension, it also interfered with her enjoyment of the book. When we were able to help her sort out the characters and their roles in the central conflict, she was able to enjoy the reading experience.

## Author Visit

One of the variables I hoped to be able to isolate in the students' motivation to read or not was the effect of the author visit. I struggled with whether or not we should tell the students from the beginning that this would be the culmination of the reading, or if we should save that information for the end. I decided to tell them from the start that we would read this book together and meet the author in their classroom at the end. From the outset, students were interested in read-

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### From the outset, students were interested in reading the book knowing that they were going to meet the man who wrote it.

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ing the book knowing that they were going to meet the man who wrote it.

We gave some background on Crutcher at the beginning and more in the day or two before he arrived. During the reading, one student in each classroom was designated as the "question keeper." As we read, students would

often ask a question, usually related to the author's motivation—why did he put that in the story?—so we collected those questions for the visit. The day before Crutcher's arrival, we prepared students by reviewing those lists of questions and deciding who would ask which one. Questions were written on note cards and saved for the big day.

I have to admit that I stacked the deck by choosing Chris Crutcher as the author for this project. Ultimately, while my research question centered around *Does meeting an author influence a student's motivation to read?*, what I really wanted to do was try to influence the students' motivation to read. From reports such as *Reading at Risk* (National Endowment for the Arts, 2004), we know that literary reading in the United States is declining. Seventh graders are younger than the youngest population included in *Reading at Risk* (2004) data, but other studies and position papers, such as the 2012 revision of *Adolescent Literacy* (International Reading Association, 2012), recommend that "Offering adolescents access to relevant and recent young adult literature can motivate interest in reading and create an opportunity to build a lifelong habit of engaging in reading and writing for pleasure" (International Reading Association, 2012, p. 13). This

position statement also advocates that adolescents be exposed to diverse reading experiences. Given that the majority of students interviewed did not read modern realistic fiction, the choice of *The Sledding Hill* would be a diverse selection.

I also knew that I needed a book that would pique their interests, be at their reading level—not too easy, not too challenging—and I needed an author that the kids could relate to and would enjoy. Chris Crutcher fit the bill. Daniel commented, "I think Chris Crutcher was awesome, so like if he was my grandpa I think he'd be an awesome grandpa. There's like your grandpa and then there's the awesome grandpa, like you have the uncle and then you have the fun uncle." Gloria said, "I thought he was just going to be one of those people who they come in and they sit there and they talk about a lot of boring stuff. Chris Crutcher was amazing. I thought he was so nice and cool." Students connected with the author as a person and were able to relate to what he said. They saw him as approachable and interesting to listen to as a speaker. So the next question becomes, did I accomplish my goal?

## Results

This project was guided by two primary research questions: *Do students' responses to a novel change after meeting the author and does meeting the author influence students' motivation to read more by that author or any other author?* Based on this project, the answer to the first question is yes. Qualitative analysis of student responses at the end of this project settled around three different themes. First, students had an increased openness to the genre of modern realistic fiction. Based on positive experiences with *The Sledding Hill*, the class discussions, and the author visit, more students were considering modern realistic fiction for upcoming book report assignments or self-selected reading and asked us for recommendations of titles and authors that were similar to what we had just read. Based on data from the initial interviews, students did not understand what the genre of modern realistic fiction was and had few experiences reading in this genre. This project exposed them to an exemplar text, and through the positive experience with this reading, students expressed motivation to read more in the genre.

Second, the author visit as a single element changed students' responses to the novel by increasing the believability of the story. Throughout the reading, there were occasions where we had to supplement students' background knowledge to help them understand if situations were real or could have been based on real events. None of these students had ever experienced a censorship challenge in our community, and they were skeptical at first that this was even a possibility or that it really happened in other places, so we provided background information and talked about real challenges in other communities. Students prepared questions for Crutcher to ask about his experiences around his books being banned, like: "How does it feel to have your books banned?" "Do you mean or intend for your books to be banned?" "Have you ever been to a school board meeting to defend one of your books?" Through these questions, students were seeking verisimilitude for the events in the story, connecting the author's experiences and his explanation of his writing process to understand how the censorship challenge in the book was described. When they asked, "Why did the Red Brickers win?" Crutcher explained that not every challenge ends with the book being reinstated into the classroom or library, and he wanted to portray a realistic challenge. In the final interview, I asked students if there was anything from the author visit that helped them understand the book better. Eric keyed in on the success of the challenge, saying, "How the Red Brickers win. I didn't understand it until he explained it. It all fits together now because he explained it to us."

There were other instances of students seeking out what was real in this story. Students looked for books written by other authors in Ruth Lloyd's curriculum and discovered that these authors were real and some of their books were in the school library. We began to see students carrying around copies of works mentioned by Crutcher like *War and Peace* (Tolstoy, 1983) and *Slaughterhouse Five* (Vonnegut, 1969).

Other cultural references added to the believability once students understood them. At one point, Billy tries to explain Eddie's reaction to the banning of *Warren Peece* by describing how Eddie is now motivated to read and listen to anything that censors have deemed inappropriate as an act of rebellion. He says, "If Coach were smart he'd give Eddie a really hard

math problem right before every race and offer him a Dixie Chicks CD if he could solve it by the end of the race" (Crutcher, 2005, p. 146). These students were too young to remember the controversial comments made by Dixie Chicks lead singer Natalie Maines in 2003 when she criticized President George W. Bush in front of a British audience. So we played "Not Ready to Make Nice" (Maguire, Maines, Robinson, & Wilson, 2006) and showed students the lyrics. When the reference made sense, they were better able to understand censorship as a real issue in society.

The ultimate example of an increase in believability came from Crutcher's school visit. From the beginning, many students were skeptical about the ways both Eddie's father and Billy died. They found the manner of death in each case far-fetched and convoluted until Crutcher sat before them in their classroom and told them that his grandfather nearly died in the same manner he used for Eddie's dad and that when he was a boy, a childhood friend died in the same way he killed the character of Billy Bartholomew. This was a pivotal moment for many of these students and the facial expressions and open jaws in the room reflected the contradictions they were feeling. Their previous perceptions that these events were exaggerated were shattered by the power of the author sitting in front of them and answering their questions like, "Why such unusual deaths?" or "Is this book based on facts?" Benjamin summed it up by saying, "Well, I wouldn't imagine that something like the deaths that happened would've really happened in somebody's life." As Crutcher told the stories of his grandfather's accident and of people he has known in his life that influenced characters such as the Reverend Tartar or Ruth Lloyd, students began to see that even though the story was fiction, there was motivation or background in events or people that were important to the author. Lisa explained her ideas about these events by saying, "I guess you could say

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**Their previous perceptions that these events were exaggerated were shattered by the power of the author sitting in front of them and answering their questions.**

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[he] spoke the truth because it had to do with his life and it actually happened to him.” Kelly described it this way:

After you see his kind of view of the book and how he wants you or the reader to see it kind of like changes how you look at it. You see it in a different light. Like you may picture a person one way, like after he said he is much like Eddie himself, it kind of made me think about what he would look like as a kid, like as Eddie. Didn’t really change my opinion of Eddie, just understand him more.

Does meeting the author influence students’ motivation to read more by that author or any other author? This is hard to tell as an isolated variable.

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**In the final interviews, all students expressed a positive attitude about the experience and connected that positive attitude to a willingness to continue reading.**

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Overall, the experience of reading and meeting the author increased students’ motivation to read. Based on the final interviews when students were asked if this experience was likely to encourage or discourage them to read more, and the evidence of students carrying around other books by Crutcher or authors we were recommending as modern realistic fiction (e.g., Laurie

Halse Anderson, Jordan Sonnenblick, or Christopher Paul Curtis), students were more interested in reading modern realistic fiction than they had expressed in the initial interviews. At one point, the school librarian had to go into storage to bring out additional copies of Crutcher’s books she had packed away because more students were asking for books than she had copies available.

In the final interviews, all students expressed a positive attitude about the experience and connected that positive attitude to a willingness to continue reading.

**Shannon:** I am reading *Stotan!* Like I see other people walking around with other Chris Crutcher books. [This experience] encourages me ’cause I didn’t like reading at the beginning when we first did interviews, but now I like it because I want to see like what he is writing about and like how other books just like are boring and everything but he put interesting things in there now, personal things

for everybody to learn [about] their life.

**Gary:** I like how he modeled the Reverend after someone he knew and most of the characters are people he knew, like his friend dying and his grandpa dying the same way as Billy and John died. That was cool. I never read these kind of realistic fiction books . . . so maybe I’ll read more of those. I’ll read different kinds of things because I usually only read two or three genres. I’ll read more of his books because I like how he writes them.

These responses illustrate the success of this project in motivating students to read and to try a genre that was relatively new to them. Through the experience of reading *The Sledding Hill* and meeting Chris Crutcher, they found that they could enjoy modern realistic fiction and were motivated by the notion that stories they might once have rejected as “fake” could actually have roots in an author’s life. That added interest and integrity to their reading.

### **What Did I Learn?**

Students in this project were craving recommendations for books they might enjoy. This is a relatively small community. School and classroom libraries are limited, and most students do not have access to a large selection of books. They look to others for recommendations: teachers, parents, librarians, and friends. They need access to a range of choices, and they want adult mentors to provide guidance. They trust friends for recommendations to a point, but acknowledge that either friends have as limited access as they do, or their friends’ choices are limited to personal preferences they don’t share.

**Maria:** It depends on what friend it is. If Tess would recommend a book to me, then I would probably want to read it because she is one of those people that likes exciting books and stuff like that. But if Karen would recommend a book to me, then I’d be like, ah, I’ll try it because she reads all books, but I’m like, not really.

Many kids would have given up on this story without adult mentoring. When they were struggling to keep the characters straight, understand who



was talking to them or telling the story, or trying to sort out the people and the issues, they needed class discussion and adult guidance to make sense of it. Without that support, they might have given up on the reading.

**Jimmy:** [I]f I would have read the first chapter or two, it probably wouldn't have clicked at first or may not have seemed too interesting, and halfway through the book, I started getting really confused about like what Eddie was doing and about the dreams and stuff that he kept going in and out, and about who each character was, and it was a little confusing.

**Beth:** I liked it because I like reading books with other people, and we got to meet the author so it was even better. Because sometimes I read a book by myself and I miss something that I won't understand the whole entire book, so it was really fun. We got to discuss the book with other people so we got to discuss what our favorite parts were or if we like the book or not.

No one would have picked up this title on his or her own. Whether that was due to the cover design or the genre, the interviews made clear that not one student would have selected this book if we had not presented it as a whole-class novel, but most found they had enjoyed the reading once we were finished. This tells me that teachers need to do two things. First, we need to expose students to a wide range of texts; second, we need to understand that in order to do that, we must be readers of a wide range of texts so that we have a deep well of books from which to draw. The Commission on Adolescent Literacy of the International Reading Association published a position statement on adolescent literacy in 1999 that begins with the first principle for supporting adolescents' literacy growth: "Adolescents deserve access to a wide variety of reading material that they can and want to read" (Moore, Bean, Birdyshaw, & Rycik, 1999, p. 4). *Reading Next* (Biancarosa & Snow, 2004), a report by the Carnegie Corporation, emphasizes the importance of diverse texts. In this case, diversity includes a range of reading levels, topics, and diverse characters and situations where students may find reflections of themselves as well as representations of those who are

different. The Common Core State Standards, College and Career Readiness Anchor Standard for Reading 6–12 encourage diversity of texts:

To become college and career ready, students must grapple with works of exceptional craft and thought whose range extends across genres, cultures, and centuries. Such works offer profound insights into the human condition and serve as models for students' own thinking and writing (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010, p. 35).

Sometimes we need to encourage readers to try something new, but that requires that we have something new to offer them. How can we do that? I asked students to give me advice for teachers and parents that could help them choose books. They suggested book talks, without knowing there was a word for "tell us about more books we might be interested in." We can do book talks live in the classroom once or twice a week or show book trailers from YouTube as students are entering our classrooms each day. We

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**Sometimes we need to encourage readers to try something new, but that requires that we have something new to offer them.**

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can read aloud to our students a few times a week for no other reason than to let them listen to a story, and then add recommendations along the way for other books like the one they are listening to. We need to have well-stocked classroom libraries. If we can't have all the physical books on hand that we would like, we could dedicate a section of wall space to posting pictures of book covers as a source of recommendation and inspiration. In the end, if we tell them about a book that we enjoyed, chances are they will be open to the suggestion.

When making our recommendations, we need to include authors. In other words, we need to tell students about the author as well as about the book. We need to connect kids and authors as often as possible. Lack of funding may prohibit school visits such as the one described in this project, but there may be untapped resources available, such as local civic organizations willing to donate and support an author visit, grants, or other donor sources. Many authors are willing to do visits via Skype, which is significantly

cheaper than a face-to-face visit. If nothing else, most authors have a webpage, and on those webpages are biographies, pictures, and often videos so that your students can connect a name and a face and a voice to the story that they are reading.

Those of us who read and study young adult literature are lucky; we get to experience the theme of Ruth Lloyd's "Really Modern Literature" class because most of the authors we read are still alive and accessible to us and to our students through websites, blogs, Skype, YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr. We need to access those resources and use these connections to authors as one more way to motivate kids to read.

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## LGBTQ Young Adult Literature:

How It Began, How It Grew, and Where It Is Now

**T**his year marks the 40th anniversary of the birth of LGBTQ YA literature, for it was in 1969 that our genre began with the publication of its first book, the late John Donovan's novel, *I'll Get There. It Better Be Worth the Trip* (Harper & Row, 1969). Its very brief, minimally described sexual incidents between two young boys must have seemed shocking to many people, but *I'll Get There* enjoyed a primarily positive reception with only a few detractors. However, despite that and its being a Newbery honor book, it was followed by only a cautious trickle of YA books dealing with LGQ (lesbian, gay, and questioning) characters and/or issues. ("B" [bisexual] and "T" [transgender] characters didn't appear in our books till much later.) In fact, I've found only 11 LGBTQ YAs for the entire decade of the 70s (see sidebar).

In 1970, Atheneum published Barbara Wersba's *Run Softly, Go Fast*, whose teenage protagonist, David, recalls a pivotal scene in which his father "accused" his straight best friend, Rick, of being gay. The boys' relationship dete-

riorated after that; afterward, Rick joined the army and was killed in action.

Homosexuality per se isn't important in *Run Softly*. Instead, it's the idea that being gay is so terrible that "accusing" someone of it can have tragic results. The consequences of spreading false rumors of homosexuality appeared in a number of LGQ early books for both YAs and adults.

In Isabelle Holland's *The Man without a Face* (Lippincott, 1972), Chuck, a straight, fatherless teenage boy, worries guiltily about his attraction to Justin McLeod, a reclusive, facially scarred man who is preparing him for a school entrance exam. McLeod tries to reassure Chuck that his feelings are normal, but when, after an unspecified minor sexual incident, Chuck asks McLeod about his own feelings, McLeod implies that yes, he himself is gay. Soon afterward, Chuck passes his exam, but later, when he tries to see McLeod again, he learns that the man has died of a heart attack, leaving Chuck's questions—and perhaps the reader's—about himself and their relationship unresolved. More

positive is a historical novel about two young 19th-century lesbians, *Patience and Sarah* by Isabelle Miller (McGraw-Hill, 1972). It was published for adults, although Miller has been quoted as saying she wrote it for adolescents. It's an unmistakable love story with a happy ending, one that would have been the first for YAs had it been published as Miller seems to have intended.

As the 1970s progressed, specific approaches to writing about LGQ characters emerged. In three '70s books, for example, teen characters act on homosexual feelings, but ultimately emerge as straight, thereby perhaps implying that teenage LG relationships are just "phases" or "crushes." But one of those books, *Ruby* by Rosa Guy (Viking, 1976), was also the first (and unfortunately for many years the last) LGQ YA featuring characters of color.

A continuing prevalent message in the 1970s was the idea that LG people are doomed to be "punished" with tragic results if they act on their feelings. McLeod's death (and perhaps his scars) in *The Man without a Face* seem to

buy into that, as does Rick's death in *Run Softly*—even though Rick wasn't gay. More obvious punishment also appears in Sandra Scoppetone's *Trying Hard to Hear You* (Harper & Row, 1974), in which the straight female protagonist learns that her best male friend and a boy she likes are lovers. The boys are mercilessly teased, and in the end, trying to prove he's straight, one of them gets drunk with a girl, takes her out in a car, and they both are killed in an auto accident. Car crashes were perhaps the most popular punishment endings, but suicide runs them a close second, along with commitment to a mental hospital or forced psychiatric treatment.

In a later Scoppetone book, *Happy Endings Are All Alike* (Harper & Row, 1978), the punishment is rape. The main character, Jaret, and her lover are both clearly lesbian and in love—a hugely important first in LGQ books published for YAs. Jaret is raped by a homophobic boy who discovers the two girls *in flagrante*. And although Jaret's lover breaks up with her when Jaret decides to press charges, the book ends on a hopeful note—another first—with a hint that the girls may eventually reconcile.

Although punishment in LGBTQ books is usually seen as a warning that being LGBTQ has tragic consequences, some authors used it to show that ignorance and cruelty from heterosexuals can lead to tragic endings for LGBTQ people.

There's no punishment, though, for Charlie Gilhooley, a secondary character in M. E. Kerr's *I'll Love You When You're More*

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## **I felt enormously encouraged by the LGQ YAs I finally saw being published in the 1970s.**

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*Like Me* (Harper & Row, 1977). He's an openly gay teen, best friend of the straight protagonist. Even though Charlie's parents don't accept his homosexuality, Charlie remains cheerful, humorous, and firmly out—another huge first step.

Donovan, plus the authors of LGQ YAs of the 1970s, laid the thematic foundations from which our literature grew—hesitantly at first, but that initial trickle led to nearly 40 new titles in the 1980s!

Why the increase? What made it possible?

I suspect one important factor was the major event in US LGBTQ history that occurred in the same year as Donovan's book: the Stonewall riots. That's when gays and lesbians, led by drag queens, fought back against the police that regularly raided one of NY's favorite gay bars, the Stonewall Inn in Greenwich Village. The riots continued for several days, and are commonly thought to have transformed the growing LGBT rights movement into its more demanding, more public modern version. That encouraged many LGBT people to become more visible in a variety of ways, including literary.

There weren't very many genuine LGBTQ books before Stonewall, and none, of course, for kids before Donovan. Most tradi-

tional publishers, fearing limited sales and charges of obscenity, refused to consider most manuscripts depicting gay life, especially for kids. But as the gay rights movement grew, and gay issues and people became more public, more LGBTQ titles appeared. Writers of books for children and teens, long silenced on LGBT issues, began trying—or trying again—to write and sell for those markets.

Like myself, many “bookish” LGBTQ kids growing up before Stonewall had searched in vain for books for and about people like us. When it appeared that it might at last be possible for us to provide the books we had wanted as teens to the post-Stonewall teens who were still searching, we leapt at the chance. I felt enormously encouraged by the LGQ YAs I finally saw being published in the 1970s, and I'm sure that many other YA authors, both LGBT and straight, felt the same. Stories, after all, both our own and those of other people, are among the most important ways through which we learn to understand and value both ourselves and others.

A few 1980s books were coming-out stories, in which the protagonist suspects he or she is LGBT, realizes it, and finally accepts it—and/or accepting it, faces the difficult task of coming out to a friend, parent, or another important person. In my first LGQ book, *Annie on My Mind* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1982), the protagonist, Liza, falls in love with Annie, who returns her love and who has suspected that she herself might be gay. Liza is conflicted about being gay, but after a struggle, she accepts both herself and her love

for Annie; the two girls end up happily together. In B. A. Ecker's *Independence Day* (Avon/Flare, 1983), a gay boy comes out to his straight best friend, with whom he's in love—and although his love isn't requited, the two boys remain friends. In *Act Well Your Part* by Don Sakers (Alyson, 1986), a high school junior, Keith, in love with a senior, Brian, comes out to his mother, who is accepting. After various complications, he finds that his love for Brian is returned.

But more books of this decade were those that focused on a straight teen's struggle to accept or reject a LGBT friend, relative, or other important adult. The late and very prolific author Norma Klein wrote four LG YAs in the 1980s in which a straight boy or girl already has or learns that he or she has a gay or lesbian parent or friend: *Breaking Up* (Random House, 1980), *My Life as a Body* (Knopf/Borzoi, 1987), *Now That I Know* (Bantam, 1988), and *Learning How to Fall* (Bantam, 1989). In an interesting variation of this pattern, in *Come Out Smiling*, by Elizabeth Levy (Delacote, 1981), a straight 14-year-old girl who finds out and accepts that her favorite camp counselors are gay decides that she herself doesn't want to be gay. Barbara Wersba (*Run Softly, Go Fast*) published two LGQ YAs in the '80s; in one of them, *Crazy Vanilla* (Harper & Row, 1986), a boy adjusts to the fact that his older brother is gay. And M. E. Kerr (*I'll Love You When You're More Like Me*) gave us the first AIDS book for LGQ teens, *Night Kites* (Harper & Row/Zolotow, 1986). Its straight teenage boy protagonist must not only deal with the fact that his

older brother is gay but that he also has AIDS.

As the 1980s gradually morphed into the 1990s, it began to seem that what we most wanted to tell were LGQ stories through the eyes of young LGQ characters themselves. But did that mean concentrating primarily on coming-out stories? Coming out is indeed a pivotal part of all LGBTQ people's lives, but some books of the '80s had already begun to suggest that it isn't the only part. Should LGQ YAs include bisexual and transgender teens? More teens of color? Other minorities? Stories that

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include more universal issues than the basic LGBT rite of passage and coming out?

Even though in the 1990s there were still coming-out stories and straights-adjusting-to-gays stories, it was then that LGBTQ YA literature increasingly addressed other issues as well. Some of the authors from earlier decades produced books in the '90s that did just that. In 1994, for example, HarperCollins published M. E. Kerr's *Deliver Us from Evie*, the first LGQ novel to feature a very butch lesbian character. Evie is the older sister of Parr, the straight protagonist. Although the book is Parr's story,

much of it concentrates on Evie and her determination to dress and act as befits the strong, self-assured lesbian she truly is. Then in 1997, Kerr's "*Hello, I Lied*" (HarperCollins) was the first, as far as I know, to introduce the subject of bisexuality; its gay teen protagonist struggles with feeling attracted to a girl. *My Lark in the Morning* (FSG, 1991) shows how a young lesbian with a steady girlfriend helps two young runaways, and *The Year They Burned the Books* (FSG, 1999) is about a young lesbian, her gay best friend, and a few other kids who try to use their school newspaper to counter the censorship attempts of their local school board.

The 1990s also introduced Jacquelyn Woodson, whose LGQ books feature the first characters of color in our genre since Rose Guy's *Ruby*. *The Dear One* (Delacorte, 1991) shows how a probably straight 12-year-old girl is helped by two lesbian friends of her mother's to accept the pregnant teenage daughter of her mother's best friend. Woodson's *From the Notebooks of Melanin Sun* (Scholastic/Blue Sky, 1995) is about a boy who learns that his mother is a lesbian and in love with a white woman, and *The House You Pass on the Way* (Delacorte, 1997) shows how a mixed-race girl of 14, Staggerlee, wrestles with her feelings for her adopted cousin. Later, after her cousin gets a boyfriend, she wonders what she herself will become as she gets older.

The 1990s also brought us more from Francesca Lia Block, who produced three books following her earlier popular YA novel *Weetzie Bat* (Harper & Row, 1989). Two of them, *Baby Be-Bop* (Harp-

erCollins/Cotler, 1995) and *Witch Baby* (HarperCollins/Zolotow, 1991) are a prequel and sequel, respectively, to *Weetzie Bat*. In the third, *I Was a Teenage Fairy* (HarperCollins/Cotler, 1998), two child-to-teen models, a girl and a gay boy, are molested by a pedophile photographer, but ultimately healed by a fairy. Like *Weetzie Bat*, these books are peopled with counter-culture characters, some gay, some straight, who coexist happily—and for the most part lovingly—in a fairytale-like atmosphere of their own making.

The 1990s saw at least eight books about AIDS, mostly stories like Kerr's earlier one in which a teen learns that an older brother, father, or uncle is both gay and has HIV or AIDS. *Earthshine*, by Theresa Nelson (Orchard/Richard Jackson, 1994), is unique in that it's often humorous despite its sad subject matter. It is distinguished by the deep and loving relationship between 12-year-old Slim and her father, who has AIDS, and the additional relationships they forge with a group of AIDS patients and their families.

Another 1990s book that stands out for being unusual is

*Babylon Boyz* by Jess Mowry (Simon and Schuster, 1997), a story about life on the streets with three homeboys of color, one of whom is gay and all of whom must decide what to do with a discarded bag of cocaine and the gun that was thrown away with it. Into the '90s, too, came the first LGBTQ YA series—short-lived, but nonetheless a milestone to be continued in the next decade. The *Pride Pack* mystery series (Alyson, 1995; Cheyenne, 2011) was written by Ruth Sims writing as R. J. Hamilton. It consisted of three books featuring a multicultural group of teenage sleuths from their town's Gay and Lesbian Community Center.

But it's been in the first years of the twenty-first century that LGBTQ YA literature has really matured and expanded. Our output has also increased enormously—I've counted 108 new books between 2000 and 2013, and there are already more I haven't yet read. Traditional publishing is still harder than ever for anyone, LGBTQ or otherwise, to break into, but the new respectability and increased opportunities for self-publishing and the rise of small independent presses have provided

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new options for writers, even as traditional publishing has wrestled with adjusting to the digital age and giants like Amazon. That has certainly helped the growth of LGBTQ YA books!

So—what's new in the 2000s?

I wish I had space to list and describe in detail all the exciting new books I've been reading! But I'll just have to give a few examples of the trends I'm seeing. I wish I could do more! So far, there have been at least 8 new YAs about transpeople. The very first appeared in 2004: *Luna* by Julie Anne Peters (Little, Brown/Tingley), whose straight girl protagonist's older brother is transitioning to female. A couple of others are *Beautiful Music for Ugly Children* (Kirstin Cronn-Mills, Flux, 2012), in which Gabe, a female-to-male transboy DJ courageously comes through the violence and hate that threaten him, and *FreakBoy*, a verse novel by Kristin Elizabeth Clark (FSG, 2013), which explores variations in basic gender itself.

There have been about the same number of YAs dealing with or hinting at bisexuality, one of which, *Ash* (Malinda Lo, Little Brown, 2009), is a variation on

### Additional Resources

In writing this article, I've drawn extensively on an informal list of LGBTQ fiction to which I've been adding over the years. To verify some of my information and remind myself of the details of books I haven't read for a long time, I've also referred to *The Heart Has Its Reasons: Young Adult Literature with Gay/Lesbian/Queer Content, 1969–2004* by Michael Cart and Christine A. Jenkins (The Scarecrow Press, 2006), and, to a lesser extent, *Lesbian and Gay Voices: An Annotated Bibliography and Guide to Literature for Children and Young Adults* by Frances Ann Day (Greenwood Press, 2000), to which I wrote the foreword.

the Cinderella story, and two more of Lo's, *Adaptation* and its sequel *Inheritance* (Little, Brown, 2012 and 2013, respectively), which perhaps can also be best classified as speculative sci fi. Two more speculative/dystopic books are *Proxy* by Alex London (Philomel, 2013) and *The Culling* by Steven dos Santos (Flux, 2013).

Unfortunately, there have still been very few LGBTQ YAs featuring African American characters: *Breathe* (Blair Poole, Burrow, 2005) and *Finlater* (Shawn Stewart Ruff, Quote "Editions," 2008); or Hispanic characters: *Down to the Bone* (Myra Lazara Dole, HarperTeen, 2008), *What Night Brings* (Carla Trujillo, Curbstone, 2003), and *Chulito* (Charles Rice-González, Magnus, 2011).

There's a new series or two in the offing, and an established series by Alex Sanchez that follows the lives of three gay boys as they mature: *Rainbow Boys*, *Rainbow High*, and *Rainbow Road* (Simon & Schuster, 2001, 2003, and 2005).

Here are a few more:

*Tough Love: High School Confidential*, Abby Denson (Manic D, 2006)—graphic novel.

*Wildthorn*, Jane Eagland (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt/Graphia, 2009)—historical novel set in Victorian England.

*Openly Straight*, Bill Konigsberg (Scholastic/Levine, 2013)—humor.

*Hero*, Perry Moore (Hyperion, 2007)—gay superhero adventure and mystery story.

*Boy Meets Boy*, David Levithan (Knopf, 2003)—love story, with elements of fantasy, humor.

*Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*, Benjamin Alire Sáenz (Simon & Schuster/BFYR, 2012)—deep, loving friendship between two boys, one gay and one straight.

*Freak Show*, James St. James (Dutton, 2007)—teenage drag queen deals with bullying.

*Almost Perfect*, Brian Katcher (Delacorte, 2009)—straight

boy falls in love with a girl who turns out to be a transgirl.

But there are many more, and if these first 13 years are any indication, they're bound to keep on coming and, more important, bringing more LGBTQ kids and their straight friends ever closer in understanding and respect, and while they're at it, providing them with many hours of enjoyable, thought-provoking reading.

*Nancy Garden* is the author of around 35 books for children and teens, and one for adults. Among her awards are the Margaret A. Edwards Award for Lifetime Achievement, the Katahdin Award for Lifetime Achievement, and the Robert B. Downs Award for Intellectual Freedom. Nancy is now a full-time writer, but earlier she worked in theater primarily as an actress and lighting designer, and in publishing as an editor and magazine writer; she has also been a teacher and a gay activist. Nancy's best-known book is *Annie on My Mind*, about two teen girls who fall in love with each other.

## Beyond Pity:

Creating Complex, Likable Teen Protagonists with Disabilities

**L**ike their real-life counterparts, fictional characters with disabilities have historically been excluded, marginalized, or used to teach moral lessons. In 1942, writing teacher and editor Maren Elwood advised writers to “select characters, especially for major roles, who are normal, mentally and physically, who do not suffer from incurable, painful, or crippling diseases, and who do not die in the end” (p. 158). Readers, she said, do not want “to have their feelings harrowed, their hearts torn, or to contemplate the disagreeable aspects of life” (pp. 157–158).

This prohibition has not excluded minor characters with disabilities from appearing in for youth fiction, in ways that marginalize and stereotype those characters. From ancient times to the present, characters with disabilities have been used to impart moral lessons. Scholar Lois Keith (2001) identifies “three stock responses toward disabled people: they (or their ancestors) have been punished; they have been pitied; or through faith in God or self, they have been encouraged to overcome

what is usually seen as a burden of sorrow” (p. 15). Many children’s (and adult) books have included characters with physical or mental disabilities as villains, their physical crippling often a symbol of their having been “touched by the devil” (p. 16). Those terminally ill or disabled characters who appear as objects of pity in classic literature serve as the polar opposites of the disabled villain. They are, as Keith describes, “too good to live” (p. 33)—uniformly “sweet, passive, and forgiving” (p. 34), accepting their fate without protest, rancor, or self-pity.

When female protagonists in classic literature acquire disabilities, Keith argues, these disabilities are always temporary and often the result of some misbehavior. Once they learn to behave in demure, ladylike ways, they are restored to health, having discovered “that there are lessons to be learnt from suffering and that out of this torment, it is possible to become a better person” (p. 86). Readers also learn that “children who cannot walk are to be pitied and cared for but they can never be *accepted*. In order for them to live into adult-

hood, they must be cured” (p. 99). Keith criticizes both the lack of realism in depicting disabilities and the assumption that those who have them cannot play leading roles in stories or society.

Fortunately, this pattern is beginning to change. In the past decade, there has been a noticeable increase in the quantity and quality of novels for teens featuring main characters with disabilities. The range of those disabilities has grown beyond physical and sensory impairments to include developmental and neurological conditions such as autism/Asperger’s, mental illness, and addiction treated as mental illness rather than as the result of poor choices.

My own interest in the portrayal of YA protagonists with disabilities grew out of my having been diagnosed with Asperger’s syndrome, a mild form of autism, as an adult (though as a child and teenager, I was keenly aware of my difference from my peers). While my earlier YA novel *Gringolandia* (2009) includes a major secondary character with physical and emotional disabilities, the result of his imprisonment and torture



during the Pinochet dictatorship in Chile, I wanted in my next novel to draw on my own struggles with understanding social rules and interactions. My greatest challenge in doing so was creating a likable protagonist, given that I had few friends at that age and most of my peers ignored or disliked me. When I enrolled in the MFA program at Vermont College of Fine Arts, I studied other YA novels featuring protagonists with disabilities to find examples with appeal to teen readers.

Former Schneider Family Book Award jury member Barbara Klipper (2011) writes that award winners “portray characters whose disabilities are part of a full life” (p. 6), characters who “are affected but not defined by their disabilities” (p. 7). These criteria offer general guidelines to make protagonists with disabilities real and appealing to readers, both disabled and non-disabled, but they are merely a starting point. Ginny Rorby’s *Hurt Go Happy* (2006), Jordan Sonnenblick’s *After Ever After* (2010), and Francisco X. Stork’s *Marcelo in the Real World* (2009)—all winners of the Schneider Award—model the wide range of specific ways that YA authors depict their main characters with disabilities as both complex and likable, with unique strengths and weaknesses and the ability to bring about change in their own lives and in the lives of those around them.

### **Likability, Complexity, and Agents for Change**

Complexity of characterization rests on a believable combination

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of likable and unlikable traits that are “at war, not simply with the world and other people, but with other traits, tendencies, and desires of our own” (Burroway, Stuckey-French, & Stuckey-French, 2011, p. 131). Readers should be able to see something of themselves in the character’s desires, and at least some of the positive traits should be ones to which readers aspire. At the same time, characters should not be “too good to be true,” or in the case of the disabled characters of old, “too good to live.”

Writers who depict protagonists with disabilities face the challenge of creating characters who pass what Winifred Conkling (2010) calls “a three-point test of verisimilitude” (p. 4) that includes medical accuracy, emotional authenticity, and going “beyond stereotypes and clichés to create multi-dimensional characters who are more than a classic set of medical symptoms” (p. 5). Addressing emotional authenticity includes presenting character traits that may be considered highly unlikable, especially when depicting characters who suffer from mental illness, autism spectrum disorders, or the aftereffects of abuse. The real-life counterparts of such characters are likely to be detached, angry, aggressive, clueless, self-absorbed, or self-pitying, and for the writer to

ignore those feelings reinforces the same stereotypes and clichés of the “too good to live” characters. Since physical attractiveness is a major source of likability, the creator of the realistic protagonist faces a different challenge if that protagonist suffers from cerebral palsy, pays no attention to his or her appearance because of mental illness or autism spectrum disorders, or is in some way disfigured. In addition, writers have the obligation to create a unique personality with negative traits that cannot be attributed to the disability so that the disability does not define the character.

At the same time, creators of protagonists with disabilities can select positive traits that dovetail with the unique challenges and complementary skills of persons with those conditions. For characters who by definition have experienced vulnerability and difficult and often unfair circumstances that might command the reader’s sympathy, the most compelling traits are ones that engage with the disability but do not focus directly on it, that represent the desire to overcome a challenge posed by the disability, and that utilize the character’s strengths to confront a problem more universal than the disability.

### **A Compelling Universal Desire and Plan to Attain That Desire**

A disabled protagonist’s desire often centers on overcoming the disability, coming to terms with it, or achieving a goal made more challenging because of the disability. The best characterizations, however, connect the particular desire of the protagonist with a disability to desires that readers

perceive as universal. Joey Willis, whose hearing impairment in *Hurt Go Happy* has left her isolated and the target of bullies, struggles against this isolation by learning American Sign Language against her mother's wishes. Her defiance of her mother will resonate with teen readers who chafe against rules imposed by the adults in their lives. Jeffrey Alper, the cancer survivor in *After Ever After*, worries about passing the state standardized tests because chemotherapy has left him with learning disabilities. Readers concerned about their own performance on high-stakes tests or about the unfairness of those tests will connect with Jeffrey and his plan, both to prepare for the tests and, ultimately, to subvert them.

### **Perseverance and Determination**

Classic literature is filled with disabled secondary characters who have resigned themselves to their fate. Whether they wallow in self-pity or cheerfully accept their lot as God's will, they are passive and dependent on others. While accepting their differences and challenges—modern young adult fiction does not generally hold out the hope of a miracle cure in the way the titles examined by Keith do—likable protagonists doggedly pursue their other goals in spite of, or perhaps with the help of, their disability. Joey Willis is a model of such determination, first learning sign language to communicate with a neighbor's chimpanzee and then traveling cross-country alone to rescue the chimpanzee who has ended up in a medical lab following the neighbor's death. Marcelo Sandoval, the protagonist with

high-functioning autism in *Marcelo in the Real World*, is equally dogged in his pursuit of justice for a teenage girl he has never met but sees in a photo at his father's law firm. Even though he cannot walk three blocks without getting lost, Marcelo forces himself to journey all over Boston by public transportation to accomplish his mission.

### **A Sense of Humor**

A sense of humor is crucial because people are generally uncomfortable when presented with the realities of illness and disability. A protagonist with a self-deprecating sense of humor acknowledges and defuses the discomfort that non-disabled people feel and is thus more likely to be liked. For example, Jeffrey Alper's sense of humor wins him friends who then become his allies in his fundraising efforts for cancer research and in opposing the standardized tests that he is in danger of failing. His optimistic personality contrasts with that of his friend Tad, the novel's other cancer survivor, whose sense of humor is much darker. Nonetheless, they bond with each other and with the reader who can laugh at Jeffrey's self-deprecating jokes and Tad's knack for saying the thing that Jeffrey (and many readers) wish they could say.

### **Being Loved and Admired by Others**

Readers come to understand characters not only through their own words and actions but also through how other people see them. Particularly for characters with disabilities, if other characters love them and affirm their worth, readers are more likely to invest emotionally in

these characters, regardless of how difficult or unsympathetic they appear to be. The neighbor and his chimp in *Hurt Go Happy* help Joey to connect with her surroundings and show her as a person who cares about others. Jeffrey Alper is one of the more popular students in his school, not because people feel sorry for him, but because he is nice to others, funny, and fun to be around. Although Marcelo, like Joey, has difficulty connecting to others, he earns his co-worker Jasmine's friendship and admiration because of his kindness, loyalty, and sense of fairness.

### **Using One's Abilities to Help Others in Need**

Disability activists often refer to themselves as "differently abled," pointing out that conditions such as hearing loss have led to the acquisition of new skills and the emergence of a distinct culture surrounding them. While she cautions against giving deaf characters "superhuman skills either in lip-reading abilities or visual ability" (p. 25), deaf education professor and children's author Jean F. Andrews (2006) writes that, "Authors overlook or barely touch on the everyday lives of Deaf individuals, which include positive features of Deaf culture such as the use of American Sign Language (ASL)" (p. 25). When characters use what they have to help others in need, they become likable and sympathetic. Not only are they taking positive action, they are also looking beyond themselves and their own problems to better the lives of others. All three protagonists in the novels I have mentioned use their unique skills to help others—

Joey by communicating with the chimpanzee through ASL; Jeffrey through bicycling, a sport he has taken up because it “works” with his physical limitations (specifically his difficulty walking) and his need for exercise; and Marcelo through his obsession with “What humankind has experienced and said and thought about God” (p. 57), which ultimately becomes a quest for personal moral guidance.

### **Standing Up for What Is Right/ Defending the Weak and Powerless**

Readers like characters who take a stand for fairness and justice, whether it be in their family, their school or sports team, their community, or the wider world. These characters offer models that help young readers to take action in their own lives.

Many novels for older children and teens published in recent years address the issue of bullying and feature young people who confront bullies. Those who are different and perceived as weaker—and persons with physical and mental disabilities are often in this category—have regularly served as targets of bullies and other predators who seek to enhance themselves at the expense of others. A character with a disability who stands up for him- or herself when targeted by a bully or predator elicits the reader’s admiration; a character with a disability who protects or seeks justice for others who are being bullied, cheated, or exploited regardless of the consequences to him- or herself is a genuine hero. Such a hero is Marcelo Sandoval, as he confronts the institutionalized bullying at his father’s law

firm and then seeks justice for a disfigured young woman cheated by the firm.

While Joey, Jeffrey, and Marcelo exhibit positive traits, their characterizations have **complexity**. Each protagonist has weaknesses that make their triumph all the more compelling because they confront the things that are most difficult for them to do. At the beginning of *Hurt Go Happy*, Joey allows herself to be dominated by her mother and bullied by her peers. By secretly defying, and then openly confronting, her mother, she exposes her mother’s failure to protect her from her father’s abuse, which led to her hearing loss. No longer dominated by others, she takes control of her life and breaks the cycle of abuse.

Jeffrey’s weakness is his learned dependency, mostly on his older brother who has decided to travel in Africa for a year, but also on his friend Tad, who helps him with his schoolwork and expresses the feelings of anger that Jeffrey suppresses. In the course of *After Ever After*, he builds on his greatest strength, his social skills, to become an inspiration to and leader of his classmates.

Like Jeffrey and Joey, Marcelo exhibits both dependency and submissiveness. He backs out of a summer job at his private school because of his father’s demand that he work in the “real world,” and he does not initially stand up to the culture of bullying and harassment that pervades his father’s law firm. In the end, however, he chooses the side of the injured girl rather than his father’s firm, and he takes this principled stand knowing the harsh consequences

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## **Ultimately, the three authors of these novels present their protagonists as agents of change.**

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for him and his family.

Ultimately, the three authors of these novels present their protagonists as **agents of change**. Given the history of characters with disabilities occupying passive roles, it is particularly important that today’s creators of such characters place them in active roles, something not all authors do. Sometimes, the first-person narrator of the story is not the story’s main actor, but rather an observer of the actions of others; this “outsider looking in” stance is particularly tempting when the character’s disability has resulted in exclusion or isolation. Beyond that, the protagonist has to effect internal or external change. If internal change is the goal, it should not occur through a cure; miraculous cures that result from a protagonist’s proper behavior or faith in God have a dated sensibility and imply that those who live with disability—that is, are not cured—are morally or spiritually lacking. Internal changes involving self-acceptance have the effect of making the novel “all about” the disability; in those cases, the disability defines the characters, the goals, and the story itself. Ideally, internal change should involve a personality trait or conflict unrelated to the disability, or one that existed before the disability manifested itself.

*Hurt Go Happy*, *After Ever After*, and *Marcelo in the Real World* feature protagonists with disabilities who act on the world and effect change not only in themselves, but also in others. The protagonists' respective disabilities may play a role in initiating this change, but their efforts to do so benefit the non-disabled characters as well as themselves.

### Using the Novels as Models

In creating *Rogue's* (2013) protagonist with Asperger's, Kiara Thornton-Delgado, I drew on these likable characteristics, aspects of complexity, and elements of change that I identified in these exemplary novels. I gave Kiara a compelling universal desire and a plan to attain that desire. On the surface, her desire is to have a friend, and as she did with all the New Kids before him, she approaches and welcomes Chad as soon as he moves to her neighborhood. However, Kiara has a deeper desire based on her obsession with the X-Men, who are mutants with special powers that they use to save society and convince people not to fear and exclude them. Kiara believes she, too, has a special power, one that she still needs to find. While her peers shun her and her parents don't know what to do with her, Kiara is not totally unloved. Chad's younger brother, Brandon, and Mrs. Mac, a family friend, like and value her, and both believe that she is capable of doing

great things even when she doubts herself.

Throughout *Rogue*, Kiara's positive traits and desires are at war with her negative impulses. Like Marcelo Sandoval and Kiara's heroes, the X-Men, she struggles with avenging her exclusion and other examples of unfairness that she sees around her, such as Chad's abuse at the hands of his parents. Her anger, like Joey's, which often leads to outbursts or secretive acts of defiance, are not stock traits of people with their respective disabilities but facets of their unique personalities, and Kiara, too, must learn to channel her anger in a way that leads her to a well-thought-out, principled stand, rather than a spontaneous tantrum. Her journey to find a friend and her special power leads her to internal change—as she learns that to have a friend, you have to be a friend—and change in the wider world—as she becomes the best friend that two abused boys can have. I hope that I did justice to the outstanding novels I used as models, as they showed me how characters with disabilities could cease being objects of pity and become agents of transformation to a more inclusive world.

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- Rorby, G. (2006). *Hurt go happy*. New York, NY: Starscape.
- Sonnenblick, J. (2010). *After ever after*. New York, NY: Scholastic.
- Stork, F. X. (2009). *Marcelo in the real world*. New York, NY: Scholastic.

### Additional Recommended YA Titles

- Bray, L. (2009). *Going bovine*. New York, NY: Delacorte.
- John, A. (2010). *Five flavors of dumb*. New York, NY: Dial.
- Kelly, T. (2010). *Harmonic feedback*. New York, NY: Henry Holt.
- McCaughrean, G. (2005). *The white darkness*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.
- Roy, J. (2010). *Mindblind*. Tarrytown, NY: Marshall Cavendish.
- Sáenz, B. A. (2009). *Last night I sang to the monster*. El Paso, TX: Cinco Puntos Press.



## Five Things to Ponder

### Think about This

1. From “The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Reader” by Colin Robinson, *New York Times*, January 5, 2014.

Budgets (in book companies) have been trimmed in various ways:

Author advances, except for the biggest names, have slumped sharply since the 2008 financial crash, declining by more than half, according to one recent survey. It’s hard to imagine that the quality of manuscripts from writers who have been forced either to eat less or write faster isn’t deteriorating. Meanwhile, spending on editing and promotion has also been pared away.

Things don’t get better after the book leaves the publisher. Price cutting, led primarily by Amazon, has reduced many brick-and-mortar bookstores to rubble, depriving readers of direct interaction with booksellers. Despite some recent good news, the number of independents has been halved in the last two decades, and the chain stores that survive increasingly employ part-time, unskilled staff.

The decline in libraries weakens another vital prop for read-

ers. Librarians, described by the novelist Richard Powers as “gas attendant[s] of the mind,” saw a national decrease in their numbers of nearly 100,000 over the two decades to 2009. Two-thirds of public libraries reported flat or decreasing budgets in 2012.

2. Elizabeth Suneby, with illustrator Suana Verelet, has written *Razia’s Ray of Hope: One Girl’s Dream of an Education* (Kids Can Press, 2013). While this is a book intended for elementary students, its message of hope is for all ages. A young Afghanistan girl would love to go to school, but it is not usually permitted in this culture. “Our girls are needed to help their mothers at home.” The author points out “only about 13 percent of girls living in Afghanistan are literate.” What does it mean not to be able to read or write?

3. Michael Sokolove, a feature writer for the *New York Times*, is the author of *Drama High* (Riverhead Press, 2013). This book is a tribute to English/Drama teacher Lou Volpe, an outstanding personality at Harry S. Truman High School in the blue collar section

of Levittown, PA. There is hardly any censorship in the productions Volpe presents in this school. He is a perfectionist, and he wants his productions to be of Broadway quality, and he is able to inspire his students to be “professional.” His productions have won many awards and caused Cameron Mackintosh, a major Broadway producer, among others, to visit the school to see what Volpe is able to do.

Over time, one of the things that I come to see is how deeply Volpe knows his students. How couldn’t he? They take chances onstage that reveal their inner selves. But it is also true that the very things they learn from being in theater—empathy, the ability to imagine lives other than their own; the actor’s gift for giving a character a backstory, a biography beyond what the playwright put on the paper—allow *them* to know *him*.

You have to “find your character,” he tells them, meaning they have to imagine lives they cannot fully know. Not the prosaic biographical details, but beyond that. What is it like to *be* that person? What resides deep within, and what is missing? Volpe gives his students only hints of his personal

life—tells them about the show he just saw in New York, the purchase he made at the mall—so they have to imagine the rest, intuit it, figure out what’s it like to be Louis T. Volpe, high school theater teacher. (p. 39)

4. From *The Rights of the Reader* by Daniel Pennac, illustrated by Quentin Blake (Candlewick, 2008).

1. The right not to read.
2. The right to skip.
3. The right not to finish a book.
4. The right to read it again.
5. The right to read anything.
6. The right to mistake a book for real life.
7. The right to read anywhere.
8. The right to dip in.
9. The right to read out loud.
10. The right to be quiet. (p. 135)

5. How does one thank all of the authors, teachers, publishers who made the 40th anniversary of ALAN a celebration in Boston? So many good presentations. The Program Committee did an amazing job. In the boxes each participant received were a multitude of fine new books. Now is the time to order books for classrooms, school libraries, public libraries to support the efforts of authors and publishers. Now is the time to recognize that giving students a variety of choices will develop a love of reading for the rest of their lives.

### **And Think More with These Books**

To encourage such an activity, here are some themes worthy of consideration.

#### **Another Time**

Bradbury, Jennifer. *A Moment*

*Comes*. Atheneum, 2013.

Brendler, Carol. *Radio Girl*. Holiday House, 2013.

Kline, Christina Baker. *Orphan Train*. Morrow, 2013.

Laskey, Kathryn. *The Extra*. Candlewick, 2013.

Longshore, Katherine. *Tarnish*. Viking, 2013.

MacColl, Michaela. *Nobody’s Secret*. Chronicle, 2013.

Westrich, A. B. *Brotherhood*. Viking, 2013.

Whelan, Gloria. *All My Noble Dreams and Then What Happens*. Simon & Schuster, 2013.

#### **When One Dies**

Arntson, Steven. *The Wrap-Up List*. Houghton Mifflin, 2013

Coriell, Shelly. *Goodbye, Rebel Blue*. Amulet, 2013.

Davis, Lane. *I Swear*. Simon & Schuster, 2013.

Koertge, Ron. *Coaltown Jesus*. Candlewick, 2013.

Lynch, Chris. *Pieces*. Simon & Schuster, 2013.

Ness, Patrick. *More than This*. Candlewick, 2013.

Seamon, Hollis. *Somebody up There Hates You*. Algonquin, 2013.

Sones, Sonya. *One of Those Hideous Books Where the Mother Dies*. Simon & Schuster, 2013.

Whitney, Daisy. *When You Were Here*. Little, Brown, 2013.

#### **Autobiography and Biography**

Freedman, Russell. *Abraham Lincoln & Frederick Douglass*. Clarion, 2012.

Harden, Blaine. *Escape from Camp 14*. Penguin, 2012.

Hapter-Gault, Charlayne. *To the Mountain Top: My Journey through the Civil Rights Movement*. Roaring Brook, 2012.

Hartzler, Aaron. *Rapture Practice*. Little, Brown, 2013.

Ko, Alex. *From Iowa to Broadway: My Billy Elliot Story*. Harper, 2013.

Nazario, Sonia. *Enrique’s Journey*. Delacorte, 2013.

Scieszka, Casey, and Steven Weinberg. *To Timbuktu*. Roaring Brook, 2011.

Wallace, Rich, and Sandra Neil Wallace. *Babe Conquers the World: The Legendary Life of Babe Didrikson Zaharias*. Calkins Creek, 2014.

#### **Family Matters**

Anderson, Laurie Halse. *The Impossible Knife of Memory*. Viking, 2014.

Gewirtz, Adina Rische. *Zebra Forest*. Candlewick, 2013.

Griffin, N. *The Whole Stupid Way We Are*. Atheneum, 2013.

Halpern, Julie. *Have A Nice Day*. Feiwel, 2012.

King, A. S. *Reality Boy*. Little, Brown, 2013.

Klass, David. *Grandmaster*. Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2014.

Mack, W. S. *Athlete vs. Mathlete*. Bloomsbury, 2013.

Manzano, Sonia. *The Revolution of Evelyn Serrano*. Scholastic, 2012.

McInnes, Nicole. *Briana on the Brink*. Holiday House, 2013.

Roskus, Evan. *Dr. Bird’s Advice for Sad Poets*. Houghton Mifflin, 2013.

Sitomer, Alan Lawrence. *Caged Warrior*. Hyperion, 2013.

Tracy, Kristen. *Too Cool for This School*. Delacorte, 2013.

#### **Multiculturalism**

Ada, Alma Flor, and F. Isabel Campoy, with pictures by David Diaz. *Yes, We Are Latinos*.

Charlesbridge, 2013.  
 Ellis, Leanne Statland. *The Ugly One*. Clarion, 2013.  
 Farrar, Josh. *A Song for Bijou*. Walker, 2013.  
 Freedman, Paula J. *My Basmati Bat Mitzvah*. Amulet, 2013.  
 Gansworth, Eric. *If I Ever Get Out of Here*. Scholastic, 2013.  
 La Valley, Jasmine. *The Vine Basket*. Clarion, 2013.  
 Rhodes, Jewell. *Sugar*. Little, Brown, 2013.  
 Sullivan, Tara. *Golden Boy*. Putnam, 2013.

### **Mystery and Suspense**

Balliett, Blue. *Hold Fast*. Scholastic, 2012.  
 Barnes, Jennifer Lynn. *The Naturals*. Hyperion, 2013.  
 Berk, Josh. *Strike Three You're Dead*. Knopf, 2012.  
 Gleason, Colleen. *The Clockwork Scarab*. Chronicle, 2013.  
 Lane, Andrew. *Black Ice*. Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2013.  
 Lane, Andrew. *Fire Storm*. Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2013.  
 MacColl, Michaela. *Nobody's Secret*. Chronicle, 2013.  
 Price, Charlie. *Dead Girl Moon*. Farrar Straus Giroux, 2012.  
 Sharp, Tim. *Mojo*. Knopf, 2013.  
 Wasserman, Robin. *The Book of Blood and Shadow*. Knopf, 2012.

### **Nonfiction**

Bascomb, Neal. *The Nazi Hunters*. Scholastic, 2013.  
 Heos, Bridget, with photographs by Andy Comins. *Stronger than Steel*. Houghton Mifflin, 2012.  
 Hoose, Phillip. *Moonbird: A Year on the Wind with the Great Survivor B95*. Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2012.  
 Meisner, David, and Kim Richard-

son. *Call of the Klondike*. Calkins Creek, 2013.  
 Newquist, H. P. *The Book of Blood*. Houghton Mifflin, 2012.  
 O'Reilly, Bill. *Lincoln's Last Days*. Holt, 2012.  
 O'Reilly, Bill. *Kennedy's Last Days*. Holt, 2013.  
 Patent, Dorothy Hinshaw, with photographs by William Munoz. *The Horse and the Plains Indians*. Clarion, 2012.  
 Rusch Elizabeth, with photographs by Tom Uhlman. *Eruptions; Volcanoes and the Science of Saving Lives*. Houghton Mifflin, 2013.  
 Sandler, Martin W. *Imprisoned: The Betrayal of Japanese Americans during World War II*. Walker, 2013.

### **Romance**

Arnold, Elana. *Burning*. Clarion, 2013.  
 Block, Francesca Lia. *Love in the Time of Global Warming*. Holt, 2013.  
 Lynch, Nicholas. *My Beautiful Hippie*. Holiday House, 2013.  
 Myracle, Lauren. *The Infinite Moment of Us*. Amulet, 2013.  
 Rowell, Rainbow. *Eleanor & Park*. St. Martin's Press, 2013.  
 Sheldon, Dyan. *One or Two Things I Learned about Love*. Candlewick, 2013.  
 Smith, Jennifer E. *This Is What Happy Looks Like*. Little, Brown, 2013.

### **School Matters**

Alexander, Kwame. *He Said, She Said*. Amistad, 2013.  
 Baskin, Nora Raleigh. *Runt*. Simon & Schuster, 2013.  
 Crane, Caprice. *Confessions of a Hater*. Feiwel, 2013.  
 Crutcher, Chris. *Period 8*. Greenwil-

low, 2013.  
 Flores-Scott, Patrick. *Jumped In*. Holt, 2013.  
 Medina, Meg. *Yaqui Delgado Wants to Kick Your Ass*. Candlewick, 2013.  
 Smith, Andrew. *Winger*. Simon & Schuster, 2013.  
 Steinkellner, Teddy. *Trash Can Days*. Hyperion, 2013.

### **Science Fiction**

Barnes, Jennifer Lynn. *Nobody*. Egmont, 2012.  
 Bruchac, Joseph. *Killer of Enemies*. Tu, 2013.  
 Colfer, Eoin. *Warp Book 1: The Reluctant*. Hyperion, 2013.  
 Deebs, Tracy. *Doomed*. Walker, 2013.  
 Grant, Michael. *Bzrk Reloaded*. Egmont, 2013.  
 Hirsch, Jeff. *The Darkest Path*. Scholastic, 2013.  
 London, Alex. *Proxy*. Philomel, 2013.  
 Meyer, Marissa. *Scarlet: The Lunar Chronicles*. Feiwel, 2013.  
 Rosenblum, Gregg. *Fugitive X*. Harper, 2014.  
 Shusterman, Neal. *The Dark Side of Nowhere*. Simon & Schuster, 2012.  
 Thomas, Lex. *Quarantine: The Loners*. Egmont, 2012.  
 Thomas, Lex. *Quarantine: The Saints*. Egmont, 2013.  
 Waggoner, Susan. *Neptune's Tears*. Holt, 2013.  
 Yancy, Rick. *The 5th Wave*. Putnam, 2013.  
 Yansky, Brian. *Homicidal Aliens and Other Disappointments*. Candlewick, 2013.

### **Special Problems**

Chapman, Clay McLeod. *The Tribe: Homeroom Headhunters*. Hyperion, 2013.

Deen, Carolee. *Forget Me Not*. Simon Pulse, 2012.

Ellen, Laura. *Blind Spot*. Harcourt, 2012.

Leavitt, Martine. *My Book of Life by Angel*. Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2012.

Rees, Celia. *This Is Not Forgiveness*. Bloomsbury, 2012.

Sloan, Holly Goldberg. *Counting by 7s*. Dial, 2013.

Takoudes, Greg. *When We Wuz Famous*. Holt, 2013.

Thorp, Tim. *Badd*. Knopf, 2011.

Vawter, Vince. *Paperboy*. Delacorte, 2013.

Vernick, Shirley Reva. *Remember Dippy*. Cinco Puntos Press, 2013.

### Sports

Brown, Daniel James. *The Boys in the Boat*. Viking, 2013.

Coughlin, T. Glen. *One Shot Away*. Harper, 2012.

Deuker, Carl. *Swagger*. Houghton Mifflin, 2013.

Feinstein, John. *Foul Trouble*. Knopf, 2013.

Green, Tim. *Force Out*. Harper, 2013.

Heldring, Thatcher. *The League*. Delacorte, 2013.

Klass, David, and Peter Klass. *Second Impact*. Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2013.

Lupica, Mike. *Game Changers—Play Makers*. Scholastic, 2013.

Seles, Monica, and James LaRosa. *The Academy: Game On*. Bloomsbury, 2013.

Wallace, Sandra Neil. *Muckers*. Knopf, 2012.

### Supernatural

Blythe, Daniel. *Shadow Breakers*. Chicken House, 2013.

Grant, Michael. *Fear*. Katherine Tegen, 2012.

Grant, Michael. *Light*. Katherine Tegen, 2013.

Hawkins, Rachel. *School Spirits*. Hyperion, 2013.

Hodkin, Michelle. *The Evolution of Mara Dyer*. Simon & Schuster, 2012.

Kotecki, Nathan. *Pull Down the Night*. Houghton Mifflin, 2013.

Lettrick, Robert. *Frenzy*. Hyperion, 2014.

Leveen, Tom. *Sick*. Amulet, 2013.

McNeal, Tom. *Far from Away*. Knopf, 2013.

Perez, Marlene. *Dead Is Just a Dream*. Houghton Mifflin/Harcourt, 2013.

Ruby, Lois. *Rebel Spirits*. Point, 2013.

Toffler-Corrie, Laura. *The Totally Awkward Supernatural Crush*. Roaring Brook, 2013.

### War

Boyden, Joseph. *Three Day Road*. Penguin, 2006.

Elliott, L. M. *Across a War-Tossed Sea*. Hyperion, 2014.

Frost, Helen. *Salt*. Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2013.

Gratz, Alan. *Prisoner B-3087*. Scholastic, 2013.

Patterson, Valerie O. *Operation Oleander*. Clarion, 2013.

Sutcliffe, William. *The Wall*. Walker, 2013.

Voorhoeve, Anne C. *My Family for the War*. Dial, 2012.

Wein, Elizabeth. *Rose under Fire*. Hyperion, 2013.

Witterick, J. L. *My Mother's Secret*. Putnam, 2013.

Yang, Gene Luen. *Boxers*. First Second, 2013.

Yang, Gene Luen. *Saints*. First Second, 2013.

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## New Genres, Same Narratives?:

A Close yet Critical Reading of Obama Biographies

**M**iddle school language arts teachers have historically thought primarily in literary terms. Considerable classroom time has been devoted to books like *A Wrinkle in Time* (L'Engle, 1962), *The Cay* (Taylor, 1969), and *Island of the Blue Dolphins* (O'Dell, 1960); the use of *nonfiction* texts in the middle school has traditionally been located in social studies and sciences classes. With the Common Core State Standards' (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010) new focus on informational texts, however, fiction will no longer dominate language arts classrooms. Alongside this shift in genre, the authors of the new Standards also demand a particular type of reader stance (Rosenblatt, 1978), presuming a narrow definition of "text-dependent" reading through which "close attention to the text" allows readers to "draw knowledge from the text" (Coleman & Pimental, 2011).

Though we do not yet know the effects of the new Common Core State Standards, these changes are expected to transform the language arts classroom. Bookshelves

once dominated by fiction will now hold biography, informational, persuasive, procedural (i.e., how-to), and reference texts, ushering in a shift in thinking about formats, genres, textual structures, and quality. Important to remember, however, is that while the expository appearance of nonfiction may appear impartial, no text is neutral. All texts are authored by people working from specific worldviews with the result of privileging some people's ways of thinking and interacting over others' (Janks, 2010). In other words, the work of the present-day language arts teacher must be more than increasing the role of nonfiction in the curriculum; it must also include careful, critical attention to the narratives embedded in informational texts, for stories frame even the most expository of texts (Rosen, 1986; Short, 2012).

In this article, we look at one particular type of nonfiction text—biography—to argue for a complicated reading of the CCSS to include a critical literacy focus. Using biographies about the 44th president, Barack Obama, written for and read by middle school students, we maintain that "close

attention to the text" can indeed prompt readers to utilize a critical literacy lens as they "draw knowledge from the text."

### Biographies

One of the more prevalent nonfiction genres (Duke & Tower, 2004; Kiefer & Wilson, 2011), biographies are designed to "convey information about an individual's life and experiences" (Duke & Tower, 2004, p. 135) and often concentrate on historical and political figures. In terms of curricular representation, one group of people has tended to dominate school texts (e.g., European American, male, heterosexual, able-bodied, etc.) (Apple & Christian-Smith, 1991; Luke, DeCastell, & Luke, 1989). So if we as teachers attend to the new "text-dependent" Reading Standards as we also work toward developing democratic citizens (Dewey, 1916), we must consider how existing multiple narratives are both acknowledged and examined, pushing back against the idea that a single narrative exists (Journell, 2011).

Aware of the increasing attention to informational texts in US public schools, we performed

**Table 1.** Obama biography overview

Title	Author	Biographical genre
<i>Barack Obama: Working to Make a Difference</i>	Brill	Narrative chapter-book
<i>Barack Obama: An American Story</i>	Carlton & Gentiles	Narrative chapter-book
<i>Barack Obama</i> (Remarkable People)	DeMedeiros	Textbook organization
<i>Barack Obama</i> (People in the News)	DeVaney & DeVaney	Narrative/textbook hybrid
<i>Barack Obama: An American Story</i>	Edwards	Narrative chapter-book
<i>Barack Obama</i> (African-American Heroes)	Feinstein	Textbook organization
<i>The Obama View: The Historic Fight for the 2008 Democratic Nomination</i> (Monumental Milestones: Great Events of Modern Times)	Gibson	Textbook organization
<i>Barack Obama: Our 44th President</i>	Gormley	Narrative chapter-book
<i>Obama: A Promise of Change</i> (An Adaptation for Young Readers of S. Thomsen's <i>Obama: From Promise to Power</i> )	Mendell	Narrative chapter-book
<i>Barack Obama—44th President</i> (Essential Lives Set 3)	Robinson	Narrative/textbook hybrid
<i>Barack Obama: "We Are One People"</i> (African-American Biography Library)	Schuman	Narrative/textbook hybrid
<i>Yes We Can: A Biography of President Barack Obama</i>	Thomas	Narrative chapter-book
<i>Barack Obama</i> (Black Americans of Achievement: Legacy Edition)	Wagner	Narrative/textbook hybrid
<i>Barack Obama</i> (The United States Presidents)	Wheeler	Textbook organization

a close, critical reading of several Obama biographies published for children and young adults. These books were written using three distinct biographical genres and varied in degrees of complexity (see Table 1). We found that in addition to providing the story of a life, each text also linked to particular ideologies. The books differed in significant ways as seen by which life events the authors selected for inclusion and how the included events were framed (May, Holbrook, & Meyers, 2010). Consider the following opening lines from four Obama biographies. They all provide specific information about the president and his family, but each establishes a different tone, emphasizes different facets of his early life, and presents a different view of his parents.

**Example 1.** On August 4, 1961, a baby boy was born at Kapi'olani Medical Center in Honolulu, Hawaii. He weighed eight pounds, two ounces. His parents, Ann and Barack, named him after his father, Barack Hussein Obama, but they called their child "Barry." (Gormley, 2008, p. 1)

**Example 2.** Barack Obama was born on August 4, 1961, in **Honolulu, Hawaii**. Barack's father was also named Barack Obama. He had come to the United States from **Kenya** to go to college. He met Barack's mother, Ann Dunham, while both of them were students at the University of Hawaii. (Feinstein, 2008, p. 1, bold in original)

**Example 3.** For many years, Barack Obama struggled to make sense of his **multicultural heritage**. He is the son and grandson of people who came from Kansas in the center of the United States. He is also the son and grandson of people who came from a small village in Kenya in East Africa. He grew up in Honolulu, Hawaii, and Jakarta, Indonesia. (Nichols, 2009, p. 1, bold in original)

**Example 4.** His father was a legend, like John Henry: strong, determined, larger than life. And as with all legends, the line between reality and fiction—that which is true and not true—got blurred over time. Was Barack Obama Sr. really the grown man who had

lifted his friend high over his head, pretending he was going to drop him over a cliff because his friend accidentally dropped his pipe? (Thomas, 2008, p. 1).

These four examples focus on different aspects of Obama's early life. Examples 1 and 2 foreground his birth and where he grew up, while Examples 3 and 4 foreground his internal struggles. Both of these approaches provide the reader with a way of organizing their thinking about Obama. The fact-based approach provides the reader with chronological details that help establish Obama's growth from infant to adult, from baby to president. Examples 3 and 4 provide the reader with a story by which to frame their developing understanding of Obama's life. Example 3 raises the question of identity, and the reader is given the framework of cultural conflict as a way to situate their knowledge about Obama. Example 4 begins not with Obama but with his father, who is compared to an American folktale hero. Establishing Obama's identity in reference to a father who is a "legend" and larger-than-life provides the reader with a way to conceptualize Obama's almost fairytale rise to the presidency.

These examples provide information about Obama's birth and family, but the methods of delivering that information varies. Examples 1 and 2 begin with Obama's birth date, the location of his birth, and the names of his parents. This example gives key, specific details in just a few sentences. Examples 3 and 4 take a more narrative approach. Example 3 begins with a struggle with which many readers

can identify—the struggle to make sense of multiple family cultures—while Example 4 begins with a question about whether or not a parent is really like the person described in family stories. Both of these approaches provide emotional and contextual background but very little in the way of specific details. In all four of the examples, the tone of the biography is established quickly through the language choices and the information given.

### **Mentor Texts for Close, Critical Writing**

These examples also serve as exemplars of a writer's craft and provide an opportunity for students to use mentor texts to bring a critical literacy lens to their own writing. Just as no text is neutral, no writer composes from nowhere; all texts are created with intent. By undertaking a close, critical analysis of writer's craft, students can begin to see that the many decisions they make in composing their own texts—the genre they select, the sentence structure they employ, the tone they construct—constitute their writings as motivated and purposeful. For instance, in addition to examining Examples 1 and 2 for their details and sentence structures, students can consider why the authors chose to represent Obama's life as a series of facts: Who is the writer addressing? What purpose does the text serve? What problem might the text be responding to? What role might the publisher and/or marketplace play in the decisions the author made? Such discussions can support students as critical creators of nonfiction texts.

For example, in an afterschool writing program, a middle school student might opt to use Example 4 as a mentor text for a piece he is writing about his great-grandfather, who emigrated from Italy to the US in the 1930s. Thomas, the author of Example 4, used comparisons to establish how much influence Obama's father had on the president's life. Readers learn that Obama Sr. was "a legend," a comparison, extended with the simile "like John Henry." This literary move prompts readers to consider Obama's father within a certain frame—similar to a folklore character, seeped in exaggeration and myth, whose exploits blur the line between fiction and reality. Taking up Example 4 as a mentor text, the middle school student might write something like the following of his own great-grandfather:

My great-grandpa was an explorer, like Captain Kirk on *Star Trek*. He left Italy when he was a young man to come to a country that he had never seen before. He didn't speak much English and had no job. He was bold and brave and willing to learn.

It is evident that this student gave "close attention" to the Thomas text, effectively using the folktale-based simile to position his great-grandfather as an extraordinary figure who, like Captain Kirk, explored unknown geographical, economic, and linguistic territories armed with courage and curiosity. To nudge this writer further into critical literacy, he could be encouraged to question why he selected Captain Kirk as a metaphor and why he chose to mention that his great-grandfather "didn't speak much English" rather than stating that he spoke Italian.

Only through critical reading can we develop the critical writers needed to act as citizens able to reason and evaluate the issues of the day. The deep reflection and unpacking of assumptions required by critical writing make achievable our goal of helping our middle school students meet the new, more rigorous Standards.

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## From Innocence to Relevance:

Preservice Teachers' Reflections on Attending the 2013 ALAN Workshop

**S**tanding in the passenger welcoming area of the Back Bay Amtrack Station in Boston on Sunday night, I took a quick scan of the room. A number of people were wearing New England Patriots gear under multiple layers of clothing waiting for a subway train that would take them to Gillette Stadium for the game to be held later in the evening against the Denver Broncos. The anticipation was thick in the station leading up to the big mid-season game that had the weight of a post-season playoff. A computerized voice announced the arrivals and departures of trains as I shook off a chill that had cut through my overcoat during the walk to the station. I had spent the last four days participating in activities and meetings related to the 2013 NCTE Annual Convention, and I was waiting at the station for six undergraduate preservice teachers from Elizabethtown College to join me on this bitterly cold night to attend the ALAN Workshop that was to follow what had already been a tremendously successful conference.

As I waited for my students to arrive, I couldn't help reflecting on

how I prepared to teach reading and writing leading up to my first job as a teacher. When I opened my first classroom, I brought along tattered copies of *Call of the Wild*, *The Pigman*, *House of Stairs*, *Freak the Mighty*, and *Touching Spirit Bear*. These texts were the highlights of my undergraduate course on young adult literature, but they were not the keystones of my preservice training. Beyond these books, I knew nothing of the rich history and traditions of YAL. The tragedy is that I did not know where to find more good books for middle school students.

There used to be a grace period given to teachers as they grew and matured into their profession. They could use this time to establish bearings in the professional landscape. However, something has happened in the last ten years. The expectations for classroom teachers have been amplified. Teachers entering the classroom must know *everything* related to their content area. They must come with a secure grip on the vast knowledgebase needed to navigate new standards and interpret the results of new standardized tests. In order

to survive in public education, they need a network of professionals representing a wide variety of expertise that can be immediately accessed when questions arise.

I suppose this is why in August I asked six of my advisees in the small Secondary English Education program that I direct for Elizabethtown College to join me at this year's ALAN workshop. My hope was that they would have an experience that would further and intensify their professional knowledge leading up to their first years in the classroom.

The computerized voice announced the arrival of the train I was waiting for. Up from the platform I watched all six students, bouncing with energy, reach the top of the steps. With large suitcases half empty for the mountains of books they were anticipating they would bring home, each arrived in Boston preparing for his or her own Super Bowl of sorts. Their big game in Boston was an opportunity to learn from the world's best authors and teachers.

For this column, I asked each student who attended the workshop to reflect, in writing, on his or

her experience. The excerpts that follow are amalgamations of the six enthusiastic reflections I received.

As stated above, the students who attended the workshop with me had several weeks to prepare for the voyage to Boston. With the help of the ALAN website (<http://www.alan-ya.org>), students were able to get a sneak peek at who would be presenting this year.

In preparation for our trip to the 2013 ALAN Workshop, I knew that I had to get both mentally and spiritually prepared. As a young teacher about to embark into the professional world of English education, the opportunity to meet authors who write for and inspire the same audience that I, too, hope to impact in a positive way seemed to me a bit inconceivable. I logged on to the ALAN website to see who would be speaking. As I looked over the lineup of workshop panelists, some of the authors—Anderson, Hopkins, Werlin, and Dessen—were already permanent fixtures on my bookshelf. Other names I was seeing for the first time. In looking up who was speaking, I went into *geek mode*, searching the Web to learn more about them.

The Sunday evening ALAN welcoming reception has become something of a family reunion for many longstanding ALAN members, and I felt it was necessary to introduce my students to the ALAN community at the reception. Fresh off of the train, the students essentially dropped their bags in their hotel rooms and raced to the grand ballroom.

The reception held Sunday night before the workshop set the tone for the entire experience. It was fun watching our college professor introduce us to various authors, colleagues, and ALAN friends. We walked into the crowded ballroom and met Chris Crutcher, Laurie Halse Anderson,

and Walter Myers, all of whom were just as interested in us as we were in them. I loved hearing how much the authors support teachers. This was unexpected.

When the main event arrived on Monday morning, I could tell the group was still abuzz from the reception the night before. They were ready to lock in for a great day at the workshop. Their reflections of their experiences leading up to the opening panel presentations speak of heightened anticipation and excitement.

At first the entire event on Monday seemed very daunting. We were walking into a huge convention center and didn't really know what to expect. Waiting in line at the registration table was like being a kid waiting in line for Santa at the mall; we couldn't wait to get to the front of the line.

Receiving the much-anticipated ALAN box was like winning the bookworm jackpot. As I flipped open the cardboard flaps, I could hardly contain my excitement and began unloading book after book, scanning the titles, authors, and cover art for the ones that looked intriguing. Looking around I noticed that many of the experienced ALAN-goers—not first-timers like me and my classmates—were stacking their books, fortress-style in front of them. This seemed like a good idea. Not only could I see what books others might want to trade, I could also easily reach for books when it came time for author signings.

Throughout the day, I was able to visit with each student as his or her stack of signed books began to grow. A theme that was expressed throughout all of their conversations with me and in their written reflections was a sense of *belonging*. Many felt as though they arrived in Boston that bitterly cold Sunday night as college students,

but they were leaving as teachers and writers.

Early on I felt like I didn't belong. As I was talking to Lauren Myracle, she told me that student teachers are just as important and that it was great that I was already getting my foot in the door. She was right; I did belong. People at the workshop treated you like a real person—not a preservice teacher or a college student. While waiting in the lines to meet the authors, I got a chance to chat with some of the other teachers. It was an honor to meet so many people from all over the country and to learn a little bit about their classroom practices.

The authors and panelists validated the connection between educators and writers, and now we share a common goal of encouraging literacy and engaging young people in reading, writing, and discussion. Hearing the authors speak so passionately about the goals of their work made me want to find ways to share those works with my future students. As a writer and avid reader, I loved hearing about the other writers' motivations and challenges. My pen could not fly fast enough to keep up with the amount of notes I wrote, useful information that I just did not want to risk forgetting. I took a lot away from what they said and even got a chance to ask a few questions face-to-face with the authors. I was even inspired to jot down several of my own ideas for a future YA novel.

We were able to stay for only one day at the 2013 workshop, but it is clear to me that these pre-service teachers encountered an opportunity to learn and grow into their professional practice. The next day we returned to the Back Bay station to board our train bound for Pennsylvania. I looked about this group of promising young people and a smile crept across my face. Each was reading a brand new book from their box, flipping

pages frantically, annotating in the margins. In the conclusion of their reflections, my students had the following to share.

I truly feel like the ALAN Workshop has prepared me more in becoming a better classroom teacher. From listening to the panels and breaking off into small group sessions, I really feel like I was able to pull some great resources for my students. I loved the workshop of authors talking about their books and how they are geared toward helping kids discover who they are and what they have to offer. From the websites they shared, to the personal stories, I feel like I can really help my future students and give them more resources than I could have before the workshop.

The whole experience helped me realize that I am not alone in my practice and will not be alone when I graduate. A big component of what I learned from the workshop was how willing authors are to help teachers teach. They care about what they write about, but even more, they care about the audience they write for. Attending the ALAN workshop has affirmed my belief in teaching from texts instead of textbooks. Every time I read a book now, I think, "How could I teach this?" or "How might this story be relevant to students?" With the rise of standardization, there may be pressures on what to teach, but the fact of the matter remains that the art of the profession comes from the how.

Prior to attending the ALAN Workshop I had this silly notion that networking was for business and political science majors. But being able to meet and talk with authors at the conference whose books I might someday teach opened

up so many possibilities for me as a preservice teacher. The authors were open to discussing their books and generally expressed a desire to work with teachers. Being surrounded by professionals from a variety of backgrounds who shared the same love literature and learning was a truly enriching experience. It is, at its core, a community of intellectuals, and I was humbled to be in their company.

The ALAN Workshop is a phenomenal venue for preservice teachers to learn about the very best books, the most interesting authors, and to become a member of a passionate community dedicated to the advancement of good literature and great teachers. Attendance at the workshop and membership in ALAN come with many benefits. Sure, there is the instant joy that follows the opening of the big box of new books. And, yes, there are multiple opportunities to meet with and talk to famous authors. However, the real benefit in this case may be the newfound confidence these young people will now wield in front of the classroom.

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## 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

**Destiny Adams Cooper**

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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

**Melissa Gulden**

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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.

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—Marney, Middle Level member from Arizona

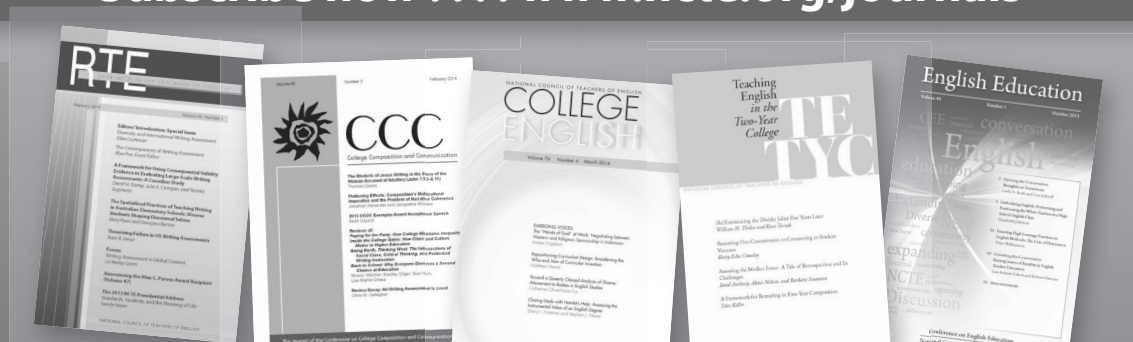
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